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"HE HAS LONG FORFEITED ALL KINSHIP TIES"

Monstrosity, Familial Disruption, and the Cultural Relevance of the Outlaw Sagas

In an address to the Viking Society for Northern Research in 2015, Andy Orchard argued that not only is there a significant clustering of story elements – such as the connection of heroes and bears, their fights with supernatural foes, or the decapitation of those enemies in or after death – in *Beowulf* and much later in *Grettis saga*, but that these story elements had become attached to outlaw narratives already at the time when tales of Hereward the Wake were current in England shortly after the Norman invasion.[1] While Orchard presented compelling evidence for this argument, he – like many before him – did not address the question why these stories are so pervasive, why they appear in both countries in various expressions and at various times; in short, why people were so interested in stories about socially marginal heroes, lawbreakers, potentially dangerous and disruptive outsiders. The aim of the present discussion is therefore to approach this question from one possible direction by reading outlaws as monstrous and situating them in their familial and cultural context. The corpus of sagas under consideration here is limited to the main three outlaw sagas, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*.[2] Detailed discussions of *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*, which arguably also partake in the tradition of stories about outlaw heroes,

1 This address has been published as Andy Orchard, "Hereward and Grettir: Brothers from Another Mother?" *New Norse Studies: Essays on the Literature and Culture of Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Jeffrey Turco, Islandica 58 (Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 2015), 7–59.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from the Íslenzk fornrit editions of *Grettis saga* (ed. Guðni Jónsson), *Gísla saga* (ed. Björn Þórólfsson), and *Harðar saga* (eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson). Quotations from Loth's 1960 edition of *Gísla saga* are indicated as such and appear in normalised spelling. All translations are my own.

Gripla XXVIII (2017): 103–137

would exceed the scope of this article, and these sagas therefore have to be excluded.[3] Due to the nature of my approach, I will read the sagas "against their narrative voices", as Ármann Jakobsson termed it.[4] In their sagas, the three major outlaws are heroes, but in the present context, it is impossible to consider the complex entanglement of heroism and monstrosity, and the way in which different voices – both intra- and extratextual – assess them. The focus is on the outlaws' disruptiveness and their potential to monstrosity in order to explore the role that stories about outlaws played in medieval Icelandic culture and society, and I recognise the limitations of this approach.[5]

Monster Theory Recontextualised

One of the features Orchard noted as shared by all heroes of the type he investigated is their problematic relationship with their fathers.[6] However, this is only part of the outlaw sagas' depiction of their protagonists and their relationships with the members of their families. The outlaw sagas

3 This article was originally presented at the Miðaldastofa Lecture Series, University of Iceland, in March 2015. My thanks go to all the members of the audience for their comments, and particularly to Dr Haraldur Bernharðsson, Prof. Torfi Tulinius, Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir and Anna-Katharina Heiniger. I also want to thank Dr Emily Lethbridge for her helpful comments during the development of the article.

4 Personal communication.

5 This also means that other aspects of and approaches to outlawry, such as the socio-legal one highlighted by e.g. Amory (Frederic Amory, "The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw: Lifestyle, Saga, and Legend," *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1992), 189–203) and currently employed in Marion Poilvez' doctoral research, has to be excluded from the discussion. Similarly, the importance of Christian ideology in medieval Icelandic culture, and the effect this would have had on the depiction of characters like Grettir (especially in his fight with Glámr), cannot be discussed at this point. This has, however, been explored by scholars such as Torfi Tulinius ("Framliðnir feður: Um forneskju og frásagnarlist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu," *Heiðin minni: Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, eds. Haraldur Bessason and Baldur Hafstað (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1999), 283–316), Hermann Pálsson ("Um Glám í Grettlu: Drög að íslenskri draugafræði," *The International Saga Society Newsletter*, 6 (1992): 1–8) and Bernadine McCreesh ("Grettir and Glámr: Sinful Man Versus the Fiend," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 51 (1981): 180–88). For a recent and detailed overview of approaches to and scholarship on outlaws, see Joonas Ahola's doctoral thesis, "Outlawry in the Icelandic Family Sagas" (University of Helsinki, 2014).

6 Orchard, "Hereward and Grettir," 29–32.

share a singular focus on the family of the outlaw, on the ties and tensions, the conflicts and loyalties that initiate, perpetuate and conclude his problematic biography. This raises the question whether the connection between family issues and outlaw heroes, between the monstrous families and the familiar monsters inside of them, is significant. To answer this question, I draw on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)",[7] in which he states that "the monster is born [...] as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment".[8] It "inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received".[9] Therefore, every monster is "a double narrative: one that describes how the monster came to be and another, its testimony, detailing what cultural use the monster serves."[10]

If one therefore understands the monster as being culturally significant and pointing towards something beyond and outside of itself, one can read the connection between monstrous outlaws and their families as being culturally significant as well. By focusing on the monstrous individual and the family around him, and on the way the monster interacts with the family as well as to what extent the family influences the development of the monster, the outlaw sagas direct the audience's attention to these issues, and to the possible social concerns underlying them. Thus, it is possible to read the double narratives of the outlaw sagas: the way in which the outlaw becomes a monster, and the cultural use to which this is put. To advance such a reading, however, it first needs to be established that one can in fact read the major outlaws of the *Íslendingasögur* as monstrous. During previous research on revenants in this genre, I compiled a list of features that scholars such as Cohen or William Sayers noted as the "hallmarks" of (revenant) monstrosity, while also adding my own observations.[11] These features are hybridity – and the closely connected notion of transgression

7 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25.

8 Cohen, "Monster Culture," 4.

9 Ibid., 4.

10 Ibid., 13.

11 William Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 242–63 and see Rebecca Merkelbach, "*Hann lá eigi kyrr*: Revenants and a Haunted Past in the Sagas of Icelanders" (MPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, 2012).

– contagion, and economic disruption, as well as the manner and extent of interaction with society on which, consequently, society then bases its perception of the monster.

In order to contextualise these features, I will briefly consider one antagonistic revenant as a case study.[12] Glámr provides the clearest example of all the features listed above. He is hybrid, as one of the inherent features of the undead is being both dead and alive,[13] and they transgress the boundary of death. Contagion, too, is an important feature of the (as Sayers put it) "chain of malign supernatural activity" in which Glámr is caught up:[14] a violent and antisocial character in life, he is infected by the *meinvættr* [malign creature] he fights and turns into a revenant after death. He, in turn, corrupts Grettir with his monstrosity when he puts the curse on him.

Economic disruption is another feature Glámr embodies. He kills animals and empties farms: *allt kvikfé þat, sem eptir var, deyddi Glámr* [...] *ok eyddi alla bœi upp frá Tungu* [Glámr killed all the livestock that was left [...] and emptied all farms up from Tunga].[15] He drives people mad: *Varð mǫnnum at því mikit mein, svá at margir fellu í óvit, ef sá hann, en sumir heldu eigi vitinu* [This was very harmful to people, so that many fainted when they saw him, and some lost their wits].[16] Thus, he keeps those that remain in the area from going about their daily business: *Varla þorðu menn at fara upp í dalinn, þó at ætti ørendi* [People hardly dared to go up into the valley, even if they had errands there].[17] This culminates in the statement that *Þótti mǫnnum til þess horfask, at eyðask myndi allr Vatnsdalr ef eigi yrðu bætr á ráðnar* [People thought that all of Vatnsdalr would be emptied if no remedy was found].[18] Glámr therefore makes farming and contact with the rest of the country impossible. During his hauntings, all social interaction

12 Especially antagonistic revenants include Hrappr in *Laxdœla saga*, Þórólfr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and Glámr in *Grettis saga*.

13 This hybridity is different from the physical compositeness of the monstrous races. See Patricia MacCormack, "Posthuman Teratology," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 304–305; Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 269.

14 Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead," 251.

15 *Grettis saga*, 115.

16 Ibid., 113.

17 Ibid., 113.

18 Ibid., 116.

between the living and thus all that human society stands for effectively comes to an end. This "economic dimension of revenant activity" highlights the way Glámr interacts with society,[19] and society responds to this interaction with fear and flight: the saga here says that *Urðu menn ákaflega hræddir; stukku þá margir menn í brott* [people became very afraid; many ran away].[20] This again underlines both the social and economic implications of Glámr's hauntings: if everyone runs away, farming becomes impossible. Another feature of this interaction, and one that emphasises that degree of interaction is just as important as manner, is Glámr's curse, and the fact that what enables him to utter it in the first place is his greater *ófagnaðarkraptr* [evil force].[21] It is the fact that he talks to his opponent that shows that Glámr is one of the most active revenants, and this is one of the reasons why his monstrosity has such an immense influence on Grettir.

What these features highlight is that the concept of monstrosity in the *Íslendingasögur* is a social one. Rather than the purely physical aspect of revenancy, it is the social dimensions of their activity that make revenants monstrous: the fact that they disrupt social interaction between the living, that they turn them mad and kill them, that they force them to abandon farms. This social threat has to be opposed by society's "Mobilisierung ihrer ordnungsstiftenden bzw. –bewahrenden Energien" [mobilisation of those energies that stabilise and preserve societal order].[22] This idea, that in the vernacular literatures of North-Western Europe monstrosity is a social concept, is not a new one: Jennifer Neville argued for a similar approach in her article on monsters and criminals in Old English literature,[23] and it is her argument that provides a way of transferring observations from the more monstrous undead to the more human outlaws.

The central point of Neville's argument is her statement that "merely being *Homo sapiens* does not grant human status in Old English texts: hu-

19 Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead," 249.

20 *Grettis saga*, 113.

21 Ibid., 121.

22 Klaus Böldl, *Eigi einhamr: Beiträge zum Weltbild der Eyrbyggja und anderer Isländersagas* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 132.

23 Jennifer Neville, "Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry," *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, eds. K. E. Olsen and L. A. J. R. Houwen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 103–22.

man status is conferred on the basis of conformance to social rules."[24] This is apparent in the case of Grendel who, as a descendant of Cain, could be called 'human' – and who is referred to as both a *wer* [man] (l. 105) and a *healðegn* [hall-thane] (l. 142), both obviously human epithets.[25] However, as someone who turns decidedly against humans by engaging in cannibalism, and who renders the hall, the symbol of society, useless, he is also monstrous: "He is a monster [...] because he also breaks those boundaries [of social norms], intrudes into human society, performs acts forbidden by society, and thus threatens society's very existence."[26] What makes Grendel monstrous is that he oversteps social boundaries: he does not pay wergild for his killings, he disrupts human interaction, and he does not acknowledge the power of the local ruler. Because of these crimes, his more human dimension is forfeited.

Many of these considerations are, as I argue below, also true of Grettir: he frequently oversteps social norms, stealing from farmers and occupying land that does not belong to him. All of this moves him further away from the human society to which he once belonged. Neville argues that "[h]uman beings exist only in social places like the hall, where their roles, responsibilities, and relationships to each other are clearly defined."[27] While it is possible to overstate the *spatial* dimension in the monstrous associations of outlawry – especially in the case of the sagas[28] – it is important to highlight that it is the breaking of social boundaries, the transgression of norms – and thus the *behavioural* aspect – that causes monstrous change. In Grendel's case, it is difficult to establish which came first, the transgression or the monstrous transformation, but in Grettir's, it is not, since he starts out as a human child, albeit a difficult one.

From this observation it also emerges that "the line between human beings like Heremod [or Grettir] and monsters like Grendel can be both

24 Neville, "Monsters and Criminals," 117.

25 He is of course also referred to by a variety of monstrous designations, but it is this ambiguity of his ontological status that makes him an interesting starting point for a discussion of human and social monsters. References to *Beowulf* are taken from *Klaeber's Beowulf: Fourth Edition*, eds. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

26 Neville, "Monsters and Criminals," 117.

27 Ibid., 119.

28 See Eleanor Barraclough, "Inside Outlawry in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 82 (2010): 365–88.

very fine and transgressible".[29] What this line depends on, according to Asa Simon Mittman, is an external dimension: "a monster is not really known through observation; how could it be? How could the viewer distinguish between 'normally' terrifying phenomena and abnormally terrifying monstrosity? Rather, I submit, the monster is known through its *effect*, its impact."[30] Thus, the impact a potential monster's actions have on those affected by them determines whether it fulfils its potential and becomes fully monstrous, and in this, both the quality and the quantity of its interaction with society assume special significance.[31] If monstrosity depends on the monster's impact, however, and on how this impact is assessed, then it emerges as a less fixed and more fluid concept than previous scholarship has assumed, and this observation will be especially important for the discussion of the often ambiguously monstrous outlaws of the *Íslendingasögur*.

It is important to note that acts that qualify as monstrous behaviour disrupt and endanger society on a fundamental level: "monsters do not threaten individuals only, but society as a whole."[32] Thus, one has to look out for markers that acts of a societally threatening nature have been performed, for they might aid in identifying the social monster. Neville draws attention to one such act, namely stealing: being a thief equals being a threat, and for that reason she states – concerning the closeness of the thief and the *þyrs* in the Old English poem "Maxims II"[33] – that "the *þyrs* [...] may merely be another miserable exile, in fact. The thief may be another monster."[34] This is the economic dimension of monstrosity already dis-

29 Neville, "Monsters and Criminals," 118.

30 Asa Simon Mittman, "Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies," *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, eds. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 6; emphasis original.

31 On interaction and perception in the construction of social monstrosity, see Merkelbach, "Volkes Stimme: Interaktion als Dialog in der Konstruktion sozialer Monstrosität in den Isländersagas," *Stimme und Performanz in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,* eds. Monika Unzeitig, Angela Schrott and Nine Miedema (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 251–75.

32 Neville, "Monsters and Criminals," 112.

33 *Þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. Þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian, / ana innan lande* [The thief must go in dark weather. The *þyrs* [giant] must live in the fen, alone in the land], "Maxims II", ll. 43–44, in Tom Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1976), 78. On the disruptive nature of stealing, see also Theodore M. Andersson, "The Thief in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 59 (1984): 493–508.

34 Neville, "Monsters and Criminals," 119.

cussed in connection with revenants; other such features are, as mentioned above, hybridity and transgressiveness, as well as contagion.

Rather than non-conformity to the laws of nature, as is the case with the monstrous races, it is therefore the social monster's rejection and/or active transgression of social laws that render it a social hybrid – someone who is (or was) human but has now taken a step outside of the human community. Social monsters are disruptive characters that, through their transgressive association with the paranormal – with that which is outside of ordinary human experience – threaten society. They have to be removed in order for society to regain peace and stability, and this is true just as much of Grendel and the dragon in Old English poetry as it is of the monstrous characters encountered in the *Íslendingasögur*, of revenants, *berserkir* and magic-users, but also – and perhaps most controversially – of the outlaws discussed in the following analysis.

One could argue that the concept of "monster" as it is developed by Cohen, Sayers or Neville was not native to medieval Scandinavia, and that therefore, the reading proposed here is methodologically flawed. While the Latin word *monstrum* from which the modern term derives would have been understood in a very different way, rendering such extraordinary marvels as the *einfætingr* in *Eiríks saga rauða*,[35] I would argue that medieval Icelanders did have a concept of the social monster similar to the contemporary one, but they used a different term to denote it: the term *troll*. If this is the case, one might ask why this term is not used here instead of the more contentious, and potentially anachronistic, term "monster". However, several scholars within the field of Old Norse studies have drawn attention to the fact that a troll is not always a troll, or at least that not all trolls are what we think they are. Martin Arnold states that the term *troll* is used to provide a "description for some worrying or abnormal characteristic of a human",[36] Ármann Jakobsson lists thirteen types of char-

35 Rudolf Simek, "The Medieval Icelandic World View and the Theory of the Two Cultures," *Gripla* 20 (2009): 190.

36 Martin Arnold, "'*Hvat er tröll nema þat?*': The Cultural History of the Troll," *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 14 (Tempe and Turnhout: Arizona University and Brepols, 2005), 112.

acters the term encompasses,[37] and John Lindow explores how the term is applied to all sorts of anti-social, potentially paranormal characters across Scandinavian cultural history.[38] There is a significant overlap between the characters I consider socially monstrous and those who are referred to as trolls, while others are compared to or otherwise linked to them. Indeed, the term is used more frequently of revenants and magic-users than of the mountain-dwelling ogres taken to be denoted by the term.[39] Interestingly, *troll* is not used to describe what a creature *is*, because trolls can be all sorts of things, but what it *does* (being anti-social) and what effect these actions have (disruption): "a troll may be categorised by trollish behaviour",[40] but what exactly constitutes such behaviour needs to be explored.

Like many scholars who have studied monstrosity, Lindow concludes by stating that "we cannot truly know trolls. If we could, they would not be trolls."[41] Even in medieval Iceland, the monster escapes classification, rendering the concept of trolls a vague one since it does not only refer to non-human 'Others', but also at times to ethnic or social 'Others' like *blámenn* or magic-users. Using the term *troll* to refer to the characters under discussion would therefore not be precise enough to facilitate approaching, and maybe answering, questions regarding how these characters are portrayed in the texts, and what cultural significance they might have carried. I therefore use the term 'monster' (as well as the 'monster theory' that comes with it) as a tool to try to better understand the socially disruptive humans of the *Íslendingasögur*. To this end, I use an 'etic' approach, hoping to achieve a new and better understanding of a subgroup of the 'emic' concept of *troll*.

37 Ármann Jakobsson, "The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *troll* and *ergi* in Medieval Iceland," *Saga-Book* 32 (2008): 52: "a troll may be a giant or mountain-dweller, a witch, an abnormally strong or large or ugly person, an evil spirit, a ghost, a *blámaðr*, a magical boar, a heathen demi-god, a demon, a *brunnmigi* or a berserk." Outlaws fall under the category of "abnormally strong or large" persons.

38 John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 12.

39 Ármann Jakobsson, "The Taxonomy of the Non-existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal," *Fabula* 54 (2013): 201.

40 Ármann Jakobsson, "The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch," 52.

41 Lindow, *Trolls*, 143.

Constructing the Social Monster: Outlaws in the *Íslendingasögur*

In his doctoral thesis on monstrosity in Old Norse and Old English literature, Alistair McLennan notes that there are degrees of monstrosity,[42] and that there seems to be some connection between society's perception of a person and the person's status as monster.[43] The implications of this and the connections between these two points, however, are not articulated in McLennan's thesis. Cohen already posits that "the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic",[44] but Margrit Shildrick has so far been the only scholar to advocate a break with the traditional binary, stating:

> In place of a morality of principles and rules that speaks to a clear-cut set of binaries setting out the good and the evil, the self and the other, normal and abnormal, the permissible and the prohibited, I turn away from such normative ethics to embrace instead the ambiguity and unpredictability of an openness towards the monstrous other [...] to contest the binary that opposes the monstrous to the normal.[45]

The monster is no longer considered an absolute, fixed and stable category, and such an approach has gained more currency in recent years. In papers presented at the Sixteenth International Saga Conference, scholars like Ármann Jakobsson, Arngrímur Vídalín and Sarah Künzler explored the breaking down of dichotomies and binary oppositions.[46] They argued respectively that trolls, *blámenn* – whose name, just like the problematic *troll* itself, can refer to a variety of beings from a black person to a *berserkr* – and courtly, as opposed to monstrous, bodies can be placed along a continuum.[47]

42 Alistair McLennan, "Monstrosity in Old English and Old Norse Literature," (Doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2009), 17 and 44.

43 Ibid., 65.

44 Cohen, "Monster Culture," 17.

45 Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 3.

46 This is similar to the way in which increasing understanding of sexuality and gender as fluid and non-binary has been entering mainstream culture in recent years.

47 See the abstracts in Jürg Glauser et al. (eds.) *The Sixteenth International Saga Conference*

Because of these developments, one needs to conceive of a different way of conceptualising monstrosity, a way that accounts for these degrees of monstrosity, and to do so, it is essential to take into account, again, the importance of the effect the monster has on those who encounter it, and the way this effect impacts their perception of the threat posed by the monster. Not all monsters pose the same threat, and therefore, in response to this threat, they are perceived differently. Thus, what makes a human or formerly human character monstrous is society's perception. It is public opinion that, for example, judges Grettir to be a *dólgr*, *vargr*, *vágestr* or *troll*.[48] If, however, an individual's status as monster is contingent on society's perception of said individual, this means that monstrosity is not a stable, fixed or absolute concept. Perceptions can change, and saga society's opinions of a saga character are often quite volatile, with public opinion giving voice to various perceptions of the protagonist as either hero or monster, depending on their actions. I therefore propose to conceive of monstrosity as a fluid scale, a continuum along which different types of characters that society perceives as 'Other' inhabit different spaces. Moreover, if the perception of one and the same individual in a given saga can change over time, this individual can move along the scale of monstrosity, coming sometimes closer to the monstrous, and sometimes closer to the human. Such a flexible concept of monstrosity is necessary to fully grasp the implications of monstrous behaviour displayed by characters such as outlaws, *berserkir* and magic-users.[49]

Another point McLennan raised in his thesis is that outlawry itself is not the cause of "monstrous change".[50] While I would agree that more is

Sagas and Space, Preprints of Abstracts (Zürich: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien, 2015), 48 (Ármann Jakobsson), 49 (Arngrímur Vídalín) and 177 (Sarah Künzler).

48 *Grettis saga*, 167: *sǫgðu, at sá dólgr væri kominn í byggðina* [they said that a fiend/enemy had come to the settlement]; 229: *Sǫgðu þeir heraðsmǫnnum hverr vargr kominn var í eyna* [They told the people of the district what a wolf/outlaw had come to the island]; 228: *þótti mikill vágestr kominn í Drangey* [a very dangerous guest seemed to have come to Drangey]; 130: *var hann furðu mikill tilsýndar, sem troll væri* [he was incredibly big to look at, as if he were a troll]. Emphases mine. These examples show that it is society that is perceiving Grettir here, they "sǫgðu" [said] or "þótti" [thought] and thus assign him his status as monster.

49 For a more detailed discussion of the conception and development of the scale of monstrosity, see Rebecca Merkelbach, "The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Quaestio Insularis* 15 (2014): 22–37.

50 McLennan, "Monstrosity," cf. 90, 107 and 140.

needed to turn a person into a monster than a sentence of full outlawry alone, it does seem to provide a trigger that then leads a character to become a monster in the eyes of society. After all, if Grettir or Hörðr had never been outlawed, they would not have had to turn to raiding and thus would not have become as socially disruptive as they turn out to be in their position as outsiders. Such triggers can be found in other types of social monsters as well: death is what turns a troublemaker into a monstrous undead creature; a certain innate pattern of behaviour, something in one's *eðli* [nature],[51] is what it takes for a man to go berserk; and it requires a specific kind of knowledge to allow a man or woman the use of harmful magic.

All of these triggers involve a boundary-crossing, a transgression of the norms and laws of nature and society that leads to the character becoming hybrid.[52] Outlaws, too, exhibit transgressive traits: they overstep a societal boundary when they commit the crime that causes them to be sentenced to outlawry. These crimes are perceived as so grave and disruptive that they warrant a person's exclusion from society.[53] The status as an outsider, as someone who constantly walks on the edge of society but is isolated from it, then facilitates the second boundary-crossing that leads these characters partially out of the world of ordinary human experience. This can be seen in Grettir's association with trolls (of the mountain-dwelling variety), as well as in Gísli's haunting dreams that gain more and more control over his waking life as his outlawry progresses. Hörðr – who founds his own parallel society – presents a slightly different case since he does not experience the same amount of isolation as Grettir and Gísli. It is possible, however, to argue that the magic used to eventually bring him down, and the *herfjö-*

51 This ascription of berserkism to something that lies in a person's *eðli* is found in *berserkr* descriptions both in *Eyrbyggja saga* (eds. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson), 67, and *Vatnsdæla saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson), 97.

52 According to Yasmine Musharbash, "Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies," *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, eds. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9, in a culture that distinguishes between humans and animals, monsters can be either a mix of those two categories, or can transcend either, or can be less than either. *Berserkir*, in their animalistic behaviour, are an ontologically mixed category, while revenants can be argued to be subhuman while also being hybrid in their undeath, and magic-users potentially transcend human limitations because of the superhuman power they have due to their magical knowledge.

53 That the legally prescribed exclusion from society does not reflect the practice as described in the literary sources has been argued by Frederic Amory, "The Medieval Icelandic Outlaw," and further discussed by Eleanor Barraclough, "Inside Outlawry," esp. 366–68.

turr [war fetters][54] that come over him before he is killed, represent his way of crossing into the realm of the paranormal.

Moreover, both Grettir and Hörðr encounter malevolent undead creatures before their social, criminal transgression, and neither of them escapes from these encounters unscathed. Glámr's curse seems to have a contagious effect on Grettir: '*heðan af munu falla til þín sekðir ok vígaferli, en flest ǫll verk þín snúask þér til ógæfu ok hamingjuleysis. Þú munt verða útlægr gǫrr*' ["from now on, outlawry and manslaughter will happen to you, and almost all your deeds will turn to ill luck for you. You will be made an outlaw"].[55] The – for Grettir – visible manifestation of this infection is Glámr's eyes which haunt him to his death, making him so afraid of the dark that he cannot be alone. Hörðr seems to be similarly affected by the mound-dwelling Sóti's curse, although he is not its direct object. However, it is only after his fight with Sóti that Hörðr performs what is later referred to as an *ódæmaverk*,[56] an unparalleled, outrageous, potentially monstrous action, when he kills Auðr and burns down his farm. It could therefore be argued that Hörðr has been infected by Sóti's contagious monstrosity during his fight. A further example of this parallel between Grettir and Hörðr is the fact that, during or after their respective monster fights, they both come in contact with something hellish. Grettir is said to lie *í milli heims ok heljar* [between the world and hel][57] when he looks into Glámr's eyes, and of Hörðr and his foster brother Geirr it is said after the encounter with Sóti that it seemed that they had been *ór helju heimt* [brought back from hel].[58] This clearly shows that both Grettir – who is later twice referred to as a *heljarmaðr* [hellish man][59] – and Hörðr become associated with potentially disruptive paranormal forces; they have crossed the boundary of ordinary human experience.

Their status as social outsiders also facilitates the economic disruption that Grettir and Hörðr cause during their outlawry, and this aspect of their interaction with the communities on whose margins they move strongly impacts their relationship with society and thus the way society perceives

54 *Harðar saga*, 87.
55 *Grettis saga*, 121.
56 *Harðar saga*, 56.
57 *Grettis saga*, 121.
58 *Harðar saga*, 43.
59 *Grettis saga*, 192 and 247.

them. Grettir goes around stealing or sitting on people's property for a large part of his life, which on one occasion, in the Westfjords, brings him close to death and at another time, on Drangey, provides the reason for Þorbjǫrn ǫngull to kill him. From these episodes, a pattern emerges. Grettir takes from people what he wants, and through this, he becomes monstrous in his own right: when he lurks next to the Kjǫlr road, he develops a similarity to Glámr whose hauntings prevent the farmers of Vatnsdalr from pursuing their every-day business, and his stealing of sheep especially on Drangey is as severe a threat to economic prosperity in the area as Þórólfr bægifótr's killing of animals. As Janice Hawes notes, "[t]his parallel to the non-human world emphasizes the danger that Grettir now poses to his society. Sheep-stealing may seem to be a trivial act for such a strong man, but it can threaten the livelihood of a farm-based society like medieval Iceland."[60] It is also at these times that the monstrous epithets like *vágestr* or *dólgr* mentioned above are used by the affected farmers to refer to Grettir. This shows that, because of the disruptive impact he has on the local community, he becomes monstrous in their eyes, turning into "a danger to the human society" of Iceland.[61] Similarly, Hörðr and his *Hólmverjar* [people of Hólmr/island-dwellers] (first mentioned in ch. 24) are eventually killed by the *landsmenn* [land-people/dwellers] (first mentioned in ch. 28) because of their stealing and raiding of farms in the Hvalfjǫrðr area. Here, an opposition is set up between those living on the island, the *Hólmverjar*, and those living on land, consistently referred to as *landsmenn*, a clear attempt at 'Othering' the disruptive island-dwellers that is comparable to the people of Skagafjǫrðr describing Grettir as a *vargr*. The *Hólmverjar* thus become a threat that must be removed for society to return to stability. The greatest weakness of the group of island-dwelling criminals lies in their numbers: too many outlaws and troublemakers have assembled on Geirshólmr. Effectively, Hörðr turns into a "Krebsgeschwür der Gesellschaft, das beseitigt werden muss" [a tumor of society that has to be removed];[62] and their presence destabilises the area to such an extent

60 Janice Hawes, "The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider," *Scandinavian Studies* 80 (2008): 31.

61 Ibid., 21.

62 Hans Schottmann, "Die *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*," *Studien zur Isländersaga: Festschrift fur Rolf Heller*, eds. Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel, Ergänzungsbände zum RGA 24 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 231.

that the farmers and chieftains form an alliance against them to bring them down.

The contagious nature of monstrosity visible in the events in Forsæludalr has been discussed above. However, the monstrous disease with which Glámr infects Grettir does not stop there, but also seems to affect Þorbjǫrn ǫngull, who, just like Grettir, is outlawed and killed with the sword he took from his former opponent.[63] While it may be going too far to suggest that Grettir's brother Illugi – who voluntarily goes into exile with his brother and is subsequently killed and buried alongside him because of it – is similarly infected, he certainly is caught up in Grettir's disruption. The manner of Grettir's death matches the monstrous potential he had in life: after being killed, Grettir is both dismembered and beheaded with his own sword.[64] Richard Harris argued that this act of beheading someone with their own weapon is reminiscent of the deaths of trolls and giants elsewhere.[65] Dismembering, too, is often used of potentially monstrous figures like *berserkir*, and this shows how close Grettir has come in death to the creatures he fought during his life, particularly in the eyes of Þorbjǫrn. Illugi is not killed in this manner – instead, [*l*]*eiddu þeir hann þá* [...] *austr á eyna, ok hjuggu hann þar* [Then they led him to the east of the island and killed him there],[66] but both his and Grettir's bodies are put in a cairn: *Þeir dysjuðu þá bræðr báða þar í eyjunni* [They buried both the brothers in a cairn on the island].[67] This kind of burial is not only used for criminals, but also for magic-users and *berserkir*,[68] and frequently for those people who later rise from their graves to haunt the living; Glámr himself is buried in this way.[69] While Illugi is a heroic character whose death is condemned as shameful and unnecessary, this common – monstrous – burial suggests that, through his connection with his older brother, he, too, becomes linked to the 'chain of malign supernatural activity' that only ends with

63 *Grettis saga*, 273.

64 *Grettis saga*, 261–62.

65 Richard Harris, "The Deaths of Grettir and Grendel: A New Parallel," *Scripta Islandica* 24 (1974): 38–39 and 47.

66 *Grettis saga*, 263.

67 Ibid., 263.

68 Cf. e.g. the sorcerers in *Gísla saga*, 60, and also *Laxdœla saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson), 106–107, and the *berserkir* in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 74–75.

69 *Grettis saga*, 113: *dysjuðu hann þar, sem þá var hann kominn* [they buried him in a cairn in the place to which he had then come].

Þorsteinn in Constantinople. Although Illugi lacks his brother's ambiguous depiction and never attains monstrous status, his brother's disruptive influence is clear: it is because of Grettir alone that Illugi dies. Grettir thus ultimately causes the deaths of both of his brothers,[70] showing the destructive influence he has on those closest to him.

This observation is also applicable to Hörðr and his sworn brothers. Both Hörðr and Helgi are declared outlaws for their crimes, but Geirr, who did not take part in them, joins them voluntarily. However, he becomes fully involved with the actions of the *Hólmverjar* when he suggests burning Hörðr's kinsmen to death. Through his actions, he is embedded into the monstrous fabric of the *Hólmverjar*. Together, these men build themselves a life on the island that comes to bear Geirr's name. Moreover, by taking their families and households with them into outlawry and to Geirshólmr – thus physically separating them from society – Hörðr and his brothers arguably contaminate them with the monstrosity that infected them during their encounter with Sóti and which, I would argue, leads Hörðr to act violently when he kills Auðr. Thus, the *Hólmverjar* come to resemble a group of revenants: in their continually growing numbers, the way they draw in troublemakers and criminals and the establishment of a parallel society they are reminiscent of the Fróðá hauntings,[71] betraying the contagious nature of their monstrous presence.

So far, the focus has been on Grettir and Hörðr exclusively, and Gísli has largely been excluded from the discussion. Indeed, the question arises how, or indeed, *if* he fits on the scale of monstrosity that is inhabited by other major outlaws. McLennan notes that Gísli "is the least monstrous of the major outlaws",[72] and while he also states that he shows some "ambiguities during his outlawry",[73] he devotes much less space to him than he does to Grettir or Hörðr, concluding that, even in his last stand, Gísli is "not a monster".[74] Similarly, Eleanor Barraclough admits in her investigation of the role of the landscape in the outlaw sagas that "Gísli's experience of outlawry is embedded more consistently in the social landscape, but

70 Atli is killed earlier in the saga because he gets mixed up in a feud Grettir started; *Grettis saga*, 123–27 and 138–146.

71 *Eyrbyggja saga*, chs. 50–55.

72 McLennan, "Monstrosity," 138.

73 Ibid., 139.

74 Ibid., 139.

despite his attempts to anchor himself in this sphere, he cannot avoid an association with the marginal realm outside it".[75] But this in itself, according to Barraclough, does not necessarily mean that he becomes monstrous in the eyes of society. How, then, does Gísli fit the picture of potential monstrosity painted by other outlaws?

I noted above that monstrosity is a social concept, and thus *Grettis saga* focuses, among other things, on its protagonist's attempts at interacting with and becoming integrated into society, whereas *Harðar saga* is, in part, concerned with Hörðr's interactions with others and his establishment of a parallel society on the island of Geirshólmr. *Gísla saga*, however, passes over such matters in one sentence: shortly after Gísli is outlawed, the saga states that *þrjá vetr ferr hann um allt Ísland ok hittir hǫfðingja ok biðr sér liðs* [for three years, Gísli travelled around the country and met up with chieftains and asked for support].[76] If one compares this with *Grettis saga*, whose main focus lies on its protagonist's travels around Iceland and his attempt at enlisting support, one must conclude that *Gísla saga* is not interested in these travels. The concern of *Gísla saga* does not appear to lie with wider society, and therefore, the concept of monstrosity also needs to be adjusted to account for such a shift in interest if one wants to determine whether Gísli can be considered monstrous or not. This shift in focus and thus in approach is justified for example by the fact that most of the characters of *Gísla saga* are related to Gísli, either by blood like Ingjaldr, or by marriage, like Eyjólfr inn grái who is a cousin of Þórdís's husbands. The saga's focus thus lies on the family of its protagonist rather than on wider society,[77] and it is in this context that one must read Gísli's potential to monstrosity.

In this light, Gísli's actions can be understood as disruptive. Where Grettir's and Hörðr's actions result in society turning against them, Gísli's killing of Þorgrímr is more than a crime against society, although he kills not only his *goði* but also his brother-in-law. This action completely fragments the family – which until Vésteinn's death had been slowly drift-

75 Barraclough, "Inside Outlawry," 386.

76 *Gísla saga*, 69.

77 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla saga*," *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, eds. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, The Viking Collection 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 243.

ing apart, but which had still been contained in the narrow confines of Haukadalr. Now, however, Þórdís has to decide where her allegiance lies, and the distress these conflicting loyalties cause her is highlighted in the narrative. Shortly before he leaves Haukadalr in the spring, Þorgrímr's brother and Þórdís's second husband Bǫrkr asks her '*at þú segir mér, hví þú vart svá óglǫð fyrst á hausti,* [...] *ok þú hefir því heitit at segja mér, áðr en ek fœra heiman*' ["that you tell me, why you were so unhappy at first in the autumn, [...] and you have promised to tell me this, before I leave home"].[78] Þórdís is not only sad to discover that her brother Gísli had killed Þorgrímr, but this shows also that it has taken her a while to decide whether or not to tell Bǫrkr about her discovery. The longer version of the saga has Bǫrkr state explicitly that '*ek hefi þik stundum eptir spurt*' ["I have asked you about this sometimes"],[79] indicating that it takes Þórdís until his departure to decide whether or not she wants to betray her brother. Moreover, her attempt on Eyjólfr's life at the end of the saga shows that Þórdís is never able to make a clear decision, but remains in conflict for years.

Further evidence for Gísli's disruptive effect on his family is the fact that the people he infects with his potential monstrosity are his wife, Auðr, and foster-daughter. The shorter version of the saga makes this explicit by having Eyjólfr say to Auðr '*Máttu ok á þat líta,' segir hann, 'hversu óhallkvæmt þér verðr at liggja í eyðifirði þessum ok hljóta þat af óhǫppum Gísla ok sjá aldri frændr ok nauðleytamenn*' ["You should also consider," he said, "how unpleasant it must be for you to be confined to this desolate fjord and suffer this because of Gísli's bad luck and never see your relatives and close kin"].[80] Eyjólfr himself does not carry a lot of luck away from his encounter with the outlaw, assaulted as he is afterwards by a woman, suggesting that, at least in the eyes of Þórdís – the only family left to make judgements at this point – he has infected himself with monstrosity through his involvement in Gísli's death.

Unlike the other outlaw sagas, however, *Gísla saga* is a narrative about internalisation and its effects. Not only does it limit its focus to the family, as mentioned above, with its action unfolding in a "claustrophobic web of marital and sibling relationships, an inward-looking, over-bonded social

78 *Gísla saga*, 61.
79 "Gísla saga," ed. Loth, 40.
80 *Gísla saga*, 99.

group".[81] The saga also reflects this narrow focus in the "confined landscape of narrow fjords and valleys; a potentially claustrophobic world that magnifies the strengths and weaknesses of the bonds that unite society."[82] In addition to this, it internalises its protagonist's association with the paranormal by letting the monster fights other outlaws engage in take place inside Gísli's mind. While Gísli does not actively fight with the dream women, through his dreams and the women that appear in them, Gísli's inner struggles are made manifest to the audience, providing an insight into the outlaw's psyche, and allowing a glimpse of a "verfolgten, verlassenen und gequälten Menschen" [a hunted, abandoned and tormented human being].[83] Like Grettir, Gísli suffers from a fear of the dark because of his internal struggles, haunted as Grettir is by what he has seen and done.

Generally, Gísli is more difficult to categorise than either Grettir or Hörðr, both of whom are more unambiguously monstrous in their actions against society. Gísli's ambiguity is most pronounced in his adoption of different disguises that confuse his pursuers,[84] and it could be argued that Gísli constructs himself as someone whose humanity is uncertain.[85] Thus, Gísli, more than the other outlaws, seems to be suspended in an uncertain ontological state that problematises our conceptions of the boundaries between human and monster. He shifts not only in his shapes and disguises, into the landscape and out of it, but his character is also highly variable across the tradition associated with him. He can never be fully grasped, always elusive, always escaping. It is this "propensity to shift"[86] that underlines Gísli's familial disruptiveness and gives him monstrous potential in the end. However, since his impact is confined to his family, he cannot ultimately be argued to be similarly *socially* monstrous as Grettir and Hörðr, and this needs to be borne in mind.

Nevertheless, it has emerged that one can in fact read the three major

81 Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 142.

82 Barraclough, "Inside Outlawry," 379.

83 Hans Schottmann, "Gísli in der Acht," *Skandinavistik*, 5 (1975): 94.

84 Which, as McLennan suggests, is a transgressive trait; "Monstrosity," 123.

85 Vésteinn Ólason, "Introduction," *Gisli Sursson's Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, transl. Martin S. Regal and Judy Quinn (London: Penguin, 2003), xx, therefore considers Gísli a trickster figure.

86 Cohen, "Monster Culture," 5.

outlaws as (potentially) monstrous if one accepts that the monstrosity explored in the *Íslendingasögur* is a social monstrosity, and that it is not a fixed concept but a continuum of degrees. Outlaws are not as disturbing or as disruptive as revenants, but that does not mean that they are not perceived as monstrous, as *dólgr* or *troll*, in the eyes of the society that cannot fully contain them. Having thus addressed the familiar monsters, the outlaws of the *Íslendingasögur*, I will turn to their families. Families have an immense impact on the marginalisation process of a potentially monstrous character – they are the ones that can either keep him closer to or push him further away from society, and both patterns can be observed.

The Monsters and the Families: Mutual Disruption

Gísla saga presents the clearest example for my investigation since its focus lies exclusively on Gísli and his family. The basis of this discussion will be the longer S version of the saga, since its more detailed Norwegian prelude provides interesting insights into Gísli's family and a more nuanced reading of Gísli's character than the shorter M version.[87] The most significant of these insights is the fact that Gísli himself does not seem to have a problem with Þórdís's suitor, who in this version is called Kolbeinn, visiting the farm. His father Þorbjǫrn, however, seems to be so severely displeased with the potential damage these visits might cause the family honour, that he resorts to goading: *Þá tekr Þorbjǫrn til orða,'[...] meylig hefir orðit tiltekjan þín* [...]. *Nú er þat mikit at vita á gamals aldri at eiga þá sonu, er eigi þykkir meiri karlmennska yfir en þar sé konur aðrar.'* [...] *Nennir Gísli nú eigi lengr at heyra á hrakyrði hans ok gengr fram* [Þorbjǫrn then said, "[...] Girlish have your doings become [...]. It is important to know in one's old age that one has the kind of sons who do not seem to be manlier than women." [...] Gísli could not stand to listen to his foul language any longer and left].[88] It is only after this incitement and several attempts at convincing Kolbeinn to stop visit-

87 On the different versions of *Gísla saga*, see Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, "Editing the Three Versions of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*," and Emily Lethbridge, "*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations," both in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, eds. Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, 2010) 105–21 and 123–52.

88 "Gísla saga," ed. Loth, 11.

ing Þórdís that *Gísli brá sverði ok hjó til hans, ok vannsk Kolbeini þat at fullu* [Gísli drew his sword and struck at him, and this was absolutely enough for Kolbeinn].[89] It is therefore Þorbjǫrn's disruptive influence on the young Gísli that first causes him to behave in such a "reckless" or "uncompromising" way. This paternal influence is later depicted at two key points in the saga: firstly, when the family decides to leave Norway, and secondly, during Gísli's last stand. On both occasions, Gísli speaks verses in which he overtly refers to his father's influence on his life, first attributing future problems to his father by saying *faðir minn, af þraut þinni / stofnast styrjar efni* [Trouble will arise from this, my father, because of your struggle],[90] and later crediting Þorbjǫrn with Gísli's heroic deeds: *þá gaf sínum sveini / sverðs minn faðir herðu* [My father gave hardness to his boy's sword].[91] The fact that these verses seem to provide a frame for Gísli's life, being the first and the last verses he speaks, show the immense impact Þorbjǫrn seems to have had on "his boy", as Gísli calls himself in the end.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argues that the different versions of the saga are different interpretations of the same material: "M emphasizes more than S the difference in character between the two brothers, while S demonstrates more clearly than M the moral conflict into which Gísli is forced by external circumstances."[92] These external circumstances are the pressure that Þorbjǫrn puts on Gísli – and this pressure stays with him for the rest of his life, introducing the conflicts with his siblings and in-laws that in turn lead to his outlawry and death. This would also explain why Gísli refers to his father in his last stanza: Þorbjǫrn has indeed hardened Gísli's sword by giving him reason to kill at least once, and by instilling in him a focus on his kin's honour that, like a sword, cuts through his family.

A similarly overarching, problematic paternal influence is depicted in the other two outlaw sagas. Grettir seems to be subjected to what nowadays would be called emotional abuse from his father:[93] *Ekki hafði hann*

89 Ibid., 11.

90 Ibid., 14.

91 *Gísla saga*, 114.

92 Meulengracht Sørensen, "Murder in Marital Bed," 241.

93 Carolyne Larrington states that, although Egill has the worst of all saga childhoods, Grettir "runs him a close second"; "Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature," *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 155.

ástríki mikit af Ásmundi, fǫður sínum, en móðir hans unni honum mikit. [...] '*Nú muntu verða af þér at draga slenit, mannskræfan,' segir* [*Ásmundr*] [...] '*Aldri er dugr í þér*' [He did not have much love from his father Ásmundr, but his mother loved him greatly. [...] "Now you will have to get rid of your sloth, you miserable coward," he said. [...] "You are good for nothing"].[94] This might be the reason why Grettir turns against his father's animals as well as against his father himself: as a boy, he is mostly unable to avenge the insult on the offender and therefore takes it out on those below him in the hierarchy, until he gets a chance at harming his father himself.[95] Thus, Grettir first turns against society in the context of paternal abuse, killing and maiming his father's farm animals – a severe crime in a society that relies on animals for its survival. The pattern of Grettir's negative economic impact has been established, and it plays a major role in the rest of the narrative.

Another pattern established in his interaction with his father is Grettir's lack of control, his constant seeking for approval and recognition, and his tendency to take everything personally, and these get him into trouble. His encounter with Auðunn at the games exemplifies this tendency: Auðunn throws a ball over Grettir's head, and he *varð reiðr við þetta, ok þótti Auðunn vilja leika á sik* [became angry at that and thought that Auðunn wanted to make fun of him].[96] Insight into Grettir's thought process reveals that he takes Auðunn's move as an attempt at humiliating him. Because of his father's abuse, he is used to such humiliation and therefore more sensitive to it than other people. This causes him to react violently because he has never learned to regulate his emotional responses adequately. Later, Grettir constantly searches for recognition and respect, and ultimately for a place

94 *Grettis saga*, 36–38.

95 Ármann Jakobsson, in "Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Saga-Book* 27 (2003): 17 notes that "Grettir's violence has no purpose: it is meaningless and uncalculated", only to state later in the same article that "psychological explanations for [Grettir's] rebelliousness, such as the need to gain the attention of an indifferent father, are hinted at", 21. I would argue that there is more than a hint at psychological explanations, especially in *Grettis saga*, but also in the other outlaw sagas, when it comes to the effects of abuse on the future criminals. See further Rebecca Merkelbach, "*Vera varð ek nǫkkur*: Fathers, Abuse and Monstrosity in the Outlaw Sagas," *Bad Guys and Wicked Women: Villains and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature,* eds. Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt (München: Utz Verlag, 2016), 59–93.

96 *Grettis saga*, 43.

in society. He takes on Glámr to test his strength and be praised for it, and he swims across the fjord for fire in order to be praised by the merchants. These actions, resulting from his desire for social acceptance,[97] lead to his outlawry. Grettir's tragedy as an outlaw is, as he says, that *'vera varð ek nǫkkur'* ["I had to be somewhere"],[98] but he cannot find a place within society. Socialisation of the unruly child has failed because it was attempted through violence, and as an adult Grettir turns against society as he once turned against his father.

Hörðr's relationship with his father is different but no less problematic. He grows up caught in the tense relationship between his father Grímkell and his maternal uncle Torfi which, from his earliest childhood onwards, teaches him to be suspicious of affinal kin. Moreover, his father gives him away to be fostered. When Hörðr is introduced to the saga he destroys his mother's necklace at the age of three, resulting in her becoming very angry and saying,

> *'Ill varð þín ganga in fyrsta, ok munu hér margar illar eptir fara, ok mun þó verst in síðasta.'* [...] *Grímkell kom í því í stofuna ok heyrði, hvat hon kvað. Hann greip upp sveininn þegjandi ok reddist mjök þessum orðum* [...] *Svá var Grímkell reiðr orðinn, at hann vildi eigi, at sveinninn væri heima þar.*[99]
>
> ["Your first walk was bad, and many bad ones will follow, but the last one will be the worst." [...] Grímkell came into the room at that moment and heard what she said. He quietly picked up the boy and became very angry at these words. [...] Grímkell had become so angry that he did not want the boy to be at home there.]

Grímkell thus projects his anger at his wife onto his young son. This is later mirrored by Torfi first exposing Þorbjörg and then giving her to the vagrant Sigmundr and his family to be fostered in attempt at humiliating Grímkell.[100] These tales of unwanted, unwelcome children show how

97 See Kathryn Hume, "The Thematic Design of Grettis saga," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974): 476.

98 *Grettis saga*, 169.

99 *Harðar saga*, 17–18.

100 Ibid., 24: *'eigi er eins konar fjandskapr Torfa við mik; deyddi hann fyrst móðurina, en rak nú barnit á húsgang.'* [...] *Alla vissi Grímkell ráðagerð Torfa, ok því vildi hann ekki, at mærin væri*

deeply this family is already disrupted when Hörðr and his sister are children, and this familial disruption affects him for the rest of his life. Hörðr's relationship with his father also never improves, and they part after Grímkell has accused him of *ofsi*, arrogance.[101]

Thus, Hörðr learns to distrust his kinsmen early on in his life, but although he later meets his brothers-in-law Indriði and Illugi with suspicion, he shows more trust to the brothers of his own choosing, especially Geirr. Generally, relationships between brothers are another key part of the family structures the outlaw sagas focus on, and even when fathers are "out of the saga", these horizontal relationships with blood, foster and affinal brothers provide a red thread through the narratives. Grettir's mother Ásdís says that his killing of Þorbjǫrn ǫxnamegin and his son to avenge his older brother Atli '*mun ... upphaf ok undirrót sekða þinna*' ["will be the beginning and cause of your outlawry"],[102] at the end of which his younger brother Illugi defends him to his death. Over the course of the years, his brothers-in-law are his most consistent source of support, and they are the ones who make sure that Þorbjǫrn ǫngull is outlawed. Grettir is the only outlaw, however, whose "relations with his brothers are excellent",[103] and is thus an exception. Gísli's problems with Þorkell, who never lives up to Gísli's expectations and prefers to look after himself rather than risk getting in trouble for aiding and abetting his outlawed brother, are only one example of this.[104] It is also significant that Gísli kills one brother-in-law in vengeance for another, and the third one, Bǫrkr, then is the one who makes sure Gísli himself is killed. Problems are kept in the family, demonstrating to what an extent affinal relationships can be the cause of tragedy. These

þar eptir ["Torfi's hostility towards me is of more than one kind: first he killed the mother, and then drove the child into vagrancy." [...] Grímkell knew all of Torfi's plans, and therefore he did not want the girl to remain there].

101 *Harðar saga*, 35.

102 *Grettis saga*, 155.

103 Robert Cook, "The Reader in *Grettis saga*," *Saga-Book* 21 (1982–85): 152.

104 *Gísla saga*, 74–75: '*Nú vil ek vita,' sagði Gísli, 'ef þú vill mér nǫkkurn fullting veita'* [...] *Þorkell svarar inu sama ok kvezk enga bjǫrg munu veita honum, þá er honum megi sakar á gefa* [...] *'Sé ek nú,' sagði Gísli, 'at þú vill mér ekki lið veita'* [...] *sagðisk eigi þó svá lítilliga við hann gera mundu, ef hann stæði í hans rúmi* ["I now want to know," said Gísli, "if you want to offer me any support" [...] Þorkell replied the same and said he would not give him any assistance that would get him into trouble. [...] "I see now," said Gísli, "that you do not want to give me any help" [...] he said that he would never act in such a small-minded way towards him, if he were in his position].

tragic tensions are epitomised in the conversation between Hörðr and his in-laws, moments before Hörðr's death:

> *Hörðr mælti þá: 'Heldr fast bindr þú nú, mágr.' Indriði svarar: 'Þat kenndir þú mér, þá er þú vildir mik inni brenna.' Illugi mælti til Indriða: 'Eigi á Hörðr þó góða mágana, enda hefir hann illa til gert.' Indriði svarar: 'Löngu hefir hann því fyrirgert, at nökkurar tengdir sé við hann virðandi.'* [105]
>
> [Hörðr said then, "You are binding me rather tightly now, in-law." Indriði replied, "You taught me so when you wanted to burn me in my house." Illugi said to Indriði, "Hörðr does not have good in-laws, even if he deserves ill." Indriði replied, "Long ago he forfeited that we honour any ties with him."]

Indriði comments in particular on Hörðr's actions and their effect on his relationship with his brothers-in-law. Again, it is important to note this focus on actions and the way they are perceived by those concerned – a focus on interaction and impact that has already been observed more generally in the context of these characters' monstrosity. Another significant aspect in both *Gísla saga* and *Harðar saga* is fictive brotherhood, meant to stabilise relationships between men, but in both sagas it fails to do so, leading directly to the development of tensions that result in the complete breakdown of stability.

The most significant familial struggle, however, arises from the issues entailed by outlawry. Above, I referred to Þorkell's failure or unwillingness to help his brother to the extent which Gísli would expect, but this is only part of the problem. Gísli's outlawry is what, as discussed above, fragments all family ties, and in the end, the only ones who are left are the women, grieving for their husbands and brothers. *Grettis saga* paints a similar picture: while Ásdís is a resilient woman, Grettir's outlawry robs her of both her remaining sons. Generally, *Grettis saga* has a pointed and very tragic way of depicting the consequences of having an outlaw in the family, even if the members of that family are not disrupted by a quarrel or feud: when Grettir parts from his half-brother Þorsteinn, it is said that they never meet again: *Skildu þeir brœðr með vináttu ok sáusk aldri síðan*

105 *Harðar saga*, 86.

[The brothers parted in friendship and never met again].[106] This formula of tragedy is then repeated later on during his mother's last words to him: '*Nú fari þit þar synir mínir tveir, ok mun ykkarr samdauði tegask*, [...] *mun ek hvárigan ykkarn sjá sinni síðan*' ["Go now my two sons, and the same death will await you, [...] I will see neither of you ever again"].[107] Despite the main concern of *Grettis saga* being the social interactions of its protagonist, such scenes bring the family of the outlaw back into the focus of narrative attention, and this continues after Grettir's death when Þorsteinn avenges him in Constantinople.

Like *Gísla saga*, *Harðar saga* never shifts its attention far away from family matters, and while its focus is less narrow, the main conflicts stay in the family. Torfi's involvement in Hörðr's problems with Auðr triggers the rage in which Hörðr kills Auðr and burns down his farm,[108] and Torfi then prosecutes the case against Hörðr that leads to him being outlawed. Later, it is the fact that his in-laws are involved in the local farmers' stand against his outlaw band that leads Hörðr to propose such monstrous deeds as burning his own relatives in their house. Like Gísli, he is the disruptive element in his family, turning against his affinal kin and thus severing their ties of obligation with him.

Family relationships, both vertical and horizontal, therefore contribute to the outlaw's gradual movement away from society. His marginalisation process is initiated or accelerated by paternal involvement, either in the form of emotional abuse, neglect, or goading, but maternal influence is not always beneficial either. Brothers and sisters, supposed sources of stability, have the power to help their outlawed siblings but often choose not to get involved, or even actively turn against their brothers. Meanwhile, the outlaw's presence puts immense strain on all relationships, fragmenting already broken families, endangering his kin, and asking more of them than they can give. The families of the outlaw sagas are broken and disrupted,

106 *Grettis saga*, 138.

107 Ibid., 223.

108 *Harðar saga*, 56: *Hörðr mælti: 'Þú hefir þat illa gert at rægja okkr Torfa saman, ok nú skaltu þess gjalda.' Hann brá þá sverðinu Sótanaut ok hjó Auð sundr í tvá hluti ok húskarl hans. Svá var Hörðr þá reiðr orðinn, at hann brenndi bæinn ok allt andvirkit ok tvær kvinnur, er eigi vildu út ganga* [Hörðr said, "You have done ill to slanderously set Torfi and me against each other, and you will pay for this." He then drew his sword Sótanaut and clove Auðr in two and also his servant man. Hörðr had become so angry that he burned down the farm and all the implements and two women, who did not want to go outside].

but also breaking and disruptive; the negative influence between family and (future) outlaw is one of mutual destruction. Thus, it emerges that the outlaw sagas are clearly focused on the various relationships inside the outlaws' families, that the ties and tensions among relatives are just as much a concern of these narratives as are the outlaw's adventures out in the wild.

Reading the Sagas through the Outlaws They Bear[109]

If one accepts my reading of outlaws constituting a variant, an aspect, of the monstrous, this makes it possible to approach them and the way in which their entanglement in family conflict in a new and different way – as monsters, they become readable. According to Cohen, the monster is "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment",[110] incorporating the fears, desires and anxieties of that time. "The monstrous body is pure culture",[111] and this enables us to read it, for, as Musharbash notes, "monsters are always bound to specific socio-cultural contexts, and within them, signify the issue that most matters to the people they haunt."[112] Thus, the monsters' culturally specific body enables them to "offer a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time."[113] A similar argument can, I argue, be made about figures who are monstrous in a behavioural rather than a corporeal way.

As I have shown, the monstrously disruptive humans of the *Íslendingasögur* are social monsters, they act not only in but also against society, and society reacts to these actions. Accordingly, due to the social nature of their monstrous impact, I propose that what social monsters signify are the social concerns and anxieties haunting the culture that produced the literature in which they appear: social monsters reflect, reflect on, point towards societal concerns. This approach opens up a new reading of why the family is at the heart of the outlaw narrative that goes beyond the as-

109 A nod to Cohen's proposal of "understanding cultures through the monsters they bear"; "Monster Culture," 4.

110 Ibid., 4.

111 Ibid., 4.

112 Musharbash, "Introduction," 12.

113 Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, "Introduction: Toward a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21st Century," *Monster Culture in the 21st Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

sumption that, due to narrative convention, the *Íslendingasögur* are always concerned with the building and breaking of relationships between members of Icelandic society. Reading the outlaw as monster makes visible the particular significance in this joint occurrence of monstrous, broken, disrupted families and monstrous, breaking, disruptive outlaws. Through the outlaws' close connection with their families, because of the way families impact the marginalisation of the outlaw and the way the outlaw creates, intensifies, heightens the loyalties, duties and conflicts inside their families, this is what they point to: the concerns and anxieties medieval Icelanders – as a society relying on kinship ties as its core stabilising element,[114] its foundation and "the spine [...] of many kinds of social relationships"[115] – must have felt about the problems and instabilities inherent in the kinship system,[116] and about the ensuing potential breakdown of this fundamental social structure.

The presence of the outlaw in these narratives, through his monstrosity, lends itself particularly aptly to such an exploration. Outlawry was supposed to cut a man loose from all social ties, including the ties of friendship and kinship. However, as can be seen from the sagas themselves, this was not regularly put into practice: an outlaw did not cease to be a kinsman. Yet his family members were not legally allowed to interact with him, and his presence was therefore dangerous and disruptive as well as potentially contagious: if caught, his kinsmen would have had to join him in his outlawry. This constant danger therefore heightens the pressure that kinship ties were already subjected to. The conflicts presented in these sagas, because of the way they involve the outlaw's closest kin, become completely irresolvable. Family ties and tensions are always at the heart of the *Íslendingasögur*, but it emerges that the outlaw sagas use them to particularly striking effect, depicting how closely tied up the individual, the outlaw, is with his particular kin group, and highlighting what mutual destruction the family and the individual within it can cause to one another.

114 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga and Society: An Introduction to Old Norse Literature*, transl. John Tucker (Odense: Odense University Press, 1993), 28 and 73.

115 Victor Turner, "An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga," *The Translation of Culture: Essays to E. E. Evans-Pritchard*, ed. T. O. Beidelman (London: Travistock Publications, 1971), 361.

116 On these inherent issues, see William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 155.

These concerns and anxieties around the fragile Icelandic kinship system do not need to be pinned down to one particular decade or even century, or to one specific historical event, although the events of the Sturlung Age might have intensified Icelandic society's preoccupation with the insecurities surrounding kinship ties and tensions. Thus, the breakdown of ties among the *Sturlungar* themselves, as depicted in *Íslendinga saga*, becomes symptomatic of the extent to which feuds and power struggles operate during the thirteenth century, and thus of the disintegration of other social structures.[117] Generally, however, this is a culturally pervasive concern since it appears both in sagas that have been dated to the "classical" period of composition, like *Gísla saga*, as well as in "post-classical" texts like the extant versions of *Grettis saga* and *Harðar saga*. Moreover, the continued transmission of these narratives across the centuries betrays their ongoing relevance for their audiences, which shows that the anxieties surrounding the disintegration of family structures appear to be an issue that retained its currency throughout Icelandic history. Rather than tying the concern with family relationships that the outlaw sagas bear witness to through their monstrously significant protagonists to one specific historical moment, it is therefore more productive to read them as mirrors into general societal concerns that became projected onto the figure of the outlaw.

The monster, according to Cohen, delimits "the social spaces through which bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself".[118] Read this way, the monstrous outlaws of the *Íslendingasögur* delimit not only the physical geography of Iceland, moving in the "monstrous territory" of highlands and islands, in the spaces where trolls live. They also point to what constituted the limits of social, human behaviour: lack of control and moderation, stealing and killing close kin do not belong to what is socially acceptable in these narratives. Moreover, the outlaw sagas with their exploration of families turned inward, and turning on each other, because of the presence of the monstrous outlaw – whom they have helped to create – allow an exploration of the breakdown of family structures. The heightened tensions of these narratives and the presence of

117 Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1998), 29.

118 Cohen, "Monster Culture," 12.

the disruptive outlaw within his equally dysfunctional family allow a focus on the monstrous, and through that a more poignant exploration of the dissolution of the most fundamental social bond than would be possible in other contexts. Thus, the outlaw sagas also betray the cultural concerns of medieval Iceland and the anxieties that must have revolved around the potential fracturing of the most fundamental social ties: that of the family. Reading the outlaw sagas through the social monsters they bear therefore gives us an understanding of their cultural relevance for a society that inquired into family structures, ties and tensions, and the stabilising role that social monsters played at the heart of society itself.

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SUMMARY

"He has Long Forfeited All Kinship Ties": Monstrosity, Familial Disruption, and the Cultural Relevance of the Outlaw Sagas

Keywords: *Íslendingasögur*, teratology, monster theory, outlaw sagas

The three *Íslendingasögur* about major outlaws have long fascinated scholars and readers alike, and the question why medieval Icelanders told tales in which social outsiders play the part of the hero has been the concern of scholarship for a number of years. At the heart of this scholarship has been a preoccupation with the characters and their families, for these families play a prominent role in the texts: Gísli is outlawed for killing one brother-in-law to avenge another; Hörðr does not trust any of his male relatives, and this eventually leads to his downfall; and Grettir's difficult relationship with his father seems to lead to his reckless and arrogant behaviour later in life. But why are these stories about outlaw heroes so focussed on the relationships between the individual and his kin group? And why were Icelanders – medieval and modern – so fascinated by these marginal, destructive figures? In this article these questions are addressed by approaching the outlaw from the perspective of monster theory. The monster, as a creature that points towards or even embodies meaning beyond itself, lends itself well to such an investigation into social and cultural concerns whose reflection we might see in the literary products of said culture. So far, outlaws have not been included into the corpus of *Íslendingasögur* monsters, and therefore, the article consists of four parts. First, the concept of social monstrosity is established, based on Cohen's monster theory but more suited to the unique situation in the *Íslendingasögur*. This concept is then applied to the three major outlaws before turning to the discussion of outlaws within their matrix of family ties. In the final step, the monstrous outlaw in his disrupted, disruptive family will be read as symptomatic of medieval Icelandic socio-cultural concerns about the fragmentation of family structures.

ÁGRIP

"Löngu hefir hann því fyrirgert, at nökkurar tengdir sé við hann virðandi": Óvættir, fjölskylduklofningur og menningarlegt mikilvægi útlagasagnanna

Lykilorð: Íslendingasögur, vanskapanafræði, skrímslafræði, útlagasögur

Íslendingasögurnar þrjár sem fjalla um útlaga hafa löngum hrifið bæði fræðimenn og almenna lesendur og spurningin um það hvers vegna miðaldafólk sagði sögur af mönnum sem standa utan samfélagsins, en eru hetjur þrátt fyrir það, hefur verið viðfangsefni fræðimanna í mörg ár. Þessar rannsóknir hafa helst snúist um aðalpersónur sagnanna og fjölskyldur þeirra þar sem ættmennin leika stórt hlutverk í sögunum: Gísli verður útlægur fyrir að drepa einn mág sinn til að hefna fyrir dráp annars; Hörður treystir engum frænda sinna, og leiðir það að lokum til falls hans; og erfitt samband Grettis við föður sinn virðist vera orsök glannalegrar og ofbeldisfullrar hegðunar hans seinna á lífsleiðinni. En af hverju er einblínt svo á samband einstaklinganna við ættmenni sín í þessum sögum? Og hvers vegna voru Íslendingar – bæði á miðöldum og í nútímanum – svo hugfangnir af þessum jaðarsettu, mannskæðu persónum? Í greininni er þessum spurningum velt upp og reynt að svara þeim með því að beita aðferðum skrímslafræða. Skrímslið, sem skepna sem bendir til eða ber jafnvel í sér merkingu út fyrir sjálfa sig, hentar vel til þess að skoða það sem snertir félagslegt og menningarlegt umhverfi þess samfélags sem bókmenntirnar urðu til í. Hingað til hafa útlagar ekki verið taldir með skrímslum eða óvættum í Íslendingasögum og þess vegna skiptist greinin í fjóra hluta. Í upphafi er hugtakið um félagslega óvætti skilgreint, byggt á kenningum Cohens um skrímsli, en aðlagað að sérstökum aðstæðum Íslendingasagna. Hugtakinu er síðan beitt á þessa þrjá þekktustu útlaga áður en umræðan snýst að þeim sem hluta af fjölskyldu og tengslum þeirra við hana. Að lokum er litið á óvættaútlagann í sinni klofnu og kljúfandi fjölskyldu sem einkenni fyrir áhyggjur íslensks miðaldasamfélags af sundrungu innan ættarinnar.

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