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Diet, Defecation and the Devil: Disgust and the Pagan Past

[D]isgust arises from the fetid ooze of what I call life soup, the roiling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot and regeneration. Yet even in the midst of unpleasant sensation, of bodies and their wastes and orifices, the larger cultural and moral orderings intrude and animate the ooze with spirit

W. I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 18.

[There is] a path of development in individuals and cultures that extends from a presumed origin of disgust as a rejection response to bad tastes, in the service of protecting the body, to the full range of elicitors listed above, more appropriately described as in the service of protecting the soul.

P. Rozin, J. Haidt, C. R. McCauley, 'Disgust', p. 637.

Introduction

This paper makes use of the concept of 'moralization', identified by psychologist of emotion Paul Rozin.¹ Rozin suggests that the emotion of disgust can be transferred from somatic elicitors, such as bad smells, bad tastes, and excretion to a moral domain which has no obvious connection to the physical.² Moralization will be invoked to suggest how the medieval church may have utilised disgust to stigmatise apparently harmless but relentlessly pagan habits of mind. A close reading of two *þættir* from the late fourteenth-century *Life of Óláfr Tryggvason* in *Flateyjarbók* will show how moralization works, primarily through the operation of metonymy, to persuade the audience that uncritical listening to stories of the heroes of the pagan past may be dangerous to the soul. At the same time as Rozin was isolating 'moralization' in the later 90s, Bill Miller's influential book, *The Anatomy of Disgust* appeared, following a parallel trajectory. Miller notes: 'disgust has other powerful communalizing capacities and is especially useful and necessary as a builder of moral and social community'.³ Though both Miller and Rozin are interested in the capacity of disgust to 'build ... moral and social community', neither specifies the kind of mechanism by which a previously unstigmatized practice becomes disgusting. Rozin suggests as a preliminary requirement: 'the growth of a large or politically powerful collection of individuals who accept and promote such a moralization' – the politics of the lobby group.⁴ Historically, the largest and most influential lobby group Western Europe has ever seen has been the Christian church. Both Bede and Ari suggest that the Church was quickly successful in extirpating many practices associated with pagan ritual and belief in both Anglo-Saxon England and Iceland: in

¹ See P. Rozin, J. Haidt, C. R. McCauley, 'Disgust: The Body and Soul Emotion', in *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, ed. T. Dalgleish and M. J. Power (Chichester, 1999) pp. 429-445 and P. Rozin, J. Haidt, C. R. McCauley, 'Disgust', in *Handbook of Emotions*, ed. M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones et al. 2nd edn (New York, 2000), pp. 637-653.

² Most pertinent to the concept of moralization: P. Rozin, 'The Process of Moralization', *Psychological Science* 10.3 (1999), 218-221. P. Rozin, 'Moralization', in *Morality and Health*, ed. A. Brandt and P. Rozin (New York, 1997), pp. 379-401.

³ W. I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge MA., 1997), p. 194

⁴ P. Rozin, 'Moralization', p. 383.

England the eating of horse-meat (still under some degree of taboo in Britain today), in Iceland sacrifice and the exposure of infants.

One habit which appears to have been hard to break however, so apparently harmless and so deeply culturally-ingrained, was uncritical listening to stories of the pagan past, celebrating the heroic feats of Germanic ancestors. Beyond Alcuin's famous rebuke to the monks of Lindisfarne: 'Quis Hiniieldius cum Christo?' ('What does Ingeld have to do with Christ?') made in 797, we know little of Anglo-Saxon attitudes to pagan story-telling.⁵ The relative absence of such narratives in the Anglo-Saxon corpus may point to proscription; the survival of *Beowulf* may in part be dependent on its relatively nuanced attitude towards the fates of its pagan heroes.⁶ While uncritical nostalgia for the pagan past may have been eliminated in Anglo-Saxon culture, Scandinavian sources indicate that the habit of listening to tales of the past died hard. Rozin's concept of moralization suggests how curiosity about, and nostalgia for, the pagan past may have been replaced by aversion to unmediated pagan material, an aversion produced by juxtaposition of pagan story-telling with two elicitors of disgust: corrupted food and excrement. I shall focus on two *Þættir* from the *Longer saga of Óláfr Tryggvason* contained in *Flateyjarbók*, compiled between 1387-1395.⁷ The late date of the manuscript dictates that we can by no means use it as a guide to late tenth-century thinking, but rather as indicative of how the fourteenth century thought moralization might have occurred in the Conversion period.

King Ógvaldr and the sacred cow

The first of the two stories, 'The King and the Guest' may be summarised briefly. It belongs to a familiar story pattern, found elsewhere with some variation in this and in other lives of Óláfr Tryggvason, notably in *Heimskringla*.⁸ In the *Flateyjarbók* version, an old one-eyed man, wearing a low-brimmed hat (both Odinic characteristics), appears as a guest in the hall at Ógvaldsness where the king is staying one Easter. In response to the king's questioning, the guest tells him about the old days, giving details of Ógvaldr, the pagan warrior-king for whom the locality was named, and his sacred cow.⁹ The guest keeps the king up late; the bishop has to remind the king twice that it is time to go to sleep. After a brief doze the king wants to talk to the guest again, but he has disappeared. Investigation reveals that the guest had visited the kitchens the day before, made disparaging remarks about the quality of the meat there, and had donated two fine sides of beef for the king's feast. The king orders the meat to be burned and thrown into

⁵ 'Letter to Speratus', *Alcuini Epistolae*, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH Aevi Carolini. (Berlin, 1895), II, 183.

⁶ See L. Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41, (1969), 1-29; for a summary of the debate about the status of the *Beowulf* characters, see E. B. Irving, Jr., 'Christian and Pagan Elements', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles. (Exeter, 1996), pp. 175-92.

⁷ Text cited from *Flateyjarbók* ed. S. Nordal, 4 vols. (Akranes, 1944-5). I. 'The king and the guest', pp. 417-8; *Þáttur Þorsteins skelks*, pp. 462-4. On the *Flateyjarbók Þættir* see S. Würth, *Elemente des Erzählens: Die Þættir des Flateyjarbók*, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie 20 (Basel, 1991). On *Þættir* as a genre, see J. Lindov, 'Old Icelandic Þáttir: Early Usage and Semantic History', *Scripta Islandica* 29 (1978), 3-44; J. Harris, 'Genre and Narrative Structure in some Icelandic Þættir', *Scandinavian Studies* 44 (1972), 1-27; and J. Harris, 'Theme and Genre in some Icelandic Þættir', *Scandinavian Studies* 48 (1976), 1-28.

⁸ The tale is also found in Snorri, *Heimskringla*, I, pp. 312-14, where it follows the adventure of Eyvindr and the sorcerers. Snorri identifies the 'gestr' as Ódin himself, not as the devil in the form of Ódin, as the *Flateyjarbók* author does. For discussion of this type of story, see J. Harris and T.D. Hill, 'Gestr's "Prime Sign": Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttur*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989), 103-22.

⁹ King Ógvaldr, though not his cow, appears also in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, ed. H. Seelow, *Rit* 20 (Reykjavík, 1981), p. 170.

the sea: 'eigi skal fjandinn svá svikja oss, at nokkurr minna manna eti hans eitrfulla fæðu' (the fiend shall not so deceive us that some of my men may eat his poisonous provisions). Óláfr suspects that the visitor was the devil, in the guise of Óðinn, intending to make him oversleep and miss divine service. The same day a magical attack by Eyvindr *kelda*, an enemy employing a number of sorcerers, is divinely foiled; the unnatural darkness they conjure up serves only to bewilder them so that they wander about in circles. The king comments at length on the power of God against both the devil in Odinic form and the sorcerers, has all his opponents, who refuse nonetheless to convert to Christianity, shipped to a nearby skerry and drowned at high tide. Óláfr breaks open the two burial mounds on the headland, where human and cattle, bones are discovered, thus effecting a kind of exorcism, and departs.

Notable in this story is the indirection with which the author treats the pagan practices of the past. The king lays himself open to temptation by evincing curiosity about king Ögvaldr; the guest obliges by stating that he was a 'hermaðr mikill' (a great fighter) and that he was accompanied by his sacred cow wherever he went, that he drank its milk, and that this gave rise to a proverb, presumably still current, that man and cow should go together, 'allt skal fara saman, karl ok kýr'. At Ögvaldr's death, he and the cow were honoured together with the erection of memorial stones over their burial mounds. The guest himself maintains some critical distance when rehearsing these facts: Ögvaldr is said to have believed that drinking the cow's milk was auspicious, though this is not endorsed by the guest. Nor does the cow appear to have protected Ögvaldr in his final battle against king Dixin, presumably by the usual panic-inducing bellowing. However, the currency of the proverb ('at margir menn hafa') appears to endorse Ögvaldr's behaviour. The king craves more of this kind of talk: 'konungi þótti orðs vant, er annat var talat' (he thought that other subjects of conversation were less satisfying); the guest sits on his bed and chats to him, until the bishop reminds him of the need for sleep. When he wakes again, the king's first thought is to call for his interlocutor, who is now missing; fortunately, perhaps, for it is time for mass.

The tale opposes two different kinds of discourse, the intriguing and in some ways addictive tales of the pagan past, of kings, battles and cult animals, and the singing of divine service in the Christian present, to which the bishop recalls the king by his repeated interventions. Yet the king intuitively knows that the diabolical attack is not over, and that his cooks must be interrogated before they get much further in the food preparation for the Easter feast. Sure enough, the Odinic visitor has been in the kitchens, denigrating the quality of contemporary meat, and offering a tasty and high-quality alternative. We infer that the sides of meat he supplies are, in some way, derived from the long-dead cult cow of king Ögvaldr, made to look 'feitar ok digrar' (fat and meaty). The king's curiosity about the pagan past has exposed him and all his men to the risk of the worst form of diabolic food-poisoning during the Easter feast.

A Devil in the Priory

The second tale, *Þátr Þorsteins skelks*, unique to Flateyjarbók, is broadly humorous in tone, drawing, as Óláfr remarks, on the familiar stereotype of the independent-minded Icelander who takes risks and disobeys the king, yet who proves his courage and devotion, and is consequently cherished by the monarch.¹⁰ Apparently sensing diabolical forces in the offing, Óláfr commands that no one visit the

¹⁰ For discussion of this story in terms of narratives of the supernatural, see J. Lindow, 'Þorsteins Þátr skelks and the verisimilitude of supernatural experience in saga literature', in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. J. Lindow, L. Lönnroth and G. W. Weber, Viking Collection 3 (Odense, 1986) pp. 264-80.

privy alone in the night after an evening of heavy drinking. Þorsteinn the Icelander wakes up, has not the heart to rouse his bunk-mate, and so creeps out to the magnificent twenty-two-seater privy alone. He has been sitting there for a little while on the seat closest to the door when a demon pops up through the innermost seat. The revenant turns out to be a heathen warrior, one Þorkell the thin, who had fought in battle with the pagan Danish king Haraldr *hilditönn*. John Lindow characterises Haraldr as 'an unsavoury character, a cantankerous old monarch who finally fell to Odin himself'.¹¹ Haraldr *hilditönn* is obviously no Óláfr Tryggvason. Þorsteinn engages the demon in conversation about hell, and learns that even men as brave as Sigurðr and Starkaðr are yelling in torment there. Þorsteinn makes an excellent straight man: when he hears that Sigurðr's torment is to kindle an oven, he remarks that that doesn't sound so bad. "Eigi er þat þó .. því að hann er sjálf kyndarinn" (It is ... if you're the kindling), quips the demon. Likewise, Starkaðr is in fire up to his ankles. Þorsteinn thinks that doesn't sound too bad either. The demon's punch-line, that Starkaðr is upside-down, has perfect comic timing. Realising that he is likely to be dragged down to join these heroes, via the privy, Þorsteinn persuades the demon to imitate Starkaðr's howls. The noise is bad enough to induce unconsciousness, and with each of three howls the demon springs closer by three seats. Þorsteinn somehow endures until at the last minute – after the third howl and with the demon now positioned next to him – the church bells suddenly begin to ring. The fiend vanishes, and Þorsteinn is saved. With the Icelander's habitual insouciance, he admits the next morning to the king that he had disobeyed orders, that he had ingeniously induced the howling in order to wake the king, in the hope of rescue, and that he had not been particularly frightened, though with the final unconsciousness-inducing howl he concedes that something like a shudder had run up his spine. Þorsteinn is given a nickname, *Þorsteinn skell* ('shudder'), is presented with a fine sword, and he serves the king until the day of his death and Óláfr's disappearance at the battle of Svölör.

This story is less homiletic than the story of the king and the guest, where the king, once he has grasped the situation, takes the opportunity to expatiate at length on the deviousness of the devil and the power of Christ. Here the dominant tone is comic: the repartee between Þorsteinn and his near-namesake Þorkell the thin, is beautifully timed. However, the comedy plays also with ideas of terror; the trip to the privy in darkness lays one open to supernatural forces, visiting a place which is both necessary and unwholesome, a building which is separate from yet part of the farm. This privy is a gateway to hell; the revenant – *draugr* – claims to have come straight from there. The hell he describes is a place of fire and unbearable noise, not, as we might expect, a cesspit of filth and corruption. Yet, I suggest, the story taps into an understanding that above and below are not so dissimilar. What Lars Lönnroth has called the 'dubbla scenan' effect,¹² the identification of the place where the audience (Þorsteinn) is situated with the place narrated (hell), contributes an immediacy which conveys a kind of truth. Þorsteinn's interest in the pagan old days is purely theoretical; his pagans are already detached from the apparatus of the heroic and pagan past of battles, burial mounds and cult animals, and are in their proper place in hell, where their heroic endurance avails them nothing. The narrator of the *Þáttur* tellingly juxtaposes the warrior of the past, who fell in battle with the disreputable and pagan hero-king Haraldr *hilditönn*, and the warrior of the present, who will fall in battle with the Christian hero-king Óláfr.

¹¹ Lindow, *Þorsteins Þáttur*, p. 271.

¹² L. Lönnroth, *Den dubbla scenan: nuntlig diktning från Eddan til Abba* (Stockholm, 1978).

Metonymy and Moralization

In 'The king and the guest' the king is tempted to listen to stories of the pagan past in which an alternative model of the warrior-king is presented by his interlocutor. No direct recommendation is made to persuade Óláfr to apostasise, to acquire for himself a holy cow, in contrast with another example of this story-type later in Flateyjarbók where the Odinic tempter gets king Óláfr *heilgi* to admit his admiration for the legendary Danish hero-king Hrólfr *kraki* (see Harris and Hill for illuminating discussion of this episode). In the present story, however, the author deliberately distances himself from a nuanced discussion of pagan practices, suggesting, perhaps satirically, that paganism boils down to little more than regular milk-drinking and undue and ineffectual attachment to a cow. The tempter too is cautious in his advocacy of the pagan past, merely demonstrating the insufficiency of the present by contrasting the two different meats. The king's readiness to listen to the guest's stories however has laid him and his men open to exposure to contaminated and contaminating meat, imbued with the putrescence of the long-dead holy cow. Uncritical interest in the pagan past is yoked to the close brush with the disgusting food, boiled up with the king's other meat and ready for incorporation into the bodies of Óláfr and his men at the most sacred feast of the Christian calendar.

In the *þáttur* of *Þorsteinn skell*, the disgusting is kept firmly below the level of the seat where *Þorsteinn* encounters his devilish double. *Þorsteinn* may, like Óláfr, invite a disquisition on pagan heroes, but this is to save himself – to keep himself out of the shit, we might colloquially say – rather than from idle curiosity; he is an unwilling and sceptical listener. Once again metonymy operates to invest pagan heroes with the disgusting. Down below the privy seat from which *fiorkell* the demon emerges, the heroes of the past suffer unendurable torment. Excrement is effaced from the hell which *fiorkell* describes, but it remains present to the reader or listener's imagination.¹³

In these two stories then, the compiler of Flateyjarbók recruits the emotion of disgust to moralise the apparently innocuous activity of listening to stories about heroes of the pagan past. Elicitors of the most primary type of core disgust: contaminated meat, the malodorous contents of a privy, are evoked to stigmatise requests for and narration of heroic material. The relation between the two is not one of direct causation; more subtly, the one denotes the other in an indirectness that works at the level of suggestion. That one of the primary intentions of *Þorsteins þáttur* appears to be comic does not contradict this argument, for, as Rozin et al. note, 'disgust is often evoked in humor, and laughter is a common response (as opposed to the disgust face) in some disgust-eliciting situations'.¹⁴ Rozin's speculations about the moralization process are productive when applied to the problematic interpretation of the heroic past by newly-Christianised and later generations. Tenth-century Christians certainly did not shrink from crude invective when attempting to stigmatise the pagan gods: Hjalte Skeggjason notably called the goddess Freyja a bitch,¹⁵ and the missionaries may well have worked to extend the sense of what is disgusting to new domains which have no obvious relation to traditional disgust elicitors. Though this cannot be proven, it seems likely that the fourteenth-century compiler of Flateyjarbók saw that the folk-narratives which clustered around Óláfr Tryggvason, and which incorporated a discourse of disgust, served to underline the king's implacable

¹³ The disgusting stench of hell is well attested in medieval visions of the Other World, for example in the 'Vision of Drythelm' in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, or in the Norse translation of the *Visio Tmogdali, Duggals Leizla*, ed. P. Cahill, (Reykjavík, 1985), 29-30, 70, 77, 82, which refers to the '(intolerabilem) fetorem' or 'fulan daun' of hell.

¹⁴ Rozin, Haidt, McCauley, 'Disgust' p. 639.

¹⁵ Ari fiorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, ed. J. Benediktsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), p. 15.

hostility to the paganism he was engaged in extirpating. The obscene, the disgusting, foul food and faeces, are recruited to stigmatise uncritical and nostalgic attachment to old heroic stories. Such attachment ends in incorporation of the unclean, contamination, and, finally, with Starkaðr and Sigurðr, inversion in the unspeakable. Disgust has indeed moved, as Rozin et al. suggest, from the service of protecting the body to mobilisation 'in the service of protecting the soul'.