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Rummagings 13: Archibald Lampman's "The King's Sabbath"

On 3 November 1884, in the midst of writing the first eight sonnets of "The Growth of Love" series,¹ Archibald Lampman wrote "The King's Sabbath," a sonnet that is decidedly odd and apparently uncharacteristic, and perhaps for those reasons has escaped critical attention:

Once idly in his hall King Olave sat
Pondering, and with his dagger whittled chips;
And one drew near to him with austere lips,
Saying, "To-morrow is Monday," and at that
The king said nothing, but held forth his flat
Broad palm, and bending on his mighty hips,
Took up and mutely laid thereon the slips
Of scattered wood, as on a hearth, and gat
From off the embers near, a burning brand.
Kindling the pile with this, the dreaming Dane
Sat silent with his eyes set and his bland
Proud mouth, tight-woven, smiling, drawn with pain,
Watching the fierce fire flare, and wax, and wane,
Hiss and burn down upon his shrivelled hand.

(*Poems* 51-52)

Both when it was written and when it was published in *Among the Millet, and Other Poems* (1888), "The King's Sabbath" participated in the growing interest in Norwegian history and mythology that spawned elements of Walter Scott's *The Pirate* (1822) and then became prominent in and through such works as William and Mary Howitt's *Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852), Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *King Olaf* (1863), Thomas Carlyle's *Lives of the Norse Kings* (1875), and the Norwegian tales in William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-77). Any one of these works—or another, such as R.M. Ballantyne's *Erling the Bold: A Tale of the Norse Kings* (1869)—may have prompted Lampman to look to the Norwegian past for the subject of a poem, but the likeliest candidates are Carlyle and Morris, the former because Lampman greatly admired his work (and, indeed, borrowed extensively from it in "Friendship"[1881], "Gambetta" [1883], and other essays)² and the latter because he is one of the poets discussed in the paper entitled "The Modern School of Poetry in England" that Lampman read to the Ottawa Literary

and Scientific Society in March 1885. Whatever relationship may exist between “The King’s Sabbath” and the works of Carlyle and Morris is far from straightforward, however: the sonnet can be read either as an instantiation of Carlylean heroism or as a parody of it; and the sonnet’s form as well as its substance can be seen as a reaction against *The Earthly Paradise*, whose tales Lampman regarded as “[b]eautiful” and “sweetly told” but lacking in “strength,” “vitality,” “humour,” “real pathos,” “dramatic or narrative force,” “genuine hearty sympathy with the movement of life,” and—as if all that were not enough—told in “sometimes gar[r]ulous and...indolent murmuring vers[e]” (*Essays and Reviews* 67).

Outside the literary background thus briefly sketched, “The King’s Sabbath” has a context in the notion that, as a northern people, Canadians have affinities of environment and character with other northern peoples. Variations of this idea were promulgated in the wake of Confederation by writers of the Canada First movement (most notably the R.G. Haliburton of *The Men of the North* [1869]) and their sympathizers and successors, including William Wilfred Campbell, whose 16 July 1892 contribution to the *At the Mermaid Inn* column is a paean to the Norwegian writer Björnson Björnstjerne as “the great poet and novelist of the north.” Several months prior to the appearance of Campbell’s paean, Lampman himself in “Two Canadian Poets: A Lecture” had endorsed the view that “climatic and scenic conditions have much to do with the moulding of national character” and then speculated that “[a] Canadian race”—and, hence, a Canadian literature—“might combine the energy, the seriousness, the perseverance of the Scandinavians with something of the gayety, the elasticity, the quickness of spirit of the south,” particularly northern Italy (*Essays and Reviews* 93). That in the summer of 1884, only months before writing “The King’s Sabbath,” Lampman was planning a “sober...realistic” and “strictly Canadian poem” “in the metre of [Longfellow’s] *Evangeline*, but more like [Goethe’s] *Hermann and Dorothea*, or, nearer still,...the translations from a Swedish poet, [Johan Ludwig] Runeberg, who wrote lovely things about the peasants of Finland” (qtd. in Connor 78), suggests that the affinity between Canada and Scandinavia that he later made more explicitly was already part of his mental outfit at that time.

Now that the literary and cultural contexts surrounding “The King’s Sabbath” have been placed on view, there remains the question of whether Lampman invented the incident depicted in it or found it in a particular work. The answer is provided by a text that was quarried by all the authors (Scott excepted for chronological reasons) whose works were mentioned earlier in establishing the sonnet’s literary background: Samuel Laing’s

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1844 translation of Snorre Sturluson's *Heimskringla: A History of the Norse Kings*. The pertinent section, "King Olaf Burns the Wood Shavings on His Hand for His Sabbath Breach," is short enough to be quoted in full:

It happened one Sunday that the king sat in his highseat at the dinner table, and had fallen into such deep thought that he did not observe how time went. In one hand he had a knife, and in the other a piece of fir-wood from which he cut splinters from time to time. The table-servant stood before him with a bowl in his hands; and seeing what the king was about, and that he was involved in thought, he said, "It is Monday, sire, to-morrow." The king looked at him when he heard this, and then it came into his mind what he was doing on the Sunday. Then the king ordered a lighted candle to be brought him, swept together all the shavings he had made, set them on fire, and let them burn upon his naked hand; showing thereby that he would hold fast by God's law and commandment, and not trespass without punishment on what he knew to be right. (2:201)³

The "Olave" of Lampman's sonnet, then, is Olaf (Olaf II) (circa 995-1030), a devout Christian who ruled Norway from 1015 to 1028 and who, for his devoutness and his efforts to Christianize his people, was later proclaimed Saint Olaf and patron saint of Norway. Among his other notable qualities and endeavours was his opposition to the Danes, both prior to his reign, when he assisted Æthelred in fighting them, and afterwards, when he led a failed attack on Denmark. Lampman's description of him as a "dreaming Dane" is therefore erroneous and misleading, and probably dictated by the need to find a rhyme for "pain" and "wane" in the sonnet's sestet.

Other aspects of "The King's Sabbath" reflect better on Lampman. "[D]agger" rather than "knife" is a nice period touch (the Norwegians did indeed use daggers); however, daggers are usually thought of as having sharp points rather than sharp edges, which makes the word somewhat in appropriate. "[A]justere" economically captures and conveys the stern and "stringently moral" (*OED*) nature of the interlocutor who prompts the king to administer the self-inflicted punishment that ensues. "[B]land" may also have been chosen because of the need for a rhyme with "brand" and "hand," but it does nevertheless suggest Olaf's gentle manner without being hackneyed, and the word "slips," which, again, may have been chosen for the purpose of rhyme, is notable as an apt alternative to a repetition of "chips." The subsequent description of the king's mouth as "Proud..., tight-woven, smiling, drawn with pain" succeeds well in providing a compressed narrative of his physical response to the pain caused by the burning

of the wood chips as—in another miniature narrative—they “flare, and wax, and wane” in the palm of his eventually “shrivelled hand.” Earlier in the poem, “Broad palm” and “mighty hips” perhaps insist too much on the thick-set stature that led the king to be nicknamed “the stout,” but on the whole Lampman is to be credited for exercising the restraint necessary to permit readers to recognize for themselves that the king’s self-mutilation was intended (in the words of Laing’s translation) to “show... that he would hold fast by God’s law and commandment, and not trespass without permission on what he knew to be right.”⁴

It is difficult to leave “The King’s Sabbath” without wondering whether Lampman’s purpose in the poem was to illustrate and condemn the harmful excesses that can result from an “austere” adherence to Christian rules, especially those enshrined in Mosaic law. This was the poet, after all, who had written in “*The Revolt of Islam*” (1880) of P.B. Shelley’s “turn away from faith” as a result of “stories of the persecutions and oppression sanctioned by the church in ages past...and the seeming harshness of some...Christian doctrines” (*Essays and Reviews* 5), and who would later write in *The Story of an Affinity* (1893-94)⁵ of “great churches in which pastor[s] “preach the great love and brotherhood of man” to “The rich and proud” who “S[i]t moveless” in “the velvet stalls.... While all that wordy thunder roll[s] and r[ings] / Around their heads and pitiless ears in vain” (2: 331-44). In “Life and Nature” (1889), the speaker “passes through gates of...[a] city,” leaving behind him “churches” in which “organs...are moaning shrill” to “meadows / Afar from the bell-ringing” where he lies “on the earth’s quiet breast” under the “blue...[of] the heaven above” (*Poems* 138-39). From the perspective of Lampman’s attitude to Christianity, “The King’s Sabbath” may not be as uncharacteristic as it might seem.

Notes

- 1 Dates of composition of Lampman’s poems here and throughout are based on L.R. Early’s invaluable “Chronology.” Dates of publication of his prose works are based on those in my edition of his *Essays and Reviews*.
- 2 See *Essays and Reviews* 205-44 and elsewhere.
- 3 The anecdote is section 201 of “The Saga of Haraldson.” It is quoted here from the 1907 edition of Laing’s translation, which in this instance is identical to the 1844 edition available in *The Online Medieval & Classical Library* at <http://omacl.org/Heimskringla/>. I am grateful to my colleague Russell Poole for directing me to online sources of the *Heimskringla*.
- 4 The commandment upon which the King trespasses is, of course, the fourth, which

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reads in part: “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work...” As Russell Poole has pointed out to me, in context the episode versified by Lampman appears to function as a kind of doctrinal corrective to the episode in which a younger Olaf fights the great battle that established his claim to Norwegian ascendancy on Palm Sunday in 1061, which would have been especially awkward for him in view of the fact that the Ottonian Henry II had famously declined to do a similar thing only a decade earlier.

- 5 Although not written until 1893-94, *The Story of an Affinity* fulfils Lampman’s plan of over a decade earlier to write a “strictly Canadian” long poem. Like the “Broad palm” and “mighty hips” of Olave in “The King’s Sabbath,” the Herculean stature and strength of the protagonist of *The Story of an Affinity* reflect a fascination with hyper-masculinity that may stem at least in part from the fact that, as a result of a childhood illness, Lampman himself had a weak heart.

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