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Njáls saga as a novel: four aspects of rewriting

Summary. Inspired by *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, the novel *Fire in the Ice* by American novelist Dorothy James Roberts is one of numerous modern rewritings of classical and medieval literature. With her works Roberts joined a diverse group of nineteenth and twentieth century writers who borrowed plots and themes from Iceland's early literature in their own works. The earlier adaptations were often influenced by the nationalistic and racial concerns of the rewriters, but the tides had changed when *Fire in the Ice* was published in 1961. By then the sagas were celebrated as remarkable works of art, even as milestones in the history of World Literature. "The best Icelandic Sagas," writes Roberts in her preface, "approach the finest of modern novels, and are more closely related to them than to the European literature of their time." With this statement in mind, four important aspects of Roberts' rewriting are explored.

Often she was the worse for ale when she stumbled to bed in the morning watch. Now and then when a man tempted her she gave herself to him, but in this she was careful not to be headlong. [...] Within a year she began to look her age. Within two years she was no longer quite slender. Within five she had passed the point at which a season of self-restraint and spare living could recoup the losses her beauty suffered. She had studied her beauty since she was old enough to learn she was female, and she knew the signs of ruin beginning to show themselves, and she grieved. But I am still able to walk past men crowding around a young girl and steal all their eyes, she thought, I am forty and I have yet to meet the woman who can be first when I am in the room. [Roberts (1961: 291–292)].

This passage is not from the unauthorized biography of a withering Hollywood actress, even though the character in question has survived three marriages and two husbands. No, we are monitoring the thoughts of the medieval Icelandic saga heroine Hallgerður Höskuldsdóttir as presented in the second half of the novel *Fire in the Ice* by Dorothy James Roberts. Hallgerda, as Roberts (1961: 290) re-names her, is at that point suffering the ruin of her marriage with Gunnar of Hlíðarendi "like a bewildering animal in the murk of her thoughts". Inspired by two Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*),

Laxdæla saga and *Njáls saga*, the novel was published in 1961, when Roberts was fifty-eight and a well-known novelist. The daughter of a West Virginia oil producer, she had done her graduate work in medieval and Arthurian literature, specializing in the legend of Tristan and Isolde, which was the source of her most popular historical novel, *The Enchanted Cup*, published in 1953.

Fire in the Ice is one of numerous modern rewritings of classical Icelandic literature. For the most part, such texts have enjoyed only limited and rather negative critical attention. But recent developments in the fields of translation and reception studies stress the cultural impact of such translations and adaptations of classical texts. As Bassnett and Lefevere (1990: 10) have pointed out, such “‘rewritings’ are at least as influential in ensuring the survival of a work of literature as the originals [...]. One might even take the next step and say that if a work is not ‘rewritten’ in one way or another, it is not likely to survive its publication date by all that many years, or even months.” From this perspective, Roberts’ novel is a part of an extensive textual tradition originating in Iceland during the Middle Ages and continually extending its borders to embrace different cultures and literary genres.

With her rewriting of *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*, Roberts joined a diverse group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American writers who used plots and themes from Iceland’s early literature. Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Niebelungen* in Germany, Henrik Ibsen’s historical plays in Norway and William Morris’s epic poem “The Lovers of Gudrun” are only a few works in an amazingly large corpus. *Njáls saga* alone has inspired children’s versions, dramatizations for stage and radio, illustrations, music, and poems.¹

Many of the earlier adaptations of *Njáls saga* were influenced by the nationalistic concerns of the rewriters, who celebrated pan-Scandinavian, Germanic, or Teutonic cultural values and racial attributes. In his preface to *Heroes of Iceland*, an American abridgement of *Njáls saga*, Allen French (1905: xxi) claimed for instance that the archetypal saga hero represented “with slight differences, all the old nations of Teutonic stock, and in this picture of him the modern Scandinavian, Englishman, German and native born American can see the strength of the root from which they spring.” This ideology was taken to its extreme during the Nazi era in Germany with, for in-

¹ On the post-medieval reception of the eddas and the sagas in Europe see e.g.: Wawn (1994), (2000), (2005). On the rewriting of *Njáls saga* see e.g.: Helgason (1998), (1999), (2001).

stance, individual saga scholars defending Icelanders' exposure of infants in heathen times with reference to eugenics.²

But the tide had changed when Roberts published her work. In the post-war period the sagas have been celebrated primarily as remarkable works of art, even as milestones in the history of World Literature. "The best Icelandic Sagas," wrote Roberts (1961: viii) in her preface to *Fire in the Ice*, "approach the finest of modern novels, and are more closely related to them than to the European literature of their time." With this statement in mind, I intend to look briefly at four aspects of Roberts' rewriting: (1) her sense of history, (2) her sense of geography, (3) her sense of narration, and finally (4) her sense of audience. It turns out that her work, somewhat ironically, illustrates why and how the Icelandic sagas need to be rewritten to enter the realm of the modern novel.

First, however, I want to dwell briefly on the positive criticism *Fire in the Ice* attracted in the United States in the early 1960s.³ "The novel is one of those increasingly rare historicals that do not exploit history but contribute to our understanding of a time and a people," wrote P. A. Duhamel for the *New York Times Book Review*. His colleague writing for *Kirkus Reviews* struck a similar note, claiming that Roberts' novel was "almost obsessively concerned with the minutiae of a way of life. Granted a Kristin Lavransdatter as focus, it might do for ancient Iceland what Sigrid Undset's book did for Norway." Orville Prescott of *The New York Times* similarly found *Fire in the Ice* "somber and splendid", as Roberts had managed to "impose order on the disorderly mass of saga material", first by telling the saga from the point of view of one key character and then by eliminating "many irrelevant scenes, superfluous characters and tiresome genealogical pedigrees." For Prescott, the rewriting surpassed its defective Icelandic sources and could promptly replace them. It is worthwhile to explore his premises.

One of the great challenges in translating the Icelandic sagas in general is that their implied reader is indeed a medieval Icelander, or at least someone who knows the basics of Iceland's early history and culture. Accordingly, many saga translations have been buttressed with commentary on Iceland's settlement, its provincial organizations, public life, parliamentary procedures and the like. The most vivid example of this sort is the first English translation of *Njáls saga*, *The Story of Burnt Njal* translated by Sir George Webbe

² Cf. Bollason (1990: 89-100). On the reception of the eddas and sagas in twentieth-century Germany see e.g.: See (1970) and Zernack (1994).

³ All quotations from reviews of *Fire in the Ice* are from *Book Review Digest* (1962: 1197).

Dasent (1861). It was originally published in two volumes totaling around 900 pages. Of these, only 600 were devoted to the translation, and the rest to Dasent's preface, introduction and appendices, all of which were designed to prepare those who knew nothing about Iceland and its sagas.⁴ Even in children's versions like *The Story of Gunnar* by Beatrice E. Clay (1907: 24), one finds an introduction addressing issues such as the "dwellings of the medieval Icelanders" with explanations such as the following: "The homestead in which these people lived consisted of several buildings surrounded by the 'tun,' i.e. the enclosure or homefields."

Roberts (1961: 6) approaches this problem of the sagas' historical context in a different manner. An example from the opening of *Fire in the Ice* illustrates her method. The reader is introduced to Hallgerda when she is ten years old, sitting in her mother's "wool house" at the farm of Hoskuldstead. When she becomes tired, she is permitted to go outside:

Hallgerda wanted to run to her mother and kiss her, but kissing, like weeping, was a sign of her light mind. She followed the nurse outdoors and stopped to draw a breath.

Hoskuldstead stood above the Laxa River on the hill slope which made the southern side of the valley. Her father's seat was a cluster of buildings, the gabled fire hall, the home dairy, the stables and barns, the stout, locked storehouse, the wool house and loft above it which was used as the women's quarters. The long, narrow houses faced south, and were either built against each other or communicated by short paths and passages. All were constructed of blocks of porous lava rock, and to keep out the wind, their side walls were covered with thick slabs of turf, now grown over with brown-green autumn grass.

Apart from the first two sentences, this text might have been a part of an introduction, but being a novelist, Roberts simply unites plot and commentary. Generally, her historical data are fairly accurate and presented as a natural part of the narrative.

A different but related concern for non-Icelandic saga readers is the reality of Iceland's geography. In many modern editions and translations of the sagas, this reality is presented through maps and even illustrations and photographs that are to help the reader connect narrative and landscape. Ever since the 1860s, many authors of Icelandic travelogues have attempted to make the same connection. Here, the primary example is *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-*

⁴ For further discussion on Dasent's translation cf. Wawn (2000: 142-168) and Helgason (1999: 47-64).

Steeds of Iceland by painter W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson. This “picture book”, as Collingwood and Stefánsson (1899: v) explained in their preface, was designed to supply “the background of scenery” for some major Icelandic Family Sagas. The idea was to help “the modern reader, out of Iceland” to “stage these dramas, to visualise the action and events.” A whole chapter is devoted to the district where most of *Njáls saga* takes place, and another chapter to the field of Þingvellir where, as almost every Family Saga will illustrate, the medieval parliament gathered each summer.

Another example might be William Morris’s *Icelandic Journals*, in which the author describes a visit to Þingvellir in the summer of 1871. Morris (1996: 30) writes:

My heart beats, so please you, as we near the bow of the pass [...] for this is the heart of Iceland that we are going to see: nor was the reality of the sight unworthy; the pass showed long and winding from the brow, with jagged dark hills showing over the nearer banks of it as you went on, and betwixt them was an open space with a great unseen but imagined plain between you and the great lake that you saw glittering far away under huge peaked hills of bright blue with gray-green sky above them, Hengill the highest of them, from the hot spring on whose flank rose into the air a wavering column of show-white steam.

I have chosen this passage because a strikingly similar description occurs in *Fire in the Ice* when Roberts (1960: 238) describes Hallgerda’s visit to Þingvellir:

Yet in time they began to see the plain of Thingmeads over the pitch of the near hills. And now they perceived how the parliament site was ringed by mountains. To the south, rising above lesser eminencies, stood Hengill, crowned with an immaculate plume of steam. And far beyond Armansfell in the north brooded the snowy dome of Skjaldbreid. Above Mossfell Heath the road dropped into a smooth, grass-grown plain. The view shortened, and the lava abruptly ended.

Descriptions of this sort imply that *Fire in the Ice* is not only a disguised lesson in Iceland’s early history but also a travelogue written for people with limited knowledge of Iceland’s geography.

The third reason for the positive critical reception of *Fire in the Ice* is that Roberts transforms the impersonal and understated narrative style of the two sagas in accordance with the accepted poetics of the modern novel. Consistent with Henry James’ well-known discussion of ‘center of consciousness’

in *The Art of the Novel*, *Fire in the Ice* is written in the third person but primarily limited to the perspective of Hallgerda. The difference between the two styles is apparent in a dramatic scene set at Þingvellir as Hallgerda presents herself to her future husband, Gunnar of Hlíðarendi. In Magnus Magnusson's and Hermann Pálsson's (1960: 93) popular translation of *Njáls saga* from 1960, the story goes like this:

One day, as he was walking from the Law Rock, Gunnar went down past the Mosfell booth. There he saw some well-dressed women coming towards him; the one in the lead was the best dressed of all. As they met, this woman at once greeted Gunnar. He made a friendly reply, and asked her who she was. She said her name was Hallgerd.

The events are being reported here as seen by someone who is following Gunnar and is able to listen to his and Hallgerd's conversation. In Roberts' (1961: 245) novel, however, we follow Hallgerda as she tricks some young women to walk with her toward Gunnar's quarters, and also enter her cunning mind.

"Come with us, Hallgerda," said one of them.

"Not I, I'm not interested in catching any man's eye."

"But you're a married woman, you – you will –"

"Protect you? I suppose it wouldn't be suitable for you just to run out and stare. I'll go for your sakes."

They were delighted to be involved in a romantic plot, especially with a woman their mothers did not approve of. "Don't giggle and give him flirtatious looks," she cautioned them. "We must seem to be enjoying a little stroll in the air."

They were childishly awkward and obvious. She moved among them gravely, thinking, if girls between fourteen and seventeen realized their gifts, if they could learn to walk, avoid grimaces, be mindful that light reflects on smooth hair but makes wool of hair allowed to bounce about their heads, what luck would even beautiful older women have?

They approached Gunnar. Hallgerda let her eyes show a flicker of surprise.

"What woman are you?" Gunnar said.

This passage gives an idea of Roberts' narrative control. The sentence "Hallgerda *let her eyes show a flicker of surprise*," for instance, carries a meaning quite different from "Hallgerda's eyes showed a flicker of surprise" that would be closer to the traditional saga style.

Finally, Roberts' implied audience is culturally different from the medieval implied reader of the original sagas. At the beginning of this essay, I intro-

duced Hallgerda, as portrayed in *Fire in the Ice*, in an alcoholic, adulterous state of mind, but another depiction might be found in her conversation with her brother, Olaf Peacock, at the end of Robert's (1961: 317) novel. Gunnar has been killed and Hallgerda is a widow for the third time. Olaf asks her how she is doing:

"Me, I am getting old." But she watched him, to see denial in his eyes.

"This fate overtakes us all in time."

"Though I am hardly gray," she added.

"I do not see a single gray hair."

"Why did you say I was getting old, then?"

He laughed at her. "I did not say it, you did."

"But you agreed with me."

Conversations of this sort were probably the primary source of annoyance for the critic who reviewed *Fire in the Ice* for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He or she complained that Roberts' portrait of Hallgerda fused "elements of past and present, and in spite of the author's best efforts, the alloy does not ring true. Hallgerda's thoughts and motivations are not quite those of a modern woman, and seem likewise to be not quite those of an Icelandic woman of a thousand years ago". I am inclined to agree with the critic on this issue, but such an analysis needs qualification. In my view, every modern reading of the Icelandic sagas, even in the original language, is bound to fuse elements of past and present, as the reading is shaped by the reader's background, including age and gender. From this perspective, *Fire in the Ice* highlights our general tendency to comprehend literature through terms and forms that correspond to our personal experiences and various contemporary cultural conventions.

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