

Arrested in Parody

The Performance of Erlend Nikulaussøn in *Kristin Lavransdatter*

Claudia Berguson
Pacific Lutheran University

THE HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of Sigrid Undset's debut as an author brought both insight and challenge to the perception of this celebrated Norwegian novelist. Leading up to the anniversary in 2007, the publication of the complete collection of Undset's essays¹ and a new biography² provided greater depth to our understanding of Undset's engagement in social and political debates of her day and a more penetrating lens through which to view Undset not only as a Norwegian author, but an author in exile in the United States during World War II. In addition to this greater scope and depth, however, a challenge in this anniversary year to the common view of Undset's trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* as a serious historical novel arose. In a 2007 Norwegian National Broadcasting interview, author Dag Solstad admitted that he had not read any of Undset's texts and had not made good on a promise some fifteen years earlier to read the first volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The interviewer challenged Solstad to read *Kransen* and to comment on the novel in a follow-up program.³ Two years later, in a 2009 interview, Solstad responded first that he was impressed with Undset as a professional writer, but, "Jeg greier ikke å ta boken helt alvorlig, når alt kommer til alt" [I cannot manage to take the book entirely seriously when it comes down to it], and, more specifically,

This essay was first published in volume 82 number 3 of *Scandinavian Studies*. Regrettably a version that was incompletely edited was printed with numerous errors. It is here presented with necessary corrections. Ed.

1. Four volumes of *Essays og artikler* edited by Liv Bliksrud were published by Aschehoug from 2004–2007.

2. *Dikterdronningen* by Sigrun Slappgard was published by Gyldendal in 2007.

3. The first interview took place on the NRK program *Kulturmytt* in 2007. An article discussing the program can be accessed at <<http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/1.6395439>> (Accessed 13 Sep. 2010). The interviewer was Agnes Moxnes.

“Jeg tror ikke et øyeblikk på at dette er middelalderkjærlighet”⁴ [I do not believe for a minute that this is medieval love].⁵

While Solstad’s statement is critical, perhaps provocative, it also is an invitation to readers to ask if Undset’s trilogy indeed should be taken entirely seriously. I propose in this article that it should not but that the trilogy’s departure from the accepted script of the medieval can be explored not as a fault of the work or its author, but as a purposeful construction, or, to use Linda Hutcheon’s term, an “authorized transgression of norms” (74). The interpretation I present here shifts the focus from a measure of the novel’s seriousness based on the degree to which it corresponds to a medieval “truth” and toward the intertextual dialog between codified texts and transgression of those texts. I consider the contentious space this dialog creates between texts as one that is carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense of laughter elicited from the challenge to authority and its dominant discourse. While I certainly do not suggest that *Kristin Lavransdatter* is a comic text, I argue that, more than one hundred years after the debut of the author and over eighty years since the publication of the complete trilogy, we open the text to the possibility of being not entirely serious. My interpretation investigates carnival laughter as it is performed most profoundly through the transgressions of Kristin’s husband Erlend Nikulaussøn.

THE AMBIGUOUS ERLEND NIKULAUSSØN: CHARMER AND VILLAIN

To be sure, the charming, romantic, seductive Erlend is one of the images cultivated in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The Erlend we come to know in the first volume of the trilogy is handsome, agile, youthful, and speaks the language of love to perfection. But he is not an unambiguous character.

It is said that a woman from Bergen wrote to Sigrid Undset praising the charming Erlend Nikulaussøn that the author had created in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The story goes that, instead of confirming the woman’s

4. The second NRK interview took place on the program *Kulturnytt* in January 6, 2009. The interviewer was Agnes Moxnes. I was given access to the interview at NRK Studios, Oslo.

5. All translations in this article are my own.

positive view of Erlend, Undset responded curtly, "Kjære Frue. Erlend er en *skurk!* Deres, Sigrid Undset" (Rieber-Mohn 9) [Dear Madam, Erlend is a scoundrel. Yours, Sigrid Undset]. A quite different assessment of Erlend from that of the charmer is to be found in a commentary in a Danish newspaper from 1923. The writer pronounced *Kristin Lavransdatter* "en utryg Bog, hvor ingenting staar fast i det sjælelige, men Personerne drives erotisk frem og tilbage efter Forholdene og Øjeblikkets Følelser" (P. Lauritsen 28) [an unsafe book, where nothing is anchored in the spiritual, rather the people are driven erotically back and forth according to the circumstances and the feelings of the moment]. Asked by the newspaper editor for a response to this review Sigrid Undset kindly called the writer's interpretation understandable but limited. She went on to provide a corrective to the writer's review, claiming Erlend is not an erotic villain, but "en forkjælet overklasse-gut" (Undset to Nordentoft; unpublished letter) [a coddled upper class boy]. From these diverse views of the character Erlend, both readers' assessments of him—from charmer to erotic sinner—and Undset's own labeling of her character as scoundrel and coddled upper class boy, we can determine the common denominator of Erlend as one healthy misbehaving lad. He has everything going for him. He gets away with plenty.

If we remember only the first volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, we could easily imagine Erlend as the knight who has rescued Kristin, the "mountain king" who has lured the young maiden into the riches of romance, and the brash and seductive cavalier who challenges the norms of marriage and position to win his true love. But he is "ingen svigerfars drøm" (Bliksrud, *Undset* 88) [no father-in-law's dream]. By the end of the first volume of the trilogy, Erlend has not only stolen the bride Kristin, but he has gotten her pregnant before they are married, precipitated the death of his former lover Eline, and formed in Kristin a deep sense of sin and regret for her defiance of the norms of her Christian upbringing.

In the second volume, *Husfrue*, we come to know Erlend as the text's bad boy, a dashing adventurer who not only squanders his inherited place in the hierarchy of political and ecclesiastic authority, but also commits transgressions in marriage and loyalty to the king. My interpretation illustrates that Erlend's departure from the roles he has been given is parallel to his transgressions of the texts of such authority. His poor memory, irresponsible actions, and laughing disregard for his own place

in inherited narrative presents a parodic challenge to the text's dominant reverence for history, religion, and the law, texts within which Erlend's wife Kristin is so deeply embedded.

MEDIEVAL TEXTS AND INTERTEXTS

There is little disagreement that Undset drew upon her knowledge of medieval tradition and literature in the writing of *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Most recognize that the trilogy also was informed by Undset's extensive research in which she set about to "ransake i Universitetsbiblioteket" (Stina Paasche 381) for information concerning medieval law, politics, and religious practice. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*⁶ and Rudolf Keyser's *Den norske kirkes historie* are clearly sources of much of the detail of medieval names, events, dynamics of power, and traditions upon which to anchor a plausible story of the Middle Ages. But if there is wide consensus on the types of sources Undset incorporated into her narrative, marked disagreement characterizes how we should interpret Undset's departure from the script of the medieval style and mentality as we know it from the sagas, legends, and ballads of the period.

One of the main schisms in Undset interpretation through the years has been that between critics who expect from the novel a faithful representation of medieval society as it is documented in fiction and non-fiction of the Middle Ages and those who consider the use of medieval texts as discursive borrowings that are retold and reshaped in the fiction of Sigrid Undset. Solstad is not the first to criticize the trilogy as less than authentic in its portrayal of medieval lives, nor is he alone in citing the difference between accepted knowledge of the Middle Ages and Undset's representation thereof as a reason to question the seriousness of the narrative. With his additional remarks in the 2009 NRK interview saying that *Kristin Lavransdatter* is "en praktfull kjærlighetshistorie" [a wonderful love story] he makes his position especially clear: "Men den forteller vel mer om Sigrid Undset og hennes

6. Undset's volumes of this text, housed at the Gunnerus Library in Trondheim, evidence extensive marginalia noting dates, religious and political events, place names, and family names in particular.

syn på kjærlighet ... enn det har med middelalderkjærlighet å gjøre” [But it probably tells more about Sigrid Undset and her view of love ... than it has to do with medieval love]. Solstad joins the company that for decades has voiced the most strikingly consistent discomfort with the dissonance between medieval “truth” and fiction in Undset’s trilogy. Solstad echoes, for example, the stance of Edvard Bull, who, in a 1927 essay on Hans Kinck as historian, contrasted Kinck’s sense of “det middelalderlige gemyt” (203) [the medieval disposition] with Undset’s clear error in portraying characters who, in thoughts and actions, were “ikke middelalderlige, men moderne” (204) [not medieval but modern].⁷ Decades later, in his 1983 article “Middelalderens lys—mellomkrigstidas lyst” [The Middle Age’s Light—The Interwar Time’s Desire], Helge Rønning applied Kåre Lunden’s categories for the historical novel concluding that Undset’s work was an “antikvarroman” [antique novel] rather than an “ekte historisk roman” [genuine historical novel] in which the main characters are clearly products of the historical period in which the fiction takes place.

Perhaps most remarkable is the 1928 Nobel Prize presentation that voiced the strongest collective ambivalence toward Undset’s historical fiction. Per Hallström, chairman of the Nobel committee, first praised the Nobel-prize winning Undset for her masterworks, then summed up the committee’s assessment of Undset’s medieval novels in particular noting first the “discrepancy” between Undset’s fictional portrayal of “the erotic life” on the one hand, and medieval documents and archeological artifact that offered no proof of “the feminist question” on the other. He then remarked on the seeming “dissemblance” between Undset’s modern “accent” of the inner life of her characters in comparison with language in medieval documents in which “the influence of poetry had not yet manifested itself.”⁸ One dissenting member of the committee provided more specific objections, arguing that *Kristin Lavransdatter* was an “ohistorisk konstruktion” (Schück

7. In fact, Bull’s Kristin Lavransdatter is a woman who “reagerer overfor tilværelsen ikke som den der er vokset op på en middelaldergård i Gudbrandsdal, men som den der er vokset op i Welhavensgate” [reacts to her existence not as one who has grown up on a medieval farm in Gudbrandsdal, but as one who has grown up in Welhavensgate] (204).

8. The entire presentation speech can be read at: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/press.html (Accessed 13 September 2010).

124) whose use of saga style was inconsistent with the style of actual saga literature.⁹

Whether in the Scandinavia of the 1920s and '30s, or the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the expectation of faithfulness to the historical period must be considered within a cultural context of nation building and an ideological orientation most associated with Marxist critics. On the one hand, medieval literature and artifacts served as links to an interrupted past, and these pieces of "evidence" became pillars upon which Norway's lost age of greatness could steadily be built. On the other hand, the relationship of literature to depiction of social and class conflict also was critical for some. The criterion to "attempt to portray historical reality as it actually was, so that it could be both humanly authentic and yet be re-liveable by the reader of a later age" (40) was, of course, made most manifest in *Der historische Roman* (The Historical Novel) by Georg Lukács. This faithfulness to the texts, mentality, and social dynamic of the period, however that period is known, was clearly found lacking by the critics who made the above assessments of Undset's historical fiction. Labeled as "inauthenticity," "discrepancy," "dissemblance," or a less-than-serious novel, difference between the worldview of Undset's characters and the worldview of those portrayed in medieval literature has remained a persistent line of criticism of the trilogy for the past eighty years.

On the other side of the critical divide, there has been, through these same eighty years, an equally consistent thread of interpretation that either emphasizes the historical accuracy of Undset's trilogy, or, more importantly for our purposes, identifies medieval literature as intertextual discourse rather than truth in the novel. Well known are the views of Fredrik Paasche who challenged Edvard Bull's contention that the Christian worldview in Undset's trilogy was incongruous with what he considered a distanced relationship of the Norwegian medieval population to the Catholic beliefs of the time.¹⁰ Though discussion of

9. In particular, he found that "hos Sigrid Undset tala människorna mycket litet, men til ersättning söker förf. att minutiöst disekera deras själsliv. Så vitt jag förstår, är detta en sämre och i varje fall tråkigare romanstil än den isländska, där människorna skildra sig själva" (Schück 125) [with Sigrid Undset the people talk very little, but instead the author tries to dissect meticulously their souls. As far as I understand, this is an inferior and at any rate more tedious novel style than the Icelandic, where the people describe themselves].

10. See Liv Blikrud's *Sigrid Undset*: 100-2, Olav Solberg's *Tekst möter tekst*: 17-9, and Sverre Bagge: 32-3 for details of the contending views of Bull and Paasche.

historical accuracy is sure to continue in the critical analysis of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, consideration of departure from the script opens the trilogy to study as both medieval *and* modern.

The trilogy is built upon the foundation of accepted social norms and the journey of the individual on the pilgrim's path, but the majority of the text's drama depicts the life of Kristin and Erlend as they deviate from this path. In the first volume, it is decidedly Erlend who "skal bli den endelige årsak til at [Kristin] bryter med den sosiale normen" (Bliksrud, *Natur* 227) [will become the final reason that [Kristin] breaks with the social norm]. In the second volume, it is "Erlends natur og ansvarløse livsførsel i utkanten av det livet som utfolder seg omkring Kristin og sønnene på gården hjemme" (Amadou 19) [Erlend's nature and irresponsible behavior on the periphery of the life that unfolds around Kristin and their sons on the farm at home] that increasingly contrasts the divergent paths of normative and transgressive worldview and behavior.

Critics who emphasize the transgressions in plot also recognize the text as multivoiced, and Undset's use of the voices of these texts as dialogic. As early as 1929, Paasche, though he insisted to a large extent on the correctness of Undset's Middle Ages, also argued for an openness to the style Undset adapts in her text:

Det er nåtids språk og Sigrid Undsets eget språk; men det er samtidig nok av middelalder i det. En uhåndgripelig middelalder: ikke sagaens stil, ikke legendens stil, overhodet ikke etterligning, studium; men nyopplevelse av sagaen og legenden, slik at makten i begge merkes. (Fredrik Paasche 35)

(It is contemporary language and Sigrid Undset's own language; but there is at the same time enough of the medieval in it. An intangible Middle Ages: not the style of the saga, not the style of legend, absolutely not imitation, study; but new experience of the saga and legend, such that the power in both is noticed.)

More recent analyses identify both the trilogy's "utallige språklige 'intertekster', spill med ord og uttrykk fra folkeviser, bibel, liturgi, helgenvitae, krøniker, diplomer, folkeminner, sagaer og andre litterære kilder" (Bliksrud, *Undset* 96) [innumerable linguistic "intertexts," play with words and expressions from ballads, Bible, liturgy, hagiography, chronicles, official documents, folklore, sagas, and other literary sources], and, most specifically, the ballad as the most operative, deviant discourse in the trilogy. Olav Solberg, in his study *Tekst møter tekst*, identifies "brurerovsviser, bergtakingsviser, historiske viser og legendeviser" (64)

[bride-stealing ballads, mountain-trance ballads, historical ballads, and legend ballads], as not only textual borrowings, but the images that form the central motif in the trilogy.

A good deal of scholarly response across the divide of interpretations points clearly to a shift in focus from medieval truth to intertextual fiction. To Helge Rønning's claim that a dissonant modern mentality can be found just beneath the illusion of the Middle Ages Undset creates in her trilogy, Vigdis Ystad urges that the reader ought to strive "å forstå den indre sammenheng i det middelaldersyn [Undset] faktisk hadde" (64) [to understand the inner continuity in the view of the Middle Ages (Undset) actually had]. Liv Bliksrud responds to Dag Solstad's 2009 comments on the trilogy's unconvincing portrayal of medieval love remarking first that, "Det er ikke noen grunn til å tro på en fiksjon i det hele tatt" [There's no reason to believe in a fiction at all], and second, that Undset herself had said that, "Man kan bare skrive romaner fra sin samtid"¹¹ [One can only write novels from one's own time]. Historian Sverre Bagge responds as well to criticism of the trilogy's "inauthenticity," arguing that "Sigrid Undset har brukt kildene så langt de rekker og har deretter supplert med sin egen fantasi—som historikere også gjør—og med sin dikteriske evne, som selvsagt er helt legitimt når det dreier seg om skjønnlitteratur" (37) [Sigrid Undset has used the sources as far as they go and has after that supplemented them with her own fantasy—as historians also do—and with her poetic talent, which of course is totally legitimate when it involves fiction].

My interpretation argues for a "both/and" approach: the laughter of the trilogy is both grounded in the serious codified medieval texts of authority and adventure, and "dissembled" from them. In other words, I consider Undset's trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* as more than a text made up of mimetic threads that are expected to form a fiction too tightly woven to be considered seriously playful. *Kristin Lavransdatter* is fiction, a constructed text and can be read in such a way that we might both engage in recognition of textual borrowings and laugh at certain deliberate departures from the medieval texts in the narrative. But who laughs in *Kristin Lavransdatter*? And is this laughter merely "play" or something more serious, more meaningful? After delineating the texts

11. This NRK interview took place in January 2009. It was made accessible to me at NRK Studios, Oslo.

Kristin and Erlend inherit, I will discuss how the dialog between texts elicits parodic carnival laughter that “[inscribes] continuity while permitting critical distance” (Hutcheon 20).

CARNIVAL AND LITERARY TEXTS

It is, of course, Mikhail Bakhtin who wrote most extensively on carnival as not only folk practice, but also as a literary dynamic. No words are neutral in Bakhtin's view of language, but rather “saturated” with a worldview, an ideology. In literature, it is the folk response to authority in plot and discourse that “brings low” the authoritative texts of “the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions” (*Rabelais* 9). These texts are most often recognized as authoritative by the common folk (and us as readers), but at the same time, they exhibit a distance from the everyday in their appearance, for example elaborate lettering and images, and language that is other than the vernacular (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 343). Differentiation of languages in a narrative can, Bakhtin points out, also be a matter of stylization and the actions and speech of characters (*Problems* 199). It is most often the saga style that is recognized as the dominant narrative voice in *Kristin Lavransdatter*, and religious language and ritual are established as normative early on in the narrative, but they do not, I maintain, remain dominant and normative without challenge.

Umberto Eco's definition of the comic in literature states explicitly the role of the reader in participating in the laughter of the text, emphasizing that, as a starting point, “transgression can exist only if a background of unquestioned observance exists” (175). In rethinking the relationship between textual rule and transgression in *Kristin Lavransdatter*, carnival begins with the recognition of authoritative texts and continues with the questioning of the “ritual of everyday life” (Eco 175), the violation of rules (for our purposes codified texts) that are implicitly understood. If we view the medieval texts not as “truth,” but as the “rule” or “ritual of everyday life” that is violated in Undset's trilogy, then the transgression of that deeply rooted narrative “truth” presents a space in which one can laugh at the inversion of order and power and temporarily subvert the established hierarchy. Viewed as meaning-bearing, departing from the script of the Middle Ages becomes transgression that is not the end of interpretation, but its beginning.

CARNIVAL IN KRISTIN LAVRANSDATTER: EVENT AND SCRIPT

Though it is in the second volume of the trilogy, *Husfrue*, that carnival is fully performed in the figure of Erlend, it must be mentioned that the carnival character of Erlend is carefully shaped in the first volume *Kransen*. In several instances, Erlend performs in typical settings of "the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns, marketplaces, prisons, in the erotic orgies of secret cults, and so forth" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 115). One well-known scene is Erlend's rescue of Kristin on the high road after she becomes lost at the chaotic marketplace. In her wandering, she is approached by thieves and saved by the knight Erlend. Another instance of typical carnival setting is the tavern/brothel of Erlend and Kristin's clandestine meeting away from Kristin's residence of Nonneseter Cloister. Erlend flirts with prisons and the erotic as well, but we must wait with these instances until the continued discussion of the second volume below.

The presence of carnival in *Husfrue* is evident in descriptive narrative of events, hypertextual self-reflection, and intertextual play. At its most remote and concrete, the experience of carnival is described by Erlend's brother Gunnulf, who has become familiar with this folk ritual on his travels as a priest in Italy. He recounts: "Vi kom til staden like før fasteinngang. Da holder folket i sydlandene store veitsler og gjestebud—de kaller det carne vale. Da renner vinen, rød og hvit, som elver i tavernhusene, og folk danser ute om natten og har bluss og bål på de åpne plassene" (179) [We came to the city just before the beginning of fasting. Then the people in the southern lands hold great feasts and gatherings—they call it carne vale.... Then the wine flows, red and white, like rivers in the tavern houses, and people dance outside at night and have torches and bonfires in the open places]. The priest Gunnulf continues his description, noting the order left untouched by carnival chaos:

Ribbaldene har slått seg ned i borgen der husbonden er ikke hjemme, og de har lokket fruen til å ture med dem i deres lyst og blodspill og ufred—.... Men under jorden er der herligheter som er dyrere enn alle herligheter som sol skinner på. Der er de hellige martyrs graver. (Husfrue 180)

(The revelers have settled into the castle where the master is not home, and they have lured the mistress into carousing with them in their desire

and ribaldry and unrest—.... But under the earth there are splendors that are more dear than all the splendors that the sun shines upon. There are the holy martyrs' graves.)

This is the only explicit reference to carnival in the narrative though it is an important one as it articulates the core tension in the trilogy between religious seriousness and adventurous play. In this passage, a number of the typical dynamics of carnival are named: it is the response of those not in possession of official political or social power, it takes place in the absence of, or in challenge to, accepted authority and hierarchy, it transgresses boundaries of order, norms and law, and it involves elements of desire, excess, chaos, and play.

Though Kristin and Erlend themselves at times cross the boundaries of their most typical behavior, they become characters whose dramatic tension is one in which they are engaged in what Bakhtin terms the carnival duality of the "never-ending folkloric dialogue: the dispute between a dismal sacred word and a cheerful folk word" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 76). This duality is evident both in the inherited scripts Kristin and Erlend are defined within and, most importantly, in their own response to these texts in their adult lives. A brief outline of the inherited texts of the two characters will be followed by my main discussion of Erlend's response as carnivalesque and parodic.

As already stated, it is the norms of Kristin's upbringing that set the foundation for the novel's drama. Kristin is most influenced by her father Lavrans, whose law is both religious and political. His position as a *lagmann* (law man), though not an active role in the narrative itself, defines the historical status of Lavrans within his context of law and authority. In the context of the narrative, he is known among his neighbors primarily as an extremely pious man, and life ordered around the religious calendar and its ordered worldview is passed down to his daughter Kristin as well.

While Kristin's religion and place as the daughter of a prominent farmer order her life, Erlend is an ambiguous character not only in traits, but in background. As will be noted in more detail below, he is born into families of political and ecclesiastical power and, prior to the narrative's events, had served in the king's court. On the other hand, Erlend's more recent lineage places him outside authority and power. His aunt Åshild is suspected of carrying out witchcraft, and, before the narrative events of *Kristin Lavransdatter*, he had been banished from the king's court for his affair with a married woman. The ambiguity

of Erlend's character as presented prior to and at the periphery of the primary narrative nonetheless foreshadows Erlend's response to his inherited script later in the trilogy.

INHERITED AND FORGOTTEN TEXTS

In a previous article (*Edda* 2005) that focused on Kristin, I argued that Kristin's relationship to texts in her young married life is metatextually reflected in the *mise-en-abyme* of paging through preserved texts that had been locked away in a chest and forgotten in the loft of Erlend's home. I return briefly to that analysis here, both to emphasize Kristin's relationship to authoritative texts and her distance from play. After Gunnulf remembers these books and retrieves them from the chest, Kristin pages through three texts: "Den ene var en riddersaga om Tristan og Isolde, og den andre var om hellige menn — Den tredje boken var på latin, og særlig skjønt prentet med store brogede kapittelstaver" (*Husfrue* 74) [The one was a chivalric saga about Tristan and Isolde, and the other was about holy men — The third book was in Latin, and especially beautifully printed with large elaborate capital letters]. As we page through this life story of romance, religion and the sacred word along with Kristin, we read that the texts are clearly not only precious to Kristin, but, in their elaborate and foreign script, authoritatively distant from the everyday. The passage in *Husfrue* continues and is appropriate to include here as a hypertextual continuity in the depiction of Kristin's seriousness and Erlend's play. In the continuation of this passage, Gunnulf draws up from the chest both a board game and musical instruments. To this, "Kristin måtte nu tilstå for mågen sin at hun var dum til brettspill, og heller ikke dugde hun meget til å leke på strengelek. Men bøkene var hun nyfiken efter å se i" (*Husfrue* 73) [Kristin now had to admit to her brother-in-law that she was ignorant of board games and not very good at playing stringed instruments either. But the books she was curious about looking in]. It is, in the following pages of the narrative, Erlend and his brother Gunnulf that tune the inherited instruments and sing ballads both known and made anew.

If Kristin embraces religious teachings, cultured literature, laws of the land and inheritance, Erlend places himself at a distance from them. In contrast to Kristin's reverence and remembering, Erlend neglects, forgets and laughs. The remaining discussion focuses on the "verbal

sideward glances, reservations, loopholes, hints, [and] thrusts" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 201) sent the way of serious, authoritative narrative.

CONSTRUING HISTORY THROUGH ERLEND

More than any other character of the trilogy, Erlend is inscribed in the ecclesiastical and political historical power of Norway. Undset offers details of Erlend's descent on his father's side from Bishop Nikulaus, a supporter of Skule, a pretender to the throne of Norway in the 1200s. His great grandmother was Ragnfrid, a daughter of Skule. This lineage connects him indirectly but significantly with the royal court, as Ragnfrid's sister Margaret marries the proclaimed king Haakon, all in an attempt to form alliances after the dispute between Skule and Haakon for the crown.¹² Upon this history, Undset develops a fictional Erlend who is simultaneously continuous with and divergent from such historical narrative.

Though it would be incorrect from both literary-critical and historical positions to say that Undset intended to write a Bakhtinian carnivalesque novel, it is clear she intended to depart from medieval history in her depiction of Erlend. As she set about writing the second volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter* in 1921, she wrote to the literary historian Fredrik Paasche that she was in the process of "at skulle opkonstruere et hittil ukjent kapitel i Norgeshistorien" (Stina Paasche 381) [creating an until now unknown chapter in Norway's history]. She chose no less an event in Norwegian history than the issue of monarchical authority of Sweden over Norway during the Middle Ages. Undset conferred with Paasche on the historical details of her work in progress, requesting in her letters suggestions for sources on, for example, the war with Russia in the 1320s, and medieval legal system in cases of murder, jurisdictions, and the like. Remarkable in Undset's letters are the specific dates and historical events that are part of her discussion of her intended story of Erlend. Erlend, "tar del i toget til Finmarken i 1325-26.... 1327-28 er han nordpaa ... han besøker ... Danmark i 1329" (Stina Paasche 379) [takes part in the

12. The events of Skule and Haakon's claims of rights to the throne of Norway are depicted, of course, in Henrik Ibsen's historical drama *Kongsemmerne* (The Pretenders), 1863.

march to Finmark in 1325–26.... 1327–28 he is in the north ... he visits ... Denmark in 1329]. Most importantly, Undset explains to Paasche, “Min idé er at Erlend omkring 1334 er midt oppe i en sammensvergelse som gaar ut paa at føre junker Haakon til Øreting og la ham ta til konge der” (Stine Paasche 379) [My idea is that Erlend around 1334 is in the middle of a plot that plans to bring duke Haakon to the Øre parliament and have him be accepted as king there].¹³

Husfrue is the result of this carefully created text that integrates the history of King Magnus Eriksen’s time with the entirely fictional plot to instate Duke Haakon as the king of Norway. In creating this plausible but fictional narrative departure, with Erlend Nikulauson at its center, Undset extends the romantic cut of Erlend’s character, shaping him as a carefree adventurer who carries out a politically transgressive attempt to re-author the royal order of the early 1300s in Norway. As will be illustrated below, Erlend is persistent in his attempt, in the carnivalesque sense of the term, to be “fully liberated from those limitations of history and memoir ... not fettered by any demands for an external verisimilitude to life” (Bakhtin, *Problems* 114).

The character of Erlend in the second volume emerges as a husband, father, and political figure who, though charming and accomplished to a degree, is prone to forgetting, disregard, and carelessness. These traits are threaded throughout the narrative of *Husfrue*, and come to be identified as Erlend’s greatest and serious faults. While the instances of his transgressions are many, I will here concentrate on four, namely Erlend’s disregard for inheritance of his property and family status, his laughing challenge to religion, his infidelity in marriage, and his participation in a plot to subvert the power of the present king.

13. Haakon was the son of Lady Ingeborg and Knut Porse. Ingeborg was the daughter of the Norwegian King Haakon V and his wife Eufemia. Ingeborg was the only child of the Norwegian royal couple, thus ending the male royal line in Norway. Ingeborg’s marriage to Knut Porse was Ingeborg’s second, her first being to Duke Erik Magnuson of Sweden, brother of the Swedish King Birger. The king of Sweden and Norway during the period the trilogy takes place (the first half of the 1300s) is Ingeborg’s son with Erik, Magnus. Ingeborg’s son with Knut Porse, Haakon, is therefore the half-brother of King Magnus. Through his mother’s lineage, Haakon is the grandson of a Norwegian king, and thus legally eligible for the throne.

FORGETTING AND LAUGHTER IN
HUSFRUE: INHERITANCE

Husfrue opens with the couple's journey to Erlend's farm estate of Husaby. The newly married couple is met by an entourage that accompanies them down to Erlend's farm. Here we are immediately reminded of Erlend's position in history, as this is no ordinary farm, but one originally built by Erlend's ancestor Skule, or King Skule as Erlend insists on calling him. Upon their arrival at Husaby, Kristin is first awed by the grandness of her husband Erlend's home in likening its main room to that of a ceremonial hall or church. The tapestries and shields of the main hall are reminiscent of a Viking chieftain's home. But a tour of the farm the next day reveals to Kristin considerable neglect Erlend has practiced on his inherited home. There are lice in the beds, food that is spoiled, cattle poorly fed, wool full of worms, and fences unmended. This volume is not called *Husfrue* for nothing. Kristin sets about bringing her husband's farm and the servants of it into line and gradually helps to rebuild Erlend's reputation among his neighbors.

This neglect of the farm serves as an expansive and continuing metaphor for the neglect Erlend has practiced on his inherited position as a whole. Two instances serve as examples of Erlend's disregard for his place in the inherited story. As Kristin familiarizes herself with her new home, she notices, for instance, that Erlend does not remember much of his family background and knows little more than what she herself has heard before from her own family: Kristin "spurte Erlend ut om livet her på Husaby i gamle dager. Men han visste merkelig lite. Sånn og sånn hadde han hørt, hvis han husket rett—men han kunde ikke så nøye minnes" (*Husfrue* 22) [Kristin asked Erlend about life here at Husaby in the old days. But he knew remarkably little. Such and such he had heard, if he remembered correctly—but he could not recall so exactly].

Erlend is also portrayed as a "strange bird" among those from the region:¹⁴

14. It is interesting to find in the most recent study of Undset's narratives, Benedicta Winda-Val's *Men han het Edvard ...* (2009) that the author comments on the etymology of Erlend's name: "mann fra fremmed land, forteller at dette er en mann som vil forbli en fremmed og gåtefull skikkelse" (251) ["man from foreign country," tells that this is a man who will remain a strange and puzzling character].

Erlend så ut som en fremmed fugl mellom sine gjester.... [Kristin] hadde ingen mann sett som var halvten så vakker som Erlend.... Erlend lo og sa han hadde da heller ikke atten sin herfra—uten farfarsmoren, Ragnfrid Skulesdatter. Folk sa han skulle være svært lik sin morfar, Gaute Erlendsson av Skogheim. Kristin spurte hva han visste om denne mannen. Men det var nesten intet. (Husfrue 24)

(Erlend looked like a strange bird among his guests.... [Kristin] had seen no man half as handsome as Erlend.... Erlend laughed and said his ancestors didn't come from here either—except his great-grandmother, Ragnfrid Skulesdatter. People said he was supposed to be very much like his mother's father, Gaute Erlendsson of Skogheim. Kristin asked what he knew about this man. But it was practically nothing.)

In relation to his past, Erlend stands in stark contrast not only to Kristin, but to his learned brother Gunnulf. Gunnulf, as a priest, denies the world's materialism but remembers well the gifts of the past, for example those in the chest of books, games, and instruments discussed above. When Erlend sees that his brother has retrieved the chest, he comments, "Ja, dette tenkte jeg på i bryllupet mitt ... at Kristin skulde ha den. Men jeg glemmer så lett, og du glemmer intet, du, bror" (*Husfrue* 75) [Yes, this I had thought of at my wedding ... that Kristin should have it. But I forget so easily, and you don't forget anything, brother].

Erlend's response can be seen not only as a form of carnival laughter but also an attempt at parody, as he distances himself from the narratives he has inherited and seeks freedom beyond the boundaries of the discursive parameters of home. Erlend is not the saga figure who defends his property and family honor to the death. If anything, Erlend is the text's adventurer, and the ballad is his discourse.

RELIGION AND TRANSGRESSION

The dominant discourse of Husaby becomes that of Kristin's domestic order, kindness to servants and neighbors, and religious observance of holy days and daily practice. This is a discourse incompatible with Erlend's nature. He gradually comes to be more marginalized even in his own home as family, religious presence, and domestic duties become the norm. It is often in the form of humor and laughter Erlend approaches the increasingly religious influence at Husaby. In contrast to his wife Kristin, Erlend spends no more time than necessary in the confines of the church and its discourse. To Kristin's surprise that Erlend one

evening has returned early from a trip north before attending the next mass, Erlend responds, "Å, to messer har jeg gavn av lenge" (*Husfrue* 50) [Oh, two masses do me good for a long time]. Half in jest, Erlend reacts to the presence one evening of two priests and his father-in-law Lavrans who was "for halvprest å regne" (107) [counted as a half priest], claiming, "Husaby var rent blitt en kollegiatkirke. Her var nu Gunnulf og Sira Eiliv, værfaeren ... og nu ville de gjøre ham til det samme. Det ble tre prester på gården" (*Husfrue* 107) [Husaby had become a regular church meeting of priests. Here were now Gunnulf and Sira Eiliv, and the father-in-law ... and now they wanted him to be the same. That came to three priests on the farm].

To Erlend's credit, he puts up with much self-righteousness and blame from his wife. Kristin remembers well not only her family past, but the sins against her father and her God in her defiance of the arranged marriage to Simon and her presence at the death of Erlend's former lover Eline. Kristin's constant reminders of the wrongs her husband has done to her finally cause Erlend at one point to burst with frustration, "Glemte, sier du jeg har. Det er vel ikke alltid den største synden, det—å glemme" (*Husfrue* 363) [You say I have forgotten. It is probably not always the greatest sin—to forget]. It is interesting to note how clearly Undset planned this growing distance in her protagonists. In her letters discussing her plans for Erlend in the narrative, Undset confides to Paasche that Erlend "holder nemlig ikke ut lenger hjemme hos sine [*sic*] kone. Kristin ... er blitt saa from at Erlend vet ikke sin arme raad; han faar en søn hvert aar av hende og ellers kunde han likegodt være i kloster" (Stina Paasche 379) [namely cannot stand it any longer at home with his wife. Kristin ... has become so pious that Erlend does not know where to turn; he gets a son every year by her and otherwise he could just as well be in a cloister].

As Erlend begins to taste the adventure and a chance to prove himself in an official role, he recognizes that he longs to travel "bort fra hjemmet og barna som huset flommet over av, bort fra snakk om gårdsstell og husfolk og landseter og unger" (*Husfrue* 216) [away from the home and the children with which the house was spilling over, away from talk about caring for the farm and household help and tenant farmers and young ones]. He first serves in an official capacity protecting the northern regions of Norway from lawlessness. Away from home, he commits his two greatest transgressions of religious and political authority and their discourses.

DOUBLE INFIDELITY

While much of Erlend's response to the religious presence in his own home is in the form of humor, there is a most significant and transgressive act in which religious narrative and textual plot intersect. In his official capacity away from his home, Erlend, on more than one occasion, is unfaithful with the woman Sunniva Olavsdatter. The juxtaposition of faith and the unfaithful is clear in the dialog between Erlend and Sunniva as they attend mass in Niðaróss:

"Ja ja," sa Erlend, "men du er så fager i kveld, Sunniva! Det er godt å skjemte med en frue som har så blide øyne—" "Du var nu ikke verd, Erlend Nikulaussøn, at jeg skulle se på deg med blide øyne—" sa hun leende. "Da vil jeg komme og skjemte med deg når det er blitt mørkt," svarte Erlend likeens. "Når messen er utsungen, skal jeg følge deg hjem—" (Husfrue 366)

("Well, well," said Erlend, "but you are so beautiful this evening, Sunniva! It is so good to joke with a woman with such mild eyes—" "You are now not worthy, Erlend Nikulaussøn, that I should look at you with mild eyes," she said laughing. "Then I'll come and joke with you when it gets dark," Erlend answered in like manner. "When the Mass is sung to its close, I will follow you home—")

It is not only spatial transgression that is at play here. It is also the most important religious narratives of Catholic Norway in the Middle Ages that are violated. One cannot construct a more intensely saintly name than Sunniva Olavsdatter, the names of Norway's saints Sunniva and Olav, with whom to be unfaithful. Erlend transgresses the holiest of holies in this event of an affair with Sunniva Olavsdatter, but, as will be discussed below, this infidelity on Erlend's part comes back in the narrative to meet him face to face.

POLITICAL AMBIVALENCE AND TRANSGRESSION

As Erlend moves away from the domestic and into the political arena of events, we first are given insight into his own love of adventure and the views of others toward him in his powerful position. It is most often through Kristin's thoughts that we learn of Erlend's accomplishments as the protector of the north from heathens, Russians, Karelians, and the like. She realizes, for example, that her husband had "vasket i sjøene langs den lange nordkyst og jaget røverskutene med de fire småskip som

fulgte hans merke.... Han hadde hugget ned en russeflokk som søkte til fjells, ryddet og brent noen fiendeskuter etsteds i utskjærene" (*Husfrue* 210) [washed in the seas along the long northern coast and chased the pirate ships with the four small vessels that followed under his banner.... He had struck down a flock of Russians trying to flee to the mountains, cleared out and burned some enemy ships somewhere out in the outer skerries]. At the same time, Kristin is aware that Erlend is not regarded by others with the respect his position might otherwise deserve:

*Hun så at folk stusset ved ting som han sa, og bakefter stakk de hodene sammen. Det kunne være meget sant og riktig i det som Erlend Nikulaussøn holdt frem. Det var bare sånn at han aldri så hva de andre herrene aldri slapp av syne — den forsiktige bakklokskap hvormed de gjetet hverandre. Renker kalte Erlend det, og lo med sin overmodige latter, som tirret folk litt, men avvæpnet dem i lengden. De lo igjen, slo ham på skulderen og sa han kunne være skarptenkt nok, men stutt-tenkt. (*Husfrue* 208)*

(She saw that people were taken aback by things he said, and later put their heads together. There could be a lot that was true and right in what Erlend Nikulaussøn presented. It was just that he never saw what the other men never let out of their sight—the careful hindsight with which they kept watch on each other. Scheming Erlend called it, and laughed his arrogant laughter, which irritated folks some, but disarmed them in the long run. They laughed, slapped him on the shoulder and said he could be quick-witted, but thoughtless.)

It is not only others' ambivalence, but Erlend's that questions the position of authority. His own ambivalence toward his superiors, in particular the king's official Erling Vidkunnsøn, is apparent in his *skjemt* or jokes: "Med Erlend var det bare det at den andres alvorlige og verdige vesen kjedet ham — så hevnet han seg ved å spotte litt over sin mektige frende" (*Husfrue* 209) [For Erlend it was just that the other's serious and distinguished manner bored him — so he took revenge by mocking his powerful kinsman a bit]. In the company of others serving Erling Vidkunnsøn, Erlend "brings low" this authority by joking that Erling is, "så hederlig og ærverdlig som den gjeveste gyldne kapittelstav foran i lovbooken" (*Husfrue* 211) [as honorable and distinguished as the finest golden capital letter foremost in the law book]. In the narrative, we are supplied with continuous questioning of Erlend's effectiveness as a leader. Kristin observes people's reaction to Erlend's jokes: "Folk lo og festet seg mindre ved Erlends lovord over drottsetens rettskaffenhet enn ved det at Erlend hadde lignet ham med en forgylt bokstav. Nei, de tok

ikke Erlend i alvor" (*Husfrue* 211) [People laughed and enjoyed themselves less at Erlend's words of praise for the official's integrity than that Erlend had compared him to a gilded letter. No, they didn't take Erlend in earnest]. In passages such as this, Erlend functions much within the discursive style of the *skjemtevis* or jocular ballad of the Middle Ages. Seriousness is neither Erlend's style nor the reaction of others toward him. But in the gaiety, Erlend is a full participant in the carnival practice of "bringing low" the authority of persons and texts of power.

PARODY AND KINGSHIP

Erlend's challenges to the authority of the Erling Vidkunnsøn are relatively harmless, but it is the plot to overthrow the Swedish king Magnus and bring Duke Haakon to power that heightens the political intrigue and links Erlend to the ultimate parodic performance, "the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 124). Bakhtin prioritizes this act as the one "most often transposed into literature" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 125), yet acknowledges that literary laughter is heard by degrees. Laughter, he claims, "rings out loudly" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 165) in the case of Rabelais's texts, but is reduced and "muffled" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 165) in texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As will be illustrated below, the role of king intersects particularly with the figure of Erlend in *Kristin Lavransdatter* in both reversals and inversions of history "as it really was."

I venture one possible reversal here, then focus on the primary transgressive act of the trilogy. As noted, Erlend is firmly embedded in the history of his nation but also is dissembled from this same history. The relationship of the names Erlend and Husaby, for instance, implies a reflection of one of the great events of medieval Norwegian history. Kristin's husband is Erlend of Husaby who plots to spirit the boy Haakon back to Norway to crown him king. We can recall from Norwegian history books and the famous Knud Bergslien painting of another boy King Haakon, spirited away by *birkebeinere* (birch legs). *Håkon Håkonssøns Saga* (59–60) relates this account, with the name of Erlend of Huseby as one of the main actors in this intrigue. The event is also referenced in P.A. Munch's *Historisk-geographisk Beskrivelse over Kongerike Norge (Norgesveldi) i Middelalderen* [Historical-geographical Description of the Kingdom of Norway (Norway's Dominion) in the

Middle Ages] (a text Undset mentions in her letters to Fredrik Paasche): "Paa Húsabýr, nu Huseby ... boede i Begyndelsen af de 13de Aarhundrede Erlend af Huseby der ... bragte Haakon Haakonssøn som spædt Barn fra Falkensberg til Nidaros" (190) [At Húsabýr, now Huseby ... lived at the beginning of the thirteenth century Erlend of Huseby who ... brought Haakon Haakonssøn as an infant from Falkensberg to Nidaros]. But the Erlend of Undset's creation shows himself to be different from the original in more than orthography, geography, and direction of transportation of the boy king Haakon.

The primary, and final, parodic act of this discussion is the plot to crown a new king for Norway. It has already been mentioned that Erlend is indirectly related to the succession of kings from King Haakon's time. In the actions to bring Duke Haakon to Norway in place of King Magnus, Erlend is no longer a by-stander to royal power, but an actor in the performance of the attempt to crown a new king. The plot can seem to be an odd and intriguing interlude in a trilogy that has Kristin Lavransdatter as its focus. At the same time, the plot, presented with brilliant narrative effect, performs its own subversive carnival act. The conspiracy is, for the most part, "kept secret" from Kristin and from us as readers as there are only hints of meetings, associations, and written communication between conspirators. At the same time, there is enough for us to know that the Norwegian population has become dissatisfied with King Magnus, that Erlend has visited Lady Ingeborg, mother of Duke Haakon, and her husband Knut Porse in Denmark, and that Erling Vidkunnsøn expresses doubts that Erlend is a wise choice for political involvement as he is among the "farligste ... Som tenker litt lenger enn til sitt eget. Men ikke langt nok" (*Husfrue* 279) [most dangerous ... Who think a little farther than their own matters. But not far enough]. The discovery of the plot exposes subversion of political authority, and subversion of authoritative texts as well.

On a day at the beginning of the harvest and as Erlend prepares for a sea excursion, Husaby is visited by over thirty men ready to confiscate letters that would implicate Erlend in a plot to replace King Magnus. Erlend quickly sends his son Gaute off with some of the letters, destroys others, then greets the men with the question, "Og så skal dere vel ransake her på garden? Å, jeg har da vært med på slikt så mange ganger at jeg skulle kjenne fremferden" (*Husfrue* 378) [And now you are probably going to ransack the farm? Oh, I have been involved in such things so many times that I should know the procedure]. One replies, "Så store

saker som landrådssak har du nu ikke hatt under hender" (*Husfrue* 378) [So large a matter as high treason you have not had to deal with before]. He advises later, "Du skulle friste først, Erlend, om frillene dine er så kloke de kan lese skrift, før du løper på nattegjesting med lønnbrev i brokbåndet" (*Husfrue* 379) [You should check first, Erlend, whether your mistresses are so wise that they can read writing, before you run around on night visits with secret letters in the band of your pants].

It is, indeed, Sunniva who exposes Erlend's plans to betray the king after she, during one of Erlend's night visits, finds a letter in Erlend's clothing detailing the plot to instate Haakon as Norway's king in place of the reigning monarch Magnus. She brings this evidence to the authorities, and Erlend is subsequently arrested for treason and thrown in prison. When Erlend is asked in prison by Simon Darre how he could have been so careless with the document of the plans of treason, he replies, "men—i helvete! kunne jeg tenke at hun kunne lese skrift! Hun syntes—svært ulærd" (*Husfrue* 435) [but—hell! could I imagine that she could read writing! She seemed—very uneducated]. Though this response seems rather comical, the judgment upon Erlend for his act of treason is more serious. He is judged guilty of "å ha villet svike land og tegner fra kong Magnus, villet reise opprør mot kongen innenlands og føre inn i Norge leid leidangsmakt" (*Husfrue* 405) [wanting to steal land and subjects from King Magnus, wanting to instigate an uprising against the king within the country and bring outside conscripted forces into Norway]. Power and position are lost for Erlend when he is ordered to turn over his lands and goods to the king.

ARRESTED IN PARODY

It is in these last events that Erlend himself becomes part of the larger parody of kingship. At Husaby, Erlend attempts a parodic neglect of the text of his own history, and seeks to write his own script. He flirts with power and authority even to the extent that his son can convey, "Mor, vet i hva de sier—de sier at far—ville bli *konge*" (*Husfrue* 387) [Mother, do you know what they are saying—they are saying that father—wants to become *king*]. When Kristin asks him not to repeat such rumors, Gaute insists that his father is of the lineage to claim such position. But in the course of the trilogy, and especially in this second volume, *Husfrue*, Erlend himself is "brought low" from his

initial status of knight and mountain king and his own association with the royal line. The prison at Akersnes where Erlend is held can be viewed in discursive terms as the place where Erlend's parody is arrested. Here we find Erlend is not just the carefree adventurer whose poor memory and laughter can distance him from the bonds of given story. Erlend's infidelity in all its manifestations is exposed as transgression, an illegal act. As he lies "på gulvet, utstrakt ... munnen syntes hvit inni skjegget; hans ansikt var snehvitt" (*Husfrue* 433) [on the floor, stretched out ... his mouth seemed white in his beard. His face was snow white], Erlend himself realizes that his life is of little consequence to those in power.

As we know, Erlend's story does not end at Akersnes prison. Erlend is a resilient character who bounces back from imprisonment and torture to spend the evening of his release from prison reveling in the local tavern. And in the years that follow, it is clear that the tenacious love between Erlend and Kristin remains. But he is no longer the agile and daring man of old. That Erlend spends his last years at a remote mountain cabin at Dovre and dies by the strike of a sword to the groin as he tries to defend Kristin's honor are pieces of a continued inversion of kingly story that are beyond the scope of this article. But it is an evolution of the story of Erlend that should not, by now, surprise us.

CONCLUSION: DIFFERENCE AND LAUGHTER

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Parody*, defines parody as "repetition with critical difference" (20). This difference, Hutcheon claims, need not elicit only comic ridicule. Parody, in fact, can sound as an ambivalent double voice that can valorize through conservative repetition of an original authority as well as ridicule through a revolutionary challenge to such authority (77). It is clear that history does not repeat itself in *Kristin Lavransdatter*. Most, I believe, would agree that Richard Poirer's definition of a parodist—one who is "encyclopedic, learned, obsessively cultured ... burdened with the wastes of time, with cultural shards and rubbish" (qtd. in Hutcheon 96)—fits Sigrid Undset at least to some degree. She recalls the "cultural shards" of medieval Norway as a means to construct a mosaic that, in its simultaneous resemblance and difference, invites us to explore dissemblance as meaningful. In the doubly

parodic space between codified and created texts in Kristin Lavransdatter, we "hear" a voice that calls for order and continuity.

My interpretation with a focus on the fiction, rather than the truth, of history in *Kristin Lavransdatter* concludes, in other words, not with the triumph of a playful, revolutionary text. Is Erlend a charmer? A seducer? Yes. A scoundrel? A coddled upper class boy? Yes. If there were records of the court of discourse, they might read:

Erlend Nikulaussøn, arrested and found guilty of attempted parody: neglect, unfaithfulness and departure from inherited story, released on grounds of extreme charm. Sentence to be completed in the service of serious narrative.

Erlend as a parodic figure arrested in his transgressions only strengthens the authoritative discourse of religious transformation as it resonates boldly across the landscapes of history and romance. Erlend is foiled by a woman who reads and framed by the woman who wrote him into a new chapter in Norwegian history in the first place.

David Lodge in *Consciousness and the Novel*, states that fiction "is a kind of benign lie, because it is known to be untrue but has explanatory power" (42). There are numerous texts in which Undset, in the course of her literary career, presents her "truth" of her relationship to the past, the Roman Catholic faith and skepticism toward modernity. These are serious issues for Undset, and her essays are at times written in sharply polemical and reactionary tones. I have suggested in this article that we might read *Kristin Lavransdatter* as not entirely serious but rather also as fictional play. But the play itself is serious as we can hear a subtle but audible laughter that challenges those who distance themselves from the narrative given to them. It comments on the past in the present and what we ought to remember or forget, cherish or neglect, honor or ridicule.

There is one final irony to consider in placing an interpretation of seriously playful dialog in the trilogy within the context of other interpretations of the trilogy from the 1920s to today. Bakhtin describes the authoritative text as one that "demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders.... It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 343). Undset certainly adheres to the authority of the sacred word but is not so rigid in her fiction as to demand our allegiance to the "indivisible mass" of the medieval history and its literary texts of the saga, ballad, and legend. She

suggests, in fact, that we might even play with the borders that define the historical novel. In providing feedback to an American student writing a thesis on her works, Undset particularly took the student to task for some of his rather monologic views of historical fiction. She wrote, "Of course one may lump Walter Scott, the German 'Schauerromane,' and modern novels of any type, in so far as they have made use of historical or pseudo-historical matter as 'Historical Novels' – as one may lump a river, a tea-kettle and a waterspout because water blows through them" (qtd. in Daniloff 123). Whether we dismiss the departures from the medieval in *Kristin Lavransdatter* or play with them is up to us. In the twenty-first century, I suggest it is time to take Undset's masterpiece a little less than entirely seriously.

WORKS CITED

- Amadou, Anne-Lisa. *Å gi kjerligheten et språk*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1994.
- Bagge, Sverre. "Menneskenes hjerter og Sigrid Undsets middelalder." *Kaupang og bispesete: Hamar by i middelalderen*. Hamar Historielag Årbok 2009. 20–38.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U Texas P, 1981.
- _____. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984.
- _____. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Berguson, Claudia. "Questions of Narrative Authority and Authenticity in Sigrid Undset's Kristin Lavransdatter." *Edda* 4 (2005): 344–56.
- Bliksrud, Liv. *Natur og normer hos Sigrid Undset*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1988.
- _____. NRK Interview 2009.
- _____. *Sigrid Undset*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 1997.
- Bull, Edvard. "Hans Kinck som historiker." *Hans E. Kinck: Et eftermæle*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1927. 194–207.
- Daniloff, Jan. "Sigrid Undsets Litteratursyn." *Hovedoppgave*. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 1974.
- Eco, Umberto. "The Comic and the Rule." *Travels in Hypertextuality*. Trans. William Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983. 269–78.
- Hallström, Per. "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1928: Presentation Speech." <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1928/press.html> (Accessed 13 September 2010).
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody*. Urbana: U Illinois P, 2000.
- Lauritsen, P. "Litteraturkritikken og Sigrid Undsets sidste bog." *Kristeligt Dagblad* 28 May 1923. (Newspaper clipping from Sigrid Undset's archive, NBO MS.fol. 4235, in the National Library of Norway).
- Lodge, David. *Consciousness and the Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.

- Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin P, 1989.
- Munch, P.A. *Historisk-geographisk Beskrivelse over Kongeriget Norge (Noregsveldi) i Middealderen*. Christiania: Wilhelm Gram Forlag, 1849.
- Paasche, Fredrik. "Sigrid Undset og middelalderen." *Samtiden* 1929; *Fredrik Paasche: Essays i utvalg*. Ed. Philip Houm. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1970. 35-47.
- Paasche, Stina. "Fredrik Paasche, Sigrid Undset och *Kristin Lavransdatter*." *Edda* 6 (1975): 377-82.
- Rieber-Mohn, Hallvard. *Sten på sten: Fem blikk på Sigrid Undset*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1982.
- Rønning, Helge. "Middelalderens lys- mellomkrigstidas lyst." *Vinduet* 37.3 (1983): 48-55.
- Schück, Henrik. "Herr Schücks yttrande." *Nobelpriset i Litteratur*. 2. Ed. Bo Svensén. Stockholm: Svenska Akademien, 2001.
- Slaggard, Sigrun. *Dikterdronningen*. Oslo: Gyldendal, 2007.
- Snorri Sturluson. *Haakon Haakonssøns Saga*. Trans. Alexander Bugge. Kristiania: Stenersens Forlag, 1914.
- Solberg, Olav. *Tekst møter tekst: Kristin Lavransdatter og mellomalderen*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 1997.
- Solstad, Dag. NRK Interview 2007. Interviewer Agnes Moxnes.
- _____. NRK Interview 2009. Interviewer Agnes Moxnes.
- Undset, Sigrid. *Kristin Lavransdatter: Husfrue*. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005.
- _____. *Essays og Artikler: 1910-1919*. Ed. Liv Blikrud. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2004.
- _____. *Essays og Artikler: 1920-1929*. Ed. Liv Blikrud. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2006.
- _____. *Essays og Artikler: 1930-1939*. Ed. Liv Blikrud. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2007.
- _____. *Essays og Artikler: 1940-1949*. Ed. Liv Blikrud. Oslo: Aschehoug, 2008.
- _____. Letter to Johannes Nordentoft. 5 June 1923. Brevsamling 348. Nasjonalbiblioteket, Avdeling Oslo. Håndskriftsamlingen.
- Windt-Val, Benedicta. "*Møn han het Edvard ...*" *Navn og navnebruk i Sigrid Undsets Forfatterskap*. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, 2009.
- Ystad, Vigdis. "Ideologisk og/eller vitenskapelig?" *Vinduet* 38.1 (1984): 60-5.

Copyright of Scandinavian Studies is the property of Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.