

BOOK REVIEWS

Bredsdorff, Thomas. *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*. Trans. John Tucker. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001. Pp. 156. \$33.00.

Kaos og kærlighed was originally published in 1971. The translation has not updated the text, though it does add a postscript addressing some of the intervening scholarship. Since one of Bredsdorff's major contributions was to argue for the importance of women's roles in saga structure, it is instructive to read the work now in light of that body of saga scholarship.

To say that the work argues for the importance of women's roles in saga structure is already to put a feminist gloss on the work. What Bredsdorff actually says is that erotic impulses (which he assumes are always heterosexual) are an important structuring element. Most critics, he notes, have found the unifying pattern in the Icelandic sagas to be men's struggle for power and honor. This remains true of the last thirty years of anthropologically-inflected scholarship. While not denying the importance of this pattern, Bredsdorff proposes a "second pattern" in which unlawful erotic impulses, not contained within acceptable social channels, create the conflict that underlies the saga. Erotic relations that break the rules—marriage without the woman's or her family's consent, rape, illicit visits to unmarried women—create social chaos. "Love—this is the philosophy that emerges from the narrative—does not just concern the two persons involved; rather it is of societal concern and, when its energies are not channeled within the boundaries established by society, it is itself a menace to its very order" (34). Bredsdorff makes this case with regard to a number of the major sagas, not only *Laxdæla saga* where most scholars agree that the love element is quite prominent, but also *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga* where it is less apparent.

Bredsdorff concludes that "In all the major sagas of Icelanders the disasters may be traced back to a discrepancy between the impulses that individual people experience and the bounds that society has laid down for their expression in action. Where an impulse is followed regardless of whether it runs counter to family interests, society is shaken to the core either on the spot or much later somewhere else" (122). He is quite right that the sagas depict a complex social system working to resolve conflicts caused by breaches of norms. The next sentence locates these impulses in one specific area of life: "Chaos comes of love."

The examples that illustrate how love creates the conflicts in the sagas, however, push the theme a bit too hard. This is especially true of his examples from *Njáls saga*. (Bredsdorff briefly summarizes this long, complex saga, but, in general, this book will be a bit confusing to someone who has not read the sagas.) He suggests that the four villains of the saga—Hallgerd, Mord, Hrapp, and Thrain—are united not just by "the abstract quality of malignity,"

which is too vague to be a unifying theme, but by the fact that “all four are in different ways engendered by or entangled in erotic behaviour that runs counter to the social norm” (78). This is true only by some major stretching. In three of the cases, the erotic transgressions are symptoms or results of already existing character flaws rather than underlying causes of conflict. Bredsdorff sees Mord’s villainous character as a result of his mother’s poor choice of husband against the advice of her relatives (a choice itself brought on by the failure of her first marriage, caused in turn by Hrut’s liaison with Queen Gunnhild). This causality helps explain the prominence of the Hrut-Unn episode early in the saga and illustrates how conflicts in the sagas frequently play out over generations; but this one example is far from explaining the whole saga.

Nor is it clear that Bredsdorff’s “second pattern” is, in fact, distinct from the first, about honor and power. When Bjorgolf in *Egils saga* sets up generations of conflict by taking Hildirid as his concubine against her father’s wishes, Bredsdorff attributes this to a dotard’s infatuation with a young woman. But such liaisons are not just about desire; they are also about power and honor. In this case it is not evident whether Hildirid herself consents. In other examples, the woman clearly does not, and the situation is clearly, in modern terms, rape. In the Old Norse conceptual world, one can detract from another man’s honor by killing one of his relatives or followers, taking his goods, or seducing or raping one of his female dependents. Given the way women are often used as tokens of exchange in the sagas, it makes sense to see these cases of social disorder as a subset of the struggles over men’s power. But Bredsdorff does not consider the power and honor aspects of rape; for him the abduction of Hildirid and similar cases are simply expressions of erotic impulses.

Feminist scholarship on the sagas has focused on a number of issues including, to name but a few: the woman as instigator of the sagas’ violence (either as a reflection of women’s social power or an attempt to blame women for social disorder); the importance of women’s consent to marriage; the fluidity of categories of masculine and feminine; the spiritual importance of women and the positive or negative effects of Christianity on women’s status; and the comparison between the role of women in Old Norse and other European literatures. Even in his postscript Bredsdorff takes no account of this work and how it might bear on his thesis. In his discussion of the erotic as a disruptive force, he makes no distinction between the disorderliness of men’s and women’s desires. Such a gender-blind approach may spring from the most admirable of motives, but it does not correspond to the way relations between men and women were understood in the medieval world.

Yet this work remains important in saga scholarship for the way it places women (or at least men’s relationships with women) at the center of the saga action and stresses their agency. Bredsdorff’s reading of *Gisla saga* is one of the most sensitive in the book. Gisli has killed the husband of his sister Thordis and is surprised when she seeks vengeance. He points out that, earlier, he saved her reputation several times by killing or maiming men who

were rumored to be her lovers, but that she seems to show no gratitude for this. Bredsdorff suggests that Thordis may not have wanted those relationships ended, that in its silence about her desires the saga implies that they did not coincide with the wishes of her father and brother. Gisli, however, assumes that they do: “He lives and thinks within a set of conventions that reveal themselves to be incapable of containing and guiding the urges that actually drive human behavior” (70). In other words, Gisli just doesn’t get it, but the saga author recognizes a fundamental disparity between the needs and desires of women and those of their families. This insight of Bredsdorff’s is an important one and a useful point of departure for further feminist scholarship on the sagas.

—Ruth Mazo Karras, *University of Minnesota*

Brimacombe, Peter. *All The Queen’s Men: The World of Elizabeth I.* New York: St. Martin’s Press; London: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000. Pp. ix + 214. \$35.00.

Joscelin, Elizabeth. *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe.* Ed. Jean LeDrew Metcalfe. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. Pp. x + 135. \$45.00; £28.00 .

The two Elizabeths who are the subjects of these books would seem at first glance to have little in common beside their given names. One was a queen whose ability to remain single virtually ensured her political and personal longevity, the other a member of the landed gentry, a married woman who died in 1622 at the age of 27 shortly after giving birth to her first child. The books themselves reflect this disparity: *The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborne Childe* is an edition—meticulously prepared by Jean LeDrew Metcalfe—of the advice book Joscelin wrote during the months preceding her daughter’s birth; *All the Queen’s Men* is a biography, geared toward a general audience, that chronicles the careers of Elizabeth I and her chief courtiers. Despite their manifest differences, the two works provoke similar questions about the limits of female authority and authorship in Renaissance England.

Metcalfe’s edition of *The Mothers Legacy* will prove invaluable to scholars wishing to work closely with Joscelin’s original text, and particularly to those who need to consider its problematic transmission history. Joscelin’s manuscript letter of spiritual and educational advice was incomplete when she died. After her death, Thomas Goad, a family friend and a clergyman, produced a manuscript copy incorporating sometimes substantive emendations (modifying Joscelin’s comments on the education of girls and softening her brand of Protestantism, for instance) and featuring his own introduction, entitled an “Approbation” (Metcalfe 23-25). Goad also supervised the publication of the first printed edition, in 1624, which includes the “Approbation” and introduces additional changes, possibly attributable to the printer (25). Although *A Mothers Legacy* enjoyed wide