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# **Monstrosity in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature**

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## Thesis Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Old English and Old Icelandic literary examples of monstrosity from a modern theoretical perspective. I examine the processes of monstrous change by which humans can become identified as monsters, focusing on the role played by social and religious pressures.

In the first chapter, I outline the aspects of monster theory and medieval thought relevant to the role of society in shaping identity, and the ways in which anti-societal behaviour is identified with monsters and with monstrous change. Chapter two deals more specifically with Old English and Old Icelandic social and religious beliefs as they relate to human and monstrous identity. I also consider the application of generic monster terms in Old English and Old Icelandic.

Chapters three to six offer readings of humans and monsters in Old English and Old Icelandic literary texts in cases where a transformation from human to monster occurs or is blocked. Chapter three focuses on Grendel and Heremod in *Beowulf* and the ways in which extreme forms of anti-societal behaviour are associated with monsters. In chapter four I discuss the influence of religious beliefs and secular behaviour in the context of the transformation of humans into the undead in the *Íslendingasögur*. In chapter five I consider outlaws and the extent to which criminality can result in monstrous change. I demonstrate that only in the most extreme instances is any question of an outlaw's humanity raised. Even then, the degree of sympathy or admiration evoked by such legendary outlaws as Grettir, Gísli and Hörðr means that though they are ambiguous in life, they may be redeemed in death.

The final chapter explores the threats to human identity represented by the wilderness, with specific references to *Guthlac A*, *Andreas* and *Bárðar saga* and the impact of Christianity on the identity of humans and monsters. I demonstrate that analysis of the social and religious issues in Old English and Old Icelandic literary sources permits

nuanced readings of monsters and monstrosity which in turn enriches understanding of the texts in their entirety.

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## Acknowledgements

I should like to claim that the merits of this work are the result purely of my own toils and proffer a list of scapegoats to be held accountable for its deficiencies, but there exist too many witnesses to the contrary for such a strategy to prove effective. Instead I am faced with the more conventional but all the more pleasurable task of offering some thanks to the many colleagues and friends who have helped this work come to fruition.

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## Introduction

In general, one of the striking things in these discussions of the boundaries of the natural is how difficult it was for medieval thinkers to be consistently systematic on the subject. Concepts of nature and its opposites and exceptions, whether the latter be construed as miracle, marvel, monster or magic, are not susceptible to quick and easy definition, indeed not only for the thinkers of the medieval period but also for us. The categories used for discussing or referring to the natural and the supernatural were fluid, potentially contradictory, and often indeed unexamined. (Bartlett, 2006, 26)

This study is concerned with the nature of the transgression of social and religious institutions that can lead to monstrous change, the process of human transformation into a monster. I use specific examples from the literature of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland in order to discuss the extent to which humans who break the conventions of society come to be identified as monsters as a result of their behaviour. As modern theoretical approaches have demonstrated, there is fluidity between categories and what distinctions are made between humans and monsters are fragile. It is possible for someone who breaks a stringently upheld social taboo to be labelled as a monster. Even if there is no actual belief in monsters as a separate species or race of beings, there is often a desire to view such offenders as inhuman in an effort to dissociate the most egregious examples of anti-societal behaviour from the humans performing them (Girard, 2005, 265-68)..

In medieval Europe belief in monsters allowed for corresponding acceptance of the possibility of humans transforming into monsters. In medieval Iceland and Anglo-Saxon England the mixture of Christian and pagan world views and beliefs create a situation where the boundaries are not merely fluid but can be transgressed, in either direction. A dog-headed man-eater can become a Christian paragon, as in the case of St Christopher, and a nobleman's daughter can become a wolf-headed, man-eating troll as in the case of

Hlégunnr in the Icelandic *Þáttur Stjörnu-Odda draumr*.<sup>1</sup> Christopher is elevated out of a monstrous nature through his devotion to Christianity. Christopher's story offers a clear example of Christianity's power over the worst aspects of a person's nature and the necessity of the missionary impulse to reach non-Christians. Hlégunnr may be only a literary device, but serves as an extreme example of the dangers of breaking out of gender roles to medieval Icelanders since she is turned into a monster as a direct consequence of her refusal to behave in a feminine manner. She dresses in men's clothes, carries a sword and leaves home to become a viking. Such transgressions of social norms or adherence to particular religious beliefs were thus not only characteristic of concerns of a particular society but often become crucial factors in identifying someone as human or as a monster, especially in literary texts where the worlds of the supernatural and the mundane aspects of society can come into contact with each other. My examples are accordingly drawn chiefly from literary sources, though in many cases real social values and concerns are being expressed even if the people and monsters described were believed in or not.

As Bartlett observes, such categorical differences as existed between humans and monsters were not necessarily clearly defined. In the Icelandic sagas, monsters such as giants and trolls can breed with humans, suggesting a racial affinity of sorts. One widespread medieval belief posited that the monsters of the world shared a common descent with man through the biblical figure of Cain, meaning that the difference between 'human' and 'monster' cannot be drawn entirely in terms of supposed racial difference. Thus the importance of fitting into society becomes considerable when deviating significantly from the accepted norm can lead to the creation of a monster.

Though in many respects different societies, the literatures of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland share themes of honour and feud and the clash of ideals between pagan and Christian faiths in warrior cultures. The context of clashing ideals and social values creates particularly fertile ground for the challenging and realigning of identity.

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<sup>1</sup> See below for further discussion of St Christopher (20). For more on warrior-women and their frequently negative portrayals in the sagas, see Jochens, 1996, 87-112 and Jesch, 1991, 176-82.

The Old English corpus offers a variety of texts that deal with monstrosity directly, such as the *Wonders of the East* and *The Liber Monstrorum* which will be considered in the first two chapters. In subsequent chapters I examine literary works, chiefly *Beowulf*, *Guthlac A* and *Andreas*, texts that offer particularly strong statements on the connections between society, monstrosity and religion. *Beowulf* offers not only a rich and complex monster character in Grendel, but also contains juxtapositions of pagan and Christian ideas in the formation of identity and monstrosity. *Beowulf* also provides an excellent example of monstrous change in the socially transgressive Heremod. *Guthlac A* and *Andreas* explore themes of monstrosity, human identity and exile in the wilderness while indicating the possibilities for monstrous men to become human and marking the truly Other as the demonic.

For the Icelandic material, I focus on the *Íslendingasögur* since they provide a corpus of texts that frequently juxtapose the supernatural with the quotidian and the Christian with the pagan. This makes them fertile ground for the exploration of the social issues germane to medieval Icelandic literary reactions to monstrosity. This group of sagas includes tales of encounters with monsters, outlaws, spirits, paganism and Christianity both in Iceland and abroad. This group of texts will therefore form the basis of the Icelandic study, providing, as they do, a wealth of useful social and teratological material.

The first two chapters outline the ideas that underpin the subsequent analyses. Chapter one identifies aspects of medieval European reactions to the monstrous and modern critical approaches that recognise that ‘monster’ and ‘human’ are not distinct categories. The problems of categorisation are shown to be considerable given both the polysemy of monsters and the numerous ways of identifying difference in the Middle Ages. Chapter two places these notions in the cultural and linguistic contexts of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland in order to prepare for the subsequent analyses of the remaining chapters.

Chapters three to six use the ideas established to analyse examples of monstrous change and the societal and religious factors involved in these processes. Chapter Three focuses

on *Beowulf* and on the monster Grendel and the human Heremod as figures that represent both humanity's uncomfortably close relationship with monstrosity and the dangers represented by social and religious transgression. Grendel in *Beowulf* is at once a classic monstrous figure who enters into society with the sole purpose of killing and destroying. But Grendel's descent from Cain complicates the picture, simultaneously accentuating his connection to humanity and his status as an ultimately irredeemable outsider. Heremod is a societal insider whose betrayal of the principles of his society sees him change from Germanic warrior hero to hated monster. Both figures share a human heritage and both come to be defined in monstrous terms largely due to the ways in which they violently reject the norms of human society, pagan and Christian.

Chapter four turns to medieval Iceland and the ways in which various forms of anti-social behaviour by those within society can result in monstrosity. Some of the key societal conventions and ideas that are important to monstrous change in an Icelandic context are considered here in the context of the undead. The societal processes involved in monstrous change, in particular in the violent anti-societal behaviour typical of the *ójafnaðrmaðr*, are explored in the cases of specific *draugar* such as Þórólfr *bægifótr* in *Eyrbyggja saga* and Glámr in *Grettis saga*. These men violate the rules of feud society and Christian faith respectively and become monsters as a result. Analysis of the process breaking down in the case of Skarpheðinn Njálsson allows for closer exploration of the complex role of Christianity in the formation of identity and the defeat of monstrous forces in Icelandic literature.

Chapter five considers the fate of those characters in sagas cast out of society due to their breaking of legal and societal conventions. As outlaws, such people are marked by society in such a manner as could suggest an association with the monstrous, while the wild spaces they are often forced to inhabit are similarly conducive to an association with the monstrous or at least bestial and sub-human. Such broad generalisations are, however, insufficient to deal with the complexity of the issues revealed in *Íslendingasögur*. A more nuanced approach is adopted in order to identify the elements which contribute to

monstrous change in outlaw figures in line with the societal conventions and notions of monstrosity explored in the preceding chapters.

The final chapter takes the thesis into the wild spaces through the exploration of voluntary exiles as represented by St Guthlac and Bárðr *Snæfellsáss*. The featured texts share as a central concern the conflict between Christian principles and pagan or demonic forces. The conflicts revolve around the wilderness from the perspective of two individuals who voluntarily enter the wild to become a hermit saint and a nature spirit respectively. Human identity in the supernatural wilderness is under severe threat and the role of the exile relative to society is bound up particularly in issues of religious faith. In one case, the civilising influence of a saint is brought to the wild through steadfast devotion to Christ while the ultimate disconnection from human society is the result of being unwilling to embrace Christian faith. Space and identity become reconfigured through the perspective afforded by a Christian world view, resulting in turn in a redefinition of what it is to be a human or a monster.

## Chapter One

### Monsters in the Middle Ages

#### Introduction

The key point of departure for the analyses in this thesis is the fact that in many medieval sources it is possible to be of human descent and be a monster, or, indeed, for some monsters to be of human origin. While few monsters are differentiated from humans solely on the basis of physical abnormality, my focus is particularly on the instances where the monster's alien social practices or behaviour are as or more important to their monstrosity than their physical appearance. Whether or not audiences believed in the actual existence of the monsters described in texts, the behavioural and cultural values that monsters can represent in their behaviour remain valuable barometers of proper and improper conduct to a particular society at a particular point in time. A monstrous being such as a dragon or troll is expected to act in a particular, anti-societal way because of their monstrous lineage, but it is also possible for those born human to become monstrous through such monstrous acts as the hoarding of treasure or the consumption of human flesh. For example, the Mermedonians in *Andreas* are humans with a developed society but are viewed as monsters as a result of their anthropophagous diet. Equally it is possible for at least some monsters to become accepted into human society due to their ability to conform usefully to society's rules and in spite of their monstrous heritage. King Dumbri in the world of *Bárðar saga* is born of to a lineage of giants and trolls but becomes accepted as a human king and protector of human society (1).<sup>2</sup> In other words, while a troll is not human by birth it is not impossible for trolls to function within human society.

In order to consider the extent to which such transformations take place in specific literary examples, this chapter will discuss aspects of monster theory and medieval belief relevant to the understanding of monstrosity and humanity and the ways in which social values and behaviour can potentially effect monstrous change.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the thesis, references to the sagas will be to chapter number and to poetry by line number. I will cite the relevant editions in the first reference to a poem and page references to the *Íslensk Fornrit* editions of the sagas in the case of direct quotations. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

## Monsters and Difference

In his classic study of medieval responses to one group of humanoid monsters known generally as the monstrous races, John Block Friedman argues that:

many of these peoples were not monstrous at all. They simply differed in physical appearance and social practices from the person describing them. Some took their names from their manner of life, such as the Apple-Smellers, or the Troglodytes who dwelt in caves; some were physically unusual but not anomalous, such as the Pygmies and Giants; and some were truly fabulous, such as the Blemmyae or men with their faces on their chests. (Friedman, 1981, 1)

Thus definition as a member of these monstrous races can mean being no more different from a human than having dark skin or a fish-based diet. In other words, some monsters were defined by some more or less obvious contrast to an individual or society's, world view. Though Friedman's observations concern one group of monsters, the point is more broadly applicable. In the more extreme cases of bodily, ethical and social strangeness, an individual or society's sense of identity becomes threatened or at least exposed to new ways of thinking. Monstrosity is thus in many instances related to issues of social and individual identity expressed through the abnormality the monster represents. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond — of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (1996, 7)

For example in the case of Germanic heroic society, as espoused in poems such as *Beowulf*, the giving of treasure is vital in order to maintain bonds between a king and his followers and in turn ensures the strength and cohesiveness of society. Dragons are monsters that by their very nature hoard treasure and are destructive enemies of human society. The dragon's behaviour is appropriate to it but inappropriate to human society.

It is not my intention to rehearse the range of possible differences or explore the wide variety of monstrous types here.<sup>3</sup> My focus instead will be chiefly on humanoid monsters and on aspects of monstrous bodily form and monstrous behaviour. These issues are in many ways linked since 'it is often not its own misshapen or hybrid body that makes the monster, but its relation to other bodies, social or individual' (Bildhauer, 2003, 75; see also Cohen, 2006, 22-42). This is a crucial point, particularly when applied to literary monsters, since the monsters within are either encountered outside social space by humans or are invading society. In a broader sense, how a monster is depicted and who or what it is depicted with to a great extent influences the audience's reaction to a monster. This in turn creates situations within literature in which human characters who behave in a monstrous manner undergo transformation into monsters themselves. In several cases this is a literal transformation into monstrous form, something which is possible in the literature not necessarily because of the workings of magic or the supernatural but because the human body is itself

a hybrid category, part cultural and part material, in which interior and exterior are always enfolded, always crossing into each other. The body *in abstracto* might be conceptualized as a Möbius strip, where any motion crosses constantly between inside and outside, undermining the utility of maintaining such frail distinctions. It makes sense, therefore, to speak of medieval subjectivity and embodiment as entangled, perhaps even inextricable processes, and to hold identity to be a cultural

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<sup>3</sup> David Williams offers a taxonomy of the various types of monstrosity and their interpretations in the Middle Ages (1996, 107-76), though he admits that it is an approach with inherent limitations. Cohen offers a useful group of theories as to the functions of monsters from a modern critical perspective (1996, 3-25).

effect that results from a constant combinatory motion. (Cohen, 1999, xvii)

Thus human beings, and even human bodies, can become monstrous through the behaviour exhibited by a given individual within a particular social framework. In cases where human identity within a social hierarchy is exposed to constant strains and stresses, the body is not necessarily a stable category. In extreme instances, this can lead to a literal transformation into a monstrous form. Thus it is possible for a human who adopts the hoarding behaviour of a dragon to become such a monster. In the case of the Germanic myths familiar in both medieval Iceland and Anglo-Saxon England, this is perhaps most powerfully represented by the dragon Fáfnir which, as described in the Icelandic *Völsunga saga*, begins life as a man who steals and subsequently sleeps on a hoard of cursed treasure. His difference from human society is made apparent by his transformation into a monstrous form, but the body that reveals his monstrosity is a result of his behaving like a dragon, rather than a man. In such cases, one 'kind of difference becomes another as the normative categories of gender, sexuality, national identity, and ethnicity slide together like the imbricated circles of a Venn diagram, abjecting from the centre that which becomes the monster' (Cohen, 1996, 12).

### Social Difference

The instability of the body can make identity within society a matter of adhering to, or being seen to adhere to, accepted social norms. In both Old English and Old Icelandic literature there are clear examples of the impact of social and religious behaviour on human and monstrous identity. Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders created social spaces which defined a person and were in turn defined by the wild spaces around them. Whether there was danger from wild animals or the terrain itself, forests, caves, swamps, moors, marshes, mountains and other difficult types of ground were places that could be travelled through, both worked and worked in, and sometimes sheltered in, but were otherwise the preserve of animals, outlaws and monsters. In both Iceland and England then, the wilderness was a place that was dangerous and in which was to be visited or

passed through, not lived in for any length of time (Robinson, 1985, 71-74). In both societies, it was necessary to belong to a household to be part of the legal and social sphere. Not belonging, in the Anglo-Saxon conception, being 'friendless', was a cruel fate and a potentially dangerous situation in terms of its implications for an individual's identity. Those who cannot fit into the expected models of their community are in a position in which they can be viewed as suspicious and falling outside the community's bounds. Whether such circumstances come about intentionally or not, there is a danger of being in some sense ejected from society's limits in a similar way to the reactions to monsters and different ethnic groups. Julia Kristeva defines the abject as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982, 4). Indeed, Jennifer Neville argues that

merely being *Homo sapiens* does not grant human status in Old English texts: human status is conferred on the basis of conformance to social rules...[Grendel] is a monster, not simply because he has glowing eyes, but because he also breaks those boundaries, intrudes into human society, performs acts forbidden by society, and thus threatens society's very existence. (Neville, 2001, 117)

Neville's definition places a sharp emphasis on threat and such threat exists in monsters insofar as they represent extremes of behaviour that run counter to a society's values or functions or expose the weakness and limitations of social institutions. This is not always the case, however, and it is important to note that degrees of monstrosity were observed in medieval sources.

For example, some humanoid monsters are differentiated from medieval Western societies by their diets. A member of the monstrous races who dines on raw meat or fish is less civilised than a Westerner but not necessarily a threat to society as much as a fascinating oddity. Indeed, such monstrous men were considered more civilized — and less monstrous — than eaters of human flesh (Austin, 2002, 37-41). Eating human flesh

is not only the ultimate disturbance of the food chain, it is both a monstrous characteristic and a monstrous act, one that threatens both body and identity: ‘The monstrosity of cannibalism has to do with the same concept as the taboo of incest; the cannibal confuses the structures that function to establish the identity of self and the identity of other through similarity and difference’ (Williams, 1996, 145).

Such extreme behaviour runs counter to the principles of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland and is the preserve of monsters. In the Old English poem *Andreas*, for example, the threat to human identity is two-fold. The anthropophagous Mermedonians use torture as a magic potion to rob their victims of their wits and effectively turn them into grass-grazing human cattle before consuming them and thus incorporating them bodily into their society (ll. 19-39). As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, the ultimate solution to the threat posed by the Mermedonians is one of spiritual, rather than corporeal, incorporation. The Mermedonians are converted to Christianity and thus made part of the larger Christian human society. In this instance, at least, reformation and integration into humanity is achieved through the cessation of the monstrous behaviour and the channeling of the society into acceptable religious and social values.

Similar issues are relevant at an individual level. Beyond Grendel’s consumption of human flesh, he is representative of the danger of unrestrained violence in a society in which feud was a major cultural component. The danger of feud as a means of settling disputes of honour was the possibility of violence escalating to involve an ever wider group of participants as more friends, relatives and grievances became involved. Grendel is an example of the danger of feud without the order restoring systems of arbitration and monetary compensation — an endless cycle of violence that robs society of its strongest members. In the sagas, people who behave with no respect for the norms of society, and thus increase the risk of socially disruptive violence, are identified typically by the term *ójafnaðrmaðr*. The correlation between such behaviour in life and a monstrous undeath is considered in greater detail in chapter four.

Naturally, not all monsters represent severe threats to social values and not all behavioural difference in a human could lead to identification with the monstrous. The question of what a monster is to a culture at any particular point is made more problematic by the notion of the Other. If monsters can be at once differentiated from man and related to humanity, what of humans who are strange by birth, geography, ethics, customs or by any of a number of other differentiating factors?<sup>4</sup> Recourse to the Other as a single category of difference creates problems in failing to take into account the varied medieval approaches to such diverse groups as peasants and monsters:

A totalizing notion of the Other also fails to discriminate among groups regarded or constructed as different. This is especially the case in the context of the Middle Ages, with its panoply of othering discourses. One must distinguish those “others” completely outside the orbit of everyday medieval European life: the monstrous races or the dimly perceived inhabitants of India, Ethiopia, or sub-Saharan Africa. The “monsters” were most obviously an invented other in the purest sense, resulting from acts of the imagination (Freedman, 1999, 301).

Freedman thus establishes that though a connection might exist between monsters, foreigners, and exiles, in that they can all be regarded as Other, to assume that all Others are viewed as equally alien or different is to misrepresent the situation. Instead, a more nuanced approach must be adopted in trying to understand particular cultural reactions to any kind of outsider.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, just as there are varying degrees of Otherness, there are clearly also varying degrees of monstrosity and, indeed, humanity. Thus even as it is possible for a society to look outward and identify difference as Otherness and monstrosity, it is also possible when confronted by difference from within to push that which is different outside the social sphere, into the realms of the Other and the monster.

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<sup>4</sup> On approaching concepts of medieval otherness, Freedman (2002, 1-24) offers a valuable discussion of the subject and outlines various theoretical approaches. Jonathan Lindow (1995, 8-31) and John McKinnell (2005) offers excellent discussions on the conception of the supernatural Other in Old Icelandic literature and representations of the Other in Norse myth respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Tally Lionarons argues persuasively for the need to treat individual monsters on an individual basis and to take nothing for granted when dealing with the possible range of linguistic, literary and religious factors involved in the literary presentation of a particular monster. (Lionarons, 1998, 1-22).

## Christianity and Monstrosity

The importance of the Christian perspective on the relationship between humans and monsters is worth considering in more detail since Christianity often forms an important part of the narratives considered here. The view taken by Christian thinkers was that monsters, if they existed, must ultimately be God's creations, and their purpose in the world, if they existed, was considered by such influential figures as St Augustine and St Isidore of Seville in their respective writings.<sup>6</sup>

Of most immediate relevance here are the views of Augustine. In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine discusses the problems presented by the possible existence of the monstrous races. Augustine's view was that such beings, if they existed at all, were human if they possessed reason, but must accordingly be descended from Adam (*De Civitate Dei* XVI.8 [Welldon, 1924]).<sup>7</sup> This is a point of considerable significance when considering Grendel, *Beowulf*'s infamous monster, who can claim descent from Cain. In this, Augustine creates a number of problems, since monstrosity and humanity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, since what is human is to be an 'animal rationale mortale', 'a rational mortal animal' (XVI.8). In this conception, reason is an important element of humanity, and one that prevents a number of monsters from actually being seen as human.

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<sup>6</sup> Isidore derives 'monster' from Latin *monstrare* 'show', or 'reveal' in his *Etymologies*, and considers prodigies, portents and monsters as variations on the theme of revealing important truths about God. Thus monsters are there to be interpreted for the purpose of revealing the future or spiritual truths. For Isidore, monsters, portents and the like are not unnatural, because nature is God, but rather they are against nature as it is understood by fallible men: 'Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura' (*Etymologiae* XI.iii [Lindsay, 1911]). Isidore's views in this are reflected to an extent in some Anglo-Saxon material, such as the *Wonders of the East*, the *Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* and the *Liber Monstrorum*, texts that attempt to describe, or debunk, supposedly real monsters. For a fuller discussion of Isidore and his views of the monstrous, see Verner, 2005, 28-43 and *passim*. See also Neville, 2001, 103-22.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Augustine was by no means entirely convinced that such monsters actually did exist. As noted, though, these were remarkably popular and enduring traditions throughout the medieval period, and Augustine's views on reason being more important to the essence of humanity than form was a point elaborated upon by later commentators in their own approaches to the material. See Verner, 2005, esp. 11-44 and Neville, 2001, 103-21.

Through a tangle of biblical and apocryphal legends, Cain, the murderous son of Adam and Eve, became identified in some branches of Christian thought as one of the key figures responsible for bringing monsters into the world of men.<sup>8</sup> Cain's identification with monsters has its roots in biblical tradition developed in various apocryphal and exegetical materials. In essence, Cain initially became a form of orthodox scapegoat for the problems created by some of the more unconventional exegetical traditions that attempted to account for interpretational difficulties in Genesis 6, verses 2 and 4.<sup>9</sup> Cain becomes, as a result, the progenitor of the giants, and, through such associations, his taint spread to encompass all the malformed marvels that medieval Christians encountered in Pliny and other sources. Cain eventually became one of the key figures used in attempts to rationalise the world and the more exotic occupants it might possess in terms harmonious to Christian doctrine. The implications of this association, and Augustine's view on the monstrous races, make for the particularly intriguing notion that occupied several medieval writers and thinkers: that the monster may be distinguished from humanity by means of a spiritual taint, but the source of that taint equally ensures that the monstrous is in a sense contiguous with ordinary men and women.

With Cain identified as the progenitor of monsters, the issue of human descent and the relative humanity of monstrous beings became an important element in medieval attitudes. At least some monsters were of human descent and if they were not necessarily human they might be capable of becoming human, usually through the spiritual elevation achieved by accepting the Christian faith. As has been suggested, in the case of the monstrous races, the question of their monstrosity was complicated by their likely human descent on the one hand, and by the fact that 'good' monsters could be identified. Examples of 'positive' monsters include those monsters that show some adherence to Christianity, though such is not the only means by which monsters can be seen in a positive light (Strickland, 2003, 247-50). St Christopher is an example of a monster, identifiable as such by virtue of being both a cynocephalus and having anthropophagous

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<sup>8</sup> See Friedman, 1981, 30-31; 87-107. For more on Cain in a specifically Anglo-Saxon context, see Mellinkoff 1979, 143-62 and 1981, 183-96, and Orchard, 1995, 58-85.

<sup>9</sup> One such collection of apocryphal material particularly relevant to Anglo-Saxon material is the Book of Enoch, which may have been fairly well-known (Mellinkoff, 1979, 143-44).

tendencies before he is converted, who becomes ‘good’, and by extension, truly human, through his conversion to Christianity and his later works.<sup>10</sup> Thus figures like St Christopher represent not just the presence of Christianity among the monstrous men, but the potential success of missionary work among any man or monster and the ultimate hope of unification of all under God.<sup>11</sup> This idea is very much apparent in the Old English poetic *Andreas*, as noted, where a race of monstrous men become good Christians but it is also germane to other cases in the *Íslendingasögur* and Old English poetry where Christian faith offers the power to combat or redeem monstrous beings.

Rudolf Wittkower argues that a positive attitude towards the monstrous races, their humanity and salvation is actually typical of the Middle Ages as a whole:

While the Augustinian conception had made the monsters acceptable to the Middle Ages and monuments like the tympanum at Vezélay had given them their due share in the creation, while the later Middle Ages had seen in them similes of human qualities, now in the century of humanism the pagan fear of the monsters as a foreboding of evil returns. We are faced with the curious paradox that the superstitious Middle Ages pleaded in a broad-minded spirit for the monsters as belonging to God’s inexplicable plan of the world, while the “enlightened” period of humanism returned to Varro’s *contra naturam* and regarded them as creations of God’s wrath to foreshadow extraordinary events. (Wittkower, 1942, 185)

It must be pointed out, however, that in Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literature and culture, the differing pagan and Christian attitudes towards monstrous beings mean that to some extent, both attitudes are at work simultaneously. The pagan conception of the monster and the Germanic traditions of giants, dragons and trolls often posit these beings as dangerous threats. But in the Christian conception, humanoid monsters can be saved by

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<sup>10</sup> See Friedman, 1981, 60 and Strickland, 2003, 206-09.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the spiritual renewal of dog-heads and giants, see Cohen, 1999, 119-41.

Christianity, their otherness dispelled not by bloody execution at a hero's hands, but with missionary zeal, successful preaching and help from God.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the horrific, marvellous and often antagonistic relationship envisaged between men and monsters was not so much broken down but rather complicated by Christianity in the literary works considered in this study. The pagan past or pagan perspective on which much of the material considered here is based on or ideologically wrestles with, exists in the meeting space of heroic warrior culture, pagan history and mythology and Christian values. The pagan material introduces a broader perspective, and the portrayal and treatment of monsters in various situations is considerably enriched by interaction between Christian and pagan or pseudo-pagan ideas of monsters, the body and identity.

### Conclusions

The lines between 'human' and 'monster' can be blurred, or, more accurately, transgressed. And while the cynocephalic Christopher can achieve humanity through his devotion to Christianity, humans can be considered monstrous or demonic by their adherence to different cultural or religious practices. This can lead to the identification of ethnic groups or certain individuals as being monstrous, usually through fear or hate fed by perceptions of difference.<sup>13</sup> This element of perception, or rather, of the relative position of the one identifying the 'monster' to the monster itself is the third point Friedman raises. Relative positions socially, culturally and geographically can be important factors in identifying otherness, and such perceptions of difference can lead to identification of the perceived individual or group as monstrous. Thus it is important to

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<sup>12</sup> In the Icelandic sagas, the tendency towards the bodily destruction of the monster is the norm, but even so, the influence of Christianity in successful monster-slaying is to be felt, and in some cases, Christianity offers salvation. More often than not, however, Christianity and paganism, and the monsters attached to the pagan past, are in conflict. The monstrous cannibals in *Andreas* are beings that can be saved while dragons can appear in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as portents of impending disaster, as they do in the entry for 793 (Irvine, 2004, 42), where they are seen as portents foretelling a famine and the sack of Lindisfarne (Bremmer Jr. & Chardonnens, 2001, 153-56). In *Beowulf* the dragon is the direct cause of social disaster, demanding a violent solution (2302-53).

<sup>13</sup> In particular, the representations of non-Christians in medieval Europe frequently painted them in monstrous terms, often while exposing Western Christians' own anxieties about their faith. On some of the issues concerning monstrosity, ethnicity and prejudice see Strickland, 2003 and Bildhauer, 2003, 75-96.

think not of the medieval reaction to the monstrous, but rather of contextualised medieval reactions.

The categories of ‘human’ and ‘monster’ might be viewed as being separated by a barrier that can be transgressed. Though movement in either direction is in no sense inevitable, it seems that it is easier for humans to be considered monsters than for monsters to be considered human, though not impossible, as the case of St Christopher demonstrates. Thus it is possible to be physically human and ‘morally’ monstrous, and in cases where physical and moral lines are blurred, there can be a certain degree of category slippage. This is not to suggest, however, that the idea of moral monstrosity is the most significant element in analysing humanoid monsters in Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic texts. Instead, monsters and monstrosity must be approached with many possible strands of enquiry in mind, and an awareness of the many different tensions the same monster can exert in a different context. The potential wealth of ideas and meanings that the monster can represent requires a response that does not rely on identifying archetypal monstrous characteristics. As Cohen puts it,

the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a “system” allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration - allowing what Hogle has called with a wonderful pun “a deeper play of differences, a nonbinary polymorphism at the ‘base’ of human nature”. (Cohen, 1996, 7)

Monsters are representative of difference, but obviously a great deal of importance rests on who is observing the difference, or, in other words, what a particular cultural gaze discovers when turned on a monstrous subject. While the initial focus on monsters in art and literary texts is frequently the grotesque or unusual form they possess, particularly in the case of humanoid monsters, their extremes of behaviour are often important in identifying them as a monster. In cases where behaviour transgresses and threatens the conventions that underpin a particular society, such as the unremitting propagation of

violence in a feud culture or cannibalism in most societies, it is sufficiently undesirable or alien as to be monstrous. Thus while monsters are often clothed in strange flesh, they also marked by such societal, cultural elements as their state of being clothed or unclothed, of being able to speak, of the kind of space or territory they occupy. It becomes possible to differentiate people according to their religion, skin colour and even their diet, and to construct a monstrous identity for people based on such perceived differences. And if it is possible to identify those from another society in such terms, what about those within a specific society who do not easily conform to a community's principles? If there is a scale of relative humanity or monstrosity, where are such people as outcasts, outlaws and exiles on it? And what of such monsters as Grendel and the Icelandic *draugar* that claim human descent? The purpose of the remaining chapters in this thesis will be to identify the extent to which cases of humanoid monsters and monstrous humans exhibit shift from one category to the other. I begin with a closer examination of the ways in which the issues discussed here factor into Old English and Icelandic literary definitions of monsters.

## Chapter Two

### Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Icelandic Reactions to the Monstrous

This chapter serves two related purposes. The first is to site the observations on monstrosity in the more specific contexts of the literature of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland examined in the thesis. The second is to consider terminological aspects of the representations of monsters in relation to the use of generic monster terms in Old English and Old Norse.

#### Introduction

The pagan past is explored by Christian authors in both Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland, and the notions of worldly honour, blood-feud and identity within a warrior culture sometimes rub awkwardly against a religious and cultural ideal almost diametrically opposed to them. Part of that pagan past is the presence of gods and monsters, and part of the Christian present was the supposed existence of various races of monstrous men and other prodigies, an existence that had to be incorporated into the Christian world view. In the case of both societies, these ideas clash, with the pagan idea of the monster as an inimical threat to be defeated by martial means meeting the Christian emphasis on faith in Christ rather than physical struggle to overcome demonic or monstrous threats. These sometimes competing, sometimes merging ideas become particularly relevant when dealing with the ways in which people and monsters are differentiated. In Old English literature, particularly, the importance and value of Christianity in the formation of social and identity structures is stressed in poems such as *Andreas* which uses the monstrous cannibalistic Mermedonians as a means to explore issues of Christian identity in which being part of a greater ‘human’ society means being Christian.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian elements of the sagas are usually less didactic than in Old English, but the role of Christianity in constructing human and monstrous identities is nonetheless vitally important. Iceland converted to Christianity in 1000 A.D., during the latter part of the

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter Six, pp. 174-80 discusses *Andreas* in more detail.

period in which the *Íslendingasögur* are set, which is roughly from the late ninth to the middle of the eleventh-century. This means that some sagas deal with an entirely pagan time in Iceland's history while others include the conversion to Christianity and the subsequent period during which pagan beliefs could still be privately observed.<sup>15</sup> As such, the *Íslendingasögur* present a world in transition which 'results in what could be called an ontological uncertainty about the characters they portray' (Tulinius, 2000, 253), an uncertainty centred on the difference in values from the pagan past and the contemporary attitudes of Christians. Thus pagan people and ideas are rarely condemned out of hand in the sagas, since there seem to be many admirable non-Christians in Iceland's past (Clunies Ross, 2000, 118), but those who reject Christianity are far more likely to be seen in monstrous terms.

While the Middle Ages in general display some belief in the physical existence of monsters, not all the various creatures, humanoid, bestial and even human, were unequivocally accepted as real. Margaret Clunies Ross argues that while attitudes would have varied, some medieval Icelanders were more likely than we are today 'to believe that non-material phenomena were real and to acknowledge that beings and forces from empirically non-verifiable other worlds existed and acted upon the material world' (2002, 449). In Anglo-Saxon England, the witty and scathing introduction to the *Liber Monstrorum* gives little credence to most accounts of monsters:

Quaedam tantum in ipsis mirabilius uera esse creduntur, et sunt  
 innumerabilia quae si quis ad exploranda pennies uolare potuisset et ita  
 rumoroso sermone tamen ficta probaret, ubi nun curbs aurea et gemmis  
 aspersa litora dicuntur, ibi lapideam aut nullam urbem et scopulosa  
 cerneret.

Only some things in the marvels themselves are believed to be true, and  
 there are countless things which if anyone could take winged flight to

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<sup>15</sup> For Iceland's conversion see Byock, 2001, 292-340. For an exploration of notions of pagan and Christian interaction in the sagas, see North, 1991, 145-76.

explore, they would prove that, although they should be concocted in speech and rumour, where now there is said to lie a golden city and gem-strewn shores, one would see there rocks and a stony city, if at all.  
(Orchard, 1995, 256-57)

Nevertheless, the author goes on to enumerate various marvels and prodigies, even though he credits only a few of them. These examples include descriptions of a transvestite and Siamese twins, but giants are also understood to exist, and wood nymphs and sirens are included in the early listings of ‘more credible’ beings.<sup>16</sup> The *Wonders of the East* tradition, describing various monstrous beings, was alive in later Anglo-Saxon England and Iceland. Even if belief in the actual existence of monsters was not wholly widespread, the *Liber Monstrorum* and *Wonders* texts show the deep fascination that monsters held for the Anglo-Saxons. Even as an imaginary figure, the monster can become reified by its repetition in written sources, its metaphorical application to individuals and social groups and its imaginative depiction in art throughout the centuries. The *Liber Monstrorum* is cynical, particularly concerning its pagan sources, even while admitting that monsters are inherently fascinating. This fascination with the monstrous is apparent in many English and Icelandic texts, a fascination sharpened by the at times contradictory attitudes towards monsters demanded by the meeting of pagan and Christian ideas.

Another aspect of the relationship to the monstrous is found in the issues of identity raised by both pagan and Christian ideas. The boundary between these two categories is, as has already been noted, not only fuzzy, but shifting and permeable in either direction. Elements such as religion, social standing and behaviour all play a part in defining people within and as a society, and the same elements, or lack of them play an important role in identifying monsters as figures on the edges of society. The distinction between monsters being ‘outside’ and ‘on the edges of’ society is worth noting, given the difference in

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<sup>16</sup> For discussions of the attitudes to monsters in the *Liber Monstrorum*, see Orchard, 1995, 116-39 and Verner, 2005, 54-66. Verner makes the interesting observation that those monsters that the book’s author accepts, or at least does not condemn, come from Christian sources, thus rendering the book an attempt to reorganise the world and its supposed monstrous supernatural denizens in acceptable terms for a Christian readership.

respective threats implied. That monsters might exist 'out there' in other lands is bad enough, but that they exist on the borders of society, on the edges of things, looking in suggests a potential ongoing threat of them breaking into (and, thus, apart) society. Grendel's movement from the moors to Heorot provokes a society-wide crisis. The pagan Germanic identification of monsters as the enemies of men and gods is broken down by the problems of 'man' and 'monster' not being fixed categories.

A flexible series of oppositions could be posited showing an 'insider' (human) and 'outsider' (monster) status, differentiating men and monsters along various societal lines of what is and is not acceptable. However, such a system breaks down in the face of, for example, non-violent or socially conforming monsters, and even more so in those cases where monstrous societies are observable, as in *Andreas*. In these cases, it is not necessarily a direct physical threat, or the lack of a recognisably structured society, but the threat of an articulated, alien point of view and the tension that arises when the cultures and viewpoints clash. In such circumstances, those humans whose actions, social arrangements or beliefs are viewed as anomalous or dangerous can be identified as monsters. As discussed in the previous chapter, the presence of monsters in the world was something that could be reconciled by Christians through attributing their creation to the sins of Cain. *Beowulf* connects its monsters to this tradition, declaring Grendel and his mother to be descended of Cain. The impacts of some of these traditions and material were clearly felt in the Anglo-Saxon period. As Orchard notes of the numerous Cain traditions, despite there being few direct references, 'it is clear that a wide range of Insular sources both allude and contribute to a fertile blend of traditions, biblical, patristic, Classical, and popular, concerning the theme' (1995, 85). And indeed, a variety of Old English texts betray an interest in the Augustinian notions implicit to Cain without Cain himself explicitly figuring in them. One aspect of this is the idea of speech and its connection to possessing reason. Many monsters, including the monstrous races, lack the power of speech, or corrupt it as a means of luring people into traps.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For a consideration of speech and reason and its importance to the monster in Anglo-Saxon conception, see Kim, 1997, 39-47 and Austin, 2002, 42-44. See also Friedman, 1981, 26-36.

In the *Íslendingasögur* the monsters of the sagas are not born from a similar meshing of Christian and pagan ideas but are rather very much part of myth and folklore reinterpreted by a Christian culture looking at its pagan roots.<sup>18</sup> But while this is the case, there are certainly far less clear-cut figures in the sagas. In particular, the *draugr*, berserk and *hamhleypa* are all in essence varieties of monster but with clear human association.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, while Christianity often plays a part in monster encounters in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is usually effective in helping to defeat the monsters, thus proving its efficacy and superiority over pagan means. But it can also very much be seen as a marker of acceptability and even, in at least one case, of salvation.

This is highlighted by yet another aspect of monstrous change that is particularly relevant to Germanic monster studies: that the body is itself not necessarily a stable category. The classic example of this is in *Völsunga saga*, where the dragon Fáfnir was originally a man who became a dragon after murdering his father to steal cursed treasure, and then leaving society and sleeping on the treasure afterwards (14). This bodily transmutation is echoed in the *Íslendingasaga Gull-Þóris saga*. Þórir earns his nickname for his famously grasping nature. Þórir's miserly propensity for accumulating gold results in the belief of his contemporary Icelanders in the saga that he did not die but rather transformed into a dragon that guards some secret trove in the mountains. The *draugar* provide another example, though in this case death is, perhaps, the most significant change to occur; still, many *draugar* swell in size and become dark in colouring, or take on other monstrous attributes, such as the terrible eyes of Glámr in *Grettis saga*.

In each of these examples, the important, differentiating element is that the transformation is apparently permanent, and is usually the result of the individual's transgressive or monstrous behaviour. The dragon transformations centre around men who are greedy and covetous, hoarding treasures that should in the natural course of things be distributed or displayed in society. As I show in Chapter Four, those that tend to

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<sup>18</sup> Trolls and giants and other beings are actually separated from humanity by religion, an idea that is particularly apparent in *Bárðar saga*, where it forms a significant part of the plot, ending with Bárðr's son killed in a dream for betraying his pagan roots and converting to Christianity.

<sup>19</sup> *Draugr* are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, pp. 74-106.

become dangerous *draugar* are usually violent, quarrelsome and dangerous in life. As undead beings they become significantly more dangerous with greater strength and no compunction to follow any social code at all. This supernatural violence in their monstrous state has led Kathryn Hume to argue that *draugar* are dark shadows of society, and that the

portrayal of *draugar* reflects the society's subliminal awareness of its own weaknesses: desire for gold and love of special objects, bloodthirstiness, selfishness, and belief in physical strength as a trait valued for itself rather than for what it can do for a society. (1980, 13)

But the knowing way in which these transmutations are presented suggests an awareness of these issues and a nuanced approach to the idea of monstrosity that has not always been credited. Indeed, in the example of Skarpheðinn Njálsson, it seems obvious that precisely because of who Skarpheðinn is in life, and the way he behaves, it is implied in the saga that people thought that he might become one of the undead.<sup>20</sup> This suggests both a keen understanding of the negative traits and their dangers as Hume describes them.

A similar attitude is exhibited in Anglo-Saxon texts such as *The Wonders of the East* and the *Liber Monstrorum* where behavioural traits are at times emphasised as much as, or in some cases more than, unusual physical characteristics. As Robert and Karin Olsen put it, texts like these 'indicate that the notion of what constitutes a monster involved more than just physical appearance ('physical monstrosity'); instead, physical differences were also associated with aberrant ethical behaviour ('moral monstrosity') and exotic ethical customs' (Olsen and Olsen, 2001, 8). In the Icelandic examples monstrous alteration or deformity is clearly a result of monstrous behaviour. Such actual physical transformations are less obvious in Anglo-Saxon cases, though one example of a man become monster through his behaviour is Heremod, described in *Beowulf* as a betrayer of the trust of his people (ll. 902-15). Heremod's fall is linked to the Biblical giants, both through the

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<sup>20</sup> See below, Chapter Four, pp. 87-95.

images of the flood on the sword hilt that spark Hrothgar's reflections and through the *eoten* mentioned in an earlier passage.<sup>21</sup> Heremod's breaking of the social codes constitutes a conceptual shift from humanity to monstrosity.

In a similar manner, those exiting the bounds of society can be looked on with suspicion or even horror. In England, the provisions in the early laws of Kent and Wessex laid down by Wihtred and Ine respectively in the late seventh or early eighth century point to the dangers of the wild and of criminals (Wihtred 28, Ine 20). Both are similar in wording and identical in purpose. In the words of Ine's provision:

Gif feorcund mon oððe fremde butan wege geond wudu gonge 7 ne  
hrieme ne horn blawe, for ðeof he bið to profianne, oððe to sleanne  
oððe to aliesanne. (Attenborough, 1922, 42)

If a foreign man or a stranger goes through a wood off the road and  
neither shouts nor blows a horn, he may be assumed to be a thief, either  
to be slain or ransomed.

In the laws of early Anglo-Saxon England, at least, a man could become stripped of his legal status in the wild if he failed to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Obviously such provisions imply that the woods were dangerous places precisely because of robbers and criminals, and failure to identify oneself in such a place meant that technically an individual could be treated as a thief, one who no longer enjoys the legal protection of society.

Later kings would focus on the importance of individuals being attached to a community or a household in order to ensure their legal accountability in the event of their perpetrating a crime. Being socially unattached became a crime: a provision in the codes

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<sup>21</sup> While Heremod's death 'mid eotenum' (l. 902) is typically taken as meaning 'among the Jutes', an argument can be made for translating the phrase as 'among the giants'. See, for example, Blake, 1962, 278-87 and Kaske, 1967, 285-310. See Chapter Three pp.67-71 for a more detailed discussion of Heremod and the issue of the translation of 'eotenum'.

of King Æthelstan turns anyone unattached to a lord or family household into a *flyma*, a ‘fugitive’, who may be killed with impunity as if he were a *ðeof* (II Æthelstan 2-2.2).<sup>22</sup> In this provision it is falling outside legal and social structures that leads to a concomitant loss of legal protection and identification as an outsider and a thief.

In Iceland there is a similar suspicion of vagabonds, of those unattached to a specific household that sees them largely without protection in Icelandic law (Miller, 2004, 125-26). Such unfortunate figures as vagrants and vagabonds do not seem to be considered monstrous, but there is certainly a clear case of a marked difference in treatment to the legally unattached, who have virtually no rights. And, indeed, the homeless, wandering vagabonds of Icelandic sagas might be seen as a form of proximate Other — they are useful as carriers of news between farms, and, perhaps, for the occasional offloading of a troublesome child, among other things.<sup>23</sup> But they are regarded with suspicion and distaste due to their effectively existing outside the law and the recognised social norm, and it is worth noting that in the sagas, these vagabonds tend to lead to trouble of some form, whether by passing on scandalous or incriminating news, or through a gullibility or stupidity that leads inexorably to violence.

More intriguing are outlaws and exiles, people necessarily removed from the social spaces and functions which help to establish identity. In the case of Iceland, Kirsten Hastrup has argued that society was defined by the areas where law controlled or affected life, and the ‘wild’ as those spaces outside of the influence of the law, and thus outside society (Hastrup, 1985, 136-45). The ‘wild’ is the space occupied by monsters, demons and spirits, and it is also the territory of outlaws, suggesting to Hastrup that they occupy a similar conceptual territory. Similarly, relationship to a lord in Anglo-Saxon England is often the means through which identity as a valuable member of society is asserted, and

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<sup>22</sup> The fate of the stranger was somewhat ameliorated in later provisions, where the king became surety for and protector to unattached foreigners unrepresented by family members. Though the protection offered by the king may well have simply extended to prosecuting a foreigner’s killers (V Æthelred 48).

<sup>23</sup> For example, in *Harðar saga*, Hörðr’s sister is given to a family of nomadic vagabonds by her uncle after her mother dies in childbirth (9).

with its loss the individual's identity is threatened.<sup>24</sup> It is possible to overstate the case. Not every outlaw or social outsider is even a potential monster. Nevertheless, those who drift further from societal norms find themselves in greater danger of being considered monstrous.

### Defining 'Monster'

I do not attempt an exhaustive discussion of monster terminology here, but rather consider sets of generic terms from each language to indicate that supposed 'monster' terms often possess a wide array of meanings and applications to other subjects.

#### Old English

The *Thesaurus of Old English* lists seven terms under the heading 'monster, strange creature': *æglæca*, *æglæcwif*, *ælwihht* (*elwihht*), *merewif*, *unsceaft*, *untydre* and *wundor* (2000, 02.06.10). Of these, three are *hapax legomena*: *æglæcwif* and *merewif* appear in *Beowulf*, while *unsceaft* appears in the *Exeter Book Riddle* 88 and refers to a rather unusual monster.<sup>25</sup>

*Unsceaft* is used in the fragmentary *Exeter Book Riddle* 88 which appears to describe in dramatic anthropomorphic terms the life of the subject of the riddle, in this case the solution being an antler that has been turned into an inkwell. As described from the perspective of the horn, 'Nu mec unsceafta innan slitað,/ wyrdap mec be wombe' (ll. 28-29 [Krapp & Dobbie, 1936]), 'now *unsceafta* tear at me inside, injure me in my belly'. *Unsceaft* is, literally, an 'un-being' but the translation 'monsters' is arguably most fitting here (Swaen, 1941, 303), particularly in the context of the violent acts the 'unsceafta' perform. Nevertheless, while the description of violence is visceral, it is a metaphor here for the non-violent, socially useful act of a quill pen being dipped into the inkhorn. As

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<sup>24</sup> Such a viewpoint is particularly apparent in poems such as *The Wanderer*, but is also an important element of *Andreas* and many other texts, to the extent that it has been argued that human beings 'exist only in social places like the hall, where their roles, responsibilities, and relationships to each other are defined' (Neville, 2001, 119). As *Andreas* makes clear, this is only part of the story since social identity is also constructed in terms of humanity's relationship to God. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six below, pp. 107-80.

<sup>25</sup> According to data retrieved from the University of Toronto's *Corpus of Old English*.

Daniel Berletti (2009, 152-64) argues, however, the extensive anthropomorphising of the antler and its emotional state renders the text a sympathetic account of ‘human experience and emotion’ (163). The reader can view the antler as a noble warrior now living in exile and tormented by monsters.<sup>26</sup> The warrior is simultaneously an inkwell and the ‘monsters’ are pens that are being used for the distinctly un-monstrous act of writing.<sup>27</sup>

Two compounds, *aglæcwif* and *merewif*, are used to describe Grendel’s mother, a more typical monster than the quill pen. *Merewif* (1519 [Klaeber, 2008]), ‘water-woman’, is not so much a generic as a specific term seemingly coined for the water-dwelling monstrous woman that is Grendel’s mother. Klaeber suggests ‘water-witch’ as another possible translation in an attempt to capture Grendel’s mother’s monstrous nature (2008, s.v.), but this cannot be justified. The alterity the term indicates is primarily carried through the inhuman relationship of woman with body of water. It is worth noting that the term is not entirely negative, in spite of referring to a supernatural creature; it is only in the specific context of Grendel’s mother in *Beowulf* that the term takes on negative connotations. By contrast, *aglæcwif* suggests something ferocious and female, but not necessarily monstrous. Its first element, *aglæca*, is used of monsters and demons, including Grendel, *Beowulf*’s dragon and Satan, but is not itself a monster term. The Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* (henceforward *DOE*) gives the more neutral definition ‘awesome opponent, fearsome fighter’ since the term is also applied to humans, including the appropriately war-like Beowulf and the appropriately impressive Bede (Orchard, 1995, 33). While the reference to Bede stresses his prowess as a teacher, the reference to St Andrew in *Andreas* rather indicates the indomitable nature of his faith. Andrew is in fact identified as an *aglæca* by a demon (l. 1358), the sort of creature that is itself identified as an *aglæca* in the poem (l. 1311). Nevertheless, the term is evidently not necessarily negative but rather emphasises the formidable aspect of the individual in question. Grendel, his mother and the dragon are awesome opponents as monstrous foes

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<sup>26</sup> The antler laments its separation from its pair, saying ‘Eom ic gumcynnes/ anga ofer eorþan’, ‘I am alone amongst the race of men on the Earth’ (ll. 17-18).

<sup>27</sup> That identity — including monstrous identity — is a matter of perspective is used for playful effect in the riddle but such issues are treated more seriously in other Old English poems, particularly in *Guthlac A* and *Andreas*. This issue is discussed in greater detail in connection with these texts in Chapter Six, pp.174-80.

just as Beowulf is a fierce, human warrior. Perhaps the most interesting use of the term is made in *Andreas* in reference to himself (l. 1358). It is not merely the fact that holy man is identified by the same term that is applied to cannibals (l. 1131) and a demon (l. 1311) earlier in the poem, but rather the fact that Andrew is so labelled by a demon.

*Elwiht*, ‘alien creature’ (*DOE* s.v.), is applied only to the water monsters of Grendel’s mere in *Beowulf* (l. 1500). Formed from the prefix *el-* ‘foreign, strange’ and the noun *wiht* ‘person, creature, being’, *elwiht* suggests a broader monstrous context than water monsters since it could refer to almost any form of strange or unusual creature or being imaginable. In the context of *Beowulf*, *wiht* is used as a simplex twice, and in each case is applied to the monsters of the poem. In the first case, it is used of Grendel (l. 120) prior to his first assault on Heorot, and in the second it refers to the dragon, or, more accurately, its corpse (l. 3038).

*Untydre* is a term that means ‘evil progeny’ (*Bosworth-Toller* s.v.), based on the negative prefix *un-* and a back formation from the verb *tydran*, ‘give birth’. The noun is recorded only once, in *Beowulf*, and describes the punishment of Cain’s sin in terms of a generative act that creates a variety of inhuman beings:

þone cwealm gewræc  
 ece drihten þæs þe he Abel slog;  
 ne gefeah h þære fæhðe ac he hine feor forwræc,  
 metod for þy mane mancynne fram.  
 Ðanon untydras ealle onwocon,  
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,  
 swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon  
 lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald<sup>28</sup> (ll.107-14)

<sup>28</sup> Mellinkoff (1981, 184) argues that *gigant* in *Beowulf* is reserved for the Biblical giants, to distinguish them from giants of Germanic or Classical tradition throughout the poem. But while *gigant* in Old English poetry is used exclusively to refer to the Biblical giants (Orchard, 1995, 58, n. 2), it is not the only giant term used to refer Biblical giants in *Beowulf*. *Ent* and *eoten* are employed alongside *gigant* to refer to the sword used by *Beowulf* to slay Grendel’s mother, a blade crafted by and commemorating the biblical giants.

The noble Lord avenged the murderous act by which he [Cain] slew Abel. He enjoyed no benefit from that assault, but the Lord exiled him for that crime far from mankind. From this arose all evil births, giants and elves and *orcneas* such as the giants who for a long time struggled against God. He paid them their due for that.

The plural *untydras* is used as the umbrella term for distinct groups of monstrous beings, giants, elves and the *orcneas*. Some difficulty is given by the presence of elves and the hapax legomenon *orcneas*. According to *Bosworth-Toller*, *orcneas* is most likely derived from the term *orc*, ‘demon’, implying the term refers to evil beings or spirits or actual demons. The latter case is a possibility, since the demons that Guthlac encounters in the wild are referred to in Felix’s *Vita Sancti Guthlaci* as ‘semen Cain’ (ch. 31 [Colgrave, 1956]). Orchard suggests ‘hellish beings’ (1995, 69), an appropriate though rather vague translation. The inclusion of elves in the list is problematic only insofar as the elf was benign in pagan tradition: Hall (2005, 67-71) suggests that this is a deliberate attempt to realign the elves with the malignant monsters of Germanic and Biblical tradition. ‘Evil progeny’ is thus perfectly fitting to its immediate context and to referring more widely to monsters marked by physical difference or a clear monstrous heritage, be it giants, elves or other identifiable monstrous types.

*Wundor* is the most widely-used term with over a thousand attestations in prose and poetic texts. It is a term applicable to anything marvellous, strange or terrible including, but not limited, to monsters. In order to give an indication of the potential range of application of the term, its uses in *Beowulf* will be considered here. The *Concordance to Beowulf* lists twelve uses of *wundor* as a simplex, eight compounds and one instance of the adjective *wundorlic* covering a range of contexts with positive and negative connotations (Bessinger Jr and Smith Jr, 1969, 247-48). *Wundor* is used in a wholly positive sense by Hrothgar to describe God’s ability to increase man’s wisdom with the passing years (l. 1724) and the compound *wundorbebod* (l. 1747), ‘strange advice’, an

entirely negative one when Hrothgar uses it to refer to the dangers of Satan's cunning temptations which can lead even great heroes to become evil men.

Less marvellous than the workings of God but rather more positively associated than the snares of Satan are the various treasures in the poem or their wondrous properties: the decorations of Beowulf's helmet (l. 1452), the hardness of the sword Nægling (l. 2687) and various treasures in the dragon's hoard (l. 2759, l. 3103) are all described as marvels. Similarly, the compounds *wundorsion*, 'wondrous sight', describes the great hall Heorot (l. 995), *wunderfæt* (l. 1162), *wundormaððum* (l. 2173) and *hondwundor* (l. 2768) refer to various treasures, the chalices used in the celebration after Grendel's demise, the golden torque given to Beowulf by Wealhtheow and a banner woven from golden thread in the dragon's hoard respectively. *Wundorsmiþ* (l. 1681), 'wonder-smith', refers rather to the makers of a treasure: the sword Beowulf kills Grendel's mother with. The skill of the smiths responsible is evidently greatly admired, but in this instance the craftsmen referred to are monsters. The sword is also identified as having been crafted by giants on three occasions: it is an 'ealdsweord eotenisc' (l. 1558), 'old sword made by giants', 'giganta geweorc' (l. 1562), the 'work of giants' and 'enta ærgeweorc' (l. 1679), the 'ancient work of giants'. The blade's association is connected through these descriptions with the notion of builder giants but also to the Biblical giants destroyed in the flood. Indeed, the hilt bears markings that identify it with the feud between the giants and God (ll. 1688-93). That a blade forged by giants should prove to be the undoing of another giant is ironic, but the appreciation of the skill of the blade's makers should not be read as such, even while their alien nature cannot be forgotten. Beowulf, the unnaturally strong warrior, is the only man who could possibly have wielded a sword never intended for human use (ll. 1557-62). The blade is wondrous, strange and terrible, as were its makers.

*Wundor* is also used to describe strange or marvellous events: Heorot surviving Grendel and Beowulf's violent struggle intact is considered a *wundor* (l. 771), as is the melting of the giants' sword in Grendel's blood (l. 1607). In the former instance, it is a testament to the craftsmanship that constructed Heorot, in the latter it is another indicator of Grendel's alien, monstrous nature. In a similar way, the compound *niðwundor* (l. 1365), 'dire

wonder', describes in entirely negative terms the supernatural evil of Grendel's mere — specifically referencing the ominous fire that burns on the water at night (ll. 1365-66). *Wundor* is also used twice in the context of the strangeness of death, on both occasions concerning the dying Beowulf. One instance refers to the unknowable mystery of when death will come to a man (l. 3062). The other instance describes the Geats' reaction to the news that Beowulf is dying: 'weorod eall aras;/ eodon unbliðe under Earnanæs,/ wollenteare wundur sceawian' (ll. 3030-32), 'the band of men arose; they went sorrowfully under Earnanæs with welling tears to see the marvel'. The marvel is evidently not simply that the mighty Beowulf has been slain but that his death has been brought about by such a formidable monster as a dragon. This is made apparent a few lines later when the poet refers to Beowulf's *wundordeað*, 'strange death' (l. 3037). Beowulf's passing is a terrible event for the Geats, but his death by combat with a dragon is undoubtedly also a fine and fitting end for a warrior (Hume, 1975, 10).

The remaining uses are more directly related to monsters in the poem and are revealing of the attitudes of the Danes and Geats in both negative and positive senses. Hrothgar's praise for God as one who works 'marvel after marvel', 'wunder æfter wundre' (l. 931) is in direct response to the sight of Grendel's severed arm and his jubilation at Grendel's destruction. *Wundor* is thus used positively to describe God's deeds, but in this instance the deed is slaying a monster. Similarly, when the Danes examine the mortally wounded Grendel's tracks in the daylight they are described as a *wundor* (l. 840), but since people are flocking to see 'lapes lastas' (l. 841), the 'tracks of the foe', the context makes it clear that the sight is wonderful only in it being another sign that Grendel has been destroyed (ll. 837-52). Grendel's severed arm is another sign of his destruction, but its description as a *searowundor* (l. 920), a 'curious wonder', which is prominently displayed and examined by many, suggests both interest and repulsion. The arm is so unusual and alien that it is fascinating to behold (ll. 916-24).

The sea monsters in Grendel's mere evoke a similar response in Beowulf's Geats. Beowulf kills one of the sea monsters in the mere, a 'wundorlic wægþora', a 'strange' or 'wonderful wave-roamer' (l. 1440). The creature is certainly strange, but it is also

fascinating. It is worth noting that it is dead and safely removed from the lake can the men stare at its gruesome form. Even though it is a ‘gryrellicne gist’ (l. 1441), a ‘terrible stranger’, the warriors are compelled to look at it. When Beowulf is assaulted later by more creatures in the mere, *wundor* remains an appropriate term for their strangeness and their fascination (l. 1509), even as the threat implicit in their alterity is actuated. *Wundor* is thus a term that is not necessarily negative in its application, with its uses in reference to monsters in *Beowulf* suggesting that in many instances several senses were operating at once.

### Old Norse

For the purposes of comparison I have compiled a short list of generic terms derived from Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vígfusson’s *Icelandic-English Dictionary* (henceforth *Cl-Víg*). I have selected those terms defined as ‘monster’ in the dictionary and focused on their occurrences in the context of *Íslendingasögur*. The terms I have selected on this basis are *fádæmi*, *óvættr*, *meinvættr* and *forað*. Much like in Old English it is more common to find a variety of terms that refer to specific types of monstrous beings, particularly giants or trolls.<sup>29</sup> And similarly to Old English, the generics in Old Norse often convey senses of the uncanny, the strange and — at times — the malevolent.

The plural noun *fádæmi* is employed in several sagas, used a total of nine times across *Bandamanna saga*, *Bárðar saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Havarðar saga* *Ísfirðings* and *Kroka-Refs saga*. *Fádæmi* is a term of some interest in that it is defined as ‘portents’ or ‘monstrosities’ in *Cl-Víg*. This sense is rarely applicable in the *Íslendingasögur*, where in many cases the sense is of something shocking or outrageous rather than relating to monstrosity in the senses that are of interest here. This sense of the term is reflected in legal contexts in *Bandamanna saga* and *Havarðar saga* *Ísfirðings*. *Fádæmi*’s three occurrences in *Bandamanna saga* are employed by Ófeigr to describe the irregularity and bad conduct of the eponymous confederates in pursuing their lawsuit against his son (8; 10). In *Havarðar saga* it appears in a similar context, only with the

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<sup>29</sup> Ármann Jakobsson’s recent discussion of the term ‘troll’ expands on the previously recorded senses of the word and reveals the numerous senses in which ‘troll’ could be employed, often with rather more general applications than to the specific monster (2008, 39-68).

roles reversed. The speaker protests that an old man seeking compensation for his slain son is speaking *fádæmi*, and that he will receive nothing for his efforts but a beating (7).

In *Grettis saga* and *Kroka-Refs saga* the noun is applied to two different situations involving sexual defamation. In the former it is used in a scatological passage in which a farm girl thinks it strange (*fádæmi*) that Grettir should be so big in build everywhere but between his legs (75), while in *Kroka-Refs saga* it describes the activities Refr is slanderously accused of by a group of his enemies, including the unsubstantiated claim that Refr transforms into a woman every ninth night and has sex with men (7).

Interestingly, the word is also used to describe the large, unusual spear Refr forges which he subsequently uses to avenge himself against these insults (8).<sup>30</sup>

The word is evidently used to describe behaviour that is in some way shocking, unusual or even unnatural, at least in the case of the charges of sexual misconduct levelled as an insult at Refr. But nothing in these instances is overtly related to monstrosity. Though the process described involves a seemingly supernatural transformation turning Refr into a woman, the barb is not that Refr is a monstrous being but instead the deadly insinuation that Refr is a catamite, a ‘deviant’ sexual nature challenging to his honour and masculine identity, one to be answered in blood (Miller, 1990, 31). In this case, Refr’s violent response is not socially inappropriate or monstrous, but rather necessary for him to refute these claims (8).<sup>31</sup>

In only two examples in the *Íslendingasögur* is *fádæmi* unequivocally connected to monstrosity or portents. In *Flóamanna saga*, a group of people stranded in an isolated bay in Greenland are afflicted by a supernatural occurrence that kills several men (22). The root of these events is in a change of faith from pagan worship to Christianity made by one of the leaders of the expedition, Þorgils. Þórr attempts to torment Þorgils into

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<sup>30</sup> *Kroka-Refs saga* is unusual in that its protagonist, while following a typical career development in beginning life as an unpromising layabout, blossoms into a cunning and capable warrior and trickster. However, Refr develops a talent for technological tinkering that sees him confound his opponents through the use of various cunning gadgets and plans. The spear is evidently a manifestation of this talent and is perhaps ‘unusual’ in this sense.

<sup>31</sup> In a similar way, Flosi in *Njáls saga* is insulted by Skarpheðinn, with the result that a process of arbitration breaks down irrevocably and a protracted bout of bloody feuding follows (123).

renouncing his Christian faith, visiting a series of disasters upon him, including his being shipwrecked in Greenland (20-24). In this case *fádæmi* is used in the context of Þorgils warning his men to be on the lookout for strange occurrences which might lead to their destruction. In fact, this essentially amounts to Þorgils desiring his men to keep to their Christian faith, since those who succumb to the pagan faith are killed and come back as the undead. The *fádæmi* are strange occurrences rather than specific beings, but their deadliness is real and very much anchored in a battle between faiths.

Such a conflict is an important theme in other sagas, particularly *Bárðar saga snæfelláss*, in which the final example of the noun is found. Here, *fádæmi* appears in another context in which the pagan and the Christian collide. A priest holds a vigil over a burial mound holding a malignant *draugr* and during a spiritual battle with its occupants many ‘marvels appeared to him both trolls and evil spirits, fiends and fairy folk’, (‘fádæmi sýndust honum, bæði troll ok óvættir, fjáendr ok fjölkunnigar þjóðir’ (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 166)). Here *fádæmi* seems appropriate in the sense of both monsters and visions, with ‘sýndust’ indicating that these various monstrous beings are visions only rather than fleshy adversaries. In this context again, Christian faith plays an important role in allowing the character to survive in the face of a phantasmal threat which nevertheless has potentially fatal consequences.

*Mein-vættir*, ‘noxious wight, monster’, refers typically to evil monstrous being in the sagas. In *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar* it describes the giant Brusi and his mother who appears in the form of a monstrous cat (6). It is used of the giant Geitir in *Fljótsdæla saga* (5) and twice of the unidentified being that kills and is presumed to have been killed by Glámr in *Grettis saga* (32). The most intriguing occurrence is in *Vatnsdæla saga* in the description of an at that point unidentified threat that has been preventing travel along a road through a forest (2). In this instance the *meinvættir* is discovered to be an outlaw living in the woods, albeit an outlaw of somewhat exceptional nature. This is of interest, however, since *meinvættir* can be used to describe a being of unidentified yet presumably monstrous nature and is used of Jökull before his identity is known. Implicit in this identification is that the threat to society in the form of murder and damage to the

economy on a fairly substantial scale is presumed to have been caused by a monster, rather than a man.

The term *forað* appears only in *Njáls saga*. This is a term that can mean literally a dangerous place or metaphorically a dangerous situation but is also defined as referring to a ‘bugbear, ogre, monster’ (*Cl-Víg* s.v.). It is perhaps used with an awareness of the latter two senses in the saga where Flosi uses it to refer to a widow pressing him to take vengeance for her murdered husband (116). Flosi, faced with her taunts, calls her *inn mesti forað*, ‘the worst *forað*’, keenly aware that in the face of her rebukes he stands to lose in personal honour if he refuses to seek blood vengeance but that if he does, a lot of people will likely die as the conflict becomes more heated. *Forað* thus enjoys some ambiguity in this context: is Flosi referring to Hildigunnr as a bloodthirsty ogress or as representing a difficult situation in having effectively staked his personal standing on the most violent course in a very public affair?<sup>32</sup> A play of words on both senses seems likely in the context.

*Óvættir* (*Cl-Víg* s.v. *ú-vættir*) refers to an evil creature or beings, and in the *Íslendingasögur* indicates its applicability to supernatural beings of a generally malevolent nature. Though it is applied only to trolls and giants in *Bárðar saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Hrana saga Hrings*, *óvættir* has a wider range of meaning and is clearly applicable to more general strata of monstrosity. Grettir emerges from the wilderness like a monster and is attacked as a result, leading to the deaths of all the men in the lodge when the fire gets out of control and burns it down. The troll-woman and giant Grettir battles during his outlaw years (64-67) are referred to as *óvættir*, an identification that coincides with their destruction and the resultant cleansing of the land. *Óvættir* is also used in the saga by the mysterious and monstrous Hallmundr in the verses that recount his deeds amongst a list of supernatural beings he has destroyed (62). Most interestingly it is used to describe Glámr (34) by a kinsman of Grettir’s who advises him that it is

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth noting that Hildigunnr is almost certainly not being called a monster for desiring blood vengeance, but for creating a situation in which it suddenly becomes a necessity for Flosi to pursue it at the cost of widespread violence or face potential personal ridicule. Flosi is infuriated at being thrust into the position of having to make such a decision by Hildigunnr’s tactics, which involve her quite literally using her murdered husband’s spilled blood to demand blood vengeance in a public forum.

‘miklu betr at fásk við mennska menn en við óvættir slíkar’, ‘much better to deal with human beings than with such *óvættir*.’ Grettir ignores the advice and comes to be identified as an *óvættir* himself due to Glámr’s curse. In this instance, Grettir is mistaken as an *óvættir* by a group of travellers when he emerges from the wilderness with his cloak frozen to him in such a way as to make him appear as large as a troll (38).<sup>33</sup> The response of those he encounters is to immediately attack. These details suggest that *óvættir* were associated with the wilderness, were inhuman in form and were entirely evil in disposition.

Some of these impressions are confirmed in its usages in other sagas. In *Flóamanna saga* a character who leaves a farmstead without warning anyone where he is going is thought to have been taken by ‘troll eða óvættir’, ‘trolls or evil beings’, suggesting once again that *óvættir* were dangerous monsters who lurked outside societal space but could enter into it (13). Another reference is made to *óvættir* during the sequence where Þorgils and his companions are assailed by a variety of evil supernatural phenomena in the wilderness (23). Of the five uses of the term in *Bárðar saga* three are in lists of monsters that usually include trolls and giants. For example, in the opening chapter when Bárðr’s father, the giant Dumbr, becomes a king of men because he will protect them from ‘risum ok trollum ok óvættum’, ‘giants, trolls and evil beings’ (1). The final examples are direct references to monsters. The first, Hetta, is twice described as a ‘tröllkona’, ‘a troll-woman’ and ‘in mesti hamhleypa’, ‘the worst shape-shifter’ whose monstrous activities include ‘ill viðskiptis bæði við menn ok fénað’, ‘dealing evilly with both men and livestock’ (8). Similarly, the other *óvættir*, Torfár-Kolla, is described as ‘in mesti tröll’, ‘the worst troll’ and is not only guilty of ‘margt illt, bæði í stuldum ok manndrápum’, ‘many evils, both in thefts and murders’, she is encountered one night amongst a farmer’s livestock and subsequently killed by the farmer (9).

*Bárðar saga*’s narrative world is one in which people and ostensible monsters are in closer proximity and, in some cases, harmony than in other sagas.<sup>34</sup> Where Bárðr and his

<sup>33</sup> See also discussion below, Chapter Five, pp. 124-25.

<sup>34</sup> *Bárðar saga* and the view of monsters it presents is fully discussed in Chapter Six, pp. 158-67.

father are explicitly of monstrous origin, they are not inherently negative figures in a pagan setting. Indeed, Bárðr and Dumbri are valuable figures in their communities as beings who will protect human society from less pacific monsters. In this saga where trolls and giants are not necessarily evil beings, anything that is identified as an *óvættir* unquestionably is. The referents in the other examples listed above are similarly negative in their connotations or actuality when an *óvættir* is encountered in a text. These are unequivocally monsters, then, in the sense of beings whose form, heritage or behaviour mark their difference from and violent antithesis to human society.

As even the brief survey of generic terms shows, the language of monstrosity is one that is applicable to humans and monsters both. The flexibility of terminology in Old English is perhaps unsurprising given that there existed a wide variety of monsters and not all of them were necessarily viewed as evil or threatening. The Icelandic terms considered here are also applicable to a wide range of beings, including humans, monsters, demons and spirits, though the connotations are more obviously negative: when Grettir is described as an *óvættir* it is in a context in which he is mistaken for a monster and attacked as a consequence. The terminology applied to monsters and humans in specific texts is worthy of close attention in helping to define aspects of their nature and the extent to which they can be seen in monstrous terms.

### Conclusions

The discussion in the last two chapters should make it clear that a flexible approach must be adopted to ensure an appropriately nuanced consideration of monsters and monstrous beings in specific contexts. Since monstrosity is as much a matter of behaviour, or morality as it is concerned with appearance or form, then it holds that even people relatively close at hand that behave in a monstrous manner might become monsters. In societies where identity and the body itself is not necessarily a stable category, then the notion of human monsters becomes one worthy of investigation. In each literature, in the ideas presented and the language used, there is a capacity for flux. The clash of heroic, pagan and Christian values creates a context in which the definitions of 'human' and 'monster' can shift and transformation from one kind to the other is entirely possible.

There are degrees of otherness, and degrees of monstrosity. The potential exists for the human and the monstrous not merely to interact but to overlap. Close attention must accordingly be paid to not just the particular details of various monsters close to the edges of humanity, but also to those other marginal groups that are often identified as close to the edges of monstrosity, to see where these edges blur, if they exist at all. The following chapters will explore these notions through both the inner workings and the outer regions of society and the ways in which humanity, monstrosity, society and religion overlap, intersect and create identity in Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic literary worlds. I turn first to tracing the roots of humanity and monstrosity in the characters of Grendel and Heremod in *Beowulf*.

## Chapter Three

*Beowulf*: Cain, Grendel and Heremod

*Beowulf* offers depictions of two societies ravaged by the external threat of monsters. Grendel and his mother threaten the Danes while a dragon all but destroys the Geats. Grendel is a *mearcstapa* (l. 103 [Klaeber, 2008]), a border-walker, and, like the dragon, makes a home in the wilderness removed from human society. Thus on the one hand, the image of the monster presented is that of external, inimical beings intruding on and threatening — or destroying — the symbols of (pagan) society. But the notions of monstrosity presented in *Beowulf* run deeper than merely the three major monsters, and the Christian elements of the poem complicate the monsters' relationship to human society and humanity's relationship to monstrosity. This chapter will explore the issues of malignant monsters in the heart of a society and the pressures on identity caused by social space, law and religion.

I begin with Grendel, the poem's monster who threatens or simply ignores society's conventions even as he comes to physically occupy and to some extent control the heart of Danish society. Grendel is described in places as an outcast and even as an outlaw, negatively associating him with the conventions of human society and placing him to some extent into a correspondence with malevolent, human, wrongdoers. As a result, many of the issues most relevant to this study aspects of Grendel's feud against society and Christianity. In the context of *Beowulf*, the most interesting figure for the purposes of comparison is the hero turned villain, and possibly monster, Heremod.<sup>35</sup> The importance of good social behaviour and the consequences of societal transgressions are stressed throughout the poem and issues such as gift-giving, loyalty to a lord and the symbolic importance of the hall or a household as a societal space are tied to notions of monstrosity throughout. Thus when an exceptional figure like Heremod fails to conform to the behaviour expected of him, his transgressions become viewed in monstrous terms. This chapter will consider how Grendel's relationship with humanity and society is explored

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<sup>35</sup> A point first developed in detail by Baird, 1966, 375-81.

in societal and religious terms and how a human figure like Heremod, through breaking social rules, can be seen as a monster.

### Grendel: Man and Monster

Grendel is described in terms of humanity and monstrosity. This apparent contradiction is reconciled in a Christian context by the explicit description of Grendel's descent from Cain. An important element in *Beowulf's* construction of the monstrous and the human is the way in which a Christian worldview permeates the poem, defining human and monster relationships. *Beowulf* ties into broader medieval traditions that identify the biblical figure of Cain as responsible for the birth of monstrous beings into the world.

Cain was a popular choice for many medieval Christian thinkers who sought to identify the human progenitor of the various monstrous beings thought to populate the earth (Friedman, 1981, 87-107; Orchard, 1995, 59-85). This connection to an influential medieval tradition places Grendel in a lineage traceable ultimately to Adam through the sin of Cain. Appropriate to his heritage, Grendel is frequently characterised in terms of crime, sin and exile throughout the poem. Within the context of the pagan society of the Danes, Grendel cannot be placed in such a Christianised hierarchy of humanity. Nevertheless, his description throughout the poem identifies him not only in monstrous and demonic terms, but also in human terms.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of the elucidation of Cain's role as progenitor of monsters is emphasised by the positioning of the two references to him.<sup>37</sup> These references come at key transitional points in the narrative; in the first instance, between Grendel's first description and his initial assault on Heorot (ll. 100b-114), and in the second, before Grendel's mother renews violence against the Danes in pursuit of vengeance for her son's death (ll. 1258b-67a). The first reference to Cain occurs during the first description of Grendel and is worth quoting in full:

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<sup>36</sup> Tolkien, for example, observes the multiplicity of terms applied to Grendel and their applicability to human, monstrous and demonic referents (1963, 51-104).

<sup>37</sup> For analysis of these Cain passages and their sources, see Mellinkoff, 1979, 143-62 and 1981, 183-98.

Swa ða drihtguman dreamum lifdon  
 eadiglice, oð ðæt an ongan  
 fyrene fre(m)man feond on helle;  
 wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,  
 mære nearcstapa, se þe moras heold,  
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard  
 wonsæli wer weardode hwile,  
 siþðan him Scyppend forscriften hæfde  
 in Caines cynne — þone cwealm gewræc  
 ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;  
 ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,  
 metod for þy mane mancynne fram.  
 Ðanon untydras ealle onwocon,  
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,  
 swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon  
 lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald. (ll. 99-114)

So the retainers lived happily with joys, until one began to perform wicked deeds, a hellish fiend. The fierce creature was called Grendel, a famed wanderer in borderlands, one who held the moors, fen and stronghold; the unblessed man occupied the dwelling place of a race of monsters for a time, since the Creator had proscribed him among Cain's kin — the eternal Lord avenged the killing, because he slew Abel. He did not gain joy from that hostile act, but the Creator banished him far from mankind because of the crime. From him all evil progeny awoke, giants and elves and evil spirits, such as the giants who struggled against God for a long time; he paid them a reward for that.

Grendel's description emphasises his status as an outsider and a monster. His dwelling place is not only firmly outside society's bounds in the wilderness of moors and fens, it is

also a place already occupied by a race of water monsters. But even as this monstrous element of Grendel's nature is being stressed, Grendel is also being depicted in human terms. He is both a *wonsæli wer*, an unblessed man, and, perhaps ambiguously, a *gæst*. While *gast/gæst* denotes a spirit, soul, demon or malignant creature, *DOE* also notes that it is sometimes used as a play on *gyst*, 'guest' or 'stranger'.<sup>38</sup> Both terms are ironically appropriate to Grendel considering his behaviour amongst the Danes as both a 'visitor' to the hall and an inhuman being. This dualistic play on Grendel's monstrous yet human nature and appearance occurs on several occasions throughout the poem, for example when Grendel is called a *guma* (l. 973, l. 1682) and a giant in size but *on weres wæstmum*, 'in the likeness of a man' (l. 1352).<sup>39</sup>

Since Cain is introduced in this passage not only as the starting point for all things monstrous, but as the first criminal, and, indeed, outlaw, it is hardly surprising that Grendel is also depicted in terms applicable to human outlaws or exiles. A particularly interesting example of the type of term applied to Grendel is *feasceaft*, meaning 'forlorn, destitute or wretched' (*DOE* s.v.) and thus certainly applicable to exiles. Beowulf uses this term to describe the dying Grendel (ll. 970b-79), but it is also used of such human heroes as Scyld Scefing, in his initial arrival as a child amongst the Danes (ll. 6b-7a), and of Beowulf himself, after returning to the Geats after the disastrous battle which sees Hygelac fall (ll. 2373-75). In a similar way, *angenga* and *gyst*, 'stranger/guest', are applicable to humans as much as monsters but are nevertheless employed of Grendel, suggesting a degree of similarity among exiles and perhaps even sympathy for such beings.<sup>40</sup> To the extent that such terms might imply sympathy, it is interesting to note that

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<sup>38</sup> See Lionarons (1998, 38-43) for an interesting discussion of the monstrous guest/host relationship between Beowulf and his 'monstrous doubles', Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon. Lionarons' reading posits the monster fights as 'culturally necessary sublations of the internal strife and violence that could, unchecked, destroy the social fabric' (39). In this reading, Grendel is not a terrifying presence for his refusal to obey societal norms of feud but is actually the scapegoat that conceals the potential for real human failing and malfeasance, making Grendel's human descent and description accordingly all the more dreadful.

<sup>39</sup> Grendel's mother is similarly described as being in the likeness of a woman (*idese onlicnes*, l. 1351), enjoying, unsurprisingly a similar form and status to her offspring.

<sup>40</sup> The notion that Grendel is being described as solitary is not necessarily the only possibility. Bammesberger (1999, 173-76) argues against the translation of *angenga* as 'solitary goer' and suggests instead 'attacker', a translation that, while it does not suggest pity, is still applicable to human or monstrous aggressors.

Grendel, in his state of being human-like but cut off from human society could well excite pity, even as his cannibalistic assault on the Danes can create only revulsion and horror. Grendel's descent from Cain makes such ambiguities possible since Grendel's lineage is ultimately human even as his spiritual taint, anomalous form and anti-social behaviour mark him as a monster.

Several of the exile terms applied to Grendel are more explicit in the degree of alienation denoted, though, such as *ellorgæst*, a term unique to *Beowulf* which combines the sense of Grendel being a spirit or malevolent being (*gæst*) coming from elsewhere (*ellor*), emphasising Grendel's foreignness from the Danes and from humanity in general. Indeed, at one point the terms are used in parallel to accentuate both beings' isolation from humanity (ll. 1348-49). Tolkien notes this layering of terms in his catalogue of Grendel's 'titles' as 'applicable in themselves to him by nature, but...also fitting either to a descendant of Cain, or to a devil' (1963, 91). The notion of a solitary being, outcast and utterly alienated from man and God, is a striking part of Grendel's description in the poem. And yet, it is somewhat at odds with his relationship with his mother, a being with which he shares a close relationship. Though Grendel is described as being alone, it is not because he has no companions, but because he has no social interaction with humans. The notion of isolation is a symbolic one, seemingly ascribed to Grendel because loneliness and isolation is part of the lot of monsters and of friendless men, as suggested in some of the Old English gnomic verses, contained in *Maxims II* and *Maxims I*, respectively.<sup>41</sup>

The gnomic wisdom of the *Maxims* poems is worth considering here since, as Paul Cavill argues, the poems

outline, and in the process construct, an Anglo-Saxon understanding of reality, quite deliberately focusing on the everyday, the typical, the social, the natural, in order to build up a framework which potentially

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<sup>41</sup> On the *Maxims* poems and Old English gnomic verse generally, see Cavill (1999) and Shippey (1976, esp. 12-19).

comprehends all human and natural phenomena and sets the whole construct under the omniscience of God. (1999, 183)

The *Maxims* poems come to represent not an incomplete catalogue of the Anglo-Saxon understanding and ordering of the world (Shippey, 1976, 18-19), but rather as a framework to contextualise the unusual things one might encounter in it. Thus it is possible to approach Grendel from such a perspective and see both the monstrous and human elements applicable to him in the poems.

Grendel is not as alone as the *freondleas* man, but he is nevertheless described as both a *mearcstapa* (103), ‘border-treader’, indicating his position on the fringes of things, and as an *angenga* (449), or ‘solitary traveller’, suggesting that he is in fact very much alone. The significance of being so marked is considerable in a society which thrives on mutual support and in which being a loner means, effectively, being outside of the structures of power and the social networks of society. Indeed, the gnomic wisdom of *Maxims I* spells out the grim fate awaiting the *freondleas* man, granting him only the company of wolves from which he can expect only treachery and a lonely death (ll. 146-51). Though this is not Grendel’s fate in the end, like the friendless man, Grendel is left unburied and his corpse is mutilated by his killer.

*Maxims II* stresses the proper location or station of various beings, including monsters, notably dragons and the monstrous *pyrs*, which may be a form of giant or more general monster. Since Grendel is described as a *pyrs*, the appropriate line is of considerable interest here. The verse given to the monstrous *pyrs* reads simply: ‘Pyras sceal on fenne gewunian ana innan lande’ (ll. 42b-43a [Dobbie, 1942]). The parallels to Grendel are apparent, since Grendel is described as one who ‘moras held/ fen and fasten’ (ll. 103b-104a), and is described as a solitary being and alone in his struggles against human society.<sup>42</sup> The reference is found between a verse on thieves and another on adulteresses.

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<sup>42</sup> It is obvious that the Danes know of Grendel’s mother, as Hrothgar is able to give report of sightings of her to Beowulf, after her attack on Heorot (ll. 1345-55). The conception of Grendel as an exile, and solitary being, a concept seemingly intrinsic to his monstrosity, is maintained up until the point of his mother’s attack, however.

The thief ‘sceal gangan þystrum wederum’ (l. 42a), ‘must travel in murky weather’, which may simply refer to the conditions required for stealth but perhaps implies a position outside societal space and thus a lack of adequate shelter. The lines concerning adulteresses address social perceptions more directly: ‘Ides sceal dyrne cræfte,/ fæmne hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce geþeon/ þæt hi man beagum gebicge’ (ll. 43b-45a), ‘A woman, a girl must with secret craft seek her lover if she does not wish to prosper among her people, so that someone will purchase her with rings’. The sentiment here is clearly ironic: fidelity is being advised rather than caution in carrying out an extra-marital affair. However, this does put social perceptions and concerns pointedly to the fore. The linking of these socially reprehensible figures with the monstrous *þyrs* is interesting, and made all the more so by the link through Grendel as a figure who is exiled, engaged in criminal acts and is himself a monstrous *þyrs*. *Maxims II* offers the suggestion of a link between the monstrous and the socially aberrant in these lines. The poem indicates that there was an Anglo-Saxon notion of a world in which monsters and humans coexisted, and seems to imply that a monster like a *þyrs* is associable with those humans who pursue courses along moral latitudes which differ from those which society accepts.

The second reference to Cain, occurring this time prior to Grendel’s mother’s assault on Heorot, while largely reiterating the information given in the first passage, identifies both Cain and Grendel as outlaws, creating a number of important thematic resonances:

Grendles modor,  
 ides aglæcwif yrmþe gemunde,  
 se þe wæteregesan wunian scolde,  
 cealde streamas, siþðan Ca[in] wearð  
 to ecgbanan angan breþer,  
 fæderenmæge; he þa fag gewat,  
 morþre gemearcod mandream fleon,  
 westen warode. Ðanon woc fela  
 geoscaftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum,

heoroweorh hetelic... (ll. 1258b-67a)

Grendel's mother, the fearsome woman, had in mind misery, the one who had to inhabit fearsome water, cold streams, since Cain became a slayer by the sword to his only brother, a kinsman on his father's side. He went then outlawed, fled the joys of man marked by murder, occupied the wilderness. From him awoke all beings sent by fate. Grendel was one of them, a hateful savage outcast...

Cain is, quite literally by the biblical account, marked by his murder and flees into the wildernesses which his descendants not only populate but are, as the use of the modal *sculan* indicates, forced to inhabit. There is in this perhaps some sense of the worldly framework the *Maxims* poems convey in their stipulation of the places and stations of various beings, human, animal and monstrous. Cain's losing touch with the joys of man (*mandream*) is a point of some importance, since it is the joys of the hall that torment Grendel into action, and the same joys from which Heremod turns away as he becomes a destructive force to his own people. This is suggestive of more than just physical exile: the joys that Cain leaves behind revolve, in the Germanic world of *Beowulf*, around companionship and a place in a structured legal, religious and social setting, exactly the principles that the great hall Heorot represents. Being driven from them for a crime is a punishment for behaviour disruptive or destructive to society. Being tormented by them or turning actively away from them is indicative of a loss of touch with the principles of human society. In *Beowulf*, such an action is entirely an anti-societal one, and results in or is the consequence of intolerable acts of violence.

One of the conflicts within the poem is the difference between the pagan setting and the Christian authorship. Cain is a figure that is — ostensibly — unknown to the pagan Danes, but one that would excite horror in both Christian and non-Christian Germanic audiences since he is a kinslayer and an exile. George Clark most economically makes the point on which this irony of *Beowulf*'s hinges: 'For the Danes, Grendel is an affliction of unknown origin; for the audience, he is one of the race of Cain.' (Clark, 1990, 72).

The fullest extent of Grendel's taint and origin is thus shielded from the Danes, even as they are exposed to the full extent of his monstrous fury. But even so, the identification of Grendel as an outlaw and as a human is one that is made in various places in the poem from the Danish perspective. In this way, Grendel's identification as an exile brings him into the realm of humanity even as exile status defines him as one removed from it. In Grendel's case, he becomes an antagonistic monstrous force when he attempts to violently enter and contend with the human society he has hitherto existed on the edges of. Thus while Cain was forced to flee the joys of man, Grendel is brought from the wilderness to the heart of society because he is disturbed by the sounds of people enjoying themselves in Heorot (ll. 86-90). Grendel's assault on Heorot is the key factor in making him a ravager of a nation, a monster at its very worst. And in this is something of the difference in the nature of horror of the wild spaces, and what they might contain, and of the horror caused by something from the outside entering into the social domain. In this context, I consider Grendel's assault on Heorot and on the Danes next.

#### The Assault on Heorot: Christianity, Society and the *Gifstol*

In *Beowulf* society is bound together by gift-giving, as the poem explains during the course of the genealogy of Hrothgar that comprises the opening lines of the poem (ll. 20-24). The munificent actions of the Danish prince Beowulf are concluded with the gnomic utterance 'lofdædum sceal / in mægþa gehwære man geþeon' (l. 24b-25), 'By praiseworthy deeds shall a man prosper in any nation'. The importance of gift-giving as a societal crux is often stressed in the poem, whether in the magnificence of Hrothgar's gifts to Beowulf for the hall cleansing and destruction of Grendel's mother to the gift of a sword given by Beowulf to the Danish coastguard, which greatly enhances his standing in the hall (ll. 1900-03), or in Wiglaf's speeches where he first rouses himself to action then rebukes his cowardly comrades (ll. 2633-60; ll. 2864-91). At the centre of these activities is the hall, specifically Heorot. The hall has for some time been seen as the symbolic centre of Germanic society.<sup>43</sup> Heorot's particular importance to the Danes and to the functioning of the heroic society that *Beowulf* presents is made apparent through the

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<sup>43</sup> The hall motif has been explored most notably by Kathryn Hume (1973, 63-74).

reasons given for Hrothgar's ambitious hall-building project. Hrothgar's intention is to build the greatest of halls inside which he wished:

eall gedælan  
geongum ond ealdum, swylc him God sealde,  
buton folcscare ond feorum gumena. (ll. 71b-73)

to share out everything God gave him to young and old, except  
common land and the lives of men.

Hrothgar's hall is built on the principle of a community spirit fostered on the sharing out of wealth to everyone. In the notion of Hrothgar as lord dispensing wealth from Heorot is one of the important societal elements that Grendel, in fact, fails to destroy, a point revealed in some of the poem's more heavily debated lines, the *giftstol* crux, which will be returned to in detail below.

The fact that Hrothgar anachronistically puts his trust in God is a feature of this and other characters in the poem, but is an important point in identifying the hall in both a heroic societal and Christian context. Christianity's place within the hall is further suggested by the song of the *scop* in ll. 90-98, where an account of the creation of the world very much like Genesis is given (Cavill, 2004, 25). It is as both a symbol and functional part of Danish society and Hrothgar's Christianity that Heorot becomes Grendel's target for assault in the poem. Immediately following the description of the poet's song is the first proper description of Grendel, a description that puts him in the light of an exile from humanity and from God, one of the monstrous kin of Cain forced to live in desolate places amongst monsters. And it is the fury awoken in Grendel by Hrothgar's great hall that inspires his subsequent attacks. Grendel's status as an exiled monster related to humanity is thus explained in Christian terms but it his prolonged assault on Heorot that serves to actively reveal the anti-societal nature of his monstrosity.

So effective are Grendel's predations that Heorot is abandoned at night where before the hall was occupied by the warriors who would feast and sleep there (ll. 138-44). Grendel's initial assault sees him enter Heorot during the night and steal away thirty men, carrying them away to devour later at his home (ll. 115-25). In this, Grendel's antithetical attitude with regard to society is revealed in a fashion horrific to Christian and pagan alike. Grendel's night-time murder is bad enough, but is compounded by the removal of the bodies, preventing the burial of the slain and worse still by Grendel's cannibalistic consumption of them.<sup>44</sup> The anti-societal nature of Grendel and his assault against the Danes is stressed initially through the ironic reversal of Heorot's symbolism and the monstrous manner of Grendel's attack:

Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan,  
ana wið eallum, oð þæt idel stod  
husa selest. (ll. 144-46a)

So he prevailed and in defiance of law he contended one against all,  
until the best of houses stood empty.

Grendel is one against an entire society, but he is nevertheless able to prevent Heorot from being used, at least during the night, and as such successfully quashes the joy of man that first disturbed him, as well as the ordered running of the society. Grendel's defiance against *riht* could suggest a generalised sense of contending against right, but may enjoy a more specific sense of contending against law. This would further highlight his outlaw status and anti-societal nature. And, indeed, the subsequent lines that describe the years in which he torments the Danes construct his assaults using feud-terms even as Grendel's refusal to adhere to the laws of honourable feud is revealed. Lines 146b-66 emphasise on Grendel's habits of laying ambushes and killing young and seasoned warriors alike (ll. 159-61), and of the violent deeds and injuries he inflicted on the Danes (ll. 164-66a), and explore Grendel's and the Danes' attitude in terms of feud:

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<sup>44</sup> On burial and dismemberment motifs in the poem, see Owen-Crocker, 2002, 81-100. On cannibalism as a monstrous trope, see Williams, 1996, 145.

sibbe ne wolde  
 wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,  
 feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,  
 ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfte  
 beorhte bote to ban[an] folmum (ll. 154b-59)

He did not wish for peace with any man of the Danish host, to abandon  
 deadly evil, to settle with money. Nor did any of the counsellors there  
 need to expect gleaming compensation at the hands of the killer.

Grendel being described as unwilling to come to some form of peace settlement once again serves to highlight his refusal to participate in human societal systems, in this case in the honour system where currency or valuable objects can become roughly equivalent to an act of vengeance. In Grendel's case, there is no interest in seeking reparation but in pursuing his particular form of feud to the bloody end. Grendel's feud is with the joys of man, those things deprived him in his exiled state, and it will not end through any means other than blood. And, in an ironic play on the poet's part, though the Danes cannot expect compensation at their killer's hand, it is of course through the bloody trophy of Grendel's severed arm and hand that they first learn that the monster has been destroyed, the hall cleansed and the deaths of many Danes avenged.

The culmination of this section dealing with Grendel's activities comes in ll.166b-69, which describe Grendel's nightly occupation of Heorot in relation to Hrothgar's throne, or *gifstol*, the seat from which treasure is dispensed and that represents the social heart of the hall and the Danish community. Grendel's relationship to the throne is explored and similarly reveals a relationship to this key symbol rather different than that of a Danish retainer. The lines in question describe Grendel in possession of Heorot during the night, at the height of his attacks on the Danes:

Heorot eardode,

Sincfage sel sweartum nihtum —  
 no he þone gifstol gretan moste,  
 maþðum for Metode, ne his myne wisse. (ll. 166b-69)

While ll.166b-67 can be translated straightforwardly as ‘He [Grendel] occupied Heorot, the richly decorated hall by dark night’, the interpretation of ll. 168-69 has been a cause of considerable debate amongst *Beowulf* scholars.<sup>45</sup> Given the importance of clearly establishing Grendel’s relationship to an object of such social significance, it is worth considering the arguments presented concerning these lines in detail. Among the problems offered by these lines is the translation of *gretan*, which could mean either ‘approach’ or ‘attack’, whether *maþðum* is to be taken in parallel with *gifstol*, whether *for Metode* refers to God, and the interpretation of the troubling half line 169b.

*Gretan* in this context is defined in the *DOE* as ‘paying respect to the throne’ indicating a formal approach to an object of great social significance (Robinson, 1992, 259).<sup>46</sup> The meaning of l.167 would then be that ‘he [Grendel] was not able to approach the throne’. This can be taken in the sense that Grendel, present only at night in Heorot, is unable to approach Hrothgar’s throne and interact in a social setting as the Danish retainers would.

Another alternative is that Grendel is actually physically restrained by the will of God, a view that is dependent on the interpretation of *for Metode* in l. 169. In the line, *maþðum* is usually taken as a parallel to *gifstol*, rendered ‘the treasure’ but referring to the throne, while ‘for Metode’ has generally been taken as ‘because of God’, with the sense that God actively prevents Grendel from approaching or molesting the *gifstol*. Line 169b has been variously translated, but, following the supposed intervention of God, one possibility is ‘nor did he know His love’, for a translation of the two lines that reads: ‘he was not able

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<sup>45</sup> For a summary of the various possible translations, see Kaske, 1985, 143-44. Kaske also offers summaries of the various arguments presented up until that point (142-51). See also Bammesberger, 1992, 243-48 and Robinson, 1992, 257-62.

<sup>46</sup> See Chaney, 1962, 513-20 for the importance of the *gifstol* in Germanic society.

to approach the throne, the treasure, because of the Creator, and he did not know His love'.<sup>47</sup>

This translation indicates both Grendel's alienation from human society and his impotence against Christian faith since God prevents him from destroying the *gifstol*, the most potent symbol of society to the Danes. Grendel's inability to approach the *gifstol* implies that he is prevented from being able to gain access to the symbolic heart of society, and, indeed, to the mechanisms by which society operates. Though the hall is the social centre, the *gifstol* is the seat from which treasure is dispensed, and this in turn is the means by which a king binds his followers to him. As a monstrous outsider, Grendel can take no part in this socially defining process, but in being denied any access or control over the *gifstol*, he is denied both any opportunity to become part of this process and the chance to disrupt it.

There are difficulties with this interpretation, however, which both Robinson and Bammesberger have separately addressed. Robinson points out (1992, 258-59) that in the following lines, 170-71, Grendel's behaviour is described as a *wræc micel*, a great misery, to Hrothgar. This would make little sense if the misery is caused by Grendel's being unable to approach or harm the *gifstol*, which would if anything be a relief to the beleaguered Hrothgar. Bammesberger (1992, 243-48), by contrast, argues that God would intervene directly only to prevent Grendel attacking the throne and not the Danes or that this preventative power was only operational during the day. Though God's purpose could be construed in a number of ways, Bammesberger offers an interesting, though dubious, alternative reading that removes God from the line. Arguing that *for Metode* should in fact be read as *formetode*, a preterite form of a unrecorded verb, *\*formetian*, to despise. He thus suggests a reading of l. 169 as 'he despised treasure, nor did he know love of it'. While such a reading would offer another point of contrast between Grendel and the Germanic society in which the dispensing of treasure is so vital, it is not persuasive. A significant problem is that when Beowulf invades Grendel's lair, there is at

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<sup>47</sup> Another alternative would be 'nor did he [Grendel] know its [the *gifstol*] function', which would suggest Grendel's alienation from human society through his ignorance of one of the chief symbols of society operating in the poem (Kaske, 1985, 143).

least to be found there the giant-made sword that Beowulf uses to kill Grendel's mother and decapitate Grendel himself, and the implication is that many treasures are indeed to be found in Grendel's hall since the poem states that Beowulf contents himself with the trophies of Grendel's head and the hilt of the giant made sword:

Ne nom he in þæm wicum, Weder-Geata leod,  
maðmæhta ma, þeh he þær monige geseah... (ll. 1612-13)

Nor did he, the man of the Weder Geats, take more of the precious possessions in those haunts, although he saw many more there.

If Grendel despises treasure, then why would he have amassed a collection of it and keep it in his home? The implication that there is considerable treasure there suggests, if anything, hoarding behaviour that monsters such as dragons are prone to, a behaviour that is itself antithetical to Germanic society and to the principles of gift-giving and generosity expounded on in *Beowulf*.

Robinson offers a more plausible reading that allows for this aspect of Grendel's nature to be taken into account, constructed along similar lines to Bammesberger's but focusing on Grendel's refusal to follow the principles of Germanic society Robinson suggests that *ne...moste* in l. 168 should be read as 'did not have to', and offers a translation of the lines: 'By no means did he [Grendel] have to show respect for the throne; he despised the precious thing, did not feel love for it' (1992, 261). It is thus Grendel's refusal to behave in the manner of a retainer and to respect the symbols of Danish society that is the cause of Hrothgar's great misery. This reading would also make sense if Grendel is to be taken as despising the *gifstol* as a place where treasure is dispensed, if Grendel is himself a hoarder of treasure as ll. 1612-13 would seem to suggest. This also fits into the context of ll. 149-69, since these lines show Grendel's violent depredations in a human context. Grendel is presented as a being that eschews the societal norms of feud and honour in favour of pursuing unrelenting blood vengeance. Grendel's disrespect and hatred of the

*gifstol* is a marker of not just his status as one outside law and society, but as a being utterly opposed to its symbols and activity.<sup>48</sup>

Grendel is not merely exiled from humanity, but violently opposed to the very social conventions that he can never be a part of. He therefore seeks to destroy them. Grendel's form imparts a great deal of his monstrosity to him, but it is in the active aggression against Danish society that he truly becomes a monster, just as his mother is not even considered a threat until she kills Æschere, though the Danes seem to have known of her existence prior to this (ll. 1345-52). If monstrosity is indeed in part defined by anti-societal actions, as the nature of the Danish complaints against Grendel suggest, then the villainous Heremod, a much debated figure associated with the monstrous, offers an excellent opportunity to investigate the reactions to a human who commits acts of excessive and anti-societal violence in ways similar to Grendel<sup>49</sup>

### Heremod and Beyond

The passages that concern Heremod in *Beowulf* occur at ll. 898-915 and 1709-23. Heremod is in the first contrasted with Sigemund, the famous Germanic hero and monster-slayer, and with Beowulf who has just destroyed Grendel, earning both Danish approbation and favourable comparison to the great Sigemund. In the latter case, Hrothgar speaks of Heremod as a moral exemplum to Beowulf as part of his 'sermon' on the dangers of pride (Hansen, 1982, 53-67 and Orchard, 1995, 37-47). Heremod is of interest here as an example of monstrous change, since he is a man of skill and courage who turns to evil ways and ends his days *mid eotenum*, a much debated phrase which might place Heremod among giants and will be considered in more detail below.

In the first passage under consideration here, Heremod's nature as an initially great hero is emphasised by the fact that the dragon-slaying Sigemund only supersedes Heremod in

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<sup>48</sup> In this context see also Day, 1999, 313-24, who argues that Grendel's violation of Hrothgar's *mund*, the legal protection Hrothgar extends to his hall as its owner and ruler, compels Hrothgar to transfer *mund* to Beowulf, adding a legal element to the struggle in the hall.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Neville most recently considered Heremod as a monstrous figure in an article that examined notions of monstrosity and humanity in *Beowulf* and in outlaws (2001, 117-18).

terms of prowess when his powers begin to fail him (ll. 898-902a).<sup>50</sup> The subsequent lines describe in elliptic fashion Heremod's apparent instability, the strangeness of his nature that causes considerable concern to his noblemen and people through his actions. It is not until the second passage that these actions are clarified, but these lines also contain a reference to Heremod's ultimate fate, and to the *eotenum* among whom he is slain:

He mid Eotenum wearð  
on feonda geweald forð forlacen,  
snude forsended. (ll. 902b-904)<sup>51</sup>

The chief issue surrounding the interpretation of *eotenum* has concerned the sense in which giants fit into the story of Heremod. Though *eotenum* is the philologically correct form of the dative plural of *eoten*, 'giant', many critics have preferred to translate the term 'Jutes', reading *eotenum* as a form of *Eotan*, as more in keeping with the story of a Dane outcast from his society.<sup>52</sup> Though the correct form of the dative plural of *Eotan* is *Eotum*, *eotenum* is argued as a form of 'Jutes' analogically derived from the genitive plural *eotena*.<sup>53</sup> Some commentators have attempted to get around this problem by suggesting that though the term employed is *eoten*, it is used not to specify giants but rather in a general sense meaning enemies or even demons, though the justifications for such senses of the word is scant.<sup>54</sup>

Translating *eotenum* as 'giants' makes sense given the context in which the term is employed. Heremod is being contrasted with Sigemund, and Sigemund, as well as a dragon-slayer, is described as a killer of giants. The reference to Sigemund is itself

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<sup>50</sup> Scott Gwara (2008, 59-81) offers an interesting analysis of the Sigemund-Heremod passages which views both men as being deliberately ambiguous, flawed figures who are both identified with Beowulf as a means of implying his 'darker traits' (59). Mark Griffith (1995, 11-41) also identifies Sigemund as a troubling figure in his parallels to Grendel.

<sup>51</sup> Klaeber takes *eotenum* as a reference to the Jutes, hence his capitalisation. See (2008, 171) for a rationale and references.

<sup>52</sup> *DOE* does not attribute any of the contentious forms to 'giant', *eoten* (s.v.).

<sup>53</sup> The most recent addition to the debate is strongly in favour of a translation of 'giants' and offers a fuller account of the arguments involved (Stuhmiller, 1999, 7-14).

<sup>54</sup> See Kaske, 1967, 285-310. See also Blake, 1962, 278-87, who argues for a demonic interpretation of *on feonda geweald* and *eotenum* as devils Heremod falls under the sway of.

inspired by Beowulf's destruction of Grendel, a being described as an *eoten* to Beowulf's *eotenweard*. Thus a possible translation of ll. 902b-904 is 'He was betrayed into the power of enemies, quickly put to death among the giants'. The importance of the reference to giants should not be played down, as there is a thematic resonance with the second Heremod passage, which features in Hrothgar's 'sermon'. The sermon is delivered by Hrothgar after Beowulf's triumphant return to Heorot bearing Grendel's head and the hilt of the sword used to kill Grendel's mother and behead Grendel. The hilt, all that remains after contact with Grendel's corrosive blood, is decorated with a scene that depicts the biblical giants being destroyed in the flood, and the sword itself is described as having been made by giants. It is in the context of giants, then, that the 'sermon' begins, and it is in this context that Hrothgar's warning against the dangers of pride is given, beginning with an exhortation to Beowulf to be a comfort to people, which then is contrasted with the behaviour of Heremod:

Ne wearð Heremod swa  
 eaforum Ecgwelan, Ar-Scyldingum;  
 ne geweoƿ he him to willan, ac to wælfalle  
 ond to deaðcwalum Deniga leodum;  
 breat bolgenmod beodgeneatas,  
 eaxlgesteallan, oþ þæt he ana hwearf,  
 mære þeoden mondreamum from,  
 ðeah þe hine mihtig God mægenes wynnum,  
 eafepum steppe, ofer ealle men  
 forð gefremede. Hwæþere him on ferhþe greow  
 breosthord blodreow; nallas beagas geaf  
 Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad,  
 þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade,  
 leodbealo lognsum. (ll. 1709b-22a)

Heremod did not become so to the descendants of Ecgwela, the Ar-Scyldings; he did not grow up as a joy to them, but as slaughter and

death to the people of the Danes. Enraged he killed table companions, comrades, until he, the illustrious prince, turned alone from the joys of man. Though mighty God exalted him in the joys of strength and power, and advanced him above all men, his heart grew bloodthirsty in spirit. He did not at all give to the Danes rings in pursuit of glory. Joyless he lived on, endured the misery of that strife, a prolonged affliction to the people.

Heremod kills those closest to him and acts out of selfish impulses in a society where, the poem stresses, generosity is the key to building a successful society (ll. 20-25). Heremod becomes an affliction to his people, not unlike Grendel to the Danes, and even, these lines imply, contends with God to the extent that the gifts of skill and strength that God grants him are turned to evil ends rather than those which would have been socially profitable, a notion that has led John Vikrey to argue that Heremod's failure to dispense rings was not an indication of his miserliness, but rather of his rapacity, and that it is greed that leads Heremod to slaughter his companions for their wealth (1974, 295-300). Heremod is thus not only a figure who is exiled from society but one who actively breaks the rules and betrays the systems that allow society to function in *Beowulf's* world. Unlike Cain who is exiled by God, then, or Grendel who is unable to enter human society and is tormented by those joys, Heremod actively turns away from human society. The horror that Heremod represents is that he not only fails to live up to his potential, but that he turns his heroic prowess against his comrades and actively damages and disrupts the society around him.

Heremod's place in Hrothgar's sermon is as a warning to Beowulf of the dangers of pride and of succumbing to too great a belief in one's own powers. Heremod is a parallel case, and it is in this context that it is worth returning to the *eotenum* that Heremod is among at his death. Given the comparisons made between giant-slaying heroes and a man who succumbs to monstrous pride, I argue that the use of *eotenum* here is a reference to the biblical giants. As monsters that represent the dangers of pride, they serve to sharpen the contrast between Heremod and the virtuous Sigemund and Beowulf, and put Heremod's actions into a context that is both Christian and monstrous. Beowulf and Sigemund are

slayers of giants, men who overcome evil without abusing the exceptional gifts that allow them to do so, while Heremod falls in with the giants conceptually for failing to remember his place and function in society. Indeed, it is possible to read ll. 902b-904a as expressing just such a sentiment. S. A. J. Bradley offers a translation that best captures Heremod's alignment with these monstrous forces of pride and evil by taking *on feonda gewæld* as a reference to devils and translating *mid eotenum* as 'along with the giants': 'Along with the giants, Heremod was seduced into the power of devils and was swiftly sent to perdition' (1982, 435). Such a reading fits into the larger context of biblical, monstrous allusion that Heremod is part of in the poem and aligns Heremod conceptually with the biblical monsters and sees him destroyed in a manner reminiscent of Grendel's death.

Heremod is a monster, one who ranks alongside the biblical giants precisely because he refuses to fulfil his responsibilities to his people and instead turns to destructive, anti-societal behaviour. While Beowulf is explicitly contrasted to Heremod in the poem, comparison with other figures such as Hygelac and Scyld Scefing is implied. In the case of Hygelac, recklessness, if not pride, is unarguably part of his downfall when he is crushed in battle (ll. 2373-75). Though there is no reference to monstrosity on Hygelac's part in the poem, there is in the description of Hygelac's bones in the *Liber Monstrorum* which suggests that Beowulf's patron was in fact a giant, indicating that some strand of Anglo-Saxon thought connected him with monstrosity (Orchard, 1995, 258-59).

In the case of Scyld Scefing, his mysterious arrival into the Danish community is unusual, but it is, in fact, his 'good' kingly behaviour that is of interest. In the course of his wars amongst other tribes, Scyld is reported as often depriving enemies of their mead benches, and it is in this that Scyld bears comparison not so much to Hygelac as to Grendel, whose nightly occupation of Heorot rendered the hall and its benches unusable to the Danish warriors. Indeed, Lionarons (1996, 5-7) points to Scyld Scefing's mead-bench-depriving behaviour as ambiguous, made heroic and the stuff of good kingship only in retrospect, just as his mysterious arrival and successful taking of the throne are seen as a consolation and aid to a 'lordless' people. In this can be seen the importance of

how an individual or his actions are perceived comes to define them as much or more than the actions themselves. Scyld wreaks havoc amongst his fellow humans, but does so in a fashion that nevertheless strengthens and enriches his own people. Scyld is a good king and a hero, whereas Heremod, proud and capable, fails to maintain the correct societal systems and is destroyed by or among the monsters he is conceptually united with.

In *Beowulf* monstrosity is represented at least as much in spiritual and social terms as it is in anomalous physical form. To be a monster such as Grendel is to be at once outcast from society and from Christianity, to be turned away from the joys of man and God. Even as the monsters are defined by their absence from human society, they are pulled into an oppositional relationship with it precisely through the perception of their outsider status in societal terms. And it is in societal terms that the monstrous depredations are experienced and lamented. Indeed, it is the perceptions of society that really separate monsters and men, since monstrosity and humanity are ultimately derived from the same source in the poem's Christian worldview. However, the dividing line is not between society and the external monstrous threat, but rather between those capable of living in accordance with society's rules and ways and those that are not. Heremod's transformation is all the more disturbing for his being a heroic figure who betrays his society rather than a more obviously anti-social individual. Heremod's example indicates that even a powerful man operating within the boundaries of society can become monstrous in the eyes of those around him due to his inability to fit into the role expected of him and his consequent behaviour. Heremod is an extreme example of anti-social behaviour, but there is a strong correlation between social misfits and monsters, a connection I consider now in the context of monstrous change into the undead within Icelandic society.

## Chapter Four

### The Lives of the Living Dead: *Draugar* in the *Íslendingasögur*

This chapter considers *draugar*, or the walking dead, in Icelandic sagas and some of the social dynamics of commonwealth era Iceland. Significant *draugar* will be explored alongside conventions of honour culture, feud, society and religion apparent in the *Íslendingasögur*. *Draugar* are often interesting figures that highlight the relations between society, identity and monstrosity, since everyone who becomes a *draugr* was at one time a human being. Many of the *draugar* of the *Íslendingasögur* are more or less ordinary people — shepherds and farmers of high or low birth and status — as opposed to the exotic kings and vikings more typical of *förmaldarsögur*.<sup>55</sup> The *draugar* explored below will focus chiefly on Icelandic figures in order to consider how elements of monstrosity, society and religion interact within medieval Iceland itself, at least as far as can be seen through the refracting lens of the sagas.

#### *Draugar* in Sagas

*Draugr* is the Icelandic term for a particular type of undead being. Cl-Víg defines *draugr* as ‘ghost’ or ‘spirit’, in particular ‘the dead inhabitant of a cairn’. In fact, the *draugr* is a walking corpse, typically active at night and often malevolently interactive with the physical world. The intensely physical aspect of the *draugr* is worth stressing since it is through struggle and destruction that these monsters make their mark in many sagas. Indeed, *draugar* are examples of the undead where

spirit is not so much breathed into matter so much as material corporeality is retained by the restless spirit...Not only are their bodies uncorrupted, but in the cases of the physically most active and temperamentally most malevolent, they are larger, heavier, and, above

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<sup>55</sup> Malevolent viking *draugar* more typical of the *förmaldarsögur* do, however, feature in *Barðar saga*, *Harðar saga ok holmverja* and *Gull-Þóris saga*.

all, stronger than in life, the faces darker and the eyes more terrifying.  
(Sayers, 1996, 242)

Some *draugar* are limited to the area around their burial site, while others roam around a wider area centred on the site of their burial or death, killing and destroying or sometimes simply getting in the way. Arguably the most famous *draugr* is Glámr of *Grettis saga*. Glámr haunts the farm he worked on in life, killing and driving people away until he is destroyed by Grettir Ásmundarson, though, thanks to a powerful curse, Glámr is as much the bane of Grettir as Grettir is of Glámr (32-33, 35). The wide-ranging destruction of Glámr can be contrasted with a relatively innocuous group of *draugar* found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where a group of drowned men haunt the fire in their old farm but harm no one and are eventually exorcised by means of legal eviction (54). *Draugar* are thus not always necessarily dangerous, but most are destructive or at least disruptive of everyday life. *Eyrbyggja saga* offers examples of different behaviour amongst *draugar*. One, Þórólfr *bægifótr*, is a malevolent, destructive creature. The drowned victims of a curse at Fróðá sit at the fire of their old home during the evenings but otherwise take no violent or destructive action. Þórgunna, a Christian woman in part responsible for the haunting at Fróðá, is essentially benevolent in her undead activities, but terrifying nonetheless to those who witness her. All three examples will be considered in greater detail in this chapter.

As noted, *draugar* do not decay but grow far stronger in undeath, making them very difficult to dispose of. The more usual course for dealing with a *draugr* is to exhume the body and relocate it in a remote place where the *draugr* will have little opportunity to cause harm to others. This is usually carried out during the day, when *draugar* are dormant, though ultimately such a strategy is rarely wholly successful. Usually more effective is cutting off the head of the *draugr*, and cremation can put paid to the *draugr* permanently — as long as the ashes are carefully dealt with. Grettir's disposal of Glámr is a good example of a dangerous *draugr* being carefully laid to rest (35):

Brá hann þá saxinu ok hjó höfuð af Glámi ok setti þat við þjó  
honum...Fóru þeir til ok brenndu Glám at köldum kolum. Eptir þat báru  
þeir ösku hans í eina hít ok grófu þar niðr, sem sízt váru fjárhagar eða  
mannavegir. (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 122)

He [Grettir] then drew the sword and struck the head from Glámr and  
set it between his thighs...They set to and burned Glámr to cold coals.  
After that they put his ashes into a skin-bag and buried them where  
there were the least cattle pastures and roads.<sup>56</sup>

The detail of placing the severed head between the thighs or buttocks recurs frequently, and may perhaps have something to do with the idea of shaming the *draugr* into inactivity (Sayers, 1996, 244-45). Indeed, beheading alone was not effective in every case, as will be seen, and finding a safe place to dispose of the ashes was important, too. In *Eyrbyggja saga* the *draugr* Þórólfr *bægifótr*'s ashes end up scattered over a beach. A cow licks them and later gives birth to a monstrous bull that kills the man who burned Þórólfr's body (63), a sequence that represents the extreme of the *draugr*'s potential for malevolence and corruption.

From this it can be seen that *draugar*, like the vampires of folklore, are capable of passing on their undead state to their victims.<sup>57</sup> This accounts for several of the Icelandic undead, including Glámr, who is a tough shepherd killed by an unknown monster before he becomes a monster himself. The problem with such a process of passing on the 'spiritual taint' in the propagation of the undead is, of course, the question of where the first *draugr* comes from. In the case of the Icelandic sagas the answer is surprisingly simple and unnerving: anyone can potentially become a *draugr* after death. A particularly vivid example of just such a transformation can be found in *Eyrbyggja saga* in the previously mentioned case of Þórólfr *bægifótr*. After an argument with his son which

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<sup>56</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>57</sup> For more on the vampires of European folklore, and some discussion of the similarities between *draugar* and vampires see Barber, 1988.

exposes both Þórólfr's power-hungry ambitions and his actual societal impotence, Þórólfr returns home in a foul temper:

hann settisk niðr í öndvegi sitt ok mataðisk eigi um kveldit; sat hann þar aptir, er menn fóru at sofa. En um morgunninn, er menn stóðu upp, sat Þórólfr þar enn ok var dauðr...en folk allt var óttafullt, því at öllum þótti óþokki á andláti hans. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson, 1935, 91-92)

He sat down in his high seat and did not eat during the evening; he sat there afterwards, when men went to sleep. And in the morning, when men got up, Þórólfr sat there still and was dead...and all the people were terrified, because his death seemed gruesome to everyone.

The terror surrounding his death and the gruesome nature of his appearance is a detail that can be found in the case of other *draugar*, including Glámr, and leads to elaborate precautions being taken with his disposal (33). In spite of this, the saga goes on to report that Þórólfr has become a *draugr* in typically laconic fashion:

Eptir dauða Þórólfs bæ gifóts þótti mörgum mönnum um verra úti, þegar er sólina lægði; en er á leið sumarit, urðu menn þess varir, at Þórólfr lá eigi kyrr; máttu menn þá aldri í friði úti vera, þegar er sól settisk. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson, 1935, 93)

After the death of Þórólfr lamefoot many people thought it worse to be outside after the sun set; and when the summer passed, people became aware of this that Þórólfr did not lie quietly; people could never have peace then after the sun set.

Several key elements are captured: the *draugr* is active during the night, and is capable of considerable malevolence and violence to anyone whose path he crosses. The idea of the

walking dead is so familiar in the sagas that the news that Þórólfr is not lying quietly would have come as no surprise after the manner of his death, and this is another important element. Þórólfr is not killed by any supernatural or monstrous means. Although there is something uncanny and gruesome in his death, it appears to be of natural causes, or at least of no external cause. In a sense Þórólfr dies as a direct result of his societal powerlessness, ‘apparently imploding with anger and frustration’ (Sayers, 1996, 250). And the corpse, before it becomes an active *draugr* in full, is terrifying and unpleasant to be around. Thus *draugar* can be the result of a natural death linked to that particular individual’s personality and social circumstances. The remainder of this chapter will focus attention on several specific examples of *draugar* and the social and religious factors involved in the processes of monstrous change that create the undead.

#### Social Misfits and Monsters: Þórólfr and Víga-Hrappr

Given the importance of certain aspects of medieval Icelandic culture to the following discussion, it is worthwhile to consider these now. In the early period of Icelandic history this was a society

without any coercive state apparatus; it had only a weak sense of lordship, yet at the same time it had a highly developed legal system with courts and elaborate rules of procedure and equally elaborate rules of substantive law. But there was no provision for public enforcement of the law; it was up to the aggrieved party to see that his wrongs were righted and execute the judgement he obtained on his own behalf.  
(Miller, 1990, 29)

It is this personal element to the legal system and the extra-legal but interrelated processes of vengeance and arbitration that create such a unique power dynamic.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For a full discussion of law and feud and medieval Icelandic society, see Miller, 1990 and Guðrun Nordal, 1998. Jesse Byock offers a different interpretation of some of the same material, geared particularly towards feud in the sagas (Byock, 1982). For more on Icelandic society and history generally, see Byock, 2001 and Gunnar Karlsson, 2000.

Within this structure feud was not a simple matter of violent retaliation, as much as feud was ever simple, but was limited by law and by the concern of neutral parties who would step in to try to prevent violence escalating too far. Thus justice is both personal and public.<sup>59</sup> It is tied into the culture of honour and personal standing which is also personal to the individual and public in that standing is ultimately decided in the eyes of the community, whatever an individual's sense of personal worth.

Feuding cultures tend to be those which set a high value upon the maintenance of group, especially family, honour; in which, as a corollary, there is marked awareness of insult to honour and social shame. Affronts can come in all manner of guises – verbal mockery, insult to precedence or status, abduction or rape of women, maltreatment of dependants or animals, theft, arson, blows, murder. Convention enters the equation in that the state of hostility between the groups concerned is recognized by outsiders as a regular form of relationship. 'Regular', in that accepted norms exist for the conduct of hostility within the feuding relationship: norms relating to the extent of collective liability, the acceptable degree of violence and bloodshed, the notion of approximate parity in the rhythmic alternation of hostile encounters, the condemnation of what is judged unacceptable.

(Fletcher, 2003, 8-9)

The danger is that it is entirely possible for the individual to become carried away and disrupt the social balance through his 'unacceptable behaviour'. Such behaviour could include refusing to participate in the systems of arbitration and settlement designed to limit feud killing. And indeed, the system of arbitration was open to abuse in that it was not always possible to secure a fair judgement. Arbitration could be carried out by neutral or interested parties, even in some cases by the accuser himself, where self-judgement was granted, the idea being that the one given self-judgement would be fair or lenient in

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<sup>59</sup> Aside from the remarkable completeness and complexity of the legal codes themselves, law was arguably central to medieval Iceland's understanding of itself in social terms (Hastrup, 1985, 136-37), a point which will be considered in greater detail in the following chapter on outlaws.

his judgement. But such a system is open to abuse, as is indeed recorded in several instances of judgement or arbitration in the sagas. Egill Skallagrímsson, awarded self-judgement in a case involving his family and the family of an old and trusted companion of his, grants himself an outrageously high award (84-85). *Bandamanna saga* is largely concerned with a group of unscrupulous chieftains who band together to gain some valuable property unfairly, only to be defeated not by just arguments but by one of their number succumbing to a bribe and betraying them. In early Icelandic law, justice could be served by the paying of compensation for a wrong done. The legal codes and systems of monetary compensation for killing and injury represented alternate paths of satisfying honour in feud.<sup>60</sup> While not always a guaranteed means of stopping violence, prompt payment of compensation could at least limit violence and restore some form of peace and social equilibrium (Miller, 1990, 259-99). Thus someone who refused to pay or to accept compensation, someone who preferred only revenge or was too greedy or arrogant to give payment was a potentially dangerous figure in society, and in danger of society turning on him. *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoði* is an example of how one such unjust man who refused to pay compensation for his crimes was eventually brought down due to his own complacent arrogance. But while Hrafnkell's behaviour was only tolerated because of the force he could use to back it up, the man who deposed him, Sámur, is looked upon with little sympathy because he humiliates Hrafnkell but lets him live, resulting in Hrafnkell's eventual revenge on him. The sense in the saga is that though Sámur got rid of an unjust man, his own folly deserved the eventual retaliation that in turn brought him down.

The Norse term for a man like Hrafnkell, who resorts to bullies and kills without respect to legal and social norms, is *ójafnaðrmaðr*. Literally, this compound means 'unequal man', and is the 'specific term for ruthless and overly ambitious men' (Byock, 1982, 30) in the sagas. The 'unequal' man is someone who flouts social conventions, sometimes in the pursuit of power, wealth and status but sometimes out of sheer maliciousness. The greater danger represented by an *ójafnaðrmaðr*, one with both the inclination and the

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<sup>60</sup> On feud, law and arbitration, Miller (1990) remains the most influential treatment on the subject. Guðrun Nordal (1998) offers an interesting examination of the ethics of Icelandic culture, in feud, violence and beyond, in the later age of Sturla.

power to do as he pleases, is that he will destroy social balance and threaten to loosen the restrictive bonds of law and arbitration that help to contain feuds and limit deaths (Miller, 1990, 273). The importance of being a man of goodwill, of taking part in events for the limiting of violence and the good of society generally is reflected in the honour accorded such men and the marginalisation or punishment of those who do not involve themselves. A good example of the latter occurs in *Laxdæla saga*, where a farmer watches a fight taking place and refuses to intervene for the malicious pleasure of being able to watch important men in the district killing each other (49). Later he is called to unpleasant account over the affair, when he is dragged from his farm and killed for his shameful behaviour (52).

The implications for the question of monstrous change in regard to behaviour that threatens the social fabric should be obvious and in some sagas the transformation from *ójafnaðrmaðr* in life to *draugr* does occur. The relationship between the concept of the *ójafnaðrmaðr*, social influence and the monstrous is apparent in several sagas, but one of the most interesting examples concerns Þórólfr *bægifótr*, a pest in society before death and a dangerous, monstrous presence lurking throughout the latter half of *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Þórólfr is of particular interest because, while described as ‘inn mesti ójafnaðrmaðr’ (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson, 1935, 14), or ‘the most “uneven” man’, he is not an influential or particularly prominent figure in society and is in fact completely overshadowed by his successful son, the *goði* Arnkell. Þórólfr’s overbearing nature comes out in the quarrels he starts with people and the ways in which he tries to force others to do as he wishes. Þórólfr’s choice of targets is revealing of how, for all he is ‘inn mesti ójafnaðrmaðr’, his grudges and targets are relatively trivial. Nevertheless, the danger of an *ójafnaðrmaðr* in a society where honour ‘was at stake in virtually every social interaction’ (Miller, 1990, 29) is made apparent as Þórólfr’s quarrels help to aggravate the tension between Arnkell and Snorri, the other man vying for dominance in the region, resulting finally in Arnkell’s death (32-33, 37) .

Þórólfr's arrival into society sets the pattern for his anti-societal behaviour. As a successful Norwegian viking, he resorts to aggression to win land, having arrived after the first settlers have claimed everything. He forces an old man into a duel, winning land, a laming injury, and the accompanying nickname, *bægifótr*, or 'lame-foot' (10). This injury, and his advancing years, effectively eliminates violence as an option for Þórólfr, who never fights again while he lives. And without the ability to commit acts of violence, Þórólfr seems powerless. Þórólfr's violent acquisition of land is his first misstep in trying to become not just integrated into but an important member of Icelandic society, since it reveals Þórólfr's grasping nature and violent ways. But Þórólfr compounds the error by choosing to sell portions of land to two freedmen. By selling the land he turns land-giving into a simple, discrete transaction, creating none of the obligations that gifting the land would have done. Gift-giving 'gave rise to social relations and adjusted the status of the parties in relation to each other. The giver gained prestige and power from the exchange. He exacted deference from the receiver and obliged him to reciprocate' (Miller, 1990, 82). Gift-giving is an activity that helps to secure social ties, cementing relationships between chieftains and their followers, between kin groups and between neighbours.<sup>61</sup> Though land-giving did not ensure political success or provide the kind of support that a feudal lord might expect, it created a considerable obligation, and many of the land distributors in sagas enjoy considerable respect and some measure of influence in their respective regions. By selling land, Þórólfr gains immediate material wealth at the cost of long-term obligation and prestige.

After this inauspicious start, Þórólfr's presence is hardly felt in the saga for a considerable time, and when he does return it is to pick fights with his neighbours as a malicious old man whose 'unevenness' leads to the deaths of both freedmen, one of his friends, several slaves and ultimately himself and Arnkell (30-37). That power and respect in the district is something that Þórólfr desires is revealed in his final conversation with Arnkell, where he tries unsuccessfully to manipulate his estranged son into helping him (33). When Arnkell refuses, Þórólfr goes home in a rage and dies.

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<sup>61</sup> See also Chapter Two, pp. 60-67 for the context of gift-giving in *Beowulf*.

What is interesting about Þórólfr's return from the grave and subsequent events is what is revealed about the nature of *draugar* and society's reactions to them. That some vestige of Þórólfr's personality remains is suggested by the strange respect accorded family ties: while Þórólfr menaces a large area around the site of his burial, Arnkell's lands and those under his immediate protections are unaffected (34). Furthermore, after Arnkell moves his father's body to a more distant burial site Þórólfr lies quiet for a time, only becoming active again after Arnkell's death (34, 63).

But there is also the degree to which the undead Þórólfr comes to attain something corresponding to the power he craved in life. He is able to fight and kill, and, indeed, is so zealous in doing so that the saga notes that even birds that landed near his burial site were killed (34). He acquires followers in the form of the *draugar* that he creates when he kills other men and, through the terror he spreads, he comes to control a far wider swathe of land more completely than he did in life. Þórólfr proves to be a particularly violent and enduring *draugr*. Though he lies dormant for certain periods, his recurring phases of monstrous activity in the saga become one of the unifying narrative strands in a particularly diffuse and complex saga. Cohen (1996, 4-5) has observed that a characteristic of the monster is that it always returns, and this is certainly the case with Þórólfr. After several periods of malevolent activity, the exhumed and incinerated Þórólfr returns in a final incarnation as a monstrous, murderous bull. Þórólfr is not destroyed in this form, but rather sinks into the earth after killing the man who burned his body. This marks the end of his activities as a monster, but the manner of his passing does not suggest his complete destruction: rather, it implies the threat of his return (63).

Equally, however, several important elements of Þórólfr's life and undead nature represent a kind of *draugr* norm. He is an outsider, and not engaged in social activity except when he is causing trouble for his neighbours and his son. This is very similar in many respects to Víga-Hrapp in *Laxdæla saga*. Hrapp flees the Hebrides because he was too much of an *ójafnaðrmaðr* to be tolerated there, and who continues his bullying ways with his neighbours in Iceland, much like Þórólfr (10). Hrapp is marked not just by

his grasping, anti-societal ways, but by his being Hebridean, something that differentiates him from the bulk of the largely Norwegian early settlers.<sup>62</sup>

While Hrappr is a greedy bully in life who gets worse the older he gets, like Þórólfr, he is motivated most strongly by a powerful attachment to his land. Before his death he makes the sinister request to be buried upright under the floor of his house, and is jealous indeed in guarding his property before his eventual destruction (17-18, 24). Hrappr is differentiated from other *draugar* by the power to shape-shift. He appears as a seal with human eyes in one section of the saga, where his malignant influence leads to the sinking of a boat and the drowning of a whole family on their way to claim his land (18). A similar supernatural occurrence is to be found in the Fróðá marvels section of *Eyrbyggja saga*, though it is not clear if the otter that appears in that saga, destroying a large amount of the cursed farm's supplies, is a shape-shifted *draugr* or another form of supernatural entity.<sup>63</sup> While Hrappr's jealous protection of his land is partly due to an obsession in life, it is also a reflection of both his being an *ójafnaðrmaðr* and a *draugr*. Þórólfr is similarly interested in his property, though he tends to target the living in particular, and Glámr always returns to the farm he died defending, tearing it apart and destroying anyone who comes there.

Thus elements of social and ethnic difference and of inability to work in the existing social framework make an individual more likely to become a *draugr* after death, particularly if there is a powerful attachment to property or place or a grudge outstanding at the time of death. And the *draugr* is a monster to be reckoned with in the level of violence and destruction it can bring to bear, far beyond that which is warranted of any feud. But while this is often the result of a *draugr* in action, there are several exceptions to these rules and a number of other factors that problematise the relationship of the undead to the living. In a similar way to the two *draugar* considered here, Glámr, though

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<sup>62</sup> For more on the importance laid on ethnic background in connection to an individual's potential to become a *draugr*, see Sayers 256-58.

<sup>63</sup> My suspicion would be that it is the latter, since it is cursed bed linen that lies at the root of the trouble, and the woman associated with it, Þórgunna, is a *draugr* only briefly and in unusual circumstances. Though the saga does not specify, Þórgunna is a Christian given a Christian burial, and this suggests that she would not return to visit destruction on the farm herself. For more on Þórgunna and the Fróðá marvels, see below, pp. 126-30.

apparently returned from the grave because he was killed by a monster, is dangerous in any event. He is an unpleasant and taciturn individual, he is from Sweden and, an important point so far unexplored, like Hrappr and Þórólfr, he is resolutely a pagan.

#### Couldn't Stand the Weather: Glámr, Society, Law, and Blizzards

Glámr is killed on Christmas Eve, a fast day which Glámr, as a pagan, not only refuses to participate in, but openly mocks (32). Glámr goes out to tend the sheep as normal, but is caught in a blizzard that springs up and is unable to return in the evening. He does not return at all, but is found beaten to death, blue and swollen the next day, after the Christmas meal (32). Glámr's body is frightening to be near, indicating that the pagan Glámr, though currently dormant, has become a *draugr*. Two efforts are made to drag Glámr's body to church for a Christian burial, but both fail because the body is too heavy for even oxen to drag, another detail that indicates Glámr's transformation. Later, a priest is sent for but Glámr vanishes while the priest is in the vicinity and can only be relocated after the priest leaves (33). Glámr is clearly actively resisting Christian burial with every ounce of his living stubbornness and undead powers, doubtless realising that such a burial would end his existence as a monster, or at least prevent his escape from the grave. The saga makes this point evident by contrasting Glámr with his replacement shepherd who is another tough, unpleasant foreigner who is killed on Christmas Eve. This time, however, Christian burial is effected and effectively removes him as a threat: the saga states that no trouble was caused as a result of him (33). Is the blizzard that traps Glámr the result of his anti-Christian behaviour? An example in another saga would suggest that Glámr's religious and social breach is precisely the cause of the unusual weather.

In *Droplaugarsona saga*, the sons of Droplaug are thrust into manhood at an early age when they must avenge an insult to their mother and to their family honour. Though Grímr and Helgi are only twelve and thirteen respectively, they prove eminently up to the task and kill the man who had been slandering their mother (3). Desiring that her sons avoid a harsh retaliation, Droplaug sends Grímr and Helgi to a relative, Geitir, out of harm's way. But the brothers do not reach their destination, due to a blizzard in which

they get lost. The blizzard is made worse when they walk clockwise round a pagan temple, and they are forced to return home where they and many others are kept virtually housebound by the blizzard that rages for two weeks (4). It is then revealed that the blizzard is a direct result of the Droplaugarsons angering the gods through not announcing the killing they performed and then by essentially violating the temple. After the killings are declared in the correct legal and social manner, the blizzard disappears and the brothers are able to complete their journey, and ultimately effect a settlement (4).

Here religious, supernatural, legal and social strands are all brought together in the form of a blizzard that erupts into the characters' world. Though the Droplaugarsons are to blame, the impact of the social breach is more widespread and it takes the intervention of another to inform the brothers of their errors and make them correct them. That pagan and Christian gods employ similar techniques for avenging social and religious breaches is only one of the interesting points of comparison between these two sequences. Of more immediate interest is that the blizzards in themselves are not altogether consequential, but the fallout of the encounters with the blizzards is considerable and in each case they serve important narrative functions. In the case of Grim and Helgi, after this introduction to the legal world through the supernatural, it leads to Helgi learning law from Geitir's son, Þórkell. Helgi uses his legal knowledge as a means to attack his enemy, Helgi Ásbjarnarson, by prosecuting any case against him or his thingmen (4). This exacerbates problems between the families and the resulting feud ends in Helgi Droplaugarson's death.

Glámr is forced into a confrontation that was inevitable and results in his undeath. The blizzard focuses attention on his mocking of Christianity just as his non-Christian burial is highlighted by the later sequence in which the other shepherd lies quiet after being buried in church. Unlike the the Droplaugarsons, Glámr is given no chance to make amends, at least not before death, and actively refuses to do so after death, though there is perhaps another form of social and religious breach observable here in the failure to bury Glámr in a Christian fashion. This social breach is more understandable in face of the difficulties of dealing with Glámr's body, but the results are devastating as Glámr kills

human and beast and destroys property throughout the valley he is buried in. It requires the intervention of Grettir, another outsider, to destroy Glámr, and here the significance of the blizzard as a plot element is apparent in the chain of circumstances that ends in Grettir's outlawry and death. This is brought about by his confrontation with Glámr, something he is advised against and something he goes on to do not because of a need to restore social balance but because he is looking for a challenge (34). And, in turn, Grettir's outlawry and death cause even wider social disruptions over the years than Glámr's violent predations (46-82). Glámr's pagan worship is less responsible for his transformation into a particularly deadly monster than his iconoclastic attitude towards Christianity in general. But the most powerful example of the influence of personal (Christian) spirituality on identity occurs in the case of Skarpheðinn Njálsson where faith is not used to delineate monstrosity or humanity but actually becomes a key component in arresting the processes of monstrous change.

#### Ghoul, Interrupted: Christianity and Social Responsibility<sup>64</sup>

Skarpheðinn, initially at least, does not appear to be the type of individual who might naturally become a *draugr*. While he is said to be sharp-tongued, he is also described as being for the most part even-tempered (25). And, indeed, it is rare that the younger Skarpheðinn goes out of his way to cause trouble, though he is usually swift with a taunt or his axe when it comes to repaying an insult or avenging a slaying.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, on several key occasions it is deemed better for Skarpheðinn not to be involved in certain activities, since the fear is that he would start trouble or disrupt peace efforts.<sup>66</sup> And it is in fact Skarpheðinn's taunt that pushes Flósi over the edge at a critical moment during the settlement proceedings that might have prevented the burning of Njáll and his sons.

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<sup>64</sup> I am indebted to Alaric Hall for first drawing my attention to Skarpheðinn's conversion and its implications.

<sup>65</sup> Except in the notable instance of the slaying of Hoskuldr *Hvitanessgoði*, Skarpheðinn never starts a fight or hurls out an insult without some provocation. Even in the case of Hoskuldr, Skarpheðinn was fed false reports of Hoskuldr's enmity for some time before taking part in that fateful slaying (109-111).

<sup>66</sup> Skarpheðinn and his brothers are excluded from two settlements that Njáll does not want them to disrupt (43 and 99) and Gunnar refuses to allow Skarpheðinn to goad Gunnar's horse in a fight since he knows it will make trouble much more likely (59).

Skarpheðinn does seem to undergo, if not a complete change, then something of a deterioration in character between his introduction and his taunting of Flósi, becoming more prone to violence and aggression. One key scene occurs after he has endured some harsh goading from his mother who urges him to blood vengeance in a feud. Skarpheðinn grins and makes light of it, but he breaks into a sweat and his face goes red, and the saga states that this was unusual for him (44), ‘en því var ekki vant’ (Einar Ol. Sveinsson, 1954, 114). Indeed, such obvious somatic signs were indicative of the inner emotional turmoil working on saga characters and were thus atypical in rendering visible thoughts and feelings usually not depicted.<sup>67</sup> Skarpheðinn’s inner fury is not so much belied but betrayed by his grin, and this kind of reaction marks him as someone who struggles to control his temper, a dangerous trait in medieval Icelandic society. The ease with which he moves into the role of tough and formidable killer in later sections of the saga perhaps belies the inner stresses working on him, which reach their peak in one sequence shortly before his death where Skarpheðinn is distinctly marked as an anomalous figure.

Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, Kári and the Njálssons visit various chieftains, looking for support in their case over the slaying of the saintly Höskuldr *Hvítanessgoði* (119-20). This slaying was occasioned by slander and is very much a stain on the Njálssons’ characters and reputations, one that is only eradicated by their being burned in retaliation and by the violence that follows until balance is restored at the saga’s end (107-58). In the scene in question, Skarpheðinn is singled out by each chieftain they visit, each finding Skarpheðinn’s presence and manner so strange that they are compelled to ask about him (119-20). Each man describes him in similar terms as formidable but pale (*fölleitr*) and luckless (*ógæfusamligr*), and one even describes him as being troll-like in one instance. He is ‘luckless’ which, in saga terms, means he is doomed and his oft-commented-on paleness, as a somatic reflection of his emotional state, is an example of how out of step he is with a society where showing emotion is potentially a shameful act. Examples abound in the same saga, but a particularly pertinent one is that of Þórhallr Ásgrímsson,

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<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of emotions in the sagas and the role of and reactions to bodily indicators of emotion, see Miller, 1992, 89-109, especially 97-105.

who is so upset at the news of Njáll and Skarpheðinn's death that he turns crimson and faints.<sup>68</sup>

Skarpheðinn is clearly remarkable to the various chieftains the Njálssons visit because of his appearance, but more striking still is the repeated confusion as to who he is. Before entering the last booth, where the most aggressive encounter takes place, Skarpheðinn's appearance is described, and it is noted that 'kenndu allir ósenn', that 'all men knew him without having seen him' (120). After Skarpheðinn's identity has been challenged in every booth he has visited, this statement is decidedly odd. Evidently, there is a tension between Skarpheðinn's reputation and his evidently strangely marked appearance that requires his identity to be confirmed even though it is apparently obvious who he is. That Skarpheðinn answers each, admittedly unflattering, question with an insult to his interrogator is a clear indication of how much his sharp tongue has become immoderate and that he no longer seems to care about the conventions of his society and the danger implicit in such behaviour. This is brought out particularly forcefully in the final, almost fatal, exchange in the sequence.

The encounter with the domineering chieftain Þorkell *hákr* is the culmination of the support-gathering scene, and brings to the fore what is simmering beneath the surface of Skarpheðinn's identity issues. The key is monstrosity. Þorkell and his exploits are described in some detail, but what is of particular interest here is that although Þorkell has killed his share of 'ordinary' foes, he is a monster-slayer, being able to claim the distinction of being one of only two men to have slain a winged dragon in an *Íslendingasaga*.<sup>69</sup> He has also reputedly killed a *finngálkni*, a half-man, half-beast creature he encountered, like the dragon, in his travels abroad (120). The encounter with Skarpheðinn follows much the same pattern as the previous ones, with the request for assistance being heard followed by the singling out of Skarpheðinn for comment on his

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<sup>68</sup> Þórhallr's response to fainting is an excellent example of the ways in which outward displays of emotion were considered shameful. On recovering from his faint, he vows that he will take revenge not for the death of his kin, but because Skarpheðinn's killers have caused him to act in an unmanly fashion on hearing such terrible news (132).

<sup>69</sup> The other is Björn *Hítælakappi*, who perfunctorily despatches his dragon at sea in decidedly undramatic fashion (4).

unusual appearance and Skarpheðinn's taunting response. Þorkell is the most insulting of the chieftains both in his refusal to help and in the way in which he describes Skarpheðinn while asking about his identity. Skarpheðinn's mocking response quickly rouses Þorkell to immediately threaten Skarpheðinn, but:

Skarpheðinn stóð með reidda øxina ok glotti við ok mælti: 'Þessa øxi hafða ek þá í hendi, er ek hljóp tólf álna yfir Markarfljót ok ek vá Þráin Sigfússon, ok stoðu þar átta menn hjá ok fengu ekki fang á mér. Hefi ek ok aldri svá reitt vápn at manni, at eigi hafi við komit.' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, 305)

Skarpheðinn stood with his axe ready and said: 'I had this axe in my hand when I leapt twelve ells over the Markarfljót river and I killed Þráinn Sigfússon. Eight men stood beside him there and they did not get to grips with me. And I have never struck at a man with a weapon that has not hit.'

Faced with Skarpheðinn's infamous grin and the threat of having his head split open, Þorkell submits quietly. The saga notes that that this 'never happened to him, before or afterwards', 'hvárki orðit á fyrir honum áðr né síðan' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, 305), stressing the singular nature of this event against a tough and dangerous man.

And what is to be made of the fact that he is a monster-slayer? That he has actually killed monsters is suggested by the matter-of-fact way the saga reports the slayings indicating that he is a brave man. In light of the strange lack of recognition Skarpheðinn receives and what follows in Njáll's burning home, it is not unreasonable to see a direct link to monstrosity being made. Two important details may be observed here. The first is that Skarpheðinn is becoming something of an *ójafnaðrmaðr*, at least in how little he seems to care for the potentially dangerous consequences of his actions at a time when his family needs allies, not more enemies. Of course, Skarpheðinn is not completely out of control, or he might simply have slain Þorkell outright, but this is still worrying

behaviour. The second detail is that Skarpheðinn is clearly far more frightening than even a dragon, and the terror he inspires in some is an important point that resurfaces after the exhumation of his body from Njáll's burnt house.

Skarpheðinn is killed in the burning of Njáll's home, retaliation for the tragic slaying of Höskuldr in which Skarpheðinn played a prominent part (129-30). The first sign that something uncanny is occurring is that, after several hours in a burning building, long past the point where Skarpheðinn should be dead, he is heard speaking a verse taunting his killers (130). When the expedition is made to recover the bodies after the burning, the tensions that have been building in and around Skarpheðinn are resolved in an unexpected manner (132). Skarpheðinn is found, partially burned, with his eyes open and, rather ominously, his axe thrust into the wall in such a way that the blade is preserved from damage. The axe is dealt with first, with the decision to give it to Þorgeirr *skorargeirr*, a man who will use it to exact blood revenge, foreshadowing the violence to come. Then attention is turned to Skarpheðinn's body:

Hann hafði lagit hendr sínar í kross ok á ofan ina hægri, en tvá dýla fundu þeir á honum, annan meðan herðanna, en annan á brjóstinu, ok var hvárrtveggi brenndr í kross, ok ætluðu menn, at hann mundi sik sjálfr brennt hafa. Allir menn mæltu þat, at betra poetti hjá Skarpheðni dauðum en ætluðu, því at engi maðr hræddisk hann. (Einar Ol. Sveinsson, 1954, 343-44)

He had arranged his arms into a cross, with the right arm above, and they found two marks on him, one between his shoulders, the other on the chest, and in both places a cross was burned on. And men thought that he must have burned them himself. All men said that they thought it better to be near Skarpheðinn in death than expected, because no one feared him. (132)

The expectations of the men in the saga are that there will be something terrible about Skarpheðinn's corpse, and it is clearly the same sort of fear that greeted Þórólfr *bægifótr's* or Glámr's corpse, the fear created by a *draugr*. Skarpheðinn, the saga implies, should have become a *draugr*; indeed, his verse rather seems to indicate that he had. Skarpheðinn has saved himself from that fate by converting to Christianity. The pains he has clearly gone to and suffered to make visible the signs of his sincere conversion seem only too fitting for the awkward, violent Skarpheðinn. But the efficacy of the action, and the power of Christianity, is equally apparent. Men were unafraid around Skarpheðinn, the man who terrified almost everyone in life.

Christianity is of considerable importance to Skarpheðinn, then, just as it is in the saga, but it is for the most part relatively subtly drawn. Nevertheless, the importance of Christianity and the privileging of Christian figures and ideas should not be underestimated. It is important to note that the impact of the new religion is woven into the sagas in numerous social interactions, but also into the very fabric of how monsters and the supernatural are dealt with and understood, just as is the case in many Anglo-Saxon sources.<sup>70</sup> The conversion section of *Njáls saga* literally pits Christian against pagan, culminating in a showdown at the *Alþingi* where the desire to keep the land united under one law sees Christianity winning the day, without bloodshed (100-5). Skarpheðinn's grisly conversion essentially plays out a similar process in a personal, intimate space, with the warring forces of Skarpheðinn's violent nature subdued by the power of Christianity within the burning hall, on Skarpheðinn's body and in his mind. The results are that Skarpheðinn is no longer frightening, and that he directly causes no further death or mayhem in the saga.

Skarpheðinn does not become a *draugr*, but his name and body are still active after his death, in a fashion. Njáll's kin prosecute Flosi and the burners, but their case is ultimately dismissed thanks to a legal trick employed by Flosi's lawyer (141, 143-44). The legal expert on the side of Kári, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, is unable to be at court due to a leg

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<sup>70</sup> *Andreas*, for example, is about a man sent abroad to deal with a group of monsters, but in this case the man is St Andrew, the monsters a race of cannibals and his mission is not to destroy them but to convert them to Christianity.

infection in the form of a large and nasty boil, but is nevertheless close at hand to provide much needed advice. When Þórhallr realises that the case is lost, he uses a spear that Skarpheðinn had given him to lance the site of infection and quickly proceeds to the court with the spear (145):

Þá mætti hann Grími inum rauða, frænda Flosa, ok jafnskjótt sem þeir fundusk, lagði Þórhallr til hans spjótinu, ok kom í skjöldinn, ok klofnaði hann í sundr, ok gekk spjótit í gegnum hann, svá at út kom í millum herðanna. Kastaði Þórhallr honum dauðum af spjótinu. Kári Sölmundarson gat sét þetta ok mælti við Ásgrím: “Her er kominn Þórhallr, son þinn, ok hefir vegit víg nú þegar, ok er þetta skömm mikil, ef hann einn skal hug til hafa at hefna brennunnar.”  
 ‘Þat skal ok eigi vera,’ segir Ásgrímr, ‘ok snúum nú at þeim.’ (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954, 402)

There he met with Grímr the Red, Flosi’s kinsman, and as soon as they met Þórhallr thrust the spear at him and it pierced the shield, and split it apart and the spear went into him so that it came out between his shoulders. Þórhallr threw him from the spear, dead.

Kári Sölmundarson saw that done and said to Ásgrím: ‘Here comes your son Þórhallr and has now immediately made a killing, and that is a great shame if he alone shall have the spirit to avenge the burning.’  
 ‘That shall not be,’ says Ásgrímr, ‘and now attack them!’

Immediately the pressure to take violent retaliation that has been steadily mounting since the burning is unleashed. Þórhallr initiates this violence after a violent but restorative act of purging carried out with Skarpheðinn’s spear, just as the first part of the blood debt is paid by the same spear being thrust into one of the burners.<sup>71</sup> That it is Þórhallr, an

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<sup>71</sup> Is the first, curative, spear thrust a form of healing miracle? Þórhallr is noted to walk extremely swiftly to the court, ‘óhaltr’, without a limp, though the ‘healing’ act is described in very physical and gruesome detail. If this is a form of healing miracle, then it is in painful keeping with Skarpheðinn’s grisly conversion and violent life.

acknowledged expert in law (27, 135, 142), who terminates the legal proceedings in favour of violence is both an indication of how completely the case has failed and how great is the need for blood vengeance. The ghost of Skarpheðinn's violence lives on in the bloody acts carried out in his name, but, just as was the case throughout his life, this is controlled carnage. Snorri *goði* is on hand to intervene at the point before the violence inflicted outweighs the means to pay a settlement (145).<sup>72</sup> And, indeed, thanks to the intervention of Snorri and Hallr of Síða, the fight is stopped and a settlement is arranged between most of the antagonists. An important part of the settlement is atoning for the killing of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, since it was that killing that prompted the burning in the first place. Höskuldr's wergild had already been set at triple the ordinary value, but how it is paid for is deserving of comment since:

That the saintly Hoskuld Hvitanesspriest in *Njal's saga* is declared to be worth the enormous sum of three wergilds means one thing, but that it was actually paid, not by a transfer of silver, sheep, or land, but by being balanced off against the corpse of his killer, the ominous Skarpheðinn, means another...What were they saying about competing cultural values when they equated the saintly man of peace, Hoskuld, with the perversely intelligent and werewolfian wisecracking killer, Skarpheðinn? (Miller, 2006, 120)

As indicated, Skarpheðinn's weapons become the means by which blood vengeance is taken, the sinister axe, preserved for the blood letting to come, and the spear that heals one man and signals the killing of many others. But his death itself is an important part of the settlement, since it is used to compensate for the death of Höskuldr. Here the man of violence is found to be the equal of the man of peace, perhaps unexpectedly given the value generally placed on martial prowess in the sagas. Still, Skarpheðinn's last minute

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<sup>72</sup> It is no accident that it is Snorri who volunteers his services as the judge of how many men Njal's kin can slay and atone for, as Snorri is not only the most devious and unscrupulous man in the *Íslendingasögur*, but one with a perfect grasp of how society works and thus how to manipulate it. By no means is Snorri the only one capable of making such judgements, however, as is apparent in many sagas. For more examples and an explanation of the weighing of compensation and blood vengeance in feud, see Miller, 2006, 119-20 and *passim* and 1990, 259-301.

conversion must play a part in the equation of these men since it does apparently bring him some form of peace in death.

There is, however, an altogether darker, violent link between the men. Höskuldr's blood is used like a weapon by his widow, who literally showers Flósi in the collected blood clots, an almost irresistible provocation to blood vengeance, and one that was certainly in Flósi's mind when he broke up the settlement over the first excuse that came to hand. In a similar way, the weapons Skarpheðinn gave to others lead the way in the bloody battle at the *Alþingi*. Both men leave behind something that others use to avenge shameful deeds. That this vengeance is achieved and the scales balanced is, of course, indicated by the successful settlement, but within that, the equation of Skarpheðinn and Höskuldr lies at the heart of why the settlement works. Rather than the endless, unbalanced acts of violence a *draugr* carries out in devastating fashion, the violence that erupts after the discovery of Skarpheðinn's corpse serves to resolve the tensions that had wracked the district since the death of Höskuldr. Skarpheðinn's personal act of repentance becomes a society-wide symbol for the repair of a particularly egregious social breach and signals the move towards a newly restored social equilibrium. Nor is Skarpheðinn's case the only instance of the interconnectivity of the personal, spiritual and social in medieval Iceland. Two examples from *Eyrbyggja saga* shows the ways in which these factors are not only involved in monstrous change but make problematic some of the assertions that have been made so far by introducing *draugar* which are not malevolent, destructive monsters but rather serve to indicate breaches of societal norms by other people.

#### Religion, Law, and the Dead: Two *Draugar* Stories in *Eyrbyggja saga*

The first is the case of Þórgunna, a Hebridean woman who comes to Iceland just after the conversion and comes to stay on a farm at Fróðá where Þuriðr, the lady of the house, is keen to have her because her covetous eye has fallen on some valuable bed linen (50). This bed linen will be the cause of considerable trouble, as such valuable status symbols often are in the sagas. And, indeed, trouble is made very likely when Þórgunna, foretelling her imminent death, orders the destruction of the bed linen. Þórgunna also

seeks Christian burial, and continues to show her prescience by picking a spot that will later become the site of Iceland's first bishopric (51).

The trouble begins when her body is being transported to the church and the men carrying the corpse are forced to stop at a farm when night falls, although they are given no hospitality and their presence is rather begrudged (51). During the night noises are heard coming from the pantry:

ok er menn kómu til búrsins, var þar sén kona mikil; hon var nökvíð, svá at hon hafði engan hlut á sér; hon starfaði at matseld; en þeir menn, er hana sá, urðu svá hræddir, at þeir þorðu hvergi nær at koma. En er líkmenn vissu þetta, fóru þeir til ok sá, hversu háttat var; þar var Þórgunna komin, ok sýndisk þat ráð öllum, at fara eigi til með henni. Ok er hon hafði þar unnit slíkt er hon vildi, þá bar hon mat í stofu. Eptir þat setti hon borð ok bar þar á mat. Þá mæltu líkmenn við bónda: 'Vera má, at svá lúki við, áðr vér skilim, at þér pykki alkeypt, at þú vildir engan greiða gera oss.' Þá mæltu bæði bóndi ok húsfreyja: 'Vit viljum víst gefa yðr mat ok gera yðr annan greiða, þann er þér þurfuð.' Ok þegar er bóndi hafði boðit þeim greiða, gekk Þórgunna fram ór stofunni ok út eptir þat, ok sýndisk hon eigi síðan. (Einar Ol. Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson, 1935, 144)

And when people came to the pantry, a large woman was seen there; she was naked, so that she had not a thing on her. She was busy at making a meal. Then they who saw her became so frightened that they did not dare to go anywhere near. And when the corpse-bearers discovered that, they went there and saw what was happening. Þórgunna had come there and it seemed advisable to everyone not to interfere with her. And when she had done just as she wished, then she carried the food to the main room. After that, she set the table and put the food on it. Then the corpse-bearers said to the farmer 'It may be that

it so turns out before we part that it will seem to you dearly bought that you did not wish to give us hospitality.’ Then the farmer and his wife said ‘We certainly wish to give you food and any other hospitality that you need.’ And immediately when the farmer had offered them hospitality, Þórgunna went from out of the room and then outside and she did not appear afterwards.

This is obviously a form of morally instructive fable, with a *draugr* serving to hammer home the point. And it is effective in its immediate context, as the farmer swiftly makes good his promise, bringing light, food and dry clothes for his guests. The farmers have been inhospitable to men carrying out Christian and, indeed, socially useful and salutary work, and are punished by being terrified by a monster in their kitchen.<sup>73</sup> This monster is not an unreasoning and malignant force that can only be stopped by violence, however but one that seeks to correct a social injustice visited on people attempting to take a corpse to church for Christian burial. Restitution of the natural order is achieved by the farmer making amends and offering what he should have offered in the first place.

Þórgunna is obviously terrifying to the farmer and his household, but the corpse-bearers are, if not quite unmoved, at least quick to take advantage of the situation by putting in the word that offers the farmer a way out of his predicament. Still the saga stresses that *allir*, everyone, thought it better to leave Þórgunna alone and not interfere with her action (51). Beyond the disturbing sight of a domestic task performed by a naked corpse is the threat inherent in this figure. Þórgunna has risen because the men who are facilitating her Christian burial are being ill-treated, but there is more underlying this than a concern with etiquette: Þórgunna’s burial is itself being threatened.

The corpse-bearers choose to stay on the farm without food because it is too dangerous to cross the river in the night. Unfed and after a likely uncomfortable night in their wet clothes, the river crossing will be riskier than it should be. In addition, it is important to

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<sup>73</sup> An interesting comparison might be made with Þórólfr *bægifótr*’s mother and her aggressive hospitality. She literally builds her home over the road, forcing people to pass through, and leaves food on a table for people to help themselves to. She is held in high regard, unlike Þórólfr (8).

ensure that the work of Christian burial is afforded the assistance necessary to ensure that it is properly carried out, for the good of individual being buried and for the larger community. These ideas are not stressed in the saga: the corpse-bearers do not even hint at abandoning the corpse. But they, as well as the farmer, are confronted with the consequences of social failures in such an important area as burial, particularly in a Christian context, and that is the example of the living dead thrust into their midst in Þórgunna's naked shape. The consequences of another social breach are painted in fuller, grimmer detail in the following episode in the saga, known as the Fróðá marvels, and centring on the tragedy that follows the failure to destroy Þórgunna's bed linen.

But before turning to the marvels, an important question is raised by Þórgunna. Is she a monster? In that she is a frightening presence, and an example of the dead walking in defiance of nature, she can certainly be identified as such. But if moral and social right is an important factor, then Þórgunna's behaviour is not monstrous since she acts properly, or more precisely, she points to the correct behaviour that should be adopted. She thus becomes a monster in the etymological sense, in that her presence and her actions are a cipher for the correct social practice, an instruction to the corpse-bearers and a lesson, decidedly in the threatening sense, to the farmer. The relief of everyone that is implicit in the clause 'ok sýndisk hon eigi síðan' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías, 1935, 144), 'and she did not appear afterwards', Þórgunna is evidently not a comforting companion, even for those she helps. The dead and the living should not interact, and yet the living and undead worlds do collide, and, more so than with many other monsters, the uncomfortable links between living and dead are visible, and even exploitable, as the Fróðá marvels in the saga show. Vésteinn Ólason notes a similar response to Gunnar Hámundarson in *Njáls saga* (2003, 158-60). Though Gunnar is generally considered a good man, he dies a pagan and urges his son to avenge him. While Gunnar is not necessarily a malignant presence, it is uncomfortable for Christians to remain in his presence due to his cheerful enjoyment of a pagan afterlife (2003, 158).

The Fróðá marvels, or rather, the *draugar* that form a significant part of the supernatural events, are remarkable in three chief ways. First, the *draugar* are the results and evidence

of the social breach at the heart of things, rather than the cause of the marvels. Second, while one group of the dead are as violent and unpleasant as *draugar* can be, another is passive and forms more of a nuisance, albeit a terrifying one, than a threat to the household, in a manner not entirely dissimilar to Þórgunna's behaviour. The third point of interest is the manner in which the *draugar* are disposed of, through essentially legal means.

The breach is again related to the requests of the soon-to-be-dead Þórgunna and her bedclothes, not all of which are burned, in spite of her instructions. And the results of this breach are a series of escalating calamities which destroy the farm's wealth and kill many of the people who live there and in the area. First a shepherd dies of a mysterious illness, then returns from the grave, in spite of a church burial, and begins killing others, who become *draugar* (53-54). Between the continuing effects of the illness and the efforts of the *draugar*, a great number of deaths occur, including that of Þóroddr, the head of the household, who is drowned with several men when his boat sinks (54).

Þóroddr and his men's bodies are never recovered, but soon, dripping with water, they return to the farm, where they begin a passive-aggressive haunting. These *draugar* enter the hall and sit by the fire, taking up space and terrifying everyone with their presence (54). With mounting deaths and a house full of the dead every night, it falls on Kjartan, Þóroddr's son, to take action. And remarkably, after seeking advice from the cunning Snorri *goði*, the action he takes is primarily legal in nature, though the solution is in effect a tripartite one (55). First, the linen at the root of the problem is destroyed. Next, Kjartan, along with several supporters and a priest, proceeds to issue summons on the various undead in the house, who leave one by one after the legal procedure, finishing with Þóroddr:

ok er hann heyrði þat, stóð hann upp ok mælti: 'Fátt hygg ek hér friða, enda flýjum nú allir.' Gekk hann þá út eptir þat. Síðan gengu þeir Kjartan inn; bar prestr þá vígt vatn ok Helga dóma um öll hús. Eptir um daginn syngr prestr tíðir allar ok messu hátíðliga, ok eptir þat tókusk af

allar aptrgöngur at Fróðá ok reimleikar (Einar Ól. Sveinsson & Matthías Þorðarson, 1935, 152)

And when he heard that, he stood up and said: “I think there is little peace here, and now we will all leave.” He went out after that. Then Kjartan and the others went in. The priest carried holy water and sacred relics throughout the whole house. The next day the priest sang all the prayers and held a high mass and after that all of the undead and hauntings went from Fróðá.

The inversion here is exquisite. The cursed linen is burned, as a *draugr*'s corpse normally is, while the *draugar* are disposed of by legal rather than violent means, yet still in such a manner as to ensure that these *draugar* never cause trouble again. With the hangings destroyed, as they originally should have been, then the root reason for the infestation of *draugar* is also gone. The exact nature of the legal act used is uncertain, and the procedure in question is mentioned only in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The purpose is clear enough, though: this is exorcism by eviction. The departing comments of the *draugr*, that they stayed as long as people would let them, points to the fact that no one was willing or able to fix this societal issue, which only made matters worse. Whether it is the belated destruction of the hangings that leads to this comment, or the direct approach to dealing with the *draugar*, is uncertain. It could fittingly reference both, since each is, in its own way, an attempt to restore the social norm by societal means.

The Christian priest's role seems almost an afterthought, and certainly he takes no part in the actual expulsion of the *draugar*. But it is only after the prayers and the mass have been said that the saga declares Fróðá cleansed. In effect, Christianity is setting the capstone to a sequence in which the strands of law, society and religion are woven together in a manner which allows the normal social order to be restored, a social order that is constructed through all of these things. And indeed, it is not the power of Christianity that disperses the *draugar*, but rather the undead beings' own recognisance of their culpability under and responsibility to the law, that causes them to depart. Law is

evidently a powerful enough force that these *draugar* still feel bound by the procedures of it even though they are dead. Just as they return to haunt the hearth of home, however, they find themselves bound by the law and unable to protest against it, at least as it is being used to mend a social breach and resolve a supernatural threat. These *draugar*, like Þórgunna and Gunnarr, are not monsters insofar as their behaviour is not malevolent but rather designed to bring attention to perceived social breaches. Nevertheless, the presence of these beings is discomfiting, in no small measure due to the fact that witnessing the undead performing everyday actions only accentuates the similarities between living and dead, human and monster and the thin line that separates these categories. The line is still further blurred by the ties of kinship, which did not stop operating after death.

#### Head in his Hands: *Svarfdæla saga* and Family Ties

Kinship obligations to some extent cut both ways in relationships with the *draugar*. In the case of Arnkell in *Eyrbyggja saga*, he is able to secure a measure of peace for those under his direct protection whom Þórolfr would not attack.<sup>74</sup> Arnkell, by the same measure, takes no action beyond moving his father's body to a more remote location when his activities become too damaging. Indeed, Arnkell is somewhat reluctant and takes his time dealing with his father's activities, and is only partially successful in doing so. A similar relationship between father *draugr* and living son can be found in *Grettis saga*. Þorfinnr does not deal with his father at all, though his motives are as much or more inspired by pragmatism than kinship: thanks to Kárr *inn gamli*'s violent behaviour towards any land or people unprotected by his son, Þorfinnr effectively gains control of the whole island. His lack of pleasure in Grettir's destruction of his monstrous father is almost certainly bound up in the twin discomforts of someone breaking into his father's burial mound and despoiling his body and the fact that his economic lynch-pin has been removed. By contrast, Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga* actually kills various members of his family. In one instance, this seems to break down, with the kin-slaying Hrappr. Hrappr's children are killed because they follow their taciturn father's unusual final request, having him buried

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<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting that Þórolfr is not entirely inclined to leave all his family in peace. He actively torments his unnamed wife in the saga, driving her to her death.

upright in his own house. The disastrous consequence of obeying a request with an anti-societal motive sees the grasping Hrappr set about killing a host of people, many in his own family. While the importance of kin ties in Icelandic society is to be stressed, Jesse Byock points out that no clan structures existed in Iceland and that kin could be divided over a number of issues, including the division of property or over differing political alliances (Byock, 1982, 90). Hrappr's connection is not to his kin so much as his land, which he jealously and violently protects.

A particularly interesting example of an unusual man turned *draugr* in *Svarfdæla saga* sheds a little more light on the issue of kinship ties surviving monstrous change. Klaufi is a member of a prominent family who is a monstrous figure in life, before he becomes a *draugr*. He is described rather memorably, at the age of eighteen (15):

Hann var þverrar handar of fimm álna hár. Armleggi hafði hann bæði langa ok digra, kinnr miklar ok þrekligar greipr. Hann var úteygr ok ennisbrattr, mjök munnljótr ok neflítill, háslangr ok hökumikill, skolbrúnn ok skarpleitr, lágu hátt kinnarbeinin. Manna var hann svartastr bæði á brýnn ok hár. Hann var oppinmynntr, ok skögðu tvær tennr fram ór höfðinu, ok allt var hann at álitu sem hann væri krepptur ok knýttur. (Jónas Krsitjánsson, 1956, 162)

He was nearly eight feet tall, and he had long, thick arms, large cheek bones, and a powerful grip, protruding eyes, a flat forehead, a very ugly mouth, a small nose, a long neck, a large chin, one bushy eyebrow stretching across his forehead, sharp features, and high cheek bones. He had very black hair and eyebrows. His mouth hung open, with his two front teeth sticking out, and his face was wrinkled and puckered (Hreinsson et al., 1997, IV: 167).

Klaufi is undeniably monstrous in appearance, the most extreme example of somatic abnormality considered in this chapter so far. Klaufi also betrays the sort of worrying

behavioural tendencies associable with the *draugr*-to-be, showing a preference to kill his enemies over a more socially nuanced approach to the workings of feud. On one occasion he has his kin's enemy Ljótólfr at a disadvantage, but is restrained from killing him in his berserker rage by Karl, his kinsman. Karl's concern is that Ljótólfr's powerful kinsmen will have to be involved after his killing and that the feud will escalate beyond anything the kinsmen can deal with. Klaufi is furious, seeing the matter only in terms of missing a chance to take immediate control of the valley by slaughtering the opposition (17). Klaufi's aim may be social power, but he seemingly does not understand or refuses to accept the ways in which to behave within his society.

From an early age, Klaufi is a killer and a societal problem. Indeed, Þórsteinn, Klaufi's uncle, offers double the money for fostering Klaufi than for Klaufi's sister, precisely because he has predicted that the money will be needed to pay out as compensation for the various killings and other problems Klaufi will cause (12-14). Klaufi is a troubling presence both in his violent response to provocation and his grotesque, monstrous appearance and abilities. Power-hungry, violent and ill-tempered and monstrous in his looks, Klaufi would certainly seem to be something of a monster already, if not in danger of becoming a *draugr*. But as different as Klaufi is in life, he becomes all the more dangerous and interesting after death as a truly unique *draugr*.

Klaufi is killed not by an undead being, but by his own wife, who is less than happy with her marital lot (17).<sup>75</sup> Almost immediately after being stabbed to death, he begins to move, prompting his killers to cut off his head. In Klaufi's case, however, this proves to be an inadequate measure. What is interesting is that Klaufi's first action is to set about avenging himself, showing far more of a surviving personality and immediate concern with honour than any other *draugr* (19). He at first appears as a disembodied voice guiding his kinsmen to vengeance, but when his kin attack Klaufi's murderous bride's father and his men, the battle begins to go against them. At that point, Klaufi himself shows up, wielding his own severed head as a weapon in the saga's most grotesquely

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<sup>75</sup> Yngvildr is forced to marry Klaufi through a successful piece of deceit and treachery on Karl and Klaufi's part.

enjoyable moment (19). That he fights alongside his kin in an action that is both concerned with honour and the rather maniacally homicidal approach to the feud he adopted in life only makes his connection to that former life and his family ties and responsibilities more apparent.

This connection remains, as Klaufi reappears as a ghastly vision to Karl *inn rauði*, foretelling his death, in another unusual twist on the conventional *draugr* motif (22). And later still, at the very end of the saga, Klaufi is mentioned again and this time it is due to his violent depredations and the death and destruction he has caused in a much more familiar *draugr* manner. Karl, son of Karl *inn rauði*, born after Klaufi was killed, disposes of Klaufi in an appropriately careful manner, digging up his body, burning him and putting the ashes into a sealed box and reinterring them (28). While the means of disposal is thorough but not unusual, Karl Karlsson is said to be upset by Klaufi's actions, and their kinship is prominently mentioned: 'Karli þóttu mikil mein á um Klaufa, frænda sinn, er hann gekk aptr', 'It seemed to Karl a great harm about Klaufi, his kinsman, that he went after [i.e. behaved as a *draugr*]' (28). While, as indicated, Klaufi is an unusual *draugr* and has an unusually close relationship with his family, it is still perhaps surprising that Karl should be so concerned with a long dead uncle he never met and who has become a monster. Kinship bonds could survive not just death, but undeath too. Since such kinship ties remained to some degree operative, this goes some way to explaining the reluctance or distress at having to deal with a dead but restless relative: it is bound up in a sense of how a family is perceived, and thus, inevitably, with honour. Karl's reaction to Klaufi indicates that it was an uncomfortable prospect to identify a relative as a monster. Glámr can be destroyed with no qualms because he is merely a *þræll* and unconnected to anyone in Iceland beyond his former employer. Glámr is thus a problem that can be eradicated without complication beyond the dangerous work involved in defeating him. Karl has the consideration of his tie to a member of his family and thus has to be forced into taking the socially responsible action and destroying Klaufi's body. This is not necessarily an entirely negative reflection on Karl, but rather indicates the fact that he had a real problem with which to wrestle. Arnkell in *Eyrbyggja saga* offers more immediate support to his *þingmen* but proves willing only to move

Þórolfr's body, not destroy it. Arnkell's actions are sufficient in the short term in that Þórolfr does lie quiet, but ultimately his failure to take the additional steps to lay a *draugr* to rest result in Þórolfr becoming the problem of another generation. The demands of family and personal honour must be weighed against the standing lost by failing to act to protect others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the question was not easily resolved.

### Conclusions

*Draugar* are problematic monsters. They defy the normal processes of nature, they are destructive, deadly and fall outside any category of human compensation. But with their ties to kin and power affected by such things as eviction proceedings or bad hospitality, *draugar* are not completely outside the scope of humanity. There are ranges of *draugar*, from the rather pathetic drowned men who hog the fire in *Eyrbyggja saga* to the inhumanly transfigured Glámr or the malignant and corrupt barrow-dwellers like Sóti in *Harðar saga ok holmverja*. And yet there are contradictions, even within this, contradictions that tend to disrupt any neat hierarchical ordering that might be imposed on these beings. The drowned men, victims of a curse brought about about by a breach of social behaviour, the failure to carry out the wishes of a dying woman, can be exorcised by legal proceedings. Violent *draugar* are usually only dealt with through violence, a fact that reflects the human's lack of concern for obeying the laws and social forms in life, amplified monstrously in death. Glámr is so distorted and swollen in appearance that the farmer he plagues describes him as inhuman. But while his form is described in grotesque terms, he himself is referred to on several occasions as a *þræll*, referring to the status he had as a slave and a shepherd on Þorkell's farm before his death. Klaufi is one of the *draugar* who, initially at least, seems to maintain most of his former personality and at first seems to be motivated by his own and his family's honour. Later on, he will become a monster in fact, one who has to be destroyed.

The problem is not resolved so much as deepened by the fact that there are cases of people who die and come back without having been killed by another *draugr* since they are typically unusual or anti-societal in life. Are these people on the fringes of society

monsters themselves? On the surface it is the transformation into a *draugr* that would see them classified as monsters, but, as has been indicated, the transformation into a *draugr* is not always associated with violent and destructive behaviour nor does it necessarily sever the ties with kin, society or even adherence to law. Rather it is the cases where the undead behaviour seems at least in part dictated by the behaviour of the living man — the more anti-societal, anti-Christian or generally disruptive the individual in life, the greater likelihood of their being destructive menaces in undeath. But even in the case of dangerous *draugar* like Klaufi, Þórólfr *bægifótr* and Kárr *inn gamli* in *Grettis saga*, those with kin ties to the *draugar* do not lose sight of those ties, even if they are motivated to disturb or destroy the bodies of their relatives in the face of the anger and fear of the living. Þórgunna's activities as a *draugr* may be designed to ensure the hospitable treatment of the men moving her body but she is a terrifying presence to all concerned, not merely the curmudgeonly farmers she aims to intimidate.

It is important to consider, then, not only aspects of society, religion and law in the shaping of an individual and how their behaviour in response to these factors affects their potential to become monstrous, but also to consider the ways in which individuals and societies react to them, 'human' or 'monster'. In order to investigate these ideas in greater detail, the subsequent chapters will explore outlaws and exiles on the fringes of and outside society.

## Chapter Five

### Outlaws: Monstrosity and Humanity in Society and the Wild

The previous chapters have considered human links to the monstrous and some of the social factors that lead to monstrous change. While the general principle of monstrous change as a consequence of aberrant or anti-social behaviour has been advanced in the previous chapter in the case of the *draugar*, several problematic examples indicate that even in the case of the undead the lines between the categories of human and monster could be blurred.

As the previous chapter indicated, even in the apparently clear-cut case of people becoming undead, their status as monsters is compounded or complicated in many instances by their behaviour and position within society before death and in some cases by their behaviour afterwards. In order to expand on the notions of the social factors involved in the transformation of humans to monsters, this chapter will focus on outlaws and consider the ways in which outlawry constitutes social transgression and exclusion, factors with great potential for triggering monstrous change as the preceding chapters have argued. The sagas of Icelanders provide a rich array of outlaw characters and reveal a varied set of responses to outlaws which problematises any notion of an outlaw as being in some sense concomitant with the wild, the other or the monstrous. In most cases, outlaws remain to some extent active, if limited, participants in society whether through the remembrance of kin ties, being afforded the protection of or used as a pawn by a powerful chieftain or offered a hideout on a remote farm. This chapter will explore the extent to which an outlaw's crimes, relationship with society, and the nature and cause of the outlaw's death affect his identity as a human or a monster. Such an approach will allow for the necessarily nuanced exploration of outlawry and monstrosity.

The notion of the outlaw as someone cast out into the territory of monsters is not a new one. Jennifer Neville, in an article on outlawry and monstrosity in Anglo-Saxon England, stressed the notion that the outlaw 'draws attention to the sharp divisions between the inside and the outside, for exiles are forced to step outside the protective boundaries and

definitions of human society into the violent and chaotic natural world' (2001, 118). Implicit in Neville's concept of the outlaw is the notion of both stepping beyond social boundaries through some form of crime or transgression and of being pushed outside society's borders as a form of legal punishment. In both behavioural and geographical ways, the notional outlaw is in dangerous territory.

Kirsten Hastrup, working from an anthropological perspective, has argued for the potent, monstrous symbolism of the outlaw in medieval Icelandic literature. While law was important throughout medieval Scandinavia (Sandvik and Jon Viðar Sigurðsson, 2005, 223), Hastrup has argued that law was particularly crucial to medieval Iceland's developing sense of itself as a society. The phrase *vár lög* comes to suggest both the importance of law in the maintenance and operation of their society, and the importance of their own distinct legal codes from the rest of medieval Scandinavia.<sup>76</sup> For Hastrup, this idea of 'our law' logically extends to the notion of the places in which human law, and therefore human society, operates. Indeed, Hastrup argues that if law and society are coterminous, then non-law and 'the wild', that which is outside (human) society may be inferred as being similarly coterminous (1985, 136-37, 139-40). With law and society so tightly bound together, the outlaw thus becomes one who is stripped not only of legal protection and social functionality, but also from membership in human society altogether. Neville puts it more forcefully still:

Human beings exist only in social places like the hall, where their roles, responsibilities, and relationships to each other are defined....Outside in the natural world, on the other hand, there are dragons, bears, fish, and 'people' whose natures are at best ambiguous, at worst monstrous, including the thief travelling alone in dark weather and the *þyrs* dwelling alone in the fen. (Neville, 2001, 119)

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<sup>76</sup> See Hastrup, 1982, 145-60, for a discussion of the emergence of an Icelandic national identity. The idea of Icelanders as a distinct people from other speakers of the 'Danish tongue' may not be applicable before the early twelfth century, though the establishment of the *Alþingi* and the Icelandic constitution in 930 A.D. certainly becomes the historical focus of the beginnings of a national identity.

While Neville's conceptualisation allows for some range with regard to the 'people' out there, she nevertheless constructs a binary in which it is only possible to be human in social spaces and while adhering to societal rules. This idea also finds more recent coinage in Miller's discussion of homelessness in medieval Iceland where he suggests that the outlaw is: 'the lone-wolf, the woods stalker, the person who, along with the uncanny creatures of the dead and monster world, belong *utangarðs*, outside the pale' (Miller, 2004, 133). And indeed, in such term the outlaw thus defined is particularly vulnerable to being perceived in monstrous terms since:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (Cohen, 1996, 12)

As such, outlaws are figures who — in theory — lend themselves well to notions of monstrous change since they not only cross into non-social, 'wild' space but do so through some form of societal breach.

In the case of medieval Iceland, the desire to view outlawry as some form of crucible for monstrous change is particularly tempting. The Icelandic term applied to the outlaw, *skógarmaðr*, is redolently suggestive in identifying the outlaw as a 'man of the forest'. In considering the theoretical full outlaw, such a figure cut off from society must survive by preying on society, whether alone or with the aid of other outlaws. In this sense the full outlaw is a figure of potential menace. Like a monster, the outlaw or outlaw gang can steal, kill, pillage and even destroy property and occupy land. Such a notion of the outlaw in the wilderness is, however, dangerously limiting. The *Íslendingasögur* alone reveal a far more complex picture in which numerous different types of outlaws exist in a wide variety of circumstances, only some of which fit into the model of complete outsiders suggested by Neville. In order to facilitate a nuanced approach to analysis, I turn next to

the nature of medieval Icelandic outlawry and the variety of outlaws and responses to them encountered in the sagas.

### Outlaws and Society

Icelandic law recognised two types of outlaw: lesser and full.<sup>77</sup> The lesser outlaw had to endure banishment from Iceland for a period of three years. After that time had elapsed, full legal rights and privileges were restored and the individual could return to Iceland. Full outlawry was effectively a death sentence. Not only did the outlaw lose all legal rights, property and possessions, he was forbidden to leave the country and could be killed with impunity by anyone who encountered him. Outlawry was not a form of justice in the modern sense of serving as a form of social restitution for a particular crime. Outlawry — particularly full outlawry — was as much a means of aiding in the taking of vengeance as a punishment in its own right (Miller, 1999, 74-75). Given both the stripping of legal protection and the harsh nature of Iceland as an environment, there can be little doubt that full outlawry was intended as a death penalty through social exile. Full outlawry did, in legal terms, represent being cut off from society in the loss of legal rights, possessions and domicile, but also in that it was a punishable offence for anyone to assist an outlaw (*Grágás* Ia 121, 127; II 402). Since Iceland had no state apparatus for the enforcement of justice, dealing with the outlaw was the task of the private individual who prosecuted the case. Outlawry was thus enforced ultimately by interested members of society and particularly by those responsible for the outlawing in the first case.

This raises two important issues which will be relevant to the ongoing discussion. The first is that the difficulty of successfully prosecuting an outlaw was dependent on greater support being available to the prosecutor than the defendant. In the case of the typical farmer this could well mean seeking the support of a *goði* or wealthy, connected relative,

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<sup>77</sup> Further distinctions between grades of outlaw could also be made on the basis of whether someone was made a full outlaw in a private settlement, in which case mitigating factors might allow such men a chance to leave the country in permanent exile (*Grágás* Ia 94-95). References to *Grágás* are to the edition by Vilhjálmur Finsen, 1852.

a situation that could be, and often was, exploited (Karlsson, 2000, 24).<sup>78</sup> The second point is that the outlaw was the responsibility of an individual and his kin or supporters, rather than of a community. One provision in the law codes makes it clear that those not directly involved in dealing with an outlaw were not obliged to take any action against him (*Grágás* II 402). In this sense, the outlaw was not necessarily an enemy of a wide community group and thus the perception of an individual outlaw could depend on how he behaved. Responses to outlaws in the sagas vary, but there are several instances of farmers and *goðar* willing to assist outlaws, in spite of the law's prohibitions on the subject (Amory, 1992, 192-93; cf. Miller, 1990, 238).

Indeed, the notion that even full outlaws were as cut off from society as the law might desire is untenable in face of the saga evidence. Frederic Amory has pointed out the various ways in which outlaws could and did interact with and within society, stating bluntly that 'for the medieval period the presence of the outlaw *in* society was a *fait accompli*, whatever the laws of Norway and Iceland may have proclaimed to the contrary' (1992, 203). This is not to suggest that all outlaws could or did operate within society, but rather that there were opportunities to do so available to those capable enough to secure them. From temporary shelter with kin or a stranger on the margins of society to a place in a chieftain's household, outlaws were able to find means of avoiding the wilderness and retaining some form of relationship with society.

Perhaps the best hope for an outlaw to achieve some measure of social reintegration was to secure a place in the household of a *goði*. The outlaw would be expected to perform some service making them worth the risk of protecting, and assassination of a *goði*'s rival was not an uncommon form of service (Amory, 1992, 199-201). As Amory notes, it was even more common that such outlaws would often be poor men of meagre skill desperate for the protection a patron could offer and that they would fail, often dying in the attempt

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<sup>78</sup> For example, in *Laxdæla saga*, an outlaw called Grímr becomes the responsibility of the *goði* Þorkell Eyjólfsson since his relative, the father of the man Grímr killed, is too old to deal with the situation (57). Þorkell is unwilling to do so, but uses the situation as an excuse to borrow his relative's magic sword. While Þorkell does hunt Grímr down, he does not kill his outlaw, choosing instead to arrange his escape from Iceland, and he keeps his relative's sword (58).

(201-2). For example, *Finnboga saga ramma* sees the wealthy and respected Finnbogi sought out by three outlaws on separate occasions. The first two he offers to protect in exchange for the work they are exceptionally skilled in — wall building and harvesting respectively — but both ultimately prove to be assassins seeking the protection of another man, Finnbogi's enemy, Jökull (39-40). Finnbogi tests both, offering them an opportunity to attack him, and kills each man when he takes it.<sup>79</sup> In the third instance, Finnbogi not only takes on an outlaw, but offers to pay compensation for his crimes and is ultimately able to reconcile him with his prosecutor and restore him to society (41-42). Though threatened with legal action over harbouring an outlaw (41), Finnbogi is unmoved and, indeed, no legal action is taken against him. Instead, the reconciliation he achieves earns Finnbogi the respect and friendship of another powerful man.

*Laxdæla saga* furnishes interesting examples of such figures in the attack on Helgi Harðbeinsson (62-64). Helgi, characterised as a generous man when it comes to offering shelter and assistance, is harbouring two outlaws (62). Both men die fighting by his side, cut down by prominent men from the attacking party (64). Helgi's attackers, by contrast, are joined by a runaway servant called Hrappr, whose desire for the patronage of a powerful man sees him immediately despatched when he rushes headlong into battle against Helgi (64). Hrappr is a grotesque, comic figure, one who styles himself as Víga-Hrappr, 'killer-Hrappr', but admits that his attempt to kill his master was a failure (63). Given their willingness to die alongside their protector, Helgi's outlaws are relatively dignified, if ineffectual, suggesting that they had earned — and appreciated — his protection.

*Goðar* seeking assassins or fighting men were not the only ones who would ignore the laws altogether and offer shelter or supplies. Whether through kinship, benevolence or in exchange for money, goods or services, people of various social ranks assisted outlaws. Examples of such behaviour include Finnbogi, mentioned above, and Björn *Hitdælakappi*, who offers Grettir support and shelter in *Grettis saga* and is generally

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<sup>79</sup> The second of Finnbogi's outlaws proves to be a tough and strong opponent, one who is thought to be more of a *troll* than a human (40).

known as someone who supports outlaws (58). Another interesting example is Finnbogi from *Finnboga saga ramma*, a man who offers to shelter three consecutive outlaws, even though the first two turn out to be assassins sent by an enemy of his. *Gísli saga* offers several characters of lower social standing and influence willing to shelter outlaws for a reward of some description. A woman named Þorgerðr is known generally as someone who shelters outlaws, presumably in return for payment (23), while Ingjaldr, a farmer living on a small island off the coast of Iceland, offers shelter to Gísli in exchange for Gísli's expert services as a craftsman (24-7). Another farmer, Refr, helps Gísli elude some pursuers when he has nothing to gain and could conceivably get himself into a great deal of imminent physical trouble, future legal repercussions notwithstanding (27). The literary evidence suggests that outlaws were not universally reviled. While some saw a chance to profit in using outlaws as either pawns in a feud or as labourers or crafters on the farm, others showed a desire to help because of family ties.

In spite of the legal prohibitions against helping outlaws, high social status and powerful kin could be of considerable importance in influencing an individual or society's response to an outlaw. Perhaps the most striking indicator of the importance of social class and the outlaw's relative position to society concerns Grettir Ásmundarson's capture by a group of small farmers who plan to execute him. The incident is recorded in *Grettis saga* (52) and opens many versions of *Fostbræðra saga*. Grettir is saved by a socially prestigious woman, Þorbjörg, the wife of a *goði*, who makes it abundantly clear that the farmers are Grettir's social inferior, referring to them as 'vesalmenn', 'miserable people' and contemptuously dismissing their desire to execute Grettir (52):

‘Vera má, at Grettir hafi sakar til þess, en ofráð mun þat verða yðr Ísfirðingum, at taka Gretti af lífi, því at hann er maðr fræg ok stórættaðr, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr.’ (Guðni Jonsson, 1936,169)

‘It may be that Grettir deserves this, but that will be too great a task for you Ísfirðingers to take on, to take Grettir's life, because he is a

renowned man and comes from a great family, although he is not a lucky man.'

Þorbjörg's assessment of the situation and her corresponding contempt for the farmers is not entirely unjustified since after capturing Grettir they bicker over who will have to take responsibility for him. They may want Grettir dead, but they are not so foolish as to imagine they will gain any honour or respect for being the ones who killed the infamous outlaw. Indeed, Þorbjörg's intervention is not motivated by snobbery but actually is an extremely shrewd social manoeuvre. Grettir is an outlaw, but his social status and family connections were evidently not forgotten and had to be factored into the ways he might be treated. Þorbjörg uses Grettir's reputation as a means to both free him from the farmers who have captured him and as a successful means of securing his promise to leave the region in peace and never to rob there again. Her mention of his great family is similarly two-pronged. Þorbjörg's point is not merely that Grettir's family are of a higher social station than his captors, but that they are a powerful family that will have to be dealt with by whoever takes responsibility for killing Grettir. Þorbjörg is in effect protecting her husband's followers by peacefully removing the two threats Grettir represents: his plundering of farms and the reprisals that will follow his death.

In some instances outlaws were sympathised with to the extent that those providing substantial assistance to the outlaws won acclaim for their actions. As noted above, in *Laxdæla saga* Þorkell Eyjólfsson helps the outlaw Grímr to escape Iceland, an action which meets with the approval of that shrewdest evaluator of early medieval Icelandic society, Snorri *goði* (58). Later in the saga, Þorkell's wife, Guðrunn, initially hides an outlaw and then convinces Þorkell to help him leave the country (69). In both cases, the saga notes that these were good men who went on to prosper abroad. Þorkell suffers no disapprobation for his actions; the saga notes, in fact, that he generally becomes increasingly popular because of his actions in life (70).

But while there were evidently always those willing to help outlaws in spite of their status, whether they were wretches or good men, outlawry did not necessarily negate

one's standing or positive social perception. Gunnarr of Hliðarendi is an interesting example of such a case. Gunnarr is made a lesser outlaw after a particularly bloody encounter (72-74), but his refusal to leave him sees him become a full outlaw (75). That the action dooms him is indicated by the responses of his wife Hallgerðr and his mother. Hallgerðr, who is represented as a destructive and socially disruptive figure throughout the saga is pleased at Gunnarr's decision, while his mother, a sensible and reliable woman, is upset. Gunnarr's decision is seen in a negative light by his brother Kolskeggr, but the disapproval is directed at Gunnarr's decision to break his word and Kolskeggr's concern is that Gunnarr will be killed, not that he will be made an outlaw (75).

Clearly, as the above examples indicate, it is not possible to make broad assumptions concerning outlaws regarding the conditions they lived in or their relationship with society, let alone their status as humans or monstrous beings. Some outlaws are able to pursue covert relationships with society, even contributing to, rather than damaging, the economy.<sup>80</sup> While this does not necessarily mean that such men were harmless, it does show a social element to their lives which law stated full outlaws were to be denied (*Grágás* Ia 121, 127; II 402). Thus it is not valuable to consider whether outlawry was in itself a cause that could equate a man with a monster, but rather it is necessary to consider the extent to which outlawry is a factor among a variety of processes that potentially lead to monstrous change. In order to explore these concepts, a group of 'monstrous' outlaws will be considered. Through exploration of these characters and their sagas, the remainder of this chapter will discuss this issue. Particular attention will be given to the extent to which an outlaw's crimes, the outlaw's relationship with society, and the nature and cause of the outlaw's death are factors in cases of monstrous change.

### The Short Unhappy Life of Svartr the Outlaw

Before considering the longer narratives of the outlaw sagas I will highlight the ways in which these factors are relevant by considering a short example from *Vápnfirðinga saga*

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<sup>80</sup> Gísli's time hiding out with Ingjaldr is brought to an end when people see the quality of hand-made goods Ingjaldr is trading, and realise that it is far beyond anything Ingjaldr could muster on his own (25).

in some detail. In this case, the outlaw under consideration is a man called Svartr whose life as an outlaw is pithily dealt with in the space of a single chapter of *Vápnfirðinga saga*. Svartr is a farmer whose troublesome nature leads Brodd-Helgi, the protagonist of this part of the saga, to make him an outlaw. The saga outlines Svartr's case with considerable economy (2):

Maðr hét Svartr, er kom út hingat ok gerði bú í Vápnafirði. It næsta honum bjó sá maðr er Skíði hét. Hann var félítill. Svartr var mikill maðr ok rammr að afli ok vel vígr ok óeirðarmaðr inn mesti. Þá Svart ok Skíða skilði á um beitingar, ok lauk því svá, at Svartr vá Skíða. En Brodd-Helgi mælti eftir vígit ok gerði Svart sekan. Þá var Brodd-Helgi tólf vetra gamall. (Jón Jóhannesson, 1950, 24)

There was a man called Svartr who came out to Iceland and built a farmstead in Vápnafirði. Near him lived a man called Skíði. He was very poor. Svartr was a big man, great in strength, well skilled in arms and the most troublesome person. Svartr and Skíði argued over grazing rights and it so came about that Svartr killed Skíði. And Brodd-Helgi spoke up after the killing and had Svartr outlawed. Brodd-Helgi was twelve years old at that time.

Svartr is established as a foreigner with great strength and martial prowess but, ominously, he is also 'óeirðarmaðr inn mesti'.<sup>81</sup> Skíði is noted only as poor and as Svartr's neighbour. His proximity to the violent Svartr seals his fate after a quarrel over resources, a not uncommon source of conflict in medieval Iceland (Byock, 2001, 208).<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, the conflict is sketched out with only minimal details. Thus while the reason behind the conflict and its results are given it remains unclear exactly how everything came to pass. Some elements of the story may be fairly safely inferred; for example, it seems likely that Svartr was the one responsible for violating Skíði's rights

<sup>81</sup> Grettir Ásmundarson is also identified in his youth as an *óeirðarmaðr* (16).

<sup>82</sup> For example, fights could break out over how to share such valuable resources as beached whales (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 57).

and for responding with abrupt, lethal violence when confronted over the issue since such behaviour is typical in stories concerning an *ójafnaðrmaðr* or *óeirðarmaðr*. More puzzling is how Brodd-Helgi becomes involved in the case. There is no mention of kinship between Brodd-Helgi and Skíði or any other piece of information that suggests that Brodd-Helgi was motivated by obligation. Brodd-Helgi's age provides an answer: Brodd-Helgi is twelve which means that he is just old enough to legally prosecute cases. As an ambitious man keen to establish his reputation in society he sees prosecuting Svartr as a means of making his name known and displaying his skill and courage at the earliest possible time in his life.

The very lack of detail in the conflict between Skíði and Svartr is itself suggestive of another important issue: social status. Typically feuds escalate beyond the principal cause of conflict because the participants seek assistance from kin or from their *goði* (Ólason, 2005, 103-04; Byock, 1982, esp. 47-142 and above, 146-47). Svartr and Skíði are simple farmers and among the details that are established about these men are that Svartr is a foreigner, implying that he has little if any kin in Iceland, while Skíði is a poor man, meaning that he has little in the way of wealth to offer as incentive to a more powerful patron. In short, neither man is connected or wealthy enough to impact greatly on the society around them, and thus their conflict is a simple, if ugly, matter. This lack of social status and, indeed, larger societal concern, is an important point. The emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to pursue or defend a case meant that the richer, more powerful and better connected always had an advantage over the poor (Gunnar Karlsson, 2000, 24). Svartr evidently is not well-connected, given that his outlawry is disposed of in a single line in which it is simply stated that Brodd-Helgi had only to speak to have Svartr outlawed: 'En Brodd-Helgi mælti eftir vígit ok gerði Svart sekan'. No one defends Svartr and he becomes a full outlaw, one who is very much cut off from society.

As an outlaw, Svartr lies out alone on the heath (2) and steals from various farms to support himself. While his solitary life on the heath is the result of being outlawed, it may also be inferred that the foreign Svartr has little choice other than to live in the wild due to his lack of family ties in the community. Other outlaws, as has been seen, are not

always so lacking in kin or wealth that they are unable to find some shelter. Svartr's isolation on the heath is, however, not without significance. It is interesting that Svartr, noted for his strength and skill in arms, does not attempt to find a *goði* willing to shelter him (Amory, 1992, 202). The saga offers a telling detail that suggests that Svartr's behaviour is not without purpose. Svartr begins to prey on the people of the district but it is made explicitly clear that he took 'miklu meira at en honum var nauðsyn til' (Jón, 1950, 25), 'much more than was necessary for him'. Svartr's malevolence marks him as different from other outlaws. He prefers to hurt the community that has outlawed him rather than to concentrate on his survival or seek some means of social reintegration. In this, Svartr's behaviour is more like that of a monster such as Grendel than most outlaws were. Indeed, his association with the monstrous is only strengthened by subsequent events.

Brodd-Helgi takes action, though only after Svartr steals several animals from Brodd-Helgi's farm. He tracks the outlaw to his hideout on the heath and mortally wounds Svartr in the ensuing encounter. But Brodd-Helgi is rewarded for his pains with a prophetic curse (2):

“Nú gerði gæfumun okkar," segir hann, "ok muntu verða banamaðr minn en sá ættangr mun verða í kyni yðru heðan af, at alla ævi mun uppi vera meðan landit er byggt.” (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, 25-6)

“Now a shift of luck occurs between us,” he says, “and you will be my killer. But there will happen family calamities among your kin from henceforward that will be remembered for all time while the land is settled.”

Svartr is to the young Brodd-Helgi a challenge of the type that Kathryn Hume has connected with monsters in many sagas:

many such combats, especially when they take place apart from society and especially when the opponents are *draugar*, bears, and berserks, are remnants of initiation rituals. Such ordeals result in the boy's becoming a man or the man's becoming an extraordinary being. (Hume, 1980, 4)

Brodd-Helgi's confrontation with Svartr occurs 'apart from society', on the heath where Svartr has been lying out and Svartr takes the place of a more obviously supernatural foe. The twelve-year-old Helgi's manhood is proved and his reputation increased, but there is a price in the form of Svartr's prophecy, a curse-like prediction reminiscent of the Glámr episode in *Grettis saga*.<sup>83</sup> The prophecy is extremely effective and appropriate precisely because Helgi has been motivated to deal with Svartr by his concerns for establishing his reputation in society. First outlawing, then killing Svartr sees Helgi's reputation flourish in the short term, but the cost is that Svartr's dying words will ensure that Helgi will ultimately be remembered for shameful deeds.

Svartr's death is otherwise unmourned and unavenged. Brodd-Helgi's reputation is enhanced and the community is relieved of a dangerous menace. Svartr's case raises several important points and some further questions that will be of importance to the remainder of this chapter. The social circumstances of Svartr are important insofar as Svartr represents the poor and poorly-connected, the sort of man who can easily be made an outlaw and whose ties to society are already weak. Svartr is a troublemaker whose violent deeds force him outside his society and see him remain on the fringes of his former community, living in the wild. And from there Svartr engages in behaviour that is more extensive in its destructiveness than his previous behaviour, until he is cut down by a heroic challenger. In this sense Svartr certainly seems to become a monstrous figure, though the roots of his behaviour are obvious in his being 'óeirðarmaðr hinn mesti'. To some extent, being made an outlaw simply gives him more opportunities to exercise his destructive tendencies, but in Svartr there exists a willingness to unleash those tendencies

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<sup>83</sup> Grettir decides to fight Glámr for the sole purpose of proving his prowess and thus increasing his prestige (*Grettis saga*, 34). Helgi's decision to outlaw Svartr is similarly motivated, and while his confrontation with Svartr is triggered by the loss of his property (*Vápnfirðinga saga*, 2), having made Svartr an outlaw, Brodd-Helgi makes Svartr his responsibility (Miller, 1990).

that is not a result of his being an outlaw, but rather stems from his nature beforehand. Svartr's case thus indicates that it is not simply being made an outlaw and living apart from society that inspires monstrous behaviour.

In order better to understand the context of Svartr's actions and the processes that bring him to a monstrous death it is necessary to examine his life before and during his outlawry as well as the manner of his death and its impact on society. Thus the remainder of the chapter will more closely analyse aspects of the lives and deaths of outlaws and their connections to society, religion and monstrosity. Much of the following discussion will focus on the three major outlaw figures depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, namely the sagas of Gísli, Grettir and Hörðr. Aside from representing the most sustained narratives concerning outlaws among the *Íslendingasögur*, the characters in these sagas offer a useful range of contrasts in the way they endure outlawry and the ways in which they interact with society, the supernatural and the monstrous. The following section will focus on the personalities, crimes and supernatural encounters of the outlaws under consideration in order to establish a basis for which to consider their lives as outlaws and their potential for being identified in monstrous terms.

### Becoming Outlaws in Early Medieval Iceland

In marked contrast to Svartr, all three of the major outlaws are noted as being born of high status families. In other words, they are made outlaws in spite of the fact that they have access to the kind of aid and resources that the aforementioned Svartr lacks: in the case of Hörðr, for example, the opportunity to make a settlement arises in spite of crimes more violent than Svartr's. It is Hörðr's failure to attend the *Alþingi* or to secure someone to speak for him which results in his outlawry, not the lack of means or opportunity to make a settlement (21).<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, it was evidently considered surprising when such men with considerable skills, wealth and strong kin ties should be made full outlaws since in each case some form of malign supernatural influence affects them.

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<sup>84</sup> Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga* is similarly afforded the lighter penalty of lesser outlawry thanks to his friends and kinsmen who could plead on his behalf and help him pay compensation for killings. Gunnarr only becomes a full outlaw because he refuses to leave the country in temporary exile (74).

Each of the major outlaws is placed under a curse that apparently contributes to their becoming an outlaw or remaining one until they are ultimately destroyed. In the cases of Grettir and Hörðr, both men are cursed by monsters. Grettir is cursed after being warned to avoid monsters and Hörðr is cursed after embarking on an expedition to the wilderness to confront another evil *draugr*. Grettir's outlawry is attributed directly to the curse laid on him by the *draugr* Glámr. The curse states that he will become an outlaw since his actions will all turn out for the worse and that he will be afflicted by night terrors that will make him concomitantly desirous of human company after dark (35). Hörðr is also cursed by a *draugr*, in his case by a violent mound-dwelling viking, who specifically curses a gold arm-ring Hörðr greedily claims from the mound (15). While nothing is overtly mentioned concerning his becoming an outlaw, the curse is designed to kill any man who attempts to claim the ring and may be operative in triggering the violent and destructive behaviour that leads to Hörðr's outlawry.

Gísli is cursed by a sorcerer as a result of his crime of secret murder, an act that is condemned in the saga (18). The curse in this instance designed to bring about the doom of a man seemingly unidentifiable due to his refusal to honourably declare the killing (18). Gísli sends some kinsmen to the assembly on his behalf, evidently not completely rejecting the possibility of reconciliation but not counting on one either (21). The details of what occurs at the assembly are left obscure, but Gísli's kinsmen comport themselves poorly and fail to prevent Gísli's outlawry. Implicit in the failure of Gísli's proxies is the notion of the curse at work, preventing him from receiving assistance in this instance as it later does in Gísli's efforts to secure shelter or support from various chieftains and kinsmen across Iceland (21). The circumstances of Gísli's act warrant closer inspection, but it is worth pointing out initially that while there are no connections with the monstrous in this curse, Gísli's deed is one considerably at odds with the norms of his society and, indeed, seemingly with his character.

Gísli Súrsson is in many ways an unlikely man to be made an outlaw, since he is shown as a generous, hard-working, caring and even easygoing man in his living arrangements

with his work-shy brother Þorkell. But while Gísli possesses a keen sense of honour, his sense of duty to his kin is shown not just in his behaviour as a dutiful son but as a fierce avenger of any perceived slight to family honour. As other commentators have pointed out, Gísli's problem is that his sense of duty is perhaps too keen and his approach to honour and vengeance too inflexible (Bredsdorf, 2001, 67-9; Theodore M. Andersson, 1969, 41). Thus when his brother-in-law Vésteinn is murdered, Gísli is compelled to take vengeance, even though he must act against his brother Þorkell and brother-in-law Þorgrímr, and this compulsion drives Gísli to the act which sees him condemned to full outlawry.<sup>85</sup> Whether in a desire to match the murder of Vésteinn or a desire to prevent open feud with his family, Gísli's secret murder of Þorgrímr is a serious crime, one far beyond any simple vengeance slaying.<sup>86</sup>

Gísli's crime is undeniably a grave one in the terms of Icelandic society, but it is an action complicated by the problems of kinship ties. Gísli's murder of Þorgrímr is done to avenge his friend and brother-in-law Vésteinn while sparing his own brother Þorkell and trying to prevent feud openly spilling out between kin. While his impulses may be noble (Bredsdorf, 2001, 64-66), however, his actions and the way his sister is forced to suffer the loss of her husband is arguably not (T. M. Andersson, 1969, 37-39). Nevertheless, as grave as Gísli's crime is, it is motivated by honour and a desire to minimise social disruption, and as will be seen, Gísli's life as an outlaw largely conforms to these qualities even if it is not the case, as T. M. Andersson contends, that 'Gísli is in fact wholly admirable during his outlawry, though not before' (1969, 40).

Grettir is in many respects the opposite of Gísli. Where Gísli is the dutiful son, hard-working and the defender of family honour, Grettir's youth is marked by his taciturn and insulting nature, his bitter squabbles with his father, the mutilation of animals and a killing of dubious justification which leads to Grettir's first, temporary period as an

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<sup>85</sup> Though as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen points out, 'No man who wished to maintain his honour could let his sworn brother lie unavenged, even if that vengeance led him and his family into catastrophe.' (1986, 263)

<sup>86</sup> Later laws would mark such a secret killing as worthy of outlawry with a price on the outlaw's head attached, something evidently designed to encourage those not directly involved to hunt and kill the outlaw and thus reflective of the abhorrence felt for such actions.

outlaw (14-16). Robert Cook has argued that while Grettir ‘behaves in strange, unsociable and unpredictable ways...his behaviour usually becomes understandable and forgivable in due course’ (1985, 143). Indeed, it is during his first outlawry that Grettir’s talents shine through as a killer of monsters and a defender of society (18-20), indicating that he can be socially useful and is capable of fitting in with others. The problem that emerges, as has been argued, is that the opportunities for Grettir to be usefully engaged are few and far between in the age in which he lives (Hume, 1974, 472) and that Grettir, unable to settle peacefully into a stable, Christian society must seek out the dangers and challenges lurking on the edges of society (Bredsdorff, 2001, 95-101) to fulfil his potential. Grettir’s propensity to hunt for such trouble is directly connected to his becoming an outlaw, though the notion that Grettir only fits in on the margins of society and its implications for his status as man or monster will be explored and challenged in the later sections of this chapter.

Grettir’s path to full outlawry does involve overt monstrous and supernatural overtones but is also less than deserved, a point that the saga stresses. Unlike most other outlaws, Grettir’s crime, the killing of several Icelanders in Norway, is the result of an accident which occurs shortly after Grettir is cursed. Glámr’s malign influence is evidently responsible for the tragic turn events take. Grettir and a group of merchants are shipwrecked and stranded on the coast on a freezing night (38). Grettir is sent to investigate after a fire from a small lodge is spotted across the channel. Swimming across, Grettir’s cloak freezes with the result that ‘he was absolutely huge to look at, as if he were a troll’, ‘ok var hann furðu mikill tilsýndar sem troll væri’ and when he enters the lodge (38):

Þeim, sem fyrir váru, brá mjök við þetta, ok hugðu, at óvættir myndi vera; börðu þeir hann með öllu því, er þeir fengu til, ok varð nú brak mikit um þá, en Grettir hratt þeim fast af handleggjum. Sumir börðu hann með eldibröndum; hraut þá eldrinn um allt húsit. (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 130)

Those who were there were much taken aback at this and thought it must be an *óvættir*. They hit him with everything they could get hold of and there was now a great uproar among them, but Grettir beat them off with his arms. Some struck at him with firebrands. The fire then spread over the whole building.

Grettir emerges from the wilderness like a monster and is attacked as a result, leading to the deaths of all the men in the lodge when the fire gets out of control and burns it down. This tragedy is the result of Grettir being mistaken for an *óvættir*, an identification that puts him into monstrous company with giants, trolls, *draugar* and other evil monsters. Grettir comes to be identified as an *óvættir* thanks to the power of Glámr's curse which leads to Grettir's outlawry in Iceland when news reaches the relatives of the men killed in the fire.

While Grettir's connections with monstrosity apparently increase as the saga progresses, *Grettis saga* presents Grettir's actions in a generally positive light. Grettir's outlawry is worthy of note because it is considered not only unusual but possibly illegal. Skapti, the lawspeaker, is reluctant to pass judgement on Grettir's case when there is no one to defend him and the general opinion is that Grettir is made an outlaw (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 147) 'more out of zeal than in accordance with the laws' (46). Indeed, the zeal of Grettir's enemy, Þórir, that keeps Grettir an outlaw leads that shrewdest of members of early Icelandic society, Snorri *goði* to observe that 'þetta óviturlegt að bekkjast til að hafa þann mann í sektum er sva miklu illu mætti orka' (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 165), 'it was unwise to play about to keep a man an outlaw who would cause so much trouble' (51). Grettir is made an outlaw against the advice of the society's protector of the laws, against the laws themselves and against the best interests of the greater social good. Þórir is content to unleash a potentially terrible menace in his zeal to avenge his son. But while this reflects badly on Þórir and provokes sympathy for Grettir, the fact that Snorri's prediction is proven true places its own implications on Grettir's character. Grettir becomes a nuisance almost immediately on his return to Iceland, robbing various farmers to acquire supplies (52), before occupying a small island which he uses as a secure shelter

throughout the last years of his life (69-82). During much of his career as an outlaw, Grettir is a robber and a killer, and his time on Drangey represents a serious drain on the local economy. However noble some of his actions are, Grettir is also frequently the social pest Snorri warns he could become.

Hörðr's destiny is seemingly decided in the wilderness in an encounter with another undead being. Hörðr accompanies the son of a Norwegian earl on an expedition to break into the mound of a powerful *draugr* called Sóti (14-15). The mound-breaking sequence bears many similarities to the one in *Bárðar saga*, though in this instance, it is an entirely pagan affair. Hörðr requires supernatural assistance in preventing the mound from resealing itself in the night after a day's digging, and receives it from a mysterious stranger who is later identified as Óðinn in the form of a magic sword. The sword laid in the hole dug into the mound serves the same function as the lengthier vigil kept by *Bárðar saga*'s priest. Sóti proves to be more than Hörðr can handle alone, but is defeated by candle light, which Sóti is unable to endure, rather than the blessed light and presence of King Ólafur in *Bárðar saga*. The difference is crucial. While the full extent of the power of Christianity in *Bárðar saga* will be explored in the following chapter, here it is worth noting that while in that saga the protagonist leaves determined to become a Christian, Hörðr leaves with his sense of pride inflated and a piece of cursed treasure. Hörðr will not live long enough to become a Christian and the fellowship he does join is that of the largest gang of outlaws medieval Iceland saw, a serious threat to society at the time.

Nevertheless, Hörðr is usually depicted as a well-intentioned and noble character, albeit one prone to bouts of fatalism. Still, the sequence in which Hörðr commits the acts that lead to his outlawry is so out of character and strange that the curse of Sóti's ring suggests itself as a cause. Given the extent of Hörðr's violence in this sequence and the resonance it has with his somewhat monstrous death, this sequence is worth considering in some detail here. The ill-omened Helgi, Hörðr's companion, kills the young son of their neighbour, Auðr, an act which Hörðr sternly rebukes as being 'saklauss', without cause (21). Hörðr's generous offer of self-judgement is refused by Auðr who turns the

matter over to Torfi, Hörðr's uncle, with whom he has a bitterly acrimonious relationship. Auðr's rejection of this offer is insulting, but it is the fact that he has gone to his uncle that seems to provoke Hörðr (21): 'Þú hefir þat illa gert at rægja okkr Torfa saman' (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 56), 'You have done badly making trouble between Torfi and me'.

If Torfi's prosecution is successful, Helgi will be the one to face the legal ramifications of his actions. But, since he is part of Hörðr's household, Hörðr's social standing will suffer and his enmity with Torfi will be all the more bitter and closer to violence than before. Hörðr's anger in the face of this is understandable, insofar as he is able to consider the full social and legal consequences of Helgi's, Auðr's and Torfi's actions. His response to the situation, however, is to entirely abandon any form of social calculation in favour of an astonishing act of violence (21):

Hann brá þá sverðinu Sótanaut ok hjó Auð sundr í tvá hluti ok húskarl hans. Svá var Hörðr þá reiðr orðinn at hann brenndi bæinn ok allt andvirkit ok tvær kvinnur er eigi vildu út ganga. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 56)

Then he drew the sword Sótanaut and cut Auðr apart in two pieces and his workman. Hörðr had then become so angry that he burned the farm and all the farm buildings and two women who refused to leave.

Hörðr's behaviour is not a hot-blooded fury but a cold, destructive rage. That two women 'refused to leave' implies that he gave people an opportunity to flee before he destroyed the farm which in turn suggests that he had not completely abandoned some degree of reasoning. But his acts of wanton destruction and shameful killing equally suggest a complete disregard for the rules and norms of society and do not even correspond with his own assessment of Helgi's killing as 'saklauss'. Hörðr's justification for killing Auðr is slender but he has none whatsoever for the burning and killing that follows.

This surprising outburst of violence is not directly attributed to a curse, but since it is instrumental in making Hörðr an outlaw Sóti's influence in this may be implied. Nevertheless, whether attributable to a curse, Hörðr's actions are brutal, savage and would seem worrying in their implications. If Hörðr is condemned, however, it is not immediately apparent in the way that Torfi pursues the case against him. Torfi takes on the prosecution of the case but is willing to accept monetary compensation from Hörðr to establish a settlement (21). The gesture proves empty since, as noted above, Hörðr refuses to attend the *Alþingi* and places the hopes of gaining a spokesman on his behalf in the hands of an incompetent who botches the job, and he is made an outlaw anyway. But the implications of Torfi's willingness to pursue a settlement are interesting. Torfi is either trying to protect his kinsman, in spite of the enmity between them, or is perhaps concerned with what damage Hörðr will cause as an outlaw after seeing his response to being backed into a corner by Auðr. The extent to which Auðr's death excites outrage is difficult to judge, in spite of Torfi's willingness to make a settlement. Auðr is a pawn between two powerful, antagonistic kinsmen, a small farmer who tries to contend with people more powerful than him and is killed for his temerity. It is worth noting, however, that when Torfi announces his intent to allow a settlement if anyone will speak on Hörðr's behalf, no one is willing to. In the silence of the chieftains and notables at the *Alþingi*, perhaps, there is condemnation of Hörðr's behaviour and some measure of sympathy for Auðr.

The three major outlaws offer interesting contrasts, then, in the nature of their crimes and characters. Grettir is, on the surface, the least noble in his youth but also displays the greatest utility in defending society from monstrous threats. This very propensity leads to his being made an outlaw and associating with monsters, however, and his behaviour as an outlaw, as will be seen, is frequently ignoble, if not monstrous. Gísli and Hörðr are guilty of grave crimes, though in Gísli's case his is the result of trying to scrupulously fulfil the demands of vengeance. Gísli's crime may be dishonourable in its secretiveness but the motivation is for it is purely honourable. By contrast, Hörðr's violence is unjustified and disturbing. If it is a deed that is not widely condemned in the saga, it is not because the action is not wrong, but because of who is harmed. Auðr is not significant

enough to spark a wider feud, but the consequences of killing him will cause more extensive damage to society than a feud might. Hörðr carries within him the potential for greater acts of destructive violence and does not possess the same sense of restraint that Gísli and even Grettir show. The focus will now be turned to the ways in which these qualities affect the men when they are forced to adopt outlaw lifestyles.

### Lifestyles of the Outlaws

The three outlaws under consideration are indicative of the different ways that outlaws could live. While Grettir famously spends a great deal of time in the wild and shows some affinity with its supernatural denizens, Hörðr never lives the life of the lone outlaw at all — the nucleus of his outlaw band is formed of his family, friends and followers immediately on his being made an outlaw.

#### Gísli Súrssonar

Gísli's approach to living the life of an outlaw is interesting in the ways in which he interacts with the wilderness, both in his facility in using terrain to his advantage and in his attempts to domesticate part of it. Gísli displays considerable prowess in evading capture through using the wilderness to his advantage, escaping his hunters through woods twice, one of the few Icelandic outlaws to really live up to the *skógarmaðr* label (20, 27). But while Gísli shows a certain degree of affinity for the wilderness both in moving through it and in setting up shelters in caves, his most significant act is in fact an attempt to domesticate the wilderness around him.

When he realises that outlawry is likely to be his punishment, Gísli sells his land and builds a new farmstead in an otherwise empty fjord (20). Gísli spends some time on the farm but also builds hiding-places in caves nearby (21) and seeks shelter in various places. Gísli's farmhouse in the wilderness of an unsettled valley represents a kind of home life, but it is one in which he and his family are largely cut off from society as a

whole. But rather than the outlaw being exiled from the family unit, the family unit itself is effectively exiled, as Miller observes:

In his last years Gisli spends much time in caves near his loved ones, but the little sociality he is granted by the loyalty and dedication of the two women who sustain him is funded proportionally by their own loss of social contact. None of them have a proper home so that Gisli might have some kind of home on the lam. (2004, 135)

Auðr's lonely position is not missed by others, particularly by the men hunting Gísli who seek to turn Auðr's effective social exile against Gísli. Eyjólfur, one of Gísli's hunters, offers a bribe and a way out of her social exile to make Auðr reveal Gísli's hiding place (31):

“Máttu ok á þat líta,” segir hann, “hversu óhallkvæmt þér verður at liggja í eyðifirði þessum ok hljóta þat af óhöppum Gísla ok sjá aldri frændr ok nauðleytamenn.” (Björn K. Þórolfsson & Guðni, 1943, 99)

“You can see for yourself,” he says, “how miserable it is for you, living in this deserted fjord, and having this happen to you because of Gísli's bad luck, and never seeing your kinsfolk or their families.”

In spite of her social isolation, Auðr refuses to aid Eyjólfur, though her rejection essentially only encompasses the monetary bribe she has been offered. She strikes Eyjólfur with his own silver, giving him a bloody wound and shaming him. Eyjólfur's barb, however, is not refuted: Auðr must live a life of social exile to be with her husband and doing so places her on a farm in the wilderness with all the attendant dangers to identity this represents. Indeed, in this instance, Auðr's identity is seemingly shifted in entering into the masculine world of honour by striking Eyjólfur, just as she finds herself briefly again occupying a masculine when she helps to defend Gísli during his final stand.<sup>87</sup> But

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<sup>87</sup> Carol Clover has argued that gender was defined to greater extent socially than it was physically in

though Auðr's actions are transgressive of social and gender boundaries, the saga makes it clear that she is to be respected while Eyjólfur is held in contempt both for his attempted bribery and his shameful retaliatory desire to kill Auðr. Auðr may be socially isolated, but she respects the value of her connection to her husband, even though he is an outlaw. As a result, throughout the remainder of his career as an outlaw Gísli has resources that other outlaws lack: a family unit and home he can live in, at least part of the time. In this sense, Gísli does succeed in bringing a fragile sense of domesticity to the wilderness, but it is a home life at odds in many respects with the larger society.

During his lengthy career as an outlaw, Gísli is differentiated from most others not only in his access to his family but in the ways he maintains himself. Gísli never has to raid for or steal supplies, gaining support either from his own farm or from those he finds shelter with. Even when he hides out with others, Gísli pays his way with cash or services, as he does when he stays with a farmer called Ingjaldr (25):

Gísli er þar þann vetr ok smíðar skip Ingjaldr ok marga hluti aðra. En allt þat, sem hann smíðaði, þá var þat auðkennt, því at hann var hagari en flestir menn aðrir. Menn undruðusk, hví þat var svá vel smíðat margt, sem Ingjaldr átti, því hann var ekki hagr. (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson, 1943, 79)

Gísli is there over the winter, and he builds a boat for Ingjaldr and many other things. And whatever he made was easy to recognise because he was handier than most other men. Men began to wonder why so many things were well made that Ingjaldr had, for he was not good with his hands.

Ironically, it is the creation of new property rather than a destructive or disruptive bent that leads to trouble, as Gísli's enemies become aware of his hiding place and seek to kill

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medieval Scandinavia and offers an intriguing analysis of this scene from that perspective (1993, 363-87).

him, a sequence which does expose one of the more troubling elements of Gísli's character.

While Gísli is not a destructive figure as an outlaw, he nevertheless proves willing to transgress social values in the interest of survival. Gísli in fact shows considerable aptitude for disguise and misdirection, allowing him to slip by his enemies on two occasions (20 and 26). The latter instance involves Gísli disguising himself as Ingjaldr's son, Helgi, and is worth considering in some detail. Helgi is himself an unusual figure (25):

Helgi hét sonr Ingjalds ok var afglapi sem mestr mátti vera ok fífl;  
honum var sú umbúð veitt, at raufarsteinn var bundinn við hálsinn, ok  
beit hann gras úti sem fénaðr ok er kallaðr Ingjaldsfffl; hann var mikill  
vexti, nær sem troll. (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson, 1943, 79)

Helgi was the name of Ingjaldr's son and he was as simple as could possibly be and a fool. A tether was made for him in such a way that a stone with a hole in it was bound around his neck and he grazed grass outside like the cattle and he was called Ingjaldr's fool. He had grown large, nearly as big as a troll.

There are several interesting details here and in the subsequent incidents. Helgi's habit of grazing is a detail that connects to traditions of madmen and those without reason, like beasts and monsters. Helgi's pacifically bestial nature is reinforced by the detail of the stone around his neck, a tether and anchor that is apparently intended to prevent him from straying too far from one spot. The connection to monstrosity in the passage is one of similarity in physical size rather than form or, crucially, temperament, but Helgi is nevertheless compared to a troll.

In attempting to evade capture Gísli pretends to be Helgi in a sequence in which his foolish antics trick his pursuers but disgust Ingjaldr, who would much have preferred a

stand-up fight to treacherous tactics (26). The results of this impersonation reflect negatively on Gísli rather than on Helgi, who remains a passive innocent, albeit one indelibly marked by otherness in his habits and lack of wit. T. M. Andersson's assertion that 'Gísli is in fact wholly admirable during his outlawry, though not before' (1969, 40) founders somewhat in the face of Ingjaldr's contemptuous reaction to Gísli's plan, particularly since he has nobly, if imprudently, offered to make an honourable stand alongside Gísli. Another disturbing aspect of Gísli's impersonation is the fact that he is able to physically match the proportions of the near troll-sized Helgi. Bound up in this act of deception are Gísli's threatening physical dimensions and his willingness to transgress social boundaries in his desire to escape.

Nevertheless, Gísli never truly lives apart from some form of society and his encounters in the wilderness are only with his human pursuers. While his dreams are haunted by supernatural forces and his opportunities to find support limited by his curse, Gísli's life as an outlaw is relatively innocuous insofar as his survival is never dependent on raiding and he never seeks out his enemies but kills only in self-defence. Even when Gísli is forced to hide in caves, he is near his loved ones. Nevertheless, Gísli's final stand is uncanny and will bear some closer consideration below.

### Hörðr Grímkelsson

Hörðr's outlawry sees him seemingly perversely scrupulous in some aspects of his behaviour and utterly ruthless in other. Thus he is capable of burning down his farm, a move evidently designed to deny Torfi the spoils due to the successful prosecutor of an outlaw (21).<sup>88</sup> Hörðr and his men join the household of his kinsman Geirr, placing him in the position of harbouring an outlaw and putting such a drain on the resources of the farm that Geirr feels compelled to turn to theft to feed his household (22). This move angers Hörðr, and his response indicates that he has not abandoned personal honour and social standing. Instead of furtive theft, Hörðr prefers the idea of open raiding to secure

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<sup>88</sup> See *Grágás* Ia 83-8 for the details of the confiscation court. Torfi would be entitled to half of anything remaining from Hörðr's property after any outstanding debts were settled.

necessary supplies, a move arguably more destructive and dangerous but also more honourable.<sup>89</sup> Hörðr's display of scruples also leads to him refusing to let the animals be used for food until the theft has been declared and the farmer compensated. His behaviour in this instance after his 'saklauss' attack on Auðr is less perverse than it initially appears, however. His desire to compensate the farmer shows a degree of social calculation rather than nobility, as the saga notes that some people believed Hörðr compensated the farmer 'því muni hann þetta mál ekki síðan kært hafa', 'so that he would not have made a case afterwards' (22). Hörðr is evidently protecting his friend and host Geirr from facing outlawry himself, but this concern for maintaining certain forms of societal behaviour and maintaining a level of honourable behaviour amongst his men will recur throughout his later life. Indeed, Hörðr's life and death as an outlaw will be marked by his attempts to bring some measure of honour and society to his band of outlaws and the violence that erupts when he fails to control them and himself.

Unlike Grettir and Gísli, Hörðr is never forced to adopt the lifestyle of the lone outlaw: caves, secret shelters, lonely hills or glaciers. Nor is he even separated from his wife and closest friend, Geirr. Hörðr and his men first take refuge on Geirr's fortified farm (22), before moving to an island off the coast of Iceland (24). Hörðr is able to hide so effectively in the open because of the sheer size of his following, one which grows as other outlaws seek to join the gang. Supporting Hörðr leads to Geirr's outlawry and these two households form the nucleus of Hörðr's gang which becomes a rallying point for the cast-out and dispossessed. The saga notes that the outlaws must not only swear oaths of loyalty to each other, but also obedience to Hörðr and Geirr, the leaders of the group (24), a move which ostensibly creates a new sense of loyalty and honour in what almost becomes a form of criminal counter-society.

With by far the largest group of outlaws assembled in medieval Iceland, Hörðr and his men are able to raid freely among the nearby farmers, causing damage on a large scale. Hörðr offers a sharp contrast to the other outlaws because of this, his threat due not to his

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<sup>89</sup> For a discussion of the differences between theft and raiding in honour terms, see Andersson, 1984, 497-98 and Miller, 1990, 77-78.

habitation in the wild but in the establishment of a counter-culture, the composition of a new form of *vár lög* in which his parasitic micro-society can function. Though this society can never hope to compete with the larger Icelandic society, the potential exists, in Hörðr's mind, to transcend the bounds of their island dwelling and base for launching raids. Hörðr hopes to complete his escape from outlawry through seizing a merchant vessel and taking his men elsewhere, to trade, raid and integrate their strange band into a larger social network (30).

But the outlaw society effectively tears itself apart even before their actual deaths. The band's bloodlust, greed, and poor judgement to lead them into a trap they could have avoided if they had followed Hörðr's instructions (30-31). However, while Hörðr is sufficiently prescient and intelligent to be aware of the dangers to and of his gang, he proves ineffectual in his efforts to steer them from disaster. While this is in part due to Hörðr's fatalistic attitude, the larger point is that the majority of outlaws rejected by society are simply too disruptive to be moulded into a new one. The stability of this group is insufficient when put to the test, but Hörðr proves too attached to his outlaw band and his own oaths of loyalty to escape Iceland, in spite of his apparent dissatisfaction with the outlaw lifestyle.

Hörðr's efforts to live in adherence to some of the strictures of society and to his own sense of honour finds him at odds with his fellow outlaws and the saga at times attempts to paint Hörðr in a positive light by stressing his honourable intentions. As noted above, Hörðr refuses to steal and insists on carrying out raids instead, a more honourable form of action, if no less destructive. Hörðr also makes an effort to remain loyal to his family, chiefly his sister who remained outside the outlaw gang. After he and his men have stolen some cattle from his sister's farm, taking the boy who was watching the herd with them (29):

síðan fóru þeir at sofa þar uppi í dalnum. Sveinninn vísaði aþr nautunum, meðan þeir sváfu. Hörðr vakti ok sá undan skildi sínum; hann lét sveininn fara leiðar sinnar ok mælti til hans: 'Far þú nú, sveinn,

því at betr er þat komit, er systir mín hefir, en þeir Hólmverjar.’ Heim kom sveinninn ok sagði Þorbjörgu orð Harðar ok kvað skaða mikinn at slíkum manni, – ‘ok gerði hann vel við mik, en menn hans drápu Svartr.’ (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vihjálmsson, 1991, 74-75)

then they went to sleep further up in the valley. The boy guided the cattle back while they slept. Hörðr woke up and watched from underneath his shield; he allowed the boy to go on his way and said to him: ‘Go now, boy, for it is better come about when my sister has it than the Holm-dwellers.’

The boy came home and told Þórbjörg what Hörðr had said and said it was a great shame about such a man, ‘And he was kind to me, but his men killed Svartr’.

This sequence cuts to the core of Hörðr’s presentation within the saga as a noble man doomed to base actions by virtue of being an outlaw and being surrounded by a gang of evil men. Hörðr is distanced from the killing of Svartr by the unnamed boy, but while his actions in sparing the boy and returning the cattle to his sister apparently show his better nature, his ineffectuality as a leader of and moderating influence on his outlaw gang is also displayed.

And Hörðr’s apparently noble intentions toward his sister are shown to be severely qualified by his desire to avenge himself on her husband and her kin (31). While Hörðr’s ultimate intention is to take advantage of his gang’s weight of numbers to secure a merchant ship to leave Iceland, removing the enormous economic drain and serious societal threat he and his gang represent, he tries to destroy his in-laws first in a move that ultimately spells doom for his gang by uniting society against such a threat. But before that, his intentions are foiled by his sister who, protective as she is of her brother, refuses to allow him to widow her and destroy the kin group she belongs to now that he lives so completely in opposition to society.

On the whole, Hörðr is an ambivalent figure, one presented in a noble light but who is also guilty of excessive acts of violent and destructive. Hörðr's fatalism, doubtless bound up in the curses and prophecies that surround him, surfaces in his frequently inadequate attempts to steer his outlaw gang to a better life and his failure to do so culminates not only in their destruction but in his own death in a final stand in which he takes on something of a monstrous appearance.

### Grettir Ásmundarson

Grettir's life as an outlaw is ambiguously presented (cf. Hume, 1974, 472). On his return to Iceland, as an outlaw, Grettir's first action is to avenge his brother, a deed which he declares afterwards in respect of the traditions of the law and society that he has been stripped of (48). But it is not long afterwards that Grettir fully embraces the opportunities of the life of an outlaw, helping himself to anything he wants from the various small farmers he encounters (52):

Þá er Grettir kom yfir Þorskafjarðarheiði í Langadal, lét hann sópa greipr um eignir smábœnda ok hafði af hverjum þat, er hann vildi. Tók hann af sumum vápn en sumum klæði; gengu þeir allmisjafnt af, en allir sögðusk nauðgir láta þegar hann var á brottu. (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 166)

Then when Grettir came over Þorskafjarðarheiði in Langadalr, he let his hands sweep up the possessions of the small farmers, and had from each that which he wished. He took weapons from some and clothes from others. They told different stories about the matter, but all said they had been forced as soon as he was away.

Grettir's casual attitude to taking the belongings of others is revealed but so too is the fact that at least some of the farmers Grettir acquired weapons or clothes from were sympathetic, if not eager to help. In spite of the necessity to avoid charges of succouring

an outlaw by maintaining that Grettir used force to acquire their possessions, the indication that there were a range of reactions to Grettir implies that at least some were positive. Much the same can be said for the rest of his career as an outlaw: no matter how much he steals or how many he kills, Grettir is never universally reviled.

Part of the reason for this is undoubtedly the fact that Grettir possesses a degree of shrewdness with regard to Icelandic society and the limits of what he can get away with. Thus when he is spared by Þorbjörg in exchange for an oath to never trouble the region he was captured in again, he keeps to the oath ensuring the continued respect of the most powerful people in the land. But perhaps the best indication of Grettir's shrewdness is given when he is attacked by the over-ambitious Þoroddr Snorrason. Grettir spares Þoroddr his life and as much dignity as he can out of respect for Þoroddr's father, Snorri *goði*. This shows Grettir's awareness not only of the danger of angering a powerful man like Snorri but also of the right way to flatter Snorri and ensure that he will be an ally rather than a foe, as indeed becomes the case (68).

But while Grettir is able to use the conventions of honour and society to his advantage, he also spends a considerable amount of time in the wilderness of Iceland and finds unusual allies there. The monstrous Hallmundr's inhuman nature is made evident through his strength and size, more prodigious even than the troll-like Grettir's.<sup>90</sup> But while he befriends some monsters, such as Þórir and Hallmundr, Grettir does not fully integrate into their world either. Evidently Grettir is accepting of the strange community of beings he finds in the wilderness, more-or-less benevolent half-giants like Hallmundr and Þórir, and he is accepted by them in ways in which others might not be. Hallmundr warms to Grettir, but prefers to rob another famous outlaw, Grímr, which proves to be his undoing when Grímr violently retaliates (62). Though Grímr finds a warmer welcome from Hallmundr's daughter, his ultimate fate is one of societal reintegration — Grímr does not belong in the monstrous lands on the edges of society. And yet, Grettir does not fit in as comfortably as he might, either. Grettir's time in the *blendingr* Þórir's secret valley

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<sup>90</sup> Grettir's identification as an *óvættir* has been discussed above, Chapter Two, 49-50, but he also raises questions of his being man or troll in the Sandhaugar episode after carrying Steinvör and her daughter across a dangerous river. This point will be discussed in greater detail below.

comes to an end for no reason other than Grettir finds his time there boring, in spite of the safety, security and worldly comforts offered (61). Grettir might be closer in many respects to the kinds of benevolent, or at least, non-malignant monstrous beings that populate the wilderness, but he feels no sense of belonging there, either.

Grettir's ambiguity and his awkward relationship with any kind of society is made especially apparent in the Sandhaugar sequence. Hearing of the monsters troubling the farm and the region, Grettir goes in disguise to fight the monsters. His prodigious size and strength lead to there being some confusion on the part of Steinvör, the lady of the house at Sandhaugar, as to whether Grettir is a man or a troll (64). It is interesting to note that Grettir's identity is made uncertain because he has performed the seemingly impossible feat of carrying two women across a raging river full of large chunks of fast-moving ice. Steinvör wants to cross the river to go to Christmas services at her church, and while she is uncertain as to Grettir's nature, her priest is certain: 'it must have been a man'.<sup>91</sup> A troll or any other monster would not help people go to church. Grettir does not go to church to take part in the Christian worship, but instead turns back to deal with the real troll, a giantess who has been preying on Steinvör's household, and subsequently her monstrous mate. Grettir's act of monster-slaying acts as a land cleansing, freeing the valley from 'revenants and hauntings' forever afterward (67). Interestingly, the priest of the region proves utterly ineffectual. Given the task of looking after a rope while Grettir delves in the giant's lair, the priest flees at the sight of blood, assuming Grettir to be dead. Christianity proves to be largely ineffectual, in other words, and it is only the trollish outlaw Grettir's intervention that cleanses the land.

This raises the issue of Grettir's spirituality since Grettir, unlike Hörðr and Gísli, lives in a Christian age. Grettir is rarely marked overtly as a Christian and much of his behaviour, including his sexual liaisons with Steinvör (65) and Þórir's monstrous daughters (61) would suggest that he is not a staunch Christian. That he does consider himself to be a Christian is indicated by some of his behaviour, most notably when he observes fasts

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<sup>91</sup> There is a parallel to St Christopher here with Grettir's superhuman act of crossing the river to bring a woman and her daughter to church comparable to the monstrous Christopher's redemptive river-crossing with Jesus (Turville-Peter, 1974, 354).

during Lent (61). This sets Grettir apart from Glámr whose refusal to observe a fast immediately precedes his death at the hands of an *óvættir* and his subsequent resistance to burial in Christian land allows him to operate as a *draugr*, as opposed to his subsequent victim, whose Christian burial sees him lie quietly afterwards. But it is worth observing that Grettir's piety on this occasion takes place in the monstrous Þórir's valley. Even in observing Christianity, Grettir manages to be contrary, just as his seemingly monstrous death will prove to reconnect him with humanity and society.

### Last Moments and Lasting Memories: Death and Reputation

To live as an outlaw is more than likely to lead to dying a violent death. Gísli, Grettir and Hörðr all die in last stands against their enemies. While Grettir is killed by a sorcerous wound, barely able to move when he is cut down by his foes, Gísli and Hörðr die rather more bloody and unusual deaths.

Both Gísli and Hörðr find themselves forced to confront their enemies with overwhelming odds stacked against them. In the case of Hörðr and his men destruction is a result of an entire community banding together in the desperation to see the vicious outlaw gang destroyed. Hörðr and his men have come to represent not just a threat to livelihoods in their increasing raids on the mainland but have also indicated their murderous intent in their attempts on the lives of prominent men (31-32). Under the guise of offering amnesty to the outlaws, a coalition of chieftains and farmers lure the gang in small groups to the mainland and promptly kill them (35-36). Hörðr's temper once again proves his downfall. He is the only one to see through the mainlanders' ruse but not only does he fail to convince any of the others, he goes into the trap himself after being taunted by one of his enemies (36).

Hörðr finds himself surrounded and unable to evade his enemies, something he attributes to the work of trolls, and that is presumably the result of Sóti's curse bringing him to his final fate (36). Forced to make a stand, Hörðr becomes enraged and quickly strikes down his foster-brother and fellow outlaw, Helgi. The irony of Hörðr's claim that he did not

wish to see Helgi killed before his eyes is not lost on his enemies, the saga wryly observing that ‘Þat þótti mönnum sem Helgi mundi mjök svá dauðr áðr’, ‘it seemed to people as though Helgi was more or less dead already’ (36). Hörðr’s intention is apparently noble, but his actions are once again violently at odds with society. After killing Helgi, ‘Svá var Hörðr þá reiðr ok ógurlegr at sjá at enginn þeirra þorði framan at honum at ganga’, ‘Hörðr became so furious and terrible to look at that no one dared to approach him from the front’ (36). Hörðr’s terrifying appearance at this point is reminiscent of *draugar* such as Glámr in *Grettis saga* whose eyes in the moonlight paralyse Grettir (35) or Þórólfr *bægifótr* in *Eyrbyggja saga* whose corpse is carefully removed without anyone passing in front of it in a failed effort to prevent harm from coming from it (33). Indeed, Hörðr is struck down from behind, none of his enemies daring to approach him even after his weapon breaks and he is left unarmed. Hörðr does not become a *draugr*, but he does become a monstrous presence, the last remnant of a malevolent and destructive force that threatened society and is terrifying for men to confront.

Gísli is less overtly monstrous in his final stand, yet it is still an uncanny event which is preceded by the culmination of a series of supernatural dreams, in which Gísli is anointed with blood by a malevolent dream presence and granted a vision of him killing wolves. Gísli is soon run to ground by his enemies and faces them on a cliff top, fighting ferociously and killing most of them (35-6). His final act is to hurl himself on an opponent, killing both of them (36):

Gísli lét líf sitt með svá mörgum ok stórum sárum, at furða þótti í vera. Svá hafa þeir sagt, at hann hogaði aldri, ok eigi sá þeir, at högg hans væri minna it síðasta en it fyrsta. Lýkr þar nú ævi Gísla, ok er þat alsagt, at hann hefir inn mesti hreystimaðr verit, þó at hann væri eigi í öllum hlutum gæfumaðr. Nú draga þeir hann ofan ok taka af honum sverðit, götca þeir hann þar í grjótinu ok fara ofan til sjávar. (Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson, 1943, 115)

Gisli died of so many great wounds that there seemed to be something strange about it. His attackers said that he never gave ground, and that they could not see that his last blow was weaker than his first. Gísli's life now comes to an end and it was said by everyone that he was the most valiant of men though he was not in all things a lucky man. They drag his body down and take away his sword and bury him there among the stones and go to the sea. (36)

Gísli is buried where he falls under a cairn, a burial method which Gísli himself used to inter the remains of the sorcerer who cursed him (19) and the choice of burial suggests that the term *furða*, meaning strange or wonderful, has negative connotations. Gísli's stand is uncanny, his final dream having prepared for him a blood-soaked and frightening end.

In neither case is the moment and manner of death the final word. Both Gísli and Hörðr are praised after their deaths as brave if unlucky men, indicating that rather than being regarded as monstrous their accomplishments were appreciated in spite — or perhaps because of — their being outlaws. In the case of Gísli, this is not too difficult to understand. As noted, despite some of his more unusual behaviour, Gísli was innocuous as an outlaw with the men hunting him so much more deserving of social disapproval than he in their behaviour that Andersson stated that no 'other saga hero, no matter how well avenged, emerges so clearly as the moral victor as Gísli' (1967, 184).

Hörðr does not emerge as a moral victor in any sense. The saga argues that Hörðr was a noble man dragged into crime by being forced into the company of criminals (36), but as has been argued above, Hörðr's actions are at times at considerable odds with his supposedly noble nature. His murderous attempt on the lives of his sister's husband and family are inspired by their efforts to put a stop to Hörðr and his gang — in other words, in defending the fabric of their society against a dangerous threat lurking on the edges. While Hörðr often disagrees with the actions of his outlaws, the gang remains very much of his creation and he is loyal to them in many respects. Thus, rather than Hörðr having

been led astray by other outlaws, he is instead precipitated onto his criminal path by an encounter with a monster in the wilderness and meets a monstrous end he is more complicit in than his saga allows.

Finally, attention will be given to the death of Grettir, by far the most overtly monstrous death but one complicated by a variety of factors that will require lengthier treatment than either Gísli or Hörðr's deaths. The manner in which Grettir dies has long been noted for its monstrous connotations (Harris, 1973, 38). Grettir's demise and subsequent beheading, by means of his own monster-slaying blade, mirrors the manner in which Grettir has dispatched various monsters. However, Grettir's death actually works to bring him closer to human society. His death is not brought about by wounds or by the beheading, but by sorcerous means, leading to his being humanised, since the focus on the uncanny in the manner of his death is on the black magic used against him. Thus, while Gísli and Hörðr move towards the monstrous in their final moments, Grettir, the more monstrous figure in life, actually becomes an empathetic, human figure in death. The beheading and subsequent grotesque display of his head operate counterproductively compared to the expected norm of an actual monster-slaying and demonstration, as Grettir's killer, Þorbjörn, discovers. Indeed, Þorbjörn is forced to abandon his plan to bring the head to the *Alþingi* because his kin are concerned that the ill-feeling of the people against him could lead to his death. Grettir's death, the removal of an economic burden on the land, is not seen as any kind of cleansing, but rather is a blot on the Icelanders' honour, leading to Þorbjörn himself being exiled.

The manner of Grettir's death has been compared to both Grendel and Beowulf, something that Orchard has argued indicates 'the ambiguous aspect of his nature which has become more apparent as the saga has progressed (1995, 165).' And, indeed, another monstrous parallel from within the saga will help to highlight and explain some of these ambiguities. Grettir's first monster fight was with the *draugr* Kárr *inn gamli*, father of Þorfinnr, Grettir's host and the most powerful man on the island of Háramarsey (18). Grettir's defeat of Kárr is both economically minded (Orchard, 1995, 144) and greeted with less than enthusiasm by Þorfinnr, at least until Grettir presents him with the treasure

from Kárr's mound (18). Þorfinnr's apparent displeasure at the destruction of Kárr has previously been noted as unusual (Cook, 1985, 141 and note), but it makes sense when taken in the context of Kárr's haunting as it is explained to Grettir (18):

‘Þar á nesinu stendr haugr,’ segir Auðunn, ‘en þar var í lagðr Kárr inn gamli, faðir Þorfinns; áttu þeir feðgar fyrst eitt bóndaból í eyjunni, en síðan Kárr dó, hefir hann svá aprt gengit at hann hefir eytt á brott öllum bóndum þeim, er hér áttu jarðir, svá at nú á Þorfinnr einn alla eyrna, ok engum verðr þeim mein at þessu, er Þorfinnr heldr hendi yfir.’ (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 57)

‘There on the ness stands a mound,’ said Auðunn, ‘and in it was laid Kárr the Old, Þorfinnr’s father; first of all he and his son had only one farm on the island, but after Kárr died he haunted the place so much that he has emptied out all the farmers who had land here so that now Þorfinnr has the whole island to himself; and no one is harmed by these hauntings who is under Þorfinnr’s protection’.

Kárr is a violent and dangerous monster, but while his depredations have deprived many people of their land, they have concomitantly benefited Þorfinnr. Thanks to his undead father, Þorfinnr has been able to seize control of the entire island, increasing his wealth and power in the process. In this instance, the monster and a human are the harbingers of social dissolution through destructive rage on the part of Kárr and Þorfinnr’s greed and profiteering on the other. Þorfinnr’s displeasure at the loss of a tool that assured his dominance in the region is assuaged by the return of the treasure and family heirlooms his father refused to pass on and jealously guarded as a *draugr*. It is only after Grettir defends Þorfinnr’s home and family from the berserks that he is truly embraced as a friend.

The parallels to events later in Grettir’s life are obvious. Grettir, now a dangerous outlaw, takes shelter on the island of Drangey, depriving various farmers on the mainland access

to their flocks and grazing territory (69-82). As the years pass with no solution to the problem apparent, most farmers sell their shares in the island cheaply to Þorbjörn *öngull* (72). Þorbjörn gains the island, but Grettir becomes his responsibility and one he has to deal with if he is to benefit from this land acquisition and retain his reputation. While Þorbjörn is ultimately successful in killing Grettir, the outlaw that has been plaguing the area, he does not enjoy the increased respect he anticipates from others. Instead, he is held in contempt and becomes an object of antipathy in the eyes of many. The chief reason stated for this is the fact that Þorbjörn, in spite of claiming that he was guided in his actions by Christ, is only able to defeat Grettir through witchcraft. Indeed, he is condemned both for relying on witchcraft and for killing a crippled, dying man. Another factor might be considered here: just as Grettir's destruction of Kárr did not serve a larger community, Grettir's destruction only benefits Þorbjörn and Grettir's other great enemy, Þórir of Garðr.

As noted above, Grettir's death scene is famous for identifying him in monstrous terms. Indeed, Grettir's slayer — and mutilator — Þorbjörn *öngull* not only beheads Grettir but implicitly connects Grettir the outlaw with Grettir the monster. Unable to prise Grettir's fingers from the hilt of his sword, Þorbjörn cuts off Grettir's hand, justifying any mutilation of Grettir's body with a rhetorical question: 'Því skulum vér reka sparmælit við skógarmanninn?' (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 261), "Why should we hold back with the outlaw?" (82). Having reaffirmed Grettir's status as a *skógarmaðr*, Þorbjörn proceeds to behead him:

Hjó hann þá á háls Gretti tvau högg eða þrjú, áðr af tœki höfuðit. 'Nú veit ek víst at Grettir er dauðr, ok höfu vér mikinn garp at velli lagit,' sagði Öngull. (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 262)

He struck then two or three blows at Grettir's neck before the head came off. 'Now I know for certain that Grettir is dead and we have laid to earth a great warrior,' said Öngull.

Þorbjörn's statement certainly implies that he is concerned with the possibility that Grettir might become a *draugr* and that he does not feel safe until he has taken further steps to deal with him.<sup>92</sup> But while Þorbjörn identifies Grettir as an outlaw and a monster and himself as a hero for defeating him, it quickly becomes apparent that this view will not be broadly shared by the rest of society. Perhaps the most interesting expression of condemnation Þorbjörn receives is from the man who had Grettir outlawed in the first place, Þórir of Garðr, who responds with utter contempt to Þorbjörn's demand for the money Þórir promised to Grettir's killer (82):

‘hefi ek ok opt fengit hart af honum, en ekki vilda ek þat til lífs hans vinna, at gera mik at ódádámanni eða fordæðu, sem þú hefir gört; mun ek síðr leggja þér fé, at mér sýnisk þú ólífismaðr vera fyrir galdr ok fjölkynngi.’ (Guðni Jónsson, 1936, 264)

‘I would not have done that to get his life, to make myself a criminal or sorcerer as you have done. I am so far from handing you the money that it seems to me that you deserve to lose your life for witchcraft and black magic.’

Þorbjörn utterly misunderstands the nature of the contempt that is to be levelled at him, to the extent that he plans to bring Grettir's head to the *Alþingi* as a trophy indicating his triumph, something he has to be persuaded out of doing (84). Þorbjörn is ultimately exiled from Iceland and Grettir's death apparently spurs a change in legislation that means all sorcerers will be made outlaws (84). Grettir's death, then, far from making him appear more monstrous, makes the employment of sorcery an object of legal and social contempt, one thoroughly rejected by society. In essence, the manner of Grettir's death marks him as a victim of a monstrous act rather than a monster deserving death.

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<sup>92</sup> In *Grettis saga*, while Glámr is explicitly a *draugr* as a result of his death at the hands of another monster (32), Kárr *inn gamli* appears to have become a *draugr* without the interference of any external agency, though nothing is said of his disposition or activities in life (18). Nevertheless, it seems likely that in *Grettis saga* as in other sagas it was possible for a person to become a *draugr* ‘naturally’, and thus Þorbjörn's concerns over Grettir are not entirely unjustified.

Interestingly, there is some slight evidence to suggest that Þorbjörn may have been not altogether unwise in beheading Grettir. Grettir's death grip on his sword is uncanny as is evidenced by the fact that those who hear of it later considered it to be 'undarliga' (83), an adverbial that in this instance can be translated 'extraordinary' (*CI-Víg* s.v.). This is, however, the only overt indication given that Grettir's death is uncanny in any way beyond the use of sorcery in bringing it about (79-82) and Grettir's subsequent burial in holy ground indicates that his will be and perhaps would always have been quiet.

Grettir's Christian burial is not only strong evidence for the positive light in which he was viewed socially after his death, it can also be contrasted with Þorbjörn. His willingness to use magic as a means of striking at Grettir is quietly condemned by his ally Halldór who understates the case when he says that 'eigi mun allt kristiligt', 'not everything is Christian' in Þorbjörn's activities. Though Christianity is not explicitly raised as a point against Þorbjörn again, it is nevertheless clear that it is his reliance on forbidden pagan methods more even than his slaying of a helpless man that condemns him. In death, Grettir finds acceptance in the spiritual community of Christianity and is embraced as a courageous and capable warrior by most Icelanders. It is Þorbjörn who becomes an object of revulsion and contempt, a man who is not entirely a Christian and not considered fit to be a member of Icelandic society.

### Conclusions

The cases of Gísli, Grettir and Hörðr indicate something of the range of reactions to outlaws in the *Íslendingasögur* and their lives provide some answers to the question of to what extent being an outlaw pushes an individual outside society and into the realm of the monstrous. Gísli is an interesting character, the least monstrous of the major outlaws and on the surface the one who fits most comfortably into society before his outlawry. However, it is Gísli's sense of honour and duty that drives him to commit the shameful act that sees him outlawed. Presented with an act that he must avenge but which can only lead to bitter feud between kin, Gísli's concealed murder is in fact the best solution he can adopt in the face of an impossible dilemma. Nevertheless, there is an ambiguity in

Gísli which begins with his crime, into which a strange sexual note enters. Though Gísli is one of the least socially disruptive outlaws to be found in the *Islendingasögur*, he nevertheless betrays further ambiguities during his outlawry. He seems to navigate the wilderness with ease and uses stratagems that are not entirely honourable in his efforts to elude his pursuers but he is essentially reacting to events. Gísli does not bring excessive disruption to his society after he has been outlawed. In his final stand he is uncanny and superhuman but not a monster.

Grettir and Hörðr are, by contrast, far more disruptive to society and far more closely linked to the monstrous, though only Grettir spends time in the wilderness. Of the two, Hörðr in his youth is the more promising man and indeed he has an easier path to being accepted as a monster-battling hero than Grettir. Indeed, where Grettir struggles to fit into society Hörðr copes well in Iceland and abroad. Both men become dangers to society after they are outlawed, but their crimes and society's attitude to them are very revealing. Hörðr's crime is violent and destructive but excites little condemnation while Grettir's crime is understood by many to be an accident and actually encourages a certain degree of sympathy for him. Both men become to some extent unleashed from their inhibitions after being outlawed, but while Grettir quickly takes to being a thief, condemnation is aimed at the men who made him an outlaw. By overzealously reacting to Grettir's crime, Grettir's persecutor becomes in part responsible for the social disruption unleashed. In a similar manner, Grettir's death being brought about by sorcery loads contempt on his killer and in effect rehabilitates him in the eyes of society generally. Ironically, Grettir's life and death hint at an ambiguous nature that does stray close to the monstrous but in society's final analysis Grettir is a figure to be sympathised with and respected.

By contrast, Hörðr, in spite of his efforts to restrain himself and his men, unleashes a gang of outlaws that cause huge social upheavals. Hörðr is a sympathetic figure to the extent that he is not an *ójafnaðrmaðr* but a man who struggles to maintain some sense of honour and responsibility even as an outlaw. But Hörðr is someone who fails at a few key points in his efforts to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Hörðr is in some senses a tragic figure in this regard but he is released from the burden of monstrosity only in his

death. In his final stand, Hörðr is a terrifying, unrestrained and murderous figure who represents a serious threat to society. Like Gísli, Grettir and Svartr, the seeds of Hörðr's potential for monstrous change lie in his life prior to becoming an outlaw but it is as an anti-social outlaw that he is at his most obviously monstrous.

As I have shown, the general argument that outlaws are driven from society and become equated with the wilderness and thus with animals or monsters is inherently flawed. Not all outlaws are truly ejected from society, in spite of their legal status. Instead, they carve out territory within or even as a part of society or maintain existence on the edges by stealing what they can from within, and those that are to all intents and purposes so removed must survive a harsh and difficult life for a lengthy period of time or earn a considerable degree of societal antipathy to attain some monstrous status. Many outlaws would likely have been wretched figures: potentially dangerous, but unlikely to be much of a threat or live for long, and certainly not monstrous. The more successful and bolder outlaws could conceivably find themselves some form of haven in society, particularly through the protection of a *goði*. Naturally such a position does not make them exempt from monstrous change, but limits the extent to which being an outlaw is a factor.

The full outlaw denied the comfort of shelter and assistance by other members of society is, however, a figure of potential menace. Like a monster, the outlaw or outlaw gang can steal, kill, pillage and even destroy property and occupy land. Successful outlaws, destructive outlaws who survive become worthy of note because of the seeming impossibility of their achievements outside a supportive social framework. The outlaw that is aligned with the supernatural or monstrous certainly exists in the sagas, but each outlaw should be considered in context and in his own right in order to best appreciate the sets of circumstances that can result in monstrous change.

The final chapter will turn to figures that are truly cut off from society and plunged into the supernatural wilderness. I will explore the wilderness as a supernatural locus and the effects of Christian and non-Christian worldviews on those who enter and dwell within the wild.

## Chapter Six

### The Wilderness as Monstrous Locus: Guthlac and Bárðr

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate interactions between man and monster and, in the case of the texts concerning St Guthlac, between man and demon in wildernesses that serve as supernatural loci juxtaposed with societal values and settings. The preceding chapter looked at outlaw figures in the *Íslendingasögur* and revealed the limited interaction with the wilderness and its supernatural denizens in most cases. This chapter will focus entirely on the wilderness by analysing three cases of those who voluntarily enter the wilderness and the ways in which they affect and are affected by the supernatural beings they encounter there. In the case of St Guthlac, the wilderness is the marsh of Crowland, the site of his eremitic existence dedicated to God and of his battles against the demons that inhabit it. Bárðr Dumbsson, a figure drawn from the stock of mythical figures of the *fornaldarsögur* — but operating within an *íslendingasaga* — finds himself unable to function inside society and withdraws to the wild spaces of Iceland where he becomes an *ás*, a pagan spirit helpful to mankind. In each case, issues of identity in the wilderness are confronted, as is the nature of the wilderness itself, in the face of Christian spirituality. St Andrew is the third figure, specifically in his interactions with monstrous men in the wilderness.

Both Guthlac and Bárðr differ from outlaws by withdrawing from society voluntarily and in being more intimately connected to spiritual concerns than the outlaws who find their way into the wilderness. In neither case is the relationship with society an antagonistic one due to the nature of their voluntary retreat, although both are prompted by acts of violence whose social acceptability varies. While living in the wilderness exposes some degree of social anxiety, the crucial factor in both cases is the power of Christianity and the ways in which religion redefines identity within a social order. This chapter will view the wildernesses depicted in the texts considered not as static locales in which supernatural entities exist, but rather as a shifting environment where pagan or Christian

belief affects the ways in which monsters, spirits and demons are understood. The emergence of Christianity profoundly affects the ways in which the wilderness is engaged with and the identity and perception of its supernatural residents. In the case of the various Guthlac narratives, the change that occurs is a process of sanctifying and civilising the wilderness. Though the Guthlac texts are concerned purely with demons, rather than monsters, the issues raised are pertinent as is evidenced by comparison with *Andreas*. *Andreas* explores similar themes of identity and spirituality in the wilderness but does so in the context of a race of monstrous men. Comparison with *Andreas* will allow for a fuller consideration of the place of monsters and demons in the wilderness of a Christian world. *Bárðar saga*'s narrative is in some respects more complex, painting a picture of a diverse pagan order of supernatural beings that are forced into a rigid orthodoxy by the coming of Christianity to Scandinavia. Monsters become demons and even the heroic, benevolent Bárðr is forced into a context in which he is certainly monstrous, if not demonic. Faith becomes a key issue in deciding where social anxieties and monstrous identity is decided.

#### Guthlac: Worldliness and the Wild

The tales concerning St Guthlac survive in several versions from the Anglo-Saxon period. A Latin saint's life by a monk named Felix of Crowland is the earliest surviving account of the saint.<sup>93</sup> Felix's *Vita sancti Guthlaci* gives a complete account of Guthlac's life, from his youth as a warrior noble to the abandonment of his worldly life for the confines of a monastery and his ultimate settlement in the marshes at Crowland. Felix depicts his struggles against the demons that inhabit the area and his later wisdom and miracles, his death and the subsequent founding of Crowland abbey. Felix's work is greatly inspired by the earlier *Vita sancti Antonii*, which described the eremitic life of the desert ascetic St Antony (Clayton, 1996, 147-76). Of particular influence were the descriptions of Antony's struggles against worldly temptations and the demons of the wilderness in one of the most influential models of the saintly eremitic lifestyle in early hagiography.

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<sup>93</sup> Felix's *Vita* dates from some time before 749 (Colgrave, 1956, 15-19)

Felix's *Vita* was translated fairly closely into an Old English prose version. Two Old English poems, *Guthlac A* and *B*, also survive and deal with different stages of Guthlac's life. *Guthlac B* is the saint's death legend, and concerns his final days and final words to his servant, Becca, and his wishes for the future, adapted from the fiftieth chapter of Felix's *Vita* (Roberts, 1979, 37-43). *Guthlac A* is chiefly concerned with Guthlac's struggles in the wilderness against the demons that have taken residence there. *Guthlac A* diverges from Felix considerably, and in its reinterpretation paints Guthlac in terms of a *miles Christi* both in his steadfast faith and in his expulsion of demons from the wilderness. The fact that Crowland becomes the site of an abbey indicates that Guthlac serves to bring society to the wild spaces, purging the demonic spirits there by means of his steadfast adherence to Christian values.<sup>94</sup>

The two versions of chief interest here are Felix's *Vita* and the Old English poetic *Guthlac A*, which differs more substantially from Felix's account than the other versions (Roberts, 1988, 7-15). These texts offer the most detail of Guthlac's life and his struggles against the demons. In Felix's account, Guthlac comes to an island in the fens, one deemed uninhabitable by others due to its wildness and the fact that it is said to be haunted by demons (ch. 25 [Colgrave, 1956]). Guthlac makes his home on a *tumulus*, a grave mound that has been looted by thieves, a detail that creates a link between the uncleansed wilderness and the evils of worldly greed (28).<sup>95</sup> Felix's account follows Guthlac's battles with the demons as he overcomes temptations and tribulations they submit him to through his unwavering faith and the intercession of St Bartholomew. The *Vita* goes on to follow Guthlac's harmonious existence with the animals and environs of his new home, his miracles both before and after death and his interactions with other priests and the exiled King Æthelbald, with Guthlac's canonisation and the founding of the abbey at Crowland completing the narrative.

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<sup>94</sup> According to Felix, Guthlac provides spiritual comfort for the exiled Æthelbald, predicting that he will become king and enjoy prosperity (49, 52).

<sup>95</sup> *Guthlac A* describes a *beorg* as the site of Guthlac's dwelling and the landscape is generally referred to as hilly. Manish Sharma argues that a *beorg* is mentioned specifically as the site for the poem's development of the theme of spiritual ascension (2002, 195-212).

*Guthlac A* on the other hand focuses primarily on Guthlac's struggles in the wilderness. One particular term is of interest in establishing the character of the wilderness in the poem. Guthlac's civilising movement into the wilderness is described as him settling the *mearcclond* (174), a term that means 'borderland' or 'waste land'. That the wilderness is a 'waste' that supernatural beings inhabit is made plain in *Guthlac A*, where it becomes a form of haven for tormented demons (ll. 205-14 [Roberts, 1979]). But since the wilderness borders societal space there is inherent in the demonic presence a sense of threat. After all, as *Guthlac A* makes clear, it is demons such as these that tempt and taunt men to be thieves and killers in society. The danger to the more typical person straying outside their society into a wilderness populated by such beings is considerable not simply for the physical threat but for the greater threat to the sense of one's identity. The extent of the threat, and its physical and spiritual nature, is even more evident in the Old English poem *Andreas*. *Andreas* will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but it is worth noting at this point that the anthropophagous Mermedonians dwell in a city in another *mearccland* (19) which becomes a site in which notions of human identity are threatened by monstrous men.<sup>96</sup> The importance of Christian spirituality as a means to overcome the identity-threatening nature of the wild and of its monstrous denizens is emphasised not only in these poems, but also in *Beowulf* through the absence of Christianity. In *Beowulf*, the wilderness association is achieved not through the land but through a monster, Grendel, the *mearcstapa* or border-treader. *Beowulf* represents the pagan-heroic approach to the wilderness and the monstrous beings that inhabit it, but in *Beowulf*'s demise is implicit the notion of the ultimate futility of heroic worldly endeavours.<sup>97</sup>

Guthlac abandons just such a world of martial valour and striving for honour, choosing Crowland as the site of his dedication to God, a process that involves his struggle against the demons. While Felix's *Vita* describes Guthlac's struggles with the demons as a consequence of his living in the wilderness, *Guthlac A* clearly establishes Guthlac's

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<sup>96</sup> Quotations from *Andreas* are taken from the edition by Krapp, 1932.

<sup>97</sup> See Hall, 2007, 221-22. The Old English elegy *The Wanderer* expresses similar notions by contrasting the exiled wanderer's despair in the face of re-establishing worldly social connections with the spiritual relief of being connected to God and men through Christian faith.

intent to scour the wilderness and build a holy home there (ll. 240-61). Though the poem does not explicitly describe Guthlac's civilising influence in terms of his later links to church and society, Christopher Jones argues that *Guthlac A*'s use of building terms reflects aspects of the *cenobium* over purely eremitic concerns (1995, 259-92). In other words, Guthlac is represented as seeking to establish a holy outpost in the wilderness by cleansing the land of its demonic tenants, rather than simply seeking spiritual solitude. Indeed, Hall has recently argued that *Guthlac A* in fact reflects the tensions of Old English warrior culture in the face of Christianity and offers an account of a Christian hero battling demons in the wild in a fashion that deliberately subverts pagan heroic traditions (2007, 207-35). The fact that some scholars have suggested that *Guthlac A*'s hilly setting may imply the presence of pagan burial mounds suggests that Guthlac's choice of battleground is made to launch a direct assault not merely on demons but on the spirits of the heathen dead, damned if not demonic themselves.<sup>98</sup> Such a conflation of the demonic and the pagan are concerns in Old English and Old Icelandic narrative sources, and will be seen to play an important role in the concluding chapters of *Bárðar saga*.

#### Guthlac, Christianity and the Demons

The opening lines of *Guthlac A* address first with the struggles of demons and angels over the souls of men (ll.1-29), then discuss the nature of men in the world and the ways in which they behave (ll. 30-80). This section of the poem concludes with a description of the eremitic way of life that Guthlac adopted by way of general introduction (ll. 81-92). Though this 'prologue' has not always been accepted as part of the rest of the poem, the importance of these lines in establishing the poem's spiritual themes has been convincingly argued (Sharma, 2002, 185-200). They are also revealing of the poem's attitudes towards society and the wild, attitudes that will be to some extent extended into and complicated by Guthlac's encounters with the demons later in the poem.

Of immediate interest in these lines are the sections that refer to the different ways of being a Christian. As well as establishing the holiness and purpose of the hermit in a

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<sup>98</sup> See Wentersdorf, 1978, 135-42, Hall, 2007, 223-30 and Roberts, 1988, 10-11.

broader context, the poem also makes an important mention of earthly law. *Guthlac A* contends that worldly law is becoming increasingly divergent from God's law, making it harder to be a good Christian:

Is þes middangeard  
 dalum gedæled; dryhten sceawað  
 hwær þa eardien þe his æ healdan;  
 gesihð he þa domas dogra gehwylce  
 wonian 7 wendan of woruldryhte  
 ða he gesette þurh his sylfes word:  
 he fe la findeð, fea beoð gecorene. (ll. 53b-59)

This world is divided into parts; the Lord looks to see where those  
 dwell who hold to his law; every day he sees the ordinances that he set  
 by his own word dwindle and turn away from worldly law. He meets  
 with many, but few will be chosen.

Several important concepts are established here. As the context of the next lines, which compare worldly lifestyles with that of the wilderness-seeking hermits, indicates, one way into which the parts of the world can be interpreted is in its division between worldly society and the wilderness. The importance of worldly law is measured against the greater importance of God's laws. The implication that worldly laws are diminished or fail when they diverge from the laws of God has its significance later in *Guthlac's* decision to seek the wilderness. But the importance of law and of God's law is here stressed and the tensions in these lines are explored throughout the poem, particularly in the juxtaposition of the demons and of *Guthlac* as effective exiles in the wilderness. Each party accuses the other of living an exile's life, but, as these lines make clear, *Guthlac* has a moral authority that trumps any worldly concerns about his position in the wilderness. The demons, by contrast, represent the epitome of exile — cast out from grace, the only peace they know is in inhabiting the wilderness, the *mearc lond*, space of exiles, spirits and monsters (ll. 209-14). The profoundly important point that the poem makes in these

lines is that God is watching for those who keep to his laws, irrespective of their position within or without society. That it is possible to live within society in a Christian manner is also discussed, but it is accompanied by a warning against the beguilement of worldly riches (ll. 60-80).

This conceptualisation of the world by no means makes the wilderness into a positive space, nor repudiates worldly law. The wilderness is made dangerous by its demonic inhabitants who are frequently depicted in terms of exiles or outlaws. Its value as a place of spirituality is in providing the opportunity for spiritual struggle, a place in which Guthlac is able to overcome temptation. Through his faith, he cleanses the wilderness, making it possible for it to become a seat of Christian spirituality in due course.

Legal terms take on considerable significance in the course of this struggle, terms that are in their origin connected to worldly law. Indeed, elements of worldly law come to encompass the battle over the land itself. Lines 215-17 describe the struggle over the land between Guthlac and the demons as one of ownership in a legalistic sense:

Stod seo dygle stow dryhtne in gemyndum  
idel 7 æmen, eþelriehte feor,  
bád bisæce betran hyrdes.

The secret place stood out in the mind of the Lord. Empty and uninhabited, far from hereditary jurisdiction, it awaited the dispute of a better guardian.

These lines at once place the land outside the claim of anyone in the society that Guthlac has left and yet convey that Guthlac is the 'better guardian' that the land awaits. In fact, as Felix's *Vita* makes clear and as anyone familiar with Guthlac's story would know, Guthlac's guardianship of the land effectively civilises it. The foundation of the abbey at Crowland brings the formerly desolate wilderness into the domain of both God and man, but Guthlac's connection to King Æthelbald during his exile, and the prophetic assurance

and guidance that Guthlac offers him, connects Guthlac, the fens, king and God in a harmony of Christian spirituality and worldly law.

The crux is in recognising the strands of influence in legal terms between which the poem differentiates. While Guthlac is a worldly man, he is urged by the demon that influences his spirit to turn his attention to criminal ways, to carry out raids and to commit outrages (ll.108-39). This emphasis on raiding, viewing it as demonically inspired, foregrounds one of the areas of societal tension concerning the Anglo-Saxon warrior lifestyle of the eighth-century and the demands of Christian living. In fact, Guthlac was a raiding warrior in his youth, in a fashion laudable in the context of a warrior culture.<sup>99</sup> Felix attempts to explain away Guthlac's martial exploits by claiming that he fought only against enemies of the kingdom on his way to embracing his role as a soldier of God, but *Guthlac A* seems to condemn the warrior lifestyle altogether, interestingly, by casting the action in terms of outlawry and extra-societal behaviour. Incited by a demon, he seeks out *wræcmæcgas* by night and concerns himself with worldly plunder until God's angel steers him onto the path of righteousness (ll.108-32).<sup>100</sup> The characterisation of Guthlac's war band as criminals — and his activities, cloaked by night, as essentially evil — accords perfectly with the injunction in the poem's prologue against the snares of worldly ways. The poem also layers considerable irony into the term *wræcmæcgas*, since this term is otherwise used only of the demonic inhabitants of Guthlac's wilderness (l. 231, l. 262, l. 558). The irony is that Guthlac seeks out these *wræcmæcgas* to do battle with them, but, unlike in the intemperate days of his youth, Guthlac's spiritual war is waged to cleanse the wilderness and his spirit, rather than raid social settlements and gain worldly wealth. In this way, that which is permissible in worldly law is represented in the poem as being not merely inappropriate, but actually in opposition to the law of God. Worldly law is not inherently evil, but it can provide traps for the unwary in the ways in which it diverges from the law of God. However, adherence to worldly law and a place in society still count for more than the demons' position, outside society and thus beyond the reach of any means of legal or spiritual redress. The demons in *Guthlac A* are not merely exiles

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<sup>99</sup> Damon provides an excellent discussion of the tropes and processes involved in Guthlac's transformation from earthly to spiritual warrior in Felix's *Vita* (2003, 58-92).

<sup>100</sup> For more on this subject, see Hall, 2007, 210-13.

from social space but in the larger spiritual sense that it is only in the wilderness, outside the reach of Christian society that they can find any surcease to their torments.

The cleansing of the wilderness and the restitution of God's will results in the remaining years of Guthlac's life being lived in relative peace and tranquillity, but though he is visited by others from the societal spheres, Guthlac's home is in and of the wilderness still, and he has a closer affinity with the birds and animals of the fens than he does with many of his human visitors. Indeed, *Guthlac A*'s final lines dwell on Guthlac's idyllic wilderness life before his death and ascension rather than on his miracles and conversations with men. The typological motif of the return of the wilderness to an Edenic state is made all the clearer in *Guthlac B*, which opens with a description of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace (ll. 825-77). Guthlac's relationship with the cleansed wilderness is indicative of what Christian humanity has to look forward to if they remain steadfast in faith. While it is Guthlac's presence that allows this glimpse of a restored Edenic state to the wilderness, even after Guthlac's death his stamp is left in a wilderness tamed to the extent that it has become the site of a social focal point, an abbey (Neville, 2001, 119). As a consequence, society penetrates into the wilderness taming it still further. But this newly opened land is, first and foremost, a site of spiritual victory over the supernatural dangers of the wild, dangers which are typified by demonic inhabitants in a literal and spiritual sense in *Guthlac A*'s Christian perspective.

#### The Call of the Wild: Bárðr and Society

By contrast, *Bárðar saga Snaefellsáss* follows the life of a monstrous man who settles in Iceland as a farmer before withdrawing from society to become an *ás*, a protective nature spirit. *Bárðar saga* shows both pagan and Christian views of the wilderness in a narrative that sees the coming of Christianity largely from the perspective of the monstrous denizens of the wilderness. Though the saga is firmly rooted in the world of the supernatural, the central preoccupation of the text is to indicate not just the power of Christianity but its superiority to and triumph over the pagan. The coming of Christianity causes a distinct change in the nature of the wilderness itself, bringing it more in line with

the world view of *Guthlac A* but in the process changing the ways in which pagan spirits, from the overtly evil monsters to the more benevolent beings of monstrous descent, such as Bárðr, are viewed. The inevitable victory of Christianity over the pagan world hangs over and motivates Bárðr from the beginning of the saga and culminates in the spiritual salvation and physical destruction of his son, Gestr.

*Bárðar saga* opens with an account of the monstrous King Dumbr, born of both troll and giant descent. The account of Dumbr's lineage and how he becomes a king of humans in Norway is worth quoting in full for revealing *Bárðr saga's* articulation of how the divisions in the pagan supernatural world work:

Hann var kominn af risakyni í föðurætt sína, ok er þat vænna folk ok stærra en aðrir menn, en móðir hans var komin af tröllættum, ok brá því Dumbi í hvárutveggju ætt sína, því at hann var bæði sterkr ok vænn ok góðr vidskiptis ok kunni því at eiga allt sambland við mennska menn. En um þat brá honum í sitt móðurkyn, at hann var bæði sterkr ok stórvirkr ok umskiptasamar ok illskiptinn, ef honum eigi líkaði nökkut; vildi hann einn ráða við þá, er norðr þar váru, enda gáfu þeir honum konungs nafn, því at þeim þótti mikil forstoð í honum vera fyrir risum ok tröllum ok óvættum; var ok hann inn mesti bjargvætr öllum þeim, er til hans kölluðu. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 101-2)

He was descended from giants' kin on his father's side, and that is a race stronger and more attractive than other people. But his mother was descended from troll-kin, and Dumbr drew from each of the two sides of his family because he was both strong and handsome and good to deal with and thus he well knew how to interact with humans. But he drew from his mother's kin that he was both strong and hardworking and ill-natured if something displeased him. He wished to become sole ruler over those who were in the North and they gave him the name of

king because it seemed to them that he would be a great defence against giants, trolls and evil beings. And he was the best protective-being to all those who called on him.

A lot of interesting details are presented here. Giants, at least in the form of a *rísi*, are differentiated from humans by their strength and appearance, though in this instance rather than presenting a horrifying or alien appearance, they are better looking than the average human. From the *rísi* side of his heritage Dumbr also inherits the disposition to facilitate interaction with humans as well as his attractive appearance. By contrast, the troll side of his heritage brings with it a harsh temper which suggests that the potential for violence and destruction lurks within Dumbr, though it must be provoked. The most unusual element of Dumbr's personality is not his ability to mingle with humans but his desire to do so. Unlike the *blendingr* Þórir who plays host to Grettir, Dumbr is evidently not content to coexist at a distance with humans but actively strives to become a part of their society. Becoming a king of humans pits him against the monsters of the wilderness and ultimately, for all that Dumbr is strong, handsome and good-natured, he is accepted as a king precisely because of his ability to protect humans from other monsters, including potentially his own kin. Evidently, a *rísi* might be better-looking than a human and might behave in a manner acceptable to human society but peaceful interaction and coexistence was not a guarantee.

The nature of Dumbr's reign also deserves attention. While accepted into a human community as a king, Dumbr is evidently nevertheless regarded as the supernatural being he is. His role as a *bjargvætr* sees him worshipped by his followers, whose reverence is rewarded with his aid whenever they call upon him. Dumbr's protection is not merely as a king and a man-like figure with a giant or troll's strength, but as a benevolent supernatural entity able to succour his worshippers. Dumbr blends elements of *rísi*, *tröll* and *bjargvætr* into a package that sees him able to place himself into the top position of a human society. Bárðr inherits many traits from his father but is never able to integrate them successfully; he becomes a community leader but abandons his place in society after giving way to his *troll* temper and it is only after this that he becomes a worshipped

protector, an *ás* (5-6). Dumbr is perhaps more successful than his son in that he never has to deal with the threat of Christianity but is instead forced to battle monsters to protect his community. Dumbr is killed by the monsters he defends his society against: Bárðr survives long enough to see Christianity forever change the way he and his kind are perceived.

Due to Dumbr's war with monstrous foes, Bárðr is sent to be fostered by the half-giant Dofri, where he is raised in a cave in more monstrous style (1). Things change with both the death of Bárðr's father and a dream vision of Bárðr's that foretells the uniting of Norway under King Haraldr and the coming of Christianity (1).<sup>101</sup> His subsequent departure to Iceland is motivated by the classic saga motive of rebelling against Haraldr's rule, but Bárðr is also fleeing the coming of Christianity, a concern that will resurface in the later portions of the saga and unify the narratives concerning Bárðr and his son, Gestr.<sup>102</sup> *Bárðar saga* from the beginning creates a tension between the supernatural, social and spiritual worlds. The issues that Bárðr flees will come to a head in a mound-breaking scene later in the saga when pagan and Christian spiritualities collide and contend. Initially, however, Bárðr's story is rooted in the pagan and the monstrous and the ways in which monstrous beings can be benevolent and malevolent in their relation to humankind.

That Bárðr's attempts to fit into settlement era society in Iceland are uneasy is made apparent from the moment of his arrival in the country. *Bárðar saga* shows a preoccupation with onomastic material that leads to an interesting sequence in which Bárðr and another settler, a human namesake, settle in different parts of the Snaefell region of Iceland (4-5). The human Bárðr shows a concern for finding the best land available, and looks after his livestock and household possessions. The route he uses to reach the land he settles is named for him: Bárðargata. The passage finishes with a

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<sup>101</sup> King Haraldr is himself a fosterling of Dofri, according to both *Bárðar saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*.

<sup>102</sup> See Ármann Jakobsson, 1998, 53-71. Ármann argues that Christianity is insufficiently observed in the first half of the saga to constitute a unifying theme, but the importance of Bárðr's dream vision which foretells the coming of Christianity is emphasised by Bárðr's final appearance in the saga in a dream vision to his son Gestr motivated by Gestr's conversion to Christianity. See below for further discussion of this vital scene and the theme of Christianity in the saga.

genealogical section concerning how his numerous descendants marry and settle across Iceland (4). Bárðr Dumbsson's section gives both more onomastic detail and more detail of the movements of his party. Bárðr's first choice of settlement is a cave that is used as a meeting-place and council chamber throughout Bárðr's life, indicating his connection to the wilderness even in the context of structured social activity. Indeed, as will be seen, *Bárðar saga* constructs a wilderness setting where monsters occupy their own form of social network.<sup>103</sup> Bárðr and his party maintain an intimate connection to the wilderness even as they attempt to form social groups in the new land and build more human habitats, with varying degrees of success. One pointed contrast between the influences of society and the wild Bárðr's party of mixed-origin followers is made through a troll-like woman, Gróa, and her husband Sköldr. Gróa, feeling herself superior to her husband, leaves his farm and takes up residence in a cave (5). Gróa never really returns to society in any strict sense; after her husband dies, she marries Bárðr's half-brother, who, like Bárðr enjoys a largely peripheral relationship with society, spending more time in the caves and cliffs of the wilderness.

Bárðr Dumbsson's party effectively exemplify the behaviour and attitudes of the monstrous creatures that inhabit the wild, and in several cases revert to type in a manner threatening to society. Þúfa and Svalr, two of Bárðr's party who are described as *trylld*, indicating that they are if not trolls themselves, then that they are capable of 'turning troll' or becoming monstrous. Immediately upon arriving in Iceland they abandon the others and take refuge in a mountain and become a monstrous threat to the region, forcing Bárðr to destroy them (5). In going to the wild this monstrous couple become monsters in fact, but the behaviour of these characters prior to their disappearances is typically surly and unpleasant. Interestingly, given his generally positive and heroic nature even after he has withdrawn from society, Bárðr's decision to leave is made as a result of his temper and the murderous act he commits because of it.

Bárðr's negative emotional state is brought about by the apparent death of his daughter, Helga, who is pushed out to sea on an iceberg. In fact, she safely reaches Greenland and

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<sup>103</sup> *Grettis saga* also offers such insights into a larger monstrous 'social network' in the wild.

eventually returns to Iceland, but not in time to prevent Bárðr's murderous response to her apparent demise. Bárðr kills his half-brothers Þorkell's sons, blaming them for the accident, and injures Þorkell himself, after which Bárðr becomes withdrawn and ill-tempered. In effect he is cut off from society while still living within its limits in a manner not dissimilar to an *ójafnaðrmaðr* or *draugr* in waiting. Bárðr recognises the impossibility of remaining as a man within society and decides to follow 'nökkurra annarra ráða' (6). In seeking 'some other course', Bárðr does not so much reject societal principles, but rather realises that he cannot live within or by society's rules due to his monstrous ancestry. It is precisely because of his desire to avoid becoming a monster amongst men that he removes himself to the wilderness. As Ralph O'Connor observes, Bárðr's 'real' self seems to emerge here in his first direct speech in the saga where he announces that he is too dangerous to dwell amongst men and that he plans to remove himself from human society (2002, 37). But though Bárðr retreats into the wilderness, he does not become a monster.

The description of Bárðr's move is revealing in medieval Icelandic attitudes to the wilderness (6):

Eptir þetta hvarf Bárðr í burtu með allt búferli sitt, ok þykkir mönnum sem hann muni í jöklana horfit hafa ok byggt þar stóran helli, því at þat var meir ætt hans at vera í stórum hellum en húsum, því at hann fæddist upp með Dofra í Dofrafjöllum; var hann tröllum ok líkari at afli ok vexti en mennskum mönnum, ok var því lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Bárðr Snjófellsáss, því at þeir trúðu á hann náliga þar um nesit ok höfðu hann fyrir heitguð sinn; varð hann ok mörgum in mesta bjargvætt. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 119)

After that Bárðr disappeared with all his possessions. It is thought by people that he vanished into the glaciers and lived there in a huge cavern. His family was more likely to live in large caves than in houses, as he had been raised by Dofri in the Dovrefjell. He was also more like

trolls in strength and size than like human beings. For that reason his name was lengthened, and he was called Bárðr the Ás of Snaefell because they practically worshipped him on the peninsula and called upon him in times of difficulty. For many he also proved to be a source of real help in need. (Hreinsson *et al*, 1997 vol. 2, 244)

There are several interesting points in this passage. Bárðr's likely choice of residence is seen as a consequence of both his upbringing as a fosterling in the cave of a giant and his heritage generally. Bárðr is more troll than human in size and strength, but in spite of his withdrawal from society and monstrous origin, Bárðr becomes a positive, helpful figure. Bárðr takes all of his possessions with him, though he leaves his land to a human friend of his. In this may be seen both evidence of Bárðr's continued links to society through material objects and the shaping influence of folk belief in the use trolls and giants make of monstrous counterparts to human utensils.<sup>104</sup> Most interesting is the positive assertion that Bárðr was a real source of help, a point that argues the efficacy and potency of him as a pagan spirit which will be undermined later in contrast to the power of Christianity.

Bárðr's retreat from society is followed by a series of episodes in the saga in which he is seen as a mysterious outsider who comes to the aid of his human neighbours against various monstrous or supernatural threats. During this period Bárðr fathers a son, Gestr, by a human who becomes the central figure of the second half of the saga (7-12). Though Bárðr cuts himself off from society, he does not sever all societal connections, and, interestingly, as well as intervening to protect people from supernatural threats, Bárðr also spends some time in human society. Typically he does so in disguise, concealing his identity and thus his inhuman nature as he does when he fathers Gestr, and sometimes openly when he visits games and wrestles with other men (7-12). Most interestingly, Bárðr teaches law and genealogy to those to whom he is particularly well disposed, just as he was taught in his youth by the giant Dofri. Implicit in this is a notion of a time when monsters and supernatural beings had a close relationship with humanity, close enough

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<sup>104</sup> Further examples from this saga include the cave-dwellings of Hít and Kolbjörn, where feasts are carried out and tables, chairs and bed closets are described, amongst more monstrous elements of giant, immovable stone doors (15-16).

that a monster could become an expert in human genealogy. Bárðr's teachings lead the men in question to become famous for their legal acumen, and though they have ties through Bárðr to the supernatural world, these humans who remain firmly inside society.

That Bárðr is a specialist in law is particularly interesting since he never has any use for the law he understands himself. Bárðr lives largely apart from human society, spending his time visiting occasionally amongst both men and monsters. The saga offers an example of Bárðr among monsters in the wilderness, when he and Gestr visit a troll-woman called Hít for another Yule-feast.<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, the feast is at once indicative of monstrosity and human social conventions. A lengthy description of the guests pays careful attention to their seating arrangements, a preoccupation typical of the honour-obsessed culture of human society (Miller, 1990, 29-34), but here the feast is held within a cave. The lack of social restraint that might be attendant at such gatherings is made evident by the comment that 'Drykkja var þar mjök óstjórnlig, svá at allir urðu þar ginntir' (13; 1991, 144), 'drinking was so greatly ungoverned there that all became intoxicated'. In a human feast, the signifiers of drunkenness and keen awareness of social standing would indicate approaching trouble, and it is no different here, even if the way conflict arises and escalates plays out in far more monstrous than human ways. The lack of moderation in the monstrous guests is reflected in their after dinner sport, a skin-throwing game that soon grows violent, culminating in an altercation between Gestr and a giant named Kolbjörn. This violent act sparks a feud that fuels much of the rest of the saga's plot, including Gestr's uniting with his human half-brothers and visiting Norway, where he is converted to Christianity. But while Gestr is ready to kill Kolbjörn immediately, Bárðr manages to effect a peace in the hall (13):

Bárðr segir, at þat skal öngum duga at gera nökkut ómak í herbergjum  
Hítar, vinkonu sinnar, 'þar sem hon hefir boðit oss með kærleikum'.  
(Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 145)

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<sup>105</sup> It is worth noting that there is an inversion of sorts in these feasts, since Yule-tide is frequently the occasion for a monstrous visitation in numerous sagas, including *Bárðar saga* when the *draugr* Raknar visits the court of King Ólafr Tryggvasson. In the case of Hít's feast, it is the monsters who hold and attend the feast, though in fact violence and enmity break out that do reflect on the human, societal world as a result of Bárðr and Gestr's presence.

Bárðr said that no one should do anything to cause trouble in the halls of his friend Hít, ‘since she has invited us out of friendship.’

Bárðr’s presence commands both deference and resentment from the more malevolent monstrous peers, but while there is a real sense of fear from the more violent of the monsters towards Bárðr, he himself is keen to keep the peace in the name of his friendship to the troll Hít and to avoid bloodshed. In conception then, the feast serves as an example of an interaction between monstrous peers in their own form of social setting, one clearly thought to be based on complex but familiar social rules, as the carefully given seating arrangements suggest, and subject to similar pressures to human feasts where different families are brought into proximity and their personal honour and standing into question.<sup>106</sup>

But by the same token, the dangerous contest of strength the dinner guests indulge in is Bárðr’s choice; his willingness to test himself in games against men and monsters is another example of Bárðr’s inhuman nature. He can be contrasted, in this, with Grettir, who battles various monstrous opponents but tends to find himself over-matched in strength, unlike Bárðr.<sup>107</sup> Though Bárðr himself slays monsters, and helps humans, he lives at a remove from humanity and is not entirely uncomfortable in the presence of even unrepentantly evil beings. The winter feast with Hít and Kolbjörn is a clear indication of the fact that Bárðr can and does coexist peacefully with giants, trolls, ogres and the like, and only acts against them when there is provocation or threat to loved ones, human or monstrous. This is not to say that there is friendliness — Bárðr is feared and hated by Kolbjörn, and doubtless many others. But Bárðr is clearly more comfortable in the supernatural than the human world.

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<sup>106</sup> The examples in sagas are numerous, but see *Njáls saga*, 35-45, for the origins and development of the feud between Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, rooted in the perceived prestige of seating arrangements.

<sup>107</sup> Grettir is shown to be weaker than Glámr (35), Hallmundr (54) and the giants he fights who raided Steinvör’s farm (65-66).

The feast with Hít marks a shift in the saga towards Gestr as the main character and a movement towards social spaces. By contrast, Bárðr seems to become more distant from the world of men. He does not intervene in Gestr's feud with Kolbjörn, even though Kolbjörn's machinations threaten Gestr's human brothers. And where Bárðr showed restraint in dealing with the monsters at Hít's feast, Gestr has no compunction in killing Kolbjörn's monstrous guests at the wedding that is meant as a trap for Gestr and his half-brothers (14-16). This shift foreshadows the events later in the saga, when the very nature of the wilderness and its monstrous denizens will be redefined in the arrival of Christianity.

#### The Coming of Christianity: Gestr and the End of the Line

The final episodes of *Bárðar saga* concern Gestr's visit to Norway and his undertaking of a dangerous mission to break into the mound of an undead viking, an undertaking paralleling the similar events in *Harðar saga*, though here the power of Christianity renders the pagan elements powerless or grotesquely comic.

King Olaf Tryggvason's court is visited by a malevolent *draugr* who boasts that he will award treasure to anyone bold enough to visit him and take them from him. The king sends Gestr with a Christian priest named Jósteinn and — at Gestr's request — two magicians. Gestr's quest takes him back into the wilderness, this time in Norway, to Raknarr's mound:

Segja sumir menn, at þessi hólmr hafi legit fyrir Hellulandi; en hvar sem þat hefir verit, þá hafa þar öngvar byggðir í nánd verit. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 165)

Some people say that the mound was located in the north of Helluland, but wherever it was, there were no dwellings in the vicinity then.

Raknarr's evil influence keeps settlements and civilisation at bay. He is the undead as anti-life in a manner similar to Þórólfr *bægifótr*, only far more widespread in his effects. Two incidents are particularly worthy of note in this journey section. The first occurs at the beginning of the journey, while Gestr and his men are aboard a ship. A mysterious man joins the ship — significantly, just north of Dumbshaf, named for Bárðr's father — who urges the necessity of sacrifice to the pagan gods for the success of their mission, until an exasperated Jósteinn strikes him with a crucifix. The stranger falls from the ship and is not seen again, at which point those aboard 'Þóttust þeir þá vita, at þat hefði Óðinn verit' (18; 1991, 163), 'realised that it had been Óðinn'. Óðinn, who turns up in a helpful capacity in other sagas, particularly in the mound-breaking sequence in *Harðar saga*, is here ridiculed and proved utterly ineffectual before the symbols of Christianity. This encounter sets the pattern for the rest of the journey into Raknarr's wilderness, where every positive pagan means at Gestr's disposal fails in the face of Raknarr's malevolence only to be overcome by Jósteinn's faith.

The second incident is the process of breaking into the mound itself. As in *Harðar saga*, it is dug into during the day, only for the resultant hole to be resealed by Raknarr's malevolent power. Gestr is unable to effect entry until he gains external supernatural support, in this case provided by Christianity. In *Harðar saga*, this support is provided by Óðinn through the means of a magic sword (15). The same result is achieved in *Bárðar saga* by Jósteinn in a remarkable sequence which owes more to the visitations of demonic spirits to wilderness hermits in the mould of St Antony and Guthlac than to typical encounters with the undead in the sagas (20). Jósteinn keeps vigil after the third day's digging and

Ok er á leið at miðri nótt, sá hann, hvar Raknarr ríðr, ok var hann fagrþúinn; hann bað prest fara með sér ok kveðst goða skyldu hans ferð gera, 'ok er hér hringr, er ek vil gefa þér, ok men.' Öngu svarar prestr ok sat kyrr sem áðr. Mörg fádæmi sýndust honum, bæði tröll ok óvættir, fjáandr ok fjölkunnigar þjóðir; sumir blíðkuðu hann, en sumir ógnuðu honum, svá at hann skyldi þá heldr en áðr í burt ganga... Ekki

gaf prestr um þetta, ok hvat undrum sem hann sá eðr hversu ólmlega þessir fjáendr létu, þá kvámu þeir þó aldri nær presti sakir vatns þess, er hann stökkti. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 165-66)

When the middle of the night came, he saw where Raknarr was riding, magnificently dressed. He asked the priest to go with him and said that he should make his journey worthwhile, ‘and here are a ring and a necklace that I will give you.’

The priest did not answer and sat still as before. Many marvels appeared to him — both trolls and evil spirits, fiends and fairy folk. Some entreated him, while others threatened him, urging him to go away instead... The priest paid no attention to that, and no matter what wonders he saw or how dreadfully these fiends acted, they could never come near the priest on account of the water that he sprinkled. (1997, 263)

The deceptive visions he is granted are interesting both for their nature as temptations, from Raknarr’s straightforward bribe to the more esoteric threats and promises of the myriad supernatural entities that appear to him. This passage sees the beginning of a shift of emphasis in the saga, from a world in which both malignant and benign pagan spirits can co-exist with and be differentiated by man to one in which that which is aligned with the pagan becomes opposed to Christianity. In effect, whether they are actual beings serving Raknarr or visions Raknarr uses to try to stop Jósteinn, the conflation of supernatural entities in their arrayal against the powers of Christianity foreshadows the saga’s tragic end. Jósteinn is not himself the focus of this passage, in spite of his active role in bringing Gestr to the confrontation with Raknarr. Jósteinn does not face down the threats pitched against him on the way to sainthood, but his intervention in the trials Gestr faces do have a holy significance — the state of Gestr’s soul. Jósteinn demonstrates the power of Christianity over the worst that Raknarr can offer in the wilderness and is thus

able to simultaneously demonstrate the ineffectuality of the supernatural, monstrous powers Gestr is used to relying on. Jósteinn in effect is able to prepare Gestr for his confrontation with Raknarr, in which he will ultimately have to choose between trusting pagan or Christian means. In the event, Gestr tries both. He finally embraces Christianity only after he has called on his father to intervene when he realises that he is outmatched by Raknarr. Bárðr responds by appearing in the mound, but is too weak to save his son from Raknarr (20). Raknarr is defeated only thanks to the spiritual intervention of King Ólafr, which is itself brought about by Gestr's pledge to be baptised and become a Christian. The supernatural world of the wilderness is being revised by the coming of Christianity, and along with it, man's relationship to the wild and to those entities that exist in it.

This revision is in fact made explicit shortly after Jósteinn hauls Gestr from the mound (21): Jósteinn 'þóttist hann ór helju heimt hafa' (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 169) 'thought he had brought him back from hell'. In effect he has, as Bárðr's last trial — and Raknarr's last trick — indicates. Bárðr and his men are faced with being stranded on Raknarr's island as rising waters conceal the reef they had walked upon to get there. Jósteinn comes to the rescue again, parting the waters with his crucifix and holy water and allowing them all to walk back safely. Though this final instance of Christian power overcoming Raknarr is somewhat anti-climactic after King Ólafr's appearance and Bárðr's pledge to become Christian, it plays an important function in Gestr and the wilderness's conversion narrative in three ways. Although Gestr has beheaded Raknarr, his evil influence is still felt and still only truly combatable by Christianity. Gestr's last link to the pagan world is his dog, Snáti, given to him previously by the troll-woman Hít, and the dog drowns trying to find the reef underwater. The inadequacy of pagan and martial means are thus displayed once again against the effectively demonic force that Raknarr has become in the Christianised world. The final point is in the obvious typology of the scene connecting it to Exodus. Although for the Israelites, the wilderness and years of wandering awaited, for Gestr the opportunity to escape the pull of the pagan and the wild and to become Christian is realised in this escape. True to his word he is baptised immediately after returning to Olaf, but this is

not without its consequences. As this saga is told from the perspective of the supernatural and the monstrous, it is from this perspective that Gestr's baptism is explored:

Ina næstu nótt eptir er Gestr var skírðr, dreymdi hann, at Bárðr, faðir sinn, kæmi til hans ok mælti: 'Illa hefir þú gert, er þú hefir látit trú þína, þá er langfeðgar þínir hafa haft, ok látit kúga þik til siðaskiptis sakir lítilmennsku, ok fyrir þat skaltu missa bæði augu þín.' Tók hann þá at augum hans heldr óþyrmiliga ok hvarf síðan. Eptir þetta, er Gestr vaknaði, hefir hann tekið augnaverð svá strangan, at inn sama dag sprungu þau út bæði. Síðan andaðist Gestr í hvítaváðum. Þótti konungi þat inn mesti skaði. (Þórhallur Vilmundarson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, 1991, 169-70)

The next night after Gestr was baptised, he dreamt that his father Bárðr came to him and announced: 'A poor deed you've done, renouncing your faith and that of your forefathers, and allowing yourself to be forced to change your beliefs for lack of character. For doing so, you shall lose both your eyes.'

Bárðr then placed his hands on Gestr's eyes, more than a little roughly, and afterwards disappeared. When Gestr awoke, he had such horrible pain in his eyes that they burst out the same day. Afterwards Gestr died, still in his baptismal clothes. The king felt it a great loss. (265)

Bárðr's vengeful dream visitation to Gestr parallels Bárðr's own dream-vision which predicted the uniting of Norway and the coming of a new faith — Christianity. Bárðr's own destruction or dissolution is assured, even as his last effectual act is carried out. Bárðr's powers have been shown to be inadequate compared to Christianity and his turn from helpful to murderous spirit marks a shift towards the reconfiguration of the pagan as the demonic, or at least its alignment with it. Gestr does not long survive his blindness, but Bárðr's last display of power in the saga is nevertheless rendered essentially meaningless. Gestr's death in his baptismal clothes signifies his purity as a Christian.

There will be a place for Gestr in the Christian afterlife, and thus a place for him in humanity itself. The saga ends with a list of the descendants of Gestr's half-brothers, but also indicates that Gestr, like the rest of Bárðr's children, had no children of his own. Thus Bárðr's line ends and, though his death is not mentioned, his opposition to Christianity would seem to spell his doom. Salvation — and humanity — is not achievable through simply mingling blood-lines with humans but through accepting Christianity, a path that Bárðr rejects, becoming fully part of a wilderness that Christianity will tame.

Though Bárðr is on the whole held in a positive light, the manner of his final actions suggests that he aligns himself with the demonic, as another tale makes explicitly clear, *Þiðrandi þáttr ok Þórhalls*. In this *þáttr*, Þiðrandi is a young man of exceptional talents and virtues who is slain by the vengeful *disiri*, or protective spirits of his family, because they are to be displaced by Iceland's conversion to Christianity. The *þáttr* makes this explicit in an uncharacteristically didactic passage that not only makes the intentions of the story plain, but also makes explicit the influence of Christianity on the perceptions of pagan beliefs in the fourteenth-century. Þiðrandi's death and the changing of the spirits protecting the land and:

margir hlutir þvílíkir þann fagnaðartíma sem eptir kom, at allsveldandi guð virtist at líta miskunnaraugum á þann lýð er Ísland byggði ok leysa þat fólk fyrir sína erindreka af löngum fjandans þrældómi ok leiða síðan til samlags eilífrar erfðar sinna æskilegra sona sem hann hefir fyrirheitit alla þá er honum vilja trúlega þjóna með staðfesti góðra verka. Svá ok eigi síðr sýndi óvinr alls mannkyns opinberlega í slíkum hlutum ok mörgum öðrum þeim er í frásagnir eru færðir hversu nauðigr hann lét laust sitt ránfengi ok þann lýð er hann hafði áðr allan tíma haldið hertekinn í villuböndum sinna bölvaðra skurðgoða þá er hann hvessti með slíkum áhlaupum sína grimmdarfulla reiði á þeim sem hann hafði vald yfir sem hann vissi nálgast sína skömm ok maklegan skaða síns herfangs.

many other such things presaged the joyful time that was to come, when God in His Omnipotence chose to view with merciful eyes the people that had settled Iceland and, through His representative, freed these people from the long thralldom of the Devil, and then, as He had promised, led all those who wished to serve Him truly with the confirmation of good deeds to share in the eternal inheritance of His desired sons. In the same way, and no less, did the enemy of humankind manifestly demonstrate in such things, and many others that have been spoken of, how unwilling he was to release his stolen hoard, and those people whom he had previously held captive throughout all time in the bonds of confusion of his accursed graven images. With such incursions, he sharpened the edge of his cruel rage upon those over whom he maintained power when he knew that his shame and the just harm of his captivity were approaching. (Hreinsson *et al.*1997, III: 461)

The previously benign pagan influences are revealed as demonic cat's-paws since they kept the Icelanders interests away from Christianity. Through its allusion to other supernatural incidents the *þáttr* retroactively links all such pagan spirits and creatures to the devil. In a sense, the struggles of demon and angel over the spirits of men as described in *Guthlac A* are reflected on a larger scale here. The nine black *disiri* that kill Þiðrandi are chased away by nine white *disiri*, spirits of the new faith. The Christian spirits are conceived of as essentially the same as their demonic counterparts, the difference of their orientation being marked out purely in the significance of their dress. Black is evil, and white is good, or rather, black is representative of the demonic and corrupt while white is pure and Christian. In its emphasis on the actual change to the land itself and the spirits that reside in it, the *þáttr* offers an image of the cleansing of Iceland as a whole and the taking up of the country as an abode by angelic beings.

Though the *þáttr* presents the reshaping of the spiritual landscape of Iceland in metaphysical terms, the conversion in fact plays out on multiple levels of society in

different sagas. *Njáls saga* offers a dramatic account of the legal and social elements of the conversion (105). Though the coming of Christianity to Iceland was by no means straightforward nor overly swift in its influence on society and folk beliefs, the impact on the saga writers' telling of the tales of their society's founding is profound, as *Bárðar saga* and *Piðrandi þáttr* show. What these two do indicate is a profound connection between the land, the spiritual and the human. The pagan spiritual world is recast in a demonic light, but the world of Christian salvation actually extended not just to men but to monsters too, even if it means their physical destruction.

Bárðr, belonging at least partly to the world of men, is a positive force, but only until a better alternative, Christianity, presents itself. In identifying himself with the wilderness and the spirits that belong there, Bárðr aligns himself with the demonic and his vengeful lashing out against his son in his baptismal clothes would seem to confirm this, just as the saga's silence on what becomes of Bárðr afterwards is telling in its own way. Gestr's journey into the heart of a demonically reconfigured wilderness lets him realise the limits of his own and even his father's abilities and through the constant successes of Jósteynn the priest and through King Ólafur's final intervention, Gestr is convinced by the power of Christianity. Gestr dies, if not a martyr, then at least cleansed thanks to the effects of his visit to the wilderness and his subsequent return to society. That no line descends from Bárðr, a being skilled in, and able to pass on to others the skill of, genealogy is the final touch – the human, baptised half-siblings of Gestr survive and have descendants, Christian descendants. Bárðr leaves only his name, his alleged actions, and some dreams. For Bárðr, there can be no conversion, only his own dissolution as Christianity cleanses him from the land in due course.

#### Exiles, Monsters and the Power of the Viewpoint in *Andreas*

In a similar manner, *Guthlac A* places its demons into a position where redemption is impossible and establishes a clear spiritual message. Salvation and grace in God is possible for those who seek to follow God's ways, but is denied to the devilish. The demons' efforts to drive Guthlac from the wilderness by presenting society's views of the

outsider are an utter failure thanks to Guthlac's steadfast faith rather than any lack of weight to their barbs. The extent of Guthlac's severance from his former worldly life is indicated in *Guthlac A* by his explicit refusal to use the sword or violence in his cleansing of Crowland (303b-307).

But what is the fate of the monstrous in such a view? *Bárðar saga* makes it clear that salvation is possible for some, such as Gestr, who align themselves with not just societal forces but with Christianity. While *Guthlac A* has nothing to say on the monstrous in the wild, the Old English poem *Andreas* explores exactly this territory, and is, like *Guthlac A*, concerned with notions of the wild and the potentially conflicting ideals of spiritual and worldly living. *Andreas* deals with the apostle Andrew's visit to the Mermedonians, a cannibalistic race of monstrous men who live in a *mearcland*, albeit one that is far removed from the English countryside (l. 19 [Krapp, 1932]). Andrew is captured by the Mermedonians, tortured and finally abused by the devil and taunted with his own outlaw state.

*Andreas* is a version of an apocryphal Greek tale of the apostle St Andrew on a mission of rescue and conversion amongst a cannibalistic people, the Mermedonians. The tale survives in Greek, Latin, and Old English, though the direct source for *Andreas* is thought to have been Latin and to be lost.<sup>108</sup> *Andreas* differs significantly in style and minor details from the other versions, while still adhering fairly rigidly to the basic story laid down in the original Greek source. The various versions of this tale deal with the mission given to St Andrew by God to rescue his fellow apostle, Matthew, from the clutches of the cannibalistic Mermedonians. The Mermedonians are a form of monstrous men, a race of exotically located *anthropophagi* who seem to belong more to the world of the Plinian races than the human world. Their exotic location places them in a sense in a form of wilderness setting, in spite of their relatively sophisticated society. Andrew rescues Matthew but is then captured and tortured for three days before God releases him.

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<sup>108</sup> The textual tradition of this particular piece of apocrypha is, as indicated, somewhat fragmented. Extant versions include the Greek *praxeis*, three Latin versions, an Old English prose homily, and *Andreas*, which survives in the Vercelli Book. See Schaar, 1949, 12-20 for a consideration of the extant sources and a summary comparison of the various versions.

Invoking God's power, Andrew washes the worst of the cannibals away in a flood that recalls the deluge, and simultaneously cleanses the remaining Mermedonians, who consent to baptism and become fully adopted into the Christian world.

Before this can occur, Andrew is plunged into a situation where his identity as a Christian and a missionary are jeopardised. Although Andrew is a heroic figure in his successful rescue of the prisoners, he is faced with an identity crisis in the poem when he is himself captured by the Mermedonians who see him as an invading monster. Not only does Andrew kill some of the Mermedonians while releasing the prisoners, by removing them from captivity he threatens the whole Mermedonian community by depriving them of their food source.

The monstrous aspects of Andrew's actions are played out in several ways in the poem. The monstrous overtones of Andrew's approach to the hall where the prisoners are kept have long been noted in the phrasal echoes of Grendel's advance on Heorot in *Beowulf*.<sup>109</sup> In *Beowulf*, as Grendel reaches the hall (ll. 721b-2): 'duru sona onarn/ fyrbendum fæst, syþðan he hire folmum (æthr)an', 'the door, fixed with forged bands, immediately gave way when he touched it with his hands'. In *Andreas*, it is as Andrew approaches the prison to release Matthew and the other prisoners (ll. 999b-1000): 'duru sona onarn/ þurh handhrine haliges gastes', 'the door opened immediately through a touch of the hand of the holy spirit'. The contrast is instructive in considering Andrew's dual role in this sequence. On the surface, a more diametrically opposed pair than Grendel and the apostle St Andrew can scarcely be imagined. Grendel approaches the hall with the intention of killing and devouring its inhabitants, while Andrew seeks to release the prisoners of the cannibals to prevent a similar fate befalling them. Though Grendel's depredations are cut short by Beowulf on the night in question, it is not before he devours a Geatish warrior, and, indeed, on many other nights Grendel causes the Danes considerable anguish through killing and devouring of their warriors.<sup>110</sup> By

<sup>109</sup> For examples of the ways in which scholars have linked *Andreas* and *Beowulf* through phrasal and stylistic links, see Peters, 1951, 844-63, Brodeur, 1968, 97-114 and Hamilton, 1975, 81-98.

<sup>110</sup> Grendel is described by Beowulf as a *muðbona*, a slayer by the mouth (2079).

contrast, Andrew releases the prisoners, and all but Andrew escape the city and the cannibals.<sup>111</sup>

But this is not as straightforward a contrast as it at first appears. The cannibals, coming upon the scene, find not only the prisoners gone, but their guards slain. Damon notes that *Andreas* seems to place responsibility for the killing on Andrew himself, in contrast with the sources, where God strikes the guards dead in response to Andrew's prayer (Damon, 2003, 127-29). Further, he suggests that the term *heorodreorig*, used to describe the slain guards, should be translated 'sword-gory', suggesting violent and bloody death, rather than the agency of a relatively peaceful miracle. Thus the cannibals are confronted initially by a scene of bloody slaughter and by the loss of their entire food supply. The hunger that afflicts the cannibals is described as a *ðeodscada*, a 'ravager of a people', a term elsewhere employed of the dragon in *Beowulf*. The being responsible for the unleashing of this *ðeodscada* is, however, Andrew. While the audience may perceive him as a heroic saint, to the cannibals Andrew is a calamity, a monster that slaughters them through both direct violence and starvation. Andrew is at once a hero and a monster, a familiar figure to the audience and a foreigner to the Mermedonians, one close to God and human society, yet also an outcast in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Indeed, in *Andreas* the theme of exile is of considerable importance and the pressures of worldly perception is similarly dependent on viewpoint. The appearance of Andrew and the other apostles — as penniless beggars without lord or homeland — invites hostile responses from the society around them. The apostles in *Andreas* are described as being outcast from the norms of their contemporary civilised society, resulting in their identification as exiles by the priest of the Jewish temple. This priest makes urges them to abandon their Lord, arguing that he Christ is an outlaw and is leading the disciples with him down the wrong path (ll. 661-91). By contrast, Andrew's disciples refuse to leave

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<sup>111</sup> And, in the sources, though not here, provides them with both physical and spiritual provender in the form of a self-replenishing fruit tree and a sermon by Paul.

Andrew precisely because they fear the consequences of abandoning their spiritual leader, even though their worldly standing would presumably improve (ll. 401-14).<sup>112</sup>

The competing viewpoints the poem cleverly introduces on the themes of exile and monstrosity are brought to a head in the confrontation between Andrew and Satan. Not only is the implicit monstrosity of Andrew's actions given a more explicit treatment when Satan and his accompanying demons torture him, but the issues of identification of exile, foreigner, and monster begin to find some resolution. At least, a baseline of absolutism becomes discernible amidst the more confounding relativism that reaches its apogee in the brief dialogue between Satan and Andrew. Prior to this dialogue, Satan's demonic followers are baulked in their attempts to visit physical harm on Andrew by the sign of the cross, prompting them to refer to him when reporting back to Satan as both an *æglæca* (l. 1359a) and an *anhaga* (l. 1351a), both formidable and an exile.<sup>113</sup> To the demons, Andrew is supernatural, other, monstrous and exiled, but this is entirely dependent on their understanding of Andrew's faith and spirituality.

With physical punishment ruled out, Satan attempts to confound Andrew verbally, and his approach is one that seeks to take advantage of the relativism of their positions, with Andrew secured in bonds facing execution at the hands of the Mermedonians:

Ðu þe, Andreas, a clæccræftum  
 lange feredes! Hwæt, ðu leoda feala  
 forleolce ond forlærdest! Nu leng ne miht  
 gewealdan þy weorce. Þe synd witu þæs grim  
 weotud be gewyrhtum. Ðu scealt werigmod,  
 hean, hroðra leas, hearm þrowigan,  
 sare swyltcwale. Secgas mine  
 to þam guðplegan gearwe sindon,  
 þa þe æninga ellenweorcum

<sup>112</sup> For more on Andrew's followers, and the exile theme in *Andreas* generally, see Irving, 1983, 222-25.

<sup>113</sup> See above, Chapter Two, pp. 40-41 for discussion of *æglæca*.

unfyrn faca feorh ætþringan.  
 Hwylc is þæs mihtig ofer middangeard,  
 þæt he þe alyse of leoðubendum,  
 manna cynnes, ofer mine est? (ll.1365b-1375)

You have long applied yourself, Andrew, to terrible arts. What a multitude of people you have deceived and misled! There are punishments appointed for you, severe according to your deserts. Heart-weary, abject, comfortless, you shall suffer further pain and bitter death. My men are ready for the sport of battle, who in a short while will quickly crush the life out of you by their valiant deeds. Who on earth of humankind is so mighty that he will free you from your shackles against my consent? (Bradley, 1982, 145)

Satan's words address not only Andrew's physical discomfort and his imminent death but also attempt to cast his missionary work in the light of deception and evil-doing at a time when Andrew has become fearful that God has abandoned him. After Satan's taunts Andrew prays to God, asking if he has been abandoned (ll.1388-1428). When Andrew is healed and promised freedom and the salvation of numerous souls, he is thankful specifically that God did not abandon him 'a foreign one': 'ellþeodigne an ne forlæte' (l.1451). The adjective *elþeodig* is used to denote foreigners or aliens, outsiders from societal groups and those cast out by God (*DOE* s.v.). Andrew shows signs that the torture and torments applied by the Mermedonians and the demons have begun to attack his faith, and, in identifying himself as a foreigner, suggests that he has begun to succumb to the Mermedonian viewpoint after all, one that places him in the context of an outsider, a monstrous antagonist and one cut off from God.

Nevertheless, Andrew is able to verbally despatch Satan by answering Satan's question in a way that begins the realigning of identities around the rock of Christian faith. Satan, obsessed with Andrew's worldly predicament, makes his mistake in asking who among human kind can release Andrew. Andrew's response exposes the flaw in Satan's

argument by recasting the situation into spiritual terms. God has the power to free him, just as it is God that ensures that Satan is forever bound in exile. With this retort, Satan flees and is effectively banished from the rest of the narrative (ll.1376-85). Notably, *Andreas* differs from the other sources at this point, first in making the discourse about being in exile, and second in the reminder of Satan's irrefutable exile being the means of driving him off. This discourse on exiles at a point where Andrew's identity is being called into question as a human or monster serves to establish God and Christianity as the ultimate determiners of identity. In Christian faith, all humans are connected through God. Andrew's own sense of faith and belonging is itself insufficient to deal with his doubts, but the external verification provided by God allows him to complete his mission in dramatic fashion by unleashing a flood on the Mermedonians.

Belonging is clearly important, and is ultimately bound up with monstrosity, foreignness, and exile status. The resolution offered by *Andreas* is one that ultimately transcends the physical and the social, since truly belonging means belonging inside the laws of God and by the precepts of Christian faith. By accepting the word of God, by becoming Christians, the Mermedonians become human, and bonded in fellowship with their fellow humans, but, more importantly, they become bonded to God. In effect, the triumph is of Christianity over monstrosity, but not simply because a group of monsters have been defeated by and converted to Christianity. Christianity offers, in *Andreas*, a spiritual escape from the problems of belonging, of being foreign or native, familiar or outcast. *Guthlac A* offers a similar message in its depiction of Guthlac's security in his humanity. Though the demons question it, comparing him to a wild animal, Guthlac is secure in his faith and knows that he is in the right place and doing the right thing. The important difference is that while the two texts agree that the demonic is irredeemably evil, there is some hope even for monstrous men such as the Mermedonians, that if they embrace the Christian faith they will become members of humanity through the cleansing power of that faith. Monsters such as Grendel in *Beowulf* become aligned with the demonic because they are not ignorant of God but willingly defy him and commit evil acts, putting them beyond the hope of redemption. Just as the denizens of the wilderness are subject to God's judgement in Anglo-Saxon texts, *Bárðar saga's* preoccupations with Christianity

in the final chapters of the saga allow the saga author to realign the pagan wilderness into a newly Christianised landscape.

### Conclusion

The wilderness exists in opposition to society and societal values, but it is also contiguous with society, as *Bárðar saga* indicates. In the pagan age, traffic with the monstrous and the supernatural was possible and not necessarily negative in nature. Bárðr, at one time a member of society and trained in such important skills as law and genealogy, the cornerstones of early Icelandic society, has largely positive interactions with the society he has rejected. Nevertheless, his position in and relationship with the wilderness mark him out as irrefutably Other. Change is brought about by the coming of Christianity. The relationship between man and the denizens of the wild is reconfigured so that even benign pagan beings are viewed as being demonic or at least in alliance with the demonic since they do not embrace God and Christianity. The supernatural wilderness of Iceland described in the *Íslendingasögur* is one that is in flux: it is a locus of monsters, pagan spirits and demons. While Christianity's influence spreads through the land and its occupants it does not easily or simply displace the supernatural world and its denizens. This may be contrasted with the more firmly rooted ideals of Christianity that Anglo-Saxon poetry presents, though pagan worship was by no means wholly extinguished during Guthlac's lifetime.<sup>114</sup>

Bárðr's status at the end of his saga is ambiguous, but it would seem that in his opposition to Christianity Bárðr damns himself and constructs an identity that is, if not demonic, then monstrous. The important point of this transformation — and equally, of Gestr's in the direction of Christianity and humanity — is that it is effected through their relationship not to a social value *per se* but rather to the redefinition of social values represented by Christianity. As *Guthlac A* stresses, it is obedience to Christian law that is of the greatest importance and the dangers of the worldly life are in obedience to a law that is not God's. It is possible to act in a socially acceptable manner and still travel on

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<sup>114</sup> See Felix's *Vita*, 47, which describes Cissa, a pagan contemporary of Guthlac's.

the path to damnation if one does not respect the new set of cultural values the new faith brings. Christian law becomes the moral arbiter in this view, one that transcends purely worldly notions of law and social space. From God's perspective, the wilderness and society are not merely contiguous, but potentially they are unified. Space and identity become reconfigured through Christian reality and in the process a man or a monster's nature can be (re)defined. As *Andreas* and *Bárðar saga* both indicate, man and monster, too, become largely meaningless categories in the eyes of God. Redemption and the resultant faith in Christianity is a means to achieving a position at once extra-societal and socially defining in its transcendence of a particular locus and creation of a fellowship in Christ.

But while this would seem to be represented as a form of spiritual truth by various Anglo-Saxon and Old Icelandic texts, it also reflects the very worldly nature of societies and their perceptions. *Guthlac A* may protest against the divergence of worldly law from God's and argue the superiority of spiritual law, but it is an argument that acknowledges that such divergences exist. Societal perceptions and values can and do differ from the Christian values that are thought to lead to betterment and are, indeed, at considerable variance with the warrior-heroic tradition that serves as the societal foundations of both Anglo-Saxon England and Iceland. Indeed, worldly law, in early Iceland in particular, was of considerable importance in the definition of society and, to some extent, self. And while monstrosity becomes reconcilable to humanity through Christian missionary work, it is also the case that in society's eyes the destruction of monsters by violent struggle is a valid and valuable course of action. The wilderness remains a place of threat and opposition to society and its values, but it is also a place that can be claimed and tamed by spiritual and societal forces. It is part of the long history of monstrosity that as society's borders expand culturally and geographically, once populous monstrous territory is incorporated and reconfigured into larger social bodies. In this sense *Guthlac*, *Andrew* and *Gestr* are pioneers opening new territory for humanity and *Bárðr* becomes a distant remnant, a dream, of a vibrant monstrous past.

## Thesis Conclusions

The notion that monsters are cultural constructs and reflect on aspects of society and human identity is not a new one, but has not been applied hitherto to readings of the Icelandic sagas or many Old English texts. I have here focused on the ways in which monsters and humans overlap in Old English and Old Icelandic literature. In particular, I have questioned the extent to which social and religious institutions and extremes of disruptive behaviour affect the identity of humans and monsters and result in human characters becoming monsters. To this end, I have undertaken specific analyses of texts while offering more generally applicable observations on the relevant factors to processes of monstrous change.

In many types of literature it is not uncommon for human characters to be transformed into monsters by some form of spell or curse or magical or scientific device. In Old English and Old Icelandic literature socially disruptive acts can also result in such transformations. While one can be born a human or a monster, subsequent behavioural factors affect how a character is perceived. Bárðr is a descendant of humans and giants but his inability to fit into society and later refusal to become Christian effectively cuts him off from membership of the human race. Normative pressures existed: for example, anomalous somatic form represented a powerful means of constructing categorical difference. However, these differences are not always easily maintained in the face of religious belief and the complexities of human behaviour.

In medieval Christian conceptions of the monstrous races, humanoid monsters were identified in some thinking as being related to man through descent from Cain. At a basic level man and monster shared a deep connection which was not necessarily fully elided by monstrous difference. Indeed, in such a world view the origins of monstrosity are predicated on the sin of humans. In *Beowulf*, Cain murders his brother and is cast out by God. This leads to the birth of monsters but also establishes a precedent for monstrous change through extreme acts of anti-societal behaviour. Thus Hermod, a human king,

becomes a monster because he not only fails in his duties but cheats and murders his supporters.

Pre-Christian views do not present monsters as being literal descendants of humans but nevertheless reveal behaviour as a key component in separating the human from the monstrous. In pagan Germanic myth, the view of human and monstrous bodies was one in which form was to some degree unstable. Transformation could occur from human to monstrous form, and in some cases such transformations are reflections of the monstrous behaviour of the individual in question. Within Christian and pagan views, then, humanity and monstrosity are not always readily separable. Men such as Fáfnir and Gull-Þórir who lust after gold can become dragons, while those like Klaufi and Þórólfr *bægifótr* who are anti-social in life can become monsters in death.

The texts I have analysed demonstrate that it was not always easy to create categorical distinctions between humans and monsters. A *draugr* is an unnatural, monstrous being, but was once a living human. Even in instances where the *draugr* is unequivocally monstrous in its violent behaviour, elements of its human life and existence are not forgotten by the *draugr*'s kin. Such examples point to a greater complexity in the characterisation and reactions to monsters than is often afforded them in criticism. Characters like Þórólfr *bægifótr* and Grendel can be identified by their destructive and unrestrained behaviour as monsters even while they possess many human elements that complicate their interpretation within a text.

The tension present in Old English and Icelandic literature between the pagan past and contemporary Christian values exacerbates the problems of identifying humanity and monstrosity. The exalted behaviour of pagan heroes is often difficult to reconcile with the very different beliefs and values promoted by Christianity. This creates greater ambiguity in the presentation of pagan figures, especially in otherwise admirable characters. For example, Bárðr's actions as an *ás* tend to be beneficial to society and are viewed in a positive light. Bárðr is, however, ultimately condemned in his saga not for belonging to a pagan era but for refusing to convert to Christianity when the opportunity

arises. The societal values Bárðr represents, even as an outsider, are worthy of respect but his final act of retribution against his Christian son demonstrates the dangers to the audience of becoming too engaged in the stories and values of the pagan past.

Reading texts with an awareness of the close relationship between humans and monsters also reveal new aspects of the ways in which relationships between humans and monsters are depicted within the texts themselves. For example, the undead and their relatives in sagas in many instances still feel the bonds of kinship in spite of the *draugr*'s unnatural state of being. The continuation of social ties complicates reactions to what are, from some perspectives, simply inimical monstrous forces. In *Grettis saga*, Kárr the *draugr* is exploited by his son, Þorfinnr, as a means of securing land and power at the cost of the lives and livelihood of others. Þorfinnr is never condemned for his behaviour. In spite of the benefit he derives from Kárr's monstrous activities, his failure to destroy his father's corpse is not merely an issue of practicality but also one of duty.

While the potential exists within the context of Old English and Old Icelandic literature for monstrous change to occur, generalisations can be unhelpful. As I have shown in the case of outlaws in the sagas, the view that outlawry was associated with the wilderness and the monstrous is demonstrably false. Outlaws were guilty of crimes against their society, but even in the most extreme cases it was rare for an outlaw to be completely cut off from society or viewed in entirely monstrous terms. As I have demonstrated in the case of the major saga outlaws, there are limits to the influence of perceived anti-societal behaviour in identifying humans as monsters. Though Grettir and Hörðr are both associated with the world of monsters and behave in anti-societal fashion, they are regarded positively. Both men are respected for their family lineage, in spite of being outlaws. In Grettir's case, he is admirable for his incredible endurance in surviving as an outlaw for twenty years. Even within the saga, his accomplishments outweigh his crimes in the eyes of most members of society. In spite of their crimes and the supernatural or monstrous events they are involved in, a nuanced reading of the sagas of Grettir, Gísli and Hörðr shows that they cannot be simply categorised as monsters.

The categories of human and monster overlap. The degree of overlap varies from text to text and culture to culture, and necessitates an appropriately flexible and nuanced approach to individual cases. Such an approach reveals otherwise unappreciated subtleties not just in the presentation of monsters but in the text as a whole. This thesis has only considered some instances of monstrous change and many other profitable areas of investigation exist, particularly in instances where identity is ambiguous or fluid or where society and the supernatural become entwined. The treatment of shape-shifters in the sagas is one such example, since they are characters who possess supernatural abilities and yet are often far from monstrous in their habits and social relationships. While my focus has been on Old English and Old Icelandic texts, the study of monstrous change is by no means limited to these literatures. Texts like *Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Gowther*, and Marie de France's *Bisclavret* reveal concerns for the ways in which humanity and monstrosity are organised according to different social and religious principles and thus provide fertile ground for further research.

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