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Unstable Identities: The Outlaw in Icelandic Sagas

by

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Introduction

Midway through *Grettis saga*, soon after the titular character has been outlawed for the deaths of several men (for which he may or may not be responsible), he wanders to Vatnsfjörðr¹ in the region of Iceland known as the Westfjords, where Þorbjörg *in digra*, “the Stout,”² is currently in charge. Grettir terrorizes the local farmers until they finally capture him, tie him up, and decide to hang him on the spot. And then Þorbjörg arrives. She reprimands the farmers and frees Grettir after making him swear to leave Vatnsfjörðr and not terrorize her followers any more. Soon after, Þorbjörg’s husband, Vermundr, arrives and says to Grettir: *Lítit lagðisk nú fyrir þik, þvílíkr garpr sem þú ert, er vesalmenni skyldu taka þik, ok ferr svá jafnan óeirðarmönnum* (“It must have been humiliating for a great warrior like you, Grettir, to have been seized by such wretches. But this is precisely what happens to troublemakers,” *Grettis*, 52).³ This scene displays a multi-layered power dynamic, a complex interaction of major and minor characters, and major and minor members of society, all while maintaining a lighthearted tone throughout, despite the immediate threat to the life of Grettir, who is ostensibly the hero of the saga. The farmers come off looking quite ridiculous, but they nonetheless overpower Grettir, an incredibly strong and courageous man, though also a hot-tempered and dangerous one. It is ultimately the *skörungr mikill ok stórvitr* (“forceful and shrewd,” *Grettis*, 52) woman, Þorbjörg the Stout, who gains the most credit from the episode. Grettir meanwhile is informed that his

¹ A brief note on orthography: there are a few letters that appear in Old Norse but not in modern English. For the reader familiar with Old English, these will pose no problem. For readers new to the language I offer a quick explanation here: Þ, þ (þorn) = unvoiced th (as in thick, thin); Ð, ð (eð) = voiced th (as in this, that); Æ, æ/œ (æsc) = short a (as in cat).

² For consistency and ease of reading I have normalized all proper names throughout to the nominative form of the Old Norse spelling, including places where different spellings are used in quotations from modern sources and translations.

³ All quotations of *Grettis saga* in Old Norse are from Jónsson, 1956. Numbers in citations refer to chapter numbers. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of *Grettis saga* in English are from Fox and Pálsson, 1974.

status as an outlaw, a social and legal outcast, makes him susceptible to men who would otherwise be his inferiors.

The interaction of gender, power, and marginalization evident in the above episode is not an infrequent occurrence in saga literature. Likewise, this subversion or questioning of social norms coupled with their simultaneous reinforcement arises with striking frequency in the two Icelandic outlaw sagas on which this project is focused: *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. Icelandic outlaws occupy an intriguing place in, or rather outside of, their society. The sagas that relate their lives and deaths likewise occupy an intriguing place in saga literature as a whole. The tensions created by the centering of the marginalized, as well as the opportunities – social, figural, and formal – opened by outlawry are the key motivations for my reading of these sagas. In order to explain these motivations more clearly, I must first briefly present some important background information on the Icelandic sagas and their origin and setting in medieval Iceland.

Iceland in the middle ages looked significantly different from most of its European neighbors at the time, and its literary production especially displayed this difference. Several bodies of fascinating literature have survived from medieval Iceland, including the weird and beautiful verses of the Poetic Edda, detailed family histories, and, most numerous and voluminous of all, the sagas.⁴ The loose genre known as the saga is often divided into several subgenres. The two sagas that this project engages with are both examples of *Íslendingasögur*, “sagas of Icelanders” or family sagas, as they are often called. Heather O’Donoghue describes them succinctly as “native, secular, and naturalistic.”⁵ While there are, of course, exceptions, the family sagas are generally prose narratives about Icelandic people, places, and history; they

⁴ For a readable and informative introduction see O’Donoghue, 2004. For a brief introduction to some scholarly issues see Clunies Ross, 2000. For a more thorough overview of the literature and relevant scholarship see Clover and Lindow, 2005.

⁵ O’Donoghue, 2004, 23.

comment on and display the religious tensions of a land recently converted to Christianity without generally making explicit religious claims; and for the most part they report believable conversations, conflicts, and resolutions between realistic people. The Icelandic saga has been taken at various times in scholarship as history, epic, and novel.⁶ In addition, I have noticed a tendency for people unfamiliar with Old Norse literature to react in a few ways to the subject. Their first response is often to think of Norse mythology – Odin, Thor, Loki, and the rest. However, mythology plays almost no role in the family sagas, which are instead about disputes between Icelandic farmers. The next reaction, following on from any mention of heroic or saga, is to think of epic poetry: *Beowulf*, the *Aeneid*, etc. While there is literature in Old Norse comparable to these stunning poems, the sagas are of an entirely different style and register. They are continuous prose narratives, often described as laconic – more Hemingway than Homer. It is perhaps most productive to approach the sagas on their own terms.

In order to grasp the evolution of the saga it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the land and people which brought sagas into existence. The first era of Icelandic history is the settlement period, from about 870 – 930, during which the island was first colonized by Norwegian immigrants. The island was uninhabited save for a few Irish monks, and was quickly apportioned by the various families who sailed there. Most sagas begin with some recounting of a journey to Iceland, and generally the voyagers turn out to be the ancestors of the major characters in the saga. The settlement remained a significant milestone for generations afterward. The first settlers were held in great esteem, and family trees became an important part of daily life and of record-keeping.

Following the settlement, the new inhabitants of Iceland set about establishing a social and political structure. If the evidence of the sagas is to be believed, many of the initial settlers

⁶ Clover, 2005 provides an overview of the major debates and developments in the field of family saga scholarship.

fled the rule of one or another Norwegian king, preferring to live on a small, inhospitable island rather than submit to their rule. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has argued that the “most important principle [of Icelandic society] was a decentralized distribution of power and a corresponding emphasis on the integrity of the individual.”⁷ William Ian Miller also emphasizes the dispersed nature of early Icelandic society, noting that “until the end of the eighteenth century, there were no villages or towns, no nucleated settlements at all,” but instead a collection of farmsteads generally bound together (or pushed into conflict) through proximity and kinship.⁸ Nevertheless, a political system did emerge “by the early eleventh century...that would remain the model of “public” authority until the demise of what is known as the commonwealth.”⁹

This structure involved first a number of *goðar*, “chieftains,” who functioned in something loosely resembling the role of a feudal lord. However, every free Icelandic male (at least in theory) had political power. This was exercised through the annual summer *Alþing*, “all-assembly,” a meeting at which suits were brought for offences committed throughout the preceding year, courts were assembled, cases tried, and punishments and settlements meted out. Each year at the *Alþing* the *lögsögumaðr*, “lawspeaker,” recited a portion of Iceland’s extensive legal code. The law formed a crucial part of Icelanders’ self-perception and is an ever-present force in the sagas, directing unrest into legal channels and often operating as a normalizing force for the reassertion of sociopolitical homeostasis.

While in theory anyone could sue anyone and hope to win by the force of the law, the sagas often show that it was only the powerful chieftains, or someone with their assistance, who could expect to win a case. Displays of manpower, through gathering allies and their followers to show up at court, dictated the outcome of cases as often as the legal arguments. In addition, the

⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen, 2000, 21.

⁸ Miller, 1990, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

incredible vastness of the law codes, preserved in two manuscripts known as *Grágás*, literally “grey goose,” meant that tiny points of legal issue were frequently the formal deciding factors even in cases where the truth of the matter was easily recognizable (and opposed to the outcome). The extensiveness and importance of the law accounts for what Miller calls “the inseparable interpenetration of law and society”¹⁰: the law codes were known to everyone who participated at the *Alþing* and figured prominently in social interactions, becoming coextensive with Icelandic society, while at the same time the extra-legal forces in society had a significant impact on adjudication in the supposedly purely legal sphere.

As mentioned above, this post-settlement period is known as the commonwealth. Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000, long after most of continental Europe. The conversion, like the settlement, is quite dissimilar to comparable events in other countries. After a few years of debating, it was decided at the *Alþing*, in an almost democratic process, that Iceland should adopt Christianity, although paganism was still tolerated (though increasingly less so in later years). In the thirteenth century commonwealth institutions began to break down as power became ever more centralized in a few *goðar*, leading to large-scale conflict and an increase in Norwegian influence. The commonwealth came to an end in 1262-1264 when Iceland agreed to submit to Norwegian rule (again decided at the *Alþing*).

It was during the height, waning, and aftermath of the commonwealth period that most scholars agree the majority of the sagas were composed.¹¹ The start of the saga period is usually dated around the beginning of the thirteenth century, with its height in the middle of that century, and its decline and demise generally dated to the mid-fourteenth century. Some of the sagas (the so-called contemporary sagas) relate the events of this period, but many are about significantly

¹⁰ Miller, 1990, 221.

¹¹ See O’Donoghue, 2004, 22-24; Clover, 2005, esp. 241-253, and 294-316. For wider-ranging information see Anderson, 2005; Kalinke, 2005; Nordal, 2000; Barnes, 2000; Cormack, 2000.

earlier events. The most prominent group of sagas in terms of cultural prestige and subsequent scholarly attention is the *Íslendingasögur*, which includes both *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. The events described in the *Íslendingasögur* generally extend from the settlement period in the early tenth century to the end of the eleventh century, with most concentrating on the early eleventh century (around the time of the conversion, though this is usually a peripheral event in the narratives themselves), two hundred years before their composition. The sagas are thus situated around major moments in early Icelandic history: the settlement and conversion, when Iceland came into existence, establishing its own cultural and political identity; and the dramatic changes in the period surrounding its submission to Norway, when the institutions associated with that identity were breaking down.

Against the backdrop of these political and historical contexts, my project is interested in how other forms of identity are established and questioned within the sagas, and in how these might be further questioned. As I mentioned above, the two sagas with which I engage in the following chapters are commonly referred to as outlaw sagas. Their central characters are tenth- and eleventh-century Icelandic outlaws, and their main narratives plot the lives of these historical people (fictionalized to differing degrees), with an emphasis on their time spent in outlawry. The importance of society – a certain accepted homeostasis – to the saga world and form cannot be understated. As Heather O’Donoghue has phrased it, “what is celebrated in the sagas is not the triumph of the physically strong, but the intellectual ability and goodwill of those who strive to maintain social order.”¹² The outlaw sagas are remarkable, then, for their emphasis on those who have been expelled by and from the social order.

The Old Norse word translated as “outlaw” is *útlagr*, composed of *út*, “out” and *lagr*, which implies both “law” and “lie” – the outlaw is also an outlier. Honing in on this marginality,

¹² O’Donoghue, 2004, 24.

I began the present project by exploring the affinity of the sagas with a spatial model of marginalization in terms of gender and sexuality put forth by Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*.¹³ This project takes up the work done by Ahmed and others in the field of Queer Theory as a means of approaching certain narrative problems in the outlaw sagas that hinge on issues central to Queer Theory, such as marginality, outsidership, performativity, and (non)identity. I would emphasize at the outset that this project is interested in the interpretive lenses made available by Queer Theory insofar as they are illuminating with respect to the chosen sagas. It should not be seen as an attempt to “queer” Old Norse-Icelandic literature more generally or even these two sagas. To this end, in the course of the project I introduce both Ahmed’s spatial theorizing and the work of Carol J. Clover and other scholars which focus on gender in Old Norse literature. These, as well as other authors who do not figure explicitly in my analyses but act as a background for the theoretical pieces upon which I draw,¹⁴ form the main lenses through which I approach and interpret *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*.¹⁵

I see both marginalization and the (in)stability of identity as crucial aspects of the outlaw sagas that have received surprisingly slight attention in the scholarship. By using broadly construed queer theoretical lenses, these elements can be brought into focus and their importance to the sagas highlighted. Queer Theory has been used in literary studies as a methodology for analyzing a broad spectrum of marginalization and difference-related issues. In employing its tools I hope that I have accessed a similarly broad range of interconnected issues. Whereas past saga scholarship has emphasized singular issues (for example, monster theory approaches, about

¹³ Ahmed, 2006.

¹⁴ Foremost among them are Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Annamarie Jagose.

¹⁵ In introducing queer theoretical work into my project I am not seeking to intervene in Queer Theory itself. However, it seems inevitable that this project, even through its disavowal of broader political aims, will be involved in them in some way. I want to recognize here the labor that went into reclaiming “queer” as a label and a possible field of study, as well as the lacunas many scholars have argued are inherent to this theoretical project. While what follows is not explicitly engaging with political or meta-theoretical concerns, I believe that it may have some bearing on them.

which see my discussion in the second chapter), I have tried to bring a multiplicity of themes into contact through a focus on multidimensional fluidity. The origin and continued interest of Queer Theory in gender and sexuality also informs the course of my study. Gender and sexuality act as the fulcrum on which the more wide-ranging analyses are leveraged and to which they ultimately return. This focus also enables an engagement with the growing scholarship on gender in Old Norse literature, beginning with the work of Carol J. Clover. My goal throughout is to examine the ways outlaws are portrayed in *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga* in order to assess the disruptive potential of these figures within the rigid legal and social framework of saga society, as well as within the saga form itself.

From *hvatr* to *blauðr* and Back: Gender Associations in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*

The majority of Icelandic sagas, particularly the family sagas, are organized around important male figures. These central characters have much to say about their society. Physical strength, devotion to kin, and legal skill are all pivotal to Icelandic notions of masculinity in the sagas. Various characters represent different combinations of these characteristics, exposing tensions between their abstract formulation and their realization in saga society. *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, the focus of this chapter, is no exception. The central conflict of the saga stems from a complex network of relations by blood and marriage, the social necessity of violent revenge for slights against honor, and the legal ramifications of this violence. The titular character, Gísli Súrsson, is outlawed for the murder of Þorgrímr, his brother-in-law, but the saga's sympathies are not straightforwardly with the law. Gísli, it is remarked, *var betr at íþróttum búinn en flestir menn aðrir* ("was more accomplished than most men," *Gísli*, 20),¹⁶ and is several other times noted for his masculine deeds.

However, a reading of Gísli as purely masculine heroic cannot stand up to scrutiny, particularly when Carol Clover's analysis of Old Norse gender is brought into consideration. In her article "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," Clover argues that the evidence of the sagas indicates that gender was construed on a one-gender model in Old Norse society.¹⁷ According to Clover, a person's "gender" was determined by the way they acted; it was essentially performative. Her argument hinges on the usage of two words: *hvatr* and *blauðr*. While previous scholars largely ignored or kept implicit the systematic gender implications of these words' semantic range, Clover brings both words and gender to the forefront. In the major Old Norse-English dictionary of Cleasby and Vigfússon, *hvatr* and *blauðr*

¹⁶ All quotation of *Gísla saga* in Old Norse are from Þórólfsson, 1943. Numbers in citations refer to chapter numbers. All quotations of *Gísla saga* in English, unless otherwise noted, are from Regal, 2003.

¹⁷ Clover, 1993.

are translated as “aggressive” and “weak” respectively, but are also translated as “male” and “female” when referring to animals, creating two distinct metaphorical and literal semantic fields.¹⁸ In Clover’s reevaluation of the words’ semantic range, this clean distinction breaks down, such that the supposed metaphorical aspects – *hvatr* as “aggressive” and “active,” *blauðr* as “weak or soft” and “passive” – are assimilated to the literal translations “male” and “female.” This results in an understanding of Old-Norse gender categories that equates the masculine with activity, with the violent, phallic aggressor, and the feminine with passivity, with the nonviolent, sexually penetrated person. The nuances of this mapping require more focused research into how gender operates in the sagas.¹⁹ In what follows I use Clover’s argument for a one-gender model as a touchstone for examining the representation of gender in *Gísla saga*. Through an analysis of several episodes in *Gísla saga*, as well as careful consideration of the skaldic verses that Gísli speaks in the saga and the dreams that many of them recount, I will argue that Gísli exhibits, and to some extent desires, a fundamental fluidity between the saga categories of masculine aggression and feminine passivity – between *hvatr* and *blauðr* existences – a fluidity that the saga both produces and constrains.

The first episode I will discuss, Gísli’s murder of Þorgrímr, has received much attention in the literature on *Gísla saga*, but I will use it primarily as a foil for a second episode that has received comparatively little attention – the episode at Refr’s farm. The first episode can be seen as the primary motivation for much of the saga’s plot. While it is not the beginning of the conflict, it leads directly to the period of Gísli’s outlawry, which comprises the bulk of the saga. Prior to this moment, the reader has become acquainted with the main figures of the saga: Gísli and his wife Auðr; Gísli’s sister Þordís and her husband Þorgrímr; Gísli’s brother Þorkell and his

¹⁸ Cleasby and Vigfússon, 1957 s.v. *hvatr* and *blauðr*.

¹⁹ Clover, 1993, 363-387.

wife, Ásgerðr; and Auðr's brother Vésteinn (Gísli's brother-in-law). It is this complex network of relationships that results in the saga's destructive course, further complicated by non-reciprocal vows amongst Gísli, Vésteinn, Þorkell, and Þorgrímr to be foster-brothers, or sworn brothers.²⁰ The primary conflict that drives the plot of the saga arises when Þorkell overhears that his wife, Ásgerðr, is having an affair with Vésteinn (*Gísla*, 9). Vésteinn is then killed; the identity of his murderer is never revealed, but Þorkell and Þorgrímr are the main suspects (*Gísla*, 13). Gísli, perhaps believing that Þorgrímr is responsible, kills him (*Gísla*, 16). This murder is the first episode I will consider. My study of this episode will depend heavily on David Clark's analysis in *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*. His focus on sexual themes in this scene will allow me to segue into a reading of the sexually-charged later episode, which mirrors, but differs in important ways from, the murder of Þorgrímr.

In the episode of the killing, Gísli enters the house of Þorgrímr and Þordís the night after a large gathering. There are many men sleeping in the hall, but the head couple has their own semi-separate room. Gísli plunges the hall into darkness and enters the bedchamber. Feeling about in the dark, he puts his hand on his sister's breast, awakening her. She thinks it is her husband, and awakens him. Gísli waits until they fall back asleep. He then wakes up Þorgrímr, who turns toward his wife in a suggestion of sexual intimacy. At that moment Gísli plunges his spear through Þorgrímr so that it sticks in the bed. Þordís awakens and rouses the men in the hall, but Gísli makes his escape unnoticed (*Gísla*, 16).

There are obvious sexual overtones to this scene: the killing occurs in a marital bed, there is a fixation on physical contact in sexually-significant ways (Gísli's handling of Þordís's breast), and the final moment is a visceral and violent penetration of Þorgrímr by Gísli (particularly in

²⁰ *Fóstbræðra*, foster-brothers, were an important part of kinship networks in medieval Iceland. The relationship referred to here could also be called blood-brotherhood. For more information of fosterage and sworn brothers see Miller, 1990, 122-124 and 171-174.

light of the other sexual elements in the scene). David Clark traces the history of this line of interpretation. He first makes note of Theodore M. Andersson's reading, which concentrates on the line *Hon hugði, at hann legði höndina yfir hana* ("she thought it had been his [Þorgrímur's] hand that touched her," *Gísli*, 16), which has many "parallel uses...in sexual situations" in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature.²¹ According to Andersson, Gísli encourages a sexual interaction between Þorgrímur and Þordís, but instead of having sex Þorgrímur is killed. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen continues Andersson's reading of the sexual mood of the scene but attributes a legal motive to Gísli's actions, arguing that Gísli is essentially killing Þorgrímur for having unlawful sexual relations with Þordís and that therefore the initiation of the sexualized moment is necessary for Gísli's plans (Gísli seems to think the marriage is invalid).²²

Clark, on the other hand focuses on the element of *níð* in the scene. *Níð* denotes a conceptual network of shaming acts, primarily sexual in nature, and most notably and frequently refers to an accusation that a man has been sexually penetrated by another man. This shaming accusation was considered so dramatic that it could lawfully be repaid with death. *Gísli saga* is frequently concerned with issues of *níð*, which in one instance explicitly occurs (*Gísli*, 2), and elsewhere is heavily suggested. It thus functions, according to Clark, as something of a "motif."²³ Clark makes use of some philological work and close reading to note that the same phrasing (*taka á*) is used when Gísli touches Þordís's breast, when Þordís thinks her husband has laid his hand on her (with that gesture's sexual connotations), and when Gísli touches Þorgrímur to awaken him. When combined with the scene's careful use of different verbs meaning "awaken," or "rouse," with varying levels of sexual connotation, Clark argues that the repetition of *taka á*

²¹ Clark, 2012, 104.

²² *Ibid.*, 103-106.

²³ *Ibid.*, 106.

indicates that “Gísli has deliberately created physical arousal in Þorgrímr.”²⁴ However, the result is not a consensual sexual relationship between Gísli and Þorgrímr. Instead Clark argues that Gísli has crafted this situation for symbolic purposes, in order to say “I am penetrating you, because I am a *real* man, and you are taking it from me like a woman, and indeed your erection shows that you are enjoying it.”²⁵ This intimation of phallic aggression aligns Gísli with a masculine heroic ideal. I will argue that his becoming thus aligned has important repercussions later in the saga. I think it not unimportant that the scene involves Gísli initiating the male-male sexual contact through the adoption of the more traditionally feminine role of arousing Þorgrímr. While Gísli’s ultimate goal, according to Clark, is to display his phallic superiority, I would argue that the way the scene plays out in the saga involves Gísli seeking the arousal of another man, which would seem to ally him with the less defensible side of *níð* situations according to their medieval Icelandic interpretations. Nonetheless he retains the active role, and thereby perhaps escapes the shame associated with passivity. As we will see, the saga complicates this reading elsewhere.

Much later in the saga, after Gísli has been outlawed for some time, and has already escaped capture and death in various dramatic and comedic circumstances, we again find him in another man’s bed. In Chapter 27, Gísli is being pursued by Þorkr, Þorgrímr’s brother. In an echo of the murder episode itself, Gísli enters another person’s farm at night. The owner of the farm, Refr, agrees to help Gísli on the condition that *hversu at með skal fara at veita þér, ok hlutask þú til einskis* (“I [Refr] alone decide how I go about matters, and you must not interfere,” *Gísli*, 27). From the very beginning, therefore, Gísli surrenders agency: he becomes the passive participant in another man’s plan, in direct contrast to the murder scene which is mostly

²⁴ Clark, 2012, 112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

orchestrated by Gísli himself. The first intimations of what Carol Clover denotes as *blauðr* are appearing – passivity and, by extension, femininity.

The scene proceeds quite comically. Refr removes the sheets from his bed and has Gísli lie down on it. He then replaces the sheets and his wife, Álfdrís, lies down on top of Gísli. When Þorkr and his men arrive, they search the farm, but Álfdrís shouts insults at them until they depart in shame, and Gísli is never found (*Gísla*, 27). While there is never any explicit mention of a sexual aspect within the scene, when read in conjunction with its earlier parallel in the murder episode, the sexual overtones of this seemingly inconsequential comedic interlude become apparent. The situation has flipped: Gísli is seeking refuge rather than revenge; rather than initiating the sexual situation he is placed into it by other characters; and his sexual role is “bottom,” that of the passive receiver rather than phallic aggressor. We might write this episode off as an unwelcome comic intrusion into a serious and often heroically-minded saga, but its obvious structural parallels with the scene of Þorgrím’s murder encourage a closer look.

At this point Gísli has totally transitioned to a *blauðr* position. He has in fact been effaced. He does not speak again in the chapter, and does not appear again until the very end to thank Refr for his help. Gísli has become a sort of palimpsest, a just-visible figure literally covered over by Álfdrís. One way we might interpret this result is to invoke the concept of cross-dressing. Previously Gísli has switched clothes with other characters and even imitated another person – we might say that he has briefly assumed their identity.²⁶ While not necessarily significant in themselves, in a way these episodes lead up to the encounter at Refr’s farm. The identity swapping actually occurs immediately beforehand. Gísli pretends to be the fool son of a man he has been staying with and outwits his pursuers who mistake him for the fool (*fífl*).

²⁶ Here (Chapter 26) and also in Chapter 20 Gísli exchanges clothes with a slave. In the latter instance it results in the slave’s death while Gísli is able to escape with only a wound to his calf. Incidentally, he is wounded in the same way in the former episode as well.

However they soon realize their mistake and succeed in wounding Gísli, suggesting that Gísli's assumption of another man's identity is not enough to avoid his pursuers. In the scene at Refr's farm, Gísli's identity has been subsumed by Álfdrís, and it is only this figurative transition to the position and existence of a woman that allows Gísli to escape detection; he is not merely cross-dressing, but crossing genders. The saga takes up this fluidity of gender association elsewhere, and as in this scene with Álfdrís, it is often Gísli's very fluidity which allows him to continue to live as an outlaw. I will discuss these moments more extensively later.

We may remain troubled by the surrounding circumstances. Gísli has not "come out" in any way; he has actually been covered, removed from view, and all this at the hands of others. Gísli has no part in his own apparent transition. The very removal of agency in this sexualized situation, however, is a part of the move from *hvatr* to *blauðr*, from hyper-masculinity to what we might call "hyper-effeminacy," with an understanding of the negative connotations that attach to such an existence in saga society. It is remarkable to note, then, that the chapter concludes with the statement that *Ok er þat ok sannsagt, at eigi hefir meiri atgǫrvimaðr verit en Gísli né fullhugi* ("it is truly said that there has never been a more accomplished and courageous man than Gísli," *Gísla*, 27). The saga emphasizes Gísli's courage, his manliness, immediately after he has been portrayed as effeminate and passive.²⁷ We can read this ironically, but the saga as a whole does not support this view. Instead the saga requires us to hold in concert Gísli's effeminacy and his manliness. It encourages us to see these not as mutually exclusive, but perhaps as necessary constituents of his existence. It is hyper-masculinity that gets Gísli outlawed, but in this scene it is hyper-effeminacy that saves his life. It is likewise significant that it is his position as an outlaw which renders this scene at all possible. Only by exiting society and

²⁷ The Old Norse words at issue are *atgǫrvimaðr*, "a man of great (physical) accomplishments," stressing Gísli's activeness (read: *hvatr*) and *fullhugi*, a "dauntless man" (from *hugr*, heart).

existing on its limits – an inherently *blauðr* position – is Gísli safely able to adopt a feminine existence, albeit for only the space of a few pages. Gísli’s marginalized outlaw existence opens horizons of possibility for ways of existing other than the masculine one of violent vengeance forced upon him by Icelandic society. Despite this opening of possibility, the scene at Refr’s farm lasts only the space of a chapter. The saga narrative seems to lack the representational means to carry this restructuring of Gísli’s identity further. However, there is a significant linguistic resource available in the sagas that, I will argue, allows *Gísla saga* to explore Gísli’s otherwise unavailable interiority, thereby fundamentally destabilizing a reading of him as the purely *hvatr* hero he often appears to be.

In many Icelandic sagas the prose narrative is interspersed with skaldic verse, which often corroborates historical claims made by the saga or functions as dialogue.²⁸ This highly wrought, traditional poetic form is notoriously abstruse to modern readers, and this obscurity is compounded in translation. Besides relying on a system of alliteration and assonance that is nearly impossible to replicate in modern English, the verses often make use of kennings, which are extremely compact metaphoric and allusive phrases. Kennings in skaldic verse frequently refer to elements of Norse mythology. For example, to understand the phrase *hringa Hildir* (“Hildir of the rings,” *Gísla*, 30), we must know that Hildir is a goddess and that rings are associated with women. Thus “Hildir of the rings” equals “woman.” Other kennings use images that are more comprehensible across a cultural and temporal gap, even if they appear initially outlandish, such as the phrase *menn...fjarðar elgs* (“sea-elk riders,” *Gísla*, 32) which means “seafarers” (a sea-elk equals a boat, its riders are sailors). The art of composing skaldic verse belonged to skilled poets or skalds (generally court poets), some of the most famous of whom are

²⁸ For information on Skaldic verse and an overview of the relevant scholarship see Frank, 2005; Gade, 2000.

also saga heroes. Both Grettir and Gísli, while not properly recognized historic skalds,²⁹ are nonetheless given a great many skaldic verses in their respective sagas. While the authenticity and dating of some of these poems are debated, they are productive sites for a gender-focused interpretation of *Gísla saga*. Focusing on those verses spoken by Gísli late in the narrative as his death approaches, I will consider what they have to say about Gísli's psychology, as well as their further implications for reading Gísli's unstable heroism – his flitting between *hvatr* and *blauðr*, as explored above – and the accompanying instability of gender identification in the saga.

We should note at the outset that skaldic verse is a revered art-form in the world of the sagas. A man might be noted as a great poet in a list of his praiseworthy qualities, which include strength, courage, and other virtues that the sagas typically consider manly. Gísli's frequent verses mark him out as a special character, someone associated with the greatness and bold deeds of the past, even though he is not a recognized skald. David Clark treats Gísli as in many ways attempting to live out a heroic ideal in a world that is fundamentally post-heroic. However, nothing like a sharp ideological break between the heroic past and the post-heroic present exists. The heroic ethos is still operative in the sagas, but it is often actively questioned, both evidentially through the accumulation of body counts in blood vengeance and ideologically through the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. Clark argues that we should read "Gísli the *character* as being made consciously to heroicize his situation through his verses," but that for the saga author, Gísli's heroism is cause for reproach.³⁰ The saga further complicates this reading (noted by Clark) by denying Gísli's heroism in the moments where it would be most appropriate,

²⁹ There is no record of Grettir or Gísli having actually been recognized as skalds in their own time, unlike e.g. Egill Skallagrímson, the titular hero of *Egils saga*. Many of the poems attributed to Egill in his saga are generally considered authentic by modern scholars.

³⁰ Clark, 2012, 101.

where actions occur which would warrant heroic responses according to a traditional understanding of the concept.

One of these moments occurs shortly after Vésteinn's sons kill Þorkell, the man they believe is responsible for their father's death. The Vésteinssons flee to the farm of Auðr, Gísli's wife, for help. However, Gísli, who is Þorkell's brother and thus would be responsible for avenging him, is also present in his hideout beneath the house (*Gísla*, 29):

Koma þeir til Auðar, ok er Gísli þar fyrir. Þeir koma þar um nótt ok drepa á dyrr. Auðr gengr til hurðar ok heilsar þeim ok spyrr tíðenda, en Gísli lá í rekkju sinni, ok var þar jarðhús undir niðri, ok beindi hon raust þegar, ef hann þurfti at varask.

By night they went to Auðr's farm – where Gísli was staying – and knocked on the door. Auðr went to the door to greet them and asked their business. Gísli lay in bed in the underground hideout, and she would have raised her voice if he had needed to be on his guard.

Gísli is made to be a felt presence in this scene, though he is markedly absent. It is only after the brothers have safely left that Auðr breaks the news to Gísli, who responds, “*Ekki má ek þat standask, at sjá bróðurbana mína ok vera ásamt við þá,*” – *ok hleypr upp ok vill bregða sverði ok kvað vísu* (“I could not bear to see my brother's killers or to be with them”, and he jumped up and went to draw his sword as he spoke this verse,” *Gísla*, 30) The verse follows (*Gísla*, 30):

*Hverr of veit, nema hvassan
Hjaldrís dragi Gísli,
Ótt mun fyrða fréttu
Færivón, ór spónum,
Alls sigrviðir segja
Snyrti hrings af þingi
Drýgjum vér til dauða
Dóð, Þórketil ráðinn.*

Who knows, but that
Gísli may draw a sharp battle-ice [sword]
(warriors will find out about the
Chance) from its sheath,
When victory-trees [warriors] tell
The sword-adorned [Gísli] from the assembly

(we will bring about fatal
deeds) [the news that] Þorkell is dead.³¹

As O’Donoghue notes, we have here a classic heroic skaldic verse, complete with Gísli referring to himself in the third-person, a number of kennings, and the insinuation of violence. As she also notes however, “Gísli has been given the chance to express his response, but not the opportunity to act on it,” he can appear heroic without actually having to do the bloody work that would follow for a truly heroic figure.³²

A similar instance occurs shortly thereafter when Eyjólfur, the man hunting Gísli for most of the saga, comes to Auður’s farm. Eyjólfur attempts to persuade Auður to tell him and his men where Gísli is hiding. He proposes to give her three hundred pieces of silver for the information. In addition, he offers to arrange a suitable marriage and reminds Auður that her support for Gísli in many ways ostracizes her from society as well. Auður admits that his methods are persuasive, and asks to see the silver he has promised, *Hann steypir nú fénu í kné henni, ok hefir hon hǫnd í, en hann telr ok tjár fyrir henni* (“So he poured the silver into her lap, and she held it there while he counted it and showed her its value,” *Gísla*, 31). Her foster daughter, Guðríður, runs to tell Gísli that his wife is betraying him, but Gísli tells her *Ger þú þér gott í hug, því at eigi mun mér þat at fjǫrlesti verða, at Auður blekki mik* (“think only good thoughts, for my death will never be the result of Auður’s treachery,” *Gísla*, 32). Then he speaks this verse (*Gísla*, 32):

*Segja menn, at manni
Mjóð-Hlín hafí sínum,
Fjarðar elgs, of folgit
Fleyvangs hugi ranga.
En grjótoluns grátna
Golfít vitum sitja;
Hykkat hæliblekku
Hrannlogs at því sanna.*

³¹ Translation from O’Donoghue, 2005, 173.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

The sea-elk riders [seafarers] claim
The mead-goddess [Auðr] has sold
Her man, with a mind
Deep and treacherous as the sea.
But I know the land
Of gold [woman] sits and weeps.
I do not think this true
Of the proud sea-flame's wearer [woman].

As it turns out, Gísli is correct. In one of the most remarked upon passages in the saga,³³ after having counted all the silver into a purse, Auðr swings it at Eyjólftr's face causing him to bleed from his nose and essentially sends him and his men away in shame.

While we might see Auðr's actions as heroic, Gísli is anything but. The scene is framed in such a way that his inaction might be deemed praiseworthy: he trusts his wife and he speaks a noble verse. But evidence from elsewhere in the saga and from the Eddic poetry that Clark sees as an important source for the scene offers a different interpretation. In an earlier sequence filled with tension and heavy with the force of fate, Vésteinn offers a model for heroic behavior. Þorkell has learned of his wife's adultery with Vésteinn and Gísli in turn knows that he knows. Upon hearing that Vésteinn will be returning to Iceland to visit Gísli for a feast at which Þorkell will also be present, Gísli sends word to his sworn brother not to come. In a classic example of situational irony, his messengers take one route and Vésteinn takes another. However, the paths lie within sight of each other and the messengers are able to warn Vésteinn after all, giving him Gísli's message and a coin – one of a pair Gísli has made, the other of which is in Vésteinn's possession. Vésteinn knows that the warning is legitimate but says, *ok mynda ek aprt hafa horfit, ef þit hefðið hitt mik fyrr, en nú falla vötn öll til Dýra fjarðar, ok mun ek þangat ríða, enda em ek þess fúss* ("I would have turned back if you had met me sooner, but now all waters flow towards Dyrafjord and that is where I will ride. Indeed, I am eager to do so," *Gisla*, 12). Vésteinn feels

³³ Clover, 1993 begins with this scene. It also appears in Meulengracht Sørensen, 1983; Barraclough, 2010.

that he must go to Gísli's farm, despite – or, we might say, because of – his knowledge that it will endanger his life. This echoes a moment from the Poetic Edda, a collection of poems largely about quasi-historical heroic figures and mythology that were composed before the sagas and function as a common narrative tradition. In the poem in question, *Atlakviða*, it is the warning from their sister Guðrún that forces the brothers Gunnarr and Högni toward danger.³⁴ There is, in both cases, an expectation that when given a warning about approaching danger, the only thing for a (heroic male) person to do is embrace it. Seen in this light, Gísli's calm acceptance of Guðríðr's warning is strangely unheroic. It is noble with respect to his marriage perhaps, but ultimately passive and even shameful, particularly for the heroic ideal that Gísli elsewhere seems to want to embody. His words are manly, but his inaction marks him as *blauðr* – effeminate.

The preceding analysis has shown that on two separate occasions Gísli gives the appearance of heroism, particularly through his use of skaldic verse, but that in both instances his actions – or rather his lack of action – display a distinctly unheroic quality. Does this amount to a proof that Gísli is not in fact heroic and that Clark and others have fundamentally misread the saga by forcing onto Gísli a heroic mode of existence that he does not, in fact, embody? The evidence is hardly strong enough for such a drastic reevaluation of the saga as a whole. What it does accomplish is a troubling of the vision of Gísli as heroic – and this is far more interesting. As Clark and O'Donoghue both point out with reference to the first scene, Gísli's failure to be heroic is just as prominent as his apparent attempt to live a heroic life. The saga author, whom Clark believes to be fundamentally indecisive about heroism's merits, also allows Gísli to be fundamentally indecisive. Behaving unheroically in many cases is apparently the best way to survive. Gísli seems to offer a performance of heroism. However, I will argue that this

³⁴ For an excellent edition of the poem (including normalized Old Norse, English translation, and commentary) see Dronke, 1969.

performance goes no further than surface-level actions; he does not ultimately identify with the heroic ideal. Attempting to analyze this lack of internal identification creates an issue when we consider that sagas are externally focalized. In traditional saga prose narration the reader is permitted nothing more than exterior performance.

Furthermore, Gísli's actions elsewhere do have a sense of Eddic heroism about them. Throughout the saga Gísli has a number of visions that are depicted as clairvoyant or prophetic. Foremost among them is a sequence, which runs through most of his outlawry, in which two women appear to him, one at a time, often switching back and forth. The presentation of these dreams in the saga is accomplished through skaldic verse, associating them with the other strictly poetic moments of the saga and likewise with the heroic concerns expressed in those verses. Gísli calls the visions he has his *draumkonur*, "dream-women." One, his good, or better dream-woman, is kind to Gísli and shows him various pleasant futures; the other, his bad, or worse dream-woman, forebodes his death in increasingly violent and gory imagery. These strange visions, which significantly alter the character of the saga as it moves to its inevitable conclusion, offer another site for productive inquiry into the status of Gísli's heroism, and one that proves crucial to reading Gísli's interiority.

Much scholarly study of the dream-women has focused on their ethical elements, arguing that the worse dream-woman represents the pagan heroic ethos while the better dream-woman represents the promise of Christianity.³⁵ For Clark, this means "that not following the Christian code, but continuing to pursue heroic aggression, will lead...to destructive human conflict that is detrimental to society."³⁶ In the context of his argument that Gísli attempts to lead a heroic life, this clearly marks the dream-women as a locus of the saga author's continued engagement with

³⁵ See Turville-Petre, 1972; Meulengracht Sørensen, 1983.

³⁶ Clark, 2012, 98.

the two oppositional ethics of Christianity and pagan heroism. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen offers a similar interpretation, in which the worse dream-woman's doom-and-gloom approach "may be taken to mean that [Gísli] will pay the penalty for what he has done," while the better dream-woman "urges him not to strike first, to be inoffensive to all and to help the blind and the crippled, and she promises him peace and joy – in the next world."³⁷ In this reading both dream-women appear to be Christian emissaries, but while one portends Gísli's death and potentially Hell, the other promises him heaven – for distinctly unheroic behavior. This bolsters Clark's claims about the saga author's views, but its relation to his argument for Gísli's self-conscious heroicizing of himself and his situation is more complex. In order to see why, we must push the questions about how the saga author deals with heroism and Christianity aside for the moment and focus on Gísli's own interpretation of his situation. For this effort we have recourse to Heather O'Donoghue's more formal analysis of the skaldic verses relating to Gísli's dream-women and their integration into the surrounding prose material.

In the chapter on *Gísla saga* in *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative*, O'Donoghue is concerned less with analyzing the ethical stance of either Gísli or the saga, and more with how the representation of this stance is accomplished within the confines of an outlaw saga. She questions what it might have been about Gísli that resulted in his saga attracting such a concentration of verses when the person himself is nowhere named a poet. As in the majority of instances in which skaldic verse is spoken by a character, many of Gísli's verses portray his emotions. For the most part, the sagas are rather reticent about their subjects' emotional lives, preferring to show the action with claims to objectivity rather than putting the reader inside a certain character's mind – as O'Donoghue stresses, they are externally focalized.³⁸ The

³⁷ Meulengracht Sørensen, 1983, 78.

³⁸ O'Donoghue, 2005, 138-141.

heightened emotion of poetic discourse thus provides a means for saga authors to get emotion into a story without breaking the objectivity of their narration. However, this seems to require that there be a reason for the verse to be said aloud – it must have an audience. For *Gísli saga*, this leads to the crucial question: “how can there be an audience for an outlaw’s verses?”³⁹

O’Donoghue argues that “the saga author experiments with verses to produce soliloquy,” that the verses in *Gísli saga* allow an otherwise impossible exploration of Gísli’s subjectivity, and that they, in fact, narratively present his subjectivity.⁴⁰

Through a thorough analysis of the verses that appear in the saga during the period of Gísli’s outlawry, O’Donoghue illuminates a trend in the narrative surrounding the use of verse, particularly with respect to the dream-women. Initially, Gísli relates his dreams in strict external focalization to Auðr but they effectively restate what the surrounding prose has already made clear. As the saga continues, however, the dreams themselves enter the narrative, so that the dream-women’s actions are spoken of “in exactly the same way as those of other, human, characters in the saga,” and Auðr is no longer explicitly mentioned to provide an audience for Gísli’s verses.⁴¹ As O’Donoghue says, “The saga author’s representation of Gísli’s subjectivity cannot be contained within the traditional constraints of saga prose, and the saga author uses verses to express what is otherwise unsayable.”⁴² We can thus read many of the verses and the immediate narrative prose in which they are embedded as insights into Gísli’s psychological life. Not only does he dream a lot, but his dreams and his verses about them allow the saga author to provide a level of insight into Gísli’s mental state that would otherwise be impossible. In what follows I will take up this reading of Gísli’s verses and dreams as representing his inner life in an

³⁹ O’Donoghue, 2005, 143.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 164.

⁴² Ibid., 178.

effort to explore his own attitude toward the outmoded heroism that some scholars see him as embodying.

If we interpret Gísli's dreams as his subconscious coming to the fore, it is interesting, first of all, to observe that his anxieties are presented in the form of women. Why should it be that Gísli's hopes and fears for his future take the shape of women? There is always the allusive possibility that they, and particularly the worse dream-woman, mimic *dísir* or valkyries, both of which are groups of mythological women associated with fate and the afterlife, and in the latter case closely tied to violence and heroism (although also tied to healing). This connection should not be cast aside as it has great resonance in the saga context, but it is still intriguing that nowhere are Gísli's fears about his death associated with male warriors until his final two prophetic dreams.⁴³ It is only when his fear is made concrete in the form of a premonition of his actual death that men appear; when it is still an abstract anxiety it appears as female. While this may seem largely speculative so far, there is a more textually grounded way of approaching the two dream-women as Gísli's subconscious.

This method will involve a closer look at Gísli's verses about his dreams. The dream-women feature in fourteen total verses (I use the numbering in the Íslenzk fornrit edition throughout; those in Regal's translation are one less in the section of interest): verses sixteen through nineteen (chapter 22), verses twenty through twenty-two (chapter 24), verses twenty-five through twenty-seven (chapter 30), and verses twenty-nine through thirty-one (chapter 33). Verses thirty-two through thirty-eight (shortly afterwards in chapter 33) relate a dream of his death, with verse thirty-eight referencing the better dream-woman – the final time either dream-woman appears. After this Gísli speaks two more verses: the first is about a dream in which two

⁴³ The two dreams that feature men appear in Chapter 33, verses 31-36 in Regal's translation, 32-37 in the Íslenzk fornrit edition.

birds fight (chapter 34), and immediately after he awakes from this dream his hunter Eyjólfur arrives at Gísli's hideout; the second and final verse is in essence Gísli's last words, spoken mid-fight before he is finally slain (chapter 36), another properly heroic occasion for verse, much like the two scenes assessed earlier.

Let us begin the analysis with the first set of verses. In this group the better dream-woman is introduced. Gísli dreams he is in a hall with seven fires, surrounded by friends and kin. The better dream-woman explains that the fires represent the number of winters remaining in his life. She then advises him to avoid violence and evil (*Gísla*, 22):

*Vald eigi þú vigi,
Ves þú ótyrinn fyrri,
Morðs við mæti-Njörðu.
Mér heitið því, sleitu.
Baugskyndir, hjalp blindum,
Baldr, hyggt at því, skjaldar,
Illt kveða háð ok holtum,
Handlausum tý, granda.*

Do not be the first to kill,
Nor provoke into fight
The gods who delight in battle [warriors].
Give me your word on this.
Help the blind and handless,
Ring-giver, Balder of the shield [warrior].
Beware, evil resides in scorn
Shown to the lame and needy.

In the prose lead-up to these verses Gísli explicitly states that the better dream-woman *réð mér þat, meðan ek lifða, at láta leiðask forna sið* ("advised me to stop following the old faith for the rest of my life," *Gísla*, 22). We can read the better dream-woman, as many have, as representing the possibility of conversion for Gísli. However, she is still associated with much of the imagery of the pagan afterlife, including the hall with one's friends and kin drinking and talking (although this could potentially represent a medieval Icelandic interpretation of Heaven). However, this

vision of a perfect Christian woman is complicated in the better dream-woman's next appearance (*Gísla*, 30):

*Heim bauð með sér sínum
Saum-Hlökk gróum blakki,
Þá vas brúðr við beiði
Blíð, lofskreyti ríða;
Mágrundar, kvazk mundu,
Mank orð of þat skorðu,
Hneigi-Sól af heilu
Hornflæðar mik græða.*

She invited me to ride home with her,
The sewing-goddess, on her grey horse
–The woman was kind to the offerer –
The fashioner of praise [poet];
She said she would
– I recall her words about that –
The ale-goddess, to health
Restore me.⁴⁴

The next verse “extends the note of luxurious eroticism,”⁴⁵ and in the last verse in this group the woman promises that Gísli will have control over both her and a large supply of treasure. In this set of stanzas the better dream-woman seems less a Christian symbol, and more an ideal woman for a heroic man; Gísli will rule over this woman as any truly *hvatr*, manly, man must rule his wife. We might even read her as presenting the positive aspects of a valkyrie. In light of this verse we can begin to see a structure emerge wherein the woman who supposedly stands for one ethos appears to encourage Gísli to adopt the other. The better dream-woman, the anti-heroic leaning element in Gísli's mind, is paradoxically placing him in the role of heroic male and moving him to adopt the heroic life.

In contrast to the sensual future offered by the better dream-woman, the worse dream-woman forebodes nothing but blood and death for Gísli (*Gísla*, 24):

⁴⁴ O'Donoghue, 2005, 164.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

*Eigi verður, en orða
Oss lér of þat, borða
Gefn drepr fyr mér glaumi,
Gótt ór hverjum draumi.
Kemr, þegars ek skal blunda,
Kona við mik til funda,
Oss þvær unda flóði,
Qll í manna blóði.*

Not all my dreams bode well,
Yet each of them must I tell.
That woman in my dreams
Takes all my joy, it seems.
As I fall asleep, she appears,
And comes to me besmeared
Hideously in human blood,
And washes me in gory flood.

This is the woman who terrorizes Gísli's sleep, and she appears more and more as his death draws nearer. As the saga progresses, Gísli's dreams of her grow ever more horrific. In the final set of verses relating only to the dream-women, he speaks with graphic frankness of the nightmares he suffers (*Gísla*, 33):

*Hugðak þvá mér Þrúði
Þremja hlunns ór brunni
Óðins elda lauðri
Auðs mína skor rauða
Ok hyrkneyfa hreifa
Hönd væri því bandi
Báls í þenja éli
Blóðrauð vala slóðar.*

I dreamed a dream of her,
Goddess of riches [woman].
She washed my hair in foam of Odin's fires
[swords; their foam: blood]
Spilled from the well of swords [wound].
And it seemed to me that
The bearer of hand-flame [gold]
Was blood-red from the wound-blizzard
Of the fire-breaker of wrists [warrior].

And then continues in the next verse (*Gísla*, 33):

*Hugðak geymi-Göndul
Gunnelda mér falda
Of rakskorinn reikar
Rúf dreyrugri húfu,
Væri hendr á henni
Í hjörregni þvegnar.
Svá vakði mik Sága
Saums ór mínum draumi.*

I thought I felt how
the valkyrie's hands,
dripping with sword-rain [blood],
placed a bloody cap
upon my thickly grown
straight-cut locks of hair.
That is how the thread-goddess [woman]
Woke me from my dream.

The worse dream-woman is clearly associated with the pagan world-view – she is called a valkyrie and the verses about her are full of mythological kennings – but her effect on Gísli moves in the opposite direction. It is she who offers the strongest condemnation of the heroic ethos. If we read the dream-women as aspects of Gísli's subconscious, she represents his own aversion to the heroic life, the life of blood vengeance and battle. There is a sort of inversion operative in the dream-women: the one who represents the anti-heroic paradoxically encourages Gísli in the direction of a heroic and manly existence, while the one who represents the heroic clearly encourages Gísli to move away from a heroic existence and towards a peaceful, perhaps soft life. In a heroic world, then, Gísli apparently sees himself as *blauðr*, but equally he recognizes that his social role would necessitate adopting the position of masculine hero. Thus we have his sexually-charged murder of Þorgrímr and his exterior performance of heroism. In his actual society however, in which this heroism is outmoded, Gísli has the opportunity to become acceptably *blauðr*. After all, it is his most traditionally heroic acts that push him into outlawry. Yet this *blauðr* existence only becomes available in outlawry, as both the scene at Refr's farm

and Gísli's anxious dreams signal. If Gísli desires to return to society, it must be as a *hvatr*, masculine man, the social position that has been forced upon him. In what follows I will take up once more the issue of representation, and recontextualize the preceding analysis within the narrative prose and social bounds of the saga.

We have seen that through skaldic verse the saga is able to accomplish something approaching the dramatic soliloquy and, furthermore, that this enables a representation of Gísli's complex subjectivity. Gísli's dreams and verses express a psychological disjunction between his internal impulse towards a feminized existence, which he is momentarily able to realize through Álfdrís, and his socially required masculine performativity. I have argued that it is only through outlawry that Gísli's feminine impulse can be achieved, through his being placed beyond the bounds of the highly legalistic medieval Icelandic community. However, he is never truly beyond his community's reach and influence. He continues to live with Auðr, and rather than pass into obscurity in the uninhabitable reaches of the Icelandic interior, Gísli stays on the margins of his old community, his old masculine life. This is, in fact, necessary for his survival, because he requires social support to live in the unforgiving Icelandic environment. In Iceland, the formal legal definition of an outlaw as entirely cut off from society did not always hold.⁴⁶ Gísli himself is a prime example of this. We find this paralleled in the saga's literary form. The verses that provide a window into Gísli's mind and permit the explosion of his subjectivity across the gender boundaries of saga society cannot subsist outside the prose frame of the saga.

The unsustainability of outlaw existence, the saga's fluidity of representation (in terms of both gender and interiority), and Gísli's own fluid identity are brought together with destructive

⁴⁶ For reference, William Ian Miller notes that "an outlawry judgement isolated the vengeance target and eroded his support. Any assistance granted an outlaw was itself actionable" (Miller, 1990, 238). It is clear that this legal stipulation was not always enforced. (See also Miller, 1990, 234, and Chapter 7 generally for a discussion of outlawry.)

results in the lead-up to Gísli's death. In the seventeenth year of Gísli's outlawry, on the last day of summer, the season during which Eyjólfur, Þorkr, and other of Gísli's enemies hunted him, the saga takes a pensive turn. Gísli, his wife Auðr, and their servant woman Guðríðr are all unable to sleep (*Gísli*, 34):

Veðri var þann veg farit, at var á logn mikit; hélufall var ok mikit. Þá kvezk Gísli vilja fara frá húsum ok til fylgsnis síns suðr undir kleifarnar ok vita, ef hann mætti sofna. Nú fara þau öll, ok eru þær í kyrtlum, ok draga kyrtlarnir dögglóðina. Gísli hafði kefli ok reist á rúnar, ok falla niðr spæirnir.

It was the kind of weather where the air is very still, but there was also a heavy frost. Then Gísli said he wanted to leave the house and head south to his hideout under the ridge, to see if he could get some sleep there. All three of them went. The women were wearing tunics and they trailed along in the frozen dew. Gísli had a piece of wood, on which he scored runes, and as he did so the shavings fell to the ground.

That same day Eyjólfur goes to Auðr's farm with fourteen other men. There they see the trail that the women's tunics have left in the frost, and the trail of shavings from Gísli's rune-carving, *sem vísat væri til* ("as if it was pointing the way," *Gísli*, 34). It was common practice in Old Norse society to inscribe verses on sticks as Gísli has done. However, this materialization of language proves to be his undoing. So long as the verses in the saga remained merely spoken, they allowed Gísli to express his subjectivity and continue in his liminal existence. Made tangible though, they become part of the external world, absorbed into the prose narrative (we are never told what runes Gísli has carved) and into its inability to represent the fluidity of Gísli's identity. Furthermore, the carving is a symbolic act of phallic aggression. Gísli's writing is accomplished through the penetrative force of his inscription of runes into a soft and passive surface. This fundamentally *hvatr* action ultimately determines Gísli as masculine.

Eyjólfur and his men track Gísli down, and a fight ensues in which Gísli becomes once again a hyper-masculine heroic figure, killing a total of eight people. The saga's final comment

about Gísli is that, *Ok er þat alsagt, at engi hafi hér frægri vörn veitt verit af einum manni, svá at menn viti með sannendum* (“it is said everywhere that no man in this land had ever been known to put up a greater stand than Gísli,” *Gísli*, 36). Upon his death, Gísli is reabsorbed into the Icelandic community that had cast him out. His subjectivity has been utterly destroyed. All that is left is what people say about him, and what they say defines him as heroic, *hvatr*, masculine. The fluidity of identity that Gísli represents cannot be permitted to live, either in the diegetic world or in the textual world. In the former, he is simply killed. In the latter, despite everything the saga does by way of formal experimentation, the narrative ultimately reasserts both Gísli’s masculinity and the traditional saga style, subjecting Gísli to the posthumous declarations of the community.

Upside Down and Inside Out: Breakdowns and Inversions in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*

In the previous chapter I argued that *Gísla saga* offers its author a distinct opportunity to experiment with the restrictions of the saga form. Gísli's outlaw existence on the fringes of society allows for an expression of his interiority, which would otherwise be outside the bounds of literary representation in the sagas. Furthermore, this interiority reveals a striking fluidity of identity – a non-identity – premised upon the tension between masculine and feminine modes of existence as these are defined by saga society. Gísli as a character cannot thrive in his established social role. It is only as an outlaw that his unstable identity comes to the fore. However, this destabilized existence is unsustainable for the saga and for Gísli, and so his identity is eventually fixed, the traditional saga form reasserts itself, and *Gísla saga* ends with Gísli's death.

Because my argument so far has claimed that it is Gísli's status as an outlaw (and his saga's as an outlaw saga) that allows for the fluidity of gender and representation, it might be thought that other outlaws and outlaw sagas will show a similar affinity and proclivity for representational fluidity and the establishment of interiority within the traditionally externally focalized saga form. However, we must be careful not to carry the argument concerning *Gísla saga* too far. The other major outlaw saga is *Grettis saga*, a text which is different from *Gísla saga* in several important ways. Contemporary scholarship dates the composition of *Grettis saga* to the early fourteenth century, near the close of the saga period, while *Gísla saga* is commonly dated to the major saga-writing era of the mid-thirteenth century.⁴⁷ In addition, *Grettis saga* is roughly three times as long as *Gísla saga* and much more stylistically varied. It is not possible simply to extend the argument I have put forward about *Gísla saga* to *Grettis saga*. However, some key points of similarity remain. Foremost among these is that both texts are sagas about

⁴⁷ For a contemporary dating see Fox and Pálsson, 1974; Thorsson, 2005; Ólason, 2003; Foote, 1963. For a more detailed consideration of dating questions see also Mundal, 2013; Clover and Lindow, 2005.

outlaws. The same marginalization that I have discussed with regards to Gísli to a large extent holds for Grettir as well. Furthermore, Grettir, like Gísli, composes or is attributed an unusually high number of skaldic verses in the saga.⁴⁸ *Grettis saga*, perhaps even more so than *Gísli saga*, is interested in the representational potential of language. Keeping in mind both the similarities and differences between the two texts, I will now proceed to my analysis of *Grettis saga*.

The significance of language, and most importantly of different levels of discourse, is both a commonality between the outlaw sagas and a divergence. While Gísli's verses for the most part allow for the representation of his inner life, Grettir's verses do not seem to be designed to offer a window into his psychology. Instead, as Laurence De Looze argues, Grettir is placed in "a genealogy of poetic production"; his poetry becomes a defining characteristic, sometimes above and beyond his familial ties.⁴⁹ The world of the sagas is obsessively genealogical. The first few chapters of almost any saga are inundated with lists of ancestors and progeny. More formally, kinship is often the driving force behind how conflicts play out in the sagas. "People looked to kin and affines for aid in law and life," says William Ian Miller, "They avenged each other's wrongs; they invited each other to weddings and funerals; they gave each other gifts."⁵⁰ De Looze argues that through *Grettis saga*'s constant allusion to other famous skalds, Grettir is placed in a relationship to other poets not unlike that which most sagas construct between fathers and sons. Grettir is figuratively a kinsman of the heroic skalds who have come before him, just as his saga is placed into a relationship with *skaldasögur*, skald-sagas, and other skaldic-verse heavy sagas.

⁴⁸ See O'Donoghue, 2005; De Looze, 1991 for discussions of the presence of skaldic verse in these two sagas.

⁴⁹ De Looze, 1991, 87.

⁵⁰ Miller, 1990, 178. For a more thorough discussion of the extent and limits of kinship, see his chapter "The Bonds of Kinship" pp. 139-178.

O'Donoghue furthers this recognition of the importance of poetry to Grettir's identity by extending De Looze's genealogical argument to encompass what she identifies as Grettir's chosen social group. Not only does Grettir follow in the footsteps of his poetic great grandfather Qnundr tréfótr, *vikingr mikill*, ("a great viking," *Grettis*, 1) (my translation), whose tempestuous life constitutes a prologue to the main body of the saga, but "through his use of language, [Grettir] operates on a level quite distinct from that of the other characters in the narrative."⁵¹ Grettir is consistently depicted as more personable toward those people he meets who can match his linguistic skill, notably his use of the complex circumlocutions of skaldic verse. From his childhood to his death –and even his postmortem avenging – "Grettir only has relaxed, friendly relations with other poets."⁵²

Skaldic verse is not the only distinctive discourse utilized by Grettir. From his childhood he displays an unusual propensity to converse not only in verse, but also in proverbs and aphorisms. In fact, almost all of Grettir's direct speech is set apart from the straightforward prose of the rest of the saga. Grettir first appears in chapter 14 as *mjök ódæll..., fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum. Ekki hafði hann ástríki mikit af Ásmundi, fður sínum, en móðir hans unni honum mikit* ("self-willed, taciturn and harsh, sardonic and mischievous. His father was not very fond of him, but his mother loved him dearly," *Grettis*, 14). He is a mean little child, but we are inclined to read his troubles with a sympathetic eye, if only sometimes for Grettir's characteristically dark humor. Grettir's father, Ásmundr, tasks his son with a series of jobs around the farm, and in the first of these Grettir's voice is introduced. When told to watch the geese, Grettir responds that this is *lítit verk ok lqðrmannligt*, ("a shabby little job," *Grettis*, 14). This translation captures the dismissive nature of Grettir's response. However, we might

⁵¹ O'Donoghue, 2005, 190.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 183.

more literally translate *lǫðrmannligr*, following Zoëga, as “mean, despicable,” or as “unmanly” revealing Grettir’s opinion of this job as what Clover might call *blauðr*-work. However, it is only in the Old Norse we can see the remarkable quality of Grettir’s pithy phrase: it is alliterative. Grettir’s first words border on the poetic; from the very beginning his speech is more than simple speech (O’Donoghue labels them a “metrical aphorism”).⁵³

The next words attributed to Grettir are a short verse on how he killed the goslings he was supposed to look after, having found the work tiresome. Contained in them is the veiled threat to his father *enn þótt ellri finnisk,/ einn berk af sérhverri* (“and I can also vanquish/ fully-grown birds,” *Grettis*, 14). Following this he responds cheekily to his father’s admonition with a phrase identified by editors and translators as proverbial,⁵⁴ the first of many such expressions spoken by Grettir. When he is assigned another *lǫðrmannligr* job, Grettir responds, *Fleira veit sá, er fleira reynir* (“the more one tries, the more one knows,” *Grettis*, 14), a proverb structured around the repetition of *fleira*, “more.” This proverb’s use not only demonstrates his linguistic separation from those around him, but also reflects what De Looze argues is “Grettir’s whole approach to language which is one of an appropriation and reutilization of a preexisting discourse.”⁵⁵ De Looze argues that throughout the saga Grettir manipulates language in an attempt to control the world around him, such that linguistic power mimics, supports, and sometimes supplants physical power.

However there is more at work in the proverbs than a simple “reutilization of a preexisting discourse.” Grettir does not simply take Icelandic proverbs or verses and use them to

⁵³ O’Donoghue, 2005, 188. Alliteration is the primary poetic device in Old Norse poetry, as in other early Germanic poetry including Old English. Skaldic verse, for example, uses alliteration to tie lines together (though some recent scholarship rejects the formal analyses of previous scholars). For background on Old Norse poetry and relevant debates see Clover and Lindow, 2005, and the extensive bibliographies to the chapters on Eddic and Skaldic verse.

⁵⁴ For example see Thorsson, 2005, xxii-xxiii.

⁵⁵ De Looze, 1991, 92.

his own ends, but in some cases he actively subverts their original usage. O'Donoghue argues that "in quoting proverbs, Grettir does not only tap into time-honoured wisdom, but also reverses the father-son relationship, in that the passing of age-old proverbs might be thought to be more natural from father to son."⁵⁶ In the proverb quoted above, Grettir is teaching his father a lesson and at the same time threatening him: the more Ásmundr tries to make Grettir help out around the farm, the more he will come to realize that this can only result in destructive behavior. Grettir's words foreshadow the remainder of the chapter, which concludes with Ásmundr's apparent acquiescence to Grettir's authority. Grettir's subversive use of wisdom proverbs plays an important part in his antagonistic, antisocial effort to control his childhood situation. It is antisocial precisely because it relies on a subversion of established norms of socialization, norms such as participation in the physical work of the household and the passing of "time-honoured wisdom" down the genealogical line, both of which solidify their recipients' role in the ever-important kinship network. Through Grettir's successful rejection of his enforced role, he becomes "an outsider to the first social unit, the family," prefiguring his later exclusion from society as an outlaw.⁵⁷ His success is tinged with the premonition of future failure and death.

Furthermore, despite his apparently successful manipulation of the preexisting discourse of proverbs and aphorisms, Grettir's reliance on these established modes of discourse linguistically enacts his dependence on the very society that he attempts to reject or surpass at various points, and that ultimately rejects him. The proverbs are predetermined in terms of words and syntax; all Grettir does is choose the context in which he says them. Thus his reliance on them as a primary mode of expression is at once freeing and limiting. He can only say, strictly speaking, what has been said before. His words are predetermined, circumscribed, by his society;

⁵⁶ O'Donoghue, 2005, 189.

⁵⁷ De Looze, 1991, 93.

Grettir and his language are contained within socially-recognized formulations. His meaning, however, is not thus constrained. It bursts out of its prescribed patterns in order to create ironic reversals of the existing power-structures of Grettir's milieu, that of eleventh-century Iceland. Grettir's use of proverbs reflects his freedom to manipulate the meaning of his discourse in order to exert control over his life.

Even this is limited, though. As becomes clearer with Grettir's use of skaldic verse, the people around him do not always understand what Grettir is saying, and so his social setting once more closes around him – or closes him off. This is further reflected in those instances, which I will examine later, in which language functions not as a tool with which Grettir can manipulate his society and his surroundings, but as a controlling force which limits his existence. Skaldic verse, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is a highly wrought poetic form. It is often Grettir's primary mode of discourse, and it is labeled by the saga as verse (unlike the verses of Grettir's great-grandfather, Qnundr, which are presented simply as dialogue).⁵⁸ Grettir chooses a largely incomprehensible mode of discourse to interact with people; it seems inevitable that this will lead to misunderstanding. A frequently cited example of Grettir's poetic skill occurs in chapter 17.⁵⁹ While sailing to Norway, the ship Grettir has booked passage on is inundated with water, but Grettir refuses to help bail and instead composes insulting verses about the crew. The captain challenges Grettir to devise a verse which will seem insulting at first, but which will show itself to be a poem praising the captain upon closer inspection. When the crewmen misinterpret Grettir's verse as predicted, they grow angry, but the captain's stoicism serves as their model and soon they ignore Grettir. Shortly afterwards, at the captain's urging, Grettir begins to bail out the

⁵⁸ Grettir's verses are almost always introduced by phrases like *kvað vísu*, "spoke a verse," whereas Qnundr's are as frequently introduced into the prose narrative without the specifying *vísu*.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, De Looze, 1991; Hume, 1974; O'Donoghue, 2005.

ship and shows himself to be remarkably strong and useful. However, this only occurs after the captain – a kind of translator between Grettir and the crew – holds off the crew’s antagonism.

This is just one example of how Grettir’s verses show his hostility towards, and cause him to be viewed with hostility by, the general population. It is only a select few (those who are also poets), in this case the captain, who are able to gain his good will. Grettir’s language pushes him out of society, yet skaldic verse, even more so than the proverb, is a constraining and integrally social form. Grettir’s words must fit into patterns of speech that have been established and accepted by the very society from which his verses dissociate him. Once again we see that Grettir’s discourse, although distinct from most of the rest of the saga, is contained within the society from which his distinctive language purportedly shows him to be separate. Grettir the poet is as restricted as Grettir the aphorist. Nonetheless it is this same restriction which produces the potential for disruption. We might say that Grettir’s ability to manipulate the signification of his verses expresses his own identity, his own meaning. However, it might be more appropriate to say that this is one way in which he can dissolve his identity. I will argue later that Grettir is in fact seriously disjointed, and non-identical with himself.

The impact of language in *Grettis saga* for which I have been arguing can be restated thus: Grettir’s use of existing modes of discourse in order to separate himself from society reveal his dependence on that society and its circumscription of his existence. His moments of success and freedom are also his moments of isolation. This pattern repeats in various forms throughout the saga, and, as will be seen, often reveals its opposite to be just as potent – not only must Grettir rely on the society that he so often rejects and that so often rejects him, but that same society often comes to rely in turn upon Grettir himself. With this in mind I will now turn to the

work of Sara Ahmed in order to begin to provide a model for the spatial relationships of internality and externality, insider and outsider, which I have identified in Grettir's discourse.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed develops a spatial understanding of sexuality, where "straightness" (heterosexuality) is taken metaphorically to indicate a "straight line" from which queer subjects deviate. Her emphasis on marginalization, both physical and ideological, as well as her model's awareness of the pervasive phenomenological impact of that marginalization, seems well-suited to an analysis of the Icelandic outlaw sagas. My argument will initially track Ahmed's model on an abstract level, exploring spatiality and marginalization in a broader sense than Ahmed's sexuality-focused approach. Through this exploration, the importance of Grettir's spatial isolation for several aspects of his existence will become apparent. I will then bring in sexuality more explicitly, once I have further established and adjusted the patterns expressed above in terms of language. Building on work done by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough and others, I will begin to show how Ahmed's theorizing can be brought into contact with certain aspects of *Grettis saga*.

The fundamental idea motivating Ahmed's work is that "if orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces as well as "who" or "what" we inhabit spaces with."⁶⁰ We can read how people exist in a space as fundamentally tied up with their sexuality – with how they manifest their sexuality as well as with how that sexuality is viewed by the "social space" in which they live. For Ahmed, we might make this reading queer "by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are "less proximate" or even those that deviate or are deviant."⁶¹ Reading outlaws as deviant immediately draws them into the orbit of this "redirection," nor is this deviant reading out of

⁶⁰ Ahmed, 2006, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

place. However, Grettir and Gísli are not explicitly outlawed for deviant sexual conduct. So while we can, in one sense, immediately place Gísli and Grettir into this queer framework, in another sense the move seems inapposite. We need to shift the direction in which we read Ahmed's theory in order to change our perspective on her ideas. I propose to abstract away from sexuality, for the moment, and look at deviance in terms of outsidersness. This initial breadth will end up bringing sexuality into the purview of the argument once more.

The most obvious overlap between a broadly construed Ahmed-style deviance and the Icelandic outlaw sagas is their shared spatial dynamic, their foregrounding of bodies' existence in both physical and social spaces. In her introduction, Ahmed talks about orientation as an extension of the body in order to make an unfamiliar space known or familiar. However, "some spaces extend certain bodies," she says, "and simply do not leave room for others."⁶² What happens to these bodies for which there is no room? To retain the spatial language, we might say that they are marginalized, or simply excluded. This is exactly what occurs for the Icelandic outlaw. The outlaw is forcibly removed from the legal sphere or space, and thus from the coextensive social realm. In addition to this social removal, outlawry entails a physical removal from society; the outlaw cannot be seen to live among the farms of his district, at the risk of severe punishment to himself and his kin. Although this wholesale exclusion is not strictly maintained in the sagas, the outlaw is still socially marginalized and geographically isolated; Grettir in particular experiences ever-greater isolation as his period of outlawry lengthens. Thus we might ask how the outlaws' exile from what Ahmed might call "the straight line" or a sort of "straight space" opens up the possibility of aslant, diagonal, or queer existences – existences denied or rejected by medieval Icelandic society. Ahmed suggests that such an opening out of

⁶² Ahmed, 2006, 11.

possibility is a positive way of reading the diagonal (as opposed to straight) line of queer existence. We might expect outlawry to follow the same trajectory.

However, this simple outside/inside spatial reading of outlawry is immediately troubled by the actuality of outlaw existence in the sagas, particularly *Grettis saga*. Rather than presenting an opening of possibilities, outlawry is fundamentally restrictive, especially with reference to the physical manifestation of the spatial metaphors upon which Ahmed and the preliminary conception I described above rely. Whereas in medieval continental societies, or even medieval England, we might expect to see outlaws exiled from a city or a civilized space to the vast and unknown wilderness beyond the boundary of civilization, practically the reverse is true in saga Iceland. The only habitable land in Iceland for the most part lies on the fjords and other lowland coastal regions. When the island was settled, it was these geographic margins which became the locus of human activity. To be exiled, in contradistinction to the word's literal meaning, meant to be restricted to the island's interior; we might say that the Icelandic outlaw, rather than an exile, was in fact an "insile." Where a traditional marginalization might envision society as a circle and marginalized populations as excluded from that circle, the geographic reality of Iceland results in the "marginalized" actually being placed within the circle, while the social becomes the circle itself, forcibly containing the marginalized – the outlaw.

This is further troubled by the fact that in *Grettis saga* several episodes occur on or around small coastal islands, pockets of asociality that are not fully encompassed by the social world (*Grettis*, 68-82). These offer a version of the traditional outside/inside picture insofar as they are the geographic margins, but they remain small, isolated, and most importantly, islands – restricted localities that are almost microcosms of Iceland itself. The spatial model we are left with enacts a double inversion: the outside is forced inside, but can occasionally escape to these

liminal islands, contained but undefined points of possibility. What Ahmed envisions as the “straight line,” in the sagas inscribes a circle, and the deviations that this line/circle prohibits are drawn to the uninhabitable (social) non-space that exists at the heart of Iceland, which is nevertheless a profoundly physical space. The outside is become inside, while the inside is now a narrow strip of sociality suspended between the uninhabitable interior and the new outer-bound of the coastal islands. And for Iceland, this whole system is located on a geographically isolated, largely barren island. The position of society, the “straight space,” is precarious indeed, while the outlaw can act as a destabilized and destabilizing figure whose socially-enforced impotence renders him paradoxically powerful.

In order to see more concretely where this double-inversion construction takes us, I turn to Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough’s article on landscape in *Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga*. Barraclough focuses her analysis on outlaw sagas because they provide a clear link between sagas more generally, and the function of landscape within saga narrative. Landscape figures prominently in the outlaw sagas. As she says, “outlaws by definition are forced to move beyond the known world, existing on the peripheries of the wilderness outside the human communities.”⁶³ This puts them in direct and intimate contact with the landscape. The spatial drive of my analysis complicates Barraclough’s reading by stressing the interiority of the periphery. Barraclough herself notes the apparent inversion of outlawry in Iceland (although not the double-inversion of the coastal islands), which she takes as emphasizing the fact that outlaws belong neither to the human, social sphere of *Miðgarðr*, “middle-dwelling,” the earth in Norse mythology and cosmology, nor to *Útgarðr*, “out-dwelling,” the world of the giants.⁶⁴ However, I would argue that her analysis, which stresses the undefined nature of the outlaw as existing

⁶³ Barraclough, 2010, 365.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 366.

somewhere between or across the normal human/monster dichotomy, misses out on the implication of placing the antisocial elements of a society at its center.⁶⁵ This geographic move has much deeper social consequences.

We can see how Barraclough's analysis of Grettir's movement from the human world to a quasi-monstrous existence by the saga's end plays out in one pivotal scene in which Grettir fights Glámr, a *draugr*, "revenant." During the fight, Grettir is torn forcibly through the doorway of the hall, destroying this symbol of society and casting Grettir into "the chaotic sphere beyond society."⁶⁶ While Barraclough focuses on the monstrous aspects of Grettir, she does not trace their implications, both for Grettir himself and for society. It is after this battle that Glámr curses Grettir (*Grettis*, 35):

Þú hefir frægr orðit hér til af verkum þínum, en heðan af munu falla til þín sekðir ok vígaferli, en flest öll verk þín snúask þér til ógæfu ok hamingjuleysis. Þú munt verða útlægr gorr ok hljóta jafnan úti at búa einn samt. Þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þessi augu sé þér jafnan fyrir sjónum, sem ek ber eptir, ok mun þér þá erfitt þykkja einum at vera, ok þat mun þér til dauða draga.

Up until now your deeds have brought you fame, but from now on outlawry and slaughter will come your way, and most of your acts will bring you ill luck and misfortune. You will be made an outlaw and forced to live by yourself. I also lay this curse on you: you will always see before you these eyes of mine, and they will make your solitude unbearable, and this shall drag you to your death.⁶⁷

Henceforth, according to Barraclough, Grettir's transition to the world of monsters becomes irreversible.

Barraclough is not the only scholar to note the borderline monstrosity of Grettir's existence; the saga has proved fruitful territory for so-called Monster Theory.⁶⁸ For example,

⁶⁵ Note also the paradoxical irony that the place associated with the outer-realm of the giants (*Útgardr*) is the physical middle of the middle-realm of human habitation (*Miðgardr*).

⁶⁶ Barraclough, 2010, 373.

⁶⁷ This is a noteworthy moment of language's ability to manipulate and control Grettir just as much as he often manipulates language.

⁶⁸ For an introduction to Monster Theory, see Cohen, 1996.

William Sayers characterizes the medieval Icelandic outlaw as “extralegal man condemned to be ‘one who lies out’ (*útlagr*) beyond the community, its epistemic and legal frameworks, and human fellowship and language.”⁶⁹ According to his argument, the outlaw, and Grettir in particular, exhibit the monstrous side of society. Janice Hawes takes this argument further by emphasizing the similarity between Grettir and his monster contemporaries, saying that “Grettir is, in fact, a *hero* who has close links to the *monsters* he fights” (her emphasis),⁷⁰ a more literal reading of monstrosity than Sayers’s. These three scholars (Barraclough, Sayers, and Hawes) provide an overview of a common approach to *Grettis saga*, namely reading Grettir as a monster, or as a transgression of the human-monster divide.

An excellent example from late in the saga is the episode of the Sandhaugar trolls. While Grettir is wandering the interior of Iceland as an outlaw, he disguises himself at Sandhaugar in order to confront the monsters which were said to be attacking the place, *með því at honum var mjök lagit at koma af reimleikum eða aptrgöngum* (“since he was so good at putting an end to hauntings and ghosts,” *Grettis*, 64). It is the Christmas season, and the bridge to the nearest church is out. Grettir carries a woman and her daughter across the raging, icy river. Upon arriving at Mass the woman tells people that *Hon sagðisk eigi vita, hvárt hana hefði yfir flutt maðr eða troll* (“she did not know whether it was a man or a troll who had carried her across,” *Grettis*, 64). That same night Grettir defeats the first of two trolls he kills at Sandhaugar. This is not the first time in the saga that Grettir is compared to a troll. When he is sixteen, Grettir kills a man in a squabble over a food bag. In a verse about the killing he jokingly says that an ogress killed the man, allying himself with these monsters (*Grettis*, 16). Later in the saga while Grettir is in Norway, he heroically swims a long distance in order to fetch fire from a hall for his

⁶⁹ Sayers, 1996, 253.

⁷⁰ Hawes, 2008, 34.

freezing, shipwrecked companions. The saga says that when he entered the hall, covered in ice, *ok var hann furðu mikill tilsýndar, sem troll væri. Þeim, sem fyrir váru, brá mjök við þetta, ok hugðu, at óvætr myndi vera* (“he was a terrifying sight, as huge as a troll. The men inside were startled by his appearance, and thought he must be an evil monster,” *Grettis*, 38). Throughout the saga Grettir straddles the line between monster and man, between killing monsters, and becoming one himself.⁷¹

However, the Sandhaugar incident has yet another aspect. As John McKinnell points out, the river-crossing bears a striking similarity to the St. Christopher legend, in which St. Christopher, who is often construed as a strangely huge or monstrous man in medieval European versions, carries the Christ child across a river.⁷² In the same scene, Grettir is tied to both trolls and saints, figured as both pagan monster and Christian martyr. A careful reading of the saga allows us to reject an equation of the saint with the monster. In the Glámr episode, Glámr’s failure to attend Mass at *jól*, yule or Christmas, seems to be tied to his death and subsequent monstrous return, while at Sandhaugar, the narrative’s sympathies are with the woman enabled to attend Mass during *jól* by Grettir’s strength and courage. In fact, both Glámr and the Sandhaugar trolls increase in potency during the winter, when the hours of darkness are longest and the terror of the uncontrollable forces of nature most press in. At the same time, Grettir is therefore enabled to perform some of his most straightforwardly heroic actions – monster-killing – around Christmas. Grettir transgresses not only the boundary separating trolls and humans, but also that separating pagan and Christian. Hawes does recognize Grettir’s saintly aspects, and thus complicates the issue of monstrosity more than Sayers or Barraclough. However, by focusing merely on monstrosity, the monster-theory approach misses the further resonances, the structural

⁷¹ See Hawes, 2008, 36 for a brief but thorough overview of the times Grettir is compared to a troll.

⁷² McKinnell, 2005, 134. On this point see also Turville-Petre, 1977, c.f. Hawes, 2008.

echoes, of Grettir's liminality beyond the human-monster dichotomy. His outlawry becomes the epicenter of a radical breakdown of numerous oppositions.

It is the double-inversion model, I argue, that best captures both the danger to saga society of Grettir's "insile," and the inability of that society to defuse, destroy, contain, or expel this danger adequately. Furthermore, both Grettir's power and society's impotence are produced by his multidimensional fluidity. Although Icelandic law casts out Grettir, in the same movement it also instantiates his central role in society by placing him within rather than without, thereby allowing his volatile existence to gain a foothold within Iceland's seemingly immutable social structures. Grettir's fluidity between hero and monster illustrates how his very centrality and significance are inseparable from the existential threat he poses to society. In his linguistic existence, the instability of the controlled-controlling dynamic enables society to contain his antisocial impulses, but by that same containment the deconstructive potential of his poetic and aphoristic expressions is ensconced within seemingly rigid discourse – the threat once more comes from inside. In both of these instances the threat is unsuccessfully encircled: it repeatedly crosses the boundary into external, unfamiliar, incomprehensible, or monstrous modes of existence. These motions will be explored below in further thematic and structural elements.

Grettir is in many ways a danger to society. His violent temperament and antisocial behavior get him outlawed in the first movement of marginalization. However, as the saga shows, this exile is really an insile, as Grettir is outlawed to the interior, making him perhaps more dangerous because it frees him from the constraints of the law. Nor are the people of the saga unaware of the risk of his outlawry. Grettir is almost acquitted some years into his sentence as part of a balancing of offences hashed out at the Althing (a common occurrence in saga

Iceland), but his enemies refuse to allow him back into society.⁷³ The saga gives Snorri the Priest, a figure of immense influence and wisdom who shows up in a number of sagas,⁷⁴ the last word on the issue: *Snorri kvað þetta óvitrligt, at bekkjask til at hafa þann mann í sekðum, er svá miklu illu mætti orka, ok kvað þess margan gjalda mundu. Skilðu menn við þat ok riðu heim af þinginu* (“Snorri the Priest said that it was very foolish to strive to keep in outlawry someone who was capable of working so much damage, and that many would suffer for it. Then the Althing broke up and everyone rode home” *Grettis*, 51).

Once outlawed, Grettir enters into an existence similar to the monsters he kills elsewhere, stealing livestock and terrorizing communities with his almost irresistible ability to get what he wants. Yet this apparently self-defeating move by society to internalize the outlaw is necessary in other ways. Without Grettir, society would have no way to deal with the trolls at Sandhaugar or other supernatural threats. The Glámr episode mentioned above is another clear example. It begins with a two-chapter exposition in which Glámr, *Þessi maðr var mikill vexti ok undarligr í yfirbragði, gráeygr ok opineygr, úlfgrár á hárslit* (“a huge man and very strange looking, with glaring grey eyes and a head of wolf-grey hair” *Grettis*, 32), already half-monstrous, is employed by a farmer because no other man will herd his sheep due to the hauntings occurring at his farm. Soon enough Glámr is killed by a *meinvættir*, a dangerous supernatural being, though he seems to kill the creature as well. However, things only get worse. Glámr, now an *aptrgangr*, a zombie-like creature (literally “back-goer”), haunts the farm to great effect. Eventually it is only Grettir who will dare to go into the valley. Society must have some way of dealing with these supernatural threats, but they require someone like Grettir – a strong and temperamental old-style hero reminiscent of a past age – to defeat them. Therefore society endeavors to contain Grettir; it

⁷³ See Miller, 1990 for an extensive discussion of feud settlement, arbitration, and reciprocity in medieval Iceland.

⁷⁴ Snorri the Priest, elsewhere called Snorri the Goði, is one of the major characters in *Eyrbyggja saga* and features prominently in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. He is also mentioned in *Gísla saga*.

offers him a circumscribed existence. However, it cannot wholly constrain him. The livability of even the asocial interior becomes fraught, and Grettir eventually has nowhere to go except Drangey, a coastal island. At this point he is no longer the internal, outlawed watchdog of society, but an unpredictable, external danger.

Grettir's final move to Drangey at last realizes what has been apparent throughout the saga: he does not fit in the Iceland he was born into. Again, Ahmed provides an illuminating way of looking at Grettir's situation. According to Ahmed, "being "in line" allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape."⁷⁵ Fitting the mold of society means that one can easily exist within that society, as its shape mimics one's own. To take a simple, modern American example, a boy who likes football will exist more easily than one who enjoys ballet because the social space available for boys expects them to be football fans, not dancers. There is overwhelming evidence that Grettir does not fit the social space that was intended for his body; he does not fit in society. Both his linguistic otherness and his affinity for various modes of supernatural existence, saintly and monstrous, indicate his distinctiveness in saga society. The fact that he is outlawed as a result of his failure to ascribe to a certain medieval Icelandic, agrarian way of living shows that his distinctiveness – his otherness – is rejected by society – that he fails to fit his social environment.

However, Grettir's failure to fit extends beyond the spatial forms analyzed above. He also exhibits a failure in the temporal dimension. Kathryn Hume has adeptly argued that the saga displays Grettir as a man in the wrong time – a hero in a post-heroic world.⁷⁶ Interestingly, Hume's argument can be construed as a conflation of the temporal and the spatial: Grettir is outside his time, he is temporally isolated. We can move from this conception of isolation to

⁷⁵ Ahmed, 2006, 15.

⁷⁶ Hume, 1974.

another important way, left unexplored by Hume, in which Grettir fails to fit temporally. This alternative tracks Ahmed's emphasis on sexuality and gender relations and picks up these threads of the argument which I earlier put to the side. It begins with his childhood animosity towards his father, analyzed earlier in terms of Grettir's marked discourse, which develops later into an extinction of the family line.

Ahmed's claim that in society, "for a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good" fits well with the medieval Icelandic emphasis on kin structures.⁷⁷ In a later chapter Ahmed equates this social good with a woman's reproduction of the father figure through childbearing, such that not bearing children represents a social failure. Grettir offers a male version of this failure. His early rejection of his father's directions is finalized by his outlawry; his utter exclusion from the social world brings with it an incapacity to provide legitimate heirs. As Ahmed goes on to say, "a queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return."⁷⁸ We can read the social threat which Grettir poses as one form of deviant sexuality, insofar as a failure to continue the family line, to increase the kin network, is a significant deviation from prescribed sexuality in the sagas. Grettir exits the "straight space" of the kin network for the queer, liminal one of isolated outlawry.⁷⁹

Grettir's sexuality figures explicitly in two episodes in the saga. However, to begin it will be helpful to recount more explicitly Grettir's initial failure. After not getting along with his father for some time, Grettir is served lesser outlawry for his violent, antisocial behavior, a sentence of three years, and travels to Norway. Before he departs, he receives no more than some food and cloth from his father, who says *Eigi hefir þú mér hlýðinn verit; veit ek ok eigi, hvat þú*

⁷⁷ Ahmed, 2006, 21.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Even while outlawed Grettir avenges his brother, Atli. Later, his brother Illugi, although not an outlaw, joins Grettir in his isolation. Finally, Grettir's death is avenged by his half-brother Þorsteinn. This continued connectivity to kin presents an interesting contrast to the familial/social isolation I am arguing.

munir þat með vápnum vinna, er þarft er; mun ek ok þau eigi til láta (“you have not been very obedient to me, and I don’t know that you are likely to do anything useful with a weapon, so I shall not provide one” *Grettis*, 17). De Looze remarks that Grettir accomplishes “with language what the bravest men do with swords,”⁸⁰ figuring his linguistic power as a stand-in for the martial masculinity denied him by his father (and later by his host in Norway). Instead it is Grettir’s mother who gives him a sword, recalling her earlier love for him and prefiguring Grettir’s later affinity for women over male social groups. While De Looze focuses on the poetic lineage established by Grettir’s linguistic power over and against his abortive paternal relationship, he neglects the influence of Grettir’s more successful relationships with women.

Women are Grettir’s companions or beneficiaries just as frequently as male poets, and only on the two explicit occasions mentioned above is there any indication of a sexual relationship. Though Grettir is denied the phallic symbol of a sword by his father, he receives it from his mother, and, despite later procuring a sword from a man whom he helps, is never fully integrated into the male social order, preferring instead the company of women. As O’Donoghue says, “as an outlaw, on the margins of society, Grettir is most likely to come into contact with women, whose husbands may be away,”⁸¹ naturalizing Grettir’s frequent associations with women. However, the significance of his keeping such company is not exhausted by an appeal to the reality of an outlaw’s life. It is this very reality that makes such associations so interesting. For while Grettir is outlawed for apparently hyper-masculine action (killing without reason, or through not knowing his own strength), his outlawry brings him into closer association with the *blauðr* elements of Icelandic society. Outlawry may be seen as an attempt to remove the social threat of the outlaw by delegitimizing him through relegation to a negatively valued, feminized

⁸⁰ De Looze, 1991, 95.

⁸¹ O’Donoghue, 2005, 207.

existence (recall here Clover's arguments on *hvatr/blauðr*). Indeed, if we invoke once more Clover's one-sex, one-gender model of saga Iceland, we see that making the outlaw feminine corresponds to pushing the outlaw to the interior. In a one-sex model, the female is seen as an inversion of the male, an internalization of the male genitalia. Outlawry in the sagas geographically enacts this internalization by forcing the outlaw into the interior of Iceland and simultaneously rendering the outlaw *blauðr*, powerless and feminine.

However, Grettir does not fall easily into an emasculated outlawry. In the first of the two scenes that explicitly invoke Grettir's sexuality (though occurring second in the saga), he has collapsed on a bench in a farmer's house, exhausted after having swum there from Drangey. The farmer's daughter and a maidservant enter to see Grettir lying there. His cover, we are told, has rolled off. The maidservant comments that *En þat þykki mér fádæmi, hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri, ok ferr þetta eigi eptir gildleika hans qðrum* ("he is certainly big enough in the chest, but it seems to me very odd how small he is farther down. That part isn't up to the rest of him," *Grettis*, 75). Grettir then wakes up, speaks two verses to the maidservant in response to this slight against his manliness, and seems to force himself on her: *Griðka æpði hástofum, en svá skilðu þau, at hon frýði eigi á Gretti, um þat er lauk* ("The maid kept crying out, but in the end, before they parted, she had stopped taunting him," *Grettis*, 75). The whole episode comes off as rather comedic in the saga, despite a modern discomfort with the events.

The two verses Grettir speaks in this episode are particularly rich. Fox and Pálsson's translation renders them readable, though it glosses many of the details and complexities of the kennings present in the original language (*Grettis*, 75):⁸²

⁸² I give here Carl Phelpstead's translation, which is closer to the Old Norse, though he still resolves some of the kennings and clarifies the metonymy: "Fickle is the conduct of this foolish girl; few wish-trees of spear-storms [= warriors] can see the sword in another's hair properly; I bet their balls are not bigger than mine, even if those trees of the storm of halberds [= warriors] have a bigger penis"; "The woman says I am short-sworded, that seam-prop [=

*Váskeytt es far flósu;
Fár kann sverð í hári
Æskiruðr fyr oðrum
Orveðrs séa gǫrva;
Veðjak hins, at hreðjar
Hafit þeir en vér meiri,
Þótt eldraugar eigi
Atgeira sin meiri.*

...
*Sverðlitinn kvað sæta,
Saumskorða, mik orðinn;
Hrist hefir hreðja kvista
Hælin satt at mæla;
Allengi má ungum,
Eyleggjar bíð Freyja,
Lágr í læra skógi,
Lotu, faxi mér vaxa.*

The hussy is taking a risk.
It's seldom one can get
So close a look
At a hair-girt sword.
I bet that other men's testicles
Won't be bigger than mine,
Though their penises may be
Larger than this one.

...
The wench has complained
That my penis is small,
And the boastful slut
May well be right.
But a small one can grow,
And I'm still a young man,
So wait until I get
Into action my, lass.

Carl Phelpstead notes that “the sword metaphor is particularly fitting as expressing the sadistic element in (Grettir’s) male sexuality and the use of the penis as an instrument of

woman]; the boasting Hrist of the twigs of the testicles [=goddess of penises = woman] speaks the truth; but for a long time a small horse [literally “mane”] can grow in the forest of my young thighs: prepare for trouble, Freyja of the leg of the island [=goddess of the stone = woman]!” (Phelpstead, 2007, 429).

phallic aggression.”⁸³ Clearly, this scene has cast Grettir in a traditional *hvatr* role. This is generally in keeping with how he is portrayed elsewhere in the saga. Grettir tends toward violent action, behavior that shows him to be cast in the same mold as older heroic figures. Indeed Kathryn Hume’s whole argument is that Grettir is a hero living out his life in a post-heroic world where what would have been glorified causes his ostracism and death.⁸⁴

As I noted above however, Grettir is arguably *blauðr*-by-association.⁸⁵ One of his more straightforwardly heroic acts, the outwitting and outfighting of the berserkers in chapter 19, occurs after Grettir is left at home with his host’s wife and sick daughter and their servants. Furthermore, in the episode with the servant girl, as Phelpstead notes, “although the penis of Grettir Ásmundarson is central to the episode, in a sense it is never actually quite present,” but is spoken of only through euphemism and metaphor (a fact that is not clear from translations, including Phelpstead’s own).⁸⁶ While Grettir exhibits phallic aggression, his penis itself is withheld from the text in a curious kind of castration. Furthermore, in his own verses Grettir twice uses kennings for woman that equate to “goddess of penises,”⁸⁷ placing himself in the controlled, passive sexual position. His aggressive masculinity is tied up with his apparent effeminacy, much as his monstrosity is linked to saintliness, and his linguistic control to being controlled by language. It is almost impossible to slot Grettir neatly into any stable binary.

From what has been analyzed so far it is not fully apparent that Grettir’s sexuality tracks the deviance that I claimed it exhibits. The second of the two scenes that put this

⁸³ Phelpstead, 2007, 429-430.

⁸⁴ Hume, 1974, 469-486.

⁸⁵ It is, however, interesting to note that some of the women with whom Grettir interacts, particularly Þorbjörg, exhibit *hvatr* characteristics.

⁸⁶ Phelpstead, 2007, 430.

⁸⁷ See footnote 82 above for Phelpstead’s translations and resolutions of these kennings.

sexuality up front will hopefully make this clear. In fact, the episode as a whole has already been discussed: it occurs while Grettir is at Sandhaugar, where he is compared to both a troll and a saint. The Sandhaugar episode ends with a brief note about Steinvorr, the woman of the household, and her son Skeggi. Skeggi, we are told, *var hann sterkastr norðr þar ok var þá eignaðr Gretti* (“was the strongest man there in the North, and so it was concluded that he was Grettir’s son” *Grettis*, 67).⁸⁸ I argued above that Grettir’s failure to produce an heir marked him as sexually deviant, insofar as he thus failed to continue his father’s line. This aside, which attributes Skeggi’s parentage to Grettir in the most noncommittal of impersonal constructs, is hardly a definitive rejection of my claim. However, it does show Grettir to be virulent and possibly *hvatr*, much as he initially appears to be in the episode with the maidservant. The saga goes on to state that *Hugðu menn, at hann myndi afbragðsmaðr verða, en hann andaðisk sjautján vetra, ok er engi saga af honum* (“everyone expected [Skeggi] to become an outstanding man, but he died when he was seventeen, and there is no saga about him” *Grettis*, 67). Skeggi is mentioned almost exclusively to recount his absence, the lack of anything significant about him.

The saga points out specifically that there is no saga about Skeggi. Of course, there is one about Grettir, which is full of contradictions, instability, and indefiniteness. The one area where Grettir is ultimately rigid is in his failure to produce an ongoing kin network. He has no sons, and the one brother who outlives him is soon killed by Grettir’s killers (Grettir’s older brother is killed earlier in the saga). Grettir’s half-brother Þorsteinn performs the traditional saga act of revenge, but in far-off Constantinople, in the quasi-romantic *Spésarþáttur* that comprises the final portion of the saga. He later dies alone after devoting his life to God (*Grettis*, 92). What little the saga gives in terms of a future is

⁸⁸ The Old Norse carries the sense that he “belonged” to Grettir.

exhausted by this stylistically distinct episode. The lesson seems to be that no sagas come after Grettir. Occurring late in the saga period as it does, perhaps this is true. Perhaps the breakdown signaled by Grettir's trespassing of boundaries and his revealingly unsustainable existence as an "insile" signal more than his own death – perhaps they portend the death of saga society's constructed rigidity, unable to withstand the destructive and deconstructive inertia of Grettir's remarkable fluidity.

Conclusion

The preceding two chapters have looked in turn at two prominent Icelandic outlaw sagas, *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. I have endeavored throughout to raise questions regarding the status of outlaws as marginal figures in saga society, and to assess how their existence on the fringes of society influenced how they lived and were portrayed. I began this project with a sense of the outlaws' outsider status, their physical and social isolation, and how this might be read as queer – how their legal marginality might track other forms of marginalization and draw them along in its wake, producing the Icelandic outlaw as a queer figure, a figure on the margins, rejected and rendered illegible. A significant issue with this sort of reading is the centrality of the outlaws Gísli and Grettir to their own sagas and, indeed, the apparent centrality of their sagas to the traditional saga canon. Here are two figures who have been rejected by their society, yet whose very rejection becomes embedded in that society and eventually written down centuries afterward. Whatever conclusions I have reached about Gísli and Grettir as figures of deviance and destabilization, and the possibilities of existence beyond the social realm, must be set against or resolved with the fact of these outlaws' apparent social significance as revealed by the existence of the very sagas that, I have argued, produce or reveal the possibilities of other existences in the figure of the outlaw.

I mentioned earlier the difference in the dates of *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. *Gísla saga* occurs much earlier in the saga period and it is, for the most part, a classical saga in form and style. The points at which it most ranges away from classical saga form are in the attempts at soliloquy through verse. I argued that these verses also reveal that Gísli's subjectivity is fundamentally conflicted. The instability of Gísli's identity, of his self-image and self-identification, both produces and is produced by his outlawry. Gísli's unsuccessful *hvatr*

existence causes him to be outlawed, but it is in his outlawry that the tension between *hvatr* and *blauðr* rises to its tragic climax. During his almost absurdly heroic final stand, Gísli, in the company of two women, climbs onto a ridge to defend himself. When this position is overrun, he ascends to an even more precarious crag; before he dies, he is stabbed so that his guts spill out (*Gísla*, 34-36). Gísli's life ends with an ever-increasing instability until finally his body is cut open, physically enacting the dissolution of his identity that occurs psychologically in his verses. It is unavoidable that this dissolution is his death. As I have argued, Gísli's fluidity cannot exist in saga society. After his death, he is dragged down from his unstable crag and buried beneath a pile of stones in a final act of solidification and immobilization (*Gísla*, 36). His death is necessitated not only by the saga's claims to historicity, but also by its formal allegiance to the model of the classical saga. Despite its experimentation with verses, *Gísla saga* is ultimately conservative. The saga itself enacts the same immobilization that occurs at Gísli's death. It puts Gísli into a final, fixed form. Yet even this is a paradoxical move, for it also ensconces at its heart the threat of Gísli's fluidity, a threat which, we might argue, is inherent both to saga society and to the saga form itself.

The scope and impact of this threat of fluidity, of the breakdown of identity categories, is most fully realized in *Grettis saga*. This late saga presents a more systematically radical consideration of the construction of the saga form and saga society. As I have argued, *Grettir* represents the inherent, internal danger and unsustainability of the dichotomies on which saga society is founded; dichotomies such as monster and hero, *hvatr* and *blauðr*, controlling and controlled, and even such simple divisions as internal and external. This last is fundamental for the organization of saga society, yet the Icelandic reality, as I hope the preceding analysis has shown, necessitates an immediate reversal such that what is external, exiled, and marginalized

becomes internal, “insiled,” and central. Even psychologically speaking, Gísli and Grettir seem to display interiority within the external focalization traditional to saga form, throwing their subjectivities outside themselves.

We might then see outlaw sagas in particular as yet another enactment of this external/internal breakdown. The exiled outlaw becomes the center of his saga; the socially marginalized becomes the focus of a significant cultural product and social form. The outlaw’s centrality is not a problem, so to speak. It is, in a sense, the locus of the network of issues surrounding marginality and the breakdown of identities and dichotomies that, I have argued, are present in the outlaw sagas. The existence of the outlaw sagas is the macrocosmic representation of the myriad microcosmic paradoxes that are present within those sagas: the outlaw’s interior existence, Grettir’s use of established discourse to represent his otherness and the monstrosity of his heroism, Gísli’s unsustainable instability and his concomitant feminization of masculinity and masculinization of femininity. All of these issues are ultimately irresolvable within the sagas except through the outlaw’s death.

On the macrocosmic scale, we should then expect the resolution of the paradox of the outlaw saga to be the saga’s death. This is exactly what *Grettis saga* offers: the death of the saga. Or rather, we might say, the explosion of the saga form, its height, its epitome, and the revelation of its inevitable demise. *Grettis saga* is at once *Íslendingasaga*, “saga of Icelanders,” *fornaldarsaga*, “saga of old-times” (generally involving heroes and monster), *skaldsaga*, and *riddarasaga*, “saga of knights” (based on continental romance): it tells the story of a historical Icelandic man, his family, and their lives and deaths, of a semi-mythic hero fighting supernatural beings, of the life of a productive poet, and even tells a version of the Tristan story in the concluding *Spésarþáttur*. The saga form reaches its consummation in *Grettis saga* – a dizzying

display of styles that is at once amazing and alarming. The saga is so disparate as to seem at times piecemeal. That it nonetheless holds up as an intricate, entertaining, and incredibly rich example of what a saga can be is no less remarkable than the life of the outlaw at its heart. After the romantic epilogue of the *Spésarþáttr*, the saga concludes with a brief chapter that is presented almost like a post-script or a justification, in the form of the testimony of an abiding Icelandic authority, Sturla Þórðarson: *Hefir Sturla lögmaðr svá sagt, at engi sekr maðr þykkir honum jafnmikill fyrir sér hafa verit sem Grettir inn sterki* (“Sturla the Lawman has said that in his opinion there was never an outlaw as distinguished as Grettir the Strong” *Grettis*, 93).

He gives three reasons for his opinion: *Þá fyrst, at honum þykkir hann vitrastr verit hafa, því at hann hefir verit lengst í sekð einnhverr manna ok varð aldri unninn, meðan hann var heill* (“First, that Grettir was the most intelligent of them all, as can be seen from the fact that he lived as an outlaw longer than anyone else and could never be overcome as long as he remained in good health,” *Grettis*, 93). This reason is rife with ironic potential. Grettir lived as an outlaw the longest and so is to be commended, but at the same time his very status as an outlaw shows that he was never quite commendable during his own lifetime. Furthermore, the qualifier *meðan hann var heill*, “as long as he remained in good health,” brings to mind the bathetic conclusion of Grettir’s life. He cuts his own leg, which grows infected as a result of sorcery, and ends his life lying down, immobilized by the weight of a man he has killed, and unable to fight to the last in an ironic reversal of the traditional heroic stand. *Þá aðra, at hann var sterkastr á landinu sinna jafnaldra ok meir lagðr til at koma af aptrgöngum ok reimleikum en aðrir menn* (“Second, that he was the strongest man in the land during his time, and more successful than any other in dealing with ghosts and monsters,” *Grettis*, 93). Immediately after the well-attested reference to Grettir’s lengthy outlawry, comes this invocation of his mythic-legendary status as a monster-

killer. Also notable is the appearance of another qualifier, *sinna jafnaldra*, “in his time,” which historicizes Grettir in the same moment as he is made mythic, and further undercuts the apparent grandiosity of Sturla’s claims – Grettir was only the strongest of his era. *Sú in þriðja, at hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði, sem einskis annars íslenzks manns* (“Third, that his death was avenged out in Byzantium, which has never happened for any other Icelander,” *Grettis*, 93). The final reason removes us for the last time from the Iceland of the sagas, attributing Grettir’s status not to his own actions, but to his avenging in far-off Byzantium where we have just seen the collapse of the saga form into that of continental romance – a geographical enactment of Grettir’s ultimate stretching of the boundaries of the saga world, a stretching which results in its rupture. *Grettis saga* is, in many ways, the consummate saga. Yet it is this very consummation, actualized in the figure of Grettir, which reveals the self-defeating nature of saga society and saga form. The dichotomies upon which the sagas rely cannot withstand the vital instability of their own contents, which break out in myriad ways to destabilize, subvert, and ultimately surpass their own construction.

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