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**Rezension zu**

**GABRIELE BENSBERG: *Die Laxdœla saga im Spiegel christlich-mittelalterlicher Tradition*. Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang 2000. 347 S. (Information und Interpretation. Herausgegeben von Carola L. Gottzmann. Bd. 9). ISBN 3-631-36009-6 br. DM 89.-\***

In approaching the work under question, originally a dissertation submitted in the German Department at the University of Heidelberg, we ought to remember that it is not the author's fault that her work appears in book form and therefore subject to reviews such as this one. She is the victim of an anachronistic system that still requires dissertations to appear in printed form easily available on the open market to whoever can afford it. As I will argue, it is not a bad dissertation. It would be acceptable in many universities in Europe, North America, and anywhere else where sagas are seriously studied and programs to train scholars to read them still exist. . Bensberg has reason to be proud of the effort she expended in completing the work, especially in returning to it after several years in which it lay fallow (see "Vorwort," Bensberg, 5), and of the careful presentation of her conclusions. Whether the work makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on *Laxdœla saga* (*LDS*) is an issue we need not be concerned with initially.

Bensberg believes that characters in the so-called family sagas (*Íslendinga sögur*: hereafter ÍS) behave badly and are shown the errors of their ways by Christian authors who promote their superior ethical system. Bensberg does not suggest that the saga is allegorical nor does she offer a theory of reading resembling the arguments put forth by D.W. Robertson, Jr., or Bernard Huppé in the 1950s and 1960s that all medieval literature is allegory of some sort whether it initially looks like it or not, but her development of her thesis is a rigid application of the art of patristic criticism. For Bensberg the plan of the saga from start to finish is to present a cast of characters in a state of sin who can only be rescued by conversion to Christianity, as Gudrun ultimately shows. In support of her reading of the saga she praises the work of two scholars, Hermann Pálsson's work (Pálsson 1971) in English (she does not mention his work in Icelandic), and Carola L. Gottzmann's book (Gottzmann 1982) on *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

Chapter I ('Zusammenfassung des Erzählinhalts unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Handlungsaufbaus') comprises a lengthy summary (Bensberg, 31-42) of the saga's plot, which is said to develop in relation to three thematic concerns: (1) the generations of Ketill Flatnose's family (2) the events involving these family members, and (3) the changes brought about in the saga's world-picture as a result of the influences introduced by courtly love and

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Christianity. These developments are worked out in a tripartite structure in which Chapters 1-7, 8-38, and 39-77 (plus 78) form individual groupings that branch out in various directions. Such an undertaking is unnecessary, for even if one believes with her that the plot of *LDS* is pretty straightforward, those readers who have trouble remembering plots are likely to forget plot summaries as well. Her summaries are ends in themselves, rather than clarifications of narrative details that are part of her ongoing discussion. Better simply to summarize plot as needed, when, for example, discussing a complex string of narrative events in which the windings of plot are easy to forget; the reader will then remember the essential details, and extraneous matter can be left out. Besides, sustaining a continuous summary is difficult without distorting the texture and tone of events.

In developing, in Chapter II, her commitment to the idea that the saga records a progressive improvement in ethical behavior (“Angangs- und Schlußkapitel: Programme heidnischer und christlicher Weltdeutung”), she argues that because the saga begins with a woman, the pagan Unn, and ends with another women, the Christian Gudrun, the author is expressing a clear preference for the Christian way of life.<sup>1</sup> She sees in the listing of Unn’s clan an echo of the biblical listing of Noah’s descendents (Bensberg, 49), a inherently implausible notion. While Unn’s ethics more or less pass muster, she is nevertheless motivated by her desire to cut an impressive figure in the secular world. Gudrun, on the other hand, withdraws from this world into the church and lives an ascetic life that contrasts to the life of festival (weddings, funerals, and other social gatherings) enjoyed by the characters in the middle portion of the saga. Gudrun in her old age spends a great deal of her time in

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<sup>1</sup> When in support of this notion she argues the significance of the superlative as applied to Gudrun, one wonders about Bensberg’s command of Icelandic. Throughout the sagas the superlative simply means that characters possess to a remarkable degree the attribute so ascribed to them; moreover, because she never translates any passages on her own (but quotes instead from the Thule series), there is no way of knowing whether she is capable of translating the hard bits—a dissertation is, after all, a kind of test; she once quotes from the saga in a way that suggests linguistic misunderstanding: *Áofanver>um* [sic] (Bensberg, 82) could simply be a misprint, but when one looks at the page (Íslenzk Fornrit, hereafter ÍF; V, 4; Roman numerals refer to series volume, Arabic to page), one can see how the typography might make her think that *Á ofanver>um* comprise one word; and she must mean the opposite of what she says when she states (Bensberg, 78) that *vikingr* is a verb (its morphology precludes this possibility) and that it scarcely occurs as a substantive, when in fact it occurs in the masculine form (*vikingr*) 144 times in the ÍS and in the feminine form (*víking*) 39 times, according to the computerized Icelandic concordance. In addition, she claims (p. 150) that *frændi* can mean ‘friend’, a notion that Cleasby-Vigfusson does not support: ‘*kinsman*; not a single instance is on record of the word having ever been used in another sense...’ (176). She claims that the adjective *kurteisligr* is applied to Gudrun’s sons (true, it refers individually to Bolli Bollason and Thord Thordsson), whereas in referring to all three of them it would have the plural form, *kurteisligir*.

church honoring God, whereas in her youth she was concerned with occupying the high seat (*öndvegi*), a device for elevating certain individuals above others in this world (Bensberg, 55). Bensberg believes that Gudrun's withdrawal from the world demonstrates that the pagan thinking initially occupying center stage, embodied by Unn, is replaced by a Christian world-picture.

Chapter III ("Die Sozio-kulturelle Perspektive: Hinführung zu einem christlichen Gemeinschaftsentwurf") offers Bensberg's ideas on the saga's program for showing the ethical progression in four stages, from what she terms (1) the *vikinglig*-phase (whose principal members are Ketill Flatnose and his children, principally Unn in Chapters 1-7); through the (2) *búandlig*-phase (= 'peasant-like,' the period in which Vikings became farmers and began to squabble over land and livestock in Chapters 8-38); and the (3) *kurteislig*-phase (a modern cultural stream heavily influenced by the manners and customs acquired abroad and influenced by Christianity in Chapters 39-77); to the *kristilig*-phase (Chapter 78).<sup>2</sup>

The first stage (Chs. 1-7) is characterized by harmony and peace; hostilities occur between the Ketill Flatnose-clan and outsiders, not among family members; an individual's sense of value depends upon the reputation of the family as a whole. Desire for material wealth is directed against others in the form of Viking raids; members of the family do not covet each other's possessions. The fragile nature of the clan loyalty characteristic of the *vikinglig*-phase, however, is shown by the different countries which members of Ketill's family colonize; Viking expeditions as practiced by Ketill's son, Thorstein the Red, are not glorified, and in fact are seen as *Raffgier*, the active acquisition of material wealth (Bensberg, 93). The passive version of greed, parsimonious conduct, makes its appearance when Helgi bjólan refuses to invite his sister Unn's entire retinue to be his guests soon after she shipwrecks in Iceland (ÍF, V, 8-9); their relationship never completely recovers, for even though she invites him to the wedding of her grandson, Olaf feilan, when mentioning the brothers together, she twice names Björn prior to Helgi—as the elder, would not Björn's name naturally and customarily occur first in any list of brothers?—and she speaks of Björn more often than Helgi as *brother* (Bensberg, 91-92). More significantly, Helgi disappears from the saga, and his descendents play no role in the story.

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<sup>2</sup> Bensberg derives this terminology for the first three phases from the description in Chapter 63 (ÍF, V, 186-90) by Helgi Hardbeinsson's shepherd of the conspirators gathered together in anticipation of attacking Helgi. Each of the three terms is applied to various group members on the basis of their appearance.

The chief difference between the first period and the second, the *búandlig*-phase, manifests itself in the squabbles between family members over material wealth (*fé*), inheritance (*arfr*) and honor (*sómi*). The first of these disputes arises between Höskuld Dala-Kollsson and his first cousin Thord Bellow (whom Bensberg incorrectly identifies, 98/99/100/111, as Höskuld's uncle) over the estate of Thord goddi following his divorce from Vigdis, Höskuld's first cousin once removed. Bensberg regards Höskuld (and, erroneously I think, Thord Bellow) as motivated by greed; Höskuld cares little for his reputation in the eyes of the community and in this respect differs greatly from his great-grandmother Unn. The second dispute, between Höskuld and his half-brother Hrut, is also grist for Bensberg's mill in revealing the breakdown in family loyalty. Whereas Helgi bjólan was not willing to share his wealth with people outside his family, Höskuld is repeatedly unwilling to share it with family members. Blood relationship is no longer a guarantee against conflict and legal disputes.

Disputes over honor (*sómi*) also contribute to a decline from the *víkinglig*-phase to the *búandlig*-phase, as Bensberg wishes to demonstrate in her discussion of the boundary dispute between Höskuld/Thorleik and Hrut (ÍF, V, 70-71). She concludes that at issue here is to show that the Icelandic concept of law, because it is based on "Formalien" (Bensberg, 112), is unstable, thus placing it in direct contrast to the concept of the individual in medieval Christianity that makes each individual responsible for his actions. As an explanation, this does not take us very far: legal formalities, after all, also define personal responsibility. But the matter is much simpler (and more concrete) than Bensberg allows: Thorleik comes out the loser on the scale of honor, simply because he uses violence where a peaceful settlement with his uncle Hrut, always amenable, was an obvious alternative. Höskuld and Thorleik violate the bonds of kinship; they are at fault, and not the law, which stipulates that Hrut, or Hrolf, would have had to pay for the land on which Hrolf built his fortune, a matter that could easily have been settled given that Hrolf himself had sufficient wherewithal to pay the bill and that Hrut considered the matter scarcely worth bothering about. Family honor is at stake, but the system would still have worked if all family members were equally men of character.

The last dispute in which Höskuld takes part is one he initiates on his death-bed when he requests his sons conceived in wedlock, Thorleik and Bard, to allow his illegitimate son, Olaf, to share equally in his estate, even though the law does not require them to do so (ÍF, V, 71-73). Bard agrees; Thorleik refuses, but is tricked by Höskuld into allowing Olaf to receive a much larger gift than the law sanctions. Bensberg argues that this episode is

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specifically designed on the part of the author to demonstrate the weakness of the bonds of loyalty inherent in blood relationships and thereby to invalidate a central aspect of pagan Germanic thinking. For her, honor (*sómi*), both in the *víkinglig*-phase and in the *búandlig*-phase, is linked to ancestry. Here, as in many places in her discussion, Bensberg does not make it clear what is wrong with the concept; this linkage, she seems to believe, is what causes the trouble rather than the character deficiencies of the participants. Again it is Höskuld and Thorleik who look bad in this incident, not the institution of the family and the identification of honor with loyalty to the clan. Why, when he had refused to provide Olaf with the means to visit his mother's relatives in Ireland (ÍF, V, 49-51), Höskuld must now trick his sons into allowing him to declare his preference for Olaf—and why he sees fit to declare this preference—tells us more about his character than about a deficiency in the system: Höskuld enjoys making people dance to his tune, and he misuses his ill-gotten wealth to divide clan loyalty rather than to improve its well-being and to grout over cracks and stress marks. This section demonstrates the general principle that when families consist of people like Höskuld, Thorleik and Olaf, no one can be held to account for wandering off down to the pub when the family album is brought out for a weepy trip down memory lane.

Bensberg rounds off a discussion of the *búandlig*-phase by discussing Olaf's wooing of Thorgerd (Bensberg, 115), the daughter of Egill-Skallagrimsson; Olaf's excesses in planning and carrying out his father's funeral service (Bensberg, 117-18); and the dispute between Thorleik and Hrut resulting from the latter's preventing the theft of Thorleik's horses by one Eldgrim (Bensberg, 120-22). She maintains that a shift within these chapters (8-38) is apparent, from the point where money and possessions (*fé*) function as a false god to one in which possessions lose their value and are replaced by a desire for revenge and the pursuit of honor. The promise of the Golden Age of Chapters 1-7, where trouble starts outside the family, is thus broken by intra-family trouble originating in greed and an excessive desire for honor.

The characteristics of the *kurteislig*-phase (Chapters 39-77), in which saga society becomes more "courtly" and more Christian, are an elimination of pagan sorcerers and their families, a degradation of Christian knightly behavior into pomp and splendor, excessive ambition, exaggerated individualism, the positively portrayed conversion to Christianity (in contrast to this presentation in other narratives from the period, for example, *Das Nibelungenlied*) of certain saga figures, especially Kjartan, and a decline in the importance of the blood bonds which are replaced by those involving friendship and sexual relations. The bonds of blood lead to heinous crimes in contrast to the bonds in the *víkinglig*-phase where

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they functioned admirably. The source of conflict that money provides in the *búandlig*-phase no longer exists, so that the personalizing of issues in disputes common in the middle phase reaches a high point through an excessive individualism on the part of the major figures, Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun.

Bensberg regards the *kristilig*-phase as one in which there are ‘no longer divisions over money, inherited wealth, honor, and love; people are allowed to participate in the enjoyment of their own possessions’ (Bensberg, 174). The bond between people is no longer primarily determined by the family but rather by the act of God’s creation. Human beings are no longer regarded as creatures deriving their strength from their own might or that of their powerful ancestors but as beings whose individuality depends upon the twin pillars of the gifts God has given them and the development of these gifts. The truth of these assertions can be seen in the fact that only those people who are god-fearing survive and that everyone after Gudrun’s generation was nominally Christian (Bensberg, 180). A skeptical voice might point out that this *phase* is only one chapter in the saga, and the last chapter to boot, one that could easily have been tacked onto the saga by a Christian writer who wished to make of the saga exactly the exemplum Bensberg construes it to be. Another such voice might also allege that the rules of narrative determine that stories cannot end in the middle of conflict but rather in resolved harmony. Shakespeare’s comedies end with wedding bells, Little Red Riding Hood never again disobeys her mother, and the worst malefactors in the sagas make a pilgrimage to Rome on their way to entering the Kingdom of Heaven. For Bensberg, *LDS* could just as well be a sermon, a Bishop’s saga, devotional literature read to monks at mealtime, scriptural commentary, processional drama, lyric poetry, eddic verse, skaldic poetry, the *foraldar sögur* or virtually any other *Textsorte* from the middle ages. If we have even a smattering of knowledge about the conventions of western painting, we can determine the most important figure in Leonardo’s *Last Supper* even if we have never heard of Christ. Likewise, reading a saga involves the observation of certain narrative conventions in interpreting its meaning, a principle Bensberg has not grasped.

Chapter IV (“Die ethisch-normative Perspektive: Die Vitia Principalia und deren Überwindung”) rounds up the usual suspects among the Seven Deadly Sins and the means by which they can be defeated. Bensberg prefers the catalogue of eight sins—even though she only treats six of them—as discussed by Alcuin, the Anglo-Saxon Benedictine Monk who authored, among other things, *De virtutibus et vitiis*, a work translated into Icelandic in Norway by the end of the twelfth century (Bensberg, 193). I did not learn much about *LDS* from this section, and regard as a thesis-driven conclusion Bensberg’s contention (Bensberg,

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208) that Hrefna, who dies of a broken heart at the end of Chapter 50, is a sinner guilty of *tristitia* ('despair' or 'wanhope'). Moreover, Bensberg's criticism of Höskuld as guilty of *fornicatio* (Bensberg, 211) is rather like objecting to the law of gravity in a story in which a man falls to his death when he jumps out of a window on the fiftieth floor. What is missing is a sense of narrative's various possibilities, a tracing of the ripples that result from the stone's striking the water's surface: among Höskuld's various misadventures is his inability even to choose a slave who will dumbly gratify his lust. Melkorka turns out to be intellectually, socially, and morally superior to her owner. More importantly, why he buys her is less important than how he subsequently treats her (her apparent deafness is, of course, an index of his lust; he spends all his money on her with which he had intended to buy wood, so that he is finally dependent upon the king's generosity [Kress 1997, 91]); Unn (and Hrut) free their slaves, and look after them after their manumission, but Höskuld does not even properly look after their son, Olaf, until he begins to make a name for himself, for Höskuld reflected honor in which he basks to the end of his life. Olaf's initial start in life is provided by his mother when she marries an inferior man for his money. Finally, this chapter in Bensberg's book is filled with similarly missed opportunities to analyze the significance of the sinful conduct she isolates. Sagas are not, I think, about sinners but about forebearers whose conduct defines, among other things, national character. We are what we did.

Bensberg sees Gudrun (in Chapter V, "Die individuelle Perspektive: Hagiographische Ausformung des Lebenslaufs der Gudrun") as an Augustine-like figure who, having sinned in an earlier phase of her life, sees the light and reforms her character. Despite the ample models in medieval hagiographic literature which the author of *LDS* could have used, I remain convinced that the relationship between them is tenuous. I can understand how a cleric might use the saga as an exemplum on which to preach the sermon Bensberg gives us, but that such a procedure constitutes literary scholarship remains open.

To be sure, there is something unsettling about this saga: all the major characters are unpleasant (Hrut, Vigdis, Aud, and Melkorka, although admirable, are minor figures), but it is not clear whether the author intended to convey this impression. Does it result from the author's lack of touch, or have we misunderstood the tone of the saga (as Kress 1997) implies? The disputes are all capable of more or less peaceful composition within the family, with the exception of the dustup over one woman. Now Christianity is not the only ethical system to be concerned with these issues: what the saga seems to be saying is that a desire for wealth, an excessive concern for personal honor, a yearning to get even with one's opponents, an exaggerated love of splendor, even pride in the highest degree can all be lived

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with, forgiven if not forgotten, and swept under the carpet of family loyalty that culture spreads upon nature. Sexual pride alone, arguably the most sensitive aspect of personal honor among a people who are inordinately sensitive about their personal honor, will sever the bonds of the restraints that normally keep swords rusting in their scabbards. Perform any of the injuries and insults that characters inflict on each other in the saga—bring about the death of a favorite son (as Thorleik, albeit inadvertently, does), prefer one son over another (as Höskuld does in giving Olaf more money than what one son regards as a fair share), trick a family member out of a large sum of money (as Höskuld does when he dupes Thord Bellow out of Vigdis's legitimate share of Thord goddi's estate), abuse a woman in your daily dealings with her for twenty years or so (as Höskuld does Melkorka)—all will be grudgingly tolerated. But show a sexual preference for one partner over another, take the place in the bed-chamber to which one lover thought he or she owns the exclusive right of entry, in short imply that someone belongs in the slow lane on the sexual Autobahn, and you are begging for trouble. Men (and women) are most likely to become physically violent when their sexual vanity is pricked. What do women (and men) in *LDS* want? Not being embarrassed sexually in public might be one thing, and while recognizing this point will not solve all the narrative problems in the saga, it might help to determine the saga's puzzling tone.

I have found a few errors in Bensberg's book: on p. 27, *geknnzeichnet*; *scene* is divided incorrectly (on p. 46, n. 10); *han* for *hann* (p. 52); on p. 55 a paragraph not indented; on pp. 76-77 the same sentence appears before and after a quotation from the Icelandic; *des Gesetzeskorpus'* (p. 97); on p. 98 *transmittet* instead of *transmitted*; *ehr-süchtig* (p. 122); *comportet* for *comported* (p. 139, n. 26); on p. 149 Joe Harris is identified as the author of an article penned by John McKinnell (this error should also be corrected in the LVZ, p. 324); in the quotation from McKinnell (on p. 149) there should be a comma after *Rule*; on p. 163, n. 81, the page reference to Pálsson should be S. 63, not S. 639; *nu* instead of *nú* (p. 243); *selfcentered* for *self-centered* (p. 269, n. 28); and on p. 170, n. 94, Wolf's article is not in *Women as Protagonists* but in the Heinrich Beck festschrift, *Studien zum Altgermanischen*, also incorrectly cited in the LVZ (p. 334).

Bensberg has been ill-served by her dissertation support-team, which has permitted her some formal scholarly glitches. For one thing she should be taught how to cite the names of characters in order to make them immediately identifiable. For example: "So verbirgt sich hinter den von *avaritia* geprägten Raubfahrten Thorsteins ein übersteigertes Machtanspruch" (Bensberg, 222). By failing to provide his nickname (the Red), his patronymic (the son of Olaf

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the White), and a page reference (ÍF, V, 7), we must wait until the next sentence (“Von Hybris beherrscht, schwingt er sich zum König über halb Schottland auf”) for additional information. We must then chase down in the index of the ÍF edition the page reference; when we do so, we discover eight characters named Thorstein, and it takes a few minutes to narrow the field down until we hit upon the Thorstein who was king of half of Scotland, look up the text passage that she must be referring to, and discover that he did battle with the Scots, conquered half the country, and reached a peace agreement with some of these unruly customers before they betrayed and killed him (what in an Icelandic saga can you expect from Scots?). And then it turns out that Thorstein the Red does not seem to be a very promising candidate for an exemplar of Alcuin’s notion of *superbia*. (Accusing a Viking of avarice is tantamount to accusing Madonna of being self-centered.) This slapdash method of partial identification of characters, repeated over the course of 300 plus pages, does little to increase pleasure in Bensberg’s book. She should also taught to compile an index (Register). Simply listing the proper names mentioned in the book will not do; an index is a guide to what the book is about, and if Höskuld is listed, then the index should indicate what subjects are discussed in relation to his name (for example, “buys a slave”) and where these topics can be found in the book. Entries that go into more detail than the “Inhalt” on subjects (“illegitimacy,” for example) would also have been desirable. In days of yore this was torture; today any decent computer program makes things manageable. Finally, the manner in which footnotes cite works already mentioned is clumsy: “Joseph Harris ... (Kap. III.4. [Anm. 18], bes. S. 212)” (Bensberg, 188, n. 4). Why not simply “(Harris 1985, 212),” a clear reference to the Works Cited at the end of the book that matches the international default style? Finally, she cites Heinrichs’ English essay on the prepatriarchal woman but not the German version (Heinrichs 1985).

Dissertation writers are notoriously obliged to cite the work of their mentors, so it is not surprising that Bensberg refers to Gottzmann’s work, but do we really need to be reminded in 2000 that “die Struktur der germanischen Gesellschaft ließ ein Leben ohne den Schutz eines Hausherrn äußerst schwierig werden,” as Roswitha Wisniewski put it in 1975 (Bensberg, 105)? Throughout the book, the work of these two scholars is mentioned whether relevant or not. A more serious mistake is her reliance on less authoritative scholars to the exclusion of more significant work: on law William Pencak (Pencak 1995) rather than William Ian Miller (Miller 1990); on the revengeful woman Susan Clark (Clark 1991) instead of Carol Clover (Clover 1986), Jenny Jochens (Jochens 1986; 1987; 1996), and Miller (1983; 1990), none of whom are mentioned by Clark. For many recent scholars (Cook 1992; Kress 1980, 1986,

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1993, 1997; and Finlay 1997), who waste nary a word on Gudrun's conversion, *LDS* is about the role of women in the saga and medieval Icelandic society, but this issue receives hardly a word in Bensberg's book, which in view of her Christian bias is unsurprising.

I find Bensberg's work satisfactory as a dissertation. It demonstrates a reasonable knowledge of Icelandic family sagas in general and *Laxdœla saga* in particular; it is conversant with much of the relevant background material to these sagas (legal codices, homiletic literature, patristic scholarship and the like); it shows an awareness of much of the secondary literature pertaining to these matters; and it offers a reading of *LDS*. I have my doubts, however, whether her book will cause an experienced scholar to look at the saga in a new light. A pity really!

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