dear colleagues,
this talk is to introduce what has been described as a forgotten fantasy classic, republished in 1974 (Newcastle Publishing Company, Inc., Hollywood, California) Rider Haggard, The Saga of Eric Brighteyes (first published in 1891).
rudyard kipling thought it was a thoroughly successful anglicized saga `despite its unfortunate title'!
andrew lang was another friend of his, and encouraged his interest in myth and legend.

haggard is known to this day for his exciting adventure novels: She, and King Solomon's Mines. when i reread these recently, i found the first contained (for my taste) too much philosophical musing, and the second too much blood and warfare!
this one is a bit different: haggard is inspired by the northern sagas. my task is not to explore which of the sagas influenced him (i am not an expert in this literature, but i did not wish to begin my talk with an apology), but to look at his style and how it is informed by medieval narrative techniques.
it is clear that he used a number of these; although not consistently, nor claiming to be `accurate', he nevertheless succeeds in making the story sound - perhaps feel - like a saga.

first, to explain my title: eric is hounded by fate, and it is clear from the very opening pages that the story will not have a happy ending. the hero, and many of the other characters, are fey - by which i mean not fairies, but fated, and despairingly conscious of the fact. however, their fate drives them not to a passive and wretched acceptance but to nobility and great deeds ... otherwise there would be no story.
a characteristic of medieval romance is an obsession with naming and namelessness; in this story, which is not a romance although it is very `romantic', the naming theme is different: the characters often take part in name-calling or flyting. this is frequently an exchange or contest of insults before a battle; or perhaps a sort of name-magic, like a curse, where the bad name sticks to the adversary. there is some discussion of this kind of discourse in my `naming and namelessness' (d. s. brewer 2008 - see index).
eric re-names himself as eric the unlucky (in the chapter entitled How Eric was Named Anew). the narrator never uses this name for him - it is part of the name-calling theme - another example is when the heroine refuses to be forced into marriage with a man who has been called `niddering', that is, base or cowardly. (p.229)
OED says this word is an incorrect version of old norse `nithingr' which was given currency by walter scott. haggard, like scott and others, uses a number of archaisms, but his language is consistent and it is not difficult to get used to it - even `thee' and `thou'. the story moves forward so briskly that one cannot help being carried along with it.

the first example of narrative style to mention is the relentless flow of one thing after another, the paratactic style that goes `and ... and ...'. it is familiar to medievalists in, for example, chronicles.
it is perhaps the most basic form of story (and none the worse for that), discussed in E M Forster's Aspects of the Novel, the chapter entitled The Plot.

rosemary sutcliff, in my opinion one of the very best writers of historical novels for children, sometimes allows herself an archaizing style. it seems unfair to single her out, because if i had to choose between her and rider haggard on my desert island she would win every time!

but these examples, from The Road to Camlann, are very clear - almost intrusive (Knight Books, 1986; p. 120).
we get four paragraphs thus: And all day long Mordred and the High King rode .... And so day drew to the edge of night ... And Arthur saw that two men stood close behind him ... And the black bitterness of death rose in Arthur the King ...
all on one page, not counting the word `and' within the paragraphs. each of these sentences would work perfectly well without `and'.
however, `and' in this story is evocative - it gives a slightly olde worlde flavour to the narrative because it is familiar from medieval literature.
haggard manages this paratactic narrative method rather differently; we get: Now they arrived at the harbour ... Then the other warriors rode up ... So they went on their way ... the effect is less mannered, but likewise evokes an older style.

another characteristic very typical of medieval narrative is the way verb tenses switch from past to present and back, sometimes inexplicably.
it has been pointed out that, in verse, a change may simply be to provide the correct number of syllables for the line! in french especially, this makes a difference, for example `il sait' or `il savait'. in english somewhat less: she knows, she knew. but: it rushed, it rushes.
not to mention extra syllables provided, for example, by thou knowest, he or she rusheth.
some scholars explain this trick, if trick it is, by saying that the present tense is more immediate, heightening the tone of the story. it is not always possible to apply this explanation (whether verse or prose, english or french) and we may conclude that it really didn't matter to most medieval writers - or readers.
haggard chooses to switch into present tense for a paragraph or two, then back into the past. he is using this trick of medieval narrative, to heighten the immediacy of what is going on, in a way that works well for the story.

i can't go on talking about the book without mentioning one or two events in the story, even though i am not doing a comparative study!
the main action is the tragedy of two women who love the same man, and how their rivalry is played out.
eric has his `double' or companion: his friendship with skallagrim begins in a way that is reminiscent of bevis of hampton and his giant ascopart, although the latter is rather inadequate as a hero's side-kick: not only does he refuse to get christened (see for example my naming book, page 32), but in one version he deserts when a proper dragon turns up (see, for example, douglas gray's `make we merry more and less', 2019, pp 377--9).
but skallagrim is faithful to the end.

another link with the medieval world is the haunting presence of The White Christ, who is stronger and yet more merciful than the terrible fates. he is mentioned at times during the story, but we are told that eric and his fellows lived `before Thangbrand ... preached the White Christ in Iceland'. this explicit reference to the future coming of christianity gives a haunting sense of sadness. (sunt lachrimae rerum.)

supernatural forces act on the characters directly, in the form of prescient dreams; and most of the plot is driven by malevolent witchcraft. the two wicked female figures are of

course more interesting as characters than the heroine! this is a topic for another study - we are not supposed to like them! but all are motivated by love, hate, or the lust for great deeds.
other medieval themes include the blood-feud, which incidentally acts as a device to move the plot forward.
closely linked to themes such as name-calling and the ways of fate, is the importance of oath-keeping. eric will not break his oath to let none but his lady cut his hair!
a lost love-token brings disaster ... as if disaster were not already on its way.
these, which give the atmosphere of a northern medieval narrative, are handled economically without over-elaboration. for example, the story is not interrupted with long flash-backs explaining this blood-feud, or that historical character, preceding the current action.

such interspersed stories might properly be for the minstrels (or skalds) to relate; in this book, songs chanted by one character or another spell out adventures or predictions.
(pp 3, 52, 83, 85,144--5, 296--7)
the form of the songs is unrhymed but metrical, with a strong flavour of traditional alliterative verse. it is not `correct' alliterative verse, but again in haggard's hands it works well: he is not so much attempting to write alliterative verse as suggesting it.
Fast, yestermorn, down Golden Falls
Fared young Eric to thy feast
and
Swift and sure across the Swan's Bath
Sped Sea-Stag on Raven's track ...

a few `kennings' are scattered about: swan's bath for sea, corse-choosing daughters for valkyries. haggard adds brief footnotes to explain some unfamiliar expressions. these include the word fey, the norns, troll, the island battle (holm) ... the latter is another theme found in medieval narrative, where two heroes fight on an island. one of the boats is pushed off, leaving only one for the victor. the fight thus takes place in a liminal space, so that blood-guilt will not fall on the territories on either bank. one such battle takes place in the anglo-norman Roman des Franceis, a twelfth-century anti-french satire by andré de coutances: king arthur meets king frollo on an island in the seine and (of course) beats him.

so here we have it.
in this book there are a number of medieval themes, but somehow the overall effect is achieved by means of several medieval narrative techniques. these are, chiefly: a paratactic style, a characteristic switching of tenses from past to present and back, and a distinctive colouring of alliteration in the verse passages.

i conclude with a few words from haggard's Introduction. he says `it is hard to persuade the nineteenth century world to interest itself in people who lived and events that happened a thousand years ago.'
now in the twenty-first century we are interested, not only in those people and events, but also in the writers and scholars of the nineteenth century world!
haggard sets out to write a story that will not only please readers but also bring them to the sagas - he calls them `the prose epics of our own race'.

let us go and find some sagas to read!