

# Auðun of the West Fjords and the Saga Tradition: Similarities of Theme and Structural Suitability

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*This paper evaluates the story of Auðun from the West Fjords, a þáttr dating from the Sturlunga period of medieval Iceland. It compares the short prose narrative to the much longer sagas in terms of their mutual concerns with kings, peace, and the place of Iceland in a larger Christian world, all of which would have been of major topical importance during the probable period of composition. Building on these common themes, a consideration is offered of the stabilizing nature of Auðun on the societies he passes through and how this relates to his identification as a lucky man. It is established that the story is optimistic and even quixotic. The þáttr, therefore, with its highly patterned, happily ended and usually amusing nature, combined with its brief and enclosed structure is the perfect form to carry such a story, in contrast to the longer, more diffuse sagas.*

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The tale of Auðun from the West Fjords is a *þáttr*, or short prose tale, about an Icelander's journey to Denmark to give a bear to the king, after which he goes on a pilgrimage to Rome and subsequently returns to his home country. The major features of the text are four encounters with two kings, during which Auðun conducts himself with utter aplomb and imperturbability. The themes of the text are surprisingly similar to those of the sagas, given the vast differences between the two forms. Concerning kings, for example, the distinct genres share a well-founded ambivalence. Tied up with the theme of kings is an interest in travel and a common project to integrate Iceland into a larger world-history, in an attempt to establish the equality of the younger nation. The text also has a preoccupation with peace and justice, a reflection of the social concerns of the Age of the Sturlungs, when the tale is likely to have been written down, possibly more so than the concerns of the period it depicts. However, a desire for balance and mutual contentment is reflected in the choice of *þáttr* as a form. This is a concern shared by many of the sagas, but hardly emphasized as neatly by their sprawling structures. Many of these themes are brought together in one of the most insistent assertions of the text. Auðun's

luck and the form which it takes is vital to an understanding of the idealism of this text, which, without being didactic, is almost utopian in the worldview it portrays. It is this worldview that ultimately divides it from saga tradition.

The most notable recurring feature of the text is Auðun's meeting with the two kings, Sveinn of Denmark and Harald of Norway. The attitude of thirteenth-century Icelanders to kings has been much discussed and is difficult to pin down. Certainly, as early as Ari Thorgilsson and *Íslendingabók*, kings have featured heavily in Icelandic literature. There is even a suggestion within that text that Ari was a class of royal biographer.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, in the same text, the lawspeaker at the Althing advises his fellow Icelanders not to bicker like kings, but to adhere to peace instead.<sup>2</sup> What emerges from this very early text is something of an ambivalent attitude towards kings which can only have grown more confused as relations between Norway and Iceland advanced. The dating of this story is tricky because its earliest extant version appears in *Morkinskinna*, a manuscript which dates roughly from the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>3</sup> This manuscript is not, however, believed to represent the original text, which is thought to have come from the first thirty years of that century.<sup>4</sup> To complicate matters further, the general assumption has been that some of the *þættir* of the text are interpolations from some point between these two dates, giving us a date range for the story's composition of somewhere between, roughly speaking, 1220 and 1275.<sup>5</sup> However, there is reason to suggest that Icelanders maintained a suspicion of kings for this entire period. As early as 1218–20, according to Diana Whaley, Snorri

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<sup>1</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "The Amplified Saga: Structural Disunity in *Morkinskinna*," *Media Aevum* 70, no. 1 (2001), 389; accessed 20 March 2013, <http://rptcd.catalogue.tcd.ie/ebsco-web/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=fd82fdfd-a51d-4a55-8c4b-8551faf188f8%40sessionmgr14&vid=2&hid=17>.

<sup>2</sup> Siân Grønlie, *The Book of the Icelanders: The Story of the Conversion in Viking Society Web Publications* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), 9; accessed 24 January 2012, <http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/IsIKr.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, (trans.), *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings, 1030–1157* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Andersson and Gade, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Andersson and Gade, 13.

Sturlusson was involved in a planned attempt to subjugate Iceland orchestrated by the king of Norway.<sup>6</sup> In 1262 Iceland finally came within the sphere of Norwegian rule.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, for the entire probable period of composition for this text, Icelanders had excellent reason to be highly suspicious of kings generally, and particularly Norwegian ones. This attitude is reflected in *Egil's Saga*, for example, when King Harald attacks Þorolf who, as the reader knows, has never been disloyal to him.<sup>8</sup> Yet this *þáttr* treats kings with a remarkably positive attitude. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is when Harald allows Auðun to continue his journey,<sup>9</sup> but this instance is by no means the only example. Auðun is also defended by Sveinn from the unscrupulous Aki,<sup>10</sup> given money for a pilgrimage,<sup>11</sup> and honored and given riches beyond his wildest dreams.<sup>12</sup> The polar bear, which is heavily over-identified, in many ways exemplifies this attitude to kings. Given its centrality to the story, it clearly holds a fascination and also represents all the potential for wealth and honor that Auðun could ever need. On the other hand, it is still a bear and inherently dangerous. Furthermore, it demands loyalty and, if it starves, Auðun is expected to starve with it:

*Ok máttu á þat líta, at dýrit mun deyja fyrir þér, þars it þurfuð vistir  
miklar, en fé sé farit, ok er búit við at þú hafir þá ekki dýrsins.*<sup>13</sup>

Here, the unscrupulous character Aki implicitly offers Auðun a deal. Unless it is accepted, he implies, his bear will die, taking with it Auðun's source of potential wealth. In good saga tradition, as

<sup>6</sup> Diana Whaley, "A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland," in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 181.

<sup>7</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, "Historical Background: Iceland 870–1400," in *A Companion to Old Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 136.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Scudder, trans., "Egil's Saga," in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin, 2001), Ch. 22.

<sup>9</sup> "Þáttr Auðunar Vestfirzka," in E. V. Gordon, ed., *An Introduction to Old Norse, 2nd Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), 130.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, 131.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, 132.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, 133–4.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, 131. And you must then acknowledge that, that the animal must die before you, since it needs a lot of food, unless you get money, and then the situation will be that you have no animal. (All translations from Gordon's text are my own).

shown by the final chapter of the saga of King Hrolf Kraki for example,<sup>14</sup> he will eventually die with the fallen provider.

However, it seems inaccurate to claim, as Jakobsson has, that this is a story which simply allows for the greater elucidation of the kingly qualities of Sveinn and Harald.<sup>15</sup> It is true that this text is embedded in *Morkinskinna* which would imply a dominating theme of royalty, but it is also a story in its own right and deserves to be treated as such. As Rowe and Harris state, its occurrence in other manuscripts indicates a certain amount of independence.<sup>16</sup> Harald and Sveinn are not purely literal, but also represent the compass of Auðun's journey which is important in itself. There are several verses in *Hamavál* which show that a journey is a way of acquiring wisdom and hence respect.

A man must go to many places  
travel widely in the world,  
before he is wise enough to see the workings  
of other man's minds.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, travel, combined with a visit to a king's court, is an excellent way of earning honor, as Judith Jesch notes.<sup>18</sup> Auðun's journey has even created a story which will guarantee his immortality for generations to come. It is not, as Jakobsson claims, Auðun who acts as typical Icelander in a story about kings,<sup>19</sup> but Harald and Sveinn who act as typical kings in a story about an Icelander. They are simply channels for the honor and riches that travels tend to bring in any case. Auðun's travels to various courts and thence to Rome also establish the primacy of Iceland in the tale, considering that it is there he chooses to remain having seen the best of Norway, Denmark and Rome. This is a common

<sup>14</sup> Gwyn Jones, trans., *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 307–18.

<sup>15</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, "Royal Biography," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris, "Short Prose Narrative (Þáttr)," in *A Companion to Old Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 467.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Terry, trans., *Poems of the Vikings* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1969), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Jesch, "Geography and Travel," in *A Companion to Old Norse Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 120.

<sup>19</sup> Jakobsson, "Royal Biography," 33.

theme for *þættir*<sup>20</sup> and reflects the impulse of peripheral Iceland to establish itself among more central powers, a particularly strong motivation after the introduction of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> This impulse, as Sørensen points out, is one of the functions that textualization fulfills in an Icelandic context,<sup>22</sup> including the sagas. Literally at the center of the tale, we have the journey to and return from Rome, as Miller notes,<sup>23</sup> but radiating outward from this central journey are the encounters with Sveinn, the encounters with Harald, and finally, on the peripheries, Iceland. It is Iceland which encloses and frames the entire narrative. Indeed, Auðun arrives in the central part of the story, Norway and Denmark, with a white bear. This wild traveling companion, as Miller states, is the single greatest signifier of the periphery.<sup>24</sup> However, the Icelander arrives back home bearing all the marks of the center: a boat, silver, and possibly a bald head as a souvenir of his trip to Rome as a pilgrim. Yet all of these things are still contingent on the bear and never would have become associated with Auðun without it. It lurks behind the symbolism of centrality, a constant reminder of the edge. Similarly, Auðun leaves the physical bear in Denmark, never to be seen again, yet a constant reminder of the ability of the peripheral to survive and even thrive in the center. Each is thoroughly integrated into the other and thus the text closes the gap between here and there. Indeed, even narrating the events of the lives of foreign kings claims them for Iceland, interpolating them into a storytelling tradition that probably formed a part of the national identity.<sup>25</sup>

One of the other characteristics which define the Age of the Sturlungs, which roughly covers the range of possible dates of composition for this text, is conflict.<sup>26</sup> A concentration of power in the hands

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<sup>20</sup> William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law and Largess in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 20.

<sup>21</sup> P. H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe* (London: Methuen, 1982), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, "Social Institutions and Belief Systems in Medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and their Relationship to Literary Production," Margaret Clunies Ross, trans., in *Old-Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 145.

<sup>25</sup> Sørensen, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Þorláksson, 149.

of just a few *goðar*, or local magnates, over the course of the twelfth century contributed to the outbreak of war around the year 1235, which ended in Iceland coming under the power of the king of Norway.<sup>27</sup> As Helgi Þorláksson notes, the treaty that ended Iceland's independence contains the word "peace" no less than four times.<sup>28</sup> This impulse toward peace is extremely clear in *Auðun*, where everyone is generous and clement. The malefactor Aki is ejected from the tale, but even this expulsion is managed in a merciful manner, as he is outlawed when he might have been executed:

*Ok þat væri makligt, at þú værir drepinn; en ek mun nú eigi þat gøra, en  
braut skaltu fara þegar ór landinu, ok koma aldri aptr síðan mér í  
auglýn.*<sup>29</sup>

The pacifism of the text is even more striking as, as Harald points out,<sup>30</sup> there is actually a protracted war going on between Norway and Denmark at the time that it is set. Miller notes that though the *þáttr* has a happy ending, hostilities are far from being ceased between Sveinn and Harald at this point in the wider narrative.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as Miller goes on to argue, the two kings seem to be using *Auðun* to conduct an elaborate gift giving competition between them which acts as a non-violent version of war.<sup>32</sup> Jacobsson suggests that this *þáttr* is a precursor of the eventual peace between the kings.<sup>33</sup> This event may indeed foreshadow peace, as is the case in the family sagas according to Þorláksson, because the thirteenth-century author is looking back from his own position in a war-torn Iceland to a fictionalized past where people had restraint.<sup>34</sup> As Ólason notes, the troubles of the thirteenth century

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<sup>27</sup> Þorláksson, 148.

<sup>28</sup> Þorláksson, 150.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon, 131. And it would be fitting that you were killed; but I shall not do that now, but you must at once go quickly out of the land, and come never again into my sight.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon, 130.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Jacobsson, "Royal Biography," 32.

<sup>34</sup> Þorláksson, 150.

probably encouraged textual nostalgia for a perceived age of social stability.<sup>35</sup> This nostalgia would also explain the interest in justice as is evident in the text's two explicit references to fairness.<sup>36</sup> Many episodes in the sagas demonstrate this impulse towards peace and balance. In general terms the gory feuds, which fuel the sagas through the constant endangerment of honor and social standing, are focused on a return to the state of balance which preceded them.<sup>37</sup> The constant give and take of violence is, in a very literal sense, about getting even.

Yet despite the concerns the sagas share with this text, the *þáttr* is clearly the more appropriate form for the story. A *þáttr* has an opportunity for unity that is not open to the sagas, where the sheer multiplicity of characters makes it impossible for every single one to get exactly what they deserve, and difficult for the reader to keep track of them even if they did. Furthermore, the *þáttr* traditionally has a happy ending,<sup>38</sup> whereas the ending of a saga, happy or not, is necessarily bound up with all of the adventures and misadventures which preceded it. This happy ending implies a finite pattern which legitimizes the ideology of the text by vindicating it. The short tale is, overall, highly patterned. The symmetry of the narrative structure creates a circle which legitimizes itself by its own perfection. Far more than is the case in the sagas, *þættir* tend to be characterized by a concentration of hilarity. It is always difficult to tell where humor lies in a society to which one is not native, but certain elements of Auðun do seem to be intentionally funny or else the story becomes, at moments, uncomfortably grim or even dull. Sveinn's masterful use of understatement when Auðun decides to go home is potentially hilarious in light of the fact that Auðun has just rejected the offer to stay with him permanently:

*Þetta sýnsk mér undarliga kosit.*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Véstienn Ólason, "Family Sagas," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon, 130, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Ólason, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon, 133. That seems to me an odd decision.

It is amusing to visualize the expression of Harald as Auðun refuses to hand over his treasured bear or that on the faces of the retainers when Sveinn admonishes them for laughing at the unfortunate Icelander. Miller suggests that Harald's one-upmanship in the gifts he proposes he would have given to Auðun in exchange for the bear could be read as humorous, depending on whether the reader thinks he is sincere.<sup>40</sup> Laughter is an excellent way of uniting a group and levelling out social distinctions, which is clearly important if, as Sørensen suggests, Icelandic audiences of his period were heterogeneous.<sup>41</sup> After all, everyone can enjoy a good joke. Furthermore, Auðun's circular journey insists on leaving everything in its proper place. The greatest of treasures, the bear, is with the most generous of kings, Sveinn. The ring is with a noble man to whom Auðun owed a favour, Harald. The marks of honor are with the honest man, Auðun, and Auðun himself is back with his mother in Iceland.

In a text which is so concerned with everything being in its rightful place and minimizing conflict, it is remarkable that Auðun is allowed to wander around being generally objectionable in the company of kings. After all, he is not a *skald*, or court poet. Neither is he a warrior. He has no apparent talent which would mark him as a useful man for a king to have around. The simple reason for this is made explicit by the text itself: Auðun is a *gæfumaðr*, or a "lucky man."<sup>42</sup> Miller points out the obvious objection to this classification: that is, that Auðun is three times very close to dying, twice in extreme discomfort.<sup>43</sup> It might also be noted that although the profits of Auðun's voyage are huge, he does have to work extremely hard to get them. It is no easy task to move a polar bear from Norway to Denmark via King Harald's court. The key to this may lie in the different conceptions of the phenomenon of good fortune held by modern and contemporary readers. Whereas luck to us signifies an external force, capricious and changeable, luck to an Old Norse audience appears to have been, as Sommer suggests,

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, 62.

<sup>41</sup> Sørensen, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, 76.



an inherent character trait.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, as Grönbech has argued, people seem to have had various kinds of luck for specific circumstances.<sup>45</sup> From whence Auðun's luck derives is yet another question that begs an answer, and it is related both to the text's obsession with kings and its preoccupation with balance. Grönbech argues that the luck of kings is particularly strong and can even be transferred to others if the need should arise.<sup>46</sup> The way Miller reads the text, Harald is an embodiment of Auðun's luck,<sup>47</sup> and it is true that Sveinn wishes him luck on his travels,<sup>48</sup> which, according to Grönbech, implies that a little bit of the king's good fortune has been transferred to the Icelander.<sup>49</sup> At his first meeting with Auðun, Harald simply observes as Auðun is leaving that he might turn out to be fortunate:

*Ok kann þat vera, at þú sér gæfumaðr.*<sup>50</sup>

This might be a prediction, a blessing or both. It is only at the very end of the *þáttr* that we get confirmation that Auðun is known to have been a lucky man. It seems likely that the luck of the kings does rub off on Auðun. It is undeniably because of them that he survives his trip and returns laden with riches. Yet Auðun had to be quite lucky to receive luck from the kings in the first place. If Harald's final comment on Auðun's luck is a prediction, carrying with it a sense of blessing, then some form of fortune must have saved him from the king's wrath before Harald lent him his.

Auðun's luck, on closer inspection, is an aspect of his character and also pertains to a specific realm. It is a species of tact. This conception of luck occurs in several family sagas where characters' fates depend on having or lacking it. In *Njal's Saga*, for example, Skarphedinn wanders from booth to booth at

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<sup>44</sup> Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer, "The Old Norse Concept of Luck," *Scandinavian Studies* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 275; accessed 23 March 2012, <http://web.ebscohost.com.elib.tcd.ie/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=18&sid=e590032e-b583-44c4-af7d-2ca972f34da7%40sessionmgr15> [accessed 23/03/12], 275.

<sup>45</sup> Vilhelm Grönbech, *The Culture of the Teutons*, vol. 1, trans. W. Worster (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 127.

<sup>46</sup> Grönbech, 133.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Grönbech, 147.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, 130. And it could be that you should be a lucky man.

the thing insulting people,<sup>51</sup> which results in disastrous isolation for him and his family. An even more extreme lack of tact is evident in *Grettir's Saga* when Grettir bursts into a hut, terrifying and indirectly killing its inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> In *Egil's Saga*, Arinbjorn mentions that “fortune alone will determine what comes of this,” but the fortune turns out to be his own personal diplomacy. It is he who soothes King Eirik and tells Egil to write the *drappa*,<sup>53</sup> or complimentary poem, for that irascible monarch. Skarphedinn, Sommer proposes, has bad luck because he killed his foster-brother Hoskuld,<sup>54</sup> but in any case his people skills are appalling. Grettir has bad luck because he is cursed, but his troll-like manners means he is even less able to win people's affection than Skarphedinn. Arinbjorn, on the other hand, is lucky. This is partly doubtless because of his loyalty to King Eirik, which he is careful to point out.<sup>55</sup> Indubitably, there is something in Grönbech's theory that luck and honor are identical;<sup>56</sup> certainly they are bound up with each other. Yet there is a subtler edge to the Icelandic definition of luck of this sort. After all, Grettir is not dishonorable. He only goes to the hut to get fire and he gets his curse fighting a pagan *draugr*, or zombie.<sup>57</sup> Arinbjorn lies quite merrily to Eirik, explaining that Egil had come all the way to England in search of forgiveness.<sup>58</sup> The trick is that he flatters the king, saying no one could bear his wrath, even if they were nowhere near him,<sup>59</sup> and also pressures him not to allow the queen to dictate his actions.<sup>60</sup> In this light, it can be seen that Auðun's luck is a self-fulfilling prophecy. He is good with people, which is a form of luck, so people help him, which is another form. In this way the bonds of honor and kinship that Grönbech stresses are perpetuated and the structure of society is strengthened. Though Auðun appears to be wandering around threatening to spread chaos, he really acts as an

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<sup>51</sup> Sir George W. DaSent, *The Story of Burnt Njal* (London: J.M. Dent, 1957), Ch. 118.

<sup>52</sup> Jesse Byock, trans., *Grettir's Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109–10.

<sup>53</sup> Bernard Scudder, trans., “Egil's Saga,” in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (New York: Penguin, 2001), 112.

<sup>54</sup> Sommer, 288.

<sup>55</sup> Scudder, 114.

<sup>56</sup> Grönbech, 153.

<sup>57</sup> Byock, 102.

<sup>58</sup> Scudder, 111.

<sup>59</sup> Scudder, 111.

<sup>60</sup> Scudder, 112.

enabler for all of the things which make society strong while also maintaining his freedom. This story, then, represents a utopian model of society in which people are good to each other, and that goodness results in peace and mutual prosperity.

Auðun's *þáttr* shares many of the preoccupations which the sagas exhibit. There is a general concern about, and simultaneous fascination with, kings. There is also an impulse to travel and thus win wisdom and fame, the latter also, possibly through contact with royalty. There is an impulse to return to an idealized past where, though in the sagas it seems very brutal, recognizable rules applied and were kept to. However, where sagas spin outward in an ever-expanding narrative, the *Morkinskinna* text of Auðun is short and highly patterned, giving a sense of structure and order. It is also consistently amusing in a way which sagas cannot be, thus promising a momentary homogeneity of audience, even if that audience is a mix of classes or backgrounds. The happy ending rounds the tale off with a naturalization of the events portrayed, implying an acceptance of them. Several of these aspects are drawn together in the idea of Auðun's luck which follows him through the text pruning and strengthening society through simply treating people as they want to be treated. On the whole, this text is as quixotic and charming as Auðun himself, reflecting many of the concerns of the sagas, but in an optimistic, even idealistic manner, reflected by the particular form.

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