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**Review: *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*. Edited by Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt. München: Herbert Utz Verlag. 2016.**

**Arngrímur Vídalín<sup>1</sup>**

*Bad Boys and Wicked Women* is a collection of articles by mostly very young scholars. Excluding one author who already holds a permanent academic position, all the authors are either postdoctoral researchers or well on their way toward finishing their dissertations. As such the volume is not only promising due to its subject matter, but in that it provides a glimpse into the thought and methods of a brand new generation of Old Norse scholars.

The theme of the collection is as straightforward as its title suggests: antagonism, troublemaking and wickedness in Old Norse literature, with articles ranging from tricksters and evildoers to social monstrosity and succubi. So far, so good.

The collection starts with an especially poignant article by Marion Poilvez, in which she analyzes the othering of killers whose transgressive actions lead to their outlawry and dehumanization, all while the reader/audience of the text is reminded of the tragic circumstances leading to them being cast out. Poilvez rightfully argues that in spite of their wrongdoings — or perhaps not least, at some level, because of them — the reader feels empathy towards these ‘criminal-heroes’ with nothing left to lose. In fact, they might be “able to satisfy our darkest and most primitive sense of justice,” as Poilvez concludes (53). Their status as other is indeed what makes their stories so compelling.

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On a similar note, Rebecca Merkelbach has these last years, culminating in her unique doctoral thesis, written a number of articles and given several papers on the topic of social monstrosity. In the simplest terms, social monstrosity may be described as the sort of behavior one might engage in or acts one might commit in order to not only be alienated or outlawed by the community, but effectively be seen as monstrous. It is not least poor upbringing which might predispose one to such a moral development. Thus, Merkelbach aims to explore “the interactions of the future outlaw during his childhood and adolescence, the effect they have on him, and in what way they influence his gradual movement away from society even before he starts to be criminally active” (61). Even though the texts under analysis are all quite different (i.e. *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga* and different redactions of *Gísla saga*), common threads are to be seen in all of them. Not least is childhood abuse successfully argued to be one of several key factors contributing to the transgressive behavior of outlaws and their subsequent status as social monsters.

Anita Sauckel writes about the trickster in *Njáls saga* and of the saga itself as a trickster discourse. The analysis of the saga is clever and convincing and I agree with her assessment that the moral dichotomy of the saga is a false one, not least the dualistic view of the saga as a clash between good and evil, Christianity and paganism (indeed, many contributors to this volume make similar arguments about other texts and personae, all of which I heartily concur with). The concept of a ‘trickster discourse,’ I must admit, is new to me and one I did not quite grasp in this context. This may be due to my own, perhaps conservative, way of thinking about texts and how they function.

Following Sauckel’s article is Jamie Cochrane’s take on *Njáls saga*, or more specifically its notorious villain, Mǫrðr Valgarðsson. Or is he only a villain because the narrator takes every opportunity to insert hyperbolic statements into the narrative of Mǫrðr’s explicitly evil nature (notwithstanding the fact that his name means ‘weasel’)? Every time Mǫrðr enters the stage he is plotting something sinister, though whether he proceeds to cackle maniacally into the night while thunder strikes is left to the imagination of the reader. It is quite

interesting how the narrator of *Njáls saga* vilifies Mǫrðr while Njáll is portrayed as a positive, almost saintly character, even though, as Cochrane notes, “many of Mǫrðr’s actions (in particular his manipulation of others and formulations of plans) might be compared to those of Njáll, but we do not react to Njáll in the same way as Mǫrðr because of the narrator’s systematic control of our perspective, perception and opinion” (139). Cochrane also notes the byname of Mǫrðr’s father, Valgarðr *inn grái*, which “suggests a wolfishness, an otherness about him” (121). This could further be linked with the weasel-like quality of the son, as well as other wolfish and grey characters, such as the anti-Christian turned supernatural being Glámr in *Grettis saga*. All of this leads to the question whether the old idea that “saga narrators refrain from making apparently partial judgement statements” actually holds true in the case of *Njáls saga* (123). Personally, I doubt that it holds true at all. An all round very convincing article.

Daniela Hahn analyzes how female characters in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* use theft as a means of inciting the desired reaction from male characters. Specifically, it is the act of revealing the theft at the right moment which they all employ to great effect, even if it means the loss of a daughter such as in the case of Þuríðr and Gróa (158–59). I have some reservations as to Hahn’s interpretation of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir’s famous line at the end of her life, *þeim var ek verst er ek unna mest*, as whom she is referring to is in all certainty meant to be ambiguous — it is a non-answer to her son’s question, and a narrative trick meant to intensify the audience’s yearning for the real answer. My disagreement with this item aside, I find the article both clear and convincing.

Franziska Groß discusses how interpretations of dreams are often (wrongfully) disregarded by saga characters. Disregarding prophesy is of course both an ancient and a common motif which, had the article been allowed to be that much longer, would have been very rewarding to compare more closely. Groß makes a most impressive comparison between dream symbols and their interpretation in the sagas with the *Somniale Danielis* and the *Oneirocritica*, showing that when saga characters interpret their dreams in accordance with established continental texts on the matter, their interpretations are proven to be wrong

(180–82)! I also favor Groß’s interpretation of why men do not seem to follow female advice in the texts: “the fact that men do not follow well-meaning female advice or warnings might be because they choose to resign to destiny, for as they are male heroes in a fatalistic saga, they are obliged to do so” (186). Put differently: the rules of narration dictate that this must be so. My only criticism of this article is that no reference is made to the work of Christopher Crocker, who has written a number of articles and a doctoral dissertation on the paranormal in dreams in Old Norse literature.

Matthias Teichert writes with a very unique theoretical perspective, comparing the brief lover of Haraldr *bárfagri* in *Heimskringla*, Snæfríðr, with succubi. The beginning of the article is particularly exciting and provides a framework for the possible analysis of other episodes in light of this demonic figure. To the frequent reader of sagas, moreover, it figures of course that the malevolent, supernatural characters of Snæfríðr and her father Svási just happen to be *Finnar*. There are some things in Teichert’s analysis I disagree with, e.g. when Snæfríðr’s body dissolves into toads, snakes and other nasty creatures when the spell over Haraldr has been broken. Why does it *have to be* assumed that “all of these animals were living within Snæfríðr’s body before her death and during her lying in state and that it was actually their presence sustaining her existence,” rather than them being a symbolic representation of her true supernatural nature? The examples Teichert draws from the Bible with regard to said creatures would seem to me to support an argument that Snæfríðr is demonic rather than the one he makes, that they were physically present throughout her existence. There are other similar examples in the corpus illustrating such supernatural rather than corporeal connotations, such as in *Ólafs saga helga* (also in *Heimskringla*), in which a heathen idol is struck so it “brast allt í sundr, ok hljópu þar út mýss, svá stórar sem kettir væri, ok eðlur ok ormar.”<sup>2</sup> The critters symbolize the evil within and that outward appearances may be deceiving. In the case of Haraldr, they may furthermore symbolize temptation.

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<sup>2</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.), “Ólafs saga helga,” *Heimskringla* II, Íslensk fornrit XXVII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1941), 188–89.

For her entire existence seems, in fact, rather to be a *sjónhverfing* or a mirage, orchestrated by Svási through witchcraft in order to lead King Haraldr astray from his true mission. The fact that she never utters a word would support this reading. On the other hand, I do agree with Teichert that Svási's and Snæfríðr's ethnicity is neither coincidental nor meaningless, and that the diabolic nature of Svási's illusion is par for the course with regard to the abilities frequently associated with *Finnar* in the sources.

Florian Deichl writes about Sinfjötli, the avenger of the Vǫlsungar who was bred through incest for that one and only purpose: to kill King Siggeir. Deichl argues that Sinfjötli in many ways is “a border crosser between male and female virtues” (225), in that he endures pain passively when he is tortured with needle and thread, and that he assumes the role of whetting his father. At the same time his role is masculine and after his purpose has been fulfilled he “remains an outcast” (230). His whole existence is transgressive and borderline. Overall, I find his assessment interesting and thought-provoking.

Yoav Tirosh takes a literary approach to accusations made against Guðmundr *inn ríki*'s supposed *ergi*, while simultaneously responding step-by-step to previous assessments made by Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, among others. An example is the interpretation of *bugaðr eða snjallr* as ‘manliness,’ qualities that Guðmundr is thought to lack, which Tirosh in my opinion correctly refutes in favor of the more nuanced ‘courage and lack of fortitude.’ Not that Tirosh's interpretation makes Guðmundr any more manly; on the contrary, for Tirosh shows clearly that the “main components of *argr* [...] are sodomy, witchcraft, and effeminacy/cowardice. All three of these are qualities that Guðmundr had been associated with to one degree or another in *Ljósvetninga saga*” (257). But Andersson's and Miller's interpretation of this phrasing was over the top nonetheless. Furthermore, the thorough argumentation made by Tirosh for the ejaculatory connotations of liquid dairy towards the end of the article (258–67) is not only surprisingly convincing, but appropriately provocative and amusing at the same time. Having reminded the

reader that sometimes a spear is just a spear, Tirosch proceeds to illustrate how sometimes the actual spearhead is indeed the dullest part of the weapon.

Andreas Schmidt's article on 'the bad guys' of *Færeyinga saga* is very much in line with previous argumentation in the volume: that the sagas are too complex to allow for the simple dichotomy of good and evil. Contrary to popular opinion, Schmidt argues that neither Þrándr nor his cabal of sinister cohorts, let alone the saga 'hero' Sigmundur, operate on the basis of good or evil. In Schmidt's reading, this is all a matter of politics rather than moral absolutes, and his argument in the simplest terms is that the saga may be read from both opposing sides depending on one's allegiance. Þrándr especially is a compelling character and I agree with Schmidt that a reading of him as a 'bad guy' is overly simplistic.

Joanne Shortt Butler argues on a similar note for a new reading of *Hrafnkels saga*, which "denies us the easy identification of any morally satisfactory binaries." The hero is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and any and all attempts at peaceful reconciliation between him and his foes are "made unsustainable: obligations to higher powers, ambitious relatives and personal honour conspire against ostensibly good, moral intentions" (351). Some readers of *Hrafnkels saga* have had problems with the fact that an ostensibly deviant character is triumphant by its end. Shortt Butler provides a detailed analysis of this without attempting to provide with any easy answers, in an approach that is both compelling and nuanced.

Milena Liv Jacobsen's contribution further serves to add nuance to the discussion of the varying degree of King Óláfr Haraldsson's saintliness according to different sources. Jacobsen gives a good overview of these different portrayals of King Óláfr and rightly argues that all the different sources: historical, literary, and iconographic, are necessary to any analysis of King Óláfr.

And finally, Georg C. Brückmann illustrates how transgressions may be vital to facilitate necessary change. It may be said that chaos is not so much a binary opposite to order, but rather that they complement each other. This seems to be the case in both mythological and ostensibly Christian sources, and Brückmann also gives some examples from saga literature. His argumentation is somewhat different from the other articles in the volume, weaving in continental



philosophy such as that of Nietzsche and Waldenfels, which at times may seem a bit overwrought. His conclusion that transgressions serve a narrative function in Old Norse texts is of course absolutely correct, which serves as a good closing remark for a book that has from the beginning to its end proven just that.

As is evident from this overview, the volume thoroughly illustrates that the standard division of the sagas' *dramatis personae* into good or bad is at best a very simplified reading of the texts, at its very worst old-fashioned and outdated. The 'bad boys and wicked women' are in fact often the ones we are meant to root for or those who are right, and the sagas do not necessarily adhere to predictable moral compasses. Foul people may emerge victorious, heroes may be no better than their foes, good people may be vilified and others may have to reap the bitter consequences of their own childhood abuse, first rejected as children and later dehumanized as adults. The sagas are not fairytales — they are startlingly difficult, nuanced and socially realistic narratives that reveal an immense psychological depth to their characters. *Bad Boys and Wicked Women* is a timely addition to scholarship on this topic and I highly recommend it.

