

Daniela Hahn, Andreas Schmidt (Hgg.)

Bad Boys and Wicked Women

Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature



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herausgegeben von
Annegret Heitmann und Wilhelm Heizmann

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Andreas Schmidt / Daniela Hahn

Bad Boys and Wicked Women: An Introduction

›Bad boys and wicked women‹ may seem an unusual choice of topic for an academic publication. Searching for pictures of the title of the present volume on the internet, one finds many results, usually composed in black and white, showing young, muscular men smoking cigarettes and mostly wearing tattoos in combination with rests of seemingly unostentatious but very expensive, sober clothes. These are supplemented by pictures of very lightly dressed women, smiling perkily, apparently ready for excessive partying that involves a lot of alcohol and spontaneous sex, or they are even more straightforward, expressing an air of being merciless seductresses, exploiting men at will for pleasure. Both types of pictures radiate sexiness, and they show that popular mass culture has long since discovered the topic of ›evik‹ and its lucrativeness. In fact, one might claim that the concepts of ›bad boys‹ and ›wicked women‹ have been popularised to such a degree that it does not seem an overstatement to say that ›bad‹ has effectively become the new ›good‹. Young people indulge in styling themselves in a dark and ›dangerous‹ fashion, presenting themselves as ›bad‹ and, therefore, ›cool, while lifestyle guidebooks and psychological magazines alike are published to answer the question why ›good girls‹ fall for ›bad boys‹ and equally why ›good boys‹ have a weakness for ›wicked women‹. Maybe this very same kind of ›wicked‹ attraction is what initially brought the participants of the workshop together on which the present volume is based, who convened to discuss the matter of literary ›bad boys‹ and ›wicked women‹ in Old Norse literature.

At any rate, we chose a topic for our workshop that is both current and timeless. The apparent modern coolness of ›bad boys‹ and ›wicked women‹ as expressed by the popular appeal of dark, and ›bad, fashion betrays our choice of topic to be a mark of its popularity in our times, while at the same time the matter of ›evik

men and women has engaged mankind throughout history. For who are they, how can they be recognised, or how are they made ›evil‹? And are there different categories for them? Not yet leaving the field of popular culture, an online search for ›bad guys‹ will also yield insights into the diversity of this concept by illustrating various fictitious characters, mostly from popular films and TV series.

Among them, there are characters any audience will be inclined to classify as ›evil‹, such as *Harry Potter*'s Lord Voldemort, the robotic antagonist of the *Matrix*-trilogy called Agent Smith, the late Heath Ledger's last performance as *Batman*'s Joker, or also a character such as Joffrey Lannister-Baratheon from the *Game of Thrones* franchise. Few viewers would identify with those characters. They are depicted as repulsive, and the films, or series, in which they are featured constructed in such a way as to make the audience sympathise with the ›heroes‹ against whom they are working. Nevertheless, they may still remain fascinating in their portrayal of utter evilness. To give a female version of the same concept as well, one may think for example of Sharon Stone's portrayal of the *femme fatale* Catherine Tramell in 1992's *Basic Instinct*, inevitably drawing the film's male protagonist into her web of violence and sex through her beauty, and ultimately to his moral destruction.

At the same time, characters such as Jack Torrance from the 1980 movie *The Shining*, based on a novel by Stephen King, while ›evil‹ in nature, can also be the main protagonists of the respective unfolding plot, raising the question of how ›evil‹ and insanity develop in the mind of a seemingly ›normal‹ human being.

Just as well, Hannibal ›The Cannibal‹ Lecter is doubtlessly one of the most ›evil‹ fictitious characters of all time, being a sadist who enjoys killing people he deems inferior. At the same time, the newest TV serial adaption of Thomas Harris' novels, featuring Mads Mikkelsen as Hannibal, displays a substantial aesthetisation of his character. The viewer may find him- or herself secretly wishing to be somehow like the cultivated and sophisticated mass murderer with his impregnable manners and style.

But the problem of the ›bad guy‹ can be fleshed out in an even more complex way, turning to characters such as Tyrion Lannister from *Game of Thrones*. He displays a certain arrogance, or even vileness, in his relations to others. He also deeply hates his sister and even kills his own father, but in fact, he has good reason to. Nevertheless, it is impossible to call him a ›good guy‹ from a moralistic point of view. Considering his sister Cersei, the question of whether she is ›wicked‹ is not much easier to answer: she has a love affair with her own brother and cold bloodedly wades through streams of blood flowing at her behest. And yet, she is a caring mother who had to suffer marriage to a man she never loved. Additionally, she is struggling with her very role as a female in a widely patriarchal society. If not redeemed by these facts, it is nonetheless made more difficult to condemn her for her actions, and especially women may also identify with her struggle for female independence. A similar paradigm may be seen in the already mentioned *Batman*. He fights criminals, while at the same time, he takes justice into his own hands, away from official prosecution, making himself accuser, judge and hangman of others on no basis but his own considerations. Are these characters therefore evil, or are they good?

All these examples show the concept of the ›bad boy‹ and the ›wicked woman‹ to be a complex problem. ›Bad‹ or ›wicked‹ people can have many faces, and their ›evilness‹ can take on many forms. Therefore, the concepts are difficult to bring to a universally valid definition and show a range of different realisations, at least in modern film and literature. But thinking especially about the medieval sagas, the same diversity of concept can be stated for Old Icelandic literature, as the present volume intends to show. For, as William Paton Ker provokingly formulated:

While the life in the Sagas is more primitive, less civilised, than the life of the great Southern nations in the Middle Ages, the record of that life is still by a greater interval in advance of all the common modes of narrative then known to the more fortunate or more luxurious parts of Europe.¹

Icelandic narrative of the medieval times often appears surprisingly modern, which can especially be seen in its treatment of literary figures. They are lively, complex and so intricately constructed that they often seem ›cut out of life‹ rather than typecast on a medieval scribe's writing board. Therefore, literary characters like Njáll, Egill, Snorri goði, Guðrún, Gísli's Auðr, Hrafnkell Freysgoði or King Sverrir Sigurðarson intrigue engaged audiences, winning or losing their sympathies through their appearance as ›real-life persons‹ on the primary text layer, at least in a scientifically unbiased first reading.² But even within this short enumeration, readers may wonder whether there is one or the other ›bad boy‹ or ›wicked woman‹ among them.

¹ Ker 1897, p. 209. While disagreeing with the harshness of Ker and his categorical, overemphasised demotion of continental European medieval literature, the editors agree with Ker's general notion of the narrative ›modernity‹ of saga literature.

² And even in a scientifically schooled reading, the liveliness of the characters in the sagas may lead the scholar to freely empathise with them, as William Ian Miller demonstrates in various instances in his latest reading of *Njáls saga* (2014).

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