

The Fantastic Reality: Hagiography, Miracles and Fantasy

It is often claimed that Western literature is mainly concerned with the representation of “real life”. The people, places and actions represented do not have to be historically factual, but they need to seem so, and the same is expected of the feelings and ideas that flow from them. However, it has also been realised that narratives have always been more than just a reflection of “reality”. There is also fantasy, which is associated with imagination and desire. Several theorists have written on fantasies and the fantastic, all them indebted to Tzvetan Todorov’s influential study: *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. In this paper I shall mainly refer to Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* and Kathryn Hume’s *Fantasy and Mimesis*. Fantasy can be seen as a deliberate departure from what is generally accepted as real or normal.¹ Rosemary Jackson writes that the fantastic has been exiled “to the edges of literary culture”, but she has also pointed out that fantasies which move towards the realm of the marvellous are the ones which have been tolerated and widely disseminated socially. The purpose of these fantasies is to transcend an actuality, which is disordered and insufficient by comparison with it, and to support established and orthodox ideas rather than subverting them.²

Both Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume discuss the different role fantasies play in different times and societies. Rosemary Jackson compares what she defines as secularized and non-secularized societies:

¹ Jackson 1981, 1; Hume 1984, xii.

² Jackson 1981, 174–175.

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Non-secularized societies hold different beliefs from secular cultures as to what constitutes “reality”. Presentations of otherness are imagined and interpreted differently. In what we could call a supernatural economy, otherness is transcendent, marvellously different from the human: the results are religious fantasies of angels, devils, heavens, hells, promised lands [...] In a natural, or secular economy, otherness is not located elsewhere: it is read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the world through subjective perception. One economy introduces fiction which can be termed marvellous, whilst the other produces the uncanny or strange.³

Hume discusses traditional literature and traditional society, which she defines as a society sustained in its values by a common mythology. The mythology tells man how he relates to the rest of the universe. Fantasies within the religious myths of a culture are held to be true and play an important role in defining its principles and values.⁴ In a traditional religious society, such as medieval societies, religious authority was compelling, and science had not yet become a challenge to its mythology. Although the term “mythology” is usually reserved for non-Christian religions it can be used in the sense of any foundation stories, but “in contrast to pre-Christian myths the Christian ones were intimately tied to the new medium of the book”, and became a part of historiography and religious literature.⁵

Christianity provided rules and rituals, and people were reassured about death by the promise of a future life and salvation which could satisfy the imagination. The physical and moral as well as the social and economic worlds fitted into a unified structure bound together by religion. Fantasy is found in the basic myths; they assert values that cannot be validated scientifically and tell stories that are not verifiable; they can be mythical stories about gods or the heroic deeds of semi-divine beings or heroes. On a more secular level, there are tales of men who fight with marvellous adversaries who are necessary to define them as heroes. Fantasy is used to copy the mythic pattern and reinforce the meaning of the narrative. We find another use of fantasy

³ Jackson 1981, 23–24.

⁴ Hume 1984, 30.

⁵ Mortensen, 2006, 8–9.

when angels, the Virgin and saints enter medieval tales; then fantasy is used to uphold morality.⁶

Most scholars who have written on fantasies discuss literature from the nineteenth century onwards and/or traditional folktale as it is preserved in literary sources written from the eighteenth century onwards. Rosemary Jackson devotes her research almost entirely to this period, from the point of view of the radical transformation brought on western societies by industrialisation, but she also admits that modern fantasy has its roots in myth, mysticism, folklore, fairytale and romance.⁷ Kathryn Hume has brought a different approach and definition into the studies of fantasies. She defines fantasy as “any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monsters to metaphor”.⁸ Her definition may appear simple, but it has the advantage of being inclusive and flexible. It can therefore be applied to a wide range of fantastic elements in literature rather than viewing uniform texts to be studied as a separate genre. Consequently, her approach therefore includes classical and medieval literature

Supernatural elements are found in most *Íslendingasögur*, where they often represent a heathen past.⁹ The fantastic is used as a mode to create suspense in the narrative. Romances follow a given structure but the fantastic is also used there to build up suspense. Anything can happen within the well-known frame. In this paper I am going to concentrate on hagiography and fantasy. Hagiography is filled with the supernatural, but there is a clear distinction between the miraculous, as in miracles, and the magical, which is caused by the evil doings of the devil. Typically, heathens are not aware of this distinction and believe miracles to be magic. In *Agnesar saga*, St Agnes is thrown into a fire. The fire divides itself miraculously in two parts, leaving Agnes unharmed but burning the people who are standing nearby: “En blót-menn sögðu þetta af fjölkynngi hennar en eigi guðs krapti”.¹⁰ *Clemens*

⁶ Hume 1984, 171.

⁷ Jackson 1981, 4.

⁸ Hume 1984, 20–21.

⁹ Kieckhefer 1993, 50–53; Torfi Tulinius 1999.

¹⁰ *Heilagra manna sögur* I 1877, 19–20

saga shows the superiority of Christendom over heathendom when St Peter the Apostle conquers Simon magus.

Fantasy is associated with the past and remote places. The fantastic is made more credible by explaining that things were different in the past (see for instance the prologue to *Piðriks saga af Bern*. In hagiography, the new religion fights heathen magic and replaces it with miracles of divine origin, new positive wonders instead of the old negative ones. Hume writes on Christianity and fantasy:

The seductive attractions of classical literature included fantastic creatures and deities of an alien faith, so early Fathers of the Church developed a rhetoric of rejection that debarred these fantasies and, by implication, did the same to other fantasies as well. To many earnest Christians, literary fantasy has seemed a species of lie.¹¹

But, as she continues, if fantasy served the cause of morality, it can be valued as “true”. Thus the *vitae* of fictitious saints were held to contain moral truth. The same applies to romances that brought forward moral messages.¹² The prologue of the *Strengleikar* claims that the fantastic adventures described in the *lais* contain significant moral messages: “til ævenlægrar áminningar til skæmtanar ok margfræðes við viðr komande þjóða at hverr bæte ok birte sitt líf.”¹³

Hagiographers modelled their writings on the Bible. The words of the Bible were not questioned however fantastic they may have seemed. Therefore, the virtues and miracles of the saint, when presented within the right framework, were considered the verity of the faith, as written in *Guðmundar saga B* (The so-called “Middle Saga”): “því at þat vita allir menn at þat er allt satt er gott er sagt frá guði ok hans helgum mönnum.”¹⁴

Visionary narratives are one of the most popular and colourful types of medieval literature and art, constantly reminding people of their fears of hell and hope of paradise. The torments of hell are described in much more varied ways than the bliss of heaven, and are

¹¹ Hume 1984, 6.

¹² Sverrir Tómasson 1989, 247.

¹³ *Strengleikar* 1979, 4.

¹⁴ *Biskupa sögur* I 1858, 592.

based more upon fantasy than theological texts.¹⁵ But fantasy was also needed to describe the more monotone landscape of paradise. In the concluding words of *Páls saga postola* II, the hagiographer wishes that his audience will be brought to the glory of heaven:

Til þess sama fagnaðar er Páll postoli segir sjálfur í frá, er honum var sýndr, ok ekki auga hefði náð þvílíka dýrð at sjá, ok ekki eyra at heyra slíkan fagnað, ok hugrinn, er miklu er þó smásmuglari heldr en sýn eða heyrn, mætti eigi hugsa þvílíka dýrð.¹⁶

The force of the mind, or the imagination, is acknowledged to be more powerful than hearing and vision, although not strong enough to be able to imagine and visualize the glory of heaven. Within hagiography, fantasy and imagination are used at their utmost in visionary literature. They challenge the sense of reality in a similar way as dreams do. Visionaries fall into a deep sleep or a coma before they experience their visions, the horrors of hell and the sweetness of heaven. But the imaginary landscapes are all the same a part of a uniform idea of the medieval Christian cosmos. In cosmological didactic literature, such as visions, fantasy is used to bring the message to the audience. The visionary has the important role of telling his contemporaries about his experience when she / he returns, and can even show signs that prove that it really happened. Religious visions were common in literature and probably also in real life, possibly encouraged by difficult social and living conditions. They were projections of the unconscious mind that affected the individual and his audience.¹⁷ The visions assure the visionary's audience that there is order and justice in the otherworld.

The Icelandic *Rannveigarleiðsla* is less fantastic in its otherworld description than the visionary literature known from translations, but it follows the usual pattern of otherworld visions. In the younger of the two extant versions of the texts, by Abbot Arngrímur Brandsson, material drawn from *Duggals leiðsla* has been added to the text. Its imaginary otherworld also has features which are drawn from Ice-

¹⁵ Gurevich, 1988, 106–109

¹⁶ *Postola sögur* 1874, 279.

¹⁷ Hume 1984, 171.

landic nature: the demons who snatch her soul when she falls asleep drag her across lava fields. When she wakes up, Rannveig must prove that her experience was no imagination, but was real: Because demons dragged her to the edge of a lake of boiling pitch, she is splashed with pitch on her hands, legs and back. The burns are visible on her body when she regains consciousness, and they prove that her experience was real. Besides, she used to tremble with fear every time she told about it, a feature that is expressed more strongly in the younger version of the text:

Gengu með þessi vitran, tveir váttar, sá annarr, at hún skalf í hvert sinn, sem hún sagði frá údæmum píslanna. Þat annat, at öllum þeim bruna, sem hún hafði þolt at eins í andar sýninni, bar skýrt vitni hennar dauðligr líkami.¹⁸

Kathryn Hume has criticised theorists who assume that literature is essentially mimetic and view fantasy as a separable phenomenon, what she calls “exclusive definition”.¹⁹ Todorov, viewed the supernatural in literature as either the uncanny and the marvellous (“étrange”, “merveilleux”) in literature such as romances, or fantastic literature as a genre.²⁰ Jackson treated fantasy as a mode rather than a genre. Hume finds their approach insufficient. Her inclusive re-definition proposes that literature is the product of both mimesis and fantasy. Fantasy is then the expression of our “desire to change givens and alter reality [...] or the need for metaphoric images that will bypass the audience’s verbal defences”.²¹ Hume’s suggestions allow the possibility of discussing both mimetic and fantastic elements within a single work. She divides literature into four categories: Literature of illusion (invitations to escape reality), literature of vision (introducing new realities), literature of revision (programs for improving reality) and literature of disillusion (making reality unknowable).

Lives of saints fit Hume’s definition of didactic literature, whose writers assume that they bring the truth, know what is best for their

¹⁸ *Biskupa sögur* II 1858–1878, 11.

¹⁹ Hume 1984, 8–20.

²⁰ Todorov 1987, 40–57.

²¹ Hume 1984, 20.

readers, and are justified in pointing out moral examples that should be followed. It is an authoritative literature where the writer knows what is good for the reader. Didactic literature focuses on the nature of man and the nature of the universe. When concerned with the nature of man it lays down rules of proper behaviour and explains why one action is good while another is bad.²² Stories that deal with the divine transcend the ordinary. The saint is exalted for the audience's edification. Although he did exist as a human being before his death, he is an imaginary ideal in the hagiographic text. Didactic literature confirms the absolute: the saint is too good to be true and therefore a kind of fantasy.²³

The lives of the Icelandic confessor bishops are not mimetic literature, but biographies of men who had really existed in surroundings familiar to their original audience. And yet these seemingly realistic narratives contain some material which departs from the norms that we call reality. In the preface to the first edition of the *biskupasögur* corpus, it is obvious that the editors value the sagas mainly as historical documents:

Nú kann sumum að sýnast sem mart sé í sögum þessum, er lítil þörf sé að kunna eða leiða fyrir sjónir, svo sem jarteinirnar og yms hindrvitni og trúarvilla, en til þess má svara því, að fyrir sjónir, en til þess má svara því, að þess verður getið sem gjört er; sá sem vill heita fróðr, verður að þekkja bæði illt og gott. Grasafræðingrinn les sér blóm og aldini ekki síðr úr grýttri jörð og hrjóstrugri, en úr blómabeðunum. Líkt verður sá að gjöra, sem sagnafróðr vill vera.²⁴

You have to take the bad with the good, but the miraculous and supernatural element is secondary to the “historical” material in the editors' eyes. Similar ideas are reflected in the approaches to religious literature by those twentieth century scholars who have made too sharp a division between hagiography and historiography. This attitude also tended to marginalise hagiography because it was foreign. Lars Boje Mortensen also warns against what he calls one-sidedness

²² Hume 1984, 102–103.

²³ Hume 1984, 56.

²⁴ *Biskupa sögur* 1858–1878, vii.

in dealing with these texts. In a recent study he discards the traditional division between hagiography and historiography and writes:

[W]e should also take a closer look at the more immediate circumstances, literary as well as institutional, and at the input from local religious concerns, and not simply put everything down to the influence of literary forms and ideas that were developed in late antiquity or to an ecclesiastical agenda pushed through by the “Church”.²⁵

Weinstein and Bell have argued that the criteria that defined a saint in the popular mind were mainly concerned with evidence of supernatural power.²⁶ Although miracles do depart from reality, they were not regarded as “fantasy” (i.e. deliberate play of the imagination), but as an occasional part of literal experience in the “real world”. A miraculous account was accepted as credible, probable and even ordinary.²⁷

Although the early Church fathers rejected the fantasies found in classical literature and even regarded literary fiction as a form of lying, fantasy was sometimes seen as acceptable in the miracles included in saints’ lives. For example, the early-eighth-century Whitby *Life of Gregory the Great* explicitly acknowledges that some miracles described in it may be symbolically illustrative of the qualities of the saint rather than historically true events.²⁸ Miracles were thought by their original beneficiaries, audiences and writers to have occurred, but they were often acknowledged to be real only in a special fashion: they only enter the lives of the spirituality or heroically elect; they are *miracula*, things to be marvelled at. Only saints could execute them as God’s intercessors.

The Icelandic miracles have numerous examples that show that miracles were regarded by their beneficiaries as surprising and wondrous:

En er hann var kominn nær heim at túni, þá flaut þar skipit heilt við bakka ok ósakat ok þar í bæði árar ok austker ok allt þat er þar hafði laust í verit, ok hafði þat jamnt farit í gegn hvössu veðri, ok þótti sú

²⁵ Mortensen 2006, 8–9, 250.

²⁶ Weinstein and Bell 1982, 143–144.

²⁷ McCready 1989, 206.

²⁸ *Saints’ Lives and Chronicles in Early England* 1968, 118–119. I thank John McKinnell for drawing my attention to this text.

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jartein mikils verð öllum sem vissu, ok lofuðu Guð ok enn sæla Þorlák byskup.²⁹

Miracles are said to be unexpected (“at þveru frá glíkendum”)³⁰ and against nature (“í gegn øðli”). Two stories tell of people who fight seals, a woman and a poor man: “ok sjá var jartein mjök í gegn øðli, at óstyrk kona skyldi geig gøra mega svá miklum sel.”³¹

En er enn fátæki maðr fann þat ok skilði at svá máttigr kraptr var kominn til fulltings við hann at selrinn mátti eigi øðli sínu halda, þá laust hann selinn í svima et fyrsta högg, ok gekk hann síðan af dauðum selnum, ok varð hyski hans fegit þessi veiði ok gørðu þakkir Guði ok sælum Þorláki byskupi.³²

Any unexpected recovery from an illness or accident could be seen as miraculous. Credible *post mortem* miracles were the essential test of an individual’s sanctity, and the texts often show the truth of them being tested by the authorities, when beneficiaries are asked to prove that they have taken place:

Hét hann þá á inn sæla Þorlák byskup at gefa vi aura váðmáls í Skálaholt at hann veitti honum miskunn. Fóru þau síðan leiðar sinnar sem þau höfðu ætlat, ok þrim nóttum síðarr vóru leyst bönd af andliti Orms, ok var svá gróit at trautt mátti á sjá at sárt hefði verit. Hann færði heit sitt Páli byskupi ok sagði greiniliga þenna atburð, en hann lét rita síðan.³³

Although so much emphasis is laid upon the truth and verification of miracles, people did have their doubts and even expressed them, but were usually punished or shown that they were wrong.

In didactic literature, fantasy is used to keep readers attentive and interested, and to move and exalt them.³⁴ In the epilogue of St Þorlák’s *Second Book of Miracles*, it is claimed that new miracle stories serve a similar purpose, to remind people of the power of their saint and to encourage them to love him:

²⁹ *Biskupa sögur* II, 2002, 111

³⁰ *Biskupa sögur* II, 2002, 126

³¹ *Biskupa sögur* II, 2002, 107

³² *Biskupa sögur* II, 2002, 122

³³ *Biskupa sögur* II, 2002, 231

³⁴ Hume 1984, 102–123.

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Ok er þat var at svá mikill fjölði gjörðisk at um jarteinir ins sæla Þorláks byskups at mönnum varð um afl í minni at hafa, en þær váru margar at hver var annarri lík, þá dofnaði hugr manna ok mæddusk málgögnin til uppburðarins, en eyddisk málit eptir at rita, þá sýndi Guð svá sína jafnlyndi til ins sæla Þorláks byskups at því víðara urðu menn gladdir með hans jarteinum sem þeim fyrndisk meir er nærri váru heimsvistum. Tók þá á nýjan leik þat at æsa ást manna til ins sæla Þorláks byskups ok hvetja vanbrýnda hugi manna til hvatleiks hollustu, þeirar allrar er menn mega til hans gjöra at kom af öðrum löndum ógrynni auðæfa með fjarlægri frásögn margra merkiligra atburða hans jarteina.

Kathryn Hume emphasizes that “fantasy and mimesis together are equally important impulses, and their interaction must be studied if we are to progress in our understanding of literature.”³⁵ Her conclusion corresponds to modern criticism of the *biskupasögur*, when they are read as a unity consisting of an idealised biography and miraculous events, a reading contrary to the interpretation of the nineteenth century editors who separated the text into “facts” and “superstition”. In didactic literature, fantasy is an important device to bring a message to the audience in a supposedly comforting way. Even the terrifying visionary literature brings comfort by assuring the audience that there is justice and hope for the faithful. The saint represented an ideal personality not easily obtained, but he was in close contact with the people through his miracles. The miracles may have reflected peoples’ fantasies about a better life. The Icelandic miracles show a desire for health, enough food and security. In spite of some scepticism, it is more likely that people wanted to be assured that miracles really happened, that although they were incredible, they were a fantastic reality.

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³⁵ Hume 1984, 25.

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