



Rewriting *Laxdaela Saga*, Translating and Adapting Human Emotion

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Laxdaela Saga has, in the words of Magnusson and Palsson, ‘always stirred the European imagination the most profoundly’.¹ The tragic story leaves its protagonists broken and exhausted by the turns of fate which envelop them. The saga mainly concerns the events surrounding the families of Olaf the Peacock and Osvif Helgason, and the central focus of the saga is the love triangle which emerges between Gudrun Osvifs-daughter and the foster brothers Kjartan Olafsson and Bolli Thorleiksson. This love story is one of the most captivating elements of the saga, as moving and relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the thirteenth.

The saga has been translated five times to date and adapted into the poem ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’,² which focuses mainly on the central love story, by William Morris. Each of these reworkings of the text adds another facet to the study of the saga, yet also reveals more than just the translator’s academic prowess. Keneva Kunz believes every translation to be an end product- a source of evidence for the choices made by a translator, of the manipulations of the text necessary to fit it to a new set of ‘receivers’.³ The finished work, then, is not only a representation of the ancient story, but also a framework of the decisions made by the translator who has created it: their intent, their beliefs about what makes a good translation and their personal sensibilities. What a translator chooses to emphasise or not emphasise, what to leave in and what to exclude has a very real effect on the text that we are introduced to as readers.

William Morris’s ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, although not a translation itself, is based on Morris’s own unfinished version of *Laxdaela Saga*, and provides a fascinating study of authorial involvement in the rendering of a saga story and the way in which Morris worked with the material provided. The poem is a bridge between the creative, yet constricted, world of translation and the freedom of poetry, rooted in the saga story and yet at liberty to expand it. A study of ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ in the context provided by the saga translations can reveal how the choices made by a translator or author can result in very different renderings of a story.

The fascination of *Laxdaela* lies in the intensely recognisable human story nestled within its Viking context and, crucially, the ambiguities within the text which leave so much of the emotional ground to be made up by the reader. Peter Foote emphasises this in his introduction to Muriel Press’s translation, noting how the characters in the saga are known but ‘imperfectly’⁴ by the author, that ‘the exploration of the possibilities inherent in their

¹ *Laxdaela Saga*, trans. with intro. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (London: Folio Society, 1975) p.9

² William Morris, ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ in *The Earthly Paradise* (London: Longmans, Green, 1903)

³ Keneva Kunz, *Retellers of Tales : an Evaluation of English Translations of Laxdæla saga* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1994) p.56

⁴ *The Laxdale Saga* trans. Muriel Press, ed. with intro. Peter Foote (London: Dent, 1964) p.x

characters is left largely to our own creative curiosity'.⁵ It is from within these ambiguities that William Morris extracts his story for 'The Lovers of Gudrun'. Morris expands every romantic ambiguity into a fully fleshed out erotic encounter, following the story closely at some points, as Andrew Wawn notes, while at critical moments rearing wildly from it.⁶

It is the expansion of the saga's ambiguous indications of love and hatred between the main protagonists and the almost garish phrasing of said ambiguities that is the real diversion of the poem from the saga. Morris had a great fascination with the language of the sagas. In his many translations this led to a style often called 'archaised'⁷ but more accurately, as Kennedy notes, one which is an Icelandicized version of English,⁸ therefore preserving the 'otherness' and mystique of sagas that Morris felt was important. However, in 'The Lovers of Gudrun' the desire to render the saga creatively begets a narrative steeped in dramatic and evocative language to depict emotions only imagined by the reader previously. Gudrun, on first encountering Kiartan, undergoes an almost divine, out-of-body experience- '...scarce she felt the earth below her feet/ Or knew who stood around, or in what place/ Of heaven or earth she was',⁹ whereas the saga says merely 'Kjartan enjoyed talking to [Gudrun], for she was both intelligent and fluent'.¹⁰

Interestingly Kiartan's first reaction in 'The Lovers of Gudrun' seems centred in lust rather than love, he is- 'gazing upon her with wild hungry eyes/ And parted lips'.¹¹ Indeed Gudrun's initial other-worldly emotions give way at the end of the passage to a more earthly plane as 'the shame of love'¹² burns her cheeks and 'her lips quivered, as if sore they yearned'.¹³

This rendering of the lovers' first encounter throws a different light on their relationship. The immoderate and clear sexual drive behind their reaction to each other prophesies what we, after hearing the seer Guest's translations of Gudrun's dream earlier in the poem, already know- their love is doomed by its earthly nature from the very start. What is also notable is that there is *no* saga-like ambiguity as to Gudrun and Kiartan's feelings for each other, Morris's reworking of the original story changes the nature of the characters, the focus of the scene and a reader's reaction to them.

But the poem's source, *Laxdaela Saga*, is a tale so bound up in human emotion and behaviour that just one words difference, or one phrase, can change everything and give a completely different view of the event as can be seen when studying the different translations of the saga. Considering just one key moment where differences in translation result in a differing meaning can show the power the translator holds and the how vulnerable the subject matter is to being interpreted in a variety of ways. To do so I will use three translations: those of Muriel Press 1899, A. Margaret Arent 1964 and Magnusson and Pallsson 1969. These three translations provide an interesting range of texts in terms of how they differ and correspond with each other.

Bolli's return to Iceland and Gudrun's questioning of him in relation to Kjartan serves as a good example. Magnusson and Palsson's version translates that Gudrun asked Bolli

⁵ Ibid. at xi

⁶ Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-century Britain*, (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002) p. 267

⁷ Keneva Kunz, p.185

⁸ John Kennedy, *Translating the sagas : Two Hundred Years of Challenge and Response* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) p.33

⁹ 'The Lovers of Gudrun' p.284

¹⁰ *Laxdaela Saga*, trans. with intro. Magnus Mangusson and Hermann Palsson, p. 140 (all further extracts from *Laxdaela Saga* will be taken from this translation unless otherwise stated)

¹¹ 'The Lovers of Gudrun' p.284

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

‘carefully’¹⁴ about his journey, and Press uses ‘very carefully’,¹⁵ before Gudrun moves on to ask about Kjartan. The implication here is that Gudrun avoids the topic she really wishes to speak about ‘carefully’ chooses her words and takes pains not to appear too eager in asking about her lover’s progress in Norway. Arent’s version, however, chooses to avoid the use of ‘carefully’, and instead renders the phrase as ‘Gudrun asked him all about his journey and then about Kjartan’.¹⁶ The sentiment previously evoked is lost in this version; this small moment becomes flat and literal instead of pounding with ulterior motive. Kunz notes that Arent’s translations sometimes lose the subtleties and alternative meanings of the original saga and that she is at times guilty, when it comes to ambiguities, of ‘ironing them all out’.¹⁷ Indeed, the chapter headings which Arent calls ‘my innovations’¹⁸ if not quite ‘doing the reader’s thinking for them’¹⁹ as Kunz claims, are at the very least denying the reader the chance come to their own conclusions about the often starkly rendered events; there are authorial value judgements inherent in headings such as ‘Ill-paid Friendship’ and ‘Right Assumptions’.

Keneva Kunz goes on to identify one of the fiercest debates in saga translation as the argument over saga origins, based on the conflict between book-prose theory and free-prose theory, both phrases coined by Andreas Heusler.²⁰ Book-prose theory supposes that the sagas are purely authorial creations, using past traditions, but not constrained by them. Free-prose theory takes up the opposite argument, that sagas were written manifestations of their oral counterparts, dictated to a scribe rather than created by an author.²¹

Both A. Margaret Arent and Peter Foote are clear that mixed sources inform the make up of Laxdaela Saga. Foote notes the likelihood of literary influence²² while Arent also sees ‘indications that point to a teller-to audience directive’.²³ Phrases such as ‘And that is the last we hear of Thorleik Hoskuldsson’²⁴ and ‘now we return to Thorkel Eyjolfsson in Iceland’²⁵ create a sense of collaboration with an audience which drives the story. Certainly most important decisions and concepts are verified and legitimised by the depicted community as a whole, thus- ‘many people believed that Thorolf Osvifsson had burned [the head-dress]’²⁶ and ‘everyone felt that death was the only proper end’.²⁷ But in none of the translations being studied is the saga as a spoken event, as a performance including an audience, privileged by the translational form.²⁸ How far would their translations have been affected had they taken further consideration of this fact? If a translation were to focus heavily on the saga as performance, emphasise the orality of it, strive to make the *sounds* of the words important, perhaps even shape it so that oral markers were privileged, it would be a very different text from the ones that we receive.

¹⁴ Laxdaela Saga p.153

¹⁵ Laxdaela Saga, trans. Muriel Press, p.145

¹⁶ The Laxdoela Saga,, trans. with intro. Margaret Arent, (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1964) p.110

¹⁷ Keneva Kunz, p.193

¹⁸ A Margaret Arent, p.xxv

¹⁹ Keneva Kunz, p.194

²⁰ Ibid. at, p.58

²¹ Ibid.

²² Peter Foote, p. xii

²³ A. Margaret Arent, p. xxiv

²⁴ Laxdaela Saga, p.139

²⁵ Ibid. at p.228

²⁶ Ibid at p.167

²⁷ Ibid.at p.130

²⁸ Indeed Arent sees orality markers in the saga as ‘on the verge of becoming hackneyed and outworn’ (Arent, p. xxiv), although she offers no evidence to support this claim. Clearly her belief is that the oral nature of sagas was declining, and this must necessarily have an impact on her translation of what she calls ‘oral cliches’ (Arent, p. xxiv).

Morris clearly considered the audience-speaker relationship when writing ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, as Wawn notes, the poem ‘cries to be read out loud’.²⁹ The lilting couplets of the poem lend themselves well to both the speaking and hearing of the poem, and the intensity of Wawn’s sentiment is further borne out by the sheer wealth of oral markers within the text. Some are explicit, such as ‘Hearken once more’³⁰ making a direct appeal to the listener, others more subtle- ‘take note too midst all this’³¹ for example. There is great emphasis on community involvement in the poem- ‘men say that...’ is a phrase found repeated throughout to give weight to the narrative. Clearly Morris’s narratorial choice in reworking this poem was to emphasise what he felt was an important element of the original saga.

Some of the techniques used, however, feel inappropriate and out of place in the saga style context. The use of rhetorical questions such as ‘what should the next move in the strange game be?’³² has a very modern tone, and Morris’s inconsistency in his placing of the tale in relation to himself is also worth noting. At times he will have a very personal interaction with the story- ‘I think that Gudrun on the morrow morn/deemed herself yet more wretched and forlorn’,³³ as if to claim that he were within the tale itself, and privy to the inner torment of the protagonist. Yet at other points he will separate himself entirely, imagining a text from which his story is drawn³⁴ with phrases such as ‘now tells the tale’³⁵ and ‘now as I find written in my tale’.³⁶ The use of personal pronouns is in itself a clear departure from traditional saga style Morris seems to attempt to imitate- passages in *Laxdaela Saga* relating to the narrator always use the pronoun ‘we’- and they are indicative of a more ego-based piece of work. Clearly small stylistic choices can have a great impact on the piece as a whole

But very different forces motivate the choices that Morris was making compared to those working upon the translators studied here. Kunz speculates that Arent, Magnusson and Palsson have based their efforts on a conviction that the work is of literary and academic merit.³⁷ Indeed both these translations focus quite heavily on the academia, with long descriptive introductions providing background information on the era and the possible sources for the saga. Sometimes this can make the translations a little dry. When Richard Beck says of Magnusson and Palsson’s translation ‘the few instances, where the present reviewer might have preferred a different wording, are primarily matters of personal taste’,³⁸ one infers that he is talking about the rather passionless nature of some of the phrasing. Muriel Press’s motives for her translation are, as Kunz notes, unknown; but they must have been affected by her contemporary situation- with a reverence for Old Norse literature in its purest form being key.³⁹ Morris also held this reverence, but in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ we also see something different something very personal that has to do with both his connection to Iceland and to the story itself.

Morris’s time in Iceland is a fascinating chapter in the author’s life and there is no denying the wealth of material that his ‘Icelandic jaunt’ provided or the effect it had on him as a writer. At the time of his first expedition to Iceland Morris left behind him a complex

²⁹ Andrew Wawn, p.250

³⁰ ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ p.309

³¹ Ibid at p.289

³² Ibid. at p. 315

³³ Ibid at p.305

³⁴ Surely not *Laxdaela Saga* itself, as ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ violently diverts from the original story at times, to the point where the meaning and emphasis is changed entirely.

³⁵ ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ p.288

³⁶ Ibid. at p.317

³⁷ Keneva Kunz, p.192-7

³⁸ Richard Beck (1972) p.366, cited in Keneva Kunz, p.197

³⁹ Keneva Kunz, p.189

and emotionally crippling home life- his wife Janey was openly having an affair with his best friend Rossetti and the two men had just taken out joint tenancy on a house in Kelmscott, Oxfordshire, in which the lovers would reside.⁴⁰ As Wawn succinctly puts it ‘if Morris could scarcely afford to go to Iceland... emotionally he could hardly afford not to’.⁴¹ Morris developed a very intense relationship with Iceland and its literature, John Purkis sees it as ‘a definite quest, a desire to find something in the wilderness of Iceland’.⁴² This was no doubt fuelled by the emotional turmoil he left in England, and one can trace this fervour in his Icelandic translations and adaptations, but most especially *The Lovers of Gudrun*.

It is all too easy to draw comparisons within the tale between Morris and Bolli, Rossetti and Kiartan, and lovely, heart shattering Gudrun and Janey Morris. Morris is described by Purkis as under ‘mental submission’⁴³ to Rossetti’s influence, just as Bolli is always outshone by Kiartan; and it was Rossetti who held Janey’s heart though she was married to Morris, just as Kiartan held Gudrun’s. It is a comparison Wawn swerves away from, although he notes that to draw a one-to-one comparison between the characters fictional and real does ‘little injury to the poem’.⁴⁴ And yet in his vividly drawn depiction of Bodli, a character that in *Laxdaela Saga*, as ‘Bolli’, seems flat and near devoid of emotion, the dedication Morris as a writer had for depicting the character is evident. Bolli’s speech after he has killed Kiartan provides a good example of the investment Morris made in this character, the following section being particularly revealing-

‘O dead friend, in my heart there springs a thought
That, since with thy last breath thou spakest her name,
And since thou knowest now how longing came
Into my soul, thou wilt forgive me yet
That time of times, when in my heart first met
Anger against thee, with the sweet sweet love
Wherwith my old dull life of habit strove
So weakly and so vainly- didst thou quite
Know all the value of that dear delight
As I did?’⁴⁵

Bodli’s logic in this section is clearly confused, his idea that Kiartan breathing Gudrun’s name with his final gasp corresponds as a token of forgiveness for himself shows a mind in torment. The guilt he has felt in wedding Gudrun, ‘his curse and his delight’,⁴⁶ has driven him to seek absolution for his crimes in the most unlikely of places. The passage also reveals the complexity of Bodli’s emotions concerning Gudrun; although he is aware that she is in love with Kiartan, although her behaviour towards him has in the past made him feel that ‘in a very hell he lay alow’,⁴⁷ still he will proclaim that he loves her most, that he knows her true value.

This is the crux of Morris’s Bodli character- he passionately loves Gudrun, has done since before himself and Kiartan went abroad, and continues to despite the bitter pain he gains for himself by doing so. In *Laxdaela Saga* Bolli’s motives for marrying Gudrun are simply that she is ‘a woman of great renown’;⁴⁸ in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ a deeper

⁴⁰ Fiona McCarthy William Morris: a Life For Our Time, (London: Faber, 1994) p.56

⁴¹ Andrew Wawn, p.246-7

⁴² John Purkis The Icelandic Jaunt : a Study of the Expeditions Made by Morris to Iceland in 1871 and 1873 (Kew: William Morris Society, 1962) p.7

⁴³ Ibid. at p.9

⁴⁴ Andrew Wawn p.267

⁴⁵ ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ p.320

⁴⁶ Ibid. at p.302

⁴⁷ Ibid. at p.304

⁴⁸ *Laxdaela Saga* p.154

emotional turmoil is created by Bodli's own burning love, a love that destroys him but which he cannot forego. The tragedy of the lovers has spanned out from encompassing purely Kiartan and Gudrun, Bodli epitomises the tragic hero most appropriately- a strong man brought low by a fatal flaw over which he seems to have no control.

Although there is no factual evidence then, no confession on Morris's part that he placed a part of himself in his depiction of Bodli, it is clear that a character who previously played a supporting role has been brought to the fore of the tragedy in Morris's adaptation. It seems apt to return to Keneva Kunz here, in her work on translations, as she notes that every choice is made based on 'a conscious or unconscious decision as to what purpose he intends [the] translation to serve'.⁴⁹ Whether a part of Morris's purpose was cathartic we cannot know, but the fact remains that no choice is unmotivated and the choice he made in relation to Bodli's character significantly changed the angle of the story, subverting it some distance from its saga roots.

Laxdaela Saga is about people, about relationships between family members, lovers, and communities. This examination of three of its prominent translations and the adaptation 'The Lovers of Gudrun' has striven to show how the choices translators and authors make, conscious and unconscious, motivated or unmotivated can be seen making a direct and important mark on their work. And while the landscape that surrounds Kjartan, Gudrun and Bolli may be incredibly foreign to the modern reader, the heart of the story, the heart that so clearly captivated William Morris, seems to transcend its setting, possessing that rare quality of resonating in any era. This is what makes it so hard to capture in translation, this is what inspired Morris to expand the parameters the saga proscribes and this is what sets it apart from other contemporary Icelandic sagas.

⁴⁹ Keneva Kunz p.181

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