

FIOLKUNNIGRI KONO SCALATTU I FADMI SOFA

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It is a commonplace in saints' lives for the saint to be tempted by beautiful women, or demons in that form; indeed, from many medieval sermons and *exempla* one receives the impression that sex, women, and the devil are merely different forms of the same thing. Medieval Scandinavia had a tradition of supernatural women onto which this motif could easily be grafted; it did not, however, take over the traditional identification of sin with women. This paper examines the way in which motifs of demonic possession and/or sexual temptation were used in a number of sagas whose protagonists are saints, and the messages they conveyed.

While most of my examples will come from the sagas of saints, the most blatant example of the traditional European attitude is found in *Yngvar's saga vidförla*; after warning his men against the local women, when Yngvar himself is approached by one of them, he stabs her in the genitals. Some of his men also succeed in driving the women away, but others "could not withstand their blandishments on account of devilish sorcery, and lay with them", introducing a fatal plague into Yngvar's army (1). It is worth noting that Yngvar has already rejected, at least temporarily, the person and kingdom of queen Silkisif, and that is subsequently considered by her to be a saint.

Such passages can only have originated in a clerical, most likely monastic, environment, such as that at Thingeyrar monastery; the attribution of the saga (at least in its original form) to the monk Oddr is by no means unlikely. Another saga associated with the monastery of Thingeyrar containing explicit condemnations of activities that might lead to sex is that of St. Jón of Hólar, first bishop of the northern diocese. The original Latin *vita* was composed soon after Jón was declared a saint (1200), and is generally considered to reflect the ideas of that period rather than those of Jón's own lifetime (+ 1121). Bishop Jón is described as discouraging lascivious behaviour such as love-songs and dancing, and he is very short with a student he catches reading Ovid. There is also an example of temptation by a demon:

"A man called Sveinn Thorsteinsson was so horribly bewitched by the devil that he nearly cast off his faith and forgot all the morality Christians should follow, and it came about in the following way. He went mad on account of a monster, which appeared to him to be an exceedingly beautiful woman, and she was able to madden him so that he didn't

want to have anything to do with other people, and went around as if lost in thought, and paid no attention to his needs. But by the mercy of God almighty, who does not desire the destruction of any of his people, but rather desires to help them all, this man was brought to the Holy Bishop Jón; that was when he was newly come to the see. The Blessed Bishop Jón received him warmly and cheerfully, led him into the church and closed the doors. He began to ask him carefully about what happened, and then incited him continually to repent. And with his holy admonitions, this young man began to confess, and told the Holy Bishop Jón sincerely about everything, about all the deceits and ambushes of the devil in which he had been entangled." (2)

Sveinn's symptoms - isolation and lack of interest in his surroundings - correspond to the possible effects of sleeping with a witch as described in stanza 114 of Hávamál: "sleep not in the arms of a sorceress . . . she will cause you not to care for assemblies nor speech with princes; you will not desire food, nor joy from anyone, sorrowful you will go to sleep." (3)

It is noteworthy that in this episode the saint cures, rather than undergoing, the temptation, which appears in the context of Jón's eradication of remnants of pagan belief.

The role of human sexual activity is more pronounced in an account from the middle of the thirteenth century, which emphasized that the occurrence was unprecedented in Christian times.:

"A girl baby was born at a farm called at Eyjar, north of Kalladarnes. Two people, a man and a woman, were appointed to take it to be baptized at Stað in Steingrimsfjörð, because at that time there was no church at Kalladarnes. And when they came to Miklasteinn, they lay down, and she put down the child, and he lay with her. And when they came to the child, it appeared to them dead and evil-looking, and they left it there; and when they had come a short distance they heard a child crying, and followed the sound, and it appeared to them even worse than before, and they didn't dare to come near it; then they went home, and told precisely what happened. People went to look for the child, and didn't find it; but a little later a woman appeared there, not

beautiful in appearance, because she sometimes seemed to have a seal's head; for that reason she was called Selkolla ("seal-head"). People understood from this that an unclean spirit had entered the body of the child, and that fiend could be seen by day as well as by night. . . . A farmer was called Dálkr Thórisson, he lived at Hafnarhólm in Steingrímsfjörðr when these events took place; he was a craftsman, and considered a popular man . . . One day when the farmer, who was fond of women, was alone putting his boat into the boathouse, it appeared to him that his wife came into the boathouse, and he began to caress her, for they were accustomed to such sport. Now he lay with this woman (no less a fiend than a woman, sent to him to cause shame to him and harm to others), and when they parted he thought that it wasn't his wife but rather the unclean spirit, Selkolla. He headed home, but Selkolla wouldn't part from him, and he was completely exhausted when he came home, and unlike a human being, but confessed and told what had happened to him. Then he lay in his bed, and people had to guard him from Selkolla night and day." (4)

Eventually the demon was disposed of by the priest and future saint, Guðmundr Arason.

Both these episodes appear to reflect traditional beliefs about supernatural possession/attack; the main difference between them is that in the second, the demon is created - and subsequently gains power over its victim - as a result of inappropriate sexual activity.

Two other "temptation miracles" from the sagas of kings deal with human, rather than demonic, women. (5) They also reverse the traditional roles of seducer and victim. The first, contained in the saga of Magnús Olafsson in *Morkinskinna*, probably dates from the late 12th or early 13th century. It describes a posthumous appearance of St. Olaf to prevent his son, Magnús, from sleeping with an unwilling woman.

The episode is a literary tour-de-force, playing off the audience's expectations based on traditional mythology. When the heroine has been left alone in bed to wait for Magnús, there are three knocks on the door. A hooded man enters. In a *fornaldarsaga*, a mysterious hooded figure who appears like this can only be one person - the god

Odin. It is not until the end of the scene that we learn that the stranger was in fact St. Olaf (6).

This story may possibly have influenced an episode in *Knytlinga saga*, which should perhaps be described as an *exemplum* rather than a miracle story. Its protagonist is the future St. Knút of Denmark, who is portrayed in the saga as rooting out the heathen way of life.

"One time king Knut was travelling around the country with his court he was received with a noble feast. On the first evening of the feast the king saw a fair woman, and thought he had never seen one more beautiful. She was married to a rich priest. The king sent loving looks towards her. He called his steward to him and said that he should arrange that this woman be in the royal bed that night. No one dared to say anything against the king's will, much less do anything, and it was done as the king ordered. During the evening the king was led to bed, and this same woman was already there. And when the king was undressed, he climbed up into the bed. When people had served him, as the custom was, they went away, and the king lay down and turned blithely toward her. She said to him: "God protect you, lord, now and always. Do that which befits your rank. Don't do anything which will harm both me and you. And as you are so fairly improving the morals of other people in this country, it behooves you to have the best morals, because you are the foremost person in the country. Now I will pray that when you come before the King who is all-powerful, that he will respond to your prayer as you to mine." The king answers: "I will grant you your prayer, because I see that you request it with great good-will, and that which you want is more fitting. And although it requires a certain amount of restraint not to do one's will at the present moment, it is a small thing beside that which our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for our sake." Then the king stood up and went away and found another bed for the night." (7)

Making a woman the protagonist and the future saint the would-be fornicator turns the traditional hagiographic motif on its head.

Most interesting, to me, is the emphasis in this passage on good morals (*sifir*). In the

singular, this word can mean "religion" or "faith," and good morals are almost by definition Christian ones. In the first examples I cited, the demonic element is explicitly associated with paganism; in Magnús saga, the intention of an overbearing king is prevented by a Christian saint, and *Knytlinga* explicitly points out that sexual morality is an important component of the Christian faith.

It is undoubtedly significant that both this *exemplum* and the miracle of St. Olaf deal with kings, whose uncurbed sexuality could endanger the peace by producing numerous claimants to the throne, as had happened repeatedly during the twelfth century. (8) It may also be pointed out that kings were at the top of the social pyramid - Icelanders liked to trace their genealogy to them - and warrior saints like Olaf and Knút (or, for that matter, Yngvar) might provide more appealing role-models than ascetics like Thorlák and Guðmundr (9).

There is evidence suggesting that literature might be put to use for didactic purposes. Jochens has argued that the depiction of monogamous marriages and references to a woman's being asked for her consent to a marriage serve this purpose (10). At the saga-conference in Spoleto three years ago, Bjarni Guðnason pointed out passages in which revenge and violence are treated as characteristic of heathen belief; when the author of *Hungrvaka* wishes to illustrate the superficiality of Christianity during the term of bishop Isleifr, the two examples he cites concern the sexual relations of the law-speaker and the fact that Icelanders still went on viking expeditions (11).

I would argue that the passages I have discussed also illustrate a conscious attempt on the part of some thirteenth-century Icelandic authors to identify improper sexual activity with the pagan past.

#### Footnotes

1) *Yngvar's saga vídförla*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* vol. II (Reykjavík:1950) pp. 445-6.

2) *Biskupa Sögur*, Hið íslenska Bókmentafélag, (Copenhagen:1858) vol. I pp. 170-71. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

3) "Hávamál", verses 113-114. *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 5th ed. revised by Hans Kuhn, (Heidelberg:1983) p. 35.

- 4) *Biskupa Sögur*, Hið íslenska Bókmentafélag, (Copenhagen:1858) vol. I pp. 604-5.
- 5) There are a number of sinning women in the miracle collections of Icelandic saints, the best known of whom is Rannveig, in the saga of Guðmundr Arason, who experiences an otherworld vision in which she is punished for vanity and sleeping with two priests. (*Biskupa Sögur*, Hið íslenska Bókmentafélag, (Copenhagen:1858) vol. I p. 452.) Otherwise sinning women are not noticeably more common - or more sinful - than sinning men, nor are they assigned the role of temptress. Sinners of both sexes are usually identified when a saint appears in a dream and informs them that their sufferings are punishment for their misdeeds. None of these stories is concerned with any sort of spiritual conflict; they deal rather with the importance of obedience to the bishop and conformity with rules of the church. See *Byskupa sogur* ed. Jón Helgason vol. 2, Editiones Arnarnáttúru Series A vol. 13,2 (Copenhagen:1978) J #6, C # 107, 159, 171).
- 6) *Morkinskinna*, ed. C. R. Unger, (Christiania:1867), pp. 33-35.
- 7) *Danakonunga Sogur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Hið íslenska Fornritafélag vol. XXXV (Reykjavík:1982) pp. 149-50.
- 8) For discussion of the problem and strategies for dealing with it see Jenny Jochens, "The Politics of Reproduction: Medieval Norwegian Kingship," *American Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (April, 1987) pp. 327-49.
- 9) In Archbishop Eysteinn's letter criticizing the Icelanders for their laxity, the most prominent chieftains are singled out for criticism. One of them, Jón Loptsson, was in fact related to the Norwegian royal family. *Diplomatarium Islandicum* vol. I pp. 262-4.
- 10) Jochens, Jenny, "The Church and sexuality in medieval Iceland," *Journal of Medieval History* 6 (1980), pp. 377-92, and "The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?" *Viator* 17 (1986) pp. 35-50.
- 11) *Biskupa Sögur*, Hið íslenska Bókmentafélag, (Copenhagen:1858) vol. I p. 62.