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Pattern in Part VI of Karlamagnús saga: a Comparison of
the Analogues, Translation, and Revision

When the compilation of translated material from the Charlemagne cycle of the chansons de geste we know as the Karlamagnús saga was made, the translator, or compiler, made a great many major and minor changes in his material to shape it into a prose narrative. Not only was he faced with the problems any translator or adaptor has in turning poetry in one language into prose in another, he was amalgamating originally separate poems into a continuous narrative which had to hang together in a reasonably logical sequence. In so doing he suppressed some (although not all) of the details in one section which conflicted with those in another and, notably in the case of Part IV, "King Agulandus," put together quite different accounts which he took to refer to the same sequence of events. Carol Clover has recently demonstrated that many of the saga's additions, deletions, and re-arrangements were not errors in translation, or the result of a slightly different textual basis from that to be observed in extant French analogues, but the inevitable result of conscious artistic choice.

Clover does not, however, discriminate between the two versions of the saga itself. The text of Part VII, Runzivals þáttur, which she analyzes is that printed by Unger, which, in this section, is basically ms. a, the only manuscript of the earlier A₁a version available in nearly complete form here, but into which Unger inserted

a number of readings from the later B₂b version, when they seemed more likely to represent the original text, as well as corrections based on a fragment of earlier date than ms. a. For Clover's purposes the differences between the earlier and later versions were not significant in this part of the saga. Overall, however, there are a great many differences between the A₂a and B₂b versions, which can hardly lack significance for the student of the saga in general. The B-redactor's tastes are often apparent in the changes he made, few of which are predictable rhetorical rearrangements of the sort which brings translated material closer to the norms of "saga style." Sweeping basic adjustments in this direction of the kinds Clover has discussed had already been made in the A₂a version. In this respect, Part VI of the saga, offers a particularly interesting case for analysis.

Otuels þáttur is a section for which we have a number of close analogues, not only in French (that is, Anglo-Norman) but also in slightly later Middle English and Welsh versions which preserve features in common with the Norse which are missing in the Anglo-Norman. There is a promising variety of mss. of the saga itself here, aside from the fact that the section begins in the middle of a long lacuna in B, for where B is available it usually agrees almost exactly with b, and we have not only A and a but a number of segments in a fragment which appears to represent an older version of the A-group, Fr2, as well as the account in the Danish Karl Magnus Krónike. In the early chapters of this section the revisions cuts--which, because of the ample material available for comparison, are often clearly identifiable as just that, which is not always the case in other parts of the saga--are not notably extensive. However, as the section

progresses it becomes more and more apparent that what is happening here is not the rather minimal revision characteristic of some other sections.

By about Chapter 9, the cutting and condensing becomes more pronounced. The A₁a version had already cut the material significantly: the duel scenes which, in a real sense, initiate and conclude the action are much shorter than in the French versions and the last chapter is a dramatic condensation which skips over around a thousand lines of the poem. But this was obviously not enough cutting to suit the B-redactor. The first really drastic cut is Chapter 13: which is completely omitted. From here on a number of chapters are cut to a one- or two-sentence summary, for example, chapters 22, 23, and 24. Most of the others have so many cuts and condensations that the notes indicating these excisions are bound to predominate over other notes in any annotated edition. The last half of Chapter 17 is omitted, as is almost two-thirds of Chapter 19 and the last quarter of Chapter 21.

The contemporary reader may sympathize wholeheartedly with what must appear to be impatience with his material on the part of the redactor (and the original compiler, for that matter). After reading the preceding sections of the saga, we may be thoroughly weary of flyting matches between combatants and battle scenes which are prolonged by new and massive troops of heathen reinforcements which enter every time the French seem to be gaining the upper hand. We are most especially apt to be put off by the sort of carnage and spectacular destruction seen in the duel scenes, where horses are mercilessly slaughtered and the ground is littered with dozens of jewels the opponents hack from each other's valuable armour. But we

must remember that our ancestors, far from finding this tale tedious, apparently valued it highly, especially in England. Of the ten extant metrical Charlemagne romances in Middle English, for example, half either deal extensively with Otuel or at least mention him.

The key to the success of this particular tale is, without question, the very duel scenes modern readers may find most distasteful. Otuel is an example of that familiar figure, frequent in the chansons de geste, the converted heathen warrior who is subsequently useful to the Christian (French) cause. Another notable example is the Chanson d'Aspremont's 'Balán,' who, called 'Balam,' plays a significant part in Part IV of the saga. Such converted heathens can be seen as foils to the other type of heathen champion, the men who remain obstinately unconvertible, such as Aspremont's 'Eumon,' the saga's 'Jamund,' of whom it is remarked that "if this man had been a Christian, no better man would ever have been born into the world." Balán/Balam does not kill Eumon/Jamund: the latter is finished off by Roland/Rollant after a longish fight with Charlemagne/Karlamagnús himself.

The significant feature of the Otinel/Otuel narrative, however, is just this confrontation of the two types. Hence, the crucial structural symmetry of the two duel scenes. Early in the narrative, the first heathen champion (Otuel) battles the greatest French champion, Rollant, a duel which ends in the miraculous conversion of the heathen. Just before the end of the tale the two heathens, Otuel, now a convert, and Klares, the "if he had only been a Christian" type, meet explicitly as champions of the two faiths, and, of course, the convert slays the stubborn adherent of heathendom.

But this structural symmetry is somewhat obscured in the French poem, Otinel, by the long-drawn-out skirmishing which follows the second duel. Thus it looks as if the saga translators and compilers were rejecting the material of Otinel not so much because of weariness with battles and the like as because the lengthy unwinding is actually anti-climactic and obscures the significance of the essential scene in which the power of the Christian cause is triumphantly indicated. But, of course, this had already been done when the A-version cut out most of the ending of the poem. The question may remain whether the B-redactor consolidated the gains achieved by his predecessor(s) or not.

If we look carefully at the sections which have been most reduced in the B-version, it appears that the answer has to be no. The four chapters which are, there, either completely omitted or reduced to a sentence or two are all important background for that second duel. Chapter 13 introduces the unregenerate heathen champion, Klares, with a group of companions who serve as foils to him: he must, of course, seem the best possible defender of the heathen cause. Chapters 22 through 24 are those which intervene between the challenge and the duel itself; they contain descriptions of the arming of the two champions and a passage in which Klares expresses to Karlamagnús his defiance and confidence that he will win. They have clear artistic purpose, for they balance and echo the sequence of scenes leading up to the earlier duel between Otuel and Rollant. These points do not seem to have impressed the B-redactor. The duel chapter itself is not quite so abbreviated, but it is still rather more cut down than one would think it would

have been if the redactor had seen its significance.

Of the remaining large cuts, the shortening of Chapter 19 eliminates a good deal of a battle sequence; the A-version had already condensed this section and made many omissions in the sequence of battle scenes, which are scarcely the core of the narrative. But the other notable omissions and shortenings all seem to indicate that the redactor did not appreciate another aspect of literary structure here. The omitted last half of Chapter 17 deals with the courteous way in which the Saracen princess received Oddgier, who had been taken prisoner by her fiancé, Klares. That the messengers dispatched with the French prisoner brought ominous tidings of heathen reversals did not upset the princess's exquisite courtesy. The redactor probably found this segment redundant because the A-version had not preserved the lengthy account of the dealings between Ogiar and the princess which are a feature of the French text, and, thus, the princess no longer played an important part in the plot.

In omitting the last quarter of Chapter 21, B₁b skips a scene between Otuel and the French princess; b, the only B-version ms. available for the first six chapters, has already cut the role of the French princess slightly in Chapter 6. Some of the B₁b cuts in Chapter 9 are from the details of the betrothal of Otuel and this princess, and one cut in Chapter 12 concerns the knights travelling in her entourage. These changes, like the reduction of the role of the Saracen princess, seem to indicate that the redactor did not see much point in the role of the women in this narrative. He cannot be very much blamed for failing to grasp a pattern here

because it is not all that clearly apparent in the A-version, which has already cut much of the ending; but then it is rather obscure in the French, too. The point seems to be linked to the principle set of parallels and contrasts involving Otuel and Klares, who are betrothed to the two princesses. Early in the action, the French princess had received Otuel, still very much a heathen enemy, just as courteously as her Saracen counterpart was to receive Oddgeir: thus the ladies, too, are parallels and foils to each other.

Looking at the overall treatment of the B-version of Part VI, then, we cannot congratulate the B-redactor on his literary sensitivity. It is at least possible that the A₂ compiler had a much better understanding of what he was about here. The result is in stark contrast to that of the only one of the seven sections where comparison of the two versions is possible which has been even more changed, Part IV, where the revision of the B-version served to bring out its central theme with clarity and force.

As a whole, the work of the B-redactor emerges as that of a competent and sensible writer who eliminated details which were of no help to the artistic purposes of the saga, insofar as the purposes of the saga are clear, and who was enough of a scholar to be able to draw on various other materials in making his revision. He could write a dignified (if sometimes a bit over-stately) prose when he wished to, as in the sections of Part IV based on the Pseudo-Turpin chronicle, but he usually revised more in the direction of "saga style," as in "there was a man called . . ."

But: despite some clear improvement effected in various parts of the saga, where more logic, order, and clarity were indeed needed,

he was not always equipped with enough literary sensitivity to appreciate the function of details which, even given the entirely different atmosphere of Norse saga as against French chanson de geste, contribute significantly to the literary shape of the narrative. Part VI is the most notable example of dubious judgment here, but there are others. In Part VIII, the omission of the offers of Rollant, Oliver, and Turpin to undertake the dangerous embassy to Marsilius is signal. While others have commented that many of the changes in this section tend to blacken the character of Guinelun, the A-version, by retaining those speeches, makes Guinelun's cowardice and malice all the more obvious, whereas in the B,b revision one might assume that anyone else might have reacted the same way given the dangerous circumstances and the apparent enmity between Guinelun and Rollant.

It may give some pause to those of us who are admirers of the structural symmetries, contrasts and parallels, and delicate ironies of the sagas to note that this apparently serious, educated, sensible Icelandic, working with a subject for which he obviously felt a general piety and respect, was in the cases discussed here--and no doubt in some others--apparently blind to just such symmetries, contrasts and parallels, and delicate ironies in the text which he edited and revised.

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