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WILLIAM IAN MILLER

Is a Gift Forever?

THIS BEAR WILL NEED NO INTRODUCTION to those of you who are Old Norse guys. It is the bear from perhaps one of the two finest short stories ever told, *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka*, *Audun's Story*.[1]

In that story Audun, a poor farmhand lodging at the farm of a wealthier kinsman, sells all his possessions, and, after providing for his mother's keep for three years, goes abroad with the three marks' worth of silver remaining to him. Audun's passage aboard ship was a gift in return for having helped a Norwegian merchant sell his wares to creditworthy customers. Audun ends up in Greenland, where he buys a polar bear giving for it everything he has. He and the polar bear take passage to Norway where Audun announces his intention to give the bear to King Svein of Denmark. Trouble is that King Harald harðraði of Norway, a tough customer if ever there was one, and King Svein are warring with each other. Harald asks Audun for the bear. Audun has the temerity or stupidity to say no to Harald three times before Harald, somewhat bemused and amused, allows Audun passage to Denmark. This misrepresents the subtlety of all the action and the intelligence of the characterizations and characters, but suffice it to say that Audun, after trial and tribulation, gets the bear to Svein, who rewards him magnificently. Svein offers him a high position at court, which Audun refuses (he says no twice to Svein's offers), but Svein sends him on his way with a ship laden with the finest of cargoes, a purse of silver, and an arm-ring. But with the greatest delicacy King Svein puts a condition on the gift of the arm-ring:

ABSTRACT This article was presented as a talk at the conference *Remakes: A Symposium in Honor of Carol J. Clover* on October 27, 2006, at the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley. / REPRESENTATIONS 100. Fall 2007 © 2007 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734–6018, electronic ISSN 1533–855X, pages 13–22. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2007.100.1.13.

Then he drew from his arm a ring, the greatest of treasures, and gave it to [Audun] and said, "if the worst should happen and you not only lose the ship, but the silver too, you will still not be penniless when you reach land, if you hold on to the ring. It can then still be seen that you have met King Svein. But I think it reasonable that if you have a debt to repay to some distinguished person, then give him the ring, because it suits a high-ranking man. And now farewell."

Now let me tell you a little about this bear whose picture introduces this article. Every once in a while you have a perfect seminar. The students play off each other and off you productively; there is a constant energy and even the students do not want it to end. This was a gift to me from the students in such a seminar three years ago. It was a seminar that led to my *Eye for an Eye* book, and I assigned *Audun's Story* as part of readings to talk about the various ways people assessed value, and the relation of particular kinds of risk to value. Thus the value of the bear goes up because Audun says no to Harald's requests for it despite the very high probability of being killed for refusing, and its value goes up even more because by letting Audun get on with his mission, the bear becomes partly Harald's gift to Svein. But it is the value of *this* bear I need first affirm. When the students presented it to me, I was quite embarrassed but genuinely touched. The bear was not a cute stuffed animal, but a real—well, you know what I mean—a polar bear. It is more an accurate sculpture than a cuddly stuffed animal. I turned red, which was probably the best thank-you I could have given. I have displayed it prominently in my office on a cabinet that makes the bear look down threateningly on any student who comes by to complain about a grade. I love this bear, and I dragged my family down to my office to see it. It has been much admired by colleagues and students who feel obliged to comment on it.

What are the rules regarding gifts you receive? Can you give them away? If so, must you conceal that you have done so from the original giver? Or is there a statute of limitations, after which any right the original giver has to feel wronged or to burden you with guilt for undervaluing it by giving it away rightly expires? Even an heirloom might exhaust its sacredness. Sometimes the sacred has a half-life, as might be the case, for instance, with your grandmother's dining set.

Can the giver ask for his gifts back if you try to give them away? Might he be able to sue to recover it? Can he justly hate you for giving it away, feel wronged? Does it matter whether the gift was the initiatory gift, the one that started it all, or that it was a payback for a prior gift, or that it was a closing gift, a gift to send someone on their way never to return, as were the swords and cloaks Norwegian kings gave to departing Icelanders? Are there different rules for different kinds of gifts, a sword by one rule, a cloak or an ox or an axe by another?

It would be a mistake to think that such questions have easy answers, for every situation presents its own set of particular circumstances that might alter what counts as a violation of proper behavior or what can be excused or understood as an imaginative and justifiable response to a special situation. But there are tendencies that can at times be stated as if they were hard and fast rules. Such rules often appear as proverbs and even as laws, laws you can sue on.

Audun's Story puts the issue of regifting squarely in play. Its sublime ending depends on doing just that, as Audun regives to ruthless King Harald the arm-ring King Svein gave to him. And as we saw in the passage I quoted at the beginning, in which Svein indicated that the ring should be passed on to a highborn person, it really was not meant for Audun to keep except under certain limited circumstances.

Another Icelandic tale expands upon the issues of giving away a gift. It suggests that the original giver retains some rights in gifts he has given. The tale involves men named Brand the Generous, King Olaf the Saint, and Isleif Gizurarson. This Isleif, by the way, made a gift of a polar bear to the German emperor (Henry III) in 1055 when he was to be consecrated the first bishop of Iceland. The events that ensued in the following brief vignette occurred some three decades earlier, when Isleif was a young priest.

Isleif had just arrived in Norway from Germany, where he had been studying. Brand was in attendance on King Olaf at the time. Olaf held Brand in high esteem and, as an indication of it, gave Brand a fine scarlet cloak lined with gray fur. Then this:

> Brand ran into Isleif in town, and they were each delighted to see the other. Isleif was a priest at the time and quite poor when he arrived from the south.
>
> Brand said, "Accept from me this cloak the king gave me."
>
> He said, "You surely haven't lost any of your generosity; I will accept it with pleasure."
>
> Later in the holiday when Brand was eating with the king, the king fixed him with a look and said, "Brand, why aren't you wearing the cloak I gave you?"
>
> He said, "My lord, I gave it to this priest."
>
> The king said, "I want to see the priest to see if I will judge it excusable that you so quickly have given away a king's gift."
>
> People were rather amazed that Brand would treat such a person's gift so cavalierly. And when on their way to a church-meeting Brand said to the king: "My lord, there stands the priest, next to the church; he is wearing the cloak."
>
> The king fixed him with his eye and said, "This is the course we are going to take, Brand, because now I want to give him the cloak. Call the priest over to me."
>
> Brand said he would do so.
>
> Isleif soon came before the king and greeted him. The king accepted the greeting with pleasure and said, "That cloak, priest, that Brand gave you . . . I wish to give it to you, and I will repay Brand its value, because you so please me that I wish to gain the protection of your prayers."

He answered, "My lord, I thought this gift a splendid one before when Brand gave it to me, but it has even greater value coming from you with these words."[2]

The king believes he retains a right to reclaim his gift if it has been "abused" or insufficiently honored, and, being a strong king, his belief regarding his rights does much to realize those rights. But the king does not go about reclaiming the gift as highhandedly as he might have. He acts with considerable restraint. He thus compensates Brand for its value, presumably the compensation being directed to satisfy two, possibly three, things: any dishonor to Brand by reclaiming it, any return Brand was expecting from Isleif that may now be compromised, or, supposing as likely, the cloak was a repayment for gifts Brand had previously made to Olaf, a new discharge of that debt.

This episode is more complex than it seems, though. Is Brand's act of generosity wiped off the slate? Does Isleif, in other words, still owe Brand? In support of this, has not the king actually ratified Brand's gift by remaking it to the same beneficiary? He has not canceled it in the least. It thus does not appear, or at least the story does not care to indicate, that Isleif handed the cloak back to Olaf so that Olaf could physically hand it back to him. The cloak stays on Isleif by Brand's hand.

There are more than a few laws that purport to regulate the reclamation of gifts. It would not be suitable to go into the legalistic details. Suffice it to say: Legally there was a robust right of reclamation in land transfers, and there was one also for any gift above a certain value that had not been repaid at least to half its value. And even a giver of gifts of lesser value could sue to recover if the receiver promised a return gift.[3] But this gift from Olaf is presumably already a countergift to Brand, not a gift that starts a cycle but more likely one that concludes a cycle, so Olaf has no claim against Brand for not having been repaid for the cloak. Not enough time has passed, in any event, for him to make such a claim, should it have been an opening gift.

And should an Icelandic father try to follow the Gospel and give all he has to the poor, the heirs can reclaim that. Dad is limited to a gift of 10 percent of his net worth—called the great tithe—once in his lifetime "for the good of his soul," but not more unless he gets the heirs to sign on.[4] Overcoming the interest of the heirs in the property dad gives away may account for the fact that types like Brand the Generous are generous abroad, far away from the jealous and watchful eye of kinsmen out to make sure their "expectations" remain great expectations, and who do not quite trust the value of any returns for gifts made to the Church or to the poor, or to kings for that matter.

Gifts come with strings attached. What else is new? Some strings are legalized, some strings tug at the heart by raising sentiments of obligation—from gratitude to oppression—and some strings are quite weak, both legally and morally. Like the ones attached to your Bar Mitzvah gifts. I remember those families that gave a contribution of ten dollars (this was 1959) to the Torah fund in my name. My mother insisted I write a thank-you note. So I did: "Thank you very much for the $10 donation to the Torah fund in my name. I will put it to very good use." What does Olaf's reclamation, a half-hearted reclamation at that, add to the gift? It is a standard view in the Maussian vein that the spirit of the giver haunts the gift, and the spirit seeks its return to its original home.[5] The gift comes with the giver imbued in it. If that is the case, Olaf's actions can be read to show a distinction between Olaf being *in* the gift and Olaf being *in on* the gift. When Brand gives the "king's gift" to Isleif—"accept from me this cloak the king gave me"—the generosity of Brand that the priest Isleif remarks upon is a reference to the value of the gift not only as a splendid cloak but also as having come from King Olaf. Olaf is already *in* the gift to Isleif when Brand gives it to him; and Brand takes care to inform him that this is the "cloak the king gave me."

Gifts from kings and other high people get their own special nomenclature in Old Norse; the gift itself gets a name by adding *naut* (meaning gift, present) to the genitive of the name or title of the giver, as long as the giver is of notable rank: Olaf's-*naut*, king's-*naut*, jarl's-*naut*, Hakon's-*naut*. A name is a sign of animation, but not just any gift qualifies for such individuated life. Cloaks, swords, spears, axes, rings are admitted to the club, an occasional ship, and that's about it. The gifts that are *naut*s thus tend to have something inherently personal about them, are generally portable and worn, or make you portable, like a ship. They are imbued with the soul of the giver and retain his name or title whether gifted on down the line or not.[6]

But having his soul already *in* the gift is not good enough for Olaf. He wants to be *in on* the gift as well as *in* it, and for that, he believes, his personhood imbuing the object is not enough; he wants to be seen as the presenter, not just as in the chain of title as the presenter of the presenter. *Audun's Story* shows that the directness of presenting can be finessed, as when Harald gets "in on" the gift of the bear by letting Audun go through to Svein without killing him and taking the bear, and Svein then gives the ring to Harald via Audun and is thus both in and *in on* the gift of the arm-ring.

Isleif is explicit about the value of the gift going up when Olaf gets in on the gift: "My lord, I thought this gift a splendid one before when Brand gave it to me, but it has even greater value coming from you with these words." The words are sheer flattery. A future saint—Olaf—is prophesying about the spiritual gifts of a young priest, such that the king almost bows before him.

That Brand must suffer his gift rating second place is the price he pays for having walked out of a conventional saga and into the story of Isleif, future first bishop of Iceland.

Everything works out well here though, in part because Olaf does not go through the motions of asking Isleif to hand him the cloak so that he can hand it right back to him. His reclamation and regiving are all done verbally, almost virtually, as we would say. Brand thus gets to feel that his gift is not so much undone, if it is undone at all, but truly ratified, despite Olaf's compensating him and purporting to buy him out. Imagine, though, the round of hurt feelings and offense if Olaf dispossessed Isleif, failed to compensate Brand, and gave it to another person or kept it and handed it back to Isleif in an elaborate ceremony the next day.

There is still room for wondering what obligations exist after this tale. Who owes what to whom? Olaf has specified what he wants from Isleif: his prayers and intercession. He is buying protection or, less tendentiously, intercessory services. Does Isleif still owe Brand anything for his good intentions, for giving Olaf the idea of giving him the gift? Surely Brand is owed by both Olaf and Isleif for pointing out the optimal recipient of this cloak. How very much like the talent Audun had of finding perfect placements for debt, a detail that only the Flateyjarbók version of *Audun's Story* makes sure to note at the story's outset, when Audun finds creditworthy customers for the visiting Norwegian merchant. And Audun was also repaid for his skill of knowing how to select the perfect recipient of a gift. That might explain part of the reason Olaf compensates Brand for the cloak. He deserves something for pointing out its highest and best use.

This cloak has a biography that no matter how you tell it includes Brand centrally.[7] His spirit imbues the gift, not quite in the same way Olaf's did (Brand is not a king), but it is there nonetheless. But we know from our own experience too and the Icelandic sources confirm this, that after the passage of time, the giver's soul in the gift can grow fainter, especially if his status has diminished or he has been adequately compensated, and that one gift is now just one of a number of others in a continuing flux of gift and countergift. And I worry that my students will drop out of the spirit of this gift once I hand it on, and eventually I will drop out of it too.

But I am making too big a deal of this: a lot of gifts get passed on without insult to the prior giver or without any sense that propriety has been breached. When a certain Jon gives a valuable book, a *gersimi*, the same word used to describe Audun's bear, to the priest Gudmund, it is mentioned that it is the book that Bishop Pal had given Jon, but there is no sense that any wrong has been done to Pal when Jon passes it on. The new recipient, Gudmund, is an appropriate one, who will become a bishop in due course

also, and that more than satisfies the respect owed the book and Bishop Pal who gave it first to Jon.[8] Similar to the sense in *Isleif's Story*, the sense here is that the object was getting to where it best belonged.

And this adds yet another wrinkle to how a gift acquires its value. It is not just a matter of the soul of the giver that imbues it, but the moral qualities and social standing of the person who receives it. Svein's acceptance of the bear raises its value, which is no different from Isleif's honoring of the coat by being the exact right person to wear it.[9] In fact, there is no story unless Audun's bear is given to a person of account, a person already sagaworthy in his own right.

The act of giving away something given to you can yield exactly contrary meanings and a whole range of meanings in between. Brand gives the cloak to Isleif not because he undervalues Olaf or the cloak but because he so values both that he cannot think of anything more appropriate to honor the worthy Isleif. Yet, as we well know, giving things away, especially things given to us already as gifts, often means unloading things we value at zero or less.

For a recipient to believe you really value the gift you are giving them, it may be that the object must be of unassailably clear value (and could be cashed out for it), or (if there is no ready market for the thing), that it really hurts the giver to give it and that the pain is hard to disguise beneath the smiles and joy of handing it over.[10] And that joy need not even be entirely feigned, though it may be mixed with regret, for rituals of giving have a way of getting the actors to generate the appropriate sentiments to make the transactions succeed.

The distrust of a gift's value by the recipient leads to some interestingly perverse behaviors.[11] I mean, the recipient often wonders: if the giver really values it, why is he unloading it? Patrick Geary, in his writings on the relic trade, shows that it was thus better to claim that the relic you acquired was stolen than that it was received as a gift—though you then had to account for what kind of relic would be so weak as to have gotten stolen unless, yes, it connived in the theft to be owned by a better owner.[12] Who, after all, would give away a real miracle-working relic, unless it was losing its efficacy? Stealing it proved the thief valued it, and proved also that its proper owner did not disvalue it enough to give it away.

Return now to Audun, giving to Harald the gift Svein gave to him and compare how different that gift operates from Olaf's regiving the gift Brand gave. In the latter exchange—Brand and Olaf—there is a weak undoing and a redoing, two successive acts of giving the same object. In the former there is one giving that simultaneously works as a complete gift from Svein *and* a complete gift from Audun, because Audun manages it so perfectly, by linking

the game he is playing with the kings to the game the kings are playing with each other. Harald understood completely the delicacy of the gestures. Olaf's way is clumsier, less grand, and makes one feel that it might well be accompanied by an almost childish chagrin of having lost the opportunity to maximize his gain from the gift by having given it away too early to the wrong person.

I believe my students would be honored to find that their gift to me is about to find a worthier recipient, one wholly within the spirit of their gift. For I understand they gave me this bear much in the manner that Svein gave Audun the arm-ring, with these subtle instructions attached, that if I ever owed a debt to some distinguished person, then this bear would be best given to her. Add to that that I love this damn bear. It hurts to give it up. If a gift's value is measured by the pain it takes to give it, then this is one valuable stuffed animal.

And here is the debt I owe Carol Clover: She welcomed me as an interloper to this field simply on seeing a draft of an essay I wrote on bloody-token rituals way back in 1982. She has been a close friend ever since, and someone from whom I have learned and learned, argued and debated, and with whom each often must admit a bit of competitiveness with the other. But mostly she is the only person in the world of whom I am absolutely certain loves these sagas as much as I do. She is also, well, so cool and regal. Academics are rarely cool; we are the nerds, beaten up on the playground, never asked out; but not Clover. So I am giving this gift to a king, playing Audun to Carol's Harald (a little gender bending fits here too, given her *Chain Saws*). Carol as King Harald as final girl.

So here, Clover, take this bear. As that sublimest of endings in which Audun shows he fully understood Svein's instructions, shows he understood perfectly that the tough Harald was owed big-time because he let him carry on with his crazy mission to give his enemy King Svein the bear. So both Svein and Audun repay Harald for basically making all the good things in the story possible, for making them both, indeed all three, look so good:

> Harald said to Audun, "I would have considered myself quit once I had given you the ship, whatever happened afterwards. Did he stop repaying you at this point?"
>
> Audun said, "He gave me this ring and said it could happen that I might lose all my property, but he said to me that I would not be penniless if I had the ring. He asked that I not part with it unless I owed some high-ranking person so great a debt that I wished to give him the ring. And now I have found that person, because you had the opportunity, sire, to take my life and make my treasure your own, but you let me travel in peace when others could not do so. All the good luck I have had comes from you."

Notes

1. The story is preserved in slightly varying versions in three mss. The version I believe to be the best, though it is not the most popular (if popularity is measured in the number of printings in the original, or translations) is from Flateyjarbók and is conveniently accessible in an excellent translation by Hermann Pálsson in the Penguin classics; see *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, 1971), 121–28; unless otherwise noted all translations are my own. *Flateyjarbók: en samling af norske konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C. R. Unger (Christiania [Oslo], 1860–68), 3:410–15.
2. *Ísleifs þáttr byskups*, in *Biskupa sögur*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Íslenzk fornrit* 16 (Reykjavík, 2002), 2:335–36.
3. *Grágás* Ia 247, II 84–85. The medieval Icelandic laws known as *Grágás* are available in an excellent translation with annotation: *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás with material from other manuscripts*, 2 vols., trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins (Winnipeg, 1980, 2000). The events of the passage I am discussing took place in Norway where *Grágás* did not govern. The laws of the Norwegian Gulaþing, in a passage that is rather obscure and whose translation is uncertain, appear to give "everyone a right [to recall] a gift unless it has been requited with a better payment; a gift is not requited unless an equal amount is set over against that which was given." But then come the limits on the right, which include apparently "gifts that the king gives us or that we give to him shall remain valid"; *Gulaþing Law* §129, in *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. R. Keyser and P. A. Munch (Christiania, 1846), 1:54. Laurence Larson's translation supplies the "to recall," which seems necessary to make sense of the very elliptical Norse; Laurence M. Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws, Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law* (New York, 1935), 118–19.
4. *Grágás* Ia 246–47, II 84.
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Gifts," in *Essays, Second Series*, 1844, http://www.emersoncentral.com/gifts.htm: "the only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb." There is an extended anthropological literature on the "inalienability" of the gift, it always in effect belonging to the giver. The idea originates in Marcel Mauss's view of the *hau*, the spirit of the owner, which seeks to bring the gift back to its owner. In Norse law there are rights of reclamation to ancestral land, but even these can be lost; see, e.g., *Grágás* Ib 79 where the assertion of land reclamation claims are subject to a limitations period. Consider in the bible the inalienability of family land, which is supposed to return in the jubilee, *unless* it is a house in a walled city, in which case there is only a one-year redemption period after the transfer; Lev. 25:29.
6. See the cloak, sword, and ring variously *konungsnaut*, *jarlsnaut*, and *Sigvaldanaut* in *Hallfreðar saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* 8 (Reykjavík, 1939), chaps. 6, 9–10.
7. On the biography of things, see the classic treatments of Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in Arjun Appadurai, ed.,

The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge, 1986), 3–63, and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Appadurai, *Social Life*, 64–94.

8. *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* chap. 19, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík, 1946), 1:116–59. *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, chap. 34, in *Byskupa sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1953), 2:167–389; see also Egil's regifting of King Æthelstan's gift to him to his friend Arinbjorn, which Arinbjorn repays by giving a sword to Egil that Arinbjorn had been given by Egil's brother; *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk fornrit* 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), chap. 62. There is no suggestion of untowardness. Quite the contrary, as the gifts are clearly meant to do honor to the recipient and both gifts had been possessed for a number of years before being passed on. Compare, however, Hallfred's payment to Gris for composing insulting verses about him. He pays over an arm-ring, *Sigvaldanaut*, he received from Jarl Sigvaldi, but Hallfred has just gotten news of his lord Olaf Tryggvason's death in a battle in which he was betrayed by Sigvaldi. The gift no longer has the value to Hallfred it once had; *Hallfreðar saga* chap. 10.
9. Jonathan Parry, "*The Gift*, the Indian Gift, and the 'Indian Gift,'" *Man* 21 (1986): 453–73, at 468, remarks that the spiritual worth of the gift in Hinduism and Buddhism, in contrast to the orthodox Melanesian story of the giver's spirit providing the main source of value, depends on the quality of the recipient. This is also true in certain understandings of almsgiving in Christianity. The poor have a certain magical power to enhance the spiritual quality of transfers to them.
10. See my *Faking It* (Cambridge, 2003), chap. 7, regarding the easy fakability of remorse and how making sure the apology hurts the apologizer is one of the few ways we will accept it as sincere, even though we know the person apologizing is sorry only for the pain it is causing him to apologize, not for the pain he caused you.
11. The deep distrust that pervaded buy/sell transactions, that one was being sold shoddy goods for too high a price if buyer, or that one could have gotten more for them if seller, is not completely avoided in the world of gifts.
12. Patrick Geary, "Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics," in Appadurai, *Social Life*.