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***Engi maðr skapar sik sjálf*: Individual Agency and the Communal Creation of Outsiders in *Íslendingasögur* Outlaw Narratives**

**Alexander James Wilson**

**Abstract.** This thesis examines how *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives engage with socio-political concepts of community and the individual. It demonstrates that the sagas discussed share key anxieties over the deep structural problems in society, which are shown to restrict the individual agency of their protagonists, a restriction that motivates the transgressive behaviour of these individuals. The thesis suggests that these texts force their audiences to consider how each of their protagonists, despite his desire to live on his own terms, has his life and fate primarily defined—or indeed created—by the other members of his community.

The introductory chapter details important trends in literary-critical scholarship about *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives, particularly trends that have caused problems for analysis of the texts' socio-political dimensions. Chapter two reviews the usefulness of interpreting Gísli Súrsson as a primarily anachronistic figure within his contemporary society; it argues that such an interpretation overly downplays how the society of *Gísla saga* is shown to be defined by conflicting systems of communal expectation, which underlie Gísli's approach to vengeance. Chapter three discusses how *Grettis saga* shows that various social constructs, including outlawry, are used reductively by Grettir's society to frame him as a figure of Otherness; it demonstrates that the text implies that society's use of these constructs to create outsiders is a fundamentally problematic method for dealing with difficult individuals. Chapter four demonstrates how *Harðar saga* juxtaposes the extra-legal Hólmverjar with normative Icelandic society in order to highlight fundamental structural problems that affect both communities in their capacity to provide stable environments for their individual members. Chapter five discusses *Fóstbræðra saga*'s treatment of sworn-brotherhood as a symbolically extra-legal community; it also shows how Þormóður uses his status as an outsider to subvert familiar notions of normativity and Otherness, thereby gaining advantages in his dealings with society.

# ENGI MAÐR SKAPAR SIK SJÁLFR:

## INDIVIDUAL AGENCY AND THE COMMUNAL CREATION OF OUTSIDERS IN *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR* OUTLAW NARRATIVES

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research project of which this thesis is the end result was funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from October 2013 to September 2016. I wish to thank the AHRC for their support, without which I would not have been able to undertake this research, and their patience in my completion of the project. I would also like to thank my parents Sarah and Jonathan, and my grandparents Joy, Janet, Peter, and Jim, for all the support and patience that they similarly showed me throughout the duration of my doctoral studies.

I first encountered Old Norse–Icelandic literature as an undergraduate student at Durham University, and would like to thank my lecturers David Ashurst and John McKinnell and my tutor John Shafer for inspiring my interest in this fascinating subject. Ash has also been a wonderful thesis supervisor over the past few years, and I am indebted to him for his consistently excellent advice. Thanks are also due to the members of the various iterations of the Durham Old Norse Group for creating such a wonderful environment in which we could all share our enjoyment of Old Norse literature and mythology. I am especially grateful to David Varley, Betsie Cleworth, Gareth Evans, Hannah Burrows, Tom Spray, Tom Morcom, Michael Baker, Giles Knox, Sigrid Holth, Ann Sheffield, Will Raybould, and Katie Harling-Challis.

I would also like to thank the many close friends in Durham who have made my doctoral studies so enjoyable and rewarding. In addition to the names listed above, I would particularly like to thank Gergely Kertész, Anna Blackman, John Blackman, Alex Burns, Dona Ismaili, Jamie Beckett, Antonia Miejluk, Iona Cullen-Stephenson, Joanna Moore, Kiera Rosenwold, Alex Carruth, Henry Taylor, Natasha Kriznik, Tom Hughes, James Miller, Sarah Lohmann, Curtis Runstedler, Natalie Goodison, Pep Mateos, Kirstyn Raitz, Leo Underwood, and Harry Cross for providing me with so much laughter and camaraderie over the last few years.



*Satt er þat, sem mælt er, at engi maðr skapar sik sjálf.*

‘It is true, as is said, that no man shapes himself.’

*(Grettis saga, ch. 41)*

For Sarah and Jonathan,  
for shaping my life always for the better.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Introduction*

This thesis discusses the socio-political dimensions of the outlaw narratives of the Old Norse *Íslendingasögur* ‘sagas of Icelanders’; in particular, it focuses on how these sagas use the subjects of extra-legality and outlawry to depict the relationship between the individual and the community. It counters certain literary-critical interpretations that suggest these sagas are concerned primarily, or even exclusively, with the tragic biographies and individual failures of their protagonists, and that consequently they do not possess complex socio-political dimensions similar to those that scholars have identified in *Íslendingasögur*, such as *Njáls saga* and *Bandamanna saga*, that focus more on the inner workings of the Icelandic Commonwealth’s normative legal system (see **1.3.3**). By analysing in detail four prominent Icelandic outlaw narratives, namely *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*, the thesis demonstrates that these texts engage profoundly with concepts of community and the individual in their narrative portrayals of Saga-Age Iceland. The narratives indicate fundamental problems with the structuration of the intradiegetic societies that they depict, and in doing so they identify problems that affect many other forms of community. They make greater use of the fantastical mode of representation than do more typically ‘realistic’ sagas (see **1.2**), but their thematic concerns are no less serious because of this. Their audiences are invited, or almost forced, to engage with the idea of society not through the depictions of the Icelandic Commonwealth in its more successful moments, as is the case with certain other *Íslendingasögur*, but through incidents in which the fabric of that society is seriously disrupted. By representing those occasions on which society and other forms of community can reasonably be said to have failed, these sagas highlight the limitations of various groups as regards their ability to provide stable, successful environments for their individual members. The

thesis demonstrates that this failure on the part of communities is not anomalous or incidental, but is part of the deep structure of the societies that the outlaw narratives depict. In fact, the creation of outsiders, such as the outlaw protagonists of the sagas, is shown to be the inevitable consequence of that structure and its internal problems.

## 1.1 Substance of the Thesis

The analyses contained in this thesis emphasise the outlaw narratives' individual qualities, as much as their common themes and motifs, in their discussions of how the texts depict concepts like outlawry, other forms of extra-legality, and the relationship between the individual and their community. Each chapter examines an individual saga in detail, and is focused around a theme or concept that is of particular interest in relation to how that saga engages with the idea of community. These themes are not exclusive to the particular sagas, as there is a great deal of common ground between the narratives, but each is especially prominent in either the narrative material or the literary-critical reception of the saga with which it is associated in the thesis. Reference is made throughout to the other outlaw narratives discussed here and to relevant material elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur* genre. The first three chapters analyse the narratives that are often referred to, problematically, as a subgenre called 'outlaw sagas' (see 1.3.2), namely *Gísli saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga*, whilst the fourth chapter focuses on *Fóstbræðra saga*, an outlaw narrative not typically associated with the so-called subgenre.

The first such chapter reviews the usefulness of the concept of anachronism in relation to *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, given that Gísli's exclusion from society has often been explained by scholars as a result of his being a man out of time, motivated to transgress by an adherence to the cultural values of a heroic past, even though such values are no longer acceptable in his contemporary society. It argues, however, that Gísli is in fact trapped by the conflicting expectations that his community imposes upon him, which arise from the different systems of moral and legal thought that co-exist within his contemporary society. Gísli inhabits a society in flux, one that is in the process of transitioning from a communal structure built around the cultural imperative of feud towards a process that encourages negotiation, arbitration, and ultimately reconciliation. It is shown that both systems of dispute resolution exert pressure on Gísli to fulfil the communal expectations that they demand, and Gísli

soon finds himself in a situation in which he cannot fulfil either set of expectations without transgressing the norms underpinning the other. Thinking of Gísli as a primarily anachronistic figure runs the risk of reducing the complex conflict between present and past in the saga to an overly simplistic dichotomy between heathenism and Christianity. The discussion indicates that Gísli himself is highly aware of the conflicting nature of the communal expectations in his society, but his attempts to avoid dealing with these expectations are ultimately shown by the saga to be futile.

The next chapter considers *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*'s depiction of the relationship between society and those complex individuals, like Grettir, who cannot be easily accommodated within society's conceptual framework. Grettir is an exceptionally large and strong man who is disappointed that he cannot find anything within his society against which to test his abilities adequately, yet he is not necessarily an antisocial figure; he is often shown to adapt easily to new situations within unfamiliar communities, and to grasp the social norms binding those groups together. In fact, the chapter demonstrates that the problems that Grettir causes normative society, which ultimately lead to his being outlawed, are as much to do with society's inability to accommodate Grettir's often contradictory character traits as they are with his own moral failings and stubborn attitude. It is shown that the saga depicts a society that insists firmly on individuals adhering to acceptable social roles, but that the presence of Grettir, whose multifaceted character problematises the rigid definitions required by normative society, reveals the limitations of this approach.

The thesis then discusses *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, which presents a particularly prominent concern over the idea of extra-legal communities in its portrayal of the Hólmverjar, a gang of outlaws and criminals that functions as something of an alternative society. The chapter analyses how the saga problematises the relationship between the community and the individual by depicting different legal and extra-legal groups as being reliant on systems of obligation that unexpectedly change and shift in ways that stifle the autonomy of the protagonist Hǫrðr Grímkelsson. It is shown that the saga implies that Hǫrðr is most successful in fulfilling his individual desires when he is able to have the greatest amount of control over how his communal context is structured. As the communities of which he is part expand and develop, however, Hǫrðr is gradually asked to sacrifice a great deal of his individual agency in order to remain part of those groups, but he is ultimately

rendered unable to exert influence over his social peers as a result. The chapter shows that *Harðar saga* draws comparisons between the alternative community of the Hólmverjar and normative Icelandic society in order to illuminate the dynamics of the latter group; it is argued that the saga thereby implies that Hǫrðr's later struggles with the more criminally minded members of the Hólmverjar have their roots in the problems that affect the communal context of his early years within normative society.

Finally, the thesis shows how *Fóstbræðra saga* engages substantially with the concepts of community, extra-legality, and society in similar fashion to the conventional 'outlaw sagas', but is also interested in the idea of extra-legality even before either of the sworn-brothers is outlawed. It is shown that the saga depicts sworn-brotherhood as constituting a symbolically extra-legal agreement in the first place, with the sworn-brothers, prior to their outlawry, fitting the mould of antisocial outsiders much more neatly than do individuals like Gísli and Hǫrðr. The thesis suggests that one of the principal concerns of the saga is how the socially disruptive violence and aggression that the sworn-brothers display can be harnessed, albeit in temporary and comedic ways, to address the problematic systemic violence of their normative society. It is shown that *Fóstbræðra saga* explores the possibilities afforded to its protagonists by their extra-legal status and their outright rejection of social norms: this is most apparent in the bloody revenge that Þormóðr takes for Þorgeirr's death in Greenland, where he destabilises the normative centre of that society by using his liminal status there to alter significantly the Greenlanders' conceptions of Otherness.

## 1.2 Methodological Considerations

Various theoretical concepts are used by the thesis to explain how *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives depict the relationship between the individual and the community. Discussion of each relevant theory is included in the chapter where it is most useful to the analysis. Among these theoretical concepts are the following: the paradigms of feud discourse and shame-culture, especially in relation to the idea of *níð*, which contribute to cultural expectations of vengeance (see **2.2.1** and **2.2.2**); the concept of deviance as a form of labelling that reflects the power politics within a given community, but which does not necessarily indicate actual transgressions (see **3.1.1**);

and the relationship between agency and the specific notion of communal debt, *i.e.* the idea that individuals are required to sacrifice some of their autonomy to be part of a community (see **4.1.1**).

It will be useful here to discuss a wider methodological concern of the thesis, which is to do with how it approaches the fantastical and supernatural elements of the outlaw narratives in terms of explaining their literary significance. In analysing the socio-political dimensions of these texts, it is important to keep in mind that they do not focus on depicting the inner workings of the Icelandic Commonwealth's legal process to the extent that some other *Íslendingasögur* do. The major legal cases in *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga* primarily concern the outlawry of the text's protagonist and are each resolved swiftly in a narrative sense, although the circumstances surrounding Grettir's outlawry later cause some problems for the normative legal process as well (see **3.2.1** and **3.2.2**). Consequently, it is probable that any engagement with societal and communal concerns in these sagas will be represented primarily through different methods than a relatively realistic portrayal of how the normative legal system worked in the Icelandic Commonwealth.

In this respect, it is useful to analyse the fantastical episodes of these texts alongside their depictions of normative society, and to consider how the symbolic and thematic elements of those episodes relate to the concept of community and the individual's position within it. Such elements frequently occur in *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives, and are often represented by supernatural beings, like *draugir* 'revenants' (sg. *draugr*), *galdrakonur* and other magic-users, and figures from the pre-Christian mythological past, like the goddess Þorgerðr hǫrgabrúðr in *Harðar saga*. These aspects of the texts, however, have historically been dismissed by some scholars as being largely irrelevant in terms of the structure and wider themes of these sagas. Andersson (2006, 16), for example, argues that the 'ghost and sorcerer stories' in the *Íslendingasögur* are simply remnants of an older tradition that 'have no particular function' within the narratives in which they are preserved; he specifically cites *Harðar saga*, among a few other *Íslendingasögur*, as having a distinctively large number of such elements. Michael Swanton (1978, 11) criticises *Grettis saga*'s structure on the similar basis that its depictions of supernatural elements are not thematically linked, but 'are quite unrelated, resulting in a loose picaresque effect', which implies that the fantastical elements of *Grettis saga* are not central to the saga's literary merits as a cohesive work.

It is notable, in respect of Swanton's criticism of *Grettis saga's* narrative structure, that the episodic sections of these outlaw narratives, which often feature fantastical elements, have been thought to be to the detriment of their literary merits. This accusation is levelled less often against *Gísli saga* because of the intricate plotting of the feud leading to Gísli's outlawry, of which Andersson (1969, 8–9) is especially praising. Jónas Kristjánsson (1978, 313), however, argues that the text is 'not among those sagas of Icelanders which are the most perfect in overall composition' on the grounds that he thinks 'the narrative [to be] occasionally disconnected and some episodes anomalous', referring primarily to the narrative's depiction of Gísli's outlawry. Carol Clover (1982, 29) similarly argues that 'the structure of [*Grettis saga's*] conflict is ... episodic and diffuse and has no dramatic center'. The sections of these texts that focus on their protagonists' time spent as outlaws are indeed generally episodic, as they are built around various entertaining tales about each outlaw's adventures in escaping from or confronting their enemies; this narrative approach may be expected from texts about individuals denied a stable social, and therefore narratological, position. That these sections are more episodic, however, should not lead us to assume that these sections are defective or of poor quality; as Frederic Amory (1992, 191) notes, 'one scholar's literary unity is another's literary disunity.' In much the same way as treating seriously the fantastical elements of these texts may prove fruitful for literary analysis, it is worth considering whether these ostensibly disparate or diffuse narrative sections are related on a conceptual level, which itself relates to the key thematic concerns of each saga.

The critical trend that treats these sections as unserious is problematic, however, as it unnecessarily discourages reading these episodes of the sagas as having some bearing on the wider themes and literary forms of their narratives. Margaret Clunies Ross (2010, 56) argues that the dismissal of fantastical elements in *Íslendingasögur* primarily reflects the expectations of early twentieth-century scholarship, which prioritised sagas that were thought to fulfil its requirements of being sufficiently realistic and objective:

There has been an unexamined privileging of realistic writing which invokes historicity, whether real or fictitious, over writing in other literary modes or in mixed modes, reflecting the literary tastes for realism in modern fiction that were dominant in the early part of the twentieth century. The former has been and still is termed 'classical', the latter 'post-classical'. Such terms are heavy with value judgements: 'classical' is associated with high culture and high literary value, 'post-classical' with a decline from a peak of achievement, with something secondary and inferior.

Conversely to that line of thinking, Clunies Ross's (2002, 453) analysis of Ari's *Íslendingabók*, one of the earlier texts in the extant Old Norse–Icelandic written corpus, demonstrates that 'the seeds of the fantastic mode were present in Icelandic literature from its beginnings'. Saga-writers made use of fantastic and supernatural elements—such as the incidence of prophetic dreams, encounters with monstrous beings, the use of magic and curses, and the appearance of figures associated with pre-Christian mythology—from the outset of Iceland's literary enterprise. Peter Buchholz (1987, 324) also argues that depictions of magic in saga literature cannot simply be regarded as indicating that the story is fanciful, as the subject is treated too seriously by the extant textual evidence for it to have been regarded as trivial by its medieval audience: 'The texts, including ecclesiastical and legal sources, take a far too serious view of sorcery to allow us to relegate it into the realm of fiction ... The demarcation of such illusions from hard reality seems, moreover, to have been difficult, if not impossible.' Clunies Ross suggests furthermore that 'even though these two worlds cannot be cleanly differentiated, a difference of quality and authority is shown to exist between them ... which accords primary ontological status to the supernatural' (453). In other words, the fantastical mode within the sagas generally functions to illuminate the nature of the text's more realistic concerns, in a similar way to how these elements are used in modern genres like fantasy literature and science-fiction. Ármann Jakobsson (2011, 29) argues similarly that 'the sagas of Icelanders may be classified as containing the same type of realism that occurs in modern fantastic fiction: what is now referred to as the supernatural is far from excluded from the narrative'.

The Icelandic outlaw narratives place less focus than other *Íslendingasögur* on how the intricate inner-workings of the normative legal process of normative society functioned. It is therefore worth analysing their fantastical elements in relation to how they depict ideas of community in more realistic settings, and to consider whether the juxtaposition of these two prominent literary modes reveal anything about the texts' attitudes towards the more realistic aspects of normative Icelandic society. In other words, it will be useful to assess whether the fantastical elements of these narratives portray the abstract notion of community in ways that illuminate the dynamics of their intradiegetic normative societies. Rather than dismiss these aspects simply as representing an interest in trivial or sensational adventure-scenes, it may



produce more fruitful literary analysis to consider the symbolic resonances of such fantastical elements in relation to the wider narrative and thematic structure in which they are contained.

It should also be emphasised that any socio-political dimensions present in the extant written sagas are probably more representative of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century attitudes towards ideas of community and society than of the ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-century societies that these texts purport to represent. As Miller (1990, 44) points out, ‘The reliability of the family sagas as accurate chronicles [*i.e.* of the society that they depict] is not seriously maintained.’ This is primarily because the written sagas were probably not composed in the forms in which they survive until at least two hundred years after the events they represent, and in any case many of the extant examples also vary significantly between their different versions. Teva Vidal (2013), furthermore, has demonstrated that most saga depictions of Icelandic houses correspond to architectural models contemporary to the period of saga-writing, rather than to those of the Viking Age, which suggests that the saga-writers probably altered considerably the narrative material available to them, whether consciously or not, to adapt it to their own age, perhaps to make it more familiar to their audiences.

This raises the question of what significance the socio-political aspects of the *Íslendingasögur* would have had for the later Icelanders who produced the written texts, which deal with an intradiegetic society far removed from the context in which these versions of the narrative material were set down. Joseph Harris (1986, 216) suggests that, rather than using their depictions of the past to engage with specific political events of their contemporary situations, perhaps by creating episodes directly paralleling their circumstances, the saga-writers would probably have engaged with their historical ancestors in order to explain the origins of their present situation: ‘Instead of an “analogy” ... in the sense of a contemporary problem transposed arbitrarily to a previous period, the best sagas seem to present a situation in the past which contains the *seeds* of the saga-writer’s present.’ In other words, the sagas in their written form are very likely to convey the cultural anxieties of their writers by recreating the dynamics, rather than the specifics, of their situation. This line of thinking correlates with Clunies Ross’s suggestion that we emphasise the mixed modality of the sagas, as these texts often draw similarities between the realistic and fantastical elements of their narratives by replicating the underlying dynamics and thematic concerns of the former in the latter.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the socio-political dimensions of the *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives, it is important that we treat their fantastical elements seriously as important thematic components by analysing how they relate on a conceptual level to the more realistic depictions of normative society within these texts. In taking this approach, it will be possible to elucidate how the writers of the extant sagas used this narrative material to express their own cultural anxieties about the ideas of community and society, and to make a reasonable assessment of why they chose this literary tradition as the vehicle for their concerns.

### 1.3 Review of Other Relevant Scholarship

The purpose of this review is to assess the major trends and key areas of interest in previous literary-critical interpretations of Icelandic outlaw narratives, both in terms of common themes and literary qualities of the individual texts. The first section of this review looks at the historical, sociological, and anthropological scholarship that deals with the realities and symbolic implications of outlawry during the period of the Icelandic Commonwealth (see **1.3.1**). The following sections of the review focus on various critical trends in the literary-critical reception of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives. These trends include the following discussions: the literary-critical problems that have arisen from scholars suggesting that ‘outlaw sagas’ constitute a consistent subgenre (see **1.3.2**); the depoliticisation, both implicit and explicit, of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives by certain scholars (see **1.3.3**); and the various interpretations that critics have put forth about how these narratives portray their outlawed protagonists’ difference from their communities (see **1.3.4**).

It should be noted at this juncture that most of the literary-critical material dealing with outlaw narratives in the *Íslendingasögur* focuses only on the established ‘outlaw sagas’ of *Harðar saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Grettis saga*, although some recent studies have moved away from this trend by foregrounding *Fóstbræðra saga* as well in their discussion of outlaw narratives (Ahola 2014; Merkelbach 2016b). As a result, the secondary material that focuses on *Fóstbræðra saga*’s distinct characteristics is included primarily in the chapter that discusses that saga in detail (see **ch. 5**). The absence of such material within this section is symptomatic of how the discussion of literary depictions of outlawry in the *Íslendingasögur* has been dominated by analyses of the ‘outlaw saga’ subgenre, and even then primarily by analyses of *Gísla*

*saga* and *Grettis saga*. These problems, which have also affected *Harðar saga*'s literary reputation, are addressed in more detail below (see 1.3.2).

**1.3.1 Politics and outlawry in the Icelandic Commonwealth.** A great deal has been written about the history of and cultural mindset behind the legal system of the Icelandic Commonwealth, no doubt in part because of the highly unusual structuration of that system, at least within medieval Europe, and the intense participatory demands that it made on its members. From the period of its settlement (c. 874–930) up to the point at which it became a dependency of Norway (1262–64), Iceland had no official head-of-state, nor a legally established aristocracy, nor any form of standing government. Instead of implementing a more conventional political apparatus similar to those of their mainland European contemporaries, the Icelanders developed a complex system of civil law to maintain the social order, which was carried out at various local and national assemblies held at different times of year. These laws were motivated towards encouraging the disputants in a legal matter to seek reconciliation with their opponents, in order to reduce the likelihood of violent feuds emerging between powerful families and disrupting the social order (see: Byock 1982; 1993a; Miller 1990, 259–99). This summary provides a sketch of the key institutions of that political and legal system, in order to contextualise the significance of its use of outlawry as a form of punishment and as a conceptual touchstone within the wider politics and culture of medieval Iceland.

The Commonwealth is best described as having been a stratified society without a state: in other words, it was a political order in which some individuals held socially agreed-upon positions that meant they had considerably more power than other people, but which did not have permanent state-level institutions tasked with maintaining the social structure by establishing a monopoly over legitimate forms of violence (Durrenberger 1992, 58). In medieval Iceland, the positions of power were held by the *goðar* 'chieftains' (sg. *goði*), of which there were probably around thirty-six, at least by the time that Iceland was divided into *ffjórðungar* 'quarter-districts' (c. 960), with nine *goðorð* 'chieftainships' assigned to each quarter-district of the country. The number of *goðar* in the Northern District was increased to twelve after the *ffjórðungsdómar* 'quarter-courts' were established at the annual *alþingi* 'general assembly' (c. 965), and the total number of *goðar* was increased to forty-eight with the introduction of the *fimtardómr* 'fifth court' (c. 1005). A man became a *goði* if he

held a *goðorð*, which Paul Durrenberger (1992, 54) notes was essentially ‘defined as a kind of property, as power, but not wealth’: ‘It could be divided, sold, inherited, or assigned to others for various periods.’ The societal positions of the *goðar* were therefore not strictly hereditary, although the *goðorð* came to be much more easily monopolised by those with more wealth and resources. Byock (2001, 14) also suggests that there may even have been ‘perhaps more than twice as many chieftains as chieftaincies’, as a *goðorð* could be shared between multiple kinsmen or friends, each of whom could refer to himself as a *goði*.

Institutions existed for overseeing the judicial and legislative aspects of the legal process—that is, those involving the oversight of individual cases and the creation, maintenance, or repeal of laws—although these were in practice temporary bodies set up at the various local assemblies and at the *alþingi*, which was held annually in summer. By the early eleventh century, the judicial institutions had been split between the *fjórðungsdómar*, which were made up of thirty-six men appointed by the *goðar* and dealt with matters from their respective quarter-districts, and the *fimtardómr*, which essentially functioned as a supreme court of appeal for cases not resolved at the *fjórðungsdómar*. Like the *fjórðungsdómar*, the *fimtardómr* was made up of men appointed by the *goðar*, who would choose forty-eight men; however, each party in the case could reject six men each, and the appeal would then be adjudicated by the remaining thirty-six men. The legislature was called the *lqgrétta* ‘law council’, which consisted of all the *goðar*, two of each *goði*’s *þingmenn* ‘assembly-men’—a *goði*’s supporters from his quarter-district, who accompanied him to legal assemblies—and the *lqsgumaðr* ‘law-speaker’, who was appointed by the other members of the *lqgrétta* for a three-year term. The *lqsgumaðr*’s primary duty was to memorise the entirety of the law, of which he would recite a third at each *alþingi* over his appointed three years, as well as to recite the entire procedures of the assembly every year, but he also had authority in matters of legal interpretation. It should be clear from this brief description that the *goðar* had considerable control over the legislative and judicial aspects of medieval Iceland’s political structure.

When it came to executive function, however, it was a rather different story, as Icelandic society did not have an institution, such as a standing military or some kind of police force, through which to enforce the sentences passed at the legal assemblies; consequently, the responsibility to carry out a sentence fell to the injured party who had brought the case. The Commonwealth did not develop a form of

explicitly capital punishment—although full outlawry was, in effect, a death-sentence—presumably because to do so would have been to grant an unreasonable amount of political power to the *goðar*. It would have been a seriously unworkable situation for this legal system, ostensibly designed to promote reconciliation, to allow for the possibility of a *goði* winning a case against an opponent and sentencing the defendant to certain death, backed by a legislature and judiciary over which he would have had significant control. Vésteinn Ólason (2003, 219–20) notes, however, that ‘the lack of executive power meant that there was no means of preventing men from taking the law into their own hands’. In other words, the statelessness of medieval Icelandic society meant that it lacked the necessary institutions for monopolising even those forms of violence that it deemed legitimate, which did at least temper the political power of the *goðar* to some extent.<sup>1</sup>

As it did not permit a process of capital punishment, the most extreme sentence allowed under Iceland’s legal system was outlawry, which entailed either a partial or full exclusion from the legal community. There were two basic types of outlawry, *fjórbaugsgarðr* ‘lesser outlawry’ and *skóggangr* ‘full outlawry’. *Fjórbaugsgarðr* referred to a temporary exile of three years from Iceland, after which the lesser outlaw could rejoin society and would regain control of their property; despite this exile, a *fjórbaugsmaðr* ‘lesser outlaw’ (pl. *fjórbaugsmenn*) was still ‘protected by law so long as he fulfill[ed] the conditions imposed’ (Turville-Petre 1977, 770). *Skóggangr*, on the other hand, meant that the outlawed individual was to be exiled from normative Icelandic society for the rest of their life, and all their property confiscated. A person could be declared a *skógarmaðr* ‘full outlaw’ (pl. *skógarmenn*) in the first place if their crime were serious enough to warrant such punishment, but if a *fjórbaugsmaðr* did not fulfil the terms of their exile, either by not going abroad in time or by returning to Iceland before the three-year period was up, they would then be made a *skógarmaðr*. The initial degree of exclusion depended on the severity of the offence, but also, in practice, on the goodwill of the prosecuting party. All the protagonists of the ‘outlaw sagas’ are *skógarmenn*, and Grettir is also a *fjórbaugsmaðr* earlier on in his saga.

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<sup>1</sup> On a practical note, Byock (1993a, 29) also suggests that the lack of an executive body can be interpreted as an efficient economic decision, noting that ‘dependence on outlawry exempted Iceland from the need to maintain a policing body to oversee the imposition of corporal punishment, execution, or incarceration’.

Because it was illegal to harbour or aid an outlaw, *skóggangr* usually meant that the individual would have to survive in the Icelandic wilderness, although the sagas indicate that in practice an outlaw's kinsmen usually would offer them support where possible. The *lqgrétta* could also 'mitigate the sentence of full outlawry, allowing a *skógarmaðr* to leave Iceland for life', but the *skógarmaðr* lost the rights afforded to an Icelander abroad, meaning that any treaties between countries guaranteeing the rights of each other's citizens, such as that between Iceland and Norway, would not protect them (Byock 1993a, 29). If the *skógarmaðr* remained in Iceland, any person could kill them with impunity, at least as far as the normative legal system was concerned. As William Ian Miller (1990, 236) notes, however, this does not mean that outlawry equated to 'being put back to the same problem one had before going to law: killing the enemy'. Successfully bringing a suit of outlawry against one's enemy also had 'a subtler effect on the members of the outlaw's kin group and support network' (238–39):

There was more than just the fear of incurring reprisal for aiding an outlaw; there were more positive inducements to abandon his cause ... The class of people subject to an outlawry action was made up only of those who had actually engaged in liability-producing conduct. The class was thus significantly narrower than the class liable for blood vengeance ... The avenger united his opposition when he kept them all on edge by preferring blood to law, but once he became a prosecutor and selected his defendant, those whom he had decided not to move against had every reason not to give the prosecutor a reason to change his mind.

Outlawry was therefore not just a means of cutting off an individual's protection within normative society, but also had the potential to deprive them of their most intimate support-base, their friends and kinsmen. The idea that an outlawed person became completely cut off from society is reinforced by the imagery of the term *skógarmaðr*, literally meaning 'person of the forest', as well as the metaphor *vargr í véum* 'a wolf in sacred-places' used of criminals (Turville-Petre 1977, 777–78), both of which associate outlawry with the chaotic, utterly asocial wilderness outside the communal sphere. Law in medieval Iceland was conceptualised as being roughly equivalent to community; the Old Norse word *lqg* refers both to laws, in the abstract and the specific sense, and to groups or societies bound together by a common legal system. To be outside the community was therefore not simply a case of being a criminal, but entailed being thought of in terms used of that which was most antithetical to society, as animalistic, monstrous, and non-human. Miller (1991, 2090) argues that the concept of outlawry was so central to the Icelandic mindset that

‘someone who was sharing your territory and was not in your law ... was likely to be conceptualised as slave, outlaw, or stranger’. Yet the cultural idea that outlaws were symbolically opposed to society did not prevent sagas from being composed about certain heroic outlaws, and the extant written literature of these outlaw narratives treats individual outlaws with a rather more ambivalent attitude.

**1.3.2 ‘Outlaw sagas’ as a subgenre.** The term ‘outlaw sagas’ is used cautiously in this thesis, with the phrase ‘outlaw narratives’ being generally preferred to refer to all of the texts discussed in the following chapters. The thesis makes this distinction in response to certain problems in literary-critical reception that appear to have emerged from the use of the term ‘outlaw sagas’ to refer exclusively to the three *Íslendingasögur* discussed in the first three chapters of the thesis, namely *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, as a distinct subgenre. These outlaw narratives are typically grouped together on the basis that they prominently depict a protagonist who ‘lives as an outlaw for a considerable part of the narrative’ (Faulkes 1993, 460). There are some reasons to believe that this grouping was already present in at least the later medieval reception of these sagas, as is discussed below, but it has not been without its problems for certain of these individual narratives, most notably *Harðar saga*, and for other texts outside of the subgenre that engage significantly and at length with ideas of outlawry and extra-legality, such as *Fóstbræðra saga*.

As with many other modern attempts at classifying medieval subjects by genre, there are both advantages and disadvantages to the use of the term ‘outlaw sagas’ to refer to these three sagas as a subgenre. The categorisation is appropriate in that there is some evidence that these three sagas were already thought of as being closely related by the end of the medieval period in Iceland; for example, it is significant that the principal manuscript for all the modern editions of these sagas is the partial manuscript AM 556a 4to, also known as Eggertsbók, which was probably produced at some point in the last quarter of the fifteenth century (Lethbridge 2012, 353). Faulkes (2004, xix) argues that only in these three sagas ‘can the hero’s outlawry be regarded as the primary theme of the story’, which is a fairly reasonable justification for the use of this generic classification. This assertion is complicated by Joonas Ahola’s (2014) overview of depictions of outlaws in the *Íslendingasögur*, which analyses episodes from other sagas as ‘outlaw biographies’. Ahola still suggests,

however, that the ‘outlaw sagas’ are qualitatively different from other textual depictions of outlaws; he refers to them as ‘tragic biographies of outlaws’, which he argues are distinct from depictions of outlaws that ‘lack the final tragic element in the form of a final unsuccessful battle’ (119–20).

There is some advantage in using the term ‘outlaw sagas’ to refer to these three *Íslendingasögur*, given their similarities in terms of narrative style and thematic content, but there are two significant problems that emerge from the use of the term. The first of these is that *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* are rather more similar to each other in terms of narrative content and form than they are to *Harðar saga*. Two examples of *Harðar saga*’s distinctiveness in this regard are the following:

- (1) All three sagas use what Andersson (2006, 17) calls a ‘biographical mode’, in that each narrative is focused primarily around a single individual, as contrasted with sagas that place more emphasis on regional histories, such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, or that focus on feuds between specific families, such as *Droplaugarsona saga*. *Harðar saga*, however, differs from *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* in the extent to which it emphasises this mode. Both *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* focus primarily on a protagonist who is isolated for long sections of the narrative, at least during the period of his outlawry; Gísli is able to stay in closer proximity to his family, specifically his wife Auðr and foster-daughter Guðríðr, than Grettir is to his kin, but each man is still usually the only outlaw within his immediate surroundings. *Harðar saga*, however, presents its protagonist as a leader of a large gang of outlaws and criminals, rather than as an isolated individual. Whilst the saga is focalised around Hǫrðr, he is not physically isolated in the way that Gísli and Grettir are. Of course, this is not necessarily to *Harðar saga*’s detriment as an outlaw narrative; it simply means that it is concerned with different aspects of extra-legality and community. It is notable, however, that when Byock (1982, 194) discusses the outlaw as an isolated individual and the outlaw narrative as being uninterested in the social ability of its protagonist, his analysis refers to *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*, but does not mention *Harðar saga*.
- (2) Both *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* are characterised by their stylistic use of poetry attributed to their protagonists to construct the inner turmoil of the



isolated outlaw. Heather O’Donoghue (2005, 9) shows how ‘the verses in these two works are used in a fully fictional, almost theatrical way’ that contributes significantly to the literary merits of each saga; *Gísla saga* uses Gísli’s poetry as a way ‘of representing [his] subjectivity’ through the ‘inner torment of [his] premonition of his own violent death’, whereas Grettir’s verses are structured to convey ‘his dislocation from society through his elevated, uncompromisingly oblique skaldic discourse ... which comes to dominate and control the whole saga even as it alienates Grettir from the other characters within the saga narrative’. Hǫrðr also composes poetry, but his poetic voice is not so dominant as Gísli’s and Grettir’s are in their narratives. *Gísla saga*’s shorter version contains thirty-nine verses, of which Gísli recites thirty-six; Grettir speaks a lower proportion of the seventy-one verses in his saga, but still speaks forty-five verses in total. *Harðar saga*, by contrast, has only nineteen verses—less than half as many as *Gísla saga*, even though *Harðar saga* is not much shorter—of which Hǫrðr recites only ten.<sup>2</sup> Because his saga contains comparatively few verses, Hǫrðr’s compositional voice is not so prominent as Gísli’s or Grettir’s. The relative infrequency of the poetry also makes it difficult for the saga to achieve a similar literary aesthetic of isolation and alienation as those created by the verses in *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*, as Hǫrðr’s verses are not as highly stylised in terms of narrative structure as are the verses in *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. *Harðar saga* is concerned with the psychological and emotional struggles of its outlaw protagonist, but it does not convey that interior conflict through poetry as prominently as *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* do.

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<sup>2</sup> The following verses—numbered below according to how they are numbered in the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the sagas, which are used throughout this thesis as the primary editions for its analysis—are attributed to each of the outlaw protagonists in their saga (*Gísla*, 11, 32, 47–48, 50, 55, 58, 62, 67–68, 70–73, 75–77, 82, 93–96, 100, 102–10, 114; *Grettla*, 37, 39, 47, 50–54, 59–60, 70, 77, 79, 86–87, 97–98, 107, 126, 136–37, 147, 149–50, 152, 156, 170–72, 177, 184–85, 193, 197–98, 207–09, 216–17, 234–35, 240–41, 252–54; *Harðar*, 31, 34, 41–44, 57–59, 73, 83):

*Gísla saga*: stt. 2, 4–7, and 9–40.

*Grettis saga*: stt. 8–9, 11–14, 16–24, 26–30, 32, 34, 37–42, 45–49, and 57–70.

*Harðar saga*: stt. 5, 7, 9, and 11–17.

In terms of the proportion of verses attributed to each of the outlaw protagonists, Gísli (~93%) and Grettir (~64%) are both ahead of Hǫrðr (~53%), with Gísli composing an exceptionally high percentage of the verse within his saga.

It is probable that these two primary distinctions, along with other differences in the narrative material, have contributed to *Harðar saga* being sidelined within the subgenre as a text that is most usually referenced as a quirky diversion from the ‘standard’ model of outlawry as depicted in *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. This position would not be so problematic, however, were there more in-depth analyses about why *Harðar saga* takes a different approach in discussing the concept of outlawry and extra-legality, but as it stands there are significantly fewer detailed readings of *Harðar saga* than there are of either *Gísla saga* or *Grettis saga*.

*Harðar saga*’s marginalisation within the subgenre may also explain why *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* both have better literary reputations than *Harðar saga* does. Outside the subgenre of ‘outlaw sagas’, *Gísla saga* is often classified as a ‘classical’ saga, a term that refers to an *Íslendingasaga* ‘generally accepted to conform to a conventional pattern of conflict, climax, revenge and reconciliation’, which is implicitly understood to be depicted realistically (Clunies Ross 1997, 450). This perception is apparent in Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough’s (2010, 379) argument that *Gísla saga*, as a ‘classical’ saga, creates a more ‘socialized, realistic expression of outlawry’ than *Grettis saga*, which has more fantastical material; in other words, *Gísla saga*’s depiction of outlawry corresponds more closely to typical depictions of normative society within the ‘classical’ sagas. The categorisation of *Grettis saga* is more fluid; it is variously defined as a ‘classical’ saga (Hume 1980, 1), as a ‘generic hybrid’ (Ashman Rowe 1993), and as an unusually high-quality ‘post-classical’ saga (Arnold 2003), which, given the negative value judgement in the term ‘post-classical’, implicitly demonstrates the esteem in which *Grettis saga* is held.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, *Harðar saga* has received little literary-critical attention as a distinct literary work. Amory (1992, 190) suggests that the saga ‘seems to be regarded as subliterary’ by modern scholars, a description that rings true in Gabriel Turville-Petre’s (1977, 773) summary of *Harðar saga* as ‘one of the less interesting, less

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<sup>3</sup> There are clear problems with the critical classification of the *Íslendingasögur* into ‘classical’ and ‘post-classical’ types, which essentially equates to sagas with fewer and more fantastical elements respectively. Clunies Ross (1997; 2002) has done much in recent years to criticise this unnecessary dichotomy and to argue for the literary merits, and even the primacy, of fantastical episodes (see 1.2). It is significant that even the ‘classical’ status of *Gísla saga* is not concrete, as Emily Lethbridge (2010, 128) notes that the saga’s longer version, which contains episodes not found in the shorter version, ‘was condemned as degenerate, post-classical, and more akin stylistically to the *fornaldarsögur* [‘legendary sagas’]’, which are often characterised as highly fantastical. Lethbridge relates this distinction to ‘idealised notions’ of modern scholars about the ‘terse and objective’ *Íslendingasögur* being superior in quality.

realistic of the Family Sagas, laden with improbabilities and standard motives’, which stands out as a particularly notable dismissal of the saga’s literary merits. Turville-Petre suggests that the most important reason for discussing *Harðar saga* is not that it is interesting in itself, but that ‘it gives a rather different picture of outlaws’ from those of *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*, and the saga is indeed most often read in comparison to its more famous ‘outlaw saga’ counterparts, usually to contrast its depiction of a community of outlaws, the Hólmverjar, with the portrayals of isolated outlaws like Gísli and Grettir. Recent work has begun to reappraise *Harðar saga* as having distinctive literary qualities; James Cochrane (2004, 248), for example, argues that ‘the three dreams told in the saga show considerable skill on the part of the writer’. It is likely, however, that *Harðar saga*’s literary reputation has been decided, at least in part, by its close association with *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* under the umbrella-term of ‘outlaw sagas’.

The other significant problem with the term ‘outlaw saga’ is that it has to some extent diverted literary-critical attention from depictions of outlawry and extra-legality in other *Íslendingasögur*. Although the aforementioned study by Ahola addresses this concern somewhat, it offers a general overview rather than a concerted literary-critical analysis, and there is more to be said about how the relevant texts treat the idea of outlawry in terms of narrative impact. To use Ahola’s terminology, the current literary-critical discussion of outlawry has been dominated by the type of outlawry presented in the ‘tragic biographies’ of the ‘outlaw sagas’, and has not often taken into account other varieties of outlaw narrative. Recent scholarship on the subject indicates that critics are moving away from discussing only these three sagas as outlaw narratives; Rebecca Merkelbach’s (2016b) article on paternal influence in sagas of outlaws, for example, focuses on *Fóstbræðra saga*’s depictions of outlawry alongside *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga*. Indeed, *Fóstbræðra saga* is the most notable omission from the critical discussion of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives; both its protagonists, the sworn-brothers Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld and Þorgeirr Hávarsson, are outlawed at various stages in the narrative, and are both depicted as socially disruptive even before that because of the symbolic extra-legal associations of their *fóstbræðralag* (see 5.1.2). Each protagonist also manages to survive as an outlaw for a substantial period of time, Þorgeirr in Iceland and Þormóður in Greenland; Þormóður’s adventures in Greenland, in particular, make use of many of the tropes and switches in saga mode characteristic of the ‘outlaw sagas’, especially

*Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*. The saga deals with similar thematic concerns and communal anxieties, particularly relating to the relationship of the deviant or disruptive individual to their communal context, to those that are discussed in this thesis in relation to *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga*. The thesis argues that *Fóstbræðra saga*'s portrayal of the concepts of outlawry and extra-legality are highly relevant to the general concerns about these subjects that are conveyed by the other outlaw narratives discussed in the thesis, with which *Fóstbræðra saga* shares considerable thematic similarities.

**1.3.3 The depoliticisation of outlaw narratives.** The emphasis that this thesis places on the socio-political dimensions of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives runs counter to the claims made by some scholars that these sagas are largely uninterested in political or social matters. This mode of thinking is typified by comments, which are discussed below, made by Jesse Byock (1982) and Anthony Faulkes (2004) about the outlaw sagas *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga*. It will be useful to explain in this section why the implications of Byock's and Faulkes's interpretations, which depoliticise these sagas by downplaying their interest in socio-political ideas, are problematic for our understanding of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives, as well as more generally our reception of how societal and communal anxieties are conveyed through thematic structures in other *Íslendingasögur*.

Byock (1982, 192) argues that the outlaw narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* are largely uninterested in how their protagonists function in relation to normative society, especially while they are still part of it; Faulkes (2004, xxii) goes further, suggesting that these texts do not have any political dimensions in how they depict the relationship between society and the individual. It should be evident from the outset that these claims are problematic for an appreciation of literary narratives about social exiles and the communities from which they are expelled. At their heart, such stories are about people who come to stand, whether through choice or by force, in symbolic and literal opposition to the political community of which they were once part. Such stories in the Old Norse–Icelandic context are also typically focalised around the outlaws, which encourages the audiences of these texts to consider the situation from the perspective of the protagonists, if not to empathise fully with them or to excuse their actions. That these texts directly engage with figures who commit transgressions not just against members of normative society, but implicitly against

that social order itself, suggests that they necessarily have socio-political dimensions. Claims that outlaw narratives are uninterested in the relations that such individuals have with and within society, or even that there is nothing political about these texts, should be treated with scepticism.

Byock's interpretation of the outlaw sagas as described above is found in his study *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982), in which he proposes a methodology for reading the *Íslendingasögur* as being built around various structures of 'feudemes', which he identifies as the smallest elements of a feud. He divides these elements into feudemes of 'conflict', 'advocacy', and 'resolution', which are typically played out through the normative legal process of Icelandic society until the feud concludes. Byock's model is useful for understanding how feud is depicted in sagas that prominently feature long-running, structurally complex feuds. The literary conclusions that Byock draws, however, about saga narratives with a 'low cluster density'—in other words, sagas that contain shorter clusters of feudemes because the specific feud is resolved relatively quickly—are problematic. This is because the feudemic model focuses on depictions of feud through the normative legal system, and therefore prioritises sagas with higher counts and longer clusters of feudemes. Byock associates such statistical qualities as indicating a narrative interest in socio-political matters, and draws a distinction between the literary interests of 'low-cluster' and 'high-cluster' saga narratives (192):

The prose shows a lower density of traditional units of action when saga narrative concentrates more on the biography, personality, and psychology of a major character than on the intricacies of Icelandic feud. When the prose does center on the legal and political maneuverings that underlie the progression of Icelandic feud, the saga story ... concentrates more on the action of feud itself than on the personality of individuals.

Byock argues that low-cluster narratives are therefore comparatively uninterested in how their protagonists relate to wider society. In relation specifically to the outlaws Gísli and Grettir, Byock suggests that 'only when a character is an outsider does saga literature abandon its concentration on the individual's social ability' (194). This view fits well with Byock's model, which associates high clusters of feudemes with a narrative interest in social and political matters, but his suggestion that texts that do not fit this ideal must lack such dimensions is reductive as regards literary analysis. The focus of the model on depictions of conflicts that are generally resolved through normative legality limits its usefulness for analysing those narratives that focus more

explicitly and in greater detail on portraying extra-legal activity. It is straightforward to downplay the socio-political concerns of *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* if one concludes that such thematic concerns are contingent on the text meeting certain structural requirements, which are in fact fairly arbitrary.

The reasoning behind Faulkes's more extreme claim that outlaw narratives are not political is also problematic. In his general overview of these texts' literary concerns in *Three Icelandic Outlaw Stories* (2004), Faulkes argues that the *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives *Gísla saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Harðar saga* are not political because the Icelandic Commonwealth did not have the kind of social structure—essentially a large state with an executive branch—that forms the background to other outlaw traditions, such as the famous late medieval and early modern English traditions about Robin Hood (xxi–xxii):

The law was identified with the way of life of medieval Icelanders, the foundation of their social organisation, and *there could be little possibility of alienation of individuals from it* and consequently no idealisation of the outlaw life. The opponents of Gisli, Grettir and Hord were not 'authorities' or officials, corrupt or otherwise, but their opponents in local feuds to whom they were often related, at any rate by marriage. There is no equivalent of the Sheriff of Nottingham in the Icelandic sagas ... The prices on the heads of Icelandic outlaws were privately put up, not by the authorities. *There is therefore no political or socio-economic element* to these Icelandic outlaw stories ... [The Icelandic outlaws] were the victims of feuds caused by social rivalry, *not rebels against authority or society itself, or fighters for social justice against corrupt officials*, though there is a good deal of unfairness both in their outlawry and in the ways in which they are killed.

[Emphasis added.]

Faulkes's use of the term 'political' seems to assume that narratives are only socio-political if they depict their characters engaging directly with state-level 'authorities' or 'officials', which is a rather restrictive use of the term. The first definition that the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for the adjective 'political'—'of, belonging to, or concerned with the form, organization, and administration of a state, and with the regulation of its relations with other states'—does indeed apply only to societies that have an established state, but the fourth and fifth definitions—'having an organized form of government or society', and 'relating to or concerned with public life and affairs as involving questions of authority and government'—are not restricted to such a narrow context ('political, *adj.* and *n.*', *OED*). The absence of a state-level executive body in the Icelandic Commonwealth does not mean that Icelandic society lacked political structure or a form of social stratification (see **1.3.1**). If a society organises itself to emphasise private interests over a centralised system of

governance, that is itself a political decision, not a natural state of affairs. It is perfectly reasonable to consider whether saga literature shows private disputes as arising from the socio-political structure of society, and whether these narratives problematise or critique that structure, and even the abstract notion of society, as a result. There is no reason to assume that the socio-political dimensions of these texts must be manifested in a similar literary fashion as those of different national traditions.

Faulkes (2004, xxii) also suggests that these narratives do not have political dimensions because ‘Icelandic geographical conditions were not conducive to the idealisation of outdoor life in the greenwood as an alternative to normal social life in the medieval town’. It is true that the depictions of the Icelandic wilderness in the outlaw narratives sagas rarely present positive alternatives to the domestic sphere, but Faulkes’s suggestion that texts should provide an idealised alternative to the societal *status quo* in order to have political dimensions seems to be predicated again on the problematic assumption that the Old Norse–Icelandic outlaw tradition should be similar to medieval English traditions. A literary text interested in socio-political matters may indeed represent an idealised alternative to the hegemony of the society that produced it, but it is not essential for it to do so in order for it to be considered political; it would be a brave modern reader who argued, for example, that George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) could not be considered to have socio-political dimensions because they only depict nightmarish dystopias, rather than idealised visions of society. The outlaw narratives do not respond to problems in society by imagining idealised alternatives to that community, although some of them instead explore the idea of problematic extra-legal communities (see 4.2 and 5.1.2). Rather, these texts depict difficult, ambivalent characters, whose stories problematise normative society’s own idealisation of its structure and make-up.

The protagonists of these sagas may perform heroic acts, but, like most saga heroes, they are not meant to be viewed in a purely positive light; Robert Kellogg (1996, 584) notes that they are ‘morally ambiguous characters’ because ‘we sympathize with them in their troubles, but we are not certain that we should’. It is in depicting these ambiguities that *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives engage their audience on a socio-political level by highlighting the more problematic aspects of normative society and the abstract concept of community. It is significant that there

has not been a purposeful response to Byock's and Faulkes's ideas, of the kind that instead emphasises the socio-political dimensions of the outlaw narratives. One of the original contributions of the thesis is to provide such a response by highlighting how these texts are thematically structured to encourage their audiences to consider abstract socio-political concepts, such as the relationship between the individual and their community, in relation to the intradiegetic communities that they depict.

**1.3.4 Interpretations of difference in outlaw narratives.** Byock's and Faulkes's arguments are unusually explicit in their rejection of the socio-political dimensions of *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives, but they are part of a wider scholarly discourse that implicitly emphasises the outlaw's individual difference as providing the narrative focus of these texts. Two literary-critical trends in the scholarship on the outlaw narratives are reflective of this discourse: the first is the idea that the protagonists of these narratives are symbolically monstrous figures, whilst the second is the argument that heroic figures who are outlawed can be better understood if we consider them to be anachronistic figures within their contemporary society. Both of these ideas have been applied to the outlaw narratives in ways that have revealed a great deal about the individual characterisation of their protagonists and about the general symbolic connotations of outlawry. These concepts can, however, produce problematic readings of how these narratives depict their protagonists in relation to their communal context; the idea that Gísli is a largely anachronistic figure, in particular, does not entirely reflect the nuance of his relationship to the past or to his contemporary society, as is discussed in the following chapter (see especially **2.1** and **2.2**). It will be useful to give an overview here of how these ideas are explored in relation to the outlaw narratives, and to suggest some of the problems that these approaches may encounter in investigating how these narratives depict society and their various other communities.

Many scholars have investigated the similarities between the outlaws and the monstrous beings that some of them encounter in their sagas. This theme has been discussed most often in relation to Grettir, where the comparison is sometimes framed in terms of the conceptual proximity between heroism and monstrosity (Hume 1974; Hawes 2008), but also of his topographical position within the Icelandic wilderness (Barracough 2010, 369–78). Kirsten Hastrup (1986; 1990, 154–84) suggests Grettir's association with the monstrous and the non-human makes



him an especially ambivalent character, whose presence within the written saga distorts the societal categories of normativity and Otherness, while Russell Poole (2004) delves into the mythical resonances of the saga. Grettir has dominated the discussion of monstrosity in the ‘outlaw sagas’, but Gísli and Hǫrðr have also been read as monstrous figures (Barracough 2010, 382–85; Merkelbach 2016a, 68–84; Wilson 2016, 131–33), although Gísli is typically treated as less explicitly monstrous than other outlaw protagonists. It has also been noted that *Grettis saga* and *Harðar saga* contain an especially large amount of narrative material about conflicts with ‘supernatural beings’; Hastrup (1986, 285) notes that this kind of material ‘is not a common feature of the genre [*i.e.* the *Íslendingasögur*]’.

The thematic resonances of these depictions of the supernatural, most notably Grettir’s conflict with Glámr, have been covered by many scholars, but, as has been discussed above, some critics have downplayed the structural importance of these fantastical episodes to the sagas’ wider narrative concerns (see 1.2). This latter approach has affected interpretations of these texts with potential ramifications for our understanding of many aspects of these texts, including their socio-political dimensions, as it can give the impression that these episodes, whilst each interesting in its own right, do not relate to the broader concerns of the text. It is also important to consider that even though an individual may be referred to as if they were a monster, that does not mean they have actually committed any actions or behaved in such a way as to validate that association. Outlawry and monstrosity certainly do have similar literary and topographical associations, but accusations by other people that an individual is monstrous can also be motivated by their desire to identify someone as Other, rather than necessarily reflecting the truth of a situation. In respect of this, accusations of monstrosity can often be indicative of communal power dynamics more than they are of individual difference; this idea is discussed in more detail in the chapter on *Grettis saga* (see 3.1.4).

The argument that outlaws are anachronistic figures, who think in terms of an ostensibly older value-system that is seen to be no longer compatible with the values of wider Icelandic society, is sometimes used to reconcile the heroic nature of these protagonists with their being justifiably outlawed. Certain heroic elements in these sagas do indeed appear to lend themselves well to being analysed in reference to anachronism. The episodes in which Grettir and Hǫrðr kill monsters, such as the *draugir* Glámr and Sóti respectively, make use of narrative material that seems to be

analogous to that in the much earlier text *Beowulf* (see: Orchard 1995) and to that in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, a *fornaldarsaga* ‘legendary saga’ that is set in the earlier fifth and sixth centuries, but was probably produced in the fourteenth or early fifteenth century (Ármann Jakobsson 1999, 140). The major difference between those texts and the similar material found in the *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives is that Grettir and Hǫrðr live in a much later time period; if these similarities are indeed analogous, the sagas may be using such material to comment on the changing reception of these heroic endeavours in different societal and temporal contexts. Vésteinn Ólason (1998, 186) suggests that there is indeed a change in the position of the monster-killing hero in these texts, as the hero moves from a central role within society, as a king or a high-ranking champion, to a more marginal position as an outlaw:

Heroes such as Beowulf tower much higher over their fellows than do *Íslendingasögur* heroes; they function in effect as social heroes, willing to fight and die in the struggle against supernatural forces, in order to safe-guard the future of their society. For the most part *Íslendingasögur* heroes live within human society, but in [later] sagas [they] move to—and sometimes beyond—society’s margins.

In this instance, the argument that Grettir and Hǫrðr are anachronistic figures helps to explain why their situation is so different from that of Beowulf or Bǫðvarr bjarki, despite their performing what are ostensibly the same heroic feats. Arguments to anachronism may, however, oversimplify these narratives’ complex attitudes towards the past, particularly when it comes to the idea of there being a dichotomy, rather than a continuity, between Christian and heathen values. The textual evidence of the *Íslendingasögur* suggests that these narratives have a complicated relationship to the pre-Christian past of their ancestors, as Annette Lassen (2005, 92–93) notes:

Writing about their heathen ancestors in Iceland, often in a glorifying manner, may have presented a conflict for these Christians. On the one hand, it was a problem for Christians to glorify heathens, but on the other, they wanted to glorify their ancestors. A way of solving this conflict could be to represent the ancestors as noble heathens ... or as heathens who respected values that were similar to Christian ones and who would have become Christians had they only been exposed to the true religion.

The sagas tend to put forth nuanced approaches in depicting the pre-Christian ancestors of the writers and their audiences; they identify points of similarity as much as key differences. To interpret the protagonists of the outlaw narratives as primarily anachronistic figures because they become legally differentiated from normative society runs the risk of presenting an overly reductive view of how the

sagas view their own relationship to the past and to the intradiegetic society that they depict. The idea that Gísli Súrsson is a primarily anachronistic figure has been especially problematic in terms of how scholars have interpreted the literary aspects of *Gísli saga*; the drawbacks of these scholarly interpretations provide the focus of the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Legal Difference and Communal Expectation in Gísla saga Súrssonar*<sup>4</sup>

One of the more prominent areas of scholarly discussion about the events of *Gísla saga* is the question of what it is exactly that motivates Gísli Súrsson to take revenge for the secret-killing of his brother-in-law Vésteinn by secretly murdering another of his brothers-in-law, Þorgrímr. Often the arguments put forward for understanding Gísli's extra-legal actions encourage readers to consider Gísli as an individual defined primarily by his moral difference from other members of his society. The assumption that Gísli is primarily motivated by individualistic desires underpins the various arguments that suggest Gísli should be read as an 'anachronistic' figure amid the society of his saga. Such readings argue that Gísli lives by a different set of values from the other figures in his society, and that those values are derived from the value-system found in legendary stories of the pre-Christian North—that is, that they are values drawn from a society displaced from his own, with that difference being primarily defined in terms of the distance in time between contemporary society and its past iterations. Such readings implicitly suggest that Gísli acts in accordance with a personal or individualistic sense of morality that differs from the acceptable behavioural and legal norms of his community, rather than in accordance

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<sup>4</sup> *Gísla saga* exists in three distinct versions, two of which are preserved in extant medieval manuscripts: a so-called 'shorter version' in the fifteenth-century Eggertsbók (AM 556 a 4to); and a 'fragmentary version' in AM 445 c I 4to (late fourteenth- to early-fifteenth century), which has been badly damaged. There are also several later paper copies, derived from a lost fourteenth-century parchment called the Membrana Regia Deperdita, of a 'longer version' of the saga (Lethbridge 2004, 45). The majority of literary-critical readings and modern editions of *Gísla saga* are based on the shorter version, which has often been considered the superior version of the saga, but the significant differences between the versions have led some scholars to argue that interpretations of the saga cannot take into consideration only its shorter version (Vésteinn Ólason 1999, 168; Lethbridge 2006, 574). As the argument of this chapter is written largely in response to trends in various literary-critical receptions of the saga, which most often focus on the shorter version, the quotations from *Gísla saga* are generally derived from the Íslenzk fornrit edition of that version, but the argument also considers some of the more prominent differences between the versions at key points of the saga in order to take fuller account of the textual tradition.

with those norms. This sense of the idea is consistent with the second definition of anachronism provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘practical anachronism’, which refers to ‘anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be, out of harmony with the present’ (‘anachronism, *n.*’, *OED*).

This line of reasoning has long been popular amongst the saga’s literary critics, even if they do not refer to Gísli specifically as ‘anachronistic’, and it will be useful to give a small sample of such arguments here. Theodore Andersson (1969, 41–42), for example, argues that *Gísla saga* emphasises the more ‘heroic’ aspects of its protagonist in order to draw a firm distinction between him and his society, which he argues has developed beyond tolerating such heroic behaviour:

The [saga’s] heroic frame of reference is significant not as a sign of continuity but because it shows so clearly how values have changed ... The sanctity of honor is not carried over unaltered from heroic poetry; it is an antiquated concept which is intellectually riddled by the author of *Gísla saga*. Honor is indeed the mainstay of Gísli’s character and this is precisely what makes him so outdated and vulnerable.

Jesse Byock (1982, 193) similarly argues that the main reason for Gísli’s outlawry, and therefore for his incompatibility with other members of Icelandic society, is that Gísli’s contemporaries adhere to the normative legal system of medieval Iceland, whereas Gísli supposedly ‘follows the traditional Norse code of family honor which was no longer appropriate to the settled conditions of Icelandic society’. Byock sees Gísli’s behaviour as being ‘inconsistent with the current norms of [his] society’, which would have regarded Gísli’s actions as being ‘irrational, even dangerous’. Along similar lines, David Clark (2012, 115) suggests that Gísli should be read as an anachronistic figure, ‘a glorious hero unfortunately out of time and place’, on the basis that Gísli’s society is beginning to turn away from the principle of blood-vengeance, which it perceives as overly disruptive, towards a more merciful Christian tradition: ‘He is an Eddaic hero in a saga world which no longer has room for such heroes: it is now a world where the demands of Christianity are taking over. Honour and revenge are no longer paramount concerns.’

These arguments are an appealing way of considering Gísli’s actions within the saga, given that the text is clearly interested in the relationship between present and past. The saga draws parallels between the early and later parts of its narrative to create echoes of the past in the events of Gísli’s present, and there are also strong associations between Gísli and the heroes of the legendary past in the saga’s

allusions to the eddic material that transmits those legends, with such allusions often made by Gísli himself in poetry (see 2.1.2 and 2.1.3). It is an understandably attractive view to interpret Gísli, who comes to be set apart from Icelandic society because of his outlawry, as having perpetrated his transgressions primarily because of an individualistic desire to hold to the values of the heroic past, even though the society itself has moved on. Such arguments do, however, present significant problems for our reading of the saga, because this mode of thinking is underpinned by certain assumptions not necessarily reflected in *Gísli saga* itself. These include:

- (1) Gísli's value-system is primarily consistent with an equivalent value-system of the heroic past, or an equivalent way of legal thinking from that past;
- (2) Gísli's value-system and legal thought are different from those of Gísli's society *because* they are rooted in a bygone past;
- (3) Gísli does not adhere to societal understandings of law and legalism;
- (4) Gísli is different from the other members of his society because he is the only one to follow his value-system and its underlying legal principles.

This last assumption may appear problematic, as it itself assumes that interpreting Gísli as an anachronistic figure means implicitly comparing him to the other characters depicted in the saga, rather than to a more general idealised view of Icelandic society and its legal system that is not necessarily best represented by those characters. This objection can be countered, however, on the grounds that society does not exist only in how it idealistically presents itself, but also in how its members actualise those ideals by putting them into practice. Considering Icelandic legal society exclusively in terms of the version of itself presented through its law codes—that is, as a binary system of idealised law-abiding people against demonised criminals—only provides us with a partial understanding of how law was conceptualised in medieval Iceland, and the more literary *Íslendingasögur* provide additional perspectives to the conception of legality found in *Grágás* and other strictly 'legal' documents. In order to think of Gísli as an anachronistic figure, furthermore, we must consider him as out-of-place in relation to his society, but if we take 'society' here to be an idealised version of that community, rather than the actual society that Gísli is shown to inhabit, on the basis that the latter does not represent the former properly, there are problems with using the idea of anachronism

as an explanation for Gísli's difference within the narrative. If the other members of Gísli's society do not truly represent 'society' because they too diverge from the idealised version of society, it is more difficult to argue that Gísli is significantly different from them in that respect. An argument that Gísli is anachronistic within his contemporary society must assume that most other members of Gísli's society generally adhere to and perceive legal matters in accordance with the normative legal system of medieval Iceland, and that Gísli is unusual in following a different value-system, which is not endorsed by the community.

The problem with the assumptions mentioned above is that they rely too heavily on an overly definite past–present binary, which does not reflect the difficult nature of the relationship between past and present that *Gísli saga* depicts. The intradiegetic setting of the saga's narrative is the early pre-Christian period of the newly founded Icelandic Commonwealth, a time of social transition and development, and the events of the present often bring the past back into play. As Emily Lethbridge (2006, 571) notes, 'The relationship between past and present in the saga is complex, with both perspectives carefully differentiated from each other, yet simultaneously, inextricably bound up with one another.' The same is true of the value-systems and modes of legal thinking that the saga associates with these chronologies, which have a similarly complex relationship. Whilst Clark argues that the saga draws a dichotomy between Gísli's pre-Christian vengeance ethics and the ostensibly more moderate Christian ethics of the saga-writer's society, Guðrún Nordal's (1998, 46–47) research into *Íslendinga saga* suggests that the practice of taking vengeance for one's kin, far from being seen as an obsolete remnant of the heathen past, retained its primacy well into the later stages of the Icelandic Commonwealth: 'Even though the Bible taught forgiveness towards one's enemies ... those Christian ideals had not begun to undermine the codes of vengeance in thirteenth-century Iceland.' Rather than thinking of past and present legal and moral systems in *Gísli saga* as being defined simply in binary opposition to one another, it is more useful to consider them as systems that co-existed for a long period of time, with all of the conflicts and compromises that this would entail.

Indeed, there is good reason to question also the distinction that some scholars make between supposedly different forms of pre-Christian morality, between an ethics of vengeance, attributed to Gísli, for instance, and an ethics of peace and reconciliation, usually attributed to Gísli's society. In his response to Andersson's

analysis of the saga, Vésteinn Ólason (1999, 167) addresses the idea that there is a significant difference between the morality of the eddic poems and that of *Gísla saga*, and argues against drawing such a firm distinction between these supposedly different value-systems:

[Andersson] seems to assume, with many other scholars indeed, that we can differentiate between an ancient and harsh morality in eddic poetry and a more modern and softer variety in the *Íslendingasögur*. I do not doubt that the morality expressed in the sagas has been influenced by the fact that they were written in a society which had been Christian for more than two hundred years, but the heroic poetry of the Edda is also written down in this same society, and it had been living in oral tradition there for a long time. By no means do the heroic poems present a rigid and unified doctrine of heroic morality, and even in the poems usually considered most archaic the deeds of the heroes are not necessarily glorified.

Vésteinn convincingly argues that differences between past and present value-systems for the sagas' medieval audiences, typically thought to be represented by eddic poetry and the *Íslendingasögur* respectively, have been overemphasised by some scholars. Elsewhere, however, Vésteinn makes this distinction himself in connection with *Gísla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, as he argues that Gísli represents 'the individualistic heroic morality of the Viking Age' (2003, viii), as opposed to the normative legal system of later medieval Iceland, which he argues are symbolised in figures like Snorri goði, Gísli's nephew, in *Eyrbyggja saga*. It is fair to say that *Eyrbyggja saga* is concerned more with how disputes are resolved through an explicitly normative legal framework than *Gísla saga* is, given its focus on the Icelandic Commonwealth's formal legal system, but it is also inaccurate to think of Gísli's actions as being overly individualistic. Gísli himself places a great deal of importance on his community and its social expectations, and is more deeply involved in society than Grettir and Hǫrður are; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough (2010, 379) notes that 'Gísli is firmly rooted in the struggles of society, and his trajectory does not take him far out of the social landscape'. The saga also draws many similarities between Gísli and the members of his community who remain within normative society, as will be demonstrated below (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2); although Gísli is associated to some extent with what the saga sees as an older mode of legal thinking, he is by no means the only one of his kinship group to take part in its rituals or to understand its requirements. It would also be inaccurate to suggest that this value-system allows for an individualistic conception of right and wrong; in



fact, the saga repeatedly shows that actions of vengeance are grounded in and motivated by a complex nexus of societal expectations.

It will be useful here to briefly clarify how the terms ‘individualism’ and ‘individualistic’ are defined for the purposes of this chapter; as Sverre Bagge (1996, 9) notes, discussions of historical ideas of the individual ‘can be very different according to one’s definition of the term and the aspects one chooses to emphasize’. Bagge himself, for example, uses the term ‘individualism’ to refer specifically to an ‘individualistic society’, which he defines, following on from the work of the anthropologist Louis Dumont (see, for example: 1980; 1986) as ‘a society in which an individual’s position mainly depends on his or her success in competition with other individuals, in contrast to a society whose members have their own fixed rank and duties’. This form of societal structuration is a useful concept to apply to Old Norse–Icelandic society; Bagge (1996, 9–10) suggests that individualism is more readily found in the sagas than is ‘individuality’, which refers to ‘ideas of the uniqueness of the individual person’. It is, however, a specific technical use of the term ‘individualistic’ that does not match the sense with which Vésteinn Ólason (2003, viii) uses it when he refers to Gísli’s moral thought as typical of ‘the individualistic heroic morality of the Viking Age’. This latter sense is congruent with the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of the word ‘individualistic’ as referring to things that are ‘characterized by or expressing individuality; distinguished in nature or style from others; idiosyncratic, unconventional’ (‘individualistic, *adj.*’, *OED*). This chapter uses the term ‘individualistic’ in accordance with the latter definition to refer to a prioritisation of the individual self over more widespread societal conventions.

In arguing that Gísli’s actions emerge from a distinct set of anachronistic morals, or that his value-system emerges from an individualistic, rather than communal, sense of morality, such approaches underplay *Gísla saga*’s engagement with the essential communal aspects of feud-style vengeance-discourse. It is therefore necessary to address more fully some of the above assumptions that underpin interpretations based on anachronism. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the saga, there is a need for a reading of the text that does not simply classify Gísli’s alterity as anachronistic, nor insist that his motivations for committing transgressive actions are primarily down to his individualistic desires to better his own situation. It is important to reconsider whether the value-system that scholars often attribute to

Gísli alone is actually exceptional to him within the intradiegetic society of the narrative, and whether such a system actually reflects individualistic desires or societal expectations. To understand why Gísli is motivated towards transgressive actions, we must consider the effect of his communal context in creating his individual difference.

This chapter argues that Gísli is not a primarily anachronistic figure at odds with his society, and demonstrates that his actions are motivated by the pressure of the conflicting communal expectations placed on him by both normative society and his immediate community to achieve justice, despite the flaws in the approach of each system. It argues that the saga draws similarities between Gísli's legal thinking and that of the figures within normative society to problematise certain elements of the latter, most notably how its legal system conceptualises justice (see **2.3.1**). The chapter considers Gísli's relationship to the past and the narratives associated with it (see **2.1**), and discusses the communal expectations underlying the various depictions of vengeance throughout the narrative (see **2.2**). Finally, the chapter considers the types of legal thought within the saga associated with characters other than Gísli to demonstrate that the differences of legal thought within the text are complex and occur between different individuals within normative society (see **2.3**).

## **2.1 Heroic Values and the Past**

In order to assess whether Gísli's morality could be said to adhere to the values associated with the legendary past, it will first be useful to consider the treatment of the past in general within the saga. First and foremost, it is important to understand how the saga situates its protagonist in relation to its intradiegetic events and the extradiegetic context of its audience. This is a society in a period of transition, which would be recognisable to some extent for a thirteenth-century audience, but yet to develop into the Christianised form most familiar to them. It will be shown that within the events of the saga Gísli is presented not as a figure belonging exclusively to a far-flung past, but as living through a period in which the 'past'—that is, the legendary heathen past—is still being constructed as such. The past is a more fluid entity for Gísli than the audience of the saga, and he interacts with disparate elements of it in different ways, embracing some aspects whilst moving gradually away from others. Gísli's relationship with the legendary narratives of his culture, as represented

in his poetic allusions to the eddic material of the *Vǫlsunga* cycle, is similarly complex. Clark (2007, 502) argues that the poetic allusions are intended by Gísli to ‘heroicize’ his own achievements—in other words, to elevate his own situation to correspond with that of the heroic past—but that the saga-narrator’s framing of these verses is designed ironically to undermine Gísli (see 2.1.2). There is an undeniably ironic element to how the past is presented in these moments in the text, but an analysis of the prose context of these verses indicates that such irony may actually be used by Gísli himself to express his disappointment at how his society’s reality fails to emulate the ideals it propagates through its culture. In particular, Gísli’s verses about his wife Auðr reveal his conflict in trying to reconcile the communal imperative for vengeance with the demands of Icelandic society’s legal system, suggesting that he recognises the limitations of the heroic mindset.

**2.1.1 *Forn siðir* and the creation of the past.** Whilst this chapter argues against interpreting Gísli as an anachronistic figure within his contemporary society, it will be useful to consider here the idea of unfamiliarity as it relates to the extradiegetic level of the extant saga. The events of *Gísla saga* are far removed from the historical context of modern scholars, but they were also removed to a lesser extent from the context of the later medieval audiences of the saga, at least in its extant written forms. In fact, the saga-narrator frequently flags up those moments in which they do not expect their audience to be familiar with the societal customs of the intradiegetic events (*Gísla*, 44, 45, 56, 92):

Síðan lét hann búa um lík Vésteins *eptir þeirri siðvenju, er þá var í þann tíma.*

Then he had Vésteinn’s corpse prepared *according to the custom that existed at that time.*

En þá er þeir hófðu veitt Vésteini umbúnað *sem siðr var til*, gekk Þorgrímr at Gísla ok mælti: ‘*Þat er tízka,*’ segir hann, ‘at binda mǫnnum helskó, þá er þeir skulu ganga á til Valhallar, ok mun ek þat gera við Véstein.’

But when they had prepared Vésteinn for burial *as was the custom*, Þorgrímr went to Gísli and spoke: ‘*It is the custom,*’ said he, ‘to bind people in Hel-shoes when they must go on to Valhöll, and I will do that for Vésteinn.’

Þetta þiggja þeir ok fara allir saman á Sæból til haugsgørðar ok leggja Þorgrím í skip. Nú verpa þeir hauginn *eptir fornum sið.*

They accepted this and all went together to Sæból to build a mound, and laid Þorgrímr in a ship. Then they raised the mound *in accordance with the old custom.*

En Þorkell er heygør at *fornum sið*, ok fara menn heim af þinginu.

But Þorkell was buried in a mound *according to the old custom*, and people went home from the assembly.

[Emphasis added.]

The events of the saga relating to these customs, and the modes of thought that underlie them, are understood by the saga-narrator and his audience to be unfamiliar to their own societal context, given the temporal distance that exists between them. The textual evidence shows that Gísli is not alone in following these customs, which are social norms for the characters on the intradiegetic level of the saga's narrative and which have significant symbolic resonances for the community.

In this respect, it is reasonable to consider that whilst Gísli's secret manslaughter of Þorgrímr would undoubtedly have been considered taboo within this unfamiliar society's customs, as would Þorgrímr's own secret manslaughter of Vésteinn, it would not necessarily have been viewed as anachronistic by that community. The saga directly addresses this point after Vésteinn's death, when it notes that *þat var þá mælt, at sá væri skyldr at hefna, er vápni kippði ór sari* 'it was said at the time that the one who removed a weapon from a wound was obliged to take vengeance' (44). Gísli's cowardly servant Þórðr huglausir refuses to remove the spear from the corpse, indicating the seriousness with which this custom is treated by the intradiegetic characters. Gísli's subsequent reaction in removing Grásíða from the wound, only to immediately hide it away in a trunk so as to *lét engan mann sjá* 'allow no one to see it' (44), hints at the conflict within him: he is now committed by a communal expectation to avenge Vésteinn, even though attaining such a vengeance necessarily entails going against his close kin, including his sister Þórdís. Nor can Gísli realistically be expected to achieve justice against Þorgrímr through the normative legal system without implicating his brother, Þorkell: the only proof he has of the killing is Grásíða itself, which the saga explicitly states to be Þorkell's property (37). It is significant that Gísli brings himself to enact this vengeance only after Þorgrímr oversteps the mark on multiple occasions on which he makes reference to Vésteinn's death in order to insult both Vésteinn, the man he has killed, and Gísli, who has left his sworn-brother unavenged; Gísli's indecision implies an awareness of the conflicting nature of the societal expectations placed on him after Vésteinn's death. For the next few chapters of the saga, Gísli attempts to take the course of action that

is least likely to harm either his brother or his sister, but in the end Þorgrímr's insults to Gísli's honour force him to take more decisive action.

In terms of whether Gísli is an anachronistic figure, it is also notable that he is one of only a few characters in the saga who is implied to distance himself from some elements of his society's pre-Christian customs.<sup>5</sup> After the saga informs the audience, for example, that *þat var þá margra manna siðr at fagna vetri í þann tíma ok hafa þá veizlur ok vetrnáttablót* 'it was then the custom of many people at that time to celebrate winter and then have feasts and the sacrifices of the winter-nights', it goes on to differentiate Gísli from other people because of his progression away from the old traditions, rather than his adherence to them: *Gísli lét af blótum, síðan hann var í Vébjörgum í Danmörku, en hann helt þó sem áðr veizlum ok allri stórmennsku* 'Gísli gave up sacrifices after he stayed at Vébjörg in Denmark, but he still held feasts as before and with much generosity' (36). Jenny Jochens (1995, 212) argues Gísli's decision to stop sacrificing at feasts suggests that 'toward the end of the pagan era the old feasts lost their spiritual content, but the celebrations continued', and notes that 'although Christian leaders attempted to purge these rituals of pagan features, they were careful to retain the timing of the celebrations' (105–06). Although Gísli is not a Christian, it is likely that the saga mentions Gísli's divergence from certain pre-Christian customs in order to depict him as something of a 'noble heathen'. It is also important to acknowledge here that the text itself does not extrapolate from Gísli's actions to paint a broader picture of cultural change. The episode may well be typical of a general historical transition from heathen to Christian customs, but it is nevertheless significant that within the scope of this literary narrative, it is Gísli alone who is said to move away from the primary religious component of the traditional winter feast.

In a similar vein, Gísli later remarks to his wife Auðr that his good dream-woman has told him *at láta leiðask forna sið ok nema enga galdra né forneskju* 'to make myself abhor the old customs and to learn no spells or magic' (*Gísli*, 70). Gísli's decision differs from the more accommodating attitude of his brothers-in-law Þorgrímr and Þorkr, who are shown to be more accepting of taboo magic in their

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<sup>5</sup> The other figures are Gísli's wife Auðr and Vésteinn's widow Gunnhildr, who at the saga's conclusion are said to have converted to Christianity in Denmark and subsequently undertaken a pilgrimage to Rome, from which they do not return to the then-unchristian north: *Þær Auðr ok Gunnhildr fara til Danmerkr í Heiðabæ, tóku þær við trú ok gengu suðr ok kómu eigi aptr* 'Auðr and Gunnhildr travelled to Heiðabær in Denmark, received the true faith and went south [*i.e.* on a pilgrimage to Rome], and did not return' (*Gísli*, 118).

association with and readiness to employ the magic-user Þorgrímr nef (see **2.3.1**). The text shows Gísli directly debating the suitability of pre-Christian religion and cultural values both before and during his outlawry, and hardly paints a picture of him stubbornly holding on to a heroic past in the face of societal opposition. The saga's audience may well have viewed many of the value-systems and customs that the saga depicts as belonging exclusively to the past, but this is not the case for the text's intradiegetic society nor for Gísli himself, who engages with those traditions in a more direct manner. Throughout *Gísli saga*, 'society itself, in effect, is taking shape at the same time as the plot', as Vésteinn Ólason (2003, xiii) puts it, and this means that even though Gísli takes part in these traditions because of their function in his present society, he also appears to recognise that these customs are slowly becoming a thing of 'the past'—that Icelandic society is taking on a different form than that which he and his family left behind in Norway. Gísli's own movement away from certain of these customs indicates that he is not wedded to the cultural past, but is aware of the transitional nature of his own historical situation.

**2.1.2 Gísli's allusions: heroicization or bathos?** In light of the complex, shifting nature of Gísli's relationship to the past, at least as it is depicted in the saga's prose, it will be useful to reconsider how Gísli uses the past in the eddic allusions that he makes in some of the verses he composes at key moments in the narrative. That these verses allude back to the legendary past is one of the more prominent factors given for Gísli being a primarily heroic figure in his own outlook, as some scholars see them as having a didactic, moralising basis on the part of Gísli. Clark (2012, 89), for example, argues that Gísli employs these eddic motifs in order to distinguish between a past moral value-system, as represented by these legendary stories, and his contemporary present, suggesting that the allusions to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir 'represent what may be called the old way of vengeance'. It is necessary, however, to address the question of whether the allusions made by Gísli in his poetry can be reasonably thought of as endorsements of 'past' moral and behavioural expectations at the expense of the other people around him, or whether Gísli uses these allusions to engage with these images of the past in a more complex manner, in line with what has been demonstrated above about the complex nature of Gísli's relationship to the past in the saga's prose.

The various allusions to eddic material in *Gísla saga* have been well documented, but it will be useful to summarise here some of the more prominent examples, specifically those that relate to the idea of Gísli being motivated by the ideology underpinning these allusions. Clark gives three key examples regarding how the saga's treatment of eddic material relates to Gísli's conceptions of morality and legality (101):

Gísli's verse on his sister's lack of loyalty shows that he thinks that his sister should behave like his perception of an Eddaic heroine—that is, be loyal to him rather than to her husband; he scorns Bjartmar's sons in another verse because they are not courageous like Eddaic heroes and thus lose his case at the assembly; his verses on his wife Auðr's grief describe her with approval as an Eddaic heroine in her epic sorrow for her brother.

Clark's suggestion that Gísli uses these allusions to heroicize his situation is a development of Alois Wolf's (1965, 475) argument that such a dynamic is present within the saga. Unlike Wolf, however, who suggests that the heroicizing elements of the saga result from both Gísli and from the saga-narrator, Clark argues that these heroicizing elements are present only in Gísli's own characterisation of events within the saga. He suggests that the saga-narrator adopts a more ambivalent view of the heroic past in order to depict Gísli's interpretation of events as problematic, in order to undermine Gísli in bathetic fashion.<sup>6</sup>

It is unnecessary to assume, however, that the allusions Gísli makes in his verse must function entirely as indicators of his moral or legal thought or that they invariably constitute attempts to simply 'heroicize' his situation by pointing out the moral failings of others. Whilst there are elements of heroicization in certain of Gísli's allusions, in so far as they do make implicit comparisons between those

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<sup>6</sup> This section focuses specifically on the eddic allusions that Gísli makes in his poetry, but it is also worth considering that the allusions in the prose are not necessarily bathetic, as Clark argues, but do sometimes function in a more serious, dramatic fashion. Turville-Petre (1944, 377), for example, suggests that the prose turns to eddic material for didactic purposes, as in its adaptation of the proverb *sér æ gjøf til gjalda* 'a gift always looks to be repaid' in Gísli's conversation with Geirmundr from *Hávamál* st. 145 (*Gísla*, 52; *Hávamál*, 352); and for emphasis, as in its declaration that the verse that Gísli speaks to his sister Þórdís, in which he enigmatically confesses his culpability for Þorgrímr's death, *æva skyldi* 'should never have been' (58). Turville-Petre notes that 'the word *æva* is archaic, and is hardly ever found in historical prose', but 'is preserved in poetic diction, and is especially common in heroic poetry', and specifically compares its inclusion in *Gísla saga* to the same wording in *Völundarkviða* st. 40, where Þoðvildr uses the phrase in her lament at the poem's conclusion. There is little in the text to suggest that this allusion is used in an especially satirical way or is unserious in character—especially as such explicit moralising judgements are rare in *Íslendingasögur* and are therefore usually read as serious, as is typically the case with the saga's judgement of Þorgrímr nef (see 2.3.1). The division Clark proposes between the attitudes expressed towards the use of eddic material in the text by Gísli and by the framing narrative of the saga—where the former indicates an anachronistic heroicizing, and the latter a detached ambivalence—is not necessarily accurate in itself.

cultural touchstones and Gísli's own context, it does not necessarily follow that each instance of heroicization works primarily to raise the stature of Gísli in comparison to his kin. Gísli's verses are indeed embedded in the saga in such a way as to treat heroic values ironically, but that there is an irony to how these verses are contextualised does not mean that they must be used to undermine Gísli's character; such a reading is possible, but it requires the reader to assume that Gísli is entirely self-serious about adopting the heroic values to which he alludes. If Gísli's intent behind these allusions is viewed as representing a more world-weary, even cynical attitude than the heroic defiance typically attributed to Gísli, it makes sense to interpret the irony not as emanating from the saga-prose at Gísli's expense, but as being a purposeful rhetorical decision made by Gísli himself to characterise the cultural dissonance of his own situation. It is worth considering whether these poetic allusions, rather than functioning solely as reference points that assert Gísli's own heroic stature by contrast, may have a bathetic purpose similar to that which Clark suggests of the narrator's eddic allusions in the prose.

In fact, an analysis of how the poetry is contextualised within the saga's prose suggests that Gísli's poetic allusions are suffused with an ironic self-awareness of the situation on the part of Gísli himself, rather than on the part of the narrator. The discussion here focuses on the verses Gísli composes about Vésteinn's uncles, who fail to prevent Gísli being outlawed, and his sister Þórdís; his verses about Auðr are dealt with in more detail in the following section to demonstrate a specific function of those verses arising from how they are contextualised by the saga's prose. As regards the verses discussed in this section, it is notable that Gísli makes allusions to the past at moments in the narrative when he is most disappointed by the behaviour of those around him, rather than when he is making a moral decision concerning his own actions or is didactically instructing another person as to how he believes they should act. Gísli's disappointment is explicit in the verse comparing his sister Þórdís, who has recently betrayed his culpability for the secret-killing of Þorgrímr, to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (*Gísla*, 62):

Gatat sól fastrar systir,  
sveigar, mín at eiga,  
gætin, Gjúka dóttur  
Goðrúnar hugtúnum;  
þás log-Sága lægis  
lét sinn, af hug stinum



svá rak snjallra bræðra  
sør-Freyja, ver deyja.

Fixated on finery, my sister was not able to have the spirit of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, firm in her mind-enclosure, when the fire-Sága of the sea [fire of the sea = gold; goddess of gold = woman] caused her husband to die; thus the amber-necklace-Freyja [= woman] took vengeance for her valiant brothers with an undaunted mind.

In his allusion to how Guðrún slew her husband Atli to avenge the murder of her brothers Gunnar and Högni, Gísli demonstrates the importance to him of prioritising his close family over the kinsmen he is bonded to by marriage, although this concern is not unique to Gísli in the saga (see 2.3.1). Gísli's verse is often cited as an example of why his value-system should be thought of as being derived from the legendary past, and the comparison he makes here indicates that Gísli attaches some value to the behaviour exemplified by such legendary figures as Guðrún, at least as it relates to prioritising kinship in matters of vengeance. At this critical point in the saga, in the midst of the legal process that culminates in Gísli's outlawry, the verse undeniably frames the conflict in primarily heroic terms; it is an emphatic, emotive summation of the value that Gísli places on his family's honour. The prose that follows the verse also constitutes the occasion on which Gísli comes closest to heroicizing his own situation, in that he explicitly compares Þórdís's betrayal to his own efforts to protect her honour, referring to his confrontations with Þórdís's overbearing suitors towards the beginning of the saga, even though it put his own life at risk: *Ok þóttumk ek eigi þess verðr frá henni, því at ek þykkjumk þat lýst hafa nokkurum sinnum, at mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en sjálfs mín; hefir ek stundum lagt líf mitt í háska fyrir hennar sakar, en hon hefir nú gefit mér dauðaráð* 'And I didn't think I deserved this from her, because I thought I had shown on certain occasions that her disgrace has been no better to me than even my own. At times I have put my life in danger for her sake, but she has now given me a death-sentence' (*Gísli*, 62).

It is important, however, to be careful about attaching to this allusion too much importance as to how far it should affect our reading of Gísli as he is portrayed elsewhere in the saga. Whilst Gísli expresses disappointment that his sister has not acted in accordance with what he had expected of her, it would be difficult to extrapolate this disappointment into a clear justification, or even an exoneration, of his own killing of Þorgrímr. Gísli may heroicize his situation to an extent here, but the comparison concerns his interactions with Bárðr and Hólmgöngu-Skeggi—as indicated by the emphasis that he places on preventing Þórdís from being disgraced

and his declaration that he had *lagt líf mitt i háska fyrir hennar sakar*, referring to his duel with Skeggi—rather than his having killed Þorgrímr: his statement is neither an endorsement nor a celebration of that particular incident of blood-vengeance. The verse as it is presented within the saga should also be read in the context of Gísli’s disappointment with both of his siblings’ actions, which is indicated by how the conversation between Gísli and Þorkell subsequently progresses (62):

‘Þat vil ek nú vita, bróðir, hvat ek skal þar eiga, sem þú ert, slíkt sem nú hefi ek at gort.’

‘At gera þik varan við, ef menn vilja drepa þik, en bjargir veiti ek þér engar, þær er mér megi sakar á gefa. Þykki mér mikit af gort við mik, at drepinn er Þorgrímr, mágr minn ok félagi ok virkðavinr.’

Gísli svarar: ‘Var eigi þess ván um slíkan mann sem Vésteinn var, at eigi myndi mannhefnalaust vera, ok mynda ek eigi þér svá svara sem þú svarar mér nú ok eigi heldr gera.’

‘Now I wish to know, brother, what I am entitled to as far as you are concerned, given what I have now done.’

‘I will give you warning about it if people wish to kill you, but I will give you no assistance that could lead to a charge against me. It seems to me that I have been greatly wronged, in that Þorgrímr—my kinsman, companion, and close friend—has been killed.’

Gísli replied, ‘There was no prospect that such a man as Vésteinn was would be left unavenged, and I would not reply to you thus as you reply to me now, and not do more.’

It is apparent from Gísli’s initial question to Þorkell that he is aware of the transgressive nature of his having killed Þorgrímr, asking for what he might expect considering the pain he has caused his brother. By contrast, Þorkell’s response to Gísli—that because of his close relationship to Þorgrímr, he will not provide Gísli with the kind of assistance that would be expected from one’s brother—is characterised by his clear lack of self-awareness. The audience knows that Þorkell and Þorgrímr’s relationship is itself closely paralleled by Gísli and Vésteinn’s friendship, but Þorkell’s prioritisation of his own grief over his brother’s, particularly given his involvement in bringing about Vésteinn’s death and causing the intra-familial feud, suffuses the scene with dramatic irony. Whilst Gísli seems to recognise how his actions have affected his brother, Þorkell is unable to recognise the equivalent effects that his earlier actions have had on Gísli, even though everything he says about Þorgrímr can be mapped onto Gísli’s own feelings about Vésteinn’s death. Gísli’s claim that he would not reply to his brother in this way, nor give so little help in this manner, is less indicative of his having an overly individualistic morality than it is of Þorkell’s being too self-absorbed to understand his own role in the breakup of their familial community. Gísli’s response to the actions of his siblings here is more prominently characterised, in both verse and prose, by a

profound disappointment in their actions than it is a heroic endorsement or celebration of his own situation. His comparison of Þórdís to Guðrún is certainly intended to portray his sister negatively—although Þórdís’s reasons for betraying Gísli are probably more complex than he realises (see 2.3.3)—but the effect is not to raise Gísli’s own stature by comparison to the legendary narrative as much as it is to highlight the bathetic nature of his own circumstances, thereby downplaying his status: where the heroic siblings of the Vǫlsunga-cycle avenged one another despite serious social ramifications, Gísli finds himself abandoned by both his sister and his brother. Most importantly, it is Gísli himself, not the saga’s narratorial voice, who downplays the heroic nature of the situation.

This invocation of the legendary in order to convey disappointment also occurs in Gísli’s verse about the failure of Vésteinn’s uncles to put forward a successful case against his being outlawed, in which Gísli alludes to the eddic poem *Atlakviða*. The poem relates the deaths of Guðrún’s brothers Gunnarr and Högni, and Guðrún’s subsequent slaying of her husband Atli in order to avenge her siblings. In *Gísli saga*, the figures of Gunnarr and Högni are closely associated with Vésteinn, first of all by the prose itself, and second by Gísli in the later verse about Vésteinn’s uncles. The allusion in the prose concerns Vésteinn’s refusal to turn back from his journey to Gísli’s home after he has returned to Iceland: despite having received a warning from Gísli that the journey will put his life in danger, he concludes that the warning has come too late to dissuade him from making the trip. Heather O’Donoghue (2005, 151) suggests that in Vésteinn’s refusal to countenance an important warning, there is a similar motivation to that in stanza 8 of Gunnarr and Högni in their decision to visit the hall of their brother-in-law Atli, despite their having received from Guðrún a message to warn them that Atli intends to betray them (*Atlakviða*, 374). O’Donoghue argues that the brothers reason that ‘their sister Guðrún’s well-meant warning to them not to visit Atli makes them honour-bound to accept an invitation they would have scorned to accept had they not been warned of some danger’ (151).

Vésteinn’s actions in this episode appear to motivate Gísli to make a more explicit allusion to that eddic poem in his own verse. In denigrating Vésteinn’s uncles for their cowardice, Gísli praises his deceased friend with an allusion that harks back to the earlier association made between Vésteinn and the brothers Gunnar and Högni (*Gísli*, 67):

Myndit þá  
á Þorsnesi  
meðallok  
á minni sök,  
ef Vésteins  
væri hjarta  
Bjartmars sonum  
í bróst legit.

There would have been a more moderate conclusion to my suit at Þorsnes then, if Vésteinn's heart were laid in the breasts of Bjartmarr's sons.

O'Donoghue (2005, 149) suggests that the verse's reference to Vésteinn's bravery being apparent from his heart similarly 'supplies an echo of *Atlakviða*, in which Gunnarr recognizes his brother Högni's heart which Atli has brought to him on a platter because unlike a thrall's heart it does not quiver'. Again, however, the overriding emotional effect that Gísli conveys through this allusion is one of disappointment, even though his comparison of Vésteinn to the famously courageous Högni also works to elevate Vésteinn's own status by association. Whilst Gísli sees the legendary past as a familiar touchstone and associates it with behavioural ideals, the purpose of the allusion in this verse is to emphasise that such a cultural milieu is, indeed, consigned *to* the past. Vésteinn, who for Gísli is emblematic of such heroic courageousness, is dead, and such valiant men are no longer easy to find.

It is also notable that the tone of the comparison is primarily emotionally critical, rather than didactic: it is a matter of judging the character of Vésteinn's uncles, rather than of condemning them for the course of action that they adopt. Gísli does not criticise Vésteinn's uncles for going to the *þing* to acquire a settlement for him through the normative legal system—indeed, he asks them to do so—but rather he denounces their lack of fortitude in failing to complete this task, as the saga's narrator also does: *Koma engu áleiðis um sættina, ok kalla menn, at þeir hafi illa borit sik* 'They did not bring about the settlement, and people said that they had conducted themselves badly' (*Gísli*, 67). In this respect, it is significant that the wording of the verse emphasises that Gísli had hoped for a more moderate conclusion to his suit, not for some form of vengeance or retribution. Rather than constituting an endorsement of the vengeance ethic that lies at the heart of *Atlakviða*, the allusion in the verse simply indicates that something has been lost, that the kind of bravery and heroic deeds that Gísli associates with Vésteinn have come to be in short supply. Whilst the society in which Gísli lives maintains such heroic literature as part of its cultural make-up, through which it expresses its values of honour and

loyalty, there is nevertheless a level of dissonance between the behavioural ideals expressed in this poetic tradition and the reality that most people do not live up to those ideals. Rather than painting his own situation as similar to that detailed in the narratives of the legendary past, Gísli's allusions emphasise this dissonance, thereby distancing his own situation from the ideals of his culture's poetic tradition.

**2.1.3 Auðr and Guðrún: allusion as warning.** Gísli makes a third prominent eddic allusion in the verses he composes about his wife Auðr's grief at the death of Vésteinn, her brother, in which he compares Auðr favourably to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. This allusion is less bathetic than those analysed above, but this is primarily because these verses have a very specific function within the episode as a whole, which is concerned with the status of the relationship between Gísli and his brother Þorkell after Vésteinn's funeral. The prose context for these verses indicates that Gísli uses his poetry here in order to distance himself, to an extent, from the legendary past and its values, whilst also reminding his brother of the possibility of his avenging Vésteinn. In a similar manner to how the prose shows Gísli as being acutely aware at times of the need to move away from this past, the comparison of Auðr to Guðrún indicates that Gísli is highly attentive to the consequences of pursuing the kind of intra-familial vengeance for which Guðrún was most renowned, and suggests that Gísli is himself reticent to seek vengeance for the sake of his brother, Þorkell, whom he suspects to be directly involved in Vésteinn's death.

Gísli composes the verses about Auðr's grief in response to Þorkell's insistent questioning as to how badly Vésteinn's death has affected Auðr and *hvárt grætr hon mjök* 'whether she weeps a great deal' (*Gísli*, 46). Gísli's response confirms that Auðr does indeed weep for her brother (47–48):

Hylr á laun und líni  
linnvengis skap kvinna,  
gríðar leggs ór góðum,  
Gefn, ǫlkera svefni;  
eik berr angri lauka,  
eirreks, bráa geira,  
bróður, dagg á bæði  
blið ǫndugi síðan.

The Gefn of the serpent-field [= bed of gold; goddess of a bed of gold = woman] hides her womanly mood secretly under her hood, ([tears] streaming fervently out from the good ale-casks of sleep [= eyes]); the oak of flowers [= woman] thereafter bears the dew of distress [= tears] of

grief for her brother on both gentle high-seats of the spears of eyebrows [= eyelashes; high-seats of eyelashes = cheeks].<sup>7</sup>

Hrynja lætr af hvítum  
hvarmskógi Gnó bógar  
hrönn fylvingum hyljar  
hlátrbann í kné svanna;  
hnetr less, en þreyr þessum,  
Þögn, at mæðar Rogni,  
snáka túns af sínu  
sjónhesli þolgrónu.

Laughter-death [= sorrow] forces the Gnó of the shoulder [= woman] to let flow a wave of the nuts of the pool [= tears] from the white eyelid-wood [= eyelashes] into the lap of the woman; the Þögn of the snake-enclosure [= bed of gold; goddess of a bed of gold = woman] picks nuts from her woe-swollen sight–hazel-wood [= eyelashes; nuts of eyelashes = tears], but yearns for this Rognir of praise [= skáld; Rognir = Óðinn, god of poetry].

The verses emphasise Auðr’s grief through the sustained imagery of tears, which Gabriel Turville-Petre (1944, 378) describes as ‘unique in the scaldic poetry of the family sagas’; he argues that Gísli’s description of Auðr’s behaviour is most reminiscent of the descriptions in eddic poetry of Guðrún weeping at the death of Sigurðr, and stt. 15–16 of *Guðrúnarkviða I* in particular, which specifically focus on Guðrún’s tears. Of the three eddic allusions discussed in this and the above section, these verses come the closest to Clark’s definition of heroicization; they clearly signify an endorsement of Auðr’s behaviour in comparing the immensity of her grief to that of Guðrún for Sigurðr, and it is reasonable to assume that the purpose of Gísli’s allusion to the legendary past is indeed, in this instance, to elevate his wife’s grief into a display of intense heroic emotion equivalent to that of Guðrún herself. As noted in the previous section, Guðrún was renowned for her willingness to take vengeance for her kinsmen, as she does for Gunnarr and Högni in *Atlakviða*, but she was also known for using her grief to whet her sons Hamðir and Sörli to avenge their sister Svanhildr in the eddic poems *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt*.

At first glance, Gísli’s comparison of Auðr to Guðrún may therefore carry with it not only the suggestion that his wife’s grief is truly admirable, but also an implicit approval of the vengeance ethic associated with Guðrún. Gísli’s motivation for composing these verses, however, is not simply to praise his wife’s grief in order to elevate their situation to the stature of that legendary material, nor is it to endorse

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<sup>7</sup> In their accompanying notes to the verse in this edition of the saga, Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson observe that some of the wording in the first *helmingr* of the verse (*gríðar leggs ór góðum ... qlkera svefni*) appears to be corrupt in the extant manuscripts of the saga. The translation given above in parentheses therefore follows more closely the wording suggested by Björn and Guðni in those same notes (*gríðar leggskór góðum ... qlkerum svefna*).

vengeance wholeheartedly as a solution to Vésteinn's death. Rather, the prose context of the verses suggests that this allusion should be read in the context of Gísli's recounting of his enigmatic dreams about Vésteinn's death, which takes place immediately before he recites the verses. The dialogue between the brothers takes place beside Vésteinn's mound, shortly after the funerary ceremony, where Gísli and Porkell *láta allólikliga, at nokkur viti, hvern þenna glæp hefir gert* 'declared it was very unlikely that anyone knew who had committed this crime' (*Gísla*, 46). This declaration is significant, as the saga suggests before this episode that Gísli does, in fact, have a good idea as to who committed the murder; when Gísli's foster-daughter Guðríðr tells him how she has encountered Porkell, Þorgrímr Freysgoði, and Þorgrímr nef together at Sæból after Vésteinn's death, with all three men being fully armed for conflict, Gísli replies that *slíks var at ván* 'such was to be expected' (45). Given his earlier remarks, it is somewhat surprising that Gísli publicly agrees with Porkell that it is probably the case that no one knows who was involved in the killing; the incongruity most probably suggests that even though Gísli has an inkling as to who murdered Vésteinn, his most immediate desire is to make peace with his brother, rather than to take vengeance for his sworn-brother.

Porkell, on the other hand, is eager to discover whether his actions have caused sufficient pain to Auðr, whom he knows to have been aware of his wife Ásgerðr's affair with Vésteinn, which is the cause of his and Þorgrímr's plot to kill Vésteinn. Porkell begins to question Gísli about Auðr's emotional state, which leads Gísli to respond in a rather cryptic manner (46):

'Hon berst af lítt ok þykkir mikit. Draum dreyndi mik ... í fyrri nótt ok svá í nótt, en þó vil ek eigi á kveða, hvern vígit hefir unnit, en á hitt horfir um draumana. Þat dreyndi mik ina fyrri nótt, at af einum bæ hrökkðist höggormr ok hjöggi Véstein til bana. En ina síðari nótt dreyndi mik, at vargr rynni af sama bæ ok biti Véstein til bana. Ok sagða ek því hvárgan drauminn fyrr en nú, at ek vilda, at hvárrgi réðist.' Ok þá kvað hann vísu:

Betr hugðak þá, *brigði*  
*biðkat draums ens þriðja*  
*slíks af svefni vorkðum*  
*sárteina, Vésteini,*  
*þás vér í sal sátum*  
Sigrhadds við mjöð gladdir,  
komsat maðr á miðli  
mín né hans, at víni.

'She shows little but thinks of it a great deal. I dreamt a dream last night and likewise the night before, and though I do not wish to say who has committed the killing, it is indicated in the dreams. I dreamt the first night that a viper wriggled out from a certain farm and struck Vésteinn, killing him. And the second night I dreamt that a wolf ran out from the same farm and bit

Vésteinn, killing him. And I have told neither dream before now, because I had hoped that neither one would happen.’ And then he spoke a verse:

I would rather remember Vésteinn when, gladdened with mead, we sat at drinking in Sigrhaddr’s hall: no one came between me and him. *I do not pray for change, for waking from a sleep of such a dream of wound-twigs [= weapons] a third time.*

[Emphasis added.]

Gísli’s description of Auðr’s grief itself is somewhat perfunctory in its brevity, as he is clearly unwilling to share Auðr’s private emotions in this public space. His subsequent segue into recounting his dreams, however, is not simply a case of changing the subject to something less objectionable; it also functions as a warning to Þorkell that he should not persist with his line of questioning. The retelling of the dreams parallels the two restless nights that Gísli endures immediately before the night of Vésteinn’s death, but Gísli also implies, through his hint that the animals in the dreams symbolise Vésteinn’s killers, that he is in fact somewhat aware of the involvement of two men in Vésteinn’s death, as represented by the two dreams of the viper and wolf emerging from the same farm. The animals probably symbolise Gísli’s brother-in-law Þorgrímr and the *seiðr*-user Þorgrímr nef; later events in the saga imply that Gísli not only considers Þorgrímr to be culpable for the crime, but also suspects Nef’s involvement, because he similarly seeks to punish the magic-user (see 2.2.1).<sup>8</sup> Gísli’s declaration in his verse that he would rather not experience the suffering *draums ens þriðja slíks* ‘of such a dream a third time’ may therefore be read as a warning to Þorkell: to wake from a third dream of this type would mean that Gísli would have to accept the involvement of a third man in Vésteinn’s death, and the likeliest candidate would be Þorkell himself.

In this episode, Gísli essentially admits to his brother that he is currently in the difficult bind of trying not to accept the role that he believes Þorkell, his own brother, must have played in causing his closest friend’s death. In this response, furthermore, Gísli implicitly accuses Þorkell of making it yet more difficult for him to maintain

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<sup>8</sup> Whilst the shorter version of the saga only implies that Nef is an accomplice in Vésteinn’s death, the longer version explicitly tells us that Vésteinn is killed by Þorgrímr after Nef uses his abilities to conjure up a supernatural storm, thus distracting Gísli: *Sva er sagt at illviðri því hinu mikla hefir valdit Þorgrímr nef með golldrum sinom oc gerningum, oc framit til seið at nockorn veg yrðe þess, at þat færi gæfiz a Vest(eini) at G(isli) væri eigi viðstaddr, þvíat þeir treystuz eigi a hann at raða ef G(isli) væri hia, enn Þorgrímr Freyssgoði for síþan til verksins oc vo Vestein* ‘So it is said that Þorgrímr nef had caused that exceptionally bad weather with his witchcraft and sorcery, and had performed *seiðr* in a certain way so that danger would befall Vésteinn if Gísli were not protecting him, because they could not be sure of causing his death if Gísli were beside him, but Þorgrímr Freyssgoði then went to do the deed and slew Vésteinn’ (*Gísli Ingr*, 32).



this delusion, even though it allows him to think less badly of his brother, because Þorkell in turn seems to want nothing more than to confirm that Vésteinn's death has caused exceptional grief to Gísli's wife. Þorkell does not stop there, however, and repeats the same question, even after this warning. Anne Holtsmark (1951, 50) suggests that Þorkell asks the question repeatedly out of fear, but it is also reasonable to interpret his actions as being born out of a desire to hurt Auðr for having been aware of Ásgerðr's infidelity. Faced with the same behaviour from his brother, Gísli responds by changing the tone of his answer and elevating Auðr's grief to heroic levels by comparing her to the weeping Guðrún. In doing so, Gísli does not simply praise the behaviour of his wife in her time of distress, but also implicitly conveys a different type of warning to Þorkell: do not forget how Guðrún urged men to vengeance through her tears, and know that my wife's grief is comparable to Guðrún's. As Holtsmark puts it, Gísli's poetic response 'is pretty, but not without its sharp point: hard tears clamour for revenge' (50).

These verses are therefore not simply representative of the behavioural ideals that Gísli could be said to hold, but also have a specific function in their performative context as a warning to Þorkell that the situation between the brothers is not so stable as he may suppose. Gísli uses these verses to indicate the extent to which Vésteinn's death, as well as his unspoken realisation that Þorkell was directly involved in the matter, has emotionally distressed him. It would be inaccurate, however, to view this warning as a direct threat by Gísli that he definitely will seek vengeance against Þorkell himself. After all, Gísli attempts to maintain his relationship with his brother throughout the saga, even though Þorkell refuses to help him on multiple occasions during his outlawry. He is also quick to accept Þorkell's suggestion, made shortly after Gísli composes these verses, that they should resume the ball-games between their households, which would 'provide the veneer of normal relationships' between them (Miller 1986, 105). It is more likely that Gísli's use of the heroic past in these verses is intended to remind Þorkell that a different path of action—namely, blood-vengeance—is possible, and perhaps even inevitable, if Þorkell cannot himself recognise the fragility of the peace that exists between the brothers. Whilst Gísli's verses in this episode do indeed heroicize Auðr, their function within the narrative is more complex than presenting an unqualified endorsement of those values, particularly as Gísli's warning to Þorkell relies on there being the possibility for him to avoid taking vengeance, which Þorkell appears to understand as he ends his

questioning. The depiction of Gísli's relationship to the legendary past in the saga, both through the saga's prose and Gísli's own poetry, suggests that Gísli has a complex, malleable connection to that cultural milieu, which can be adapted for a variety of purposes. Heroicization is one possible such use of this stock of cultural material, but Gísli also uses his poetry to express his disappointment in the bathetic reality of his situation.

## 2.2 The Communal Dimensions of Vengeance

As discussed above, the conceptualisation of Gísli's approach to vengeance as being anachronistic derives in part from the notion that Gísli's legal and moral thought is primarily individualistic, in the sense that it relies on him as an individual to take whatever actions he sees fit to ensure that vengeance is done, rather than preferring the ostensibly more communal legal process required by wider society. Some *Íslendingasögur* appear to represent these kinds of approaches to legality, which prioritise the individual and his or her more immediate community over broader societal concerns. A key example is the sworn-brotherhood ritual depicted in *Fóstbræðra saga*, in which the sworn-brothers Þorgeirr and Þormóðr implicitly claim the right to take revenge for each other regardless of whether normative society validates their actions, thereby rejecting its claim to be the sole arbiter of legal disputes (see 5.1.2).

Gísli's own approach to matters of legality and vengeance, however, is rather different; he does not attack others without provocation, as the sworn-brothers often do, and is relatively restrained in his use of violence to take revenge. Whilst he is not averse to killing or maiming his enemies in order to achieve vengeance, Gísli, as will be shown in this section, nevertheless abides by an ethics of balance and equivalence in this process, which suggests his actions are primarily motivated by communal impulses. Gísli is also often provoked into taking revenge by shaming *níð* insults made against him, which constitute an inherently disruptive rejection of the individual's legitimate position within his community: they demand a response by the individual in order for them to retain their social standing, leaving them with little choice but to act. Finally, it is argued that the significance of Gísli's reticence to take revenge after Vésteinn's death has been underplayed. Gísli is hardly eager to kill his brother-in-law Þorgrímur at the first opportunity, and initially responds to his loss by

trying to ‘lump it’, that is, to deal with the transgression by deliberately not responding to it in the hope that this will avoid the continuation of the feud. This aspect of the saga paints a rather different picture of Gísli, not as a man desperate for vengeance, but one attempting to suppress the shame of his own family’s having been directly involved in the death of his sworn-brother. Gísli does not simply follow his own desires in taking revenge, but reacts in accordance with the overriding social expectations that require him to take vengeance, and which also determine the form that this vengeance must take.

**2.2.1 Equivalence and expectation in feud.** Gísli’s approach to revenge is not simply born out of a desire to prioritise his individual autonomy over the cultural values of his social group, but emerges directly out of the social discourse of feud and honour, which was central to Old Norse–Icelandic ideas of morality. Aron Gurevich (1985, 160–61) suggests that it would be inaccurate to understand morality within pre-Christian Germanic societies as emerging primarily from individual opinion, rather than from communal factors:

Membership of a social order or stratum in barbarian society determined the behaviour of the individual in that society. All aspects of his life were regulated: it was known in advance how he was to behave in this or that situation; personal choice hardly entered into it. Each and every action was strictly prescribed by virtue of his belonging to one group or another, and by an awareness of family or clan rather than personal honour ... In these circumstances, morality is not so much a hallmark of the individual, conditioned by his personal qualities and finding expression in his personal behaviour, as a qualitative system proper to his family, his kin, his social stratum, in the same way as his rights and obligations. In fact, these rights and obligations are inseparable from the ethical evaluation of the individuals who make up the group.

This is not to say that individuals within this societal structure could not make moral decisions, but rather to highlight that such a structure emphasised its conventional form of morality to the extent that the individual’s actions would be largely determined and judged not by his own consideration of how to behave in a given situation, but by his ability to fulfil the behavioural standards upheld by wider society. Heroic morality was individualistic in so far as it was the individual’s worth that was judged by their community, but it relied on the hero in question living up to a societal standard, not in deviating from that ideal because of their personal desires.

The various instances of Gísli taking revenge in the saga imply that Gísli operates within the context of feud discourse, which informed much of the legal process in both pre-Christian and Christian Iceland. This suggests that Gísli’s actions do not

deviate from societal standards of honour and morality, but are carefully formulated to fit into that cultural framework as closely as possible, as in his interactions with his enemies, Gísli acts on the principle of equivalence that underlies feud discourse. William Ian Miller (1983, 160) notes that ‘virtually all blood-feuding societies recognize a rough rule of equivalence in the prosecution of the feud’, and are opposed to instances of excessive vengeance: ‘Taking ten lives for one was not feud; it was either war or anarchy.’ Such equivalence lends acts of vengeance their quasi-legal status within such societies: to avoid a level of equivalence in punitive matters would be to sidestep the idea that such matters had any legal significance. As Miller (1990, 182) points out, the ideal of equivalence underpinned not only the Icelanders’ concept of feud, but also formal disputes within the normative legal system:

The Icelanders did have a model of feud and of the disputing process. It was a model of balance and reciprocity. The central notion was one of requital, of repayment ... Wrongs done to someone, like gifts given to him, unilaterally make the recipient a debtor, someone who owes requital. But in the world of feud, unlike the world of gift-exchange, the debts are debts of blood.

For a saga hero to adhere to a principle of equivalence in feuding therefore indicates a legal mindset attuned to communal expectations, rather than one reacting against the wider societal understanding of law and justice.

In terms of feud discourse, it is significant that even though Gísli often responds to insults with violence, he does not generally act as the aggressor in the saga. He does not instigate the violent components of the disputes in which he is involved, apart from his killing of Bárðr early on in the saga; even that killing is not entirely unprovoked, however, as Bárðr illicitly seduces Gísli’s sister Þórdís against the wishes of her male kinsmen, refuses to stop visiting her, and insults both Gísli and his father in a particularly serious manner (see 2.2.2). Gísli does not seem to be a particularly overbearing or arrogant individual in any case, and does not use violence to attain either individual wealth or communal power; Vésteinn Ólason (2015, 188) describes him as ‘an unaggressive man who becomes heroic in defence of the honour of the family rather than in the pursuit of increased honour’.

Gísli is also considerably more restrained than other figures in the saga, such as his brother-in-law Þorgrímr (see 2.2.3) and Bárðr’s kinsman Hólmǫngu-Skeggi, both of whom impose violence on others to further their own agendas. By contrast, Gísli tends only to respond to violence, as is the case in his encounters with those

two men. In some episodes, the saga's use of literary forms explicitly reflects the ideas of reciprocity and equivalence that frame Gísli's reactions to the violence perpetrated against him and his kin. This is evident in the verses used to punctuate the physical attacks in Gísli's duel with Hólmǫngu-Skeggi (*Gísli*, 10–11):

Skeggi hefir sverð þat, er Gunnlogi hét, ok høggr með því til Gísli, ok gall við hátt. Þá mælti Skeggi:

Gall Gunnlogi,  
gaman vas Sǫxu.

Gísli hjó í móti með høggsþjóti ok af sporðinn skildinum ok af honum fótinn ok mælti:

Hrökk hræfrakki,  
hjók til Skeggja.

Skeggi had that sword that was called Gunnlogi, and struck with it at Gísli, and it rang out loudly. Then Skeggi spoke:

Gunnlogi rang out;  
there was pleasure for Saxa.

Gísli struck against him with his halberd, and sliced off the lower pointed-end of the shield and his leg, and spoke:

Hræfrakki fell back;  
I struck at Skeggi.<sup>9</sup>

Not only does Gísli's action parallel Skeggi's, but his poetic response uses a similar meter and imagery to Skeggi's initial taunt. Gísli's strike and his poem are certainly more effective than Skeggi's, but his actions are still carefully framed as an equivalent response to those of his opponent. This form of aesthetic mirroring is foregrounded to an even greater extent in the verses following the confrontation during the ball-game between Gísli and Þorgrímr, where Þorgrímr is utterly outperformed, as well as being injured and humiliated, by Gísli (50):

Þorgrímr stóð seint upp; hann leit til haugsins Vésteins ok mælti:

Geirr í gumna sǫrum  
gnast; kannkat þat lasta.

Gísli tók knöttinn á skeiði ok rekr á milli herða Þorgrími, svá at hann steypðisk áfram, ok mælti:

Böllr á byrðar stalli

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<sup>9</sup> Holtsmark (1951, 20–27) argues that the words *Gunnlogi*, *Saxa*, and *Hræfrakki* in these verses are all names signifying weapons, and her conclusions have influenced this translation. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1980, 59–61) builds on Holtsmark's argument to suggest that these verses therefore represent a competition of sexual dominance between Gísli and Skeggi (see 2.2.2).

brast; kannkat þat lasta.

Þorgrímr stood up slowly; he looked at Vésteinn's burial-mound and spoke:

The spear clashed in the wounds of men; I cannot speak ill of it.

Gísli picked up the ball while running and flung it between Þorgrímr's shoulders, so that he fell down on his face, and spoke:

The ball crashed into the burden's support [= Þorgrímr's shoulders]; I cannot speak ill of it.

The two verses here are notably similar; both conclude with the declaration that *kannkat þat lasta*, and Clark (2007, 510) notes that Gísli's verse 'mirrors Þorgrímr's *kviðlingr* exactly in form', if not necessarily in the seriousness of their content at face-value. The physical actions accompanying these verses, however, are less obviously equivalent than in the duel with Skeggi. Whilst Þorgrímr seriously insults Vésteinn, and by extension Gísli for not having avenged his sworn-brother, he does not physically attack Gísli. This point is addressed in the next section, which deals specifically with how Þorgrímr's insult works to shame Gísli and to require repudiation from him (see 2.2.2). For now, it is sufficient to highlight that Gísli's use of the same poetic form as his rival in this episode suggests that the saga-writer wishes to emphasise to the audience that there is a level of equivalence in Gísli's response: his sudden attack on Þorgrímr is not unprovoked, but rather functions as a direct reciprocal action to his brother-in-law's insult.

The idea of balance is also apparent from Gísli's climactic slaying of Þorgrímr in revenge for his earlier killing of Vésteinn. Gísli uses the same weapon, *Grásíða*, to kill Þorgrímr as Þorgrímr used to kill Vésteinn; both attacks take place at night; and both Vésteinn and Þorgrímr are killed by having the spear plunged through them while they are lying in bed, although Gísli strikes Þorgrímr so hard with *Grásíða* that *í beðinum nam stað* 'it stuck in the bed' (*Gísla*, 54). Gísli's actions are portrayed more negatively in this scene than in the previous examples discussed, but this is a consequence of the fact that his killing of Þorgrímr constitutes a truly extra-legal act, rather than a form of more socially acceptable violence, such as those that he performs during the organised duel and the pre-arranged ball-game.<sup>10</sup> That Gísli is

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<sup>10</sup> The general impression from the depictions of various *knattleikar* 'ball-games' and *skofuleikar* 'scraper-games' in the *Íslendingasögur* is that roughness, violence, and even death were an expected part of these games. The ball-game later on in *Gísla saga* between Þorgrímr and Þorsteinn Annmarkason ends with Þorgrímr breaking Þorsteinn's bat, leading Þorsteinn to hurl Þorgrímr to the ground; a fight also breaks out after the game over which of the men played the best (*Gísla*, ch. 18). In a more extreme case in *Harðar saga*, the scraper-games between the followers of Hǫrðr and of Kolgrímr inn gamli

nevertheless shown to perform the killing in such a way as to parallel the earlier events surrounding Vésteinn’s death suggests that the saga intends for its audience to recognise Gísli’s actions as being legalistic—if not legal—in their nature. These actions occupy a moral grey area, in which, despite the problems in Gísli’s rejection of normative legality, there is a familiar set of legal values present underpinning the otherwise unfamiliar actions that the audience witnesses.

Finally, it is also important to consider in relation to this episode that Gísli only takes revenge for Vésteinn’s death by killing Þorgrímr, even though he has accomplices in Þorkell and the *seiðr*-user Þorgrímr nef. The saga suggests Gísli is aware of both Þorkell’s and Nef’s parts in the crime, as mentioned above (see 2.1.3), and when his foster-daughter Guðríðr tells him that she found Þorgrímr, Þorkell, and Nef together, all fully armed for conflict, shortly after Vésteinn’s death, Gísli replies that *slíks var at ván* ‘such was to be expected’ (*Gísli*, 45). Gísli is unwilling to take vengeance on his own brother, Þorkell, but presumably would have no such qualms about dealing with Nef, yet he takes only the equivalent single life for Vésteinn’s death in his parallel killing of Þorgrímr. In fact, Gísli does not take vengeance on Nef until much later in the saga, and does so only after he is able to frame that killing in terms of a different equivalence, namely as revenge for Þorkr’s having killed Nef’s sister Auðbjörg (chs 18–19). Auðbjörg is, like her brother, a *seiðr*-user, and her son Þorsteinn is friends with Gísli; the saga shows Gísli encouraging Þorsteinn to play as roughly as he can against Þorkr in the course of a ball-game, which leads to a fight afterwards between Þorsteinn and Þorkr’s supporter Bergr. After Bergr injures Þorsteinn, Auðbjörg creates a magical snowstorm that causes an avalanche to crash into Bergr’s household, killing twelve men. Þorkr subsequently has Auðbjörg seized and stoned to death; Gísli immediately administers the same punishment to Nef, having him stoned and buried next to his sister. Given that Nef is not involved in the case surrounding Auðbjörg and Bergr, it is probable that Gísli simply uses the opportunity—or perhaps even creates it, through his manipulation of Þorsteinn’s behaviour—to take vengeance on Nef for his part in Vésteinn’s death. It is notable, however, that Gísli frames his killing of Nef as being an equivalent response to Auðbjörg’s death: the methods of punishment are the same, and the ostensible motivation for Gísli’s actions is that Nef, like Auðbjörg, is a *seiðr*-user and is

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result in several of Kolgrímr’s men dying, but no charges are brought against any of Hqrðr’s men (*Harðar*, ch. 23).

therefore dangerous. Gísli’s method is extra-legal, especially because he has no concrete evidence linking Nef to Vésteinn’s death or to the case involving Auðbjörg, but it is nevertheless accepted by Borkr and his followers: no vengeance is taken for Nef, despite Borkr’s association with him (see 2.3.1), and Gísli is not criticised for his actions. It is the underlying principle of equivalence, however, that ensures the legalistic idea of ‘a witch for a witch’ is understood by Gísli’s opponents. Gísli’s approach to vengeance is bound up with his community’s expectations of how he should act in that situation; it is implicitly understood by Gísli’s enemies, and functions along similar legalistic principles as the normative legal system, despite there being specific differences between the processes.

**2.2.2 *Níð, ergi, and social disruption.*** Even though Gísli responds to the insults made against him in a manner of equivalence, it is unlikely that this balance of aesthetic form and moral exactitude would affect an audience’s perception of Gísli’s actions if there were not also especially compelling motivations for Gísli to respond to these insults in the first place. In this respect, it is significant that many of incidents that motivate Gísli to seek revenge at various times in the saga constitute shame insults—most commonly *níð* insults, which were often made against men to call into question their manliness. Such insults are particularly important on a communal level, as they do not permit the accused individual the choice of simply walking away from his aggressor. If left unaddressed, they have clear implications not only for the place of the individual within his community, but also for the fundamental existence of the community itself.

The idea that the object of a *níð* insult is ‘required’ to respond to the affront cannot be understated, as it is vital to an understanding of why these insults held such weight. The necessity to answer one’s accuser arises out of the fact that *níð* insults constitute inherently violent attacks on the legitimacy of the victim’s membership of his society, as they accuse that man of being *argr* ‘unmanly, perverse, craven’ (n. *ergi* ‘unmanliness, perversity, cravenness’). To be considered as *argr* by others was an utterly damning status to hold within Old Norse–Icelandic society; the concept of *ergi* entailed what the culture perceived to be the worst elements of behavioural transgressions and non-personhood (see especially: Ström 1974; Meulengracht Sørensen 1980). Although it encompassed a variety of perceived transgressions, *ergi* was generally characterised by allegations of sexual perversity; for men, these often



took the form of their being accused of having been penetrated during sexual intercourse, thereby assuming what society held to be the normative sexual role of women. Such a reversal of conventional sexual practices would have constituted a serious transgression of the norms within Old Norse–Icelandic culture, as Jochens (1996, 74) observes: ‘Whereas a woman was expected to receive a penis or expel a baby, for men both actions ... were considered repulsive.’ Whilst the concept reaches back to pre-Christian times, accusations of *ergi* also retained prominent legal significance within the later Christianised society that produced the written sagas. In order to maintain social cohesion, for example, *Grágás* allowed any man who had been called *argr* either to pursue the case at court, where he was permitted to demand the highest possible level of compensation, or to kill his accuser with impunity (*Grágás St*, 392 [‡ 376]).

*Níð* refers to the actualization of this concept into an insult, the nature of which was inherently socially disruptive because of the cultural and legal seriousness of accusations of *ergi*. Folke Ström (1974, 20) suggests that the most important function of *níð* was that it essentially ‘branded’ a man as having been deemed socially unacceptable, from which it is apparent that *níð*’s most damaging aspect was its ability fundamentally to differentiate the individual from the other people in their community. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1980, 32) similarly emphasises *níð*’s socially disruptive nature:

The purpose of *níð* is to terminate a period of peace or accentuate a breach of the peace and isolate an opponent from society by declaring that he is unworthy to be a member. The man attacked must show that he is fit to remain in the community, by behaving as a man in the system of Norse ethics; that is to say, he must challenge his adversary to battle, or avenge himself by blood-revenge.

Karen Swenson (1991, 11) builds on this argument to suggest that *níð* should be considered not just in ethical terms, but rather as a quasi-legal concept, noting that *níð* generally manifests itself ‘as a performative utterance with legal and ritual force’. The performative aspect is especially important, as the public nature of a *níðing* meant that it did not only affect the immediate relationship between the accuser and the object of his insult, but also had significant consequences for the latter’s place in society on a much wider scale. Thomas Markey (1972, 13) describes this effect, in terms of social hierarchy, as a ‘liminal defamation in a ritual of status reversal’, by

which ‘a king is transformed into a wanderer devoid of power’ and ‘a courageous warrior is transformed into a coward and a social outcast’.

*Níð* therefore constitutes a violent repudiation of the existing power dynamics underpinning the community in question, and seeks to break down that social structure by calling into question the legitimacy of the communal position afforded to those at its normative centre. The pressure on the accused individual to respond to such an insult emerges from society as much as from the individual; what is at stake is not only that person’s status within the community, but also the validity of the societal structure itself. In this way, *níð* insults create a state of social disruption in which the object of the insult is placed in a position of ambiguity, in terms of the validity of their social status within normative society, and must take decisive action in order to retain their place within the community. As Bjørn Bandlien (2017, 259) notes, ‘A free man was rendered “in-between” during the period between a defamatory act and its counter-act.’ This ‘in-between’ status would remain unresolved until the insult had either been confirmed—usually by the individual’s passivity or failure to rise to his opponent’s challenge—at least for those who were witness to the act, or successfully repudiated through violence or law, with the individual’s position within the community denied or reinforced respectively. *Níð* should be understood as functioning primarily on a communal level, driven by the strict behavioural expectations behind the concept.

Given how socially disruptive these insults are, it is important to emphasise that Gísli does not have much practical choice as to whether he reacts to them in the first place. His responses in these episodes are not simply the decisions of an individual reacting against a personal slight, but are reactions to the most chaotic moments in the saga narrative, in which Gísli’s standing within his community is rendered symbolically unstable. Gísli must respond successfully to these insults if he is to retain any sort of position within that community; his failure to do so would itself be socially disruptive, as it would leave his family in danger of being bullied or coerced in their dealings with other households and would hand over power to the aggressors within the district. An individual made the object of an allegation of being *argr* has to react to it in a suitable way: if they fail to do so, they run the serious risk of being entirely dislocated from the community.

In Gísli’s duel against Hólmǫngu-Skeggi, the *níð* aspect of the insult is especially clear. When Skeggi begins to suspect that neither Gísli nor Kolbjørn will

attend the arranged duel, he decides to shame them by ordering his servant Refr to construct a *trénið* ‘an insulting wooden effigy’ of the two men in a sexual position (*Gísla*, 10):

Skeggi kom til hólmsins ok segir upp hólmgöngulög ok haslar völlum Kolbírni ok sér eigi hann þar kominn né þann, er gangi á hólminn fyrir hann. Refr hét maðr, er var smiðr Skeggja. Hann bað, at Refr skyldi gera mannlíkan eptir Gísli ok Kolbírni,—‘ok skal annarr standa aptar en annarr, ok skal níð þat standa ávallt, þeim til háðungar.’

Skeggi arrived at the island and declared the rules of the duel and set up the wooden poles for Kolbjörn, and saw that he had not arrived there, nor had someone to second him in the duel. There was a man called Refr, who was Skeggi’s craftsman. He declared that Refr should make an effigy in the likeness of Gísli and Kolbjörn—‘and one shall stand behind the other, and that shame shall always stand to their disgrace.’

Given the transgressive sexual connotations underlying *níð*, Skeggi’s demand that the figures in the effigy be arranged so that *annarr standa aptar en annarr* means that the *trénið* is meant to stand as an accusation of same-sex intercourse between Gísli and Kolbjörn, thereby calling into question the normative societal position of each man.<sup>11</sup> Gísli, who has been waiting in the forest, reveals himself to Skeggi before the *trénið* can be constructed, but the implicit insult nonetheless stands against him until he responds to it through violent action.

Þorgrímr’s verse during the ball-game between him and Gísli similarly functions as a shame-insult against Gísli, as Clark (2007, 510) argues that Þorgrímr ‘is publicly exulting over Vésteinn’s murder, and, since it has not yet been avenged, he is also implicitly shaming Gísli for failing in his duty of revenge, which is of course linked with masculine reputation’. Þorgrímr insults Gísli by reminding him of his failure to fulfil his obligation to avenge Vésteinn, his brother-in-law and sworn-brother, thereby calling into question Gísli’s manliness, for it was a man’s duty to avenge his kinsmen, and his reputation depended on his ability and willingness to do so.<sup>12</sup> This idea was bound up with the concept of *ergi*, as is apparent from the famous proverb

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<sup>11</sup> The text is not explicit about whether it is Gísli or Kolbjörn who has been placed in the passive sexual role within this effigy. Ström (1974, 12) suggests that it is probably Kolbjörn, whom Skeggi is expecting at the duel, and thinks that the saga is therefore inaccurate in Skeggi’s declaration that the *níð* should shame both Kolbjörn and Gísli. Meulengracht Sørensen (1980, 57–58), however, convincingly argues that the *trénið* does accuse both men of *ergi*, but on different grounds: Kolbjörn because he has been sexually penetrated by Gísli, and Gísli because he has perpetrated a societal transgression by penetrating his prospective brother-in-law.

<sup>12</sup> The specific wording used by Þorgrímr to declare that *geirr í gumna sórum / gnast* ‘the spear clashed in the wounds of men’ (*Gísla*, 50) may also be significant here, as *gumna* is a genitive plural. It is usually taken to refer to Vésteinn alone, as Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson note in the Íslenzk fornrit edition of the saga, but it is possible that Þorgrímr intends the insult to refer to multiple people—in this case, both Vésteinn, who lies unavenged, and Gísli, who has failed to avenge him.

in *Grettis saga* that *þræll einn þegar hefnið, en argr aldri* ‘a slave alone takes vengeance immediately, but an unmanly man never’ (*Grettla*, 44). The same concept occurs earlier on in the saga, when Bárðr insults Gísli and his father by dismissively declaring them to be *ómagar* ‘men who cannot sustain themselves’ (*Gísla*, 7), which refers generally to the dependants of those with greater societal power or physical ability, including children, the elderly, those affected by disabilities, and the impoverished (*Zoëga*, 459). Bárðr’s insult functions in a similar way to Þorgrímr’s: he accuses Gísli and Þorbjörn súr of failing to uphold their proper responsibilities as male kinsmen, especially as he has been visiting Þórdís without their consent, and of being relatively passive figures, such as young babies or aged men, who had comparatively little societal or individual power.

Because these insults all constitute forms of *níð* in their attacks on the manliness of Gísli and his kinsmen, and because the social distortion created by such *níð*-insults requires an active response on the part of the subject of the insult, it is no surprise that Gísli feels compelled to respond to them—after all, his position within society is at stake. It is important to note, however, that these episodes do not simply portray Gísli in a positive light for having responded to those insults in the expected manner, but demonstrate the problems that arise from answering such insults, despite there being immense communal pressures to do so. Responding to a *níð* insult does not in itself stop the feud, as such responses are themselves also determined by the conceptual parameters of *ergi*. An accusation of passivity must, by necessity, be countered by a demonstration of action: a charge of sexual submissiveness must be countered by a demonstration of sexual dominance. Previous scholars have shown that Gísli’s responses themselves contain elements of *níð*. Meulengracht Sørensen (1980, 59–61) suggests that during the fight against Skeggi, Gísli uses his verse to highlight the phallic qualities of his weapon shortly after cutting off his opponent’s leg, thereby implying his sexual dominance over Skeggi. Similarly, Clark (2007, 509–13) argues that there are strong elements of phallic aggression in both Gísli’s response to Þorgrímr during the ball-game and his secret-killing of him; he suggests that the specific wording used in the latter scene may even carry the implication that Gísli sexually arouses Þorgrímr before he kills him in order to ensure that his brother-in-law’s shame is complete. The components of phallic aggression in Gísli’s actions reveal the more punitive side of feud-discourse: for a shaming insult to be countered, the initial instigator of the conflict must also be humiliated in some way.

The importance of shame, particularly *níð*, in Old Norse–Icelandic feud-discourse is problematic, as such shame-insults constitute violent distortions of social norms, but require equally violent resolutions. The idea that when one has been insulted, one must in turn insult the perpetrator in order to reach that balance, is hardly a good foundation for a system to favour arbitration, as is demonstrated by the fact that Gísli’s distribution of justice is itself characterised by being bloody and violent, despite his not instigating any of these conflicts. Gísli’s actions in these scenes are not explicitly endorsed by his community, but they do appear to be required by it. Communal expectations demand that the humiliated individual both disprove the accusation and shame their accuser in turn; the primary problem with *níð* is that these expectations are given such prominence, rather than that the individual in question responds to such insults. *Níð* is a form of social disruption that cannot go unaddressed, and the individual’s capacity to decide how they act is seriously restricted by the need to form a suitable response to these insults.

**2.2.3 ‘Lumping it’: Gísli’s attempt at inaction?** From the above analyses of the communal aspects of Gísli’s vengeance, it should be clear that when Gísli responds to wrongs committed against him, he ensures that his actions are roughly equivalent to his injuries, and that in reality he has little choice as to whether he can ignore such offences, given the seriousness of *níð*-insults. In focusing on the acts of revenge in the saga, however, there is a danger of overlooking the events leading up to Gísli’s killing of Þorgrímr, the most critical instance of vengeance in the text. Although these events culminate in Gísli violently and illicitly killing his brother-in-law, the intervening episodes between Vésteinn and Þorgrímr’s deaths suggest that Gísli is not particularly eager to undertake blood-vengeance, to the extent that he tries to avoid taking revenge at all. The idea that Gísli hesitates to respond to Vésteinn’s death has been mentioned in this chapter in reference to Gísli’s use of his verses about Auðr to warn Þorkell about the possibility of vengeance (see 2.1.3), and it will be useful to return to this idea here in relation to the concept of ‘lumping it’ in feud.

‘Lumping it’ is one of several approaches that Andersson and Miller (1989, 23–34) list as having been available to disputants in medieval Icelandic legal cases. Some of these approaches, including ‘adjudication’, ‘arbitration’, ‘mediation’, and ‘negotiation’, are familiar terms within the context of critical material about the Icelandic system of civil law, as they all take place within the normative legal

framework of Icelandic society. These terms are distinguished in Andersson and Miller’s classification depending on the number of participants involved in the reconciliation process and the extent to which the disputants enter into the process with a fixed idea as to who has the power ultimately to issue a decision over the case. ‘Negotiation’, for example, is a dyadic process between the parties directly involved in the case, whereas the other approaches rely on a third party having a role; these approaches are differentiated primarily according to how much power the third party is given and the source of that empowerment. Both ‘arbitration’ and ‘adjudication’ involve the third party having the power to decide the case, but the former requires the disputants themselves to hand over power, whereas ‘adjudication’ occurs when the party is empowered independently of the disputants’ wishes. ‘Mediation’ refers to disputes where a third party is involved, but has no power to decide the case.

In connection with extra-legal approaches, Andersson and Miller list the related categories of ‘violence’ and ‘coercion’, which together generally refer to ‘the “procedure” that includes vengeance killing, sheep-raiding, or bullying’ (24). Gísli’s killing of Þorgrímr unambiguously falls under the category of ‘violence’, but in itself this act does not tell the entire story of Gísli’s reaction to Vésteinn’s death. As Andersson and Miller put it, ‘feud was something more than active violence’, and constituted ‘the whole process by which people in hostile competition regulated their affairs’ (23). In terms of analysing the events that take place in between Vésteinn’s and Þorgrímr’s deaths, which are themselves indicative of the wider feud between the two men, it is important to consider the final two categories that Andersson and Miller list, which are ‘avoidance’ and ‘lumping it’. These concepts are related, but differ in how the parties involved in the dispute come to relate to each other (24):

*Avoidance* means acting on the dispute by withdrawing from contact with the other disputant. Relations are severed. Depending on the relative power of the disputants, this could be a fairly powerful sanction or a sign of weakness. But exercising this option in Iceland required some delicacy if it was to be done without losing face, for avoidance could always be mistaken for cowardice.

*Lumping it* is different from avoidance in that the parties still maintain relations, but the aggrieved party chooses to ignore his grievance. In Iceland, sitting on one’s rights was with little exception considered a sign of weakness, although the powerful could choose to ignore an offense as a way of showing contempt for the offender.

Whilst the demands of honour in Old Norse–Icelandic culture primarily incentivised individuals to pursue either blood-vengeance or monetary compensation in feud disputes, victims of the offence may have been persuaded to ‘lump’ their misfortunes

in particularly difficult circumstances, albeit often at a social cost of being thought of as cowardly. Laura Nader and Harry Todd Jr. (1978, 9) suggest that people who decide to ‘lump it’ would usually base their choices ‘on feelings of relative powerlessness or on the social, economic, or psychological costs involved in seeking a solution’. There is some evidence in the sagas that this approach was valued in situations in which there was a low possibility of successfully resolving a dispute; in *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, Spá-Gils tells Oddr Kǫtluson that when one is not sure who has committed a crime, *er betra at missa síns en stór vandræði hljótask af* ‘it is better to carry your loss than for great trouble to result from it’ (*Eyrbyggja*, 34).

In Gísli’s case, the psychological costs of pursuing the feud are clear: not only does he lack strong enough evidence to prosecute Þorgrímr through the normative legal system, but the circumstantial evidence that leads him to suspect Þorgrímr’s culpability for Vésteinn’s death is that Þorgrímr, Þorkell, and Nef were found fully armed immediately after Vésteinn was killed, which directly implicates Þorkell. As Vésteinn Ólason (2003, xiv) notes, the conflict is tragic because the individuals involved are ‘so closely linked that all options seem equally unappealing’, meaning that ‘vengeance is bound to hurt the avenger himself’. Instead, Gísli attempts to ‘lump’ his friend’s loss. He tries to discourage Þorkell from provoking him to consider vengeance (see 2.1.3), and subsequently agrees to recommence the ball-games between their households to show that there are still warm relations between them; this return to normality is reinforced in the saga’s claim that *tókusk nú upp leikar sem ekki hefði í orðit* ‘they then took up the games as if nothing had happened’ (*Gísla*, 49). Gísli is notably violent in his game against Þorgrímr, but not without provocation (see 2.2.2), and the primary social outcome of the games is only the impression that *fætkaðisk nú heldr með þeim Þorgrími ok Gísla* ‘things now grew rather cold between Þorgrímr and Gísli’ (*Gísla*, 50). In general, the perceived communal relationship between the households does not dramatically alter because of the games; Gísli is unwilling to endure abuse from his brother-in-law, but does not actively seek to avoid or confront him.

The schism occurs only when Þorgrímr begins to over-assert himself against Gísli in sending for the tapestries that Vésteinn had bought to give to Þorkell, and which had been left with Gísli after Vésteinn’s death. Þorkell himself recognises the potential disruptiveness of this request and refuses to countenance it, declaring that *allt kann sá, er hófit kann, ok mun ek eigi eptir þeim senda* ‘he knows all who knows

moderation, and I will not send for them’ (51). Undeterred, Þorgrímr sends Þorkell’s dependant Geirmundr to fetch the tapestries, but not before slapping the boy, who vows to take revenge. He does so by deceiving Gísli, already disturbed by the request, as to Þorkell’s intentions, telling him his brother had approved the errand; upon hearing this, Gísli declares that *þat skal ærit eitt til* ‘that alone must be sufficient for it’ (51–52). Whilst Gísli puts up with Þorgrímr being overbearing, he is unwilling to suffer such indignity from his brother, who has benefited from his silence, even though Þorkell has not actually behaved as Geirmundr says and is surprised by Gísli’s response when Geirmundr returns with the tapestries: *Ólíkr er Gísli qðrum mǫnnum í þolinmæði, ok hefir hann betr en vér* ‘Gísli is unlike other people in his forbearance, and he has the better of us’ (52). Subsequent events do not bear out Þorkell’s analysis, but it is significant that Gísli is motivated to carry out his vengeance only after multiple insults from Þorgrímr and, as he believes, from Þorkell, and otherwise attempts to maintain the truce between their households.

Gísli therefore does not appear to be particularly single-minded in his approach to taking revenge for Vésteinn’s death. Andersson (2006, 81) suggests that Gísli suffers in comparison to his sister Þórdís, who he argues has ‘a keen sense of conflicting loyalties, a quandary to which Gísli seems quite oblivious’, but the evidence of the text itself suggests quite the contrary. Gísli has a keen understanding of the various systems of loyalty and obligation at work, which is why he is unable to take action until Þorkell, at least in Gísli’s mind, and Þorgrímr overstep the mark through immoderate actions. That Gísli is ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavour does not mean he is either unaware of or indifferent towards these social conflicts; rather, it indicates that the overwhelming social nature of the conflict is too much for him, as an individual, to overcome. Gísli’s conduct is, at least to some extent, characterised by a degree of moderation (Vésteinn Ólason 1999, 173). On realising that he cannot fulfil the communal expectations to take vengeance without breaking obligations to his surviving kinsmen, Gísli attempts to ‘lump’ his loss, but when Þorgrímr does not allow him to do so honourably, he is left with no choice but to seek revenge.

### **2.3 Differences in Legal Thought**

In arguing against interpretations of Gísli as a primarily anachronistic figure, it is also necessary to address the assumption underpinning those readings, that the



members of normative society other than Gísli share a cohesive worldview about how the legal process should work, and indeed about what the purpose of the law should be. As has been detailed in the previous section, vengeance in the saga is driven primarily by communal expectations, and Gísli is far from the only character to be defined by his involvement in matters of revenge. Indeed, his brother-in-law Bqrkr's role in the narrative is almost entirely focused around his attempts to kill Gísli or to have him killed; Bqrkr uses the normative legal process to pursue Gísli, but he is willing to operate in an extra-legal capacity as well in order to hunt down his enemy. Porkell, on the other hand, is defined largely by his implicit opposition to normative cultural values, whilst Gísli's sister Þórdís appears to endorse the normative legal system, like her husband Bqrkr, but with a notably different purpose in mind, which is to achieve a form of justice that does not necessarily entail vengeance. The following discussion demonstrates how the saga includes a variety of differences in legal thought between these characters, which, when they come into conflict, showcase how the normative legal system can be purposed by different people to various ends, some more problematic than others.

**2.3.1 Bqrkr: a means to an end.** More than his brother-in-law Gísli, Bqrkr is associated with the saga's depiction of the normative legal system; after all, he brings the case of outlawry against Gísli, and he follows it through by appointing Eyjólfur to hunt down the outlawed Gísli. Taylor Culbert (1959, 157) argues that Bqrkr's primary role in the saga is therefore to function as a societal figurehead, representing the acceptable method by which to prosecute wrongdoers within a large-scale community, as opposed to Gísli's approach:

Inasmuch as Bqrkr was instrumental in obtaining the judgement of outlawry against Gísli, his persecution, which was carried on by several agents, represents not merely personal vengeance but also the official pursuit of its enemy by society. The verdict of the Thing, in other words, sanctioned Bqrkr's private actions and, in effect, publicly commissioned him to hunt down Gísli on behalf of the entire community.

The saga's consistently negative depiction of Bqrkr, however, does not suggest that his association with normative legality in the saga is a resounding endorsement of that system. In fact, Bqrkr's actions throughout the saga do more to problematise the normative system of Icelandic law than to reinforce it as a superior counterpart to Gísli's approach. This is because Bqrkr and Gísli are similar in terms of the

motivations behind their legal approaches, as, despite differing in the details, both men essentially use different methods to seek revenge. Despite Þorkr pursuing Gísli in a manner deemed more legitimate by normative society than Gísli, who is unable to go through the normative legal system to achieve justice (see 2.2.3), the saga depicts Þorkr and his follower Eyjólfur, whom Þorkr tasks with killing Gísli, more negatively than the outlawed man. This may result from the relentless, almost over-zealous approach that Þorkr takes in hunting down Gísli; whilst Gísli is comparatively reluctant to take vengeance on Þorgrímur, Þorkr shows no such restraint towards his own brother-in-law.

It is important to emphasise here, however, that Þorkr's relentlessness in pursuing Gísli is not a result of his misusing or going against the spirit of the normative legal system itself. Although the legal system of the Icelandic Commonwealth generally incentivised its members to resolve disputes peacefully and moderately, it did not discourage those disputants who had had other men outlawed against subsequently taking blood-vengeance on those outlaws. Indeed, as Miller (1990, 239) notes, 'going to law did not mean forgoing revenge', but 'was often a sensible way of going about it', as 'the legitimacy acquired by the judgment made it easier to gather support to hunt down the outlaw' and 'may even had led someone else to kill [them]'. Nor did the written law-codes afford the successful disputant leniency in any further dealings they might have with the outlaw, as the Staðarhólsbók version of *Grágás* makes clear (*Grágás St*, 398 [‡ 380]; *Laws*, 236):

Ef sa er secðe lætr undan ganga scogar maNinn. oc varðar honom þat scog Gang oc eigo þeir menn söc þá er honom förðo manniN enda er hann af biorgum öllum við aðra menn vm scogar maNiN. Ef sa maðr er secþi sendir scogar mann a hendr avðrom mönnum eða bergr hann honom i nokoro. þa er hann af biorg allri við alla menn aðra enda varðar honom scog Gang oc a hvert er vill at sökia hann vm þat. at hann hafe borgit scogar Manne þeim er hann secðe siálfv vís vitande oc lata varða scog Gang oc telia hann af biorgum öllum scogar manzens. oc telia ser sakirnar.

If the man who got him condemned lets the outlaw go, the penalty is outlawry and the case lies with the men who took the man to him, and he further loses every right to proceed against people who assist the outlaw. If the man who got him condemned sends an outlaw to other men or assists him in any way, then he loses the right to proceed against anyone else who assists the outlaw, and his penalty is outlawry and the case lies with anyone who wishes to prosecute him for it on the grounds that he knowingly assisted an outlaw he himself had got condemned, and the prosecutor is to make outlawry the penalty and claim that he has lost all right to proceed against anyone who assists the outlaw and claim that such cases now lie with himself.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Given the technical nature of law-codes and the sensitivity that is therefore required in translating them, translations of quotations from *Grágás* are derived from the comprehensive modern English translation by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (= *Laws*), unless otherwise noted.

Formal law in medieval Iceland unequivocally opposed the idea that someone might forgive or assist anyone whom they had successfully had outlawed, partly to discourage unnecessary suits of outlawry being brought forth on minor charges. Although the laws do not require a successful disputant to pursue the person they have had outlawed, they do require them to kill that outlaw if they are able to do so (*Grágás K*, 189 [‡ 110]). Whilst Þorkr’s pursuit of Gísli is not required by the law’s treatment of outlawry, it is nevertheless endorsed by the law in spirit. This endorsement is represented in the *Íslendingasögur* in the depictions of those cases where a chieftain is unwilling to execute properly a suit of outlawry for which he was responsible. In *Droplaugarsona saga*, for example, Þorgrímr skinnhúfa asks the *goði* Helgi Ásmundarson to help him get compensation from Helgi Droplaugarson, whom Helgi had successfully had made a lesser outlaw the previous year, but who has defied his sentence by remaining in Iceland. Þorgrímr warns Helgi Ásmundarson that if he does not help him, he will tell other people that he cannot protect his *þingmenn* at assemblies because he is unable to enforce his suit against Helgi Droplaugarson; the threat of being shamed in this way convinces Helgi to help Þorgrímr in his case (*Droplaugarsona*, ch. 9). A chieftain who had his enemies outlawed could find himself in a rather precarious political position: if he did not properly follow through with the case, others might use the shame of his inaction as leverage in their own dealings with him, in much the same way as they might if he had not even attempted to gain some form of compensation in the first place.

Þorkr’s negative portrayal therefore does not result from his being overly aggressive in his use of the normative legal system, as that system was not incentivised to discourage such aggression in cases concerning outlaws and their enemies. This is not to say, however, that the saga itself endorses all the aspects of Þorkr’s attempts at taking vengeance. For one thing, Þorkr is not consistent in his use of the normative legal system; whilst he is relentless in trying to hunt down Gísli, he is quick to abandon the case against Þorkell’s killers, despite recognising that the responsibility for prosecuting Þorkell’s killers lies primarily with him as his brother-in-law (see 2.3.2). He appears interested in the system only in so far as it allows him to obtain what he wants—namely, Gísli’s death. Even if, as Culbert (1959, 157) puts it, Þorkr’s revenge against Gísli represents ‘the official pursuit of its enemy by society’, the communal aspects of justice appear to be less important to Þorkr himself than the personal aspect of revenge, given that he does not ensure Þorkell is

avenged or compensated. Despite his reluctance to bring the case against Þorkell's killers, Þorkr is unhappy with how he is viewed after this episode: *Þorkr unír nú illa við sína ferð ... ok hefir þó svá búit, mikla sneypu ok svívirðing af þessu máli* 'Þorkr was then discontented with his journey, and yet as things stood he received great ignominy and disgrace from this case' (*Gísla*, 92). Significantly, Þorkr's reaction is similar to his unhappiness at his trip to visit his brother, only for Gísli to kill Þorgrímr: *Þykkisk enga virðingarfor farit hafa vestr þangat, látit þvílíkan mann sem Þorgrímr var, en fengit enga leiðréttu* 'He thought it had not been an honourable journey to have gone west to that place, lost such a man as Þorgrímr was, and gained no redress' (60). There is, however, a crucial difference between the episodes. In the earlier case, Þorkr is not yet aware of the identity of Þorgrímr's killer and is unable to take legal action against a specific person. In the case of Þorkell's murder, however, Þorkr has a good idea as to who the culprits are; in fact, Helgi Vésteinnsson, one of the killers, addresses Þorkr while escaping, so that Þorkr *þykkisk nú vita af orðum þeim, er Helgi hafði mælt, at synir Vésteins muni verit hafa* 'then thought that he knew from those words that Helgi had spoken that they must have been Vésteinn's sons' (91). Yet Þorkr still passes up on his opportunity, and indeed his responsibility, to take vengeance through the legal system. It is notable, then, that whilst it is Þorkr himself who says that he has not enjoyed an honourable journey after Þorgrímr's death, primarily because he has not yet had the opportunity to avenge his brother's murder, the disgrace he receives after Þorkell's death stems not from his own thinking, but from the external disapproval of society. Þorkr has the agency and capacity to obtain legal justice for his brother-in-law, and yet still refuses to follow through with the case—hardly a consistent reaction from someone so closely associated with normative legality elsewhere in the text.

Þorkr not only fails to uphold these legal duties, but is also so zealous in pursuing Gísli that he does not always operate within the bounds of normative legal society, and does so only after attempting to punish Þorgrímr's killer by extra-legal means. As mentioned above, Þorkr is initially unaware that Gísli has killed Þorgrímr, but he does pay the *seiðr*-user Þorgrímr nef to curse the man responsible for his brother's death (56–57):

Þat er næst til tíðenda, at Þorkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni yrði ekki at björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit, þó at menn vildi duga honum. Oxi níu vetra gamall var honum

gefinn til þess. Nú flytr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi ok skelmiskap.

It happened next that Þorkr paid Þorgrímr nef to work a spell, so that there would be no protection for that person who had killed Þorgrímr, even if people wanted to help him. A nine-year-old ox was given to him for this. Then Þorgrímr performed the spell and made preparations for himself according to his habit, and constructed for himself a timber-frame, and he practised this sorcerously with all manner of unmanliness and devilry.

Bernadine McCreesh (1980, 59) observes that the saga's invective in describing Nef's ritual as being practised *með allri ergi ok skelmiskap* is exceptional among *Íslendingasögur*, because this represents 'a definite condemnatory moral judgement' atypical of saga narration. The text also describes Nef's evil nature even before he performs this ritual: *Hann var fullr af gørningum ok fjölkynngi ok var seiðskratti, sem mestr mátti verða* 'He was full of sorcery and witchcraft, and was a *seiðr*-user, as much as could be' (*Gísla*, 37). Nef's status as a *seiðr*-user is notable in that it contributes to the curse being framed by the text as an extra-legal act, primarily because of the liminal place that *seiðr* held in relation to normative society. Jochens (1996, 74) notes that there was a strong connection between *seiðr* and *ergi*, and Neil Price (2002, 210) suggests this link meant *seiðr* occupied a conceptual space at 'society's moral and psychological borders'. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2009, 414–15) points out that this association was also reflected by the legal system, where 'medieval law codes both in Norway and Iceland ... proscribe the use of magic'. Nef's act is therefore extra-legal in the sense that it is not endorsed by the normative legal system, and for Þorkr to employ Nef in this way, despite the Otherness associated with *seiðr*-rituals, indicates his motivation to obtain vengeance for Þorgrímr by any means possible, whether legal or otherwise.

After Þorkr discovers Gísli's culpability and brings the suit of outlawry against him, his first thought is to kill Gísli even before he has begun the legal proceedings or had a sentence passed. On the expedition to summons Gísli, Þorkr and his men spot Gísli and his slave Þórðr inn huglausi and immediately set off in pursuit of them; the saga is clear that Þorkr intends to kill Gísli, as when his men kill Þórðr, who is disguised as Gísli, it tells us that *þykkir nú minna happ í en þeir ætluðu, því at þeir kenndu þar Þórðr inn huglausa, er þeir ætluðu Gísli* 'there now seemed less luck in it than they had thought, because they recognised there Þórðr inn huglausi when they had thought it to be Gísli' (*Gísli*, 65). Þorkr only brings the case after his men fail to capture Gísli, at which point they *hverfa aprtr við svá búit til bæjarins ok búa*

*nú mál til á hendr Gísla um víg Þorgríms* ‘turn back to the farm with things standing thus, and then prepare the case against Gísli for the killing of Þorgrímr’ (66).<sup>14</sup>

Þorkr’s desire for vengeance ultimately makes him just as willing to circumvent the normative legal system as to use it to obtain legitimacy for his actions. At least in relation to Þorkr, that system does not represent a significantly different approach to obtaining justice as much as it does a means to an end, namely blood-vengeance.

**2.3.2 Þorkell’s rejection of kinship.** The second figure to be discussed in this section is Þorkell, Gísli’s brother and an accomplice in the killing of Vésteinn. Although Þorkell is closely connected to Þorkr after Þorgrímr’s death, the two are dissimilar in their relationship to the normative legal system. Whilst Þorkr operates within that system when it helps him to get revenge for Þorgrímr, Þorkell, like his brother, more generally acts extra-legally when it comes to disputes in which he is involved. Most prominently, Þorkell’s involvement in the plot to kill Vésteinn is central to Gísli’s conflicted reaction to the death. Where Þorkell differs from Gísli, however, is that his legal thought is characterised by an implicit rejection of his kinsmen in favour of figures external to the familial structure, which is an unusual attitude within the saga. When Þorkell acts in an extra-legal manner, he is typically motivated by selfish desires, rather than familial honour.

This is apparent in Þorkell’s reaction to Gísli’s killing of Bárðr in the shorter version of the saga.<sup>15</sup> When rumours spread of Bárðr’s having seduced Þórdís, her father Þorbjörn súr threatens him, but Bárðr refuses to stop his visits to Þórdís. Bárðr’s decision angers Gísli—although Vésteinn Ólason (1999, 168) notes that Gísli is initially more lenient in the longer version, confronting Kolbeinn only after he is persuaded to do so by his father—but it does not upset Þorkell, who is Bárðr’s friend and *var ... í bragði með honum* ‘was in cahoots with him [*i.e.* in the affair with Þórdís]’ (*Gísla*, 7). When Gísli kills Bárðr to protect Þórdís and the family’s honour,

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<sup>14</sup> This case is often taken to relate to Gísli’s killing of Þorgrímr Freysgoði, but Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson note that the longer version, which does not specifically mention that the case was brought against Þorgrímr, seems to understand it as relating to Gísli’s killing of Þorkr’s followers during their pursuit of him immediately prior; it declares that the case was brought *þviat nu voro bryn mala efni, oc þurfti nu eigi getsakir at sækia* ‘because now there was a clear case, and now there was no need to prosecute with loose imputations’ (*Gísla Ingr*, 43). This interpretation suggests that Þorkr has the same problem that Gísli has in attempting to avenge Vésteinn—of having only circumstantial, rather than firm, evidence—and acts similarly to Gísli by consequently pursuing the case in an extra-legal capacity. In both readings, it is notable that Þorkr does not bring the suit against Gísli before attempting to kill him without having already obtained legitimacy through the normative legal system.

<sup>15</sup> In the longer version of the saga, the equivalent character to Bárðr is named Kolbeinn.

Þorkell is furious at his brother; the saga observes that *aldri varð síðan jafnblítt með þeim bræðrum* ‘things were never so friendly afterwards between the brothers’ (8). Unwilling to return with Gísli to their father’s home, Þorkell rejects his brother’s jocular attempts at reconciliation and leaves the family dynamic. In the shorter version, he decides to stay with Hólmgöngu-Skeggi, but, in an unexpected turn of events, *eggjar mjök Skeggja at hefna Bárðar, frænda síns, en ganga at eiga Þórdísi, systur sína* ‘strongly urges Skeggi to avenge Bárðr, his kinsman, but to agree to marry Þórdís, his sister’ (8).

Implicit in the suggestion that Skeggi avenge Bárðr is Þorkell’s wish for Gísli to be killed for his actions, which, within this society, is a shocking thought for a man to have of any of his kinsmen, let alone his brother. The idea that any man who had killed his brother, or been involved in the killing, was utterly reprehensible is significant within Old Norse–Icelandic culture, particularly in eddic poetry. *Hávamál* lists in stt. 84–89 the types of people and objects that are not to be trusted, one of which is *bróðurbani sín* ‘the killer of his own brother’ (*Hávamál*, 340). Similarly, the seeress’s prophecy about the apocalyptic *ragnarök* ‘destruction of the powers [*i.e.* the gods]’ in *Völuspá* begins with a declaration that *bræðr munu berjask / ok at þönum verðask* ‘brothers will fight one another and become each other’s deaths’ (*Völuspá*, 302), the implication being that to slay one’s own brother was considered so taboo that were the offence to become commonplace, it would presage the end of the world. In saga literature, such offences are notable by their absence; Miller (1990, 160) observes that ‘in the entire saga corpus there is no patricide, nor for that matter is there matricide or fratricide, exactly the kind of enormities that would have been preserved had they occurred’. There are instances of violent conflict between foster-brothers and sworn-brothers, with perhaps the best-known example being Bolli Þorleiksson’s deeply troubling killing of his foster-brother Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga* (*Laxdæla*, ch. 49), but violence between fictive kinsmen was no more socially acceptable for occurring more frequently, as Carolyne Larrington (2015, 211) notes: ‘Foster-brother murder is strongly deplored; the killer’s reputation will suffer if he himself survives the conflict.’

It is significant that Þorkell, in the shorter version, goes against this ingrained cultural tradition so strongly in his urging Skeggi to take revenge for Bárðr, which necessarily entails Skeggi’s killing of Gísli. Vésteinn Ólason (1999, 168) notes that whereas Þorkell ‘behaves outrageously’ in the shorter version, the longer saga

presents Þorkell ‘more realistically’; Meulengracht Sørensen (1986, 239–40) argues that the shocking nature of the shorter version suggests that it must be ‘bungled to such a degree that it is difficult to see how an author and an audience ... familiar with saga attitudes could have accepted it’. It is probable, however, that the writer of the shorter version purposefully changed this aspect of Þorkell’s characterisation to portray Gísli in a more positive light, similarly to how the longer version depicts Gísli as being more moderate in his approach to Kolbeinn. Þorkell is partly reconciled with Gísli after his victory over Skeggi; the saga tells us that *var nú mjök vel í frændsemi þeira* ‘things then went very well in their relationship’ (*Gísli*, 11). Even so, Þorkell’s actions in these early stages of the shorter saga show him to be a disruptive figure within his kin-group, and a man who is considerably less loyal to his family than would be expected.

In a similar vein, Þorkell’s repeated questioning of Gísli about Auðr’s grief may be interpreted as a subtle form of violence against his brother (see 2.1.3). Despite Gísli’s attempts to warn Þorkell about the potential consequences of this course of action, as well as Gísli’s clear inner conflict over his decision to ‘lump’ Vésteinn’s death in order to maintain a good relationship with his brother, Þorkell’s selfish desire to know that he has hurt Auðr overrides his concern for his sibling, and he desists only when Gísli alludes to the possibility of vengeance through his comparison of Auðr to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. Even after the fragile peace between the brothers is restored, Þorkell still finds it necessary to tell Gísli that *eigi at síðr verðr hverr með sjálfum sér lengst at fara* ‘no less will each one travel by themselves for the longest time’, which signifies a loss of co-operative relations between the brothers, and to ask him not to grieve for Vésteinn in such a public manner that *menn renni þar af því grunum í* ‘people develop suspicions because of it’ (*Gísli*, 49). Whilst he informs Gísli about Þórdís’s betrayal and warns him that Þorkr intends to summons him, Þorkell gives Gísli no assistance during his outlawry that might compromise Þorkell personally. After the last occasion on which he asks Þorkell to give him assistance and is denied, Gísli declares *vita skaltu þat, at eigi mynda ek svá við þik gera* ‘you must know that I would not act thus towards you’ (78), an echo of his reply from the first occasion on which Þorkell refuses to give him substantial support (see 2.1.2). The difference in each brother’s thought as to the obligations that he has towards the other demonstrates that even though both men act in an extra-legal capacity on various occasions during the saga—Þorkell in bringing about Vésteinn’s



death, and Gísli in Þorgrímr's—their actions are far from equivalent. Gísli is motivated by the social need to maintain not only his own honour, but also that of his kinsmen; Þorkell, on the other hand, views his family as secondary to his own ambitions and desires.

The difference between the brothers is behind Hans Schottmann's (2000, 252) argument that the tragedy of the saga lies in the outcome that 'für Gísli, das eindringlichste Bild eines verfolgten und geschundenen Menschen, gibt es keine Rache, nur für seinen Bruder Þorkell, der ihn im Stich ließ' ('for Gísli, the most poignant image of a persecuted and maltreated man, there is no revenge, only for his brother Þorkell, who left him in the lurch'). Significantly, however, it is not actually the case that Þorkell is avenged after he is murdered at the *alþingi*. Even though Þorkr, Þorkell's brother-in-law, recognises after Þorkell's death that he is the man to whom the obligation of vengeance most obviously and immediately falls, he fails to do so after being talked out of pursuing the case by Gestr inn spaki (*Gísli*, 91–92):

Þorkr mælti: 'Mér er þat skyldast allra manna at mæla eptir Þorkel, mág minn ... Gef þú til ráð, hversu málit skal upp taka.' ... Letr Gestr mjök, at sökín sé fram höfð. Þat hafa menn fyrir satt haft, at Gestr hafi verit í ráðum með sveinunum, því at hann var skyldr þeim at frændsemi. Nú hætta þeir, ok falla niðr málin.

Þorkr spoke: 'I, of all men, am most obligated to bring a case for Þorkell, my in-law. Give me some advice as to how the case should be taken up.' Gestr greatly discouraged the case from being brought forward. People were convinced that Gestr had been in agreement with the lads, because he was bound to them by kinship. Then they ceased speaking, and the case was dropped.

Þorkr's failure to avenge Þorkell not only lends further credence to the idea that he is hardly a paragon of the normative legal system, but also reveals the potential danger to Þorkell that lies in prioritising those outside his immediate kinship circle. Þorkr is generally keen to take vengeance, but only when it comes to his own brother Þorgrímr; by contrast, he is quick to abandon his duties towards his brother-in-law, to whom he is related only through marriage. Gestr, on the other hand, is thought by many to have helped Vésteinn's sons precisely because of their shared kinship.

Despite the network of friendship and support that Þorkell builds up with men from outside his family, then, he does not end up much better off than Gísli in terms of having people around him upon whom he can truly rely. In fact, Gísli predicts such a fate for Þorkell at the brothers' final parting: *Þykkisk þú ǫllum fótum í etu standa ok vera vinr margra höfðingja ok uggir nú ekki at þér, en ek em sekr, ok hefi ek mikinn fjándskap margra manna. En þat kann ek þér at segja, at þú munt þó fyrr*

*drepinn en ek* ‘You think you stand with all your legs in the manger and are a friend of many chieftains and are now off your guard, but I am outlawed, and I have great enmity from many people. But I can tell you that you will nevertheless be killed before me’ (78). Throughout *Gísla saga*, kinship is shown to provide a far stronger basis for interpersonal support than anything external to it: it is what encourages Þorkr to pursue Gísli so fervently, whilst its absence discourages him from doing the same for Þorkell, his brother-in-law. In terms of legal thought, Þorkell’s decision to prioritise those outside his family is an alternative even more detached from normative expectations than Gísli’s extra-legal actions are. Whereas there is a general assumption in Old Norse–Icelandic law and culture that people are likely to be motivated above all else to protect their kin-group, Þorkell’s behaviour runs counter to such norms. Gísli’s transgression in killing Þorgrímr is problematic, but it is ultimately a flawed response to an unwinnable situation, motivated by a worthy desire to protect the honour of his kinsmen. By contrast, Þorkell’s easy rejection of his kinsmen portrays his extra-legal excursions in a much more negative light, and suggests that no matter how the society of *Gísla saga* develops, it will not succeed if its mindset ceases to hold kinship in sufficient worth.

**2.3.3 Þórdís: protection through the law.** Whilst Þorkell rejects the conventional kinship model as a basis for his legal thought, this does not mean that the saga sees an alteration to that system as being necessarily problematic. The trouble with Þorkell’s behaviour in the saga, particularly in the shorter version, is mostly to do with his individual failings; Peter Foote (1963, 107) damningly describes him as being ‘vain, ineffectual, resentful, [of] an aristocratic disposition with its virtues stunted by self-pity’. Þorkell’s rejection of his kinsmen appears to be less a measured decision than a selfish prioritisation of his individual desire. His sister Þórdís, on the other hand, also moves away from the typical kinship model in her betrayal of Gísli to her husband Þorkr, but does so in a more considered way than Þorkell does.

Gísli himself interprets Þórdís’s betrayal as signifying that his sister has chosen to side with her husband Þorgrímr over her brother (see 2.1.2), but is this indeed what motivates Þórdís to reveal Gísli’s culpability to Þorkr? Foote (1963, 108) argues that Þórdís’s reaction is based on ‘resentment that Gísli should have put his wife’s brother before his sister’s husband’, whereas Vésteinn Ólason (1999, 170) suggests she is motivated primarily by the fact that she is pregnant with Þorgrímr’s child, the future

Snorri goði: ‘The possibility of raising a son with an obligation to take revenge for the killing of his father by killing her brother is too much for her, and she decides to get the matter resolved at once.’ Vésteinn’s interpretation is particularly convincing in reference to the wording of the verse that Gísli speaks to Þórdís to confess his guilt, which begins with the lines *teina sák í túni / tál-gríms vinar fǫlu* ‘I saw shoots in the enclosure [*i.e.* burial-mound] of the destruction-Grímr [= destruction-god] of the troll-wife’s friend [= giant; his destruction-god = Þórr, *i.e.* Þorgrímr]’ (*Gísli*, 58). On the face of it, the shoots literally refer to the saga’s claim that Þorgrímr’s mound was always free of snowfall because of his association with Freyr and is therefore unusual in having foliage. James Cochrane (2007, 87), however, notes that the imagery in the verse is similar to that found in poetry that uses trees and plants as symbols of progeny, and suggests that the shoots metaphorically refer to Þorgrímr’s unborn descendant, the future Snorri goði, whose mother is currently sitting on the side of the mound. Cochrane suggests that Gísli, who ‘dreams true dreams’, uses this metaphor because he has already guessed ‘that he is destined to die childless’; presumably the verse functions, in part, to express Gísli’s sadness at this fact, particularly as he uses it to convey his guilt for having killed the child’s father. The effect of the verse on Þórdís, on the other hand, would be to reveal to her the full tragedy of her situation: her brother has killed not only her husband but her child, who will emerge from that enclosure and be obligated to take revenge for his father’s death. The problem with the verse is that it makes public, albeit to a limited extent, Gísli’s culpability for Þorgrímr’s killing, and in doing so it necessarily prolongs the feud that will involve her child.

That Þórdís betrays her brother’s confidence to Bǫrkr, however, does not necessarily mean that she believes Gísli’s punishment must involve his death. Gísli himself explicitly condemns Þórdís’s actions as being equivalent to giving him a death-sentence (see 2.1.2), and he interprets his sister’s actions as constituting an attempt at taking vengeance for Þorgrímr. The ending of the saga, however, indicates that Þórdís does not think that she has severed her familial obligations to Gísli, as she attempts to kill Eyjólfur in revenge for his having killed Gísli—although she manages only to wound him shamefully in his leg, for which Bǫrkr pays Eyjólfur full compensation. Þórdís then immediately declares herself divorced from Bǫrkr, in effect declaring that she does not endorse either Eyjólfur’s killing of Gísli or Bǫrkr’s involvement in that process. Her hostility is also apparent beforehand, when Bǫrkr

asks her to grant Eyjólfur a warm welcome, to which she replies *gráta mun ek Gísla, bróður minn ... en mun eigi vel fagnat Gíslabana, ef grautr er górr ok gefinn?* ‘I will weep for Gísli, my brother, but will Gísli’s killer not be warmly welcomed if gruel is prepared and served?’ (*Gísla*, 116). The saga’s depiction of Þórdís allows its audience to interpret her behaviour as being motivated by the recognition that justice must be done, but not in a punitive sense. Rather, Þórdís must intervene in order to prevent this feud escalating into a conflict between Gísli and her unborn son, but not necessarily in a way that requires Gísli to be killed in order for the law to be upheld.

Indeed, the longer version of the saga encourages this interpretation more explicitly than does the shorter version, as it draws an especially firm distinction between Þórdís’s approach to the situation, which revolves around the normative legal system, and Borkr’s, which calls for blood-vengeance. Borkr immediately expresses his desire to kill Gísli after Þórdís’s revelation, but decides to pursue Gísli through the normative legal system instead because he is reminded of the phrase *eru opt kold kvenna ráð* ‘the counsels of women are often cold’ (61). Judy Quinn (2005, 531) notes that the phrase refers to the whetting role of women in vengeance-discourse, which was perceived to be cold ‘not ... in the sense of being unfeeling, but in the chill implications of its logic for men’, who would be killed because of such pronouncements. In the shorter version of *Gísla saga*, Borkr speaks the phrase himself, but Lethbridge (2004, 49–50) highlights how the other versions attribute it to Gísli’s siblings: the fragmentary version has Þorkell speak it, whilst Þórdís does so in the longer version. Lethbridge suggests that although Þórdís’s undermining of her own revelation is unusual, it makes sense as a means of dissuading Borkr from immediately killing her brother, as he claims he will (51). Indeed, in the longer version Þórdís then details the advantages of pursuing Gísli in a legal, rather than extra-legal, capacity (*Gísla Ingr*, 41):

Þat ráð B(orkr) at fara landzlogum fram um þetta mal, oc gera mann sekann, þviat þu hefir mala efni sva bryn at bita mun G(isla) saukinn, þott honum væri nockor vorkun a manom vær þa oc leiða hia os þetta mal sem vær megom ef þannig er atfarit, enn þer er betra at spilla eigi mala efnum þinum, oc rasa sva fyrir ráð fram.

It is advisable, Borkr, to act according to the laws of the land in this matter, and to have the man outlawed, because you have such a clear case that Gísli will be found guilty—although it may be that men will have some compassion towards him then and will lead this case past us [*i.e.* try to get around us], which men will do if it is proceeding that way. Yet it is better for you not to destroy the circumstances of the case, and thus to blunder grievously.

Lethbridge (2004, 52) argues that the connection between Þórdís and the normative legal system in the longer version, as contrasted with Borkr's discourse of blood-vengeance, suggests that Þórdís's behaviour may be interpreted, at least in that version, 'as an attempt ... to put off the inevitable consequences that must follow her acknowledgment of her brother's self-incrimination'—in other words, to delay, or even prevent, her second husband, Borkr, from killing Gísli. She also argues that Þórdís, unlike Borkr, views the normative legal process not as a method through which to obtain vengeance, but as a framework in which she can fulfil the expectations of feud-discourse while also discouraging her husband from taking blood-vengeance (51):

Þórdís seems to be discriminating between two different types of advice here: established vengeance-discourse requires her to state the information which she has acquired regarding the murder of her first husband, despite the fact that she is thus betraying her brother in doing so. The outcome of this—the inevitable killing of her brother by her husband—will be a chilling conclusion. If, on the other hand, she can persuade Borkr to operate within the frames of the public justice system, that outcome—the outlawing of her brother—is again inevitable, but perhaps not quite as 'cold'.

This distinction is not emphasised so prominently in the shorter version, but is still present in the difference between Þórdís's declaration that *munu rétt búin málin honum á hendr* 'the case will be rightly prepared against him [*i.e.* Gísli]', evoking the normative legal process in its recommendation that a formal suit be organised, and Borkr's own assertion that he instead wishes *þegar aptr snúa ok drepa Gísli* 'to turn back and kill Gísli immediately' (*Gísli*, 61). The longer version emphasises this interpretation of Þórdís's behaviour more than the other extant versions, but it is possible to read her motivations in a similar fashion in the shorter version as well, especially given her later actions in attempting herself to take vengeance for Gísli.

The variations in the depictions of this scene, as well as Þórdís's attempts to take vengeance for Gísli at the conclusion of the narrative, suggest that at least some saga-writers and audiences viewed Þórdís's revelation as being more complex than a simple betrayal of her brother. Her decision seems to be motivated in large part by the threat of an impending familial conflict between Gísli and her unborn child; furthermore the saga, especially the longer version, portrays Þórdís as attempting to use the normative legal system to discourage her husband Borkr from taking blood-vengeance instead. Although both Þórdís and Borkr are associated with normative legality to some extent, there is a significant difference between them as to what

purpose they think that system should fulfil: Bǫrkr sees it as a means of taking revenge against Gísli, but Þórdís views the normative legal system as a potentially more peaceful way of preventing the feud from escalating. Whilst Gísli's outlawry is necessarily violent in removing him from the community, it does not in itself ensure a violent death for him; most importantly, it also offers Þórdís a chance, albeit a slim one, that she will not have to see either her son or her brother be killed as part of an intra-familial feud. Þórdís's intentions in engaging with this system are, of course, undercut by Bǫrkr's dogged pursuit of Gísli, which Þórdís does not appear to endorse. The saga does not criticise the normative legal system in its essential construction, but it does suggest that it may be used inconsistently because of its capacity to be shaped according to the varying desires of its members, whose opinions about its purpose may differ significantly.

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Overall, this chapter has argued that interpreting Gísli Súrsson as an anachronistic figure runs the risk of simplifying the communal aspects at the centre of the narrative conflict. Gísli's relationship to the past reflects the fact that he lives in a society in transition, whose legendary narratives are still in the process of being consigned to the heroic past. Gísli's attempts to seek vengeance are required by the community in order for him to retain his societal position, and are carefully formulated to adhere to the expectations of feud and vengeance discourse; they are defined by their equivalence, rather than by individual excessiveness. Although Gísli attempts to deal with the impossible problem of Vésteinn's death by 'lumping' his loss, he is ultimately unable to pursue that strategy because the burden of communal expectations is too great. The saga's depictions of Gísli's brother-in-law Bǫrkr and his sister Þórdís also problematise the normative legal system, which is shown to be inconsistently applied by Bǫrkr, and which is easily dominated by vengeful approaches as opposed to the more nuanced form of justice advanced by Þórdís. Interpretations that rely on the idea that Gísli is anachronistic may be likelier to downplay the saga's depiction of these legal differences, as well as the more problematic aspects of the normative legal system, in order to emphasise Gísli's individual difference from his community. The tragedy of Gísli's outlawry, however, is not that it arises from his simply being 'a socially inept individual' (Byock 1982,

192), but rather from the conflicting demands made of him from various parts of his community, none of which can be truly reconciled into a clear course towards justice.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Categorical and Societal Limitations in Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*<sup>16</sup>

The previous chapter has argued that the idea of Gísli being anachronistic is of limited use in terms of understanding the narrative conflict of *Gísli saga*; however, the idea is somewhat more applicable to *Grettis saga*, which engages with the concept of *fornaldarsaga*-style heroism—in other words, of the hero who is renowned for his skill in battle and fights the often supernatural enemies of his society—in relation to the imagined eleventh-century Icelandic society depicted in the saga. The saga has several episodes that seem to be analogous to material in the various Germanic texts containing the ‘Bear’s Son’ motif, including the Old Norse tradition about Bǫðvarr bjarki—of which the renowned poem *Bjarkamál* is now lost, although parts of it are preserved in, among other texts, the *Bǫðvars þáttr* section of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Heimskringla*, and the poem *Bjarkarímur*—and the first half of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, concerning the hero’s battles with the demonic Grendel and his mother (McKinnell 2005, 131–32).<sup>17</sup> The difference between *Grettis saga* and those texts, however, is that Bǫðvarr and Beowulf inhabit societies in the distant past of the fifth and sixth centuries, which are depicted in those texts as communities that celebrate the heroic achievements of these men and offer them

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<sup>16</sup> *Grettis saga* is generally dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (Swinford 2002, 613), but the earliest extant versions of the text are four vellum manuscripts from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries—including Eggertsbók (AM 556a 4to), which also contains *Harðar saga* and *Gísli saga*—which preserve a consistent version of the saga. Faulkes (2004, xiii) notes that ‘some of [the manuscripts] have been added to since the original saga was written’, and suggests that some of these interpolations may be derived from an account of Grettir’s life by Sturla Þórðarson, which is no longer extant—if it did indeed ever exist. The saga also shares a significant intertextual relationship with *Fóstbræðra saga*, as both contain accounts of Grettir’s misadventures in Ísafjörðr and how Þorgeirr Hávarsson is outlawed (see 1.3.2).

<sup>17</sup> The corresponding episodes in *Grettis saga* are usually identified as Grettir’s fights with Glámr and with the *óvættir* at Sandhaugar (McKinnell 2005, 132), although some scholars have also argued that Grettir’s defeats of Kárr inn gamli and the great bear in Hálogaland should also be considered as analogous to *Beowulf* (McConchie 1982; Wachslar 1985).



social rewards as a result. Grettir, on the other hand, lives mostly in an eleventh-century Iceland that is shown to vilify such behaviour, and ends up outlawed because his heroic deeds are coded as quasi-monstrous, disruptive acts by other members of society. It would still be reductive to classify Grettir as an entirely anachronistic character, but the saga appears to use material associated primarily with the legendary past in order to explore how certain alterations in societal context may affect the interpretation of such deeds by the hero's contemporaries.

Whereas the fantastical material in *Harðar saga* has generally been dismissed as trivial (see 1.2), similar elements in *Grettis saga* have been treated more seriously as integral to the saga's plot; Janice Hawes (2008, 20) specifies Grettir's fight with Glámr as being 'of central concern to many scholars, particularly in relation to how this scene affects Grettir's place in his society'. Of particular interest to this thesis is Kathryn Hume's (1974, 472) influential argument that *Grettis saga* is thematically structured around such fantastical scenes, which are used to critique the concept of 'heroism and its relation to society', primarily by 'examining the kind of hero who figures in legends of the past and his effectiveness in the less heroic context of the real world'. Hume argues that Grettir's difficulty in assimilating to his normative social context is the major thematic concern of the saga, which uses its protagonist as a cipher for a broader discussion of heroic ideals. Grettir seeks 'a heroic world, one in which human society is a small stronghold surrounded by darkness and chaos, and he, the hero, can venture beyond the pale to grapple with the forces of darkness and be welcomed back as a savior' (473). Icelandic society, however, does not accord with Grettir's idealised heroic community; whilst Grettir has 'a definite code of behavior in mind, and wishes the satisfaction of living up to it all the time', he soon finds that 'agrarian Iceland offers few opportunities' (472).

When Grettir tests his strength against the hostile figures, both supernatural and otherwise, that exist outside the bounds of normative society, he is notably successful; he is praised for his courage in defeating the *draugr* Glámr and the *óvættir* at Sandhaugar, as well as a great bear that preys on his friend's livestock, which is symbolically similar to those more supernatural beings despite not being explicitly paranormal (Wachsler 1985, 382–83). Within society, however, Grettir is more often than not a disruptive, unconventional presence, unwilling to undertake menial tasks or to contribute to the labour required by rural life; he is interested in being a heroic figure performing exceptionally valiant feats, but Icelandic society

does not offer him much opportunity in this respect, as Grettir himself laments: *Þá þótti Grettir mikit mein, er hann mátti hvergi reyna afl sitt, ok fréttisk fyrir, ef nokkut væri þat, er hann mætti við fásk* ‘It seemed then to Grettir a great hindrance that he could not test his physical strength, and he asked around for whether there might be anything with which he could contend’ (*Grettla*, 107).<sup>18</sup> His frustration at his lot in life often causes Grettir to act out in ways that disrupt the mundane social sphere of his farming society, eventually leading to his being outlawed and hunted by his enemies during his outlawry. In this tension between heroic ideals and disappointing reality, Hume (1974, 485–86) convincingly argues that the narrative is just as critical of Icelandic society as it is of Grettir himself:

The greatness accorded to *Grettis saga* seems to me generated largely by this double perspective. Like men from any civilized age, we recognize the justice of the farmers’ discontent. Had we been victimized by Grettir’s depredations, we too would have shouted for his extermination. But as members of society—where by definition the individual is subordinated to the whole—we can feel some of Grettir’s discontents, and can sympathize with his gnawing need for the heroic, the special, the significant, and the morally uncomplex. The tragedy underlying the whole saga is that there is no solution: society naturally and rightly tries to eliminate threats to its peace, but does so at the cost of diminishing itself ... Grettir’s stormy relations with society gain immeasurably in importance when viewed not just as the result of personal quarrelsomeness, but as reflecting a clash between two sets of values, ways of life, both of which have merit but which cannot really coexist.

Hume is accurate in emphasising the ambivalence of the saga’s view of Grettir and society and in suggesting that society can exile Grettir only ‘at the cost of diminishing itself’ (see 3.2.3). To read the saga from the perspective that Grettir is actually a menace to society is to overlook the contributions that he makes towards it, even as a socially disruptive outlaw, in protecting members of that community from supernatural threats. The idea that Grettir’s marginalisation by and subsequent exclusion from this community reflects ‘a clash between two sets of values’, however, is somewhat more problematic, as it plays down the active role that Icelandic society takes in labelling Grettir as deviant, and implicitly assumes that

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<sup>18</sup> Ironically, it is in testing his strength against Glámr that Grettir has his strength curtailed, as the *draugr* curses Grettir so that, among other things, he will not physically develop to be as impressive as he otherwise might have been: *En þat má ek segja þér, at þú hefir nú fengit helming af þess ok þroska, er þér var ætlaðr, ef þú hefðir mik ekki fundit; nú fa ek þat afl eigi af þér tekit, er þú hefir áðr hreppt, en því má ek ráða, at þú verðr aldri sterkari en nú ertu* ‘But I can tell you this: that you have now attained half the physical strength and maturity that was meant for you if you had not met me. Now I cannot take from you the physical strength that you have already obtained, but I can decide it that you will never become stronger than you are now’ (*Grettla*, 121). Given Grettir’s already extraordinary strength, the curse leaves him stranded in a liminal space between society and its antithesis: too strong to be considered normal within normative Icelandic society, yet not so strong as to be fully assimilated to the realm of the paranormal and the supernatural.

Grettir's actions within normative society are actually disruptive when they are proclaimed as such by the other members of that community. This dynamic appears to underlie Hume's suggestion that the saga itself 'tacitly admits that there is no way for Grettir to fit into Icelandic society', because 'only in a fantasy situation can he function acceptably' (472). Yet this perspective on Grettir's relationship to society assumes that his behaviour is indeed inherently problematic or disruptive, and that the problem lies primarily with Grettir, whose more difficult characteristics are fundamentally unable to be assimilated into that community.

Grettir is not an idealised character by any means; he is often aggressive, enjoys poking fun at other people, and can be short-tempered when he thinks that others have treated him poorly (see **3.1.1**). He is also socially disruptive during his outlawry when he robs and bullies various farming communities, although Grettir's actions there are necessitated by his lack of food and permanent shelter (see **3.2.2**). His behaviour in the episodes directly leading up to his outlawry, however, could not be said to be unambiguously disruptive in themselves. In these episodes, the saga shows how Grettir's more unusual characteristics, including his physical strength, huge stature, and willingness to undertake challenging endeavours, are interpreted by other people in terms of monstrousness, rather than heroism, even though the latter category is also reasonable (see **3.1.4**). It is not sufficient to suggest that Grettir's behaviour is only acceptable 'in a fantasy situation' without also recognising the role that society plays in actively constructing what is acceptable in a given situation, as that community is often inconsistent in labelling certain behaviours as different, unacceptable, or even monstrous.

This chapter argues that Grettir is not labelled 'deviant' by society simply because he performs actions or exhibits behaviours that are universally coded as unacceptable within this social context, but rather because he cannot be readily defined according to any single conceptual category that is familiar to the wider culture. Rather than being a complete misfit in every situation, Grettir is often able to fit comfortably into different categorical contexts throughout the saga, albeit generally only for a limited period of time. He is a notably ambiguous saga protagonist in his motivations and his characterisation, but is also able to perform acts that no other member of society is physically or mentally capable of undertaking, and he holds a fluid, ambiguous position in relation to his immediate communal context. Because his actions are atypical of the kind of behaviours normally sanctioned by society, as Hume notes,

they cannot be contained satisfactorily within its categorical framework. As Hastrup (1990, 163) neatly puts it, ‘Grettir is always either “more” or “less” human than everybody else’, but it is important to recognise that the decision to classify Grettir as “more” or “less” human’ is actively made by other members of the community, who find it difficult to categorise Grettir in any simplistic way because of the ambiguities in his character (see **3.1.1**).

This chapter sets out to demonstrate that the perception of Grettir as a deviant, even monstrous figure is reliant on Grettir’s community actively deciding to frame him as such, despite there being other interpretative possibilities available to them for making sense of Grettir. The judgements that other people make of Grettir are not necessarily endorsed by the saga as legitimate criticisms of its protagonist; in fact, the text indicates that such social constructions are often flawed or inconsistently applied, depending on whether it is in the best interests of the powerful members of a community to make that judgement in the first place. Grettir’s marginalisation by his society is caused by the community’s unwillingness, or even its inability, to accept Grettir as an ambiguous, contradictory character, even though Grettir demonstrates on many occasions that he can benefit society, and other characters in the saga display similar behaviours and characteristics to Grettir without being labelled ‘deviant’ as a result. If Grettir appears to be a man out of time, who favours heroic deeds deemed inappropriate by his society, it is fair to consider how his society plays an active role in constructing him as anachronistic by refusing to accommodate Grettir’s behaviour at all.

### **3.1 Social Constructions of Difference**

More so than Gísli or Hǫrður, Grettir is depicted as a particularly complicated, contradictory figure by his saga; he is a hyperbolic figure in almost every sense, capable of being either the most valiant, the most bellicose, the most indolent, or the most impudent person in any given situation. Jónas Kristjánsson (2007, 238) suggests that Grettir’s contradictions make him ‘more human, more real, precisely because of them’, but the saga also shows how the complexity of Grettir’s character leads other members of his contemporary intradiegetic society to interpret Grettir as being an outsider to the community. Grettir is viewed as a transgressive presence by those within his community long before he is formally declared an outlaw: indeed,

this happens almost immediately upon his introduction to the narrative (see **3.1.2**). Grettir's character traits are seen by the saga as contributing in large part to his eventually being legally designated a deviant figure through his outlawry, but the text also highlights how Grettir's difference is constructed in how the other members of his community choose to interpret his actions. This is evident from the early sections of the narrative before Grettir is outlawed, which emphasise how Grettir's actions, although often framed as being unacceptable by other people, are equivocal in how they can be interpreted (see **3.1.2** and **3.1.3**). Such notions of deviance are never ideologically neutral, but are invariably socially constructed, whether that be as a result of these actions not necessarily being coded as unacceptable within these communal contexts, or because the rules against which these transgressions are defined are laid down by those members of the community who have the most power to determine its social structure. Whilst Grettir is shown to have certain characteristics that are problematic within the context of Icelandic society, the saga also suggests that the codification of these elements as belonging outside that communal context is part of a social process that does not necessarily label actions or characteristics as transgressive because they are immoral, but often because it is more expedient to do so for certain other members of the community.

**3.1.1 Deviance as social construction.** It is true that Grettir has some character traits that do not equip him to be an ideal member of rural Icelandic society. For one thing, Grettir is notably averse to physical labour: the saga describes him as *lítill verklundarmaðr* 'not a particularly hard-working man' (*Grettla*, 173), and he often comes into conflict with others because he refuses to undertake the quotidian chores necessary for farm-life. In this respect, Grettir differs from Gísli and Hǫrðr, both of whom are said to be industrious farmers (*Gísla*, ch. 6; *Harðar*, ch. 20). Whilst Grettir does not always act in a purposefully antisocial manner in order to avoid labour, his general unwillingness to work is seen as implicitly antisocial in itself. When Grettir is taken in for the winter by his kinsman Þorsteinn Kuggason, he does not prove to be a hard-worker during his stay, but he is not especially troublesome either: *Grettir var atgangsmikill at drepa járnit, en nennti misjafnt, en þó var hann spakr um vetrinn, svá at ekki bar til frásagnar* 'Grettir was enthusiastic in hammering iron, but not always thus inclined, but he was nonetheless quiet during the winter, so that there is nothing of note to tell' (*Grettla*, 173–74). Although Grettir is not disruptive within

the household, Þorsteinn still asks him to leave the following spring when Grettir's enemies hear of his presence on the farm, attributing his decision at least partly to Grettir's reluctance to work hard: *Ek sé, at þú vill ekki starfa, en mér henta ekki þeir menn, sem eigi vinna* 'I see that you do not want to work, but those people who will not do labour are unsuitable for me' (174).

Grettir is also said to be an unfortunate man with a poor temper, which spoils his reputation as an otherwise impressive figure in terms of his physical strength and mental fortitude. When Grettir offers to join Barði Guðmundarson on his expedition to seek vengeance, Barði's foster-father Þórarinn inn spaki rejects Grettir's proposal despite Barði's protests. Whilst he acknowledges Grettir's heroic qualities, Þórarinn argues that they are discounted entirely by the more problematic elements of Grettir's character (*Grettla*, 104–05):

Satt er þat, at mikit aþragð er Grettir annarra manna, þeira er nú er kostr á váru landi, ok seint mun hann vápnum verða sótt, ef hann er heill. En mikill ofsi er honum nú í skapi, ok grunar mik um, hversu heilladrjúgr hann verðr, ok muntu þess þurfa, at eigi sé allir ógæfumenn í þinni ferð, ok nóg mun at gort, þó at eigi fari hann með.

It is true that Grettir is a great paragon among those other men of whom there is now a choice in our country, and he will be slow to be attacked by weapons if he stays healthy.<sup>19</sup> But there is a great domineering quality now in his temper, and I have doubts about how fortunate he will be, and you will need it that not all the men on your journey are unlucky, and enough will be done even if he does not travel with you.

A similar assessment of Grettir is made later on in the saga by King Óláfr inn helgi, who declares to Grettir that *fáir menn eru nú slíkir fyrir afls sakar ok hreysti, sem þú ert* 'few men are now such as you are in terms of physical strength and prowess', but also refuses to have Grettir stay with him on the grounds that he is *ógæfumaðr* 'an unfortunate man' (134). It seems clear that the saga intends its audiences to understand Grettir's outlawry as deriving in part from some key character flaws: an unwillingness to contribute to Icelandic society through necessary menial labour; a quick temper; and a notably short supply of luck. As Jónas Kristjánsson (2007, 237) puts it, Grettir's lot 'is determined not only by malevolent fate but by elements in his own personality'.

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<sup>19</sup> Whilst the phrase *verða sótt vápnum* properly means 'to be attacked by weapons', the element *sótt* (the past participle of the verb *sækja*, in this instance 'to attack') sounds notably similar to the noun *sótt* 'sickness'. There may be a subtle ambiguity in the text here, as Grettir's opponent Þorbjörn ǫngull is indeed only able to kill him after Grettir has already been brought low by sickness, as a result of a curse that causes Grettir to inflict upon himself by accident a grievous wound, which festers and saps him of his strength (see 3.2.3).

The saga also suggests, however, that Grettir is a rather more complex figure than these negative judgements indicate, as he is also lauded for his heroic prowess, to which Þórarinn and Óláfr allude, by other intradiegetic figures in the narrative. After he kills the unruly *berserkir* in Norway, Grettir is greeted as a hero by the people of the nearby town of Vágan, who are aware of his deeds: *Fognuðu þeir margir honum þar vel, sem hann hefðu eigi sét fyrr, fyrir sakar þess frægðarverks, sem hann hafði unnit, þá er hann dráp víkingana* ‘Many of them, who had not seen him before, welcomed him warmly for the sake of this famous exploit that he had done when he killed the vikings’ (73). Similarly, after he slays the *draugr* Glámr in Iceland, Grettir is spoken of in exceptionally positive terms by those who hear of his feat: *Öllum þótti mikils um vert um þetta verk, þeim er heyrðu; var þat þá almælt, at engi væri þvílíkr maðr á öllu landinu fyrir afls sakar ok hreysti ok allrar atgørvi sem Grettir Ásmundarson* ‘All of those who heard about this deed thought it of great worth; it was then said by all that there was no such man in all the country, in terms of physical strength, and valour, and all accomplishments, as Grettir Ásmundarson’ (122). The version of the saga preserved in Eggertsbók even includes a dedication to Grettir made shortly after his death, in which the text itself describes him as *inn vaskasti maðr, er verit hefir á Íslandi* ‘the most valiant man who has lived in Iceland’ (262); Guðni Jónsson argues in the Íslenzk fornrit edition to the text that the dedication cannot be original to earlier versions of the written saga because it does not appear in the other key manuscripts, but it is significant that at least one compiler of *Grettis saga* felt it accurate to describe Grettir in this manner.

Yet whilst Grettir acts impressively in several episodes and is clearly thought of as a hero by many other people, these aspects of his characterisation do not efface the more negative elements, such as his unwillingness to work and his aggressive temperament, any more than those flaws obscure his positive qualities. The saga depicts Grettir as a contradictory figure, a man who is both ambitious and idle, poetic and surly, protective and destructive. Grettir is therefore a difficult figure for other people to make sense of when they encounter him, as he is a hyperbolic person in both his positive and negative qualities. It is notable, however, that the judgements of Þórarinn and Óláfr, major figures within their respective societies, do not allow for such a nuanced understanding of Grettir’s character, but ultimately interpret him primarily as a disruptive figure, as each man rejects Grettir’s request to become a member of his community. In judging Grettir to be unable to become part of his

community on the assumption that he will be unable to adhere to its communal norms, each man, it is implied, pre-emptively labels Grettir as in some way deviant: that is, he is thought to be someone ‘who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group’ in the first place (Becker 1963, 1). Despite his qualities, Grettir is judged to be too contradictory a figure to be accepted into these communities. This is not a first for Grettir, who is marked out as different by other people on previous occasions in the saga, including: by his father Ásmundr, who is upset by Grettir’s refusal to undertake various tasks on the farm (see 3.1.2); by his ship-mates on his first journey to Norway (see 3.1.3); and by the Norwegian jarl Sveinn, who is angered by Grettir’s conflicts with his retainers (see 3.1.3). All these figures perceive Grettir to be an outsider to varying degrees, and judge him accordingly.

To assume that these judgements necessarily indicate that an individual is actually antisocial or socially incompetent, however, does not convey the communal process through which a judgement of deviance is constructed, as Howard Becker (1963, 8–10) argues:

Such an assumption seems to me to ignore the central fact about deviance: it is created by society. I do not mean this in the way it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in ‘social factors’ which prompt his action. I mean, rather, that *social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance*, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an ‘offender’. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label.

Since deviance is, among other things, a consequence of the responses of others to a person’s act, students of deviance cannot assume that they are dealing with a homogenous category when they study people who have been labeled deviant. That is, they cannot assume that these people have actually committed a deviant act or broken some rule, because the process of labeling may not be infallible; some people may be labeled deviant who in fact have not broken a rule. Furthermore, they cannot assume that the category of those labeled deviant will contain all those who actually have broken a rule ... What, then, do people who have been labeled deviant have in common? At the least, they share the label and the experience of being labeled outsiders.

Becker argues that deviance is best viewed as ‘the product of a transaction that takes place between some social-group and one who is viewed by that group as a rule-breaker’ (10): it is a result of those in positions of communal or societal power ‘always *forcing* their rules on others, applying them more or less against the will and without the consent of those others’ (17–18). He also suggests that the process of labelling another person as deviant is an inherently political act, as ‘the rules created and maintained by such labeling are not universally agreed to’, but often become ‘the object of conflict and disagreement, part of the political process of society’. The



socio-political, public element of deviance is its most significant aspect: ‘Whether an act is deviant ... depends on how other people react to it ... Just because one has committed an infraction of a rule does not mean that others will respond as though this had happened’ (11–12). When one person declares another to be deviant, that action is only meaningful if validated by a communal consensus; such validated judgements are necessarily a realisation of the underlying power dynamics within a community.

It is important to emphasise the process through which deviance is socially constructed in order to avoid dangerous assumptions, such as the following: presuming that cultural norms and their transgressions are overly fixed, whether on a geographical or temporal basis; that transgressions are always coded as being deviant, or that those witnessing them will inevitably think of them as such; and that those accused of deviance or labelled as transgressive must have committed a deviant act in the first place. *Grettis saga* problematises such assumptions by emphasising to its audience how Icelandic society does not always enforce its rules fairly or consistently. Grettir is at times condemned for behaviours that are not coded as transgressive when performed by others with more prominent social connections (see **3.1.3**); he is also accused of having committed transgressions which the saga’s audience are shown that he did not commit (see **3.1.4**). Whilst Grettir undoubtedly can be a difficult figure to accommodate within society, the saga takes a more equivocal view of its protagonist’s supposed difference. It highlights how the demands placed on Grettir by society, which he fails to fulfil from the perspective of those at its normative centre, can be socially constructed in problematic ways by those in power, so that any transgressions which arise are not entirely the fault of the individual, but are partially a result of how their community has been structured.

**3.1.2 The difficult child.** A useful case-study for considering how *Grettis saga* treats the idea of deviance, and especially how it emphasises the equivocal way in which this concept is constructed by both the behaviour of the individual and the social context in which that behaviour is received by others, is chapter 14 of the saga, in which Grettir himself is introduced to the audience and his relationship with his father Ásmundr is detailed. Grettir is described as having been a difficult child in many ways; the saga says he *var mjök ódæll í uppvexti sínum, fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum* ‘was very troublesome in his formative years, of

few words and unfriendly, mischievous in both words and actions’ (*Grettla*, 36). The following scenes that portray the conflict that develops between him and Ásmundr, however, suggest that the more antisocial aspects of Grettir’s character may develop and emerge because of the problematic structuration of his communal environment, as represented by the various chores on the farm that Ásmundr assigns to Grettir. Whilst Ásmundr thinks that these jobs are suitable for his son, Grettir worries that they will lead to his manliness being questioned by other people; he suspects that his social role within the context of the farmhouse will threaten his reputation, even if he does not transgress the rules of the tasks assigned to him. In other words, Grettir thinks that he will be ostracised whether he accepts this role or rebels against it, and his transgression of the rules that Ásmundr lays down represent Grettir’s attempts to avoid being seen as a transgressive figure on someone else’s terms. The saga itself, however, does not seem to endorse Ásmundr’s judgement of Grettir as a workshy troublemaker, but rather shows how the organisation of the household is problematic enough to encourage Grettir to behave in a more antisocial manner.

This is especially true if we consider that Ásmundr also has a difficult relationship with his own father Þorsteinn during his childhood, and that the kinsmen fall out because Ásmundr, like his son, is unwilling to carry out the farm-work: *Ásmundr vildi lítt vinna, ok var fátt um með þeim feðgum* ‘Ásmundr did not want to work much, and there was little affection between father and son’ (34). Yet whereas Ásmundr continues to assign Grettir various chores, and chooses not to give him many saleable goods when Grettir later travels abroad (ch. 17), Þorsteinn does not force Ásmundr to work on the farm and gives him enough goods to trade with for him to become *inn mesta kaupmaðr ok vellauðigr* ‘a very substantial merchant and extremely wealthy’ (34). Ásmundr becomes respected in Norway before returning to Iceland, where he establishes himself as *búsýslumaðr mikill* ‘a great farm-manager’, as Þorsteinn is said to be earlier on (34, 36). The saga shows how Ásmundr becomes successful by first demonstrating his individual prowess as a prominent merchant, then settling in Iceland in order to adopt the societal role he spurned in his youth; this process has its roots in Þorsteinn’s restraint in not marginalising his son because of his youthful idleness, which is not used to label him as deviant even though it causes problems in the relationship between father and son. Robert Cook (1982–85, 136) suggests that the readers’ knowledge of Ásmundr’s family background necessarily colours how they interpret the subsequent detail of the hostile relationship between

Grettir and Ásmundr when it is first mentioned by the saga, given the similarities with the previous chapter:

The portrait presents gaps: is Grettir's difficult nature the cause or the result of Ásmundr's dislike of his son? The order of presentation—Grettir's character is described before the statement that his father did not care for him—might suggest that Grettir is the source of the problem, but then Ásmundr's own history might suggest that he was treating his son in the same fashion as his father had treated him, whether fairly or not. In Chapter 13 the blame for the discord is laid on Ásmundr; with Grettir the question is left open, and the reader must turn to the succeeding events for an answer.<sup>20</sup>

Ásmundr assigns to Grettir the following three tasks: looking after the geese on the farm; rubbing Ásmundr's back by the fire; and caring for the horses. Grettir describes the first task as *lítit verk ok lqðrmannligt* 'an unimportant and servile task' (*Grettla*, 37), and is so irritated by the geese that he kills the goslings and breaks the wings of the older geese. He similarly refers to the idea of rubbing his father's back as *verkit loðrmannligt* 'the servile task' (38), eventually getting out of it by dragging a sharp comb down Ásmundr's back instead. O'Donoghue (2005, 191) suggests it is significant that Grettir objects to the jobs on the basis of their being suited to feeble cowards 'when one might have expected him to object to them specifically as childish', and argues that he does so because 'the tasks do seem to be associated with women's work'; Larrington (2008a, 151) agrees, suggesting the use of the term *lqðrmannligr* 'servile' in this scene 'functions as an antonym of *karlmannligt*', meaning 'manly'.<sup>21</sup> The reasoning behind Grettir's complaints reveals a mature understanding of his society's gender expectations, and complicates his unruly behaviour in completing these tasks; Grettir is unwilling to undertake these tasks because they are themselves chores that a high-status man would not be expected to carry out within the community. We may question how reasonable it is to expect Ásmundr to treat the ten-year-old Grettir in accordance with the gender expectations

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<sup>20</sup> Cook (1982–85, 133–34) specifies that his approach in this article, which is informed largely by reader-response theory, concentrates 'on the experience of a modern, informed reader of the sagas as he confronts the text sequentially', and does not argue for or against interpretations 'which may well come after long reflection on the saga but will not occur in the process of reading to which [he is] committed here'. It is likely that a medieval audience would have been more familiar with the characters featured in the saga, and therefore would have had preconceived ideas about them before engaging with how they are depicted in the extant saga, but it is reasonable to suppose that the ambivalence that Cook identifies would have also led individual listeners and readers of medieval audiences to disagree over whether Grettir or Ásmundr were primarily at fault.

<sup>21</sup> *Lqðrmannligr* literally means 'lather-manly' or 'froth-manly', and therefore has connotations of softness and inconstancy. It may also refer to the process of washing clothes, which was viewed as being a woman's task (Jochens 1995, 123).

placed upon adult men, although he does refer to his son as *mannskræfa* ‘a miserable coward’, for no more reason than he thinks that Grettir is not rubbing his back hard enough (*Grettla*, 38). Grettir’s protests, however, encourage the audience to question the suitability of Ásmundr’s assignments. If Grettir’s father assigns him a social position where it would be unmanly of him to fulfil its duties, should Grettir’s refusal to accept that position be interpreted as transgressive against his local community, or as a necessary measure in refusing to be forced to act in a way that is transgressive on a wider cultural level?

When Grettir is told to look after the horses, he is more responsive because he approves of the task as being *kalt verk ok karlmannligt* ‘cold and manly work’ (40), at least in comparison with his previous chores: *Hann kvað sér þat betra þykkja en bakeldagörðin* ‘He said it seemed better to him than rubbing his back by the fire’ (39). Ásmundr annoys Grettir, however, by telling him that he must take the horses into the stable and out to the pastures in accordance with how Ásmundr’s favourite mare, Kengála, behaves, as he claims that she never wants to travel to the pastures if there is an impending storm. Unfortunately for Grettir, Ásmundr’s praise of Kengála’s ability proves to be unfounded, as the mare does not return to the stables in anticipation of any storm, but *stóð á, þar sem mest var svæðit, í hverju illviðri* ‘stood wherever was most exposed in every instance of bad weather’ (40). Because Grettir has been told to perform the task according to how Kengála acts, her behaviour causes him to suffer severely from exposure: *Grettir var lítt settr at klæðum, en maðr lítt harðnaðr; tók hann nú at kala* ‘Grettir was poorly furnished with clothes, and little hardened as a man; he now began to feel the cold’ (40). Whilst the task may be more acceptable to Grettir, who is already aware of the importance of demonstrating his manliness in a communal context, Grettir himself is not yet an adult, and the structuration of the task, which must be carried out according to the whims of an animal, does not take into account his needs as an individual or as an adolescent. Unsurprisingly, Grettir finds a way to sabotage this task as well, flaying Kengála so that she refuses to venture too far from the stable. Cook (1982–85, 137) suggests that whilst this act ‘looks like a second instance of gratuitous cruelty to animals’, the fact that ‘Kengála is one of those strange animals who ... does exactly that which hurts her keeper the most’ may justify Grettir in his actions to some extent, as does Ásmundr’s own lack of forethought: ‘Surely it is

unjust and perverse for a father who craves warmth for himself ... to allow his son to be so badly clothed for a task that involves extreme exposure to the cold.’

Despite there being obvious problems with each task, as Grettir himself explicitly outlines to his father in each instance, Ásmundr consistently ‘misreads or ignores the challenge implied in his son’s evaluation of his choice of task’, and instead ‘insists on the task and urges Grettir to try to please him by performing well’ (Bonner 2015, 208–09). Yet when Grettir does not perform his second task in the way that Ásmundr would prefer, Ásmundr is quick to frame his son as a deviant individual, rather than to question the suitability of the chore in question. As aforementioned, Ásmundr calls Grettir a coward for not rubbing his back hard enough, even though Grettir had already objected to the task on the grounds that it was suitable only for cowards; ironically, were Grettir to perform the task properly, he would be transgressing a cultural norm, but Ásmundr conversely insists that Grettir’s not taking the task seriously constitutes the transgression of that norm. The disparity in power between father and son is also apparent; as the conventional authority figure in the relationship, Ásmundr is quick to blame his dependent for not carrying the chore out to his liking, whereas Grettir puts forth a more ambivalent perspective on the conflict when his mother asks him about it, claiming in a verse that *hofugt ráð es þat bóðum* ‘this course of action is heavy-going for both of us [*i.e.* Ásmundr and Grettir]’ (*Grettla*, 39). Ásdís takes a similar approach upon hearing of Grettir’s flaying of Kengála, as she criticises both her kinsmen for their part in the conflict: *Eigi veit ek, hvárt mér þykkir meir frá móti, at þú skipar honum jafnan starfa, eða hitt, at hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi* ‘I don’t know which seems more immoderate to me, that you are always assigning him tasks, or that he performs them all in one way’ (41–42). Ásdís’s ambivalence supports the idea that whilst Grettir has performed all his tasks badly, even cruelly, Ásmundr is also to blame for the situation by having repeatedly insisted upon Grettir performing tasks that are in some way unsuitable for him. Ásmundr says he will stop giving Grettir chores, but that because of his poor work ethic *hafa skal hann viðrgörning verra* ‘he must have worse treatment’ (42)—another attempt to frame Grettir as a troublemaker within the community. The saga itself appears to favour the ambivalent perspective, however, with Cook (1982–85, 137) noting that by the end of the chapter, the reader ‘is not certain whether he has met a tyrannous and unreasonable father, an incorrigible and sadistic ten-year-old, or a budding hero not content with menial tasks’. The text does not entirely endorse

Ásmundr's attempts to frame his son's behaviour as unacceptable, as it also suggests that Ásmundr himself creates the problematic situation in the first place. By laying down rules to which Grettir cannot adhere without becoming culturally deviant—that is, without behaving in such a way that he would be marked out as a coward within normative Icelandic society—Ásmundr implicitly constructs circumstances under which Grettir's refusal to complete unmanly tasks can be thought of as an infraction of social rules, rather than as resistance to being framed as transgressive.

**3.1.3 Different ways of dealing with outsiders.** The saga further problematises Ásmundr's approach to his son in the subsequent depiction of Grettir's first voyage to Norway (*Grettla*, ch. 17), where the saga suggests that the requirement to work can be structured in a way that ensures the individual can contribute to the practical needs of the community while maintaining the integrity of his disposition. In this episode, Grettir's friend Hafliði, the ship's captain, actively discourages his crew from labelling Grettir as a 'deviant' presence, and is eventually able to demonstrate Grettir's value to the rest of the community as a result. Hafliði's intervention is rather generous, as Grettir's refusal to work on board the ship does not appear to be motivated by the same anxieties over the chore being unsuitable for him. The saga simply tells us that *Grettir gerði sér grof undir bátinum ok vildi þaðan hvergi hræra sik, hvárki til austra né at segli at vinna ok ekki starfa, þat sem hann átti at skipi at gera til jafnaðar við aðra menn; eigi vildi hann ok kaupa af sér* 'Grettir made himself a den underneath the ship's rowing-boat and did not want to move from his place there, neither to bale water nor to work the sail, and did not do the work that he was obliged to do on the ship to the same extent as other men; he also did not want to buy himself out of it' (*Grettla*, 50).

It is significant that the saga explicitly tells the audience that Grettir was obliged to contribute to these tasks *til jafnaðar við aðra menn*, as the text here appears to take a dim view of Grettir's refusal to work alongside the other men. Rather than suggesting that the situation in which Grettir is required to work is problematic, as in the previous episode's conflict between Grettir and Ásmundr, the saga implies that Grettir has a responsibility to complete his share of work on board the ship, and notes that he did not even take up the acceptable option of paying someone else to undertake his work for him. There is nothing in this description of the equivocal approach that characterised the saga's depiction of Grettir's transgressions at home;

instead, the text presents its protagonist as an unreasonably idle man, unwilling to contribute without giving a justification for his inactivity. Grettir does not even have the excuse that the tasks he is expected to perform on board the ship are unsuitable for a man to perform, because the type of work required in maintaining a ship was more commonly associated with men than women in Old Norse–Icelandic culture, at least according to the extant literary evidence. Judith Jesch (2001, 49) notes that there is ‘little linguistic evidence for a close symbolic association between women and ships in or even after the Viking Age’, and suggests that ‘the relationship was more likely to be that of woman as onlooker, as landlubbing admirer of both nautical technology and *masculine prowess at sea*’ [emphasis added]. The association between manliness and seafaring is particularly evident in the verse composed by Björn Hítðelakappi about his rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson, in which Björn denigrates Þórðr for having sex with his wife Oddný, to whom Björn was previously betrothed, while Björn and his companions perform the properly manly duties required of sailors at sea (*Bjarnar*, 123):

Hristi handar fasta  
hefr drengr gamans fengit;  
hrynja hart á dýnu  
hløð Eykyndils vøðva,  
meðan vel stinna vinnum,  
... ór á borði.

The bold man grasped the Hrist of hand’s fire [= gold; Hrist (*valkyrja*) of gold = woman] for pleasure; the laden muscles of Isle-Candle [= the nickname of Oddný, the woman] fell hard on the downy bed, while we worked well to stiffen the supple oar on board.

In respect of this, it is notable that Grettir himself is also accused by those on board of having ignored his responsibilities supposedly in favour of having sex with the wife of Bárði, the ship’s steersman, who has accompanied her husband on the voyage: *Þykkir þér betra ... at klappa um kviðinn á konu Bárðar stýrimanns en at gera skyldu þína á skipi* ‘It seems better to you to bonk the belly of Bárði the steersman’s wife than to perform your duties on ship’ (*Grettla*, 51–52).<sup>22</sup>

Because Grettir does not provide any reasonable objection to having to complete his share of the work, and that the grounds for any such objection would be dubious in any case, it is unsurprising that the other men accuse him of *logleysa* ‘lawlessness’

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<sup>22</sup> I, like many students of Durham University, have David Ashurst to thank for his especially memorable translation of *klappa um kviðinn*.

(51), which implies that Grettir is completely outside of the community because of the conceptual association with outlawry implicit in the term. Even Hafliði, whom Grettir greatly admires, accuses his passenger of having done *ólög* ‘an injustice’ to the other men (52). Hafliði does not, however, validate the other men’s judgement that Grettir must be punished for his behaviour—he mentions to Grettir that *þeir heitask at steypa [honum] fyrir borð* ‘they have vowed to throw him overboard’ (52)—but instead attempts to ameliorate the situation by encouraging Grettir to compose a verse that appears to insult Hafliði. Grettir does so, albeit only on the understanding that the verse will in fact be complimentary of his friend if studied more closely, which gives Hafliði an opportunity to demonstrate to the men how he would prefer them to act in response to Grettir’s laziness and his insults (53):

Kaupmönnum þótti allilla, ok sögðu, at hann skyldi eigi til einskis gera at níða Hafliða bónda.

Hafliði mælti þá: ‘Nóga hefir Grettir verðleika til þess, þótt þér gerðuð honum nokkura smán, en eigi vil ek hafa sæmð mína í veði til móts við illgirn hans ok forsjáleysi; nú munu vér þessa ekki at sinni hefna, meðan vér erum í svá miklum háska staddir, en minnizk þessa þá, er þér komið á land, ef yðr líkar.’

It seemed entirely evil to the merchants, and they said that he should not do anything to libel Hafliði the farmer.

Hafliði spoke then: ‘Grettir deserves enough from this, even if you were to do him some disgrace, but I do not want to have my honour staked against his ill-will and short-sightedness. Now we will not take revenge on him for this while we are situated in such peril [*i.e.* at sea], but remember this when we arrive at land, if it pleases you.’

By refusing to countenance Grettir’s infractions as sufficiently serious to cause him much shame, Hafliði discourages those on board from being so quick to call attention to Grettir’s disrespect, and the situation soon settles down; the saga mentions that *þaðan frá vonduðu skipmenn miklu miðr um kviðlinga en áðr* ‘from then on the sailors cared a great deal less about insults than before’ (53). Shortly afterwards, Hafliði challenges Grettir to prove his worth to the crew by baling out the water when the ship starts leaking, after which the men’s opinion of Grettir changes: *Þaðan af skiptisk mjök um orðalag kaupmanna við Gretti, því at þeir sá, hvat hann átti undir sér fyrir afls sakar* ‘From then on the merchants’ manner of speaking to Grettir changed a great deal, because they saw what power he had in him as to his physical strength’ (55). Cook (1982–85, 141) argues that the audience becomes aware at this point that ‘Grettir is not lazy but simply prefers to save his unusual strength for unusually demanding tasks’, and that ‘Grettir is not only superior to others but is also conscious of his superiority’. There is some truth in this view, but it is important not



to downplay Grettir's own development in this episode, as Grettir is also changed by the experience: *Var hann ok þaðan frá inn fræknasti til liðs, hvers sem við þurfti* 'He was also from then on the most valiant one in providing assistance, whatever was needed' (*Grettla*, 55). Grettir learns that if he wishes to avoid being framed as a deviant figure, it is not enough to assume that his 'superiority' will be evident to others; he must find ways of demonstrating it to them.

The admirable Hafliði appears to believe that being quick to identify other people as troublemakers is a rather reductive, simplistic approach to dealing with their more negative qualities, which is later borne out by Grettir's efforts to prevent the ship from sinking when the rest of the crew are exhausted. Whilst it is tempting for the existing members of a community to exclude those who do not initially conform to their communal norms, to do so also carries the risk of exiling someone who can genuinely benefit the community in a more unconventional manner (see 3.2.3). Hafliði's decision to intervene on Grettir's behalf ultimately proves to be a shrewd move, as Grettir is able to save his ship, but his approach is not mirrored by some of the communities that Grettir encounters in Norway. Sveinn jarl, in particular, is rather more eager than Hafliði to have Grettir marked out as a troublemaker when Grettir comes into conflict with his retainers and their kinsmen, beginning with Grettir's dispute with Björn, a distant relative of his host Þorkell. The saga says of Björn that *hann afflutti mjök fyrir þeim mönnum, er váru með Þorkatli* 'he greatly disparaged those men who stayed with Þorkell' (*Grettla*, 74), including Grettir, whom he denigrates to the extent that Þorkell demands Björn pay compensation to Grettir, after the latter proves his worth by slaying a great bear that had been harrying Þorkell's hall, for having dishonoured his guest. Björn refuses to pay the compensation himself or to allow Þorkell to pay it on his behalf, and Grettir kills him in a duel when the two later meet by chance. Björn's death leads to a feud in which Grettir is attacked by Björn's brothers Hjarrandi and Gunnarr, neither of whom are willing to accept blood-money for his death. Grettir is able to kill each brother in self-defence, and the saga seems to support his actions; Hume (1974, 471) argues that Grettir's slaying of Björn in their duel 'is neither surprising nor particularly discreditable', noting also that 'Grettir kills Björn's brothers only after they have refused mediation and attacked him treacherously'.

Yet Hjarrandi is a retainer of Sveinn jarl, who is upset by Grettir's having killed not only Hjarrandi, but also Hjarrandi's kinsmen. Sveinn accuses Grettir of being an

inherently aggressive, unruly figure after Hjarrandi's death, despite Grettir's protests that he only defended himself after Hjarrandi attacked him: *Bar jarl sakar á hendr Gretti um vigin, en hann gekk við ok sagðisk hann hafa átt hendr sínar at verja ... Jarl segir, at þat var illa, er hann var eigi drepinn; 'mun þat verða margs manns bani, ef þú lifir'* 'The jarl held Grettir responsible for the killing, and he confessed to it but said that he had acted in self-defence. The jarl said it was bad that he had not been killed: "If you live, it will be the death of many a man"' (*Grettla*, 82). Sveinn's hypocrisy is apparent to the saga's audience, however, who know that he is aware of how Björn had provoked Grettir—*fannsk jarli, sem margar sakar hefði Björn gort við Gretti* 'it was made evident to the jarl how many offences Björn had committed against Grettir' (80)—and that the brothers themselves were in fact the aggressors in these situations, as Sveinn later approvingly declares that *váru þeir svá hraustir menn í sér, at engi þeira vildi í sjóð bera annan* 'they were such valiant men in themselves that none of them wished to carry any other in his money-bag [*i.e.* to accept compensation]' (84). Sveinn demonises Grettir for the same behaviour that he conversely praises when he identifies it in his followers, and the contradictory judgements that Sveinn makes in this episode would have made it difficult for audiences to accept readily his claims that the full responsibility of the case lies with Grettir, who is shown only to defend himself. Sveinn's refusal to accept the complexity of the situation, and instead to blame entirely his enemy for the matter, ultimately results in a standoff between the jarl and many of his supporters, including Grettir's friend Þorfinnr and his brother Þorsteinn drómundr. This conflict is resolved, but at a serious cost to the stability of the community, as the social bonds between the jarl and most of the men are severed: *Skilðu með engum kærleikum ... Engi af þeim mǫnnum komsk í kærleika við jarl þaðan frá, þeira er Grettir höfðu lið veitt, nema Bersi einn* 'They parted without affection. None of those men who had given assistance to Grettir returned to friendly terms with the jarl from then on, except Bersi alone' (85–86). Whilst Hafliði discourages his men from being too quick to ostracise Grettir, which eventually leads to Grettir benefiting the community aboard Hafliði's ship, Sveinn's eagerness to interpret Grettir only as an outsider leads to a significant portion of his support-base being estranged from him. Through this comparison, the saga forces its audience to consider the usefulness of labelling an individual as different, or even deviant, without considering the more complex social context that constructs that notion in the first place.

**3.1.4 Monstrousness as social construction.** Several members of Grettir's community also demarcate him as different by metaphorically describing him as if he were a monster, most commonly a troll-like figure. At the ordeal to prove his innocence of having caused a burning in Norway, Grettir is described as *margýgjuson* 'a sea-troll's son' by a young boy (*Grettla*, 133), presumably referring to the fact that Grettir's trollish appearance in the previous incident resulted from his having crossed an icy river. After he has been outlawed, Grettir steals food and clothing from the people of Vatnsfjörður, leading them to declare that *sá dólgr væri kominn í byggðina, at þeim þótti ekki dæll viðfangs* 'that devil, which did not seem to them easy to deal with, had come into the inhabited district' (167). Similarly, when Grettir raids the farms in Mýrar, the saga notes that *þótti Mýramönnum mikill vágestr kominn* 'it seemed to the people of Mýrar that a great woe-stranger [*i.e.* monster] had arrived' (187). After Grettir is attacked by Gísli Þorsteinsson, Gísli declares that *er illt at fásk við heljarmanninn* 'it is bad to contend with the hellish man' (192), and that he considers Grettir to be *sjálfan fjándann* 'the devil himself' (194). Grettir is also referred to as being like a *troll* on several occasions, including by the saga itself when he enters the hall near Staðr before the burning (130), and by Þórir of Garðr, who interprets Grettir's success in battle—actually a result of Grettir's being assisted by the giant Hallmundr, of which neither Þórir nor Grettir is aware—as meaning that *hér er við troll at eiga, en ekki við menn* 'here there are trolls to deal with, and not people' (184). Grettir is even referred to as an *óvættir* 'evil being' by those in the hall near Staðr (130), who are scared enough by his trollish appearance to attack him, which leads to the hall burning down. The usage of this particular word in this scene is especially significant, as the saga refers to only three other figures as *óvættir* in the course of the narrative: they are the *draugr* Glámr and the pair of monsters Sandhaugar, all of whom Grettir confronts to protect normative society from their supernatural threat, and who are arguably the most monstrous figures in the text.

That Grettir is commonly labelled as a monstrous figure is unsurprising, as his opponents tend to describe him in such terms when he is acting in an antisocial manner, such as when he steals livestock and other provisions from farmers in the various districts of Iceland. Outlaws in general are often conceptualised in the sagas as being closely associated with monsters on a symbolic level (see **1.3.1**), as they inhabit the margins beyond normative society, the same literary and topographical

space in which such supernatural beings as trolls and giants are said to exist. This location of monsters beyond normative society's parameters is evident within *Grettis saga* itself from the depictions of Glámr, Hallmundr, and the *óvættir* at Sandhaugar, all of whom are set apart from the conventional Icelandic domestic sphere of the farmhouse. That monsters, particularly trolls, were often associated with the chaotic, asocial space outside normative society is evidenced by the metaphorical imagery used in certain Icelandic proverbs, which revolves around the idea of the trollish figure intruding onto the supposedly safe domestic sphere, as in the idiom *troll standi fyrir dyrum* 'a troll stands before the door', which refers to an unknown threat outside one's frame of familiar reference (*Cleasby–Vigfússon*, 641). The *konungasaga Sverris saga* contains similar imagery in the claim by Sverrir's captured enemies that they had hoped to join up with their allies *eigi kæmi troll milli húss ok heima* 'if no troll had come between outhouse and home' (*Sverris*, 26), referring to Sverrir, an extra-legal pretender to the Norwegian throne, as a metaphorical monster occupying the topography between the refuge of the domestic sphere and the liminal social space of the privy (Wilson 2016, 129–30). Given that outlaws are also associated with these same physical and conceptual spaces, albeit perhaps not quite so prominently with outhouses, it makes sense that Grettir's antisocial actions would be thought of by his victims as being symbolically monstrous, because the categories of outlaw and troll are thematically and topographically proximate.

Yet it is also important to consider what characterises the 'monstrous' in terms of categorisation, as the monster can be read as defying the kind of straightforward classification that allows people to make sense of the world around them. Some modern scholarship has treated trolls and other monstrous creatures in Icelandic literature as distinct entities, an approach evident in Jón Árnason's (1954–61) decision to organise his collection of Icelandic *þjóðsögur* 'folktales' according to sub-categories of monsters, such as *draugasögur* 'sagas of revenants' and *tröllasögur* 'sagas of trolls', and in Lotte Motz's (1987) argument that saga literature divides giants into the four types of *jotnar*, *tröll*, *þursar*, and *rísar*, each with different symbolic functions. The textual evidence of the *Íslendingasögur*, however, suggests that monstrousness was not viewed as being entirely distinct from humanity, at least

not in the way that a taxonomic division would suggest.<sup>23</sup> When Hróarr vows to defeat Sóti in *Harðar saga*, his father warns him that *Sóti var mikit tröll í lífinu, en hálfu meira, síðan hann var dauðr* ‘Sóti was a great troll in life, but twice as much since he has died’ (*Harðar*, 39), which indicates that trollishness is a more malleable state than a rigid categorisation. Ármann Jakobsson (2008; 2011) has shown that there is a significant overlap in Old Norse–Icelandic literature between the terminology used of trollish beings and magic-users; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (2003, 163–64) argues similarly that the wide variety of meanings for *troll* in these texts indicates that the few categorical approaches that do exist appear ‘to have only been a temporary device of people who felt that ideas about giants were rather inconsistent, and wanted to make them more logical by this distinction’. Most depictions of monsters in the sagas suggest that labels of monstrosity were generally used not to indicate that a being belonged to a specific category of the paranormal, but rather to demarcate figures who defied such straightforward classification—not to categorise a subject, but to indicate that it *could not* be categorised. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, 6) suggests that the defiance of categorical norms is typical of monsters in general across cultural contexts:

This refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally; they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.

Dana Oswald (2010, 2) similarly suggests that the monster is ‘an outlier’ in reference to a particular normative centre, and is defined primarily not by the category into which it can be most easily accommodated, but rather against the normative category from which it most differs: ‘The monster is always read against the bodies of those who are not monstrous—the so-called “normal” humans or “normal” animals.’ In other words, to label something as monstrous is to distinguish it from those known

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting here that the rather unusual *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* does establish a rather rigid taxonomy of types of giant at its outset, although it does not persist with this framework for the majority of its narrative (*Bárðar*, ch. 1). Ármann Jakobsson (2005, 2), however, argues that this is atypical of Old Norse–Icelandic literary approaches to giants as regards both saga literature and *Snorra Edda*, referring to the writer of *Bárðar saga* as a ‘lonely systemiser’ among the producers of the *Íslendingasögur*. Peter Dendle (2012, 438) argues that such classifications of monstrosity, which ensure that monsters are ‘catalogued [and] controlled’, and therefore less ‘frightening, unfamiliar, or uncanny’, are more typical of approaches in modern literature and culture.

quantities that can be more readily categorised as ‘normal’, and implicitly to claim that it must be fundamentally different and Other.

In this respect, it is notable that *Grettis saga* takes care to frame Grettir’s monstrosity as being constructed as a result of how others try to make sense of him, or rather how they consistently fail to make sense of him and thus code his actions and physical characteristics as monstrous. Just as an individual who is labelled as different does not actually have to *be* different, those termed ‘monstrous’ also may not necessarily perform the kinds of actions associated with monstrosity; there may be contextual and environmental factors that influence the decisions of other people to term them monstrous, even if they would not do so elsewhere. This is a significant consideration to take into account in reference to Grettir’s supposed monstrosity, as the first occasion on which Grettir is compared to a troll is portrayed in a way that suggests the other people present are inaccurate in their framing of him as a monstrous presence (*Grettla*, 130–31):

Grettir ræðr nú inn í húsit ok vissi eigi, hverir fyrir váru. *Kuflinn var sýldr allr*, þegar hann kom á land, ok *var hann furðu mikill tilsýndar, sem troll væri*. Þeim, sem fyrir váru, brá mjök við þetta, ok *hugðu, at óvætr myndi vera*; þorðu þeir hann með öllu því, er þeir fengu til, ok varð nú brak mikit um þá, en Grettir hratt þeim fast af handleggjum. Sumir þorðu hann með eldibröndum; hraut þá eldrinn um allt húsit. Komsk hann við þá út með eldinn ok fór svá apr til félaga sinna.

Then Grettir entered the house, but did not know who was inside. *His cowl had entirely stiffened with ice* as soon as he arrived on land, and *he was astonishingly large in appearance, as if he were a troll*. Those who were inside were greatly startled, and *thought that he must be an evil being*; they struck him with everything that they could get hold of, and then there was a great creaking noise around them, but Grettir pushed them away firmly with his forearms. Some people struck him with firebrands; the fire then spread through the entire house. He was then able to get out with the fire and went back to his companions thus.

[Emphasis added.]

This episode emphasises that the perception of Grettir as a monstrous figure is the key aspect in the events directly leading up to his outlawry, but it also shows acute awareness of the social processes through which the perception of Grettir as monstrous is constructed. Grettir is not inherently monstrous, but his defining characteristics, such as his exceptional strength and his enormous physical stature, are often interpreted by others through a framework of monstrosity, because the extreme nature of those traits marks Grettir out as different. His unusual physical abilities mean that Grettir’s actions rarely fit in with other people’s expectations of how one should act in certain societal contexts, even when he is not actually violent

or dangerous, but whilst Grettir’s strength is usually categorised as strange by others, it is not always categorised as monstrous. When the young Grettir demonstrates his strength by lifting up a huge boulder, the saga says that *gengu til margir menn at sjá steininn, ok þótti þeim mikil furða, at svá ungr maðr skyldi hefja svá mikit bjarg* ‘many people went to look at the stone, and it seemed to them a truly astonishing thing that so young a man should lift so large a rock’ (48). The wording of *mikil furða*, similar to that in the Staðr passage, indicates the unusual nature of the event, but even though the onlookers perceive Grettir’s actions as noteworthy, this does not cause them to refer to him as a monster.<sup>24</sup> On Grettir’s arrival at Sandhaugar, the saga notes that *húsfreyja sá, at hann var furðu mikill vexti, en heimafólk var furðu hrætt við hann* ‘the lady of the house saw that he was astonishingly large in stature, but the people of the house were strangely afraid of him’ (210), with the wording of *furðu mikill vexti* similar to that of the previous examples. Whilst the people of the house find Grettir’s appearance unusual enough that they are scared, he is not attacked in the way that he is at Staðr, and whilst the *húsfreyja* Steinvör does later question whether her houseguest is a troll or a man, as is discussed below, she does not refuse him food or shelter.

It is significant, then, that the saga’s description of Grettir’s appearance at Staðr emphasises that his ostensible monstrousness is related only to elements of his appearance that are either temporary aspects of it or that are not necessarily coded as monstrous elsewhere in the text. The first of these is Grettir’s cowl, which, being *sýldr allr*, gives Grettir the appearance of a frost-troll by obscuring the visual signifiers of his humanity. The second is Grettir’s large physical stature, which the saga tells us on multiple occasions is thought of by others as unusual, but which is not always associated with being monstrous. Grettir’s intrusion into the hall is unexpected, with Foote (1965, xii) arguing that it constitutes ‘wild and hasty behaviour’, but he does not attack or threaten the inhabitants; his framing as a monster in this scene is not a result of his actually being a violent, antisocial presence, as his actions are not especially monstrous in themselves, but is connected to how the people within the hall code his appearance. Indeed, Grettir has little time

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<sup>24</sup> The adverb *furðu* is an intensifier that is often simply equivalent to ‘very’ in modern English, but can also mean ‘wonderfully’ in the sense of being astonishing or strange (*Zoëga*, 153). It is related etymologically to the verb *furða* ‘to wonder’ and the noun *furða* ‘a strange (wonderful) thing’ (153). As this word is generally used in *Grettis saga* when Grettir is compared to a monster or undertakes an impressive physical feat, it is reasonable to assume that the medieval audiences of the saga would have picked up on *furðu*’s connotations of something happening in a strange or astonishing way.

to do anything before the hall-dwellers take him to be a monster and assail him, and in the ensuing confusion he simply defends himself from their attacks while leaving with some of the fire. Grettir is perceived as being monstrous not because he specifically acts in a monstrous way, but because the hall-dwellers cannot comprehend his presence within this social context; he does not accord with their typical model of a guest, so they react to his entrance by reaching for a different conceptual category, that of the *óvættir*, by which they can make more sense of this unexpected presence. Grettir's monstrousness in this scene is not inherent, other than his unusually large size, but is constructed by those around him as an immediate response to their categorical confusion at his sudden entrance into their familiar social setting. If Grettir is thought of as monstrous in this scene, it is because he defies easy categorisation, but the decision to classify him as monstrous, thereby effacing his humanity, is more contingent on the reactions of other people than it is on any actual monstrousness on Grettir's part.

The saga suggests, however, that the other members of Grettir's community have alternative interpretative possibilities for making sense of Grettir, and that they do not necessarily have to categorise him as monstrous in these episodes. A notable example of this is Grettir's ferrying of Steinvör and her daughter across the frozen river at Sandhaugar, an action that is interpreted in different ways by Steinvör herself and the priest Steinn at Eyjardalsá, where Steinvör is heading to attend mass. As with the event that caused his outlawry, Grettir, who is staying at Steinvör's farm under the pseudonym Gestr, uses his strength to cross an icy river in order to help his companions, who worry that they will not be able to attend church for the Christmas services. Despite Steinvör's repeated protests that the trip would be *ófært* 'impossible' (211), Grettir ferries mother and daughter across the treacherous river, which is laden with ice-floes. The episode has thematic resonances with the mythological figure Þórr, who is associated in extant material with river-wading and with crossing dangerous bodies of water (see: Wills 2017). It also directly parallels the monstrous imagery of Grettir's previous crossing of a frozen river, which alters his appearance sufficiently for him to be thought of as a troll by others; similarly, when Steinvör relates her adventures at church, *hon sagðisk eigi vita, hvárt hana hefði yfir flutt maðr eða troll* 'she said that she did not know whether she had been carried across by a man or a troll' (*Grettla*, 211).



Whilst this type of action has intertextual associations with heathen gods and intratextual ones with monstrous trolls, which could both have symbolised dangerous forms of Otherness for a medieval Christian audience, these are not the only cultural touchstones that a medieval audience could have used to interpret Grettir's ford-crossing, which John McKinnell (2005, 134) suggests 'seems closer to the legend of St Christopher, the giant-sized man who carries the child Christ over a water which is deeper than it has ever been before', which would probably have been known in some form by the saga-writer. Assuming that the Christopher legend was a reasonable reference point for *Grettis saga*'s medieval Icelandic audiences, it may be significant that the priest Steinn assures Steinvör that the figure who helped her *mann víst vera mundu* 'will certainly be a man' (*Grettla*, 211). The priest encourages Steinvör not to think of Grettir as a monster, but simply as a man who *fára maki sé* 'is matched by few others' (211). Grettir's actions in this scene do not necessarily have to be interpreted as monstrous, as there are different referential possibilities through which the saga's audiences can interpret this event; the Christian parallels of the Christopher legend may also have been especially prominent within the minds of such medieval audiences because of the context of Grettir's mission to deliver the women to church.<sup>25</sup> Even though Steinvör herself regards Grettir as a potentially trollish figure, the similarities with the Christopher story would have opened up possibilities for medieval audiences, well-versed in such Christian narratives, to instead interpret Grettir's ostensibly monstrous actions in reference to Christopher.

### 3.2 The Limitations of Outlawry

*Grettis saga* depicts many of the social constructs used to define Grettir's difference in such a way as to question the validity of these concepts being applied to Grettir himself; it shows how difference is constructed and shaped by those with communal power in order to benefit themselves, and how the resulting categorical confusion can even result in allusions to monstrosity, as normative society is often unable to make sense of those figures who do not fit into its typical conceptual framework.

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<sup>25</sup> We should not underestimate the interpretative sophistication of medieval saga audiences, particularly not of *Grettis saga* itself; Laurence de Looze (1991, 91) suggests that its concluding *Spesar þáttur*, entailing a 'sudden switch from the literary code of the heroic Family Saga to that of continental romance', is representative of 'the complexity and sophistication of the interpretative community of Icelandic literature', who seem to have been 'capable ... of moving easily between different modes of literary appreciation'.

These are not the only social constructs that *Grettis saga* questions, however, as the narrative also problematises the core concept underlying its protagonist's conflict, namely the outlawing process of the medieval Icelandic Commonwealth. One might imagine that Grettir being declared a *skógarmaðr* would help those within normative society in their attempts to understand Grettir's relation to the community, given that *skóggangr* symbolically represents a formal acceptance by the community that the individual in question is to be consigned primarily to the position of Other, albeit in a relatively liminal position; at the very least, the legal status, or lack thereof, of the outlaw should be evident. Yet *Grettis saga* shows how its protagonist's outlawry only further complicates how he is interpreted by the members of normative society, and how this process presents a series of practical problems for Icelandic society in how it copes with the figures that it demarcates as serious threats through the outlawry process. As a text that postdates the fall of the Icelandic Commonwealth, and therefore the abolition of the old law as it is preserved in *Grágás*, *Grettis saga* looks back on a superseded legal system and highlights its more problematic elements, which encourages the saga's audience to question the usefulness of having such extreme processes of social exclusion in the first place.

**3.2.1 Categorical confusion in outlawry.** Grettir is made a *ffjorbaugsmaðr* early in the saga because he commits a clear transgression: he kills a farmhand named Skeggi, albeit in self-defence and only after Skeggi attempts to strike Grettir with his axe (*Grettla*, ch. 16). When Grettir is sentenced to *skóggangr*, however, it is as a result of the burning near Staðr, which, as has been discussed above (see 3.1.4), is caused less by Grettir's own actions than by the reactions of the hall-dwellers there, who swiftly interpret Grettir's unusual intrusive presence as being monstrous and attack him. The actual circumstances are rather ambiguous; it is fair to say that Grettir could have expected his large stature and frozen clothing to raise suspicions among the inhabitants of the hall, but he does not directly cause the blaze, which starts because the people inside attack Grettir with logs from the fire. The judgement in Iceland dealing with the case, however, does not take both sides into account.

Upon hearing the news of the burning from a ship-crew shortly before the *alþingi*, Þórir of Garðr declares that he will accept no less punishment than Grettir's being made a *skógarmaðr* throughout Iceland, but his verdict is met with resistance by Skapti, the *logsoğumaðr*: *Víst er þetta illt verk, ef svá er, sem þetta er sagt; en jafnan*

*er hálfsoð saga, ef einn segir, því at fleiri eru þess fúsari, at færa þangat, sem eigi berr betr, ef tvennt er til* ‘This was certainly an evil deed, if it happened just as it is said, but a story is always half-told if one person speaks, because more people are more willing to convey it to the point where no one carries it better, if there are two sides to it’ (146). Despite Skapti’s objections, Þórir pursues the matter fervently enough that Grettir is declared an outlaw anyway. As Skapti notes, however, the judgement does not present a solution to the problem of categorical confusion surrounding the burning; rather, Þórir’s success in sentencing Grettir without being opposed merely reinforces the problematic, one-sided narrative that Grettir’s previous companions have spread. The legal system allows for Þórir, a powerful chieftain, to use his influence to have Grettir outlawed without hearing his version of the story, which is recognised by those present at the assembly: *Margir mæltu, at þetta væri meir gort af kappi en eptir lögum* ‘Many said that this had been done with more zeal than in accordance with the law’ (147).

Despite the communal disapproval of how Þórir conducted the case, the saga notes that *þó stóð svá búit* ‘nevertheless, matters stood thus [*i.e.* the sentence was upheld]’ (147), but whilst Þórir does manage to further the narrative about the burning by having Grettir outlawed—that is, having him formally designated as a dangerous outsider—Grettir’s actual status in relation to normative society remains confusing in a categorical sense. When Grettir returns to Iceland in chapter 47 of the saga, he is told that Ásmundr has died, that his brother Atli has been unlawfully killed, and that he has been sentenced to *skóggangr* throughout the country, but is not visibly altered as a result: *Svá segja menn, at Grettir brygði engan veg skapi við þessar fréttir ok var jafnglaðr sem áðr* ‘People say thus, that Grettir in no way changed his mood at that news, and was just as cheerful as before’ (148). He proceeds home to Bjarg and promises his mother that he will avenge Atli’s death; after hearing that Þorbjörn øxnamegin, Atli’s killer, is at home on his farm, Grettir rides there and kills both Þorbjörn and his son Arnórr. Ásdís is pleased by this outcome, but declares to Grettir on his return that *mun þetta upphaf ok undirrót sekða þinna* ‘this will be the beginning and the underlying cause of your outlawry’ (155). In his note to the Íslenzk fornrit edition of the saga, Guðni Jónsson points out that Ásdís’s declaration runs counter to the series of events as presented in the narrative, as Grettir has already been declared an outlaw throughout Iceland—indeed, has already been informed of it—in a judgement that took effect about a

week before his return to the country. Ásdís herself has also already mentioned Grettir's outlawry to him in a lament that she makes before he avenges Atli: *Þú útlægr gorr ok óbótamaðr* 'You have been made an outlaw and a criminal' (153). Perhaps Ásdís's later comment is simply intended to function in a metaphorical sense, as she also mentions that Grettir must now live apart from his kinsmen—a symbolic confirmation that his outlawry truly begins with his actual isolation from the family unit, rather than the declaration at the *alþingi*—but it also conveys a sense of conceptual confusion about Grettir's relationship with normative society.

It is worth noting, however, that such uncertainty also exists amongst Grettir's enemies, as they do not always regard him as an outlaw in the events before he is exiled and immediately thereafter. This confusion begins after Atli's death, where the narrator mentions that *engi kómu fram fégjöld fyrir víg Atla, enda beiddisk engi bóta, því at Grettir átti eptirmálit, ef hann kæmi út* 'no payment was forthcoming for the killing of Atli, and indeed no compensation was demanded, because Grettir had the responsibility of pursuing the case if he returned to Iceland' (146). The next chapter of the saga focuses on how news of the burning reaches Iceland and causes Þórir to have Grettir sentenced to *skóggangr*, thereby removing Grettir's legal rights, but also his responsibilities within the normative legal system. Grettir kills Þorbjörn on returning to Iceland, and his opponents later attempt to have Grettir's killing of Þorbjörn recognised as being equivalent to Þorbjörn's slaying of Atli, in order to avoid paying compensation for Atli (ch. 51). The majority of those present at the *alþingi* agree with this settlement, but Skapti points out a flaw in the argument (164):

Skapti spyr: 'Hvart var fyrr, Grettir sekr gorr eða Atli var veginn?'

En er þat var reiknat, þá varð þat viku munr, er Grettir var sekr gorr á alþingi, en hitt varð þegar eptir þingit.

Skapti mælti: 'Þat grunaði mik, at yðr myndi yfir sjásk um málatilbúnaðinn, at þér helduð þann aðila, er sekr var áðr ok hvárki mátti sín mál verja né sækja. Nú segi ek Gretti ekki eiga at gera með vígsmálinu, ok taki eptirmál sá, sem næstr er at lögum.'

Þá mælti Þóroddr dráputúfr: 'Hverr skal þá svara víginu Þorbjarnar, bróður míns?'

'Sjái þér sjálfir fyrir því,' segir Skapti.

Skapti asked: 'Which happened first, Grettir being made an outlaw or Atli being killed?'

And when it was calculated, it came out as a week's difference from Grettir being made an outlaw at the general assembly to the other thing happening immediately after the assembly.

Skapti said: 'I suspected that you would have overlooked this about the preparation of the suit, that you hold him to be the chief defendant who was already outlawed, and could neither defend nor prosecute his case. Now I declare Grettir to have no responsibility to manage the killing-case, and let him take up the prosecution who is closest in law.'

Then Þóroddr dráputúfr said, 'Who, then, must answer for the killing of Þorbjörn, my brother?'

'See to that for yourselves,' said Skapti.

Skapti's argument is itself confusing on a narrative level, if it is even accurate. The saga tells us that Atli is killed by Þorbjörn *nökkuru fyrir miðsumar* 'a while before midsummer' (145), and that Grettir was outlawed that same summer at the *alþingi*, which was held around the time of the midsummer solstice after Iceland became Christianised (Billington 2008, 47). The saga gives us no reason to assume that this specific iteration of the *alþingi* took place before midsummer, and in fact the chapter concludes by mentioning that *varð nú tíðendalaust fram yfir miðsumar* 'nothing newsworthy happened before midsummer was over' (*Grettla*, 147). The order of events as depicted in the narrative is also unusual, as the saga relates first the events surrounding Atli's death (ch. 45) then the process by which Grettir is outlawed (ch. 46), which, combined with the details regarding each event's proximity to midsummer, gives the audience the impression that Grettir was outlawed after Atli's death, not beforehand as Skapti claims. Whether this is a mistake on the part of the saga-writer is unclear, but Skapti's observation is accepted without question in any case by Þóroddr, and it is possible that medieval audiences may also have read Skapti's argument as sufficiently accurate; Carl Phelpstead (2017, 189) emphasises that 'the saga dates events in quite a different way from the chronological tables with which they are equipped in modern editions and translations', with such events often being dated relative to one another, and the temporal inconsistencies of this scene may be more immediately apparent to a modern reader than a medieval one.

Even if we assume that Skapti's argument is accurate, however, the scene still demonstrates the confusion about Grettir's status as an outlaw in the eyes of his opponents. Whilst *skóggangr* is ostensibly a fixed category of social relations, in that *skógarmenn* are unequivocally declared to have no position whatsoever in normative society and no legal rights, Grettir's status as an outlaw appears to be rather more malleable on a conceptual level, as his enemies do not consciously regard him as an outlaw when it suits them better to do otherwise. For Þorbjörn's kinsmen, the fact that Grettir kills Þorbjörn after having already been outlawed is problematic, as it invalidates their claim to full compensation for their kinsman's death; it makes sense that they ignore Grettir's legal status at the time of the killing, but this approach, whether unconscious or purposeful, reveals the uncertainty surrounding Grettir's relationship to society. Whilst Grettir's opponents recognise that he is an outlaw, they are willing to jettison that knowledge when it does not help them achieve what

they want, which is to avoid having to pay compensation for Atli. Being made an outlaw does not necessarily help the members of normative society more easily assign Grettir to any particular conceptual category, but only introduces a new level of potential confusion to his situation. It is significant that Grettir's opponents are willing to treat him as a legitimate participant in society, rather than as an outlaw, whose deviance is formally confirmed on a communal level by his change in legal status, when it benefits them more to do so.

**3.2.2 Relinquishing control.** Whilst Grettir's outlawry does not resolve the confusion over his placement within society's typical categorical framework, it does create a new problem, as in placing Grettir beyond the protection of the normative legal system, the community also relinquishes any leverage it had either to influence or to control Grettir's behaviour. The situation leaves only the possibility of dealing with the threat that Grettir is thought to pose through violent means—as indeed happens when Grettir is killed by Þorbjörn ǫngull (see **3.2.3**)—but Grettir's exceptional strength and imposing stature, the qualities that contribute most prominently to his part in the events leading up to being outlawed, also make him especially difficult to kill. Any danger that Grettir presents to the other members of Icelandic society is heightened, rather than minimised, through his outlawry, as his increasingly desperate situation motivates him to undertake more crimes, including intimidating those who oppose him and robbing peaceful communities in order to survive. In its depiction of the problems surrounding Grettir's outlawry, the saga highlights the limitations of the outlawing process, which successfully sets the community against the individual without necessarily providing a practicable framework for controlling or eliminating the disruption caused by his presence.

Grettir's killing of Þorbjörn ǫngull is representative of this problem. When Grettir takes vengeance for his brother, the ideal solution for normative society would be for a legal settlement to be agreed by Grettir's and Þorbjörn's kinsmen, thereby ensuring at least a temporary halting of the feud because Atli and Þorbjörn's deaths would be balanced out in the eyes of their families, as is generally agreed upon by those present at that *alþingi*. Grettir's outlawry, however, complicates the situation in that Þorbjörn's kinsmen have nobody to hold accountable for Þorbjörn's death; because Grettir is now outside the protection of the law, there is also nothing that can be done through the legal apparatus alone to punish him for his actions or to

compensate his victims' kinsmen. The saga emphasises this in Skapti's declaration to Þóroddr dráputúfr that *ekki munu frændr Grettis ausa fé fyrir hann eða verk hans, ef honum kaupisk engi friðr* 'Grettir's kinsmen will not pay money for him or his deeds if no freedom can be bought for him' (*Grettla*, 164). In other words, if Grettir is not permitted to be part of normative society, his kinsmen within normative society cannot be held responsible for his actions. The problem is serious for Þorbjörn's kinsmen, who are now legally required to pay Atli's family compensation for his death, but are not entitled to any recompense for Grettir having killed Þorbjörn. As a result, Þóroddr soon agrees to Snorri goði's suggestion that Grettir's outlawry be revoked, on the condition that Grettir's family waives the compensation owed them by Þorbjörn's kinsmen on behalf of Atli. Snorri suggests the strategy partly because he has already promised Grettir that he will help him in legal matters by speaking in his favour (ch. 49), but also because he recognises that Grettir could prove to be a particularly difficult extra-legal presence for normative society: *Ek ætla, at hann verði sárbeittr í sekðinni* 'I expect that he will become wound-keen [*i.e.* will cause others to suffer a great deal] in outlawry' (164).

Snorri's plan fails, however, as Þórir of Garðr refuses to release Grettir from his outlawry and declares that *meira fé skyldi leggja til höfuðs honum en nokkurum þóðrum skógarmönnum* 'more money should be placed on his head than on those of any other outlaws' (165). Unable to escape paying compensation, Þóroddr also places another three marks of silver on Grettir's head, which the saga notes was exceptional for an outlaw, as no man's life had been valued at more than three marks before. Snorri reminds the assembly that *þetta óvitrligt, at bekkjask til at hafa þann mann í sekðum, er svá miklu illu mætti orka* 'this is unwise, to strive to keep in outlawry the man who might cause such great trouble', and that *þess margan gjalda mundu* 'many would pay for that' (165), but his objections have no effect, and Grettir's conceptual status as an outlaw is strengthened by the increased bounty. Þórir's personal hostility towards Grettir continues to be problematic, as he ensures that Grettir is kept in outlawry, despite other members of Icelandic society expressing a desire that he be reassimilated into the community. After Grettir has been an outlaw for nearly twenty years, including both his *fjorbaugsgarðr* and his *skóggangr*, his kinsmen ask that he be allowed to rejoin society on the basis that no person should be expected to remain in outlawry for such a long period; the *lögsoðgumaðr*, Steinn Þorgestsson, agrees, declaring that *engi skyldi lengr í sekð vera*

*en tuttugu vetr alls, þó at hann gerði útleigðarverk á þeim tímum* ‘no one should remain in outlawry longer than twenty years in all, even if he had performed actions punishable by outlawry during those times’ (245). Þórir leads the opposing side, who argue that any ‘crimes’ committed by an outlaw should cause his sentence to be extended: *Þeir, sem sakar áttu við hann ... kolluðu hann mart útleigðarverk gort hafa síðan, ok þótti sekð hans eiga at vera því lengr* ‘Those who had charges against him declared that he had subsequently performed many actions punishable by outlawry, and thought that his sentence therefore ought to be longer’ (244). Whilst the group is unsuccessful in convincing Steinn to adopt their position, Þórir manages to convince Steinn not to release Grettir from his outlawry until the following year, as there is some confusion over the exact length of Grettir’s outlawry; this deadline subsequently leads the people of Skagafjörður to demand that Þorbjörn ǫngull kill Grettir within that timeframe, and to do so Þorbjörn takes extreme measures that ultimately reflect poorly on society itself (see 3.2.3).

Even though Steinn does not side with Þórir’s group in the debate over Grettir’s outlawry, their objection allows the saga to raise the question of whether it is indeed reasonable to judge an outlaw by the standards expected of a member of normative society for any ‘crimes’ that the outlaw commits during his exile. Such individuals have already relinquished their own right to protection through the normative legal system, and the desperate nature of their situation must influence their behaviour. Grettir, for example, does not rob other people of their belongings at any point in the saga before he is outlawed; the closest he comes is in his dispute with a man named Skeggi over a food-bag, which each man claims as his own lost property (*Grettla*, ch. 16). Grettir’s behaviour soon changes out of necessity, however, during his outlawry, with several scenes focusing on the social disruption that Grettir causes as a result of his stealing food from peaceful farmers (chs 52, 54, 58–60, 71). Even when Grettir, on the advice of the *lǫgsögumaðr* Skapti, resolves not to rob anyone else and decides to fish for sustenance instead—*því at hann vildi nú hvatvetna annat en ræna, fekk sér net ok bát ok veiddi fiska til matar sér* ‘because he now wished to do anything other than commit robbery, he got himself a net and a boat, and caught fish for himself’ (178)—he is able to do so only in the uninhabited wilderness of the Icelandic interior. That isolated locale is hardly safe, as Grettir is nearly killed on several occasions by Þórir and the assassins he sends after him, and it is unsurprising when, having been forced to flee his hut in the mountains, Grettir returns to robbing farmers



instead. Grettir's context affects his behaviour and the kinds of actions he performs, which supports Steinn's decision to waive any crimes committed during his outlawry; if Grettir does not enjoy the same privileges as a member of Icelandic society, he cannot fairly be held to the same expectations in terms of judging his actions through the normative legal system. Yet this reasonable judgement also sums up the problem that the outlawing process creates for the community it is meant to protect: if the outlawed individual has no incentive to avoid being socially disruptive, and is in fact placed in a situation that encourages them to perform illicit actions simply to survive, how does the sentence benefit the community in the long term?

**3.2.3 Society diminishing itself.** Grettir's outlawry does not solve the categorical confusion that his presence causes among the other members of normative society, and instead leads that community to relinquish any practical means of asserting control over what it deems to be a dangerous individual. On a more fundamental level, however, the outlawing process is not reductive only in terms of how society is then able to interact with and make sense of problematic individuals like Grettir, but also because society significantly diminishes itself by completely rejecting Grettir, thereby excluding his more positive qualities along with his negative, socially disruptive aspects. There is a sense in the narrative that whilst Icelandic society must, like any community, address those elements that threaten to destabilise its cohesion, the outlawing process is an overly absolutist method by which to achieve such an objective, seeing as it also involves the displacement of the socially beneficial actions that Grettir performs. That this community is able to so thoroughly reject an individual, however problematic, who fights to protect it must have affected how audiences would have reacted to the text's depiction of society; Hume (1974, 485) goes so far as to suggest that 'when social equilibrium is finally re-established at the end of this saga, it is so tarnished that we are hardly sure we wish to see it prevail'.

This tension is represented most prominently by the saga through its comparison of Grettir and Þorbjörn ǫngull: Grettir's enemy towards the conclusion of the narrative, who seeks to kill Grettir in order to claim ownership of the island of Drangey, on which Grettir establishes himself. Despite their hostility towards one another, the two men are similar in some respects. Richard Harris (1973, 49–50) notes that Grettir and Þorbjörn are both surly in disposition as young men and that each of them is vilified for supposedly being lazy; Andy Orchard (1995, 165–66)

also suggests that Þorbjörn kills Grettir in a way that mirrors Grettir's own killing of trollish figures earlier in the narrative. It is this latter parallel that is of particular attention for this section of the thesis, as Þorbjörn appears to fulfil a similar role to Grettir, albeit a rather degraded version of that role. Grettir is renowned as a monster-slayer because of his achievements in killing such supernatural beings as the *draugir* Kárr and Glámr, both of whom Grettir beheads after he has slain them to ensure that they do not return to haunt other people (*Grettla*, chs 19 and 35). Similarly, after he and his men kill Grettir, Þorbjörn beheads Grettir, despite the protests of his followers: *Þeir sǫgðu þessa eigi þurfa, þar sem maðrinn var dauðr áðr. 'At skal þó meira gera,' segir Öngull. Hjó hann þá á hals Gretti tvau högg eða þrjú, áðr af tæki höfuðit* 'They said there was no need for this, as the man there was already dead. "There is yet more that must be done," said Öngull. Then he struck two or three blows on Grettir's neck, before he took off the head' (262).

Yet Þorbjörn's actions are not directly equivalent to Grettir's, as the saga makes clear through his companions' reaction; such behaviour is not appropriate unless one is fighting actual monsters, and whilst Grettir may often be framed by others as a monstrous figure, he is nevertheless too human to be treated in such a way. The saga ensures that Þorbjörn's beheading of Grettir alludes to the methods used by Grettir in his conflicts with the paranormal, but does so in order to emphasise how unheroic Þorbjörn actually is in comparison with Grettir himself. It is worth noting that when Þorbjörn and his men actually come to kill Grettir, the outlaw has already largely succumbed to an infection, caused by a piece of driftwood cursed by Þorbjörn's foster-mother, Þuríðr; when Grettir attempts to cut up the driftwood, his axe rebounds off the wood and strikes him in the leg, causing a festering wound that will not heal. By the time that Þorbjörn actually confronts Grettir, the outlaw is already virtually dead because of his wound: *Varð þá engi vörn af honum, því at hann var áðr kominn at bana af fótarsárinu; var lærit allt grafit upp at smáþörmum* 'There was by then no defence from him, because he had already come to the point of death because of his leg-wound; the venom had spread up into his small-guts' (261). Þorbjörn's willingness to use socially unacceptable magic to kill Grettir is received with horror by the other members of normative society, including even Grettir's opponent Þórir í Garði, who denounces Þorbjörn's actions and tells him that he considers him *ólífismaðr vera fyrir galdr ok fjölkynngi* 'to be a man undeserving of life on account of this sorcery and magic' (264). The turn of events even leads to a

law being passed at the next *alþingi* outlawing all use of sorcery (ch. 84), and Þorbjörn himself is exiled from the country in ignominy.

The contrast between Grettir and Þorbjörn highlights how Icelandic society diminishes itself in exiling the heroic Grettir and in its inability to deal properly with him once he is an outlaw. When Grettir attacks truly monstrous, external threats to society, the saga appears to endorse his actions as heroic achievements; it notes how everyone who heard of Grettir's slaying of Glámr *þótti mikils um vert um þetta verk* 'thought this deed was of great worth' (122), and that many people *þótti Grettir þar gort hafa mikla landhreinsun* 'thought Grettir had performed a great land-cleansing there' after the conflict at Sandhaugar (218). Þorbjörn, on the other hand, is universally reviled for having acted in the same way as Grettir, but towards an unworthy target. Grettir may appear to be monstrous, but he is not *actually* a paranormal being; as Ármann Jakobsson (2008, 51) points out, even though some saga protagonists 'are interpreted as trolls ... of course, they are not, since they are the heroes of their sagas and a troll is never the hero'. Yet society demarcates him as a similarly external threat in making him an outlaw, and whilst it is Þorbjörn who ultimately performs the killing, the community as a whole contributes to the arrangement of the circumstances in which Grettir can be framed as a monster. Whilst Grettir performs socially beneficial actions in combating the real threat beyond society's borders, Þorbjörn's execution of him is simply a continuation of the problematic process begun with Grettir's being made a *skógarmaðr*; whilst Grettir's stay on Drangey is disruptive to the farmers around the area, including Þorbjörn, the threat that Grettir poses to the community is also, in part, *caused* by society's decision to place him in a position where he can be more readily identified as Other than treated on his own terms. In this respect, it is useful to consider Hawes's (2008, 48) suggestion that 'with Þorbjörn's example, the saga suggests that not all threats to society come from men with unusual (even monstrous) abilities'. This argument may be taken a step further: in highlighting the contrast between the ostensibly similar figures of Grettir and Þorbjörn, the saga implies that society's true problem lies in its propensity to create images of monsters where none exist, whilst simultaneously expelling those individuals who are actually capable of confronting the real monsters that exist beyond society's borders.

It is accurate to suggest, as Foote (1965, xii) notes, that ‘Grettir is by no means free of responsibility for his rejection and the years of condemnation that are to follow’. Grettir is rude and dismissive of others, especially during his formative years; his heroic endeavours do make up to some extent for his refusal to conform to any societal norms, but he is typically a difficult individual in his interactions with other members of the community. Nonetheless, it would be reductive to explain Grettir’s marginalisation by and exclusion from normative society merely in terms of his own social incompetence or his character failings, as the saga highlights how his status as a deviant, monstrous, and extra-legal figure is also largely contingent on how society receives and constructs a social identity for him based on his actions and his behaviour. Whilst it is reasonable on certain occasions for Grettir’s contemporaries to think of him as troublesome, the saga suggests that even in those instances such labelling does not necessarily provide a useful framework for ensuring communal success. Grettir is also sometimes labelled a transgressor for certain behaviours despite those actions not being labelled deviant when performed by others. The limitations of such categorical frameworks are also apparent in the saga’s questioning of whether the finality of outlawry is indeed a suitable method for dealing with difference, given that this entails Icelandic society relinquishing control over Grettir and significantly diminishing itself in the process. Grettir’s difference is understood by the saga to be in part derived from his individual decisions and his character traits, but it is also shown to result from the limitations of the various categorical frameworks that other members of society use to interpret individuals like Grettir. Overall, *Grettis saga* suggests that difference is created by a complex interaction between individual characteristics and the social context through which these qualities are interpreted, and problematises the various social constructions that contribute to this process, whether they be the concepts of deviance, monstrousness, or outlawry itself.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Communal Structure and Individual Agency in Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*<sup>26</sup>

Of the outlaw narratives discussed in this thesis, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* is the most explicitly concerned with how problems arise within communities of all kinds from the expansion of systems of obligation, and how these problems motivate frustrated individuals to act in an extra-legal capacity. This area of the saga's interest is reflected in the title *Hólmverja saga* 'The Saga of the Hólm-Dwellers' given to the saga in the Eggertsbók version of the text, which emphasises the role played in its narrative focus by the saga's most prominent extra-legal community, the Hólmverjar, who are essentially a gang of outlaws and criminals, led by Hǫrðr and his sworn-brothers during their outlawry. Although they come together as an organised group only in the latter parts of the saga's narrative, the depiction of the Hólmverjar as a stylised alternative society is what most obviously sets *Harðar saga* apart from the other Icelandic outlaw narratives. Hǫrðr himself is the most well-developed member of that group in terms of his characterisation and the saga is primarily focalised around his individual experience of the community, but his development cannot be fully understood without making reference to his role within the Hólmverjar as a part

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<sup>26</sup> *Harðar saga* is preserved in two distinct versions in vellum manuscripts: a complete text in AM 556a 4to (Eggertsbók), generally dated to the late fifteenth century; and a fragmentary text preserved on a single leaf in AM 564a 4to, written towards the end of the fourteenth or around the beginning of the fifteenth century, which is one of three manuscripts that make up the codex Pseudo-Vatnshyrna (see: Hast 1960a; McKinnell 1993, 690; Faulkes 2004, xiii). The complete account of the saga preserved in Eggertsbók constitutes the principal version of the saga used for modern editions and translations, given that the version that survives in Pseudo-Vatnshyrna is fragmentary and contains only the first eight chapters of the saga in a much shorter form (for a comparison of the two versions, see Jakobsen 1990). Furthermore, all of the post-medieval paper copies of the saga appear to follow the version of the saga preserved in Eggertsbók (Hast 1960b, 192–93). Eggertsbók refers to the saga as *Hólmverja saga*, but the Pseudo-Vatnshyrna manuscript titles it *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*. To take account of the difference in naming, the thesis generally refers to the saga as *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, or simply as *Harðar saga*. Unless otherwise noted, references made to *Harðar saga* in this thesis are from the version of the saga found in Eggertsbók.

of that community. To understand Hǫrðr's role within the community, it is also necessary to analyse the circumstances that lead both to Hǫrðr being declared an outlaw and to the establishment of the Hólmverjar by Hǫrðr and his foster-brother Geirr. This is because the dynamics that underpin the Hólmverjar are not unique to that community, but are representative of how all of the prominent communities within the saga are structured and develop over time. It is useful to compare how the saga's depiction of the Hólmverjar relates to its portrayals of the saga's other communities, including normative society, as this comparison reveals themes that unite the otherwise disparate episodes of the saga.

Indeed, the relationship between the individual and their community is of key importance to the events of *Harðar saga*. The saga depicts both how an exceptional individual is capable of shaping, or reshaping, their community, and how the structure of the community in turn affects the capacity of that self-same individual to act. In other words, the text highlights that the personal and political spheres are intrinsically bound up with one another, and demonstrates how each of those spheres continuously determines and redefines the other. In this respect, it appears that *Harðar saga* deals with similar concerns to those of *Íslendingasögur* that are more readily accepted as socio-political works about the dynamics of communities. The pattern and key themes of the saga could be summarised in similar fashion to Heather O'Donoghue's (2005, 80) description of *Eyrbyggja saga* as a text that is most interested in 'the development ... of the community, and the place of the outstanding (or ostracized) individual within it'. Whereas *Eyrbyggja saga* generally engages with these ideas through realistic depictions of normative society and the legal disputes that arise between its members, although it does contain a significant amount of fantastical material related to these themes, *Harðar saga* takes a different tack in depicting both legal and extra-legal communities in depth. In exploring the problems in the group-dynamics of the Hólmverjar that ultimately lead to their downfall, the saga draws comparisons between those problems and the similar tensions that exist in the normative communities depicted in the first half of the narrative.

*Harðar saga* is primarily interested in how large communities come to oppress their individual members by limiting their capacity to act in a successful, honourable manner. This concern is made clear in the opening lines of the Eggertsbók version of the saga, which concisely contextualises the principal matter of its narrative, namely

the events in Iceland before and during Hǫrðr's outlawry, against the background of Iceland's settlement, emphasising the role that King Haraldr hárfagri's ascent played in causing this settlement (*Harðar*, 3):

Á dögum Haralds ins hárfagra byggðist mest Ísland, því at menn þoldu eigi ánauð hans ok ofríki, einkanliga þeir, sem váru stórrar ættar ok mikillar lundar, en áttu góða kosti, ok vildu þeir heldr flýja eignir sínar en þola ágang ok ójafnað, *eigi heldr konungi en öðrum manni*.

In the days of Haraldr hárfagri, most of Iceland was settled, because people—especially those who were of prominent families and were proud in mind, and had good prospects—would not suffer his oppression and tyranny; and they would rather leave their possessions than suffer aggression and injustice, *whether from the king or from anyone else*.

[Emphasis added.]

Whether it constitutes an accurate historical account of why Iceland came to be settled in the late ninth century, the idea that Iceland was settled as a direct response to the oppression by King Haraldr hárfagri of his political opponents in Norway was a popular literary trope in saga literature. Snorri's *Haralds saga hárfagra* describes the settlement of Iceland and the Faroe Islands as directly resulting from Haraldr's violent attempt to unify Norway under his rule (*Heimskringla*, 1:117–18). The idea also features prominently in the early sections of some *Íslendingasögur* such as *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga*, where it is said to motivate the ancestors of Egill and Grettir to leave Norway and to settle in Iceland (*Egla*, chs 3–27; *Grettla*, chs 2–8). Unlike in those sagas, however, the account given in the Eggertsbók version of *Harðar saga* does not go into the specifics of Haraldr's supposed tyranny, or how it especially affected Hǫrðr's ancestors, at any length. The focus of the trope in *Harðar saga* instead appears to be the claim that Iceland was settled because the settlers refused to endure any form of injustice at all, *eigi heldr konungi en öðrum manni*. The wording of this phrase broadens the scope of the idea beyond the immediate conflict between Haraldr and his political opponents to encompass all the kinds of oppression depicted within the narrative. From the outset, this version of *Harðar saga* frames its narrative against the widespread belief in Haraldr's tyranny to encourage its audience to consider not only the specific oppression associated with the Norwegian king, but also the forms of injustice perpetuated by other people in the course of the narrative.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the dynamics of the typical relationship that exists between individuals and their communities, focusing especially on how this relates to the idea of individual agency. It argues that *Harðar saga* depicts its protagonist as an exceptional individual who is best able to function when not overly

constrained by communal responsibilities, and shows how the movement of events leading up to Hǫrðr's outlawry is caused because Hǫrðr is forced to rely not on his individual ability, but on a fragile support network made up of normative kinship bonds that are ultimately not respected by his kinsmen. The discussion then analyses how the major extra-legal community of the saga, the gang of outlaws who come to be called the Hólmverjar, is depicted as being advantageous in relation to the more obvious communal problems that affect normative society, such as the unreliability of one's kinsmen, in order to explain why Hǫrðr seeks out extra-legal communities at various points in the narrative. It is important to recognise, however, that the saga does not simply present this extra-legal group to its audience as an example of an idealised alternative community, as it is shown to have serious fundamental problems of its own. The discussion details the major problems relating to the idea that individuals can lose their capacity to act as the importance of their individual position within the larger group is reduced, as happens to Hǫrðr within the organisation of the Hólmverjar (see 4.2.3). The final section of the present chapter demonstrates how the text's depictions of the problems affecting the Hólmverjar correspond to its portrayal of normative society, many of whose members face the same kind of problems as those that afflict Hǫrðr during his time spent with the sworn-brothers and with the Hólmverjar. The chapter argues that the problems that arise within the Hólmverjar's extra-legal community are not exclusive to that group, but are shown to be symptomatic of wider concerns that affect large communities in general, whether they are considered normative or otherwise.

## 4.1 Agency and Communal Structure

As aforementioned, *Harðar saga* uses its depictions of normative and alternative communities not simply to draw a hard contrast between the two types of group organisation, but rather to explore the idea of community itself on a more dynamic level by highlighting how each type of group encounters similar problems in its development. The growth of a community at the expense of the loss of individual agency is the most prominent of these problems, and is also related to the idea of how the concept of power works as a necessary incentive for constructing communities, but also as a means of persuading individuals to curb their own idiosyncrasies in order to conform to their community's identity. The concept of



individual agency within the context of one's community is important to both *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*, but is particularly significant to *Harðar saga* because of the narrative's more explicit thematic interest in different types of community through its portrayal of extra-legal groups. It will be useful here to cover in more detail the relevant theoretical ideas behind the concepts of agency and power, and to discuss the applicability of these more modern concepts to medieval saga literature.

**4.1.1 Individual agency and communal debt.** *Íslendingasögur* outlaw narratives are interested in how the actions of individuals are in large part influenced by their position within localised communities and within wider society—in other words, how the social standing of the individual relative to other members of the community determines the parameters in which they have the theoretical and practical ability to act. This relationship is, of course, not unique to medieval Icelandic society: recent studies into the connection between an individual's perceived power and their capacity to act have shown that the universal dynamic of power hierarchies is that they 'create psychological distance, conferring agency at the top and requiring deference at the bottom' (Fiske *et al.* 2016, 46). It is important to be cautious about giving too much weight to modern studies in interpretations of medieval literature, given that such concepts could not have been available in these exact forms to the authors and audiences of the sagas, but it is reasonable to suppose that a similar dynamic to that described here—that in order to increase one's capacity to act, it is necessary for the individual to increase their perceived status within the community—could have been represented in some form in the sagas.

As regards how these general assumptions about the relationship between the individual and their community might be applied specifically to medieval Iceland, it would probably be anachronistic to read anything as strong as individual autonomy into that culture's mindset, but it is reasonable to interpret certain narrative concerns in terms of individual agency. Anthony Low (2003, 20) suggests that the former claim implies a kind of individualism more typical of modern cultural thought, which would not be accurate enough to convey the emphasis that medieval cultures usually placed on the closeness of the relationship between individuality and social standing; in other words, it would be inaccurate to suggest that each member of medieval Icelandic society thought of themselves as being a 'purely autonomous self'. The idea of 'agency', however, places more emphasis on the individual as being a

constituent part of society; it indicates that one's capacity to act is necessarily determined by the external factors of one's communal context, rather than by the internal will of the individual. A consideration of the nature of agency in medieval society may encompass literary concerns over the relationship between society and the individual without arguing for an excessive separation between individual and social identities. It is appropriate, for example, to discuss how problematic societal structures make it difficult for individuals to act according to the expectations of their social positions, or how an individual can put the community itself at risk by acting in a way that is beyond the remit of their social status.

Because social position is not necessarily fixed, depending on the particular communal context, the individual may improve or worsen their standing either through their own actions or by a change in their external circumstances, thereby altering the range of socially acceptable actions available to them. In certain situations, however, where the individual attempts to gain a social advantage for themselves in a socially unacceptable manner, there can emerge a tension between: (1) the individual's prioritisation of themselves; and (2) the self-sacrifice demanded of any individual by the community—that is, the requirement by the group that no member assert their individuality against its common interest, thereby threatening its stability—in order to maintain its unified communal identity. Byock (1982, 193) emphasises this aspect of the outlaw sagas, noting that 'behavior that is inconsistent with the current norms of a society is often considered irrational, even dangerous'.

The threat of dangerous non-conformity by individuals is the primary reason for communities to establish internal methods of regulating behaviour, which often take the form of disciplinary or punitive measures. Gervase Rosser (2015, 191) identifies this pattern as the way in which 'community' is generally understood across various cultural contexts, and refers to this dynamic of mutual intra-group self-sacrifice as 'a common absence':

Community is not a particular body or place; not the membership of an exclusive association or the population of a bounded territory. Hard as it is to conceive of community without objectifying it in a definite form, on this understanding *it is not a specific presence but a common absence*. The absence is an acknowledged, unpaid debt, a sense of guilt or obligation, which requires all human beings to make a propitiatory sacrifice. While the particular understanding of this obligation has varied between societies, and has taken both religious and secular forms, the conviction that mankind is united by being born into a common burden of debt appears to be found in all cultures ... It is in order to honour this debt that each person is called, alongside others, *to move outside the scope of merely selfish interest and to take up his or her burden*.

[Emphasis added.]

This is the key anxiety that provokes society into establishing systems of punishment to accompany systems of law. How can any community reasonably expect to maintain its stability through the establishment of common rules and social norms if it permits an individual to fulfil their own desires at the expense of following those rules? Were such deviancy to go unpunished, the moral and legal authority of the community's leaders to demand that their followers put aside individual desires in favour of a common purpose would surely be lost.

The question of how society deals with the deviant individual is an essential component of the Icelandic outlaw narratives discussed in this thesis, and a significant proportion of literary-critical scholarship into the subject operates under the assumption, either explicit or implicit, that the source of the tension between individual and community in these narratives can be located in the excessive individuality of the individual who is outlawed. Whilst such an assumption may seem perfectly reasonable in many interpretative contexts, it is not so intuitive as to go entirely without critical questioning. It is important to keep in mind that in any such instance of tension or conflict, there are interpretations to be made by both sides; in the case of this specific tension between individual and community, it is likely that the former is not entirely blameless. As Becker (1963, 1–2) puts it:

When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group ... But the person who is thus labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. He may not accept the rule by which he is being judged and may not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so.

Communities and societies are capable of requiring their individual members to give up their own desires to an unreasonable extent, thereby encroaching on the socio-political agency of each individual as a direct result. When presented with a display of individuality that is excessive enough to be categorised as deviant, it is important to consider the part that the individual's communal context had to play in motivating them to act thus. After all, it is this ambivalence of perspectives that the outlaw narratives, in their capacity as literary works, seek to represent to their audiences.

In connection with thinking about agency specifically in relation to *Harðar saga*, it will be helpful to detail how Hqrðr's social success within the course of the narrative correlates with his capacity to act in an autonomous manner. The saga's

approach to agency is fairly straightforward: as an individual gains additional bonds of loyalty with other people, they concurrently receive additional social obligations from and towards those people. This necessarily restricts the agency of all the individuals involved to some extent, as additional relationships add to the complexity of each individual's own nexus of obligations to other people. As the system becomes more complex, the likelihood reduces that an individual's actions will be received positively by all those to whom they have obligations, because the other members of that community may themselves have links to other people or other social groups whose interests conflict with that of the individual.

This understanding of agency is common to the other outlaw narratives of the *Íslendingasögur*. The central conflict in *Gísli saga*, for example, stems from the fact that whilst Þorgrímr has no obligations towards Vésteinn other than being his friend, Gísli is the brother-in-law of each man, through his marriage to Vésteinn's sister Auðr and Þorgrímr's marriage to Gísli's sister Þórdís. When Þorgrímr subsequently has a hand in Vésteinn's death, Gísli's capacity to take vengeance for Vésteinn is compromised because he also has kinship obligations to Þorgrímr, who is close friends with Gísli's brother Þorkell (see 2.2.3). Gísli still has a responsibility to take revenge, but cannot do so without harming members of his own family, nor can he let Vésteinn go unavenged if he wishes to maintain his relationship with his wife Auðr. Gísli's communal ties restrict his agency in this situation, as the range of possible actions available to him are reduced because he is closely connected to both the murderer and the victim.

This is not to say, however, that the sagas depict communal obligations only as posing problems for the individual, as it is through these obligations that individuals gain power, either by increasing their own social standing or by allying themselves to someone of high social standing. As aforementioned, agency correlates within a social context with one's perceived stature; in other words, the more that an individual is perceived by those around them as being powerful, the more agency they will have within that community. In the medieval Icelandic context, this is apparent in an aspect of the relationship between the *goði* and his *þingmenn*, which Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999, 122) highlights. This relationship was generally reciprocal, but nevertheless the 'assembly men had only limited opportunities to act independently', as 'essentially the chieftain ... held the initiative'. *Þingmenn* could seek support from other *goðar* if there was a serious breakdown in the relationship

with their current *goði*, which incentivised the *goðar* to ensure their own *þingmenn* did benefit from being sworn to them, but within a working relationship the *goði* always had the most say as to what he would do for his *þingmenn* and what he could expect in return. Jón Viðar notes that *þingmenn* had to support their chieftain ‘in the way that suited him best’, yet when ‘the assembly men committed any offences—such as murder or theft—they could not automatically count on the full support of their chieftain’ (122). Whilst *goði-þingmaðr* relationships were usually marked by reciprocity, they were still based on a power imbalance that translated directly into a difference of agency. As long as the individual was able to structure at least some elements of their community, as the *goði* did in determining the nature of his relationship with his *þingmenn*, they could maintain a greater level of individual agency within it.

**4.1.2 Social structure and individual success.** The dynamic described above can be seen in *Harðar saga* in the episodes before Hǫrðr is outlawed, in which he tries to achieve social success in various communal contexts. Whenever Hǫrðr manages to perform impressive feats, and thus achieve some social or personal benefit for himself or those around him, it is because he is able to acquire a prominent position within a group and can exercise his individual agency. This is most evident from Hǫrðr’s exploits abroad in Gautland, where he breaks into the burial-mound of the infamous troll Sóti, manages to win his treasure from him, and spends the following years with his sworn-brothers raiding in Scandinavia. The saga does not include these typically heroic exploits only to demonstrate Hǫrðr’s individual prowess, but also to highlight how he is able to shape the community he belongs to within this specific context, and how his ability to carve out a prominent role within the group provides him with the agency to decide the best course for himself and the community in general.

In terms of how the saga depicts Hǫrðr as being able to influence the structure of the group, it is significant that the expedition to break into Sóti’s mound begins with a sequence of *heitstrengingar* ‘binding-vows’ made by Hǫrðr, Hróarr, Geirr, and Helgi. By this point in the narrative, Hǫrðr and his companions are staying in Gautland with Haraldr jarl, Hróarr’s father, who thinks very highly of Hǫrðr and treats him exceptionally well, even having Hǫrðr sit beside him at the table *it næsta sér, í rúm Hróars, sonar síns* ‘next to him in the seat of Hróarr, his son’ while the

latter is away on a raiding voyage (*Harðar*, 38). This is a significant moment in the saga, as it implies that Hǫrðr is an impressive enough individual for the jarl to view him as a kind of surrogate son in Hróarr's absence. When a saga highlights the specificities of the seating arrangements within a particular context, it does so in order to communicate to its audience the social standings of the individuals mentioned within that context; Guðrún Nordal (1998, 149) notes that when feasts were depicted in the sagas, 'the seating arrangement was often particularly noted, as it conveyed the esteem in which the guest was held by the host', and Miller (1990, 30) suggests that such arrangements 'provided one of the few occasions in the culture where relative ranking was clearly visible'. It is telling that the seat assigned to Hǫrðr is one that is already assigned, more permanently, to another individual with a stronger claim to it, given that Hróarr is the jarl's son, as this implies that Hǫrðr's position within this context can only be that of a surrogate: his esteemed position cannot outlast Hróarr's absence. Indeed, when Hróarr returns home, the saga reminds the audience that his arrival meant that *þokar Hörðr fyrir Hróari* 'Hǫrðr gave up his place to Hróarr' (*Harðar*, 38). This detail, whilst not unexpected, highlights the transitory nature of Hǫrðr's social standing within the jarl's household: he is an honoured guest, certainly, but a guest nonetheless. Whilst Hǫrðr is esteemed within this community, he does not have any control over how the community itself is structured, and his position within it is susceptible to change at the behest of others.

When the household later gathers for the traditional winter-feasts, however, Hǫrðr is able to use the ceremony of *heitstrengingar* that takes place to move towards a more permanent position within the community. Hróarr instigates the ceremony by making a vow to break into the mound of the *draugr* Sóti before the same time next year, after which Hǫrðr makes his own vow in turn: *Mun eigi sannligt at fylgja þínum siðum? Strengi ek þess heit at fara með þér í Sótahaug ok eigi fyrr í burtu en þú* 'Would it not be appropriate to follow your customs? I make a solemn vow of this, to go with you to Sótahaugr and to not leave sooner than you do' (39). Hǫrðr's companions Geirr and Helgi subsequently make their own binding-vows to follow Hǫrðr in his future expeditions, but Haraldr jarl is most impressed by Hǫrðr's contribution: *Jarl var vel til Harðar ok kveðst helst vænta þar frama Hróari, syni sínum, til framkvæmdar, sem Hörðr væri* 'The jarl was warmly disposed to Hǫrðr, and said he had the greatest hope for Hróarr, his son, to distinguish himself in terms of prowess wherever Hǫrðr was' (39). The *heitstrengingar* in this scene offer a way

for individuals within the community to forge stronger bonds with each other, but they also constitute a method through which Hǫrðr, an outsider to the community, can to some extent determine his place within the social group. Whereas Hǫrðr has little control over his social position within Haraldr jarl's hall on Hróarr's return, his binding-vow enables him to establish a more reciprocal relationship with Hróarr, who himself has a permanent high standing within the community because of his familial connections. It is significant that Hǫrðr begins his vow by asking Hróarr whether it would be appropriate for him to follow the customs of the community, as his vow is motivated towards more firmly establishing him within that group.

In their ensuing expedition to Sóti's mound, Hǫrðr further negotiates how his relationship with Hróarr is structured by acting in a heroic manner on the occasions when Hróarr is himself unable to do so. Despite having made his vow to fight Sóti without prompting from others, Hróarr becomes reluctant to continue with the mound-breaking after the group finds that the mound repairs itself every night, thus thwarting their efforts. Hǫrðr obtains a certain sword from a man named Björn, whom the saga later implies is Óðinn, which Björn claims will counter Sóti's magic and allow Hǫrðr to break into the mound. On Hǫrðr's return from the meeting with Björn, however, Hróarr *segist þá vilja frá hverfa ok fást eigi við fjanda þenna lengr* 'says that he wants to turn away and not to contend with this fiend any longer' (40). The other men support Hróarr's suggestion, but Hǫrðr reminds them that *eigi dugir þat at enda eigi heitstrenging sína* 'it will not do for one not to fulfil his binding-vow' (40). They break into the mound by driving the sword into the hole that they have dug out, preventing it from closing over again, but Hróarr is still reluctant to confront Sóti. Hǫrðr offers to undertake the task on Hróarr's behalf, benefiting both parties: Hróarr is saved the shame of returning home having failed to fulfil the binding-vow he made in public at the feast, whilst Hǫrðr ascertains a guarantee from Hróarr that he will be granted social prestige and wealth in exchange for taking on the task, thereby improving his own standing in the community. It is conventional for the hero who confronts the mound-dweller to receive financial reward and honour from the undertaking, but it is still significant for the thematic concerns of the saga that this trope is framed as a reciprocal communal process. In allowing Hróarr to save face by agreeing to take on his binding-vow in exchange for prestige, Hǫrðr is able to have a say over how the relationship between them is structured, as the offer symbolically places Hǫrðr on an equal footing to Hróarr by suggesting an exchange

of places. At this point, Hǫrðr is not simply Hróarr's follower, but has become the driving force behind the expedition; he ensures it continues when Hróarr wishes to abandon it, and is most responsible for arranging the conditions for its success.

Hǫrðr's feat in overcoming Sóti, whom he manages to drive out of the mound before taking the treasure, is subsequently recognised by the local community. The saga says that *mikit ágæti þótti mönnum Hǫrðr gert hafa í hauggöngunni* 'it seemed to people that Hǫrðr had performed a great feat in going into the mound', whilst Hróarr assures Hǫrðr that he is *makligastr* 'most deserving' of receiving the valuable items promised to him (44). Hǫrðr's achievement is validated further on a societal level by Haraldr jarl's reaction when the men come to divide up the rest of the treasure, as the jarl refuses his portion and declares *Hörð makligan mest af at hafa* 'Hǫrðr the most deserving of having it' (44). Again, it is not unusual for heroic actions to be praised in this way within saga literature, but Haraldr jarl's decision to reward Hǫrðr further signifies that Hǫrðr has become more permanently accepted within the community because of his deeds. Whereas the jarl's earlier interactions with Hǫrðr appear to be based primarily on goodwill towards his guest, his awarding of the treasure to Hǫrðr in this moment is more typical of the lord–retainer relationship of reciprocal benefit, as Hǫrðr improves the fortunes of the jarl's son and is rewarded in turn. The decision demonstrates that the jarl believes Hǫrðr to have earned a more prominent place within the social sphere of his hall, an idea reinforced in the next chapter when the jarl allows Hǫrðr to marry his daughter (45):

At vári sagði Hörðr, at hann vildi til Íslands, en jarl ok Hróarr kveðst gjarna vilja, at hann færi eigi á burt, ok þótti þar eigi slíkr maðr komit hafa.

Hörðr mælti: 'Gera skal ek ykkur kost á því; giptið þit mér Helgu jarlsdóttur.'

Jarl kveðst því mundu vel svara. Þau ráð tókust með samþykki Helgu ok Hróars. Hörðr unni mikit Helgu, konu sinni; hann hafði þá fé mikit.

In the spring Hǫrðr said that he wanted to go to Iceland, but the jarl and Hróarr said that they eagerly wanted for him not to leave, and they thought no such man had come to that place.

Hǫrðr spoke: 'I must offer a choice to you two about this; give to me Helga jarlsdóttir in marriage.'

The jarl said he would answer that positively. They undertook the arrangement with the consent of Helga and Hróarr. Hǫrðr loved Helga, his wife, very much; he then possessed a great deal of wealth.

Hǫrðr is again able to determine to some extent the parameters of his communal relationship with Haraldr jarl and Hróarr, offering them the possibility of establishing a familial bond with him through the marriage to Helga, and he improves his social



standing further as a result. That Hǫrðr can successfully make this proposal is representative of his social standing, and therefore of his agency, within the community: after proving himself to be an exceptionally capable individual, he is able to negotiate with the most prominent members of the group in order to determine his place within it.

The final sections of Hǫrðr's expeditions in Scandinavia, where he and his sworn-brothers take part in raiding expeditions, demonstrate Hǫrðr's ascent to the position of leader within the group. Away from Haraldr jarl's hall and the established social hierarchy, in which the jarl and Hróarr are prominent figures, the structure of the community is initially more flexible. The saga describes how each of the four sworn-brothers had a ship, and *stýrði sínu hvern þeira* 'each of them had command over his own' (45). In the communal context of the raiding party, which is less rigidly fixed than the domestic space of the aristocratic hall, the sworn-brothers are placed on an ostensibly equal footing, despite the gulf that exists in the latter context between Hróarr, the son of a jarl, and Helgi, the son of a vagrant. When Sigurðr Torfafóstri later encounters the group, however, and asks after their leader, the saga emphasises Hǫrðr's *de facto* position at the head of the community: *Hann fréttir, hverir þar væri forráðs. Þeir sögðu, at sá hétu Hǫrðr, er fyrir þeim væri, Hróarr ok Geirr ok Helgi* 'He asked who was in charge there. They said that there was one called Hǫrðr, who was over Hróarr, Geirr, and Helgi' (47). Within a social context in which there is potential for him to have some control over its structure, given that the typical social hierarchies are not emphasised so forcefully, Hǫrðr's individual prowess leads him to be recognised as a socially significant figure: in other words, his capacity to realise his potential as an individual is directly related to the structuration of his community.

**4.1.3 Agency and communal power.** That Hǫrðr is successful in Scandinavia because he is able to exercise his agency, however, does not mean that the saga prizes individual ability without strong communal ties. Hǫrðr's ability to gain agency within society in these episodes is related to his individual abilities, but only because he is able to transfer those abilities into social capital by establishing reciprocal relationships that benefit others as much as himself, which give him power within the community by establishing his value in its successful function. Power is necessarily communal, as Hannah Arendt (1970, 44) observes:

*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power) disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes.

Arendt distinguishes between communal *power* and individual *strength*, and argues that the former is more important on the grounds that ‘the strength of even the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many’. Arendt argues that because power arises from sociality, individuals who are strong but lack power will often be interpreted as socially disruptive figures, against whom the powerful ‘will combine for no other purpose than to ruin strength precisely because of its peculiar independence ... [because] it is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against independence, the property of individual strength’ (44). This distinction is useful for outlaw narratives in general, given that the protagonists of those stories are by definition individuals who are specifically denied power, despite their own individual abilities in terms of their physical strength or intelligence.

*Harðar saga* similarly suggests that an individual must attain power through communal bonds in order to be successful, as the Sóti episode also contains several reminders that individual strength is not enough to accomplish such difficult tasks. When Hróarr vows to defeat Sóti, Haraldr jarl warns him that *muntu eigi verða þér einhlítr at enda, því at Sóti var mikit tröll í lífinu, en hálfu meira, síðan hann var dauður* ‘it will not be possible for you to perform this entirely on your own, because Sóti was a great troll in life, but twice as much since he has died’ (*Harðar*, 38–39). When Hqrðr encounters Björn, the stranger similarly tells him that the task ahead will be difficult if he does not have the support of others—*veit ek, at þér ætlið at brjóta haug Sóta víkings, ok mun yðr þat eigi greitt veita, ef þér eruð einir í aktaumum* ‘I know that you intend to break into the mound of Sóti the víkingr, and it will not work clearly for you if you are alone at the sail-straps [*i.e.* if you attempt the task without help]’ (39–40)—and Björn’s own assistance proves invaluable in finally allowing the party to break into the mound after their initial setback. Finally, Hqrðr’s success over Sóti is only possible because of his co-operation with Geirr, who accompanies him into the mound. In his fight with Sóti, it becomes apparent that the *draugr* is physically stronger than Hqrðr, who is *mjök aflvani* ‘greatly weakened’ by the encounter: *Tók Sóti svá fast, at hold Harðar hljóp saman í knykla* ‘Sóti grabbed

so firmly that Hǫrðr's flesh bunched together in knots' (42). It is only when Hǫrðr tells Geirr to light a wax-candle and shine its light over Sóti that the men can weaken him enough for Hǫrðr to steal Sóti's arm-ring and eventually to force him to flee.

Although Hǫrðr does use his individual abilities during this episode to gain more prominent social standing, and therefore more agency, he can do so only because his actions are simultaneously supported by the community around him. Hǫrðr's ability to affect the structure of the community is possible only because his suggestions are subsequently validated by the powerful members of the group, such as Haraldr jarl and Hróarr. In this respect, however, his experiences in Scandinavia are atypical within the saga, as Hǫrðr has much less positive relationships in Iceland with the prominent figures in normative society who would normally be expected to support his actions at a social level, most notably his kinsmen (see 4.2.1). As a result, Hǫrðr is less successful within Icelandic society because he is not always able to translate his individual prowess into social capital with such ease.

The saga does not suggest, however, that there is an inherent problem with Hǫrðr's desire to retain individual agency within that society, as he establishes himself within Iceland by demonstrating that he is an exceptional individual through his initial interactions with Torfi. On arriving home, Hǫrðr discovers that his brother-in-law Illugi has taken over the management of his family's farm, following Grímkell's death. Illugi offers Hǫrðr all of Grímkell's property that had fallen under his administration, but Hǫrðr tells him that he is *tíðara at heimta fé sitt af Torfa, frænda sínum* 'more eager to recover his property from Torfi, his kinsman' (*Harðar*, 53), referring to an earlier legal case in which Grímkell successfully sued Torfi over his attempts to shame Grímkell. Torfi is required to pay thirty-six hundreds of homespun to Grímkell, who reserves the money for Hǫrðr as *móðurarf sinn* 'his inheritance from his mother' (27). Torfi does not pay the settlement before Grímkell's death, leaving Hǫrðr to claim the property himself, but Torfi rejects his claim on the grounds that he is not yet sure of Hǫrðr's character. Illugi advises Hǫrðr to give way to Torfi in the hope of a better outcome, but Hǫrðr decides to gather supporters to challenge his uncle through a show of force. Torfi is impressed by Hǫrðr and agrees to pay over the money; he legitimises Hǫrðr's actions by declaring that *Hörðr hefði rétt at tala* 'Hǫrðr has the right to talk [*i.e.* is in the right legally]', and predicts that *mun hann ok verða mikilmenni ... miklu hefir hann skjótara við*

*brugðit* ‘he will also become a great man; he has been a great deal quicker in responding’ (54).

Hǫrðr’s claim is successful not simply because he gathers enough men to have more power than Torfi, but rather because he demonstrates his ability as an individual to make himself powerful swiftly and efficiently within a community. In emphasising the extent of his ability as an individual and taking decisive action, Hǫrðr indicates his value to the community, and Torfi’s legitimisation of his actions leads to him gaining more social standing within it. It is significant, however, that once he is established in this society with the help of Torfi, who gives him the farm at Breiðabólstaðr, Hǫrðr chooses not to involve himself in local affairs: *Öngvir urðu til at leita á Hörð, enda var hann óáleitinn við aðra* ‘No one happened to intrude on Hǫrðr, and indeed he was not intrusive towards others’ (54). This detail is relevant to the subsequent conflict between Hǫrðr and his neighbour Auðr, whose son is killed by Hǫrðr’s sworn-brother Helgi without much provocation. Hǫrðr hears of the killing, condemns Helgi, and visits Auðr to arrange compensation with him, but their conversation ends badly (55–56):

Ok er þeir fundust, mælti Hörðr: ‘Þar hefir tekizt illa, ok þó í móti mínum vilja, er son þinn var drepinn. Nú vil ek selja þér sjálfðæmi ok sýna þat, at mér þykkir þetta allilla orðit, ok lúka þegar upp allt féit, ok munu þat flestir tala, at þér sé varla ván betri málaloka at svá vöxnu máli.’

Auðr svarar: ‘Nú hefir ek hitt Torfa, vin minn, ok selt honum málit, ok hefir hann heitit mér at fylgja því til inna fremstu laga, enda mætta ek þat allvel sjá, at þér kæmið hart niðr Breiðbælingar.’

Hörðr mælti: ‘Þú hefir þat illa gert at rægja okkr Torfa saman, ok nú skaltu þess gjalda.’

Hann brá þá sverðinu Sótanaut ok hjó Auðr 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.

And when they met, Hǫrðr spoke: ‘It happened badly there, and still against my wishes, when your son was killed. Now I wish to give you self-judgement and to show that I think this happened entirely badly, and to pay over all the money immediately, and many would say that there could hardly be the prospect of a better end to the matter for you in such a kind of case.’

Auðr replied, ‘I have now met with Torfi, my friend, and given the case over to him, and he has promised me to follow it through to the full extent of the law, and I can indeed look on it very well if he comes down hard on you Breiðbælingar [*i.e.* all the people of Hǫrðr’s household].’

Hǫrðr said, ‘You have done an evil thing in setting me and Torfi at odds by slander, and now you must pay for it.’

Then he brandished the sword Sótanautr and sliced Auðr apart into two pieces, as well as his servant. Hǫrðr had become so angry that he burned down the farmhouse and all the hay and two women who did not wish to come out.

Hǫrðr’s anger is surprising, as he rarely acts so aggressively elsewhere in the saga; whilst it is possible that this anger is intended to stem from a character flaw, it would be unusual for Hǫrðr to act so differently in the rest of the narrative if the text wished to portray him as a typically violent individual. His reaction makes more sense,

however, when read in relation to the climactic scene later in the saga in which Hǫrðr and Helgi are captured, after the other Hólmverjar have been executed, by the mainlanders. Hǫrðr becomes exceptionally angry when his and Helgi's attempts to escape their captors are thwarted—not because the men manage to capture them, but because Hǫrðr's progress is repeatedly restrained by a magical *herfjoturr* 'war-fetter', which stops him running away despite his great speed.<sup>27</sup> After he is restrained a third time by the *herfjoturr*, Hǫrðr declares to his pursuers that *mikil troll eiga hér hlut í, en ekki skulu þér þó hafa yðvarn vilja um þat, sem ek má at gera* 'great trolls have a part in this, and yet you shall not have your wish about anything that I can do' (87). Hǫrðr then cuts in half the nearly-dead Helgi in front of his opponents, who are shocked by his anger: *Svá var Hǫrðr þá reiðr ok ógurligr at sjá, at engi þeira þorði framan at honum at ganga* 'Hǫrðr was then so angry and terrible to behold that none of them dared go up to him'.

Whilst these scenes may not seem similar, apart from both depicting Hǫrðr committing violent acts born out of anger, they share a common dynamic pattern. In both scenes, Hǫrðr's anger stems from an inability to act, because his capacity to do so has been severely restricted by external factors. The *herfjoturr* represents an external force that prevents Hǫrðr from using his individual qualities to his own benefit, thus constricting his agency. That Hǫrðr can temporarily resist this magical restriction is demonstrative of his exceptional ability, but he is ultimately unable to break free of the external factor restricting him; left with no other option, he asserts what remains of his agency in an act of shocking violence. When Hǫrðr reacts violently in his dealings with Auðr, it is because he has been made similarly powerless, albeit in a rather different way. Auðr himself is obviously not an external factor in the confrontation, but his decision to reject Hǫrðr's generous offer of self-judgement—which would hand over to Auðr complete control in deciding how much money Hǫrðr should pay as compensation—and to have Torfi pursue the case *til inna fremstu laga* 'to the full extent of the law' denies the possibility of Hǫrðr influencing the terms of the settlement. Instead, Auðr refers the matter to the external structure of

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<sup>27</sup> Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson note that the mention of a *herfjoturr* in the sagas more commonly indicates metaphorically that a warrior is greatly exhausted within himself, and as a result 'jafnan hefur verið talið, að söguhöf. misskildi hér orðið herfjötur, þar sem hann segir, að Hǫrður hafi tvívegis höggvið af sér herfjöturinn' ['it has usually been said that the author of the saga has misunderstood the word *herfjoturr* here, where he says that Hǫrðr had struck from him in both directions the *herfjoturr*']. It is not necessary, however, to argue that the saga has misunderstood the material; the restraints may be genuinely magical, as Hǫrðr suggests, particularly as the mainlanders are closely associated with magic-users in the saga (see 4.2.2).

the normative legal system, but in such a way that Hǫrðr is isolated from Torfi, his own major source of legal support (see 4.2.1). Auðr's rejection of self-judgement therefore stands as a symbolic severance of Hǫrðr's connection to the community, which exists only because of his relationship with Torfi; that Auðr enlists Torfi to prosecute the case further repudiates the legitimacy of Hǫrðr's social standing. In this context, Hǫrðr's violent reaction functions, similarly to his response to the *herfjoturr*, as a temporary release of his anger at being made utterly powerless, yet it is an action that only confirms his social impotence. Unable to affect the structuration of his communal context, Hǫrðr is stripped of the requisite social power to gain any benefit from his individual abilities, and his rage is representative, most of all, of a complete loss of control, not just on a personal or emotional level, but also in terms of his place as an individual within the community.

## 4.2 The Function of the Hólmverjar

Whereas Hǫrðr finds his individual agency restricted in normative Icelandic society, where he has little control over his social connections and his place within the community, he finds a possible solution in the Hólmverjar, the alternative society of criminals that he and Geirr establish after Torfi has had Hǫrðr outlawed. As a large extra-legal organisation, the Hólmverjar are exceptional amongst the outlaw narratives of the *Íslendingasögur*, although some family sagas do depict groups of outlaws in Iceland: *Vatnsdæla saga*, for example, contains a scene in which Ingólfr Þorsteinsson fights a gang of eighteen thieves, and the latter parts of *Eyrbyggja saga* portray the *fjörbaugsmaðr* Óspakr Kjallaksson and his criminal followers resisting their neighbours' attempts to dispatch them (*Vatnsdæla*, 107–09; *Eyrbyggja*, 157–69). None of these groups, however, is so highly stylised as are the Hólmverjar, who exist somewhere in between those less salubrious communities and the heroic *víkingar* war-bands of such *fornaldarsögur* as *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*. *Harðar saga* uses the Hólmverjar to explore the distinction between justifiable raiding and the antisocial behaviour more typical of criminals, but also emphasises the advantages that Hǫrðr derives from being part of the group, by contrast with his time in normative society. Whereas Hǫrðr does not have a secure support-base within Iceland as his kinsmen consistently fail to assist him, he is able to secure support from the Hólmverjar as their leader, and is able to put his powers of

perception to good use against the more problematic aspects of normative society itself, albeit only for a time.

**4.2.1 The failure of normative kinship.** Although the Hólmverjar as they are depicted in *Harðar saga* are a highly stylised organisation, it is remarkable that the sagas depict large groups of outlaws as having existed in Saga Age Iceland at all, given that the Icelandic legal context provided incentives for people to kill outlaws to attain reprieves for their outlawed kin, and for outlaws to kill each other for the same purpose, in order to destabilise extra-legal communities.<sup>28</sup> *Grettis saga* depicts two such encounters, the first involving the outlaw Grímr being promised his freedom by the people of Hrutafjörðr if he kills Grettir; when Grettir discovers the plan and kills Grímr himself, the saga notes that *nú þóttisk Grettir sjá, hvat þat var, at taka við skógarmönnum* ‘now Grettir thought he could see how it was to take in outlaws’ (*Grettla*, 180). In the next chapter of the saga, the outlaw Þórir rauðskeggr is hired by Grettir’s enemy Þórir í Garði to kill Grettir, again on the promise that he will be freed from his outlawry. Grettir agrees to give Þórir a chance, but Grettir is betrayed by Þórir and kills him; the saga says that *eptir þat vildi Grettir aldri við skógarmönnum taka, en þó mátti hann varla einn saman vera* ‘after that Grettir never wanted to take in outlaws, even though he was scarcely able to be alone’ (183). The psychological impact of this system on outlawed individuals like Grettir is simple: despite being affected by the fundamental human need for community, which in Grettir’s case has been aggravated by the curse placed on him by the *draugr* Glámr (ch. 35), Grettir is not able to trust other people who share his experience as an outsider. In such hostile conditions, it is difficult to envisage how a stable group of outlaws could emerge as any kind of alternative to society.

What, then, would motivate Hǫrðr and his sworn-brothers to establish such a large extra-legal community as the Hólmverjar? The likeliest explanation, at least in

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<sup>28</sup> The laws regarding how a man outlawed for theft or killing might win a reprieve, or how his kinsmen might win it on his behalf, differ between *Grágás*’s extant versions. *Staðarhólsbók* does not allow for those outlawed for either thieving or killing cases to earn a reprieve unless special permission from the *lögretta* is obtained on their behalf (*Grágás St*, 399 [‡ 382]). *Konungsbók* is open to more interpretation in this regard, as it does not explicitly forbid those outlawed for killing crimes from attempting to earn a reprieve in the same manner permitted of their kinsmen, provided they had already been offered the opportunity to settle in the case that led to their outlawry (*Grágás K*, 187 [‡ 110]). In practice, however, the wording of the law eliminated the possibility for most men outlawed for killing cases to claim a reprieve, as *Konungsbók* declares that killing cases were only to be settled in exceptional circumstances, as is discussed below with regard to Torfi’s offer of settlement.

Hǫrðr's case, is that even before he is declared to be an outlaw, Hǫrðr lacks a secure support-base within normative society because of his poor relations with his kinsmen, whether related to him by blood or marriage. Hǫrðr is only close to his foster-brother Geirr, his foster-father Grímr, and his sister Þorbjörg, who promises him that she will ensure he is avenged if he dies before her (*Harðar*, 32):

Verðir þú,  
svá ek vita gerla,  
vápnum veginn  
eðr í val fallinn,  
þeim skulu manni  
mín at sönnu  
bitrlig ráð  
at bana verða.

If you are killed with weapons or struck down with the slain, in such a way that I may fully know it, my keen counsels shall be the sentence to kill that man.

Hǫrðr has rather more turbulent relationships with his other family members, however, especially his parents, Grímkell and Signý, and his uncle Torfi, the last of whom has been discussed above. As regards his relationship with his parents, Hǫrðr is sent away from home at a young age to be fostered because of his mother's anger towards him (see 4.3.3). He returns when he is older to ask his father to give him money in order to travel abroad, but Grímkell reacts badly when Hǫrðr suggests a figure of sixty hundreds of cloth, twenty hundred of which would be striped—a highly valuable amount of property—and accuses his son of being arrogant and greedy, even though Grímkell's wife Sigríðr later insists that the figure *næri mun sú vera, sem hann hefir ætlat sér til kaupa* 'will be close to what he himself had intended to offer' (*Harðar*, 35).

Hǫrðr does manage to improve his relationship with Torfi in claiming the settlement from him in impressive fashion, but this development proves short-lived, as Torfi is shocked by Auðr's death: *Kvað hann engan slíks fyrr fýst háfa,—‘at gera slík óðamaverk við vini mína, en þó Hörð eigi gott af eyrum at leiða* 'He said no one had before desired to do such a thing—"to perform such monstrous deeds towards my friends, and yet it will not be good to get rid of Hǫrðr"' (56). Nevertheless, Torfi publicly declares at the *alþingi* that he is willing to accept a settlement from Hǫrðr's supporters for the killings. For Torfi to offer the possibility of a settlement is noteworthy, as cases involving killing were not intended to be concluded through such means, at least according to *Konungsbók*: *Of vig öll þav er nv hefi ec talið oc*



*sva vm en meire sör scolo menn eigi sættaz á fyrir alþingis lof* ‘For all the killings I have now told and also for major wounds men are not to settle without prior leave of the General Assembly’ (*Grágás K*, 174 [‡ 98]; *Laws*, 161). Torfi’s decision is rather surprising, especially given Hǫrðr’s expectation that he and Helgi *eigi geta af sér fyrir fjandskap Torfa at bjóða neinar sættir sjálf* ‘would be unable to offer themselves as peace-makers in any way because of Torfi’s enmity’ (*Harðar*, 56). It does, however, allow the saga to raise the possibility of Hǫrðr being redeemed by his supporters—but only after it shows how they have failed him.

Before the *alþingi*, Hǫrðr turns to his surviving kinsmen Indriði and Illugi, his brothers-in-law, for their support. Even if an individual accused of committing a violent crime were given the permission to settle the case, they could not provide the settlement themselves, because their being accused of the crime meant they forfeited their right to attend legal assemblies, as well as their immunity and the immunity of their party from injury if they attended regardless (*Grágás K*, 174–75 [‡ 99]). Miller (1990, 234) observes that ‘most of the time spent preparing for lawsuits was devoted to recruiting supporters’, and ‘the judgment was usually assured’ against those who were unable to gather sufficient support for their side of the case. If a person accused of a violent crime was to have any chance of maintaining their legal status within normative society, they needed to persuade their kinsmen or friends to attend the assembly to obtain a positive outcome for them. Indeed, Hǫrðr attempts to recruit Indriði to offer a settlement on his behalf, but his decision to send the unruly Helgi to persuade Indriði to attend the *alþingi* predictably backfires (*Harðar*, 56–57):

Indriði svarar: ‘Ek hefí heitit Illuga rauða at fara til Kjalarnessþings, en bjóða vil ek Herði hingat til mín.’

Helgi svarar: ‘Minni nauðsyn mun þér at fara til Kjalarnessþings en at svara fyrir mág þinn jafnröskvan, ok muntu vera skauð ein.’

Þorbjörg mælti: ‘Þetta væri órlausn nökkur, ef dugandi maðr færi með erindum, en nú kann vera, at engi verði; hefir ok þessi ógæfa af þér hlotizt.’

Helgi fór heim ok sagði ekki Herði frá heimboðinu Indriða, en kvað hann ekki lið honum veita vilja.

Indriði replied: ‘I have promised Illugi rauði to go to the Kjalarnessþing, but I want to invite Hǫrðr here to me.’

Helgi replied: ‘There will be less need for you to go to the Kjalarnessþing than to answer for your equally brave in-law [*i.e.* Hǫrðr], and you will be nothing but a mare’s cunt.’

Þorbjörg spoke: ‘There would have been something of a solution if a resolute man had come with this message, but now it may be that nothing will happen; this misfortune has also resulted from you.’

Helgi went home and did not tell Hǫrðr about Indriði's invitation, but said that he did not wish to offer him support.<sup>29</sup>

Hǫrðr is clearly let down here by his sworn-brother Helgi, although is not made aware of this because of Helgi's dishonesty, but Indriði is also at fault; his invitation for Hǫrðr to join him at a different legal assembly means that he would still be absent from the *þing* where Torfi offers to settle Hǫrðr's case. Helgi is certainly insulting in his dealings with Indriði, but his claim that Hǫrðr is more in need of Indriði's support than Illugi is accurate.

Because he lacks a secure support-base within normative society, Hǫrðr is not represented at the *þing* and is unsurprisingly outlawed. Rebecca Merkelbach (2016b, 81) argues that because Hǫrðr is 'alienated from his birth-family and inspired with distrust in his kinsmen', it is accurate to conclude that 'his own family [leads] Hǫrðr further away from society'; because Hǫrðr lacks the conventional means of support within normative society, he is less invested in the success of that community, which has marginalised him in any case. By contrast, the extra-legal organisation of the Hólmverjar offers Hǫrðr the possibility of establishing a community in which he is more certain of the support of others, and where he is a more central presence. It is notable that among the laws set down for the Hólmverjar to follow is the demand that *allir skyldu skyldir at fara, hvert sem Hǫrðr vildi eða Geirr, ef þeir væri sjálfir í för* 'all should be obliged to go wherever Hǫrðr or Geirr wished, if they themselves were on the expedition' (*Harðar*, 65), a firm requirement that the Hólmverjar support Hǫrðr and his close friend whatever the circumstances. Indeed, in the initial episodes during Hǫrðr's outlawry, his and Geirr's position at the head of the Hólmverjar is unquestioned by other members of the group, even though more criminally minded individuals like Þorgeirr gyrðilskeggi do attempt to influence the direction of the community as well. To have such control over his obligations to others appears to be important to Hǫrðr; before forming the Hólmverjar, he comes close to parting company with Geirr when he discovers that his sworn-brother has been stealing, only for Geirr to entice him to stay by swearing to recognise Hǫrðr's authority in the group: *Skaltu einn öllu ráða okkar á milli* 'You alone must decide everything between the two of us' (60). Whilst it was a risk for outlaws to group together, as is

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<sup>29</sup> Þórhallur Vilmondarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson note that this passage appears to contain a mistake, at least as it is preserved in the extant versions of the saga, as the Kjalarnessþing would have been held in spring, and therefore would not have conflicted with the *alþingi* in the summer.

apparent from Grettir’s experience, for an individual like Hǫrðr, who is already deeply alienated within normative society, the creation of an extra-legal community offers the possibility, however hazardous, of structuring his social obligations so that he has more power and agency than would be otherwise available to him.

**4.2.2 Outsider perspectives and societal corruption.** As well as allowing him to establish a support-base, living outside normative society also lets Hǫrðr perceive things within that communal context from a different standpoint—as an outsider, rather than as someone invested in the structure of the group—which affects how Hǫrðr’s appetite for heroic endeavours manifests itself. When he decides to confront supernatural threats before he is outlawed, Hǫrðr looks to the boundaries of his society, setting out into the forests of Gautland to confront the *draugr* Sóti. Once he has been outlawed, however, Hǫrðr shifts his focus to combatting forms of Otherness within normative society itself, as symbolised by the *galdrakonur* ‘sorceresses’ (sg. *galdrakona*) who support the chieftains on the mainland.<sup>30</sup> These women represent a dangerous kind of Otherness through their magical abilities, which are capable of distorting how those around them perceive reality, yet their presence is tolerated, and even endorsed, by the other members of their society.

Even before he is outlawed, Hǫrðr is said to be a particularly perceptive individual. The saga says of him that *honum mátti öngvar sjónhverfingar gera í augum, því at hann sá allt eptir því sem var* ‘no visual delusions could enter his eyes, because he saw everything according to how it was’ (*Harðar*, 32). While Hǫrðr is still part of normative society, his perceptiveness is revealed through his forebodings about various matters, although he is not always able to articulate exactly what motivates his doubts. When his brother-in-law Illugi offers him a ring in friendship, Hǫrðr is reluctant to trust Illugi: *Eigi veit ek ... hví mér býðr þat í hug, at þú munir eigi vel halda mágsemd við mik, en þó mun þat síðar reynast* ‘I don’t know why I

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<sup>30</sup> This chapter consistently uses the Old Norse–Icelandic term *galdrakona* to refer to the female magic-users discussed in this section, but *Harðar saga* itself does not always use this term to refer to those women, and more often uses the adjective *fjölkunnig* ‘skilled in magic’ to indicate that a woman is a magic-user (*Harðar*, 8, 63, 67). The noun *galdr* ‘magic’ is also not specifically associated with women in the saga, but has connotations of trollishness; Hǫrðr describes the *draugr* Sóti in a verse as *galdra greypr* ‘the fierce one of sorcery’ (44). The reverse is also true, as Hǫrðr describes the *herfjóturr* that restrains him as arising from *mikil troll* ‘great trolls’ (87), whilst his sister Þorbjörg calls the it *grimmra galdra galdr* ‘the magic-charm of grim sorcerers’ (90). There is a great deal of overlap between the supernatural elements of the saga, and the *galdrakonur* should not be viewed as entirely distinct from figures like the *draugr* Sóti and the heathen goddess Þorgerðr hǫrgabruðr, who seem to be related in some way (see 4.3.3).

have a foreboding that you will not uphold in-lawry well with me, but it will nonetheless be put to the test later’ (31). Similarly, after Helgi makes a vow of sworn-brotherhood to him, Hǫrðr reminds his companion to be careful in his actions: *Ekki er víst, at okkar verði langt milli, ok hugsa þú um, at eigi standi af þér til beggja okkarra líflát eða þó fleiri manna annarra* ‘It is not certain that there will be a great distance between us, but give thought that you do not cause both of our deaths, or still more of other men’ (38). When Helgi later kills Sigurðr Auðsson, an act that eventually leads to Helgi and Hǫrðr being outlawed, Hǫrðr remarks bitterly that *er nú þat fram komit, er mér sagði hugar um* ‘it has now happened as my mind told me [*i.e.* according to my foreboding]’ (55).

During his outlawry, however, Hǫrðr puts his powers of perception to a different purpose in confronting the *galdrakonur*, who oppose the Hólmverjar when they steal from the mainlanders. The antagonism between Hǫrðr and these women does not simply constitute a personal conflict, however, but is representative of wider societal concerns, because the women are deeply embedded within normative Icelandic society. Thor Ewing (2008, 110) argues that magic-users in pre-Christian Scandinavia may have constituted a parallel community operating independently of mainstream society, but this is not the case for the *galdrakonur* of *Harðar saga*, who are mothers to influential chieftains around the district and so are closely associated with the power hierarchy of the local community. Þorbjörg katla, for example, is introduced as being *fjölkunnig mjök ok in mesta gjaldrakona* ‘exceptionally skilled in magic and the greatest sorceress’, and is the mother of the *goði* Refr Þorsteinsson; similarly, the *galdrakona* Skroppa is the foster-mother of the prominent farmer Þorsteinn oxnabroddr (*Harðar*, 63). Even Hǫrðr’s brother-in-law Indriði, known for his familial connections and wealth (see 4.3.1), is the son of the sorceress Þorgríma smíðkona (*Harðar*, 8).

Although these *galdrakonur* occupy a central role within normative society through their close relations with their powerful sons, the saga does not indicate that their presence there is without problems. *Eyrbyggja saga* contains the proverb *eru ... opt flogð í föguru skinni* ‘witches often exist in fair skin’ (*Eyrbyggja*, 53), indicating that a significant element of the threat that supernatural women were thought to pose was that this threat was difficult to perceive in the first place.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the magic of

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<sup>31</sup> *Flogð* refers generally to monstrous female figures, including giantesses and troll-women, but has the sense of ‘witches’ in this proverb (*Cleasby-Vigfússon*, 159; *Zoëga*, 140).

the women of *Harðar saga* is shown to hamper their opponents' ability to interpret their environment accurately. When Geirr leads a party of the Hólmverjar to steal Refr's cattle, for example, Katla casts a spell so that *myrkr mikit* 'a great darkness' falls over Geirr and his men, leaving them unable to see and vulnerable to the subsequent ambush (*Harðar*, 66). Skroppa's spells are also focused on creating illusions. Two of the Hólmverjar are killed when they attack a bull on her farm and their weapons ricochet back at them; the rest think they see a horde of armed men charging at them, only to discover that the horde is in fact a herd of cattle; and Skroppa disguises herself and her granddaughters on two occasions, first as three boxes, then as a sow and two piglets (ch. 26).

Whilst Geirr and the other Hólmverjar are invariably deceived by these illusions, Hǫrðr's perceptiveness enables him to see through the *galdrakonur*'s deceptions. He returns to Refr's farm after Geirr's unsuccessful expedition there, and Katla again works her magic so that the darkness falls over the Hólmverjar, but *ekki fal sýn fyrir Herði af göldrum Kötlu* 'Hǫrðr's sight did not fail because of Katla's sorcery' (66). Hǫrðr directs the Hólmverjar to slaughter Refr's sheep and take them back to Hólm, while Refr and his men watch on, unwilling to confront Hǫrðr and his men. Hǫrðr similarly takes charge at Skroppa's farm after the two Hólmverjar are killed by the magical bull, urging the rest of the party to follow him: *Hafi þér ráð mín, því at eigi er hér allt sem sýnist* 'Take my advice, because everything here is not as it appears' (67). Hǫrðr dissuades the men from attacking the women in their disguise as three boxes—presumably because he suspects a similar effect from this illusion as happened previously with the bull, with the supposedly harmless object being made to harm its aggressor—before striking the sow with a stone, killing Skroppa and thereby dispelling the other illusions.

On an individual level, Hǫrðr uses his powers of perception to overcome his opponents' magic, but the nature of these illusions suggests that they do not affect only the *galdrakonur*'s enemies, or only social outsiders like the Hólmverjar. Although Refr and his men kill one of the Hólmverjar, Þórðr kǫttr, while he is in the darkness, they attack Geirr and the others only after the darkness has been lifted; similarly, they are unwilling to confront Hǫrðr and his party once it is apparent that the darkness does not hinder them. The saga does not explicitly explain why the darkness lifts, but the apparent hesitancy of the mainlanders to attack the majority of the Hólmverjar while they are under this spell implies that the darkness would affect

them as well. This may suggest that Katla's spell is manifest in nature—that is, it is an external, tangible threat to the Hólmverjar, rather than something that affects only them in a psychological capacity—as Refr and his men may also be affected by it, but the text is unspecific in this regard. The magic does not affect the mainlanders in quite the same way that it does Geirr and the Hólmverjar, as they do kill Þórðr within the darkness, but there is a subtle implication that the members of normative society are themselves susceptible to having their senses confused by this magic.

Whilst the Katla episode demonstrates the ability of witches to blind people to obvious dangers, Skroppa's magic works in a more insidious way, as it renders those affected by it unable to perceive the true nature of things. It is significant that the Hólmverjar become unusually aggressive towards the magical bull, of which it is said that *þeir vildu glettast við hann* 'they wanted to provoke it', and the boxes, which *þeir vildu brjóta* 'they wished to break', despite these being fairly mundane objects in the context of a farm (67). Skroppa's magic appears to make others believe there is danger where there is none, presenting commonplace elements of rural Icelandic society as if they were threats—which the bull certainly is, but not in the way that the Hólmverjar would expect. Although the bull brandishes its horns at the Hólmverjar, it does not use those horns to kill them; rather, their attacks against it are turned back against them, with their unusually aggressive approach being the problem. By causing such reactions in the Hólmverjar, Skroppa not only confuses their sensory abilities but also distorts their view of the threats around them; she convinces her enemies of danger where there is none, and confuses them about the nature of present dangers.

This is the threat that the saga sees the *galdrakona* posing to society, as an enemy within and a sign of societal corruption. The *galdrakona* hinders those around her from perceiving the reality of things, thereby maintaining an ambiguous position within Icelandic society as a liminal figure, who is both normative through her maternal relations to powerful chieftains and farmers, and yet Other because of her use of chaotic magic to create deceptive illusions. In this respect, Hǫrðr's status as an outsider is crucial in his dealing with this threat. Whilst society itself does not recognise the threat posed by these *galdrakonur* because they are intertwined with its hierarchies of power, protected by their familial connections, Hǫrðr has no such limitations placed on him. He is himself an Other in relation to normative society, a marginalised outlaw and a monstrous figure, treated by Torfi as if he were a trollish

figure in the manner of Sóti (Wilson 2016, 131–33); his detachment from the social order means that he is able to see its problematic aspects far more clearly than those within it can. In this respect, Hqrðr's success in seeing the truth behind the *galdrakonur*'s illusions is similar to an episode in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the *galdrakona* Katla uses magic to disguise her son Oddr on several occasions so that his enemies cannot capture him. Katla's enemies return with the *galdrakona* Geirríðr, however, whom Katla realises she cannot deceive with her illusions: *Mun Geirríðr trollit þar komin, ok mun þá eigi sjónhverfingum einum mega við koma* 'Geirríðr the troll will have arrived there, and visual delusions alone will then not be able to work' (*Eyrbyggja*, 53). The underlying thought in this episode, as well as those in *Harðar saga*, is that monstrous outsiders like Hqrðr and Geirríðr are well positioned, because of their marginalisation by normative society, to see the truth behind the visual deceptions caused by the corrupt figures that inhabit it.

**4.2.3 Exclusivity and losing control.** Although Hqrðr does manage to use his status as an extra-legal figure to create a social structure in which he has power, thereby ensuring he has the support-base he lacks within Icelandic society, and is able to perceive corrupt forms of Otherness within the local community around Hólm because he is an outsider, his success as a heroic outlaw is short-lived, primarily because the group does not retain that same structure in the long term. The Hólmverjar originate as a comparatively exclusive community, consisting largely of the members of Hqrðr and Geirr's households, although the saga does note that Hqrðr has already been joined by Þórðr kqtr and the outlawed Þorgeirr gyrðilskeggi before he decides to move his followers to Hólm (*Harðar*, ch. 23). Shortly after Hqrðr and Geirr establish the community on Hólm, however, they are joined by others with rather more unsavoury intentions: *Þangat drifu nær allir óskilamenn ok svörðu eiða þeim Herði ok Geir at vera þeim hollir ok trúir ok hverr þeira öðrum* 'To that place rushed nearly all untrustworthy men, and swore oaths to Hqrðr and Geirr to be faithful and true to them, and each of them to the others' (65). The text also takes care at this juncture to highlight Þorgeirr gyrðilskeggi's negative influence on the community: *Hann var einn tillagaverstr af öllum Hólmverjum ok fýsti allra illvirkja* 'He alone gave the worst advice of all the Hólmverjar and urged all manner of evil deeds' (65).

Whilst these criminal elements do not affect the Hólmverjar much in the initial development of the community, because of Hǫrðr and Geirr’s accepted leadership over the group, they do become problematic over time. A significant element in this is the divergence between Hǫrðr and Geirr’s priorities, despite their close friendship, as Geirr is more willing than his sworn-brother to endorse criminal activity, which compromises Hǫrðr’s capacity to act in ways that he sees as more justifiable. Whilst Hǫrðr is deeply suspicious of creating social obligations towards others whom he does not implicitly trust, Geirr is keener to make casual social connections with a wider range of people, and often persuades Hǫrðr to enter into relationships that later cause a great deal of trouble for both of them. The most obvious example of this is Geirr persuading Hǫrðr to let Helgi accompany them on their journey to Scandinavia; despite Hǫrðr’s intense dislike for Helgi’s family because of the shame they caused to his sister Þorbjörg (see 4.3.2), Geirr convinces Hǫrðr to bring Helgi with them, which ultimately leads to Helgi and Hǫrðr becoming sworn-brothers against the latter’s wishes (*Harðar*, ch. 12). The problematic aspects of Geirr’s influence over Hǫrðr, and his own tendency for criminal behaviour, are brought into focus directly after Hǫrðr is outlawed and he moves his own household across to Geirr’s farm at Botn. When their food supplies run low, Geirr and Helgi decide to steal cattle from their neighbours and murder two men in the process. This greatly upsets Hǫrðr, who makes a distinction between forms of appropriating goods: *Likaði Herði allilla ok kveðst á burt skyldu, ef þeir vildi stela. ‘Þykki mér ... miklu ráðligra at ræna, ef eigi má við annat vera’* ‘Hǫrðr was entirely displeased, and said he would leave if they wished to steal. “It seems to me much more advisable to plunder, if we cannot exist otherwise”’ (60). Geirr persuades Hǫrðr to stay by promising to turn over to him any decisions that affect them both, but Geirr’s willingness to commit criminal acts has been established.

The distinction that Hǫrðr makes here between stealing and raiding is significant. In an Old Norse–Icelandic context, the verb *stela* ‘to steal’ refers to the idea of taking other people’s property in a covert manner; the sense of stealth is also apparent in the phrasal reflexive form *stelask at*, which Geir Zoëga translates as ‘to steal upon’ someone or ‘to attack [them] unawares’ (Zoëga, 406). Hǫrðr appears to use *ræna* ‘to plunder’, on the other hand, to refer to the idea of robbing property through defeating one’s opponents in a show of violent force, as in the *víkingar* raids that Hǫrðr and his sworn-brothers are said to undertake earlier on in the saga (ch. 16). Such raiding was



never acceptable within Iceland itself, so the validity of Hǫrðr's distinction must be treated with some caution; Carolyn Larrington (2008b, 284) notes that such activity was socially acceptable for young men who raided in places far from home as a means of acquiring wealth and honour, but that those who kept up this activity at 'a more advanced age' or who raided nearer to home were thought of as antisocial figures. The concepts of *rán* 'raiding' and *stuldr* 'theft' are interrelated and exist on a spectrum of criminal activity, rather than being distinct categories; *rán* was more acceptable than *stuldr*, but it still needed 'to be ethically justifiable' (276). It is significant that Hǫrðr values, more than his sworn-brothers do, the idea that the acquisition of goods should be justifiable, even if it still amounts to illegal activity.

In this respect, it is notable that whereas Hǫrðr's successful expeditions in his early outlawry can be reasonably justified, his later excursions with the Hólmverjar are characterised more by the criminal mentality that comes to pervade the group. When Hǫrðr manages to best Katla and Skroppa, it is significant that the motivation for the raids on both their farms is not simple criminal intent—although in both cases the Hólmverjar do make off with a large number of livestock—but rather to respond to the boasts that each *galdrakona* has made against them (*Harðar*, 65, 67):

Þorbjörg katla hældist um þat, at hon kvað aldri Hólmsverja sér mundu mein gera; svá treysti hon fjölkynngi sinni. Ok er þeir spurðu þetta í Hólmi, kveðst Geirr vilja reyna þat.

Þorbjörg katla boasted about it, that, she said, the Hólmverjar would never do harm to her, so much did she trust in her skill in magic. And when they heard that on Hólmi, Geirr said he wished to test it.

Fór Hǫrðr ... til Saurbæjar, því at Þorsteinn öxnabroddr hafði hælzt um þat, at Skroppa, fóstura hans fjölkunnig, mundi svá geta gert, at honum yrði ekki mein at Hólmverjum, með fjölkynngi sinni.

Hǫrðr travelled to Saurbær, because Þorsteinn öxnabroddr had boasted about it that Skroppa—his foster-mother, skilled in magic—would be able to work it that no harm would come to him from the Hólmverjar, because of her skill in magic.

These boasts constitute serious insults against the Hólmverjar, but are also explicit declarations of the *galdrakonur*'s willingness to use their magic, a force of chaotic Otherness, to benefit their kin. These boasts specifically emphasise the alterity of these women to the audience, and give Hǫrðr a more legitimate reason to confront them; they are supernatural threats, just as Sóti is, and the saga highlights their Othered nature to justify Hǫrðr's actions against them. The Hólmverjar's later raid on Þorgríma smíðkona's farm, however, is unprovoked: Þorgríma does not make any

boasts against the Hólmverjar, who simply want to steal her cattle. Whereas the Hólmverjar can reasonably claim the livestock they acquire from Katla and Skroppa as *rán*, their taking of Þorgríma's cattle is closer to *stuldr*; the Hólmverjar lead the cattle away at night while Þorgríma is sleeping, which can hardly be framed as an impressive endeavour. The journey ends poorly for the Hólmverjar as a grey ox, which appears to be magically controlled by Þorgríma, herds the other cattle away from the Hólmverjar and back to the farm, where Þorgríma declares to the oxen that *laust heldu garparnir nú* 'the dauntless men held you loosely then' (76).

The Hólmverjar's decline into pure criminality is reflected in the development of Hǫrðr, who is initially quick to condemn criminal activities, but gradually falls under the influence of his more criminally minded companions. At Botn, Hǫrðr scolds his followers for letting other people in the scraper-games played there, saying they are *til illgerða einna búnir* 'only prepared for evil deeds' and declaring them *eigi þá meðalklækismenn vera, ef þeir þyrði eigi at hefna sín* 'to be not even middling scoundrels, then, if they did not dare to avenge themselves' (62). Hǫrðr also consistently argues with Geirr over what course of action the Hólmverjar should take. Geirr is more likely to welcome and be fooled by people from outside the community looking to trick the Hólmverjar, like the slave Bolli (ch. 27), or to turn away from heroic action, as when he urges the men to run away from Skroppa (ch. 26). Hǫrðr, on the other hand, consistently encourages the Hólmverjar to be cautious of those outside the group and to prove their worth in the face of difficult odds, but Geirr's success in persuading him to stay with his household after the thefts at Botn also demonstrates that Hǫrðr is no more immune to his sworn-brother's influence than are the other Hólmverjar.

Geirr's growing authority within the group is highlighted immediately after the Hólmverjar are tricked by Þorgríma. Hǫrðr interprets this outcome as indicating deeper-lying problems with their community, and asks the Hólmverjar whether they would like to change their ways: *Þykki mér ... illt ráð vart at svá búnu, at vér lifum við þat eitt, er vér rænum til* 'It seems to me a bad decision of ours as matters stand that we live on that alone which we plunder' (76). Whilst the Hólmverjar tell Hǫrðr that *hann mundi mestu um ráða* 'he must decide about it', they then reject Hǫrðr's suggestion—*vér færum til kaupmanna í Hvítá ok gerðum þeim tvá etjukosti, at þeir gæfi upp skipit við oss eðr vér munum drepa þá ella* 'we shall travel to the merchants in Hvítá and give them two difficult choices, that they give over their ship to us or

else we will kill them’—in favour of Geirr’s proposal that they burn their opponents, including Torfi, Illugi, and Indriði, in their homes (76). Hǫrðr initially condemns their decision, but after the men spend some time on Hólm he agrees to attack Illugi and Indriði: *Peir hafa einart ... mér í móti verit, en aldri með, í svá miklum nauðum sem ek hefði staddr verit* ‘They have consistently been against me, and never with me, amid such great needs as I have been placed in’ (77). Hǫrðr’s own disposition towards heroic activity is easily surpassed by the now-overwhelming majority of criminally minded people within the Hólmverjar; they are far likelier to side with Geirr, which in turn influences Hǫrðr himself towards more criminal activities.

The extra-legal community of the Hólmverjar offers Hǫrðr a means of obtaining power because he has a decisive say over the group’s structure, thereby allowing him to undertake expeditions on which he confronts the more problematic aspects of normative society, but this alternative state of affairs proves to be temporary. Hǫrðr finds his autonomy constrained by the development of the group in a similar way as happens to him in normative society; in both cases, he is slowly alienated from the community by not being able to control its direction. Hǫrðr’s reaction to being made powerless in Icelandic society is to lash out with excessive violence, which works only to convey his impotence at that moment, but his response to the Hólmverjar’s change in direction is one of resignation. Þorbjörg’s dream about the Hólmverjar reflects Hǫrðr’s isolation within his community: she imagines the other outlaws as monstrous wolves, with *brynni eldar ór munni þeim* ‘fire burning out of their mouths’, but Hǫrðr as a lone polar-bear in their midst, seeming *heldr dapr* ‘rather downcast’ (77). The saga also highlights at its conclusion the effect that Hǫrðr’s communal context had in directing him to commit crimes: *Hann væri eigi auðnumaðr; ollu því ok hans fylgdarmenn, þó at hann stæði í slíkum illvirkjum* ‘He was not a lucky man; his followers were also the cause of all that, even though he had been involved in those evil deeds’ (88). Whether in legal or extra-legal contexts, Hǫrðr is unable to act in an autonomous manner; he is consistently restrained by those around him, who either do not acknowledge his position in the power hierarchy of the community or do not allow him such power in the first place.

### 4.3 A Mirror to Society

The Hólmverjar are not presented as an idealised alternative to normative society, but are shown to have seriously problematic dynamics that fundamentally undermine their long-term stability and therefore their chances of success. The organisation of the Hólmverjar does not remain an exclusive institution, but accommodates many people with undesirable intentions, leading to problems for individuals like Hǫrðr, whose personal identity differs from that developed by the group. It is notable, however, that these problems are not typical only of the Hólmverjar. In fact, the conflicts that emerge within normative society in the earlier parts of the narrative emerge from similar constraints being placed on individuals by their communities. Whilst the same dynamics within these groups are less prominent and considerably less stylized than they are for extra-legal communities like the Hólmverjar, they are nevertheless present within the former as well. This section analyses how the problematic dynamics of the saga's extra-legal communities can be traced back to similar patterns in normative society. It considers the saga's concerns over marriage arrangements and male homosocial interactions, before analysing how the saga demonstrates the difficulty of perceiving the full extent of one's social connections, complicating how the actions of individuals are received by wider society.

**4.3.1 Marriage arrangements and male kinship bonds.** *Harðar saga* portrays the male kinship bonds acquired through marriage as having the potential to undermine communal stability if they are not properly reinforced from the outset in the arrangements for the marriage. This anxiety is represented primarily through Hǫrðr's relationships with his brothers-in-law Illugi Hrólfsson and Indriði Þorvaldsson and through Grímkell's similarly poor relationship with Hǫrðr's uncle Torfi. Hǫrðr's relationship with both of his brothers-in-law deteriorates throughout the saga as a result of his outlawry, leading Illugi to declare that *eigi á Hǫrðr þó góða mágana enda hefir hann illa til gert* 'Hǫrðr does not have good brothers-in-law, and indeed he has been ill-deserving' (*Harðar*, 86), but these relationships are not particularly strong in the first place. Hǫrðr's father Grímkell also comes into conflict with his own brother-in-law, Torfi, early on in the saga because of Grímkell's marriage to Signý, and their feud in turn informs Hǫrðr's formative experiences and his place within normative Icelandic society.

The saga's general distrust of in-lawry is significant, as it was vital for a chieftain within Icelandic society to maintain strong ties to other powerful men, and

establishing kinship obligations through marriage was a key aspect in this strategy.<sup>32</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999, 147) notes that when it came to acquiring support for one's side in a legal dispute, 'in some situations the in-laws could be even more important than kinsmen, especially if the in-laws in question were chieftains'. Indeed, whilst neither of Hǫrðr's Icelandic brothers-in-law is specifically described as a chieftain, both are depicted as prominent and powerful men. The saga introduces Illugi with a description of his physical and financial prowess and a lengthy genealogical account to emphasise his prominence within Icelandic society (*Harðar*, ch. 11). Similarly, when Grímkell delays in answering Indriði's request to marry his daughter Þorbjörg, his wife Sigríðr reminds him of Indriði's fine reputation: *Allkynliga leizt þér á þetta, at gipta eigi dóttur þína Indriða, er oss þykkir inn merkiligasti maðr vera* 'You appear very strange in this, that you will not marry your daughter to Indriði, who seems to us to be the most distinguished person' (51). Indriði himself draws attention to his wealth and social status in his conversation with Grímkell: *Er þér ... kunnigr uppruni minn ok svá fjárhagr minn* 'My ancestry and likewise my financial standing are known to you' (50). Yet whilst Illugi has a positive relationship with Hǫrðr for a while after the latter's return to Iceland, neither of Hǫrðr's brothers-in-law lends him sufficient support after Torfi summonses him to the *þing*, which leads to Hǫrðr being outlawed because he lacks familial support (see 4.2.1). Despite both of Hǫrðr's Icelandic brothers-in-law being well-respected figures within normative society, the kinship ties and the support-base that are supposed to emerge from marriage arrangements do not seem to manifest.

This lack of secure obligation appears to stem from Hǫrðr's kinsmen often excluding him from important organisational matters within the kin-group, such as these marriage arrangements. When Illugi asks to marry Þuríðr, Hǫrðr's half-sister through Grímkell's first marriage, the saga explicitly states that *eigi var Hǫrðr hjá þessu kaupi* 'Hǫrðr was not present at this arrangement' (*Harðar*, 29). At the wedding-feast itself, Illugi asks Grímkell why Hǫrðr is absent, to which Grímkell replies that it is up to Hǫrðr to invite himself, and that he had not specifically invited

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<sup>32</sup> Although this anxiety over in-law relationships is generally unusual in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is not unique to *Harðar saga* amongst the outlaw sagas. In *Gísla saga*, the central conflict has its origins in Þorgrímr's distrust of another of Gísli's brothers-in-law, Vésteinn. Whilst Vésteinn is Gísli's brother-in-law through Gísli's marriage to Auðr, Vésteinn's sister, he has no formal ties to Þorgrímr himself, and the lack of such a firm bond between Vésteinn and Þorgrímr causes a schism in the relationship between the brothers Gísli and Þorkell (see 2.2.3).

him. Illugi does not think this befitting of his future brother-in-law, and rides to Grímsstaðir to talk with Hǫrðr himself (30):

Geirr gekk til hurðar ok spurði, hverir komnir væri. Illugi segir til sín ok spurði at Herði. Geirr kvað hann vera inni. Illugi mælti: ‘Bið þú hann út koma, því at ek vil finna hann.’

Geirr gekk inn ok kom út, sagði Hǫrðr liggja ok vera sjúkan. Illugi gekk inn, því at Hǫrðr vildi eigi út ganga. Illugi mælti: ‘Með hverju móti er sótt þín, Hǫrðr?’

Hann kvað vera ekki mikla.

Illugi mælti: ‘Gjarna vilda ek, at þú færir til boðs míns með mér ok legðir vináttu til mín.’

Hǫrðr kvað hann þetta hafa mátt fyrir mæla, ef honum þætti allmikil undir,—‘vil ek hvergi fara, því at lítt hafi þér mik at þessum málum kvatt.’

Geirr went to the door and asked who had arrived. Illugi said it was him and asked for Hǫrðr. Geirr said he was inside. Illugi spoke: ‘Ask him to come out, because I want to meet him.’

Geirr went inside and came outside, saying that Hǫrðr was lying down and was sick. Illugi went inside because Hǫrðr did not want to go out. Illugi asked: ‘What is the manner of your sickness, Hǫrðr?’

He said it was not much.

Illugi spoke: ‘I would really like you to come to my wedding with me and contribute your friendship to me.’

Hǫrðr said he could have mentioned that earlier if it was worth such a great deal to him—‘I do not wish to go at all, because you all have consulted me little in this matter.’

Geirr persuades Hǫrðr to attend the wedding ceremony, and Hǫrðr is reconciled with Illugi after he presents Hǫrðr with a valuable ring, but the saga notes that *varð fátt um kveðjur* ‘there were few salutations’ when they parted; Hǫrðr also mentions to Illugi that he doubts his brother-in-law will uphold the kinship between them well (31). The scene demonstrates that it is important to consider not only what obligations a saga character gains through marriage, but also how they acquire them. Although Hǫrðr now ostensibly has the support of Illugi, a powerful man within Icelandic society, the fact that he is not consulted in the arrangement of this relationship—in other words, that he does not have a say in a matter directly affecting the structure of his kin-group—casts doubts over the long-term validity of the obligations arising from it.

Hǫrðr is also excluded from the arrangement of the marriage between Indriði and Þorbjörg, but his absence is more reasonable in this case, as he is abroad in Scandinavia at the time. Nevertheless, his father Grímkell appears to have changed his approach to marriage arrangements since his dealings with Illugi, as when Indriði demands to have an answer straightaway, Grímkell refuses: *Ekki megu vér skjóta því þegar fram, ok ekki mun þat ráðast svá skjótt* ‘We cannot rush ahead with this at once, and it will not be decided so quickly’ (50). Whether Grímkell’s decision is motivated by a wish for Hǫrðr to be involved in the process is unclear, and Sigríðr

soon persuades Grímkell to agree to the marriage in any case, but it is significant that the marriage arrangement also includes the stipulation that *Indriði skyldi sjálf ábyrgjast, hversu þeim líkaði, er eigi váru við* ‘Indriði himself should be responsible for how those who were not present [*i.e.* at the arrangement] felt about it’ (51). Hǫrðr’s reaction to the marriage is not mentioned by the saga, but his perception of Indriði is not improved by what he perceives as a failure to support him at the *þing*, even though that decision is affected equally by Helgi’s antisocial nature, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the hostile approach Hǫrðr later adopts to his brother-in-law is at least partly affected by similar problems in being excluded from the arrangement of their relationship.

It is worth noting, however, that Hǫrðr is not the only major figure in the saga who attaches this level of significance to the male kinship bonds formed through marriage, and particularly how they are constructed in the process of arranging the marriage itself. Both Grímkell and Torfi express the same concerns in the process of Grímkell’s marriage to Signý, which Grímkell arranges with Signý’s father Valbrandr at the *þing*. Torfi, who was not present at the *þing*, is furious at the arrangement, and condemns his father’s actions: *Allítils þykkja yðr verðar mínar tillögur, er mik skyldi ekki at spyrja slíku, enda þykki mér ekki ráð þetta, er þú hefir sét fyrir dóttur þinni, jafnvirðuligt sem þér þykkir vera* ‘My views seem of very little worth to you, since it was not necessary to ask me about them, and yet this marriage that you have arranged for your daughter does not seem so worthy to me as it seems to be to you’ (9). Torfi refuses to attend the wedding, even though his father is so ill that he cannot attend himself, and composes a slanderous verse about Grímkell; when Signý arrives without any male kinsmen accompanying her, Grímkell and his friends *þóttu þeir feðgar sýnt óvirða sitt mál, er þeir sóttu eigi brúðkaupit* ‘thought the father and son [*i.e.* Valbrandr and Torfi] had appeared to disrespect their arrangement, as they had not attended the wedding-feast’ (12). This recurring concept in the saga is not simply an idiosyncratic quirk of Hǫrðr’s, brought about by a selfish desire not to extend his obligations to others unless absolutely necessary, but is an anxiety shared by his kinsman Torfi.

The Scandinavian episodes, however, contain a more positive example of a marriage arrangement, in which all the male kinsmen of the bride are involved. When Haraldr jarl asks Hǫrðr to remain in his hall, Hǫrðr agrees on the condition that he be allowed to marry Haraldr jarl’s daughter Helga, who is also the sister of

Hǫrðr's sworn-brother Hróarr, and specifically addresses his request to both Haraldr jarl and to Hróarr (see 4.1.2). The saga mentions that *þau ráð tókust með samþykki Helgu ok Hróars* 'they arranged the marriage with the consent of Helga and Hróarr' (*Harðar*, 45); whilst Haraldr jarl is the primary representative of his family, the actual arrangements of the marriage are also shown explicitly to include his other prominent kinsmen Helga and Hróarr. Hróarr's involvement is especially significant, as he occupies the same position, as the brother of the woman whose marriage is being arranged, that Hǫrðr and Torfi do in the other episodes. Whilst Hǫrðr and Torfi do not have a say in arranging the relationships with their future brothers-in-law, Hróarr is encouraged to give his consent to a decision that will have a sizeable impact on his communal and legal identity; Hróarr and Hǫrðr are already sworn-brothers, with the quasi-legal importance that this relationship holds (see 5.1.2), but Hǫrðr's marriage to Helga adds another layer of expressly legal complexity to the bonds that exist between the men. Given the additional communal responsibilities that accompany marriage, Hǫrðr recognises the need to consult Hróarr in the matter. Yet his own experience in these affairs is considerably different, as the exclusivity of Hǫrðr's kin-group is undermined by marriage arrangements with men whom he does not know well enough to trust, much as his heroics as an outlaw are undermined by the lack of exclusivity in the organisation of the Hólmverjar.

**4.3.2 Unwanted obligations in fosterage.** It is important to note that Hǫrðr is not the only figure depicted by the saga as having problems in maintaining control over the extent of his social obligations, as this problem is also key in the hostile relationship between Torfi and Grímkell, which comes to a head when Signý, who is heavily pregnant, returns to visit her birth-family. Torfi persuades her to prolong her visit beyond the half-month period that she had already agreed with Grímkell, and Signý gives birth to her daughter at Breiðabólstaðr, rather than at Grímkell's home in Qlfusvatn. When Signý dies as a result of giving birth shortly thereafter, Grímkell declares that he considers this to be equivalent to Torfi having purposefully killed Signý: *Trauðr var ei Torfi at deyða / tvinna skorð ok borða* 'Torfi was not reluctant to kill the stay of twisted-threads and tables [= woman, *i.e.* Signý]' (*Harðar*, 24).

Torfi's treatment of the baby, however, is equally damning to his reputation, as Torfi ultimately attempts to foster the child to a vagrant, Sigmundur, in order to shame Grímkell by forcing him into unwanted obligations to his social inferiors (ch. 9).



Torfi initially refuses to have the child sprinkled with water and orders his foster-son to expose her. The exposure of children was permitted in pre-Christian Iceland—usually if the family was too poor to look after the child properly or if the baby was thought to be malformed—unless they had already been sprinkled with water, been given food, or been named, but the practice was generally shown in a negative light by the later writers of the *Íslendingasögur*, suggesting that saga depictions of the practice ‘may be reflecting a fictionalized heathen past’ (Lawing 2013, 137). The saga makes it apparent that Torfi’s intentions in attempting to expose the child are not born out of necessity; he is clearly rich enough to have the child raised, and the saga says she is *bæði mikit ok jóðligt* ‘both large and thriving’ (*Harðar*, 20). Rather, Torfi’s actions emerge from his hatred of Grímkell, which he admits when he declares Grímkell *makligan þvílíkrar svívirðingar frá sér* ‘deserving of such disgrace from him’ (22). In this light, it is worth considering Sean Lawing’s (2013, 136) observation that child exposure might also be motivated by the baby being ‘the product of an unlawful or adulterous relation, [or] an unsanctioned marriage’. Whilst the saga itself does not suggest that Grímkell’s marriage to Signý is illegitimate, Torfi opposes it from the outset and refuses to endorse the arrangement, even shaming Grímkell by refusing to attend the ceremony; it is possible that his decision to expose Grímkell and Signý’s child could constitute a further denial of the legitimacy of Grímkell’s marriage to Signý.

After Torfi’s foster-son Sigurðr conspires to save the child’s life with Grímr, who sprinkles the child with water and names her Þorbjörg, Torfi is legally unable to have her killed; the saga tells us that *þat var morð kallat at drepa börn, frá því er þau váru vatni ausin* ‘it was called murder to kill children from the moment that they had been sprinkled with water’ (*Harðar*, 22). His initial plan having failed, Torfi instead shames Grímkell by refusing to care properly for Þorbjörg; he assigns a slave-woman to raise her, but gives the woman nothing with which to clothe the child and refuses to reduce her workload, ensuring that the child is neglected. Upon receiving a visit from a vagrant named Sigmundur and his family, however, Torfi asks him to foster Þorbjörg and to show her off to Grímkell, who is unaware of the birth of his daughter, at Ólfusvatn. When the wretched Sigmundur arrives to tell Grímkell that he has been made Þorbjörg’s foster-father by Torfi, Grímkell is furious: *Heyrið, hvat göngumaðrinn segir; þú mundir vera barnfóstri minn, allra stafkarla armastr; ok eigi er eins konar fjandskapr Torfa við mik; deyddi hann fyrst móðurina, en rak nú*

*barnit á húsgang* ‘Listen to what the vagrant says, that you, the most wretched of all beggars, are to be the foster-father of my child! And Torfi’s hostility towards me is not of a single kind; he killed the mother first, and now he has driven the child into begging from house to house’ (24).

It is important to emphasise that Grímkell’s horrified exclamation here is not simply a reaction to the fact that his daughter has been placed into a situation of poverty without his knowledge. Whilst this act in itself would have brought shame on Grímkell as the girl’s father, because of his legal responsibilities towards his dependants, it does not tell the full story in itself, as Torfi’s plan also involves forcing unwanted social obligations onto Grímkell. Jamie Cochrane (2012, 67) argues that Grímkell’s reaction is largely to the clear disparity in social standing between himself and Sigmundur, because Grímkell ‘recognises the plot for what it is: Torfi’s attempt to make him enter into a familial bond with the lowly Sigmundur, an ignominious and potentially dangerous relationship’. It is notable that Sigmundur introduces himself to Grímkell as *barnfóstri þinn, bóndi sæll* ‘the foster-father of your child, good master’, a phrase that Grímkell disbelievably parrots back at him (*Harðar*, 24). Sigmundur’s address of Grímkell as ‘good master’ highlights the vast distance that exists between the two men in terms of their social standing, but its juxtaposition with the notion that they are still personally connected through the social construct of fosterage, with all the communal obligations that would accompany it, highlights the shamefulness of the affiliation for Grímkell by associating him so closely with his extreme social inferior. It is apparent that Grímkell is aware of such matters because earlier in the saga, when Grímr inn litli asks Grímkell to arrange for him to marry Guðríðr Högnadóttir, his immediate response is to remind Grímr that *hér er mannamunr mikill, þú ert féltíll, en Högni er auðmaðr mikill* ‘there is a great difference in rank here; you are poor, but Högni is a very wealthy man’ (13).

Besides affecting Grímkell’s reputation, Sigmundur’s fostering of Þorbjörg would also have had longer term economic implications for Grímkell’s household. Fosterage did not always take place between families that were unconnected by kinship ties as a means of creating bonds between those families, but also occurred between households that were already connected through their kinship. Fosterage between families unrelated by kinship usually took place in order to strengthen the social bonds between those families; Durrenberger (1992, 72) refers to this type of

fosterage as part of ‘the model of social exchange, in which fosterage [was] one of the central means of establishing or strengthening reciprocal social relationships’. Sometimes fosterage occurred between kinsmen, however, of which Miller (1990, 122–23) identifies two types of fosterage as ‘social exchange’: first, that in which ‘foster-parents were of lower status than the child-givers’, where foster-parents gained strong bonds to socially powerful families and the child-givers foisted off the economic burden of raising a child; and second, that in which ‘parents and foster-parents were of fairly equal rank, at times kinsmen by blood or marriage’, where the fosterage usually took place to mend divisions between the families. Fosterage between kinsmen, however, was mostly motivated by economic necessity than social exchange, as poorer families within the kin-group would offload children that they could not afford to keep onto their wealthier relatives. Miller notes that here, in contrast to other types of fostering, there was usually little benefit for the foster-parents in such arrangements (123):

Such arrangements in effect were the inverse of those fosterings in which the child-givers were superior to the fosterers. In either case the children may have been perceived as burdens, but in the first type [*i.e.* where the child-giver was socio-economically superior to the fosterers] they cemented an ongoing patronage relationship between the fosterer and the parents of the child, whereas in the other type the wealthy fosterer gained little but a drain on his household stores and a small hand to assist in chores as soon as the child was old enough to produce as much as he or she consumed.

Miller also emphasises that whereas other types of fosterage generally took the form of ‘a voluntary agreement’, in the case of a wealthy individual fostering the child of one of his poorer kinsmen, it is safe to assume that ‘the child was forced upon the fosterer by the law’ (123). Although there is no legal process in the case of Grímkell and Sigmundur, the dynamic is similar; in discovering that his child has been fostered by Sigmundur, albeit without his knowledge, Grímkell must have been aware of the possibility that Sigmundur would use the connection established through fosterage to force his own child, Helgi, into Grímkell’s household. The saga implies that Sigmundur and his wife had not planned to keep both children in the long-term, as after Grímkell’s rejection they *lögðu nú órækt á barnit, því at þau þóttust eigi vita, at þau mundi því nökkurn tíma af hendi koma* ‘started then to neglect the child, because they thought they did not know whether they would have her taken off their hands for some time’ (*Harðar*, 24). In any case, Sigmundur could not hope to achieve much

from fostering Þorbjörg if he had planned on simply returning her to her father, thereby giving up any incentive Grímkell would have had to assist him in turn.

For Grímkell, there is a clear social component in Torfi's attempts to shame him by mistreating his daughter. The medieval audience of the saga would have interpreted the fosterage arrangement between Sigmundur and Grímkell, via Torfi's intervention, with reference to the nexus of potential legal obligations that accompanied such matters. The threat of these expectations leads Grímkell to reject not only Sigmundur and his family, but also Þorbjörg, as in order to deny the familial bond that Torfi attempts to create between him and Sigmundur, Grímkell is forced to turn away his own daughter. Torfi presents Grímkell with two possible outcomes, either of which would shame him: he must either accept serious legal obligations towards Sigmundur's family or else leave his daughter in a state of poverty. In response to his own feeling earlier on in the saga that he has lost control over the structure of his kin group through Grímkell's addition to it—and lost his sister Signý in the process—Torfi creates a similar problem for Grímkell, in which he is made to consider taking on an unwanted connection arranged without his consent. As it turns out, Þorbjörg is lucky enough to be saved through Grímr inn litli's intervention in the matter, but it is notable that the communal dynamics that motivate Torfi in this episode are essentially the same as those that cause problems for Hǫrðr in relation to the Hólmverjar, the key idea being that it is difficult for an individual to control how their social obligations develop and change.

**4.3.3 Unperceived relations.** In its depictions of marriage arrangements and male kinship relations, *Harðar saga* suggests that such social bonds can become problematic when placed upon individuals without their express consent, as those individuals lose control over how their immediate community is structured. They become obliged to support other people without having the opportunity to define the terms of that relationship themselves, which alters their nexus of social bonds and therefore impacts their decisions as individuals. The saga also explores this idea in its later depictions of the Hólmverjar, where the identity of that group also changes significantly as it admits more criminally minded people to its membership. Whilst Hǫrðr can initially realise his individual potential because of his control over the group's structure, its dynamics shift over time so that its deplorable elements become the community's dominant voice.

The earlier parts of the saga also engage, however, with the idea of perception in a similar way to how the later section frames Hǫrðr's relationship with the Hólmverjar as a community. As the leader of the Hólmverjar, Hǫrðr is able to realise and combat the insidious threat posed by the *galdrakonur* of normative society, yet he fails to perceive that Geirr's growing influence over the community changes the group's identity significantly, to the point where they favour undoubtedly criminal activities over comparatively justifiable deeds. Hǫrðr only realises this shift in identity when it is already too late, and soon afterwards becomes convinced of that approach himself as he is subsumed into his communal situation. In these episodes, the saga indicates that it is easier for an individual to perceive problematic elements outside of his community than to identify similar problems within it, because he is often unaware of the true nature of his community's identity or structure. Similar problems affect Hǫrðr in the saga's earlier chapters while he is part of normative society, as he is unable to understand the parameters of his community enough to recognise the possible consequences of his actions. The saga does not appear to criticise Hǫrðr for this, however, as these parameters are shown to be virtually impossible for him to comprehend. Rather, the text uses these moments to explore the idea that individuals are less capable of perceiving problems within their community than outside of them, because they are unable to understand fully the limits of their social relations.

Daniel Sävborg (2012, 335) argues that Hǫrðr's conflict with Sóti is distinct from his later misadventures in Iceland, and suggests that the saga is 'relativt tydligt sönderfaller i tvá delar' ('relatively clearly divided into two parts') between Hǫrðr's exploits in Scandinavia and the tragic events that take place in Iceland. The saga itself, however, implicitly relates Hǫrðr's attack on Sóti to his lack of success in Iceland because of the relationship between Sóti and Þorgerðr hǫrgabrúðr, the heathen goddess, whom Grímkell worships, who refers to Sóti as her brother (ch. 19). Grímkell arranges the marriage between Þorbjörg and Indriði and decides to pray about it at his temple, only to discover that Hǫrðr's adventures abroad have had unexpected consequences for his family (*Harðar*, 51–52):

Grímkell fór til hofs Þorgerðar hǫrgabrúðar ok vildi mæla fyrir ráðahag þeira Þorbjargar; en er hann kom í hofit, þá váru goðin í busli miklu ok burtbúningi af stöllum. Grímkell mælti: 'Hví sætir þetta, eðr hvert ætli þér, eðr hvert vili þér nú heilum snúa?'

Þorgerðr mælti: 'Eigi munu vér til Harðar heilum snúa, þar sem hann hefir rænt Sóta, bróður minn, gullhring sínum inum góða ok gert honum marga skömm aðra; vil ek þó heldr snúa heillum

til Þorbjargar, ok er yfir henni ljós svá mikit, at mik uggir, at þat skili með okkr; en þú munt eiga skammt ólifat.’

Grímkell went to the temple of Þorgerðr hǫrgabrúðr and wanted to pray about the marriage between Þorbjörg and Indridi, but when he came into the temple, the gods were in a great bustle and preparing to leave their altars. Grímkell spoke: ‘What has caused this, and where do you mean to go, and where will you direct luck now?’

Þorgerðr spoke: ‘We will not direct luck towards Hǫrðr now, because he has robbed Sóti, my brother, of his fine gold-ring and caused many another disgrace; I wish to direct luck towards Þorbjörg instead, but there is such a great light over her that I fear that it will divide us two. And you have a short time left to live.’

Grímkell subsequently burns down the temple, declaring that the house-gods *eigi skyldi optar segja sér harmsögur* ‘should not tell him tales of woe more often’ (52), only to die suddenly that evening. The episode illustrates that disparate events in the saga’s narrative can be connected by communal bonds of which the characters themselves are unaware, as the sibling relationship between Þorgerðr hǫrgabrúðr and Sóti, whether actual or metaphorical, is not mentioned in the narrative before this episode. Presumably Hǫrðr, like the saga’s audience, would have been unaware of how his confrontation with Sóti would affect his family in Iceland. Hǫrðr’s actions in Scandinavia inadvertently lead to the dissolution of his family’s social structure, as Grímkell’s gods abandon him and he dies. Þorgerðr’s declaration that the *ljós mikit* over Þorbjörg will divide the gods, the family’s traditional guardian-spirits, from Þorbjörg also suggests there will be a symbolic schism between Þorbjörg and the other members of her family, which does indeed happen as Þorbjörg is divided from her brother Hǫrðr by his outlawry. Whilst Hǫrðr believes that his adventures in the woods of Gautland are detached from normative society, the saga reveals that quite the opposite is true. Sóti is no more removed from that nexus of interpersonal relations than Hǫrðr himself is, and Hǫrðr’s actions in Gautland are not free from social repercussion, despite his conceptions of the parameters of his community. Hǫrðr’s impression of his communal identity is shown here to be incomplete, if not flawed, as his attempts to exercise his autonomy in the ostensibly appropriate landscape of Gautland, far removed from his home, come into conflict with those of his community in an unexpected way.

Similar concerns, albeit conveyed in more subtle fashion, underpin Hǫrðr’s negative experience with his mother Signý shortly after his birth. Hǫrðr is said to be prodigious in most areas as a child, but has not been able to walk by the age of three years old. Shortly before a communal gathering at Qlfusvatn, Hǫrðr attempts to walk towards his mother: *Sat Signý á stóli sínum á miðju stofugólfí; bjóst hon þá um, ok lá*

*men hennar it góða í knjám hennar. Sveinninn Hørðr stóð við stökk ok gekk nú it fyrsta sinni frá stokkinum ok til móður sinnar ok rasaði at knjám hennar; menit hraut á gólfrit fram ok brast í sundr í þrjá hluti* ‘Signý sat on her stool in the middle of the sitting-room floor; she was getting ready then, and her fine torque lay on her knees. The boy Hørðr stood by the bench, and then walked for the first time from the bench and to his mother, but stumbled into her knees; the torque tumbled forward onto the floor and broke asunder into three parts’ (16–17). The torque is one of Signý’s most treasured possessions, along with her horse Svartfaxi, and is her last significant link to her previous life in her father’s household after Svartfaxi is killed on the way to her wedding. Anna Hansen (2005, 224) suggests that ‘the breaking of the pendant is symbolic, representing both Signý’s isolation from her family and her unhappiness in marriage’. Signý is furious with Hørðr, and composes a verse about what she sees as his avaricious malice (*Harðar*, 17):

Braut í sundr fyr sætu  
Sírnis hljóða men góða;  
ýta, trú’ek, at engi bæti  
auðar hlíði þat síðan;  
gangr varð ei góðr ins unga  
gulls lystis inn fyrsti,  
hverr man heðan af verri,  
hnappstr mun þó inn efsti.

He broke the fine necklace of the speech of Sírnir [= a giant; speech of giant = gold] in front of the isolated woman; I trust that no one among men can compensate the lady with wealth after that. The first walk of the young one lusting for gold did not go well; each one hereon will be worse; harshest still will be the last.

It is significant that Signý calls her son *inn ungr gulls lyst* ‘the young one lusting for gold’, whereas Grímkell, who catches Signý scolding Hørðr and responds with his own verse, refers to him instead as *auðs beiðir* ‘the requester of riches’ and *beiðir brennu sjós* ‘the requester of the sea’s fire [= gold]’ (17–18). Grímkell evokes the standard kennings used of men to describe his young son, but Signý interprets Hørðr’s actions as if he had intended to steal her necklace, a reaction probably born out of her frustrations at being isolated from her family. It is significant in this respect that Signý refers to herself in the verse as *sæta*, translated as ‘isolated woman’, which *Skáldskaparmál* defines as referring to *sú kona er búandi hennar er af landi farinn* ‘that woman whose husband has travelled out of the country’ (*Skáld*,

I:107).<sup>33</sup> Merkelbach (2016b, 78) argues that Grímkell’s response of having Hǫrðr sent away from the home is not much better, as it indicates that ‘he projects his anger at his wife onto his son’, even though ‘none of this is Hǫrðr’s fault’: ‘The fragile bond between the parents is easily broken, and the child is made to suffer for it.’

For his parents, Hǫrðr becomes symbolic of the animosity that already exists between Grímkell and Signý, yet he is unable to comprehend his mother’s feelings of isolation or his father’s frustration with their tempestuous marriage. He is caught up in a communal conflict, the parameters of which he, as a child, could not be expected to understand. What is intended as a child’s affectionate gesture towards his mother becomes evocative of wider problems within their familial community, but in a way that suppresses Hǫrðr’s own individual desire to be further integrated into that group; the direction of his first walking, from the margins of the hall to his mother at its centre, is symbolically significant in itself. Perhaps it is for this reason that when the adult Hǫrðr tries to assert his autonomy while retaining his social self, he looks to the margins of his society—first to the conflict with Sóti, and later to the possibilities offered by the Hólmverjar—rather than to its centre.

Just as Hǫrðr does not perceive the altered nature of the Hólmverjar’s communal identity until his late realisation that he is implicated in their criminality, he does not become aware of other social relations, whether they are Sóti’s sibling relationship with Þorgerðr or Signý’s isolated existence from her family, until it is too late for him to remedy the situation or to extricate himself from that group. The episodes discussed in this section engage with the same idea that the saga explores in the Hólmverjar episodes, that it is not possible for a person to assert assuredly their autonomy without there being some level of social repercussions, no matter how much control they think they have over their communal situation.

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*Harðar saga*’s intense focus on different forms of community, rather than on an isolated individual protagonist in the mould of *Gísla saga* or *Grettis saga*, is not to its detriment as an outlaw narrative, despite the opinions expressed in previous

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<sup>33</sup> Faulkes suggests that the term is close to the modern English phrase ‘grass widow’ (*Skáld*, II:410), which refers to ‘a discarded mistress’ or ‘a married woman whose husband is absent from her’ (‘grass widow, *n.*’, *OED*).



scholarship (see 1.3.2). The saga's careful juxtaposition of certain concepts in different dynamic contexts of normative Icelandic society, the heroic expeditions in Gautland, and the extra-legal organisation of the Hólmverjar enable the saga to explore ideas of individuality and community in a substantively different way. Hǫrðr is a less isolated character than Gísli or Grettir, as he is invested in a highly organised community even after he is outlawed, but the saga uses his position within these groups to demonstrate how easily an individual can be isolated *within* their own community and lose control of their own social context. In adopting a different focus from the other typical 'outlaw sagas', *Harðar saga* focuses less on the isolation of the individual exiled from mainstream society and more on the relationship between the social individual and the alternative society of which he is a part. In analysing the similarities, as well as the differences, that exist between the Hólmverjar and normative society, it becomes apparent that *Harðar saga* is interested in the concept of the individual as an ever-receding absence within the framework of their community—in other words, as a figure gradually suppressed over time as their individuality is subsumed into their communal identity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Violence, Authority, and Social Disruption in Fóstbræðra saga*<sup>34</sup>

In the previous chapters, this thesis argues that the protagonists of these Icelandic outlaw narratives are not necessarily inherently disruptive individuals, and that their communal contexts, as much as their individual failings, contribute significantly to the various events leading up to these individuals' being outlawed. In the case of *Fóstbræðra saga*, however, such a reading may be useful to consider, at least initially, as a way of understanding how the text portrays the extra-legal intentions of its protagonists, the sworn-brothers Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bersason, also known as Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld. In comparison with Gísli, Hǫrðr, and even Grettir, the sworn-brothers adopt an anti-social attitude much earlier on in their saga, without enduring anywhere near the same level of provocation from their communal context. The saga appears to take for granted that the sworn-brothers are socially

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<sup>34</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga* is preserved in two distinct types. The first is represented by the versions in the medieval manuscripts AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók) and GKS 1005 fol. (Flateyjarbók), both generally dated to the late fourteenth century, as well as that in the late seventeenth-century paper manuscript AM 142 fol. (Codex Regius), a copy by the scribe Ásgeir Jónsson of a now-lost fourteenth-century manuscript (Sigurður Nordal 1943, lxx). The second is represented by the version in AM 554 4to (Hauksbók), the dating of which is generally estimated at some point between the late thirteenth and mid fourteenth centuries. According to Paul Schach (1993, 216), the first type 'is characterized by an ornate style, including personification and kennings, and by the use of anatomical, theological, and other digressions', whilst the second has a simpler style and does not contain those digressions. The versions constituting the first type are not more similar to each other in all respects, however, as Sigurður Nordal (1943, lxx) notes that whilst the Möðruvallabók and Hauksbók versions seem considerably different from one another, the Flateyjarbók version 'hefir margt fram yfir þær báðir' ['has much beyond both of them'] and stands apart in terms of its variation.

The quotations of *Fóstbræðra saga* in this chapter are taken from Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson's Íslensk fornrit edition, which combines the versions of the saga preserved in Möðruvallabók (the first part of the saga, breaking off part way through chapter twenty [*Fóstbræðra*, 222, l. 6]) and Hauksbók (the remaining parts of the saga) for its primary text. The edition also prints lengthy passages from the version in Flateyjarbók where it diverges significantly from the other two versions, as well as including notes that detail differences in wording between manuscripts. Unless otherwise explicitly noted in the text, quotations are derived from the primary text of that edition, and are therefore generally drawn from the Möðruvallabók and Hauksbók versions of the saga.

disruptive presences, and is not particularly interested in giving complex social explanations as to *why* its protagonists consistently act in such a violent and disruptive manner.

It is therefore unsurprising that despite its not typically being thought of as an outlaw narrative (see **1.3.2**), *Fóstbræðra saga* has been similarly interpreted by some scholars as being primarily interested in its individual protagonists rather than in societal or communal matters, as the sworn-brothers accord with the stereotypical image of the anti-social individual, which is often associated with the protagonists of the ‘outlaw sagas’. Theodore Andersson (2012, 185), for example, argues that the saga ‘is most assuredly a tale of action, and the action does not share the stage with family or social concerns’; he goes so far as to suggest that Þormóðr’s relationship with King Óláfr, which forms the narrative framework for the saga’s conclusive episodes (see **5.2.3**), can be characterised simply as a ‘last-minute attachment’, which is hardly a useful way to approach one of the text’s more prominent elements. Whilst Andersson is misguided to assert that the text is devoid of any social concerns, the idea that the saga is conspicuous by its lack of interest in familial relationships is an important factor in its composition. Giselle Gos (2009, 282) highlights how the text does not give as much attention to familial or genealogical concerns as is generally expected of an *Íslendingasaga*, and instead focuses primarily on the immediate experiences of the sworn-brothers:

Neither of the protagonists, Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bersason, gets married, produces any children, or even leaves a farm to the next generation of the family via nephews or younger cousins. No Norwegian prologue traces their families’ departure for and settlement in Iceland; no statement after their deaths links them with any prominent Icelanders, descendants or otherwise.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 402) similarly notes that whilst ‘most of the *Íslendingasögur* have a marked social setting with the family at the centre of it’, this central narrative focus on the family-unit ‘hardly exists in *Fóstbræðra saga*’. Even by comparison with the other outlaw narratives, in which the protagonists by necessity often find themselves isolated from their kinsmen still living within normative society, the lack of familial structure in *Fóstbræðra saga* is notable; Hǫrðr, Gísli, and Grettir are shown to retain close connections to at least some of their kin, be they their spouses, siblings, parents, or extended family. The sworn-brothers are only shown to be connected to their fathers Hávarr and Bersi, the former

of whom is killed early on in the saga, and to Þorgeirr's mother Þórelfr, who makes a brief appearance after Þorgeirr avenges his father's death, in which she praises her son for his actions, but she then moves away from the district and is not mentioned again in the saga. Bersi plays a more prominent role later on in the saga during Þormóðr's ill-fated love-visits to Þórdís and Þorbjörg kolbrún, but he is also largely out of the narrative action after these events.

This absence of the typical familial concerns of an *Íslendingasaga* is significant, as it suggests that *Fóstbræðra saga* is less interested than other outlaw narratives in the subject of *why* or *how* society deems certain individuals to be deviant enough to exile from the community. Whilst the protagonists of those other sagas have difficult relationships with their kinsmen, particularly their fathers, during their childhoods (see: Merkelbach 2016b), and whilst these problems presage the later conflicts that they will have with society itself, the sworn-brothers do not endure such troubled formative years. Each man appears to have a positive relationship with both of his parents, and neither of them could be said to turn to disruptive, violent activity because of conflict with their kinsmen, whereas Gísli and Hǫrðr are both largely motivated to act in an extra-legal capacity because of hostilities within their respective kinship groups. In this respect, the sworn-brothers are more similar to Grettir, who gets on well with his kinsmen, his father Ásmundr aside, and whose full outlawry is not directly related to any conflict within his familial circle. Grettir's outlawry is still conceptually related to his separation from his family, however, as his mother Ásdís declares that separation to be the actual beginning of his outlawry (see 3.2.1). By contrast, neither of the sworn-brothers' outlawries is shown to affect their kinsmen in any meaningful sense. By the time of Þorgeirr's outlawry, his father has been dead for some time and his mother is no longer incorporated into the events of the narrative, whilst the saga does not directly address what impact, if any, Þormóðr's outlawry in Greenland may have had on his family back home in Iceland.

That the saga is not particularly interested in the typical familial concerns of the *Íslendingasögur*, however, does not rule out the possibility of its having socio-political dimensions as part of its focus on violence and action. Even though both Þormóðr and Þorgeirr fit into the proposed mould of the inherently antisocial individual more neatly than do any of the protagonists of the other outlaw narratives, this does not necessarily mean that the saga is primarily interested in their individual psychologies in the way that *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*—and even *Harðar saga*, to

an extent—are in their protagonists’ interior lives and emotional struggles. Indeed, the saga explicitly states that Þorgeirr does not possess typical emotional behaviours at all, as indicated by his reaction to his father’s death (*Fóstbræðra*, 127–28):

Er Þorgeirr spurði víg föður síns, þá brá honum ekki við þá tíðenda sagn. Eigi roðnaði hann, því at eigi rann honum reiði í hqrund; eigi bliknaði hann, því at honum lagði eigi heipt í brjóst; eigi blánaði hann, því at honum rann eigi í bein reiði, heldr brá hann sér engan veg við tíðenda sagnina, því at eigi var hjarta hans sem fóarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu, heldr var þat hert af inum hæsta hqfuðsmið í qllum hvatleik.

When Þorgeirr heard of his father’s slaying, he did not react to the news of the events. He did not turn red, because no anger ran through his skin; he did not turn pale, because no hatred laid in his breast; he did not turn blue, because no anger ran through his bones. Rather, he reacted in no way in himself to the news of the events, because his heart was not like the gizzard of a bird. It was not so full of blood that it trembled from dread; rather, it had been hardened in all ardour by the most glorious head-smith [*i.e.* God].

Þorgeirr is primarily characterised throughout the narrative by his inability to feel afraid, as well as by his unthinking attitude to violence. The Flateyjarbók version of the saga says of Þorgeirr that he *var óskelfr ok ólífhræddr, ok flestir hlutir hafa honum verit karlmannliga gefnir sakar afls ok hreysti ok allrar atgørvi* ‘was untrembling and unafraid for his own life, and many things had been given him in a manly way on account of his physical strength, his prowess, and all his abilities’ (190–91). In the same version, Þorgils Arason says of Þorgeirr that he *ekki vætta hræðask kunna ok sízt bregða sér við noykkurn váveifligan háska* ‘did not have experience of being afraid, and reacted very little to any sudden peril’, and contrasts him with Þormóðr, whom Þorgils says fears God, and Grettir, whom he says is afraid of the dark (191). Þormóðr, on the other hand, is motivated to action more as a result of his being bored by the way of life within normative Icelandic society, and finds staying in his father’s household to be *longum daufligt* ‘continuously dull’ (161). Aside from Þormóðr’s later adventures in Greenland, which are motivated directly by Þorgeirr’s death, the saga does not give many overarching reasons for why the brothers act in such a violent, disruptive manner. Þorgeirr is simply unafraid of consequences, whilst Þormóðr is in any case disenchanted with the possibilities that life within normative society could offer him. The social disruption that the sworn-brothers cause does not appear to constitute a reaction to any serious systemic problems within the community, but is more of an active property, a choice made largely without provocation and without any significant form of contextual justification or explanation on the part of the narrative.

To understand how the narrative status of the sworn-brothers as disruptive presences relates to the saga's social concerns, it is necessary to consider how the saga frames the actions of the sworn-brothers in relation to their communal context. It is significant that Þormóðr and Þorgeirr are far from the only violent, disruptive characters in the saga, which depicts an Icelandic society that contains a great many overbearing individuals. The kind of social disruption embodied in the actions of the sworn-brothers is far from the only type of violent iniquity depicted in the text, but the saga makes a distinction between the sworn-brothers and the majority of the quarrelsome men whom they encounter; this distinction emerges primarily because of Þorgeirr and Þormóðr's status as *fóstbræðr*, a status that carries an extra-legal quality to it (see **5.1.2**). The saga does not attempt to problematise instances of individuals acting in an extra-legal capacity, in the ways that the outlaw narratives previously discussed do, but it takes such social disruption as a given; at times, it revels in the transgressive nature of these actions, as when Þormóðr purposefully distorts societal norms in Greenland in order to achieve vengeance for Þorgeirr (see **5.3.3**). To understand the social concerns of *Fóstbræðra saga*, it is important to consider not *why* the sworn-brothers are motivated to act in an extra-legal fashion, but rather *how* they shape society as a result, through their own actions and through society's response to the havoc that they cause both within and from outside its communal structure.

This chapter analyses the extra-legal dimensions of the saga in reference to three of its key themes: disruption, authority, and antisociality. The first of these themes covers the various socially disruptive presences within the saga, focusing primarily on instances of male competition within normative society in the early parts of the saga and on the legalistic and symbolic aspects of Þorgeirr and Þormóðr's sworn-brotherhood pact. The second theme deals with the depictions of different types of authority in the narrative in order to assess the relative successes and failures that each institution of authority has in attempting to contain, overcome, or direct these disruptive individuals. Finally, the discussion concludes by considering the significance of Þormóðr's depiction during his exploits in Greenland; it demonstrates how the saga uses Þormóðr, who is already something of an Othered figure because of his physical limitations and his anti-social approach to normative Icelandic society (see **5.3.1**), to subvert ideas of 'typical' or 'familiar' Otherness, thereby causing social disruption on a different narrative level (see **5.3.3**). The chapter argues that

extra-legal status is portrayed differently in *Fóstbræðra saga* than in the other Icelandic outlaw narratives, where it is imposed on the outlawed protagonist by external forces, because the sworn-brothers embrace this status in order to gain advantage for themselves over the members of normative society. Indeed, *Fóstbræðra saga* depicts an Icelandic society that appears far weaker than it is in the sagas previously discussed, as that community is characterised in large part by its failure to protect its members from the socially disruptive forces that exist within its own boundaries.

### 5.1 Social Disruption and Systemic Violence

It will be useful to analyse here the specific nature of the disruption that the sworn-brothers cause in their community, specifically regarding from where that disruption originates. Martin Arnold (2003, 166) suggests that the pair are socially disruptive because the saga associates the violent conflicts in its early parts exclusively with the sworn-brothers, and argues that the narrative draws a dichotomy between the supposedly heroic values espoused by Þorgrímr and Þormóðr and the more peaceful attitude of the wider farming community:

The narrative voice [presents] a picture of a community under siege. This not only establishes a contrast between the parochial, petty heroics of the oath-brothers and the mundane, but essential, peace of the rural community, but also suggests the conflict of two ideologies. On the one hand, there is the ideal of heroic individualism, which finds its idealised expression in the poetic encomium of Þormóðr's *Þorgeirsdrápa*; and on the other, there is the narrative voice itself, which deplores disruption and, by implication, champions the homogeneity of purpose entailed in an ideology of community.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2015, 216) similarly suggests that there is a 'discrepancy between the sworn-brothers' ideas about how to behave and their neighbors' predominantly peaceful farming way of life', and argues that the saga highlights this discrepancy because it is interested in 'not only showing the heroic model as unappealing, but occasionally ridiculing it'.

The problem with such interpretations, however, is that they assume the sworn-brothers are the only excessively violent presences within the narrative. As the protagonists of the text, Þormóðr and Þorgeirr are the most prominent such figures in the saga, but they are by no means the only violent or confrontational men depicted within it; indeed, the society depicted in the saga is shown to be contingent on its

more powerful members monopolising violence in order to preserve the social fabric. Whilst the sworn-brothers are disruptive figures, and are to some extent set apart from their community, it is not because of their violent actions; rather, their social disruptiveness stems from their status as *fóstbræðr*, which the saga portrays as being symbolically extra-legal. The dynamics underpinning that status, however, are contingent on the sworn-brothers embracing the alternative form of community and masculinity that becoming *fóstbræðr* symbolises, and the saga indicates that such alternatives are difficult, or even impossible, to maintain in the long term.

**5.1.1 Masculine violence in Iceland.** It is notable that neither of the sworn-brothers appears to be affected by their being made outlaws to the same extent as are Gísli, Grettir, and Hǫrðr, all of whom suffer a great deal because of their social exclusion. By contrast, Þormóðr and Þorgeirr hardly change how they act as a result of their shift in legal status, nor do they bemoan their fate as outlaws, isolated from society. Þormóðr is already an outsider in Greenland before he is outlawed, and his outlawry is soon forgotten once he returns to a position of centrality in King Óláfr’s retinue. Although Þorgeirr’s outlawry does ultimately cause him to leave Iceland after his kinsmen arrange safe passage for him, it is otherwise almost incidental to the narrative. The version in *Möðruvallabók* notes that Þorgeirr was outlawed for killing Þorgils Másson, but the description immediately following does not suggest that this had any great effect on the sworn-brothers, who simply continued their antisocial behaviour: *Þeir Þorgeirr ok Þormóðr váru þat sumar á Ströndum, ok váru þar allir menn hræddir við þá, ok gengu þeir einir yfir allt sem lok yfir akra* ‘Þorgeirr and Þormóðr stayed in Strandir that summer, and all the people there were frightened of them, and they alone spread over everything like weeds over a field’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 149–50). Þorgeirr’s outlawry is not itself a catalyst for a significant change in his relationships with other people, despite its proximity to the breakup of the sworn-brothers’ partnership; rather, it is a logical extension of the violent and socially disruptive behaviour that the sworn-brothers display in their early career.

The saga’s treatment of outlawry as a relatively trivial change in status is related to its depiction of normative society itself, which is characterised in the early parts of the narrative by a prevalence of violence and oppression directed at the weaker members of society by the strong. The discussion below demonstrates how most of the men within this depiction of normative Icelandic society are eager to use violence



in order to solve their immediate problems and to gain wealth and power, usually by bullying and intimidating their neighbours. The proliferation of disruptive male characters in the early parts of the text does not suggest ‘a community under siege’, to recall Arnold’s phrase, from Þorgeirr and Þormóðr as much as it does a chaotic social environment, in which power within the community is conveyed primarily through both implicit and explicit violence. The problems relating to violence within this region are not simply a result of a clash between the supposedly dichotomous ideologies held by the sworn-brothers and by their wider community, but represent a fundamental systemic problem, which is that this society’s ‘peace’ is contingent on its more vulnerable members not being able to challenge the legitimacy of the violence committed against them by those in positions of societal power.

This is not to say, of course, that the sworn-brothers are themselves to be lauded in comparison with the other violent and confrontational men that they encounter in their district and further afield. The saga takes care to highlight the problematic traits of its protagonists, of whom it says early on that they *váru eigi vinsælir, tölðu margir þá ekki vera jafnaðarmenn* ‘were not popular; many people said at the time that they were not equitable men’ (125). Þorgeirr is depicted as being especially domineering; the saga says that *var hann mǫrgum mǫnnum nokkurr andvaragestr* ‘he was for many people a somewhat unwelcome guest’ (126), and that he *óblíðr var ... hversdagliga við alþýðu* ‘was generally unkind to the majority of people’ (128). The saga associates these overbearing characteristics with the sworn-brothers’ fathers, Hávarr and Bersi, who are said to be complicit in the boys’ raiding: *Hǫfðu þeir hald ok traust hjá feðrum sínum, sem ván var at; virðu margir menn sem þeir heldi þá til rangs* ‘They had the support and protection of their fathers, which was to be expected; many people guessed that they were encouraging them to do wrong’ (125). Of the two fathers, Þorgeirr’s father Hávarr is, like his son, the more unruly; his family settle in Ísafjörðr after leaving Akranes because he has killed people in that district, and he is described as *mikill vígamaðr ok hávaðamaðr ok ódæll* ‘a great slayer of men, a self-assertive man, and quarrelsome’ (123). The sworn-brothers’ actions cannot be explained entirely by their familial connections, but it is significant that their formative social environment does not discourage the use of violence at all. As Merkelbach (2016b, 87) argues, the sworn-brothers’ fathers ‘either encourage their antisocial deeds, or at least do not actively discourage them’, and ‘do not provide a socially beneficial alternative to [their] roaming and raiding’.

This familial background would not be especially significant in itself on a societal level were the attitudes developed within it generally atypical in other communal circles, but this is not the case within the narrative of *Fóstbræðra saga*. Shortly after Hávarr and his family leave Ísafjörður, Hávarr is killed at Akranes by the chieftain Jøðurr, who is described as being *óðæll ok lítill jafnaðarmaðr við marga menn, ríkr í heraðinu ok stórráðr, vígamaðr mikill* ‘quarrelsome and hardly an equitable man towards many people, powerful in the district and ambitious, a great slayer of men’; the saga also tells us that he *bætti menn sjaldan fé, þótt hann vægi* ‘seldom paid money as compensation for men even though he killed them’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 126). When Þorgeirr visits Jøðurr to demand compensation for Hávarr, Jøðurr refuses to countenance the request (129–30):

Jøðurr mælti: ‘Eigi veit ek, hvárt þú hefir þat spurt, at ek hefi mǫrg víg vegit ok ek hefi ekki bætt.’  
‘Ókunnigt er mér þat,’ segir Þorgeirr; ‘en hvat sem um þat er, þá kœmr þetta til mín, at leita eptir þessum vígsbótum, því at mér er nær hǫggvit.’  
Jøðurr segir: ‘Eigi er mér allfjarri skapi at minnask þín í nǫkkuru, en fyrir því mun ek eigi þetta víg bæta þér, Þorgeirr, at þá þykkir ǫðrum skylt, at ek bæta fleiri víg.’

Jøðurr spoke: ‘I don’t know whether you have heard that I have performed many slayings and I have not paid any compensation.’

‘That was unknown to me,’ said Þorgeirr, ‘but however that is, it falls to me to inquire after compensation for the slaying, because it has been struck close to me [*i.e.* I am closely related to the victim].’

Jøðurr spoke: ‘It’s not very far from my disposition to remember you with something, but I will not pay compensation to you for this slaying, Þorgeirr, because then it will seem necessary to other people that I pay compensation for more slayings.’

Þorgeirr subsequently kills Jøðurr after he refuses to pay compensation, but it would be difficult to argue that Þorgeirr is the less reasonable of the two during the course of this conversation. Whilst Þorgeirr offers Jøðurr a chance at reconciliation, Jøðurr is unwilling to accept that process. What is most significant about Jøðurr’s refusal, however, is that it appears to be primarily motivated by his awareness that arbitrating the case would cause him to appear weak not only to Þorgeirr but also to the other people living in the district, thereby entirely undermining his power within the community. Jøðurr is aware that the violence he commits is not simply a by-product of his having power within the district, but plays a key role in determining his social standing: it is the means by which he acquires and retains wealth, the implicit threat that discourages others from holding him to account. The violence that Jøðurr commits is not incidental to his societal position; rather, that position is dependent on his continued use of violence to reassert his social dominance.

Þorgeirr's confrontation with Jǫðurr is followed by two encounters between the sworn-brothers and some of the other overbearing men who also live within normative Icelandic society. The first encounter depicts both brothers fighting against Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, a father and son whom the saga describes as *ójafnaðarmenn miklir* 'big bullies', with Þorbrandr specifically being labelled *óðall ok óvinsæll* 'quarrelsome and unpopular' (133–34). Ingólfr and Þorbrandr intimidate and steal from their neighbours in the district, yet escape harm because they are protected by their chieftain, Vermundr Þorgrímsson. The following scene depicts a confrontation between Þorgeirr and Vermundr's kinsman Butraldi, who is referred to as *einhleypingr* 'a loner with no fixed abode' and *vígamaðr mikill, nasbráðr ok heiptúðigr* 'a great slayer of men, hot-headed and vindictive' (142–43). The significance of these figures is discussed in more detail below in relation to how the saga problematises the authority held by the chieftains (see 5.2.1); for now, it is enough to note that these episodes indicate that the sworn-brothers are far from the only socially disruptive male presences within the normative society of the saga, as is also the case with the material about Jǫðurr.

This succession of violent male figures within normative society culminates in the confrontation between the sworn-brothers and Þorgils Mátsson over the flensing rights to a beached whale. Þorgils finds the whale first and cuts out a large portion of the blubber before the sworn-brothers arrive, at which point Þorgeirr asks Þorgils *at láta fleiri af njóta en yðr þessa gagnsmuna* 'to let more people than yourselves benefit from these useful things', on the grounds that *öllum jafnheimolt* 'it is equally free to all' (*Fóstbræðra*, 148). Þorgils agrees to this notion, but refuses Þorgeirr's proposal that he and his men either share the part they have already flensed with the sworn-brothers' party, or that they keep that part and leave the uncut parts of the whale to the newcomers. When Þorgeirr responds to the refusal by announcing that *þat munu þér þá reyna verða, hversu lengi þér haldið á hvalnum fyrir oss* 'you will have to prove, then, how long you can hold on to the whale against us', it may appear to be simply another example of Þorgeirr's pugnacious character. Þorgils accepts that Þorgeirr is simply standing on his rights, however, and declares that *þat er ok vel, at svá sé* 'it is also good for things to turn out this way' (148–49). When Þorgeirr suggests that it would be fairest for them to engage in single combat, Þorgils agrees in a similar manner: *Vel líkar mér, at svá sé* 'It would please me for things to turn out this way' (149). Whilst Þorgils accepts Þorgeirr's proposal that those present are

equally entitled to benefit from the flensing, he is unwilling to facilitate such a course of action peacefully, and instead endorses violence as a means of resolving the dispute. It is significant that both disputants are content to decide the case through physical combat, as Þorgeirr's suggestion is not framed as being unusual in this social context; the saga implies that this society's individual members see violence as a valid method of dispute resolution.

Interestingly, Þorgils is not an aberrant or intrusive figure to the community in the way that certain of the other violent male presences discussed above are; he is not a dangerous vagrant, like Butraldi, or a bully, like Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, but is said to be *góðr búþegn* 'a good farmer' (148). The saga passes no negative judgement on him for endorsing violence in this situation, nor does it explicitly judge Þorgeirr. Although his killing of Þorgils directly leads to his outlawry, Þorgeirr is shown in a more positive light by initially attempting to establish a fair resolution in a peaceful manner, even though this ultimately fails. Overall, the violence committed by the sworn-brothers is not entirely in conflict with the values of the community around them, which is itself built around a nexus of men who either encourage or perpetuate violence, often against the weaker members of the community, in order to maintain its social order and their place within its hierarchy. *Fóstbræðra saga* depicts an Icelandic society in which violence is not simply incidental or external to its communal structure, but is built into the system itself and is readily endorsed by even the less problematic men in that society, like Þorgils.

**5.1.2 Extra-legality and *fóstbræðralag*.** Given the proliferation of violent male presences within the normative society of *Fóstbræðra saga*, it would be inaccurate to assume that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr are socially disruptive figures because they too act violently against other people. This is not to say, however, that the sworn-brothers are not disruptive figures at all. In fact, their self-proclaimed status as *fóstbræðr* does far more to threaten the structure and hierarchy of normative society than do their aggressive actions against certain individuals, and this is because of the legalistic and symbolic elements underlying that status and the oath-taking ceremony that precedes it. The vow that the sworn-brothers make to each other—that whichever one of them lives longer must avenge the other's death—is a symbolically extra-legal act that sets apart the brothers from society more than their violent behaviour does in itself.

The saga treats the concept of *fóstbræðralag* ‘sworn-brotherhood’ as something Other from the outset, which is partly to do with the association it draws between that agreement and the heathen customs of pre-Christian Iceland and Scandinavia. The extant saga suggests that its intradiegetic society, despite being Christian, was unfamiliar to the later audiences of the written text, as it warns those audiences of the purported connection between heathenism and some of the behaviours that it depicts. The saga says, in reference to the *fóstbræðralag* ceremony, that *þó at þá væri menn kristnir kallaðir, þá var þó í þann tíð ung kristni ok mjök vangor, svá at margir gneistar heiðninnar váru þó þá eptir ok í óvenju lagðir* ‘although people were called Christians then, Christianity was still young at the time and very undeveloped, so that many sparks of heathenism were still present then and manifested as bad habits’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 125). It also states that the sworn-brothers *meir hugðu ... jafnan at fremð þessa heims lífs en at dýrð annars heims fagnaðar* ‘always thought more about the honour of this world’s life than about the glory of the next world of joy [*i.e.* the Christian heaven]’ (124–25). The *fóstbræðralag* ceremony and the accompanying status of being *fóstbræðr*—that is, being men who have sworn to avenge each other’s deaths, rather than having been fostered together as part of a social transaction (see 4.3.2)—are defined to some extent by a symbolic opposition to normative society. The saga’s association of the ceremony with heathen practice would presumably have been particularly evocative for the saga-audiences of the thirteenth century and later, who inhabited a society with a long-established Christian identity.

The idea that *fóstbræðralag* is set apart somewhat from normative society is also apparent from the specifically legal elements of the arrangement. The saga describes the sworn-brothers’ oath in highly legalistic terms, referring to it as *fastmæli* ‘a binding-agreement’ and *logmál* ‘a legal agreement’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 125). The concept is also presented in legal contexts when it is depicted elsewhere in the sagas. In *Gísla saga*, for example, the decision of Gísli, Þorkell, and their brothers-in-law to swear an oath of sworn-brotherhood to one another takes place at the *alþingi*, and Gísli also uses similar language to the narrator of *Fóstbræðra saga* in his description of the ritual as a way to strengthen their friendship *með meirum fastmælum en áðr* ‘with a greater binding-arrangement than before’ (*Gísla*, 22). It is also important to note that the *Íslendingasögur* do not portray such ceremonies as taking place exclusively between like-minded individuals. *Vatnsdæla saga* depicts a ritual similar to those in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Gísla saga*, which also entails the participants passing under

long strips of cut turf as a performative declaration of the oath that they are swearing to one another, but the saga contextualises the ritual as part of the settlement of a legal case between hostile disputants (*Vatnsdæla*, 87–88):

Bergr kvazk eigi mundu fébætr taka ok því at eins sættask, at Jökull gengi undir þrjú jarðarmen, sem þá var siðr eptir stórar afgørðir,—‘ok sýna svá lítillæti við mik.’

Jökull kvað fyrir mundu hann troll taka en hann lyti honum svá. Þorsteinn kvað þetta vera álitamál,—‘ok mun ek ganga undir jarðarmenit.’

Bergr kvað þá goldit. It fyrsta jarðarmen tók í oxl, annat í bróklinda, þriðja í mitt lær. Þá gekk Þorsteinn undir it fyrsta. Bergr mælti þá: ‘Svínbeygða ek nú þann, sem æztr var af Vatnsdælum.’

Þorsteinn svarar: ‘Þetta þurftir þú eigi at mæla, en þat mun fyrst í mót koma þessum orðum, at ek mun eigi ganga undir fleiri.’

Bergr said he would not take compensation and that he would only be reconciled if Jökull passed underneath three long strips of turf, as was then the custom for important transgressions—‘and thus show humility towards me.’

Jökull said that the trolls would take him before he would bow down to him thus. Þorsteinn said this was a case for consideration—‘and I will pass underneath the strips of turf.’

Bergr said it would be granted then. The first strip of turf reached to his shoulder, the second to his waist, the third to the middle of his thigh. Then Þorsteinn passed underneath the first one. Bergr spoke then: ‘I made that one who was the highest in Vatnsdalir bow down like a pig.’

Þorsteinn replied: ‘You did not need to say that, but it will first come about in return for these words that I will not pass underneath any more.’

The ceremony is perceived as being a legitimate means of securing a legal resolution between the parties, but Jökull’s initial reaction to Bergr’s demand indicates that the ritual was problematic in a legalistic sense even when accommodated into such negotiations. Lois Bragg (2004, 224) argues that Jökull is incensed because Bergr’s suggestion would require him not only to reconcile himself with Bergr, but to prostrate himself in front of his opponent. Bragg notes that whilst anthropologists generally think of blood-brother rites as ‘a symbolic rebirth of the participants as brothers from one womb’—with the turves, the ends of which would still be attached to the ground from which they were cut, representing the birth canal—the *Vatnsdæla saga* episode indicates that the Old Norse–Icelandic ritual was also characterised by the participants symbolically submitting themselves to one another.<sup>35</sup> Bragg suggests

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<sup>35</sup> The act of a man forcing another man to bend down also carried connotations of *ergi*. Clark (2007, 510) argues that the phallic aggressive *níð* elements of Gísli’s response to Þorgrímr during the ball-game, in which Gísli composes a verse implying his sexual dominance over Þorgrímr (see 2.2.2), are ‘further supported by the position into which Gísli forces his antagonist by knocking him over—either on all fours, or head over heels into the air’, as Þorgrímr therefore appears to be in a position associated with being the passive sexual partner. The idea that a man bending down in front of another was thought of as *argr* is also apparent from the *trénið* ‘wooden *níð*-effigy’ in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, which depicts two men bent over, one behind the other, in a sexual encounter, which the text describes as *illr fundr* ‘an indecent encounter’ (*Bjarnar*, 155).

that the *Fóstbræðra saga* ceremony should also be interpreted in light of this element of submission (225):

The point of the blood-brother ritual seems ... to be not so much rebirth from the earth as brothers, but rather submission of the participants to one another. What was humiliating for Jökul and Thorstein in stooping ‘like a pig’ to Berg would have been, in the blood-brother ritual, a token of mutual submission, each friend to the other ... It shows that Thorgeir’s concern that he not disgrace his ‘manly vigor’ by ‘crouching around women’ does not pertain to stooping or crawling under turves with his best friend.

In this sense, the element of ‘mutual submission’ in the *fóstbræðralag* ritual contrasts with how the saga portrays the power hierarchy in normative society, which is characterised by the domination of the weaker members of society by those with greater societal power and individual strength. Whilst such submissiveness is explicitly framed by Berg in the *Vatnsdæla* episode as a humiliation of his enemies, the ceremony in *Fóstbræðra saga* does not depict either participant as being shamed by the other. Rather, by placing themselves in a common position of vulnerability, the men further strengthen the bond between them by testing their trust in one another and by defining themselves against their external community, which would typically condemn or mock such behaviour. It is the shared transgression of conventional gendered behaviours, in its members’ active rejection of normative legality and cultural norms, that primarily gives the group its initial identity.

Of course, the saga also depicts this arrangement as being difficult to maintain because of the strains that an especially dominant and aggressive individual like Þorgeirr will put on a relationship defined by mutual submission. The sworn-brothers break up their partnership after Þorgeirr asks a question of Þormóðr that destroys the semblance of equality between them: *Hvárr okkarr myndi af qðrum bera, ef vit reyndim með okkr?* ‘Which of us would overcome the other, if we two were to test ourselves against each other?’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 151). Þormóðr immediately declares their relationship untenable, despite Þorgeirr’s protestations that he is not fully committed to the idea. It is not surprising that such an alternative community, which is based on both individuals submitting to each other as equals, is not viable in the long term, given that it contains two men who the saga says were *ráðnir til at láta sinn hlut hvergi eða undir leggja, við hverja menn sem þeir ætti málum at skipta* ‘determined not to let go of anything or to submit to any man with whom they might have cause to deal’ (124).

What is particularly important to note here is that the sworn-brotherhood ritual constitutes an inherently political, extra-legal act. Because the purpose of the ceremony, at least in practical terms, is to ensure that each of the sworn-brothers will avenge the other, the ritual redefines the relationship of each participant with all other members of normative society, because it entails the individuals involved claiming the right to take blood-vengeance for each other, whatever the context, which does not accord with the legal process of their society. As has been discussed above in reference to *Gísla saga*, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the normative legal framework of the Icelandic Commonwealth was entirely opposed to blood-vengeance (see 2.3.1), but whilst the Commonwealth had legal strategies for dealing with and containing the potential of blood-vengeance, the sworn-brotherhood ceremony constitutes an actualised threat of that potential. In each participant's declaration that he will take vengeance for his comrades, regardless of circumstance, is a performative refusal to abide by the legal process required by normative society, as the men taking the oath choose to disregard their community's laws in favour of a different approach to resolving their dispute.

**5.1.3 Systemic violence vs. social disruption.** The extra-legal status of sworn-brotherhood suggests that the violence committed by the sworn-brothers should be viewed as being qualitatively different from that done by their equally violent opponents, who either hold positions of power within normative society or are protected because of their relationships with those more powerful individuals. These men's actions are disruptive on a local level because they harm their weaker neighbours, but the violence that they perpetrate is also implicitly endorsed by society because of either the position they hold or their social connections. Their violence is not *socially* disruptive on a larger scale, as their actions do not threaten their social order, only the wellbeing of those individuals who already lack power within that system. The acts performed by these men consist of such crimes as killing other people unprovoked and robbing their neighbours, making this form of aggression extra-legal. Because this violence is either used by or allowed to continue by the more powerful members of society, however, it is not held to account through the normative legal system, which primarily empowered the chieftains themselves and which was reliant on their regulating communal disputes to ensure that the law was upheld (see 5.2.1).



As a result, the violence committed by the chieftains and their followers actually maintains the social hierarchy in their favour by ensuring that their positions within society go unchallenged by others. Jǫðurr reveals this himself to Þorgeirr in explaining that he will not compensate him for the death of his father, because he cannot pay compensation for one man without being expected to do so to all his previous victims as well. Similarly, the saga-narrator is explicit in asserting that until the sworn-brothers finally kill them, Ingólfr, Þorbrandr, and Butraldi did not receive appropriate and deserved punishments for their antisocial actions, as a direct result of their relationships with the powerful chieftain Vermundr (see 5.1.1). The intradiegetic Icelandic society of the saga accommodates, rather than rejects, the violence performed by these figures, and does not code it as being disruptive on a societal level, but it is not presented as legitimate by the saga itself, which highlights the problems that this violence causes for the local community. Because of this lack of legitimacy, related to the Icelandic Commonwealth's lack of the requisite state-level institutions to legitimise it, the behaviour of the chieftains and their followers does not constitute a kind of 'monopoly on legitimate physical violence' in the sense that Max Weber (1991, 78) proposes for his definition of the modern political state. It does, however, function in effect as a monopolisation of *illegitimate* violence. This is a society characterised by a type of violence that is clearly unlawful, yet is also systemic; it is a violence that goes unchallenged because it is perpetuated and tolerated by powerful individuals in society, as it maintains the power dynamics and social structure that benefit them. Because this extra-legal violence is committed by those with more societal power, and therefore more agency (see 4.1.1 and 4.1.2), it does not threaten the societal *status quo* and is not coded as socially disruptive by the people who have the most influence within normative society, meaning that the individuals responsible for this aggression are not held to account.

By contrast, the sworn-brothers' status as *fóstbræðr* means that their violent behaviour is seen as being not only extra-legal, but also disruptive on a societal level. Whilst Þorgeirr and Þormóðr are outsiders even before being made outlaws, their partnership formalises their opposition to society in the first place, and this is reinforced by their repeated conflicts with those who ostensibly uphold the social order. Because the sworn-brothers choose to set themselves apart symbolically from their normative community, the violence that they commit against the chieftains and their followers is socially disruptive; the problematic nature of that society also

means that this violence is not always portrayed negatively. While the partnership does exist, the sworn-brothers have a similar relationship to society as does Hǫrðr when he is a member of the Hólmverjar. Þorgeirr and Þormóðr cause significant problems to society because they constitute a disruptive presence to it, but their disruption is also directed towards performing heroic deeds to counter certain threats, which normative society is unable to confront because these threats emerge from within society itself, as they do in *Harðar saga* (see 4.2.2).

Depictions of violence and disruptiveness in *Fóstbræðra saga* do not necessarily perform the same narrative function, and it is useful to consider how the narrative treats different kinds of aggression as having more positive and negative roles to play. Maria Bonner and Kaaren Grimstad (1996, 11) emphasise the need for such ambivalent approaches in their analysis of the term *ójafnaðarmaðr* ‘inequitable man’, with specific reference to *Fóstbræðra saga*, noting that ‘although the word is frequently associated with excessively aggressive behavior of villains, it can also be used to characterize the main protagonist ... so that clearly we can not think in terms of a fixed pejorative value irrespective of other features in the portrayal of the character’. Joanne Shortt Butler (2016, 119–20) presents a more nuanced idea of how the sagas use such lexical signifiers, arguing that the phrase *engi/ekki jafnaðarmaðr* ‘not an equitable man’ tends to be used to refer to men ‘of a much higher status’ than those who are referred to as *ójafnaðarmenn*. She also suggests that the former phrase is more indicative of intradiegetic public consensus and the latter of extradiegetic narratorial opinion. It is important to keep in mind that not all depictions of inequity within the sagas perform the same narrative function, and any reading of a text like *Fóstbræðra saga* that engages with this concept in depth should take into account the complex treatment of violent behaviour within the sagas: some men are more disruptive than others and may indeed be regarded as more problematic by their neighbours, but such views are not necessarily endorsed by the saga itself.

It is significant that whilst the saga says that many people in the district thought of the sworn-brothers as *ekki jafnaðarmenn*, it directly refers to their opponents Ingólfr and Þorbrandr as *ójafnaðarmenn* (*Fóstbræðra*, 125, 134). This distinction may also be reflected in the language that Þorgeirr uses when the sworn-brothers confront the kinsmen, as he declares that *þat er vart þrendi hingat, at skapa skor ok jafna ójafnað* ‘it is our purpose in coming here to lay down a marker and to even out inequalities’ (138), referring to the injustices that Ingólfr and Þorbrandr have done to their

neighbours. Their neighbours may think of the sworn-brothers as hardly being equitable individuals, but if we accept Shortt Butler’s conclusion that the term *ójafnaðarmaðr* represents the judgement of the narratorial voice to a greater extent, it seems that the saga does not directly equate their socially disruptive behaviour with the systemic violence done by their opponents. The scene depicts Þorgeirr and Þormóðr as the more heroic characters fighting on behalf of the weaker members of their society, even though Sigrfljóð has to persuade them to do so (see 5.2.2). As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2015, 217) points out, the saga seems to sympathise ‘with women and the lower classes, who, as innocent bystanders, are the victims of excessive use of violence’, rather than their established tormentors, and in this scene the sworn-brothers are on the side of those victims.

Þorgeirr and Þormóðr’s heroic behaviour in this scene, of course, does not excuse their misdeeds elsewhere; Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 404) argues that despite the ‘almost chivalric’ nature of the fight in this scene, the fact that the sworn-brothers similarly go to Strandir and intimidate the locals there indicates that they ‘are fundamentally on a par with the scoundrels they dispatch’. Þorgeirr and Þormóðr’s extra-legal status as *fóstbræðr*, however, affects the dynamic of the conflict. Ingólfr and Þorbrandr operate from a position of communal power within the fixed system that oppresses Sigrfljóð and her neighbours. By contrast, the sworn-brothers inhabit a more liminal space outside that system in their refusal to accede to the authority of Icelandic law, and whilst their social disruptiveness usually finds form in their own raids and robberies, the fact that they exist outside this problematic system allows Sigrfljóð to direct their disruptiveness against the system itself. Violent figures exist both within the normative society of the text and in opposition to it, but the marginalised and vulnerable members of the former are depicted as being primarily oppressed by the former, and they are at times able to make use of the extra-legal presence posed by the sworn-brothers to challenge their tormentors.

This dynamic is also apparent in Þorgeirr’s conflict with Butraldi, despite the community of the sworn-brothers not being fully present because of Þormóðr’s absence. Butraldi is neither called an *ójafnaðarmaðr* nor said to be *ekki jafnaðarmaðr*, but he is described as being *vígamaðr mikill* ‘a great slayer of men’, as Jøðurr is earlier on in the saga, as well as *nasbráðr ok heiptúðigr* ‘hot-headed and vengeful’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 143). When Butraldi arrives at the home of the cowardly farmer Þorkell, he and his men sit in the main hall *með vápnum sínum* ‘with their

weapons [*i.e.* brandishing their weapons]’, presenting such a visible threat to Þorkell’s workmen that they *váru fram í skála* ‘stayed farther out in the room [*i.e.* close to the door]’, not daring to get any closer. Þorkell himself is so intimidated that he is unable to make Butraldi and his men leave, even though he *þótti ill seta þeira* ‘thought badly of their staying [*i.e.* did not want them to stay]’. Þorgeirr arrives at the farm soon afterwards, ostensibly making Þorkell’s situation even worse: he is now obliged to host two sets of unwanted guests, whom he suspects are poorly disposed to each other because of the animosity between Þorgeirr and Butraldi’s kinsman Vermundr, even though Þorgeirr claims that he will not harm his host.

In fact, rather than disrupting the fragile peace of Þorkell’s household, Þorgeirr’s staying there maintains a sense of equilibrium within the domestic sphere, as it counteracts Butraldi’s implicitly aggressive presence. Þorkell appears to view the two men as being equivalent to one another—Helga Kress (1996, 61) suggests that ‘af viðtökum bóndans ... má ráða að hann leggur þá Butralda og Þorgeir að jöfnu’ (‘from the reactions of the farmer, we can assume that he considers Butraldi and Þorgeirr to be equal’)—and therefore believes that the meeting will necessarily result in conflict. The animosity between Þorgeirr and Butraldi, however, strangely prevents Butraldi from being his usual troublesome self. Rather than bothering Þorkell and the members of his household, Butraldi and Þorgeirr recognise each other as genuine threats and focus on proving their manliness in front of each other in a comedic dining scene, in which the two men eat unappetizing food: a piece of old mutton short-rib for Butraldi, and an ancient slab of cheese for Þorgeirr. They refuse to share either the meat or the cheese-knife with each other, meaning that each man can eat only one type of food, and neither of them procures any food from their own provisions *því at þeim þótti þat skömm sinnar karlmennsku* ‘because it seemed to them that it would shame their manliness’ to do so (*Fóstbræðra*, 145). The scene is repeated the next morning with the roles reversed, with Þorgeirr hoarding the meat while Butraldi keeps the knife from him. Rather than disrupting the peace of Þorkell’s household, Þorgeirr and Butraldi’s hyper-masculine natures strangely cancel each other out, resulting instead in a passive-aggressive contest; Þorgeirr later kills Butraldi, but only after they have left the farmhouse. Within the domestic context, however, Þorgeirr and Butraldi are forced to prove their masculinity to each other, precisely because they recognise each other as a threat. Oddly enough, the competition between these aggressive men, with differing attitudes towards

normative society, has the effect of negating the problems that they cause to its weaker members; the systemic violence normally done to them does not occur when an extra-legal threat is also present.

Such moments occur in the narrative only when the sworn-brothers come into contact with the violent men within normative society, who are not shown as being in conflict with one another at any point, because the sworn-brothers present a threat *to* the system, not a threat from within it. The sworn-brothers' aggressive behaviour is problematic when undirected, but it is also not of the same kind as that displayed by the other men in the early parts of the narrative, because it is not representative of the systemic violence perpetuated by normative society. Consequently, the sworn-brothers often disrupt the more violent aspects of that system, whether by chance or because they are diverted towards doing so, in a way that the saga appears to endorse, given how critical it is of the chieftains and their associates. As in *Grettis saga*, the social disruption that outsiders bring often causes major problems for society, but, when directed against justifiable threats, it can also address the problematic aspects of society itself.

## 5.2 Authority and Attitudes towards Violence

*Fóstbræðra saga* does not shy away from depicting extreme violence, but it is also interesting to consider the ways in which different characters in the saga react to this violence, and the saga's own attitude towards it. Andersson (2012, 177–78) notes that the saga makes few explicit judgements about this violence, arguing that 'the indifference with which [the violent killings] are treated is striking', but also suggests that 'the neutrality in *Fóstbræðra saga* may seem exaggerated, and we may wonder whether it is an oversight or intended for special effect'. Indeed, the ambiguity of these episodes in the saga is often read as being a purposefully comedic critique of the heroic values related to such violence (see: Helga Kress 1996, 45–65; Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 161–62; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2015, 216–17; and Viðar Pálsson 2017, 221). Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 406), however, suggests that we should be careful about interpreting such incidents as being exclusively humorous, given the intense shame-culture of the *Íslendingasögur*:

In these accounts of killings by Þorgeirr a reader is put into a position where he can admire him for his courage and skill under arms, but where he can also disapprove of the way in which he

employs his abilities. The occasions for his actions are often trifling, and he is shown to have such a prickly sense of honour that the possibility of some degree of satire may be contemplated ... On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that the norms of honour and shame in the world of the *Íslendingasögur* are radically different from those we are accustomed to in our modern circumstances ... It is not so certain that a thirteenth-century audience in Iceland would find much or anything of satire in the description of Þorgeirr's touchiness.

It is fairly easy for a modern reader to read Þorgeirr's acts of excessive violence as satirical, but it may be that the medieval audience who produced this literature felt they were too close to the action to interpret such violence in that way. As noted above, the intradiegetic society of *Fóstbræðra saga* is characterised by a systemic violence emanating from the behaviour of prominent male characters. In this context, violence is less generally an intrusive force disrupting the *status quo* than something that typically occurs in interactions between men in that society, who often either commit violence themselves or enable it by their inaction. A major concern of the text is whether such violence, if it cannot be prevented entirely, can be usefully directed by authority figures within society; this relates to the idea of how traditional institutions of authority fail to deal with, and in fact rely a great deal on, the more systemic aspects of this violence discussed above. It is interesting that in *Fóstbræðra saga*, the conventional sources of authority in the narrative are primarily differentiated by their effectiveness in influencing societal affairs, as the saga depicts the chieftains, the Commonwealth's authorities, as being too weak and feckless to fulfil this role. Instead, the saga turns to alternative sources of authority, including various female figures and the Norwegian King, to explore other methods of controlling violence.

**5.2.1 The weakness of the chieftains.** The primary source of authority in medieval Icelandic society were the *goðar* 'chieftains', who were held to be responsible for resolving disputes and maintaining the social order; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999, 151) notes that their authority extended to such areas as 'the resolution of conflicts, their dominant role in religion, their supervision of foreign trade, and their control of settlements'. The perception that authority ultimately lay with the chieftains is apparent in *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, when the farmer Þórólfr bægifótr demands that the chieftain Snorri goði get him compensation, reminding Snorri that he is responsible for assisting him *því at ek kalla þik heraðshöfðingja ok skyldan at rétta þeira manna hlut, er áðr eru vanhluta* 'because I call you my district-chieftain and

declare you are obliged to redress the wrongs of those people who have been dealt with unfairly before’ (*Eyrbyggja*, 85). With the local and societal power that came from holding a *goðorð* ‘chieftainship’ also went the authority, and therefore the responsibility, to resolve conflicts between the other members of society by reducing disruptive instances of violence in order to maintain social cohesion. As Jón Viðar (1999, 184) suggests, the *goði* ‘alone was able to give and to mobilise effective help as defender or prosecutor’ when it came to legal matters.

The chieftains depicted in *Fóstbræðra saga*, however, are hardly models of this adjudicatory role. They often ignore violence when they have a conflict of interest in the situation, or they themselves act violently in order to consolidate or increase their societal power. This kind of behaviour was not unusual for the *goðar*—Jón Viðar notes that ‘chieftains often used conflicts to stamp their authority on weaker chieftains and their assembly men’ in order to maintain their power-base (184)—but those portrayed in *Fóstbræðra saga* are not defined by their shrewd legal capabilities as much as by either their feckless or their overbearing characteristics. The primary example of the former is Vermundr Þorgrímsson, who is a key figure in the early part of the sworn-brothers’ development. Vermundr is introduced in positive terms, with the saga calling him *hofðingi ágætr* ‘an excellent chieftain’ and describing him as *vitr ok vinsæll* ‘wise and popular’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 121), but his authority is put to the test by the emergence of Þorgeirr and Þormóðr within the district. When the sworn-brothers begin causing trouble to their neighbours, Vermundr is urged to put a stop to their antisociality and asks Hávarr to leave the district with his family in order to split up the sworn-brothers. Hávarr accepts the legitimacy of Vermundr’s command, but claims that he cannot speak for Þorgeirr: *Ráða muntu því, Vermundr, at vér munum ráðask í brott ór Ísafirði með fé vart, en eigi veit ek, nema Þorgeirr vili ráða vistum sínum* ‘You will decide it, Vermundr, that we will go away from Ísafjörðr with our property, but I do not know about it except that Þorgeirr will want to decide his lodgings’ (126).

Vermundr partially succeeds in detaching Þorgeirr from the district, although Þorgeirr simply ends up staying with Þormóðr’s family in Ísafjörðr instead, which casts doubt over what Vermundr actually manages to achieve in a practical sense. Subsequent episodes, however, indicate that Vermundr repeatedly fails to deal with the other violent and disruptive figures in the region, generally because of conflicts of interest relating to kinship, and that his authority is perceived to be weak as a

result. Shortly after Vermundr commands Hávarr to leave the district, the sworn-brothers confront a man named Ingólfr and his son Þorbrandr, two *ójafnaðarmenn miklir* ‘very inequitable men’, who have acquired much of their wealth by robbing and intimidating their neighbours, while their actions go unpunished because of their relationship with Vermundr: *Þeir váru báðir þingmenn Vermundar, ok helt hann mjök hendi yfir þeim, því at þeir gáfu honum jafnan góðar gjafar; ok var þeim því eigi skjótt hefndr sinn ofsi, sá er þeir höfðu við marga menn, at eiðr Vermundar stóð fyrir þeim* ‘They were both Vermundr’s assembly-men, and he protected them a great deal because they always gave him valuable gifts; and their arrogance, which they exerted against many people, was not avenged swiftly, because Vermundr’s oath protected them’ (134). Because of Vermundr’s inaction, Sigrfljóð, a widow who has long been troubled by Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, encourages the sworn-brothers to slay the kinsmen (see 5.2.2). After the brothers complete this task, Sigrfljóð visits Vermundr to tell him of the killings; Vermundr reacts angrily, at which point Sigrfljóð scolds him for having failed to uphold properly his obligations as a chieftain (*Fóstbræðra*, 140–41):

Vermundr mælti: ‘Mjök ganga þeir fóstbræðr nú af sér, er þeir drepa menn fyrir oss, ok mundu vér þat vilja, at þeir dræpi eigi vára menn marga.’

Hon mælti: ‘Þat er sem ván er, at yðr sé svá um gefit, en þat munu sumir menn mæla, at þeir hafi eigi þessa menn fyrir yðr drepit, heldr má hinn veg at kveða, at þeir hafi þessi víg fyrir yðr unnit. En hvern skal hegna ósiðu, rán eða hernað, ef eigi vilið þér, er stjórnarmenn eru kallaðir heraða? Sýnisk oss, at þeir Þorgeirr ok Þormóðr hafi þat unnit, er þér skylduð gort hafa eða láta gera, ok mun yðr svá sýnask sem ek segi, ef yðr gefr eigi missýni í þessu máli. Fór ek af því á yðvarn fund, at ek vilda mennina í frið kaupa, þá er vígin hafði vegit, en eigi fyrir þá sök, at þeir sé bóta verðir, er vegnir eru, því at þeir hafa fyrir löngu fyrirgort lífi sínu ok fé, heldr viljum vér gera í qlu þinn sóma, sem vér erum skyld til.’

Vermundr spoke: ‘These sworn-brothers now go to extremes when they kill men in our presence, and we must desire it that they do not kill any more of our men.’

She spoke: ‘It is as was expected that you would react thus, but some people would say that they have not killed these men in your presence. Rather, it may be put in a different way, that they have performed this slaying in spite of you. But who must punish criminality, robbery, or plundering, if you, who are called the governors of the district, do not want to? It seems to us that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr have performed that which you should have done or have ordered to be done, and it would appear to you just as I say if you were not given to blindness in this matter. I have travelled to meet you because I wished to buy peace for the men who have performed the slayings, but not because those who were slain deserve to be compensated for—because they have forfeited their lives and property a long time ago—but rather because we wish to do honour to you in all things, as we are obliged to.’

[Emphasis added in the Old Norse.]

It is significant that Sigrfljóð uses second-person plural pronouns, in the forms *þér* (nominative), *yðr* (accusative), and *yðvarn* (genitive), to address Vermundr



throughout this passage. This may suggest that Sigrfljóð's comments refer to corrupt, feckless chieftains in general, but she also uses this mode of address in alluding to incidents specifically concerning Vermundr; for example, she describes his reaction to the events, as well as the notion that the men were *fyrir yðr drepit*. This may indicate that Sigrfljóð is addressing Vermundr in the plural, given that he is her social superior; the fact that Vermundr has failed Sigrfljóð as her chieftain, however, given that he has not protected her from his *þingmenn*, may imply that Sigrfljóð's tone in addressing Vermundr thus is rather ironic. After all, Sigrfljóð lays particular emphasis in her speech on properly fulfilling one's societal duty, something that Vermundr has failed to do; she specifically frames her own payment to Vermundr not as compensation for Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, but as part of her own duty to respect the chieftain of her district. Her action not only reminds Vermundr of his own obligation to control his *þingmenn*, but also implies that his own inaction was equivalent to harbouring the men as outlaws, particularly as Sigrfljóð declares the men to have *fyrir löngu fyrirgort lífi sínu ok fé* as a result of their antisocial behaviour. Sigrfljóð's use of the term *stjórnarmenn ... heraða* also seems sarcastic in the context of Vermundr's failure to govern the district properly, particularly because the *goðar* were not 'governors' or 'rulers' in the sense that this term implies. In this scene, Vermundr functions as a symbolic representative of weak chieftains; he is unable to see past his self-interest to understand properly the societal responsibilities that accompany his position, which Sigrfljóð highlights in her claim that he is given to *missýni í þessu máli*.

In fact, Vermundr's response to the matter, besides accepting the compensation that Sigrfljóð offers him, consists only of ordering Þormóðr's father Bersi to move away from the immediate area *því at Vermundr vildi eigi svá nær bæ sínum láta vera hráskinn þeira Þorgeirs ok Þormóðar* 'because Vermundr did not want to allow a refuge for Þorgeirr and Þormóðr to be so near to his farm' (142). Whilst this indicates that Vermundr has enough authority to influence Bersi as he did Hávarr, ordering Bersi to leave the area on the grounds that he does not want Þorgeirr near his own farm only reinforces Sigrfljóð's accusation that Vermundr does not look beyond his own interests to his responsibilities to the people of the district: he is only concerned about the unrest within his district in so far as it disrupts his own social position. In this episode, Vermundr is shown to be easily swayed from his responsibilities as a chieftain to protect his followers, first accepting valuable gifts

from Ingólfr and Þorbrandr to allow their continued antisocial behaviour, then accepting money from Sigrfljóð even though that gift is specifically said not to constitute compensation for his followers. To return to the earlier discussion about how *goðar* had more power than their *þingmenn* in structuring the parameters of their relationship (see 4.1.2), it is also significant that Vermundr allows his *þingmenn* to dictate the terms of their agreement by accepting their transgressive behaviour. Despite Ingólfr and Þorbrandr's actions seriously damaging his reputation within the district, Vermundr is willing to tolerate such societal disruption while he financially benefits from it.

The same problems occur, albeit less explicitly, in the next episode of the saga dealing with Butraldi (see 5.1.3). Despite being a well-known antisocial individual, Butraldi is *nokkut skyldr at frændsemi Vermundi í Vatnsfirði, ok því var honum eigi skjótt goldit þat verkkaup, sem hann gerði til* 'distantly related by kinship to Vermundr in Vatnsfjörðr, and he was therefore not readily repaid those wages that he deserved [*i.e.* his crimes went unpunished]' (143). The phrase *var honum eigi skjótt goldit þat verkkaup, sem hann gerði til* is markedly similar to the earlier phrase *var þeim ... eigi skjótt hefndr sinn ofsi* describing Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, particularly as each phrase describes how these men were not punished for their crimes because of their close association with Vermundr. Vermundr himself does not feature in this episode, even after Þorgeirr kills Butraldi, but it is noteworthy that his distant kinship with Butraldi is given as the reason for this bullying individual being tolerated within normative society despite his antisocial behaviour.

Besides Vermundr, the other prominent *goði* in the early parts of the saga is Jøðurr Klængsson. Vermundr uses his societal power as a chieftain to benefit himself while neglecting his communal responsibilities, but Jøðurr is more actively aggressive in his dealings with others. As has already been argued in this chapter (see 5.1.1), Jøðurr's position as a chieftain does not simply let him escape punishment for violent acts, but is in fact contingent on maintaining this systemic violence; Jøðurr himself recognises that his being violent without recrimination is what defines his social position. When Jøðurr refuses to pay compensation to Þorgeirr for Hávarr's slaying, on the basis that it would lead to the families of his other victims demanding compensation in turn, it is evident how strongly his place within the social hierarchy depends on his being associated with violence. In fact, both Vermundr and Jøðurr are reliant in their roles as chieftains on there being a monopolisation of violence by

society's elites; Vermundr finds his position under threat only when faced with the disruptive violence done by the sworn-brothers, whom he cannot control, whilst Jøðurr maintains his own social standing through an implicit recognition that he is exceptional in being able to use violence without fear of being punished. The saga undermines the authority of the chieftains by exposing the coercive manner in which they use violence, culminating in Sigrfljóð's devastating response to that institution.

**5.2.2 The role of women in redirecting violence.** Although the chieftains of *Fóstbræðra saga* prove to be a weak source of authority, it is not the case that the Icelandic society depicted there is completely devoid of groups or individuals who are capable of controlling the violence posed by the men within this community, be they the extra-legal sworn-brothers or the chieftains themselves. Instead, the text depicts several women who manage to gain some level of socio-political influence, albeit often only temporarily and in a way that does not radically alter their societal role, to address the problems with systemic male violence that underpin this society, and which often keep these women disenfranchised. It will be useful to summarise the significance here of how two women, Sigrfljóð and Þorbjörg digra, are depicted, as these scenes are important for understanding how the saga suggests violence can be redirected and contained.

Concerning Sigrfljóð, it is notable that her role in encouraging Þorgeirr and Þormóðr to kill Ingólfr and Þorbrandr is similar to the trope of the vengeful mother who whets her sons to take vengeance, reminding them of their responsibilities to their fallen kinsmen. A prominent example of this trope is Guðrún Gjúkadóttir's whetting of her sons Hamðir and Sqrli to take vengeance for their murdered sister Svanhildr, which is recounted in the eddic poems *Guðrúnarhvöt*, which literally translates as 'Guðrún's incitement', and *Hamðismál*; another example is the depiction in *Njáls saga* of Hildigunnr Starkaðardóttir inciting her uncle Flosi to avenge her late husband Høskuldr by throwing over Flosi the cloak that Høskuldr had been wearing when he was killed, thereby covering Flosi in dried gore (*Njála*, 290–91). Zoe Borovsky (1999, 16) notes that the purpose of such *hvöt* 'incitements' was 'to arouse and bind together the forces of the kin group and direct those forces toward acts of restitution that often involved violence', and that 'women gained honor for themselves and their families' when they successfully persuaded their kinsmen to take action. The *hvöt* was one of the few methods through which women

could participate in legal matters; women were largely disenfranchised from the normative legal process, with only the daughter of a male victim able to prosecute a case for him if he were killed (Miller 1983, 177–78). Clover (2002, 36–37) argues that these conditions would also have led women to become disillusioned with the normative legal system and to favour blood-vengeance over reconciliation through legal settlement, as a consequence of their being ‘excluded from the legal arena and hence from whatever agonistic satisfaction was to be had from the successful prosecution of a case’.

After Sigrfljóð incites the sworn-brothers to undertake violent retribution on her behalf, she is also shown to be disenfranchised from the normative legal system and power structure of society, which she explicitly criticises in rebuking Vermundr; such extra-legal justice is the only way she can amend her situation. Unlike most whetting women, however, Sigrfljóð is unrelated to the men she incites, so has none of the emotional power that a kinswoman would possess when confronting the men in her family. Neither of the sworn-brothers has any motivation to attack Ingólfr and Þorbrandr on the basis of revenge, as the men have not directly harmed them or their kinsmen. Sigrfljóð tries to shame the brothers into helping her by questioning their manliness—a key element of *hvot* scenes, but one that is rather risky for someone unrelated to the men (*Fóstbræðra*, 136–37):

Þormóðr svarar: ‘Vér munum fara norðr á Strandir ok vita, hvat þar vili til *fanga* bera, en láta hér eptir skip vart.’

Sigrfljóð mælti: ‘Undarligir menn eru þér, vilið fara á Strandir at *hvolum*, en taka eigi *nálægri fong ok drengiligri*.’

Þormóðr mælti: ‘Hvar eru þau *fong*?’

Hon segir: ‘Drengiligra sýnisk mér at drepa þá illvirkja, er hér ræna menn, en starfa at *hvolum*.’

Þormóðr replied, ‘We will travel north to Strandir and see what *opportunity* will arise there, but will leave our ship behind here.’

Sigrfljóð spoke: ‘You are strange men, wanting to travel to Strandir for the *whales*, but not to seize *the nearer-to-hand and more valiant opportunity*.’

Þormóðr asked, ‘Where is this *opportunity*?’

She replied, ‘It seems more valiant to me to kill the evildoers who rob people in this area than to concern oneself with whales.’

[Emphasis added.]

Sigrfljóð’s response puns on Þormóðr’s use of the word *fong*, which in its plural forms—including the genitive plural *fanga* that Þormóðr uses—means ‘provisions’ or ‘opportunity’, but which in its singular form *fang* specifically refers to fishing (*Cleasby–Vigfússon*, 141). Martin Regal’s (1997, 338) translation of the saga

particularly emphasises the pun, as he renders Sigrfljóð's initial reply as 'there's a much better and braver catch to be made close by'; this highlights the implicit comparison in the original between the opportunity for heroic behaviour, intended by Þormóðr, and the mundane act of fishing, which Sigrfljóð invokes to undercut Þormóðr's posturing. Strandir is associated with whaling elsewhere in the saga—it is where the sworn-brothers fight Þorgils Másson for the rights to the beached whale, as mentioned earlier (see 5.1.1)—so Sigrfljóð's pun makes logical sense, but it also communicates to the sworn-brothers that their actions are not necessarily manly or heroic in themselves. Whilst Þormóðr does not actually express a desire to go fishing, Sigrfljóð's mocking response implies that such quotidian chores constitute all the opportunity that a man such as him can expect, hence he is hardly the hero he thinks himself to be.

Þormóðr objects to Sigrfljóð's proposal on the grounds that Ingólfr and Þorbrandr are friends of Vermundr, leading Sigrfljóð to explicitly shame the sworn-brothers for their lack of manliness: *Þér þykkizk vera garpar miklir, þá er þér eruð í þeim veg at kúga kotunga, en hræðizk þegar, er í manna raunir kþmr* 'It seems to you that you are exceptionally bold men, when you tyrannise poor people in that way, but you grow scared as soon as it comes to tests of manliness' (*Fóstbræðra*, 137). This direct questioning of their manliness does the trick, as Þorgeirr immediately leaps up and commands the men to undertake the task. The scene functions similarly to *hvöt* episodes elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur*, in that the female subject denigrates the reputation and status of the male listeners in order to spur them into action. It is significant, however, that women usually incite male kinsmen to blood-vengeance in order to achieve personal satisfaction, rather than with a view towards ensuring communal benefit.<sup>36</sup> Sigrfljóð, however, emphasises the social benefits of the incitement in her praise of the sworn-brothers on their return, alluding back to her earlier pun: *Hagligan hafi þér haft hvalskurðinn, rekit ok vel margra manna harma ok sneypu ok svívirðu* 'You have handily performed the flensing of the whale, having also avenged the sorrows, dishonour, and disgrace of many people' (*Fóstbræðra*, 139). Through a combination of humour and shame, Sigrfljóð uses the cultural framework of the *hvöt* to redirect the extra-legal aggression of the *fóstbræðr* to

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<sup>36</sup> A prominent example is Þorgerðr Þorbeinisdóttir in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who declares that she will do whatever is required to achieve blood-vengeance for her husband Vigfúss, including showing his severed head to her kinsman Arnkell, *ef þá yrði þyngri hlutr óvina [sinna] en áðr* 'if the lot of her enemies then becomes more burdensome than before' (*Eyrbyggja*, 69).

challenge the system of violence that oppresses her and her neighbours—although the comedic nature of her punning also suggests the saga does not view this strategy as entirely serious. Despite, or perhaps because of, both the sworn-brothers lacking kinswomen who are still prominent within the narrative, there is room for a woman like Sigrfljóð to adopt the typical role of the female inciter that usually would fall to such a kinswoman, and her detachment from the familial sphere allows her to redirect the incitement to a more explicit form of social justice.

The other prominent female figure in the saga's early stages is Vermundr's wife, Þorbjörg digra, who in the Möðruvallabók version of the saga is said to take care of Vermundr's affairs, including his communal responsibilities as a chieftain, when he is away from the district: *Jafnan er Vermundr var eigi heima, þá réð hon fyrir heraði ok fyrir mǫnnum, ok þótti hverjum manni sínu máli vel komit, er hon réð fyrir* 'When Vermundr was not home she always had authority over the district and over the people, and it seemed to each person that his case went well when she had authority over it' (121). The dynamic between Vermundr and Þorbjörg is interesting; Gos (2009, 285) notes that 'we do not hear anything about Vermundr's judgments being well thought of, and it is clear that the focus has shifted completely to Þorbjörg's impressive abilities'. This imbalance is also reinforced later in the saga through Vermundr's inability to fulfil his social role as a chieftain to the satisfaction of the people in the district, as outlined above (see 5.2.1).

Despite this laudatory introduction, Þorbjörg appears only in the first chapter of the versions of the saga preserved in Möðruvallabók and the paper copies of the *Membrana Regia Deperdita*. The episode depicts her preventing the farmers of Ísafjörðr from putting to death the outlawed Grettir Ásmundarson, a scene that is also found in *Grettis saga* itself (*Grettla*, ch. 52).<sup>37</sup> Harris (2015, 64–65) argues Þorbjörg is portrayed as being more authoritative in the *Fóstbræðra saga* scene than she is in the corresponding episode in *Grettis saga*. In the latter text, Þorbjörg releases Grettir only on the condition that he swear an oath not to cause any trouble in Ísafjörðr, whereas in the former she simply demands that the farmers release him: *Eigi mun hann nú at sinni af lífi tekinn, ef ek má ráða* 'He will not have his life taken from him

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<sup>37</sup> Although this episode was for some time thought to have been an interpolation from *Grettis saga*, Jónas Kristjánsson (1972, 81–82) has convincingly argued that it is probably original to *Fóstbræðra saga*, because the episode is found both in the Möðruvallabók version and in the version associated with the *Membrana Regia Deperdita*, which appear to derive from different sources. Jónas argues that the corresponding episode in *Grettis saga* is therefore interpolated from *Fóstbræðra saga*, rather than the other way around.

now if I can decide it' (*Fóstbræðra*, 122). Rather than argue with her, the farmers immediately acquiesce to her demands: *Hafa muntu ríki til þess, at hann sé eigi af lífi tekinn, hvárt sem þat er rétt eða rangt* 'You will have power over this, that he will not be deprived of his life, whether it is right or wrong'. Þorbjörg's role as chieftain *in absentia* is vital to her having this power, but it is also notable that the text praises her for this action, saying that *í þessum atburði má hér sýnask, hversu mikill skörungr hon var* 'from this occurrence it may be seen here what a truly outstanding woman she was'. *Fóstbræðra saga* does not question the legitimacy of its society's established positions of authority—we have seen that Sigrfljóð's scolding of Vermundr, in which she questions the suitability of his actions, nevertheless ends in her giving him a significant amount of money to show her respect for him as her chieftain—but it does encourage its audience to consider whether an individual in such a position has properly fulfilled the responsibilities that accompany it. In Vermundr's case, the text is explicit that he has not, but it clearly approves of Þorbjörg's actions.

This does, of course, raise the question of why the text appears to approve of Þorbjörg's releasing of Grettir against the wishes of the farmers. Gos (2009, 285–86) persuasively argues that 'it is precisely because Þorbjörg is a trusted and respected public figure and has successfully advanced the welfare of her community in the past' that the farmers trust her judgement when dealing with disruptive extra-legal figures, like Grettir. It is also notable that Þorbjörg highlights how Grettir's death would only lead to a continuation of the violence that the farmers associate with Grettir, as *mun frændum hans þykkja skaði um hann, þótt hann sé við marga menn ódæll* 'his kinsmen will think him a great loss, even if he is quarrelsome towards many people' (*Fóstbræðra*, 122), alluding to the potential for Grettir's death to be met with blood-vengeance. Þorbjörg's actions attempt to prevent the possibility of further violence, whereas the male chieftains are shown to allow systemic violence to carry on, either out of weakness or self-interested aggression. When the women in the saga take matters into their own hands, however, they are able either to redirect or to contain violence in such a way as to benefit the local community. Such effects are unfortunately only temporary, however, as Sigrfljóð still acknowledges the

validity of Vermundr’s authority as a chieftain, and Þorbjörg’s position as administrator can be held only in her husband’s absence.<sup>38</sup>

**5.2.3 King Óláfr: a true authority?** Whilst the saga’s depictions of influential women provide a model how for the disruptiveness caused by extra-legal figures like Grettir and the sworn-brothers can be either redirected or contained, thereby ensuring a measure of social cohesion, their actions are nevertheless undercut by the male chieftains who have a permanent role in such societal matters—particularly Vermundr, who is still depicted negatively after both of the aforementioned episodes. Gos (2009, 286–91) argues, however, that the depictions of Sigrfljóð and Þorbjörg digra mirror that of King Óláfr inn helgi of Norway, another major authority within the saga and the patron of both Þorgeirr and Þormóðr. Þorbjörg’s pardoning of Grettir on the grounds that *hann er ættstór maðr ok mikils verðr fyrir afls sakar ok margrar atgørvi, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr í öllum hlutum* ‘he is a man from a good family and greatly esteemed because of his physical strength and many accomplishments, even if he is not a lucky man in all things’, as discussed above (see 5.2.2), is notably similar to Óláfr’s appraisal of Þorgeirr: *Þú ert mikill maðr vexti ok drengiligr í ásýðnu ok munt eigi vera í öllu gæfumaðr* ‘You are a man of great stature and valiant in appearance—and you will not be in all things a lucky man’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 122, 159). Gos (2009, 291) also points out that when Sigrfljóð manages ‘to integrate the foster-brothers into society for a time ... [by] putting them to good use upholding the values of the community’, there is ‘only one other person able to induce them to do so’, namely King Óláfr.

The most obvious example of Óláfr’s ability to control the sworn-brothers is the scene in which Óláfr commands Þorgeirr, who has by this point been made a *skógarmaðr* and has travelled abroad to Norway, to return to Iceland in order to act as his assassin. During his time with Óláfr, Þorgeirr has already proved that he is particularly successful when entering into situations of conflict, as the saga tells us that he *fór kaupföðr suðr til Vindlands, ok var þar lítill friðr í þenna tíma kaupmönnum norðan ór löndum* ‘travelled south on a trading-voyage to Vindland,

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<sup>38</sup> Gos (2009, 291–97) also argues that Gríma and Katla, the mothers of the two girls whom Þormóðr romances during Þorgeirr’s time in Norway (see 5.3.1), attempt to ‘diffuse [his] socially disruptive behaviour’ by offering for him to be integrated into their family structures by marrying their daughters. These episodes are not covered in this section of the present thesis as the scenes involving Sigrfljóð and Þorbjörg digra are a more relevant point of comparison with the Icelandic chieftains, but the dynamic outlined above is present elsewhere in the saga’s depictions of prominent women.



and there was little peace there at this time for merchants going south out of our lands’—but, despite the dangers associated with Vindland, it is noted that *af þessi ferð varð hann ágætr, því at hann hafði þat af hverjum, sem hann vildi* ‘from this journey he gained fame, because he got whatever he wished from everyone’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 159). Óláfr hears of one of his followers having been wounded in Steingrímsfjörðr by a man named Þórir—another problematic male figure within Icelandic society, who is described as *mikill hávaðamaðr ok heldr ódæll ok óvinsæll* ‘a greatly boisterous man and rather quarrelsome, and unpopular’ (183)—without any settlement having been made for him, which constitutes a failure of the normative legal system as far as the king is concerned. Óláfr commands Þorgeirr to avenge his follower, in order to maintain the king’s reputation within Iceland, and Þorgeirr kills Þórir with ease; on his return, Óláfr *þakkaði honum þat, er hann hafði rekit þeirrar sneypu, er Þórir hafði gort honum* ‘thanked him for it, that he had taken vengeance for the dishonour that Þórir had done to him’ (192). Whilst this episode may not initially appear to have a social benefit for Icelandic society, and to reflect little more than a personal vendetta of Óláfr’s, in the context of how problematically this society is depicted in *Fóstbræðra saga*—with its dysfunctional chieftains who fail to address the presence of such violent, unpopular figures as Þórir—Þorgeirr’s actions are less antisocial than elsewhere, such as when he kills the shepherd Skúfr and the boy Bjarni with little provocation (ch. 8). At least when it comes to Þórir’s death, there is a social purpose to Þorgeirr’s violence.

Similarly, Óláfr’s effect on Þormóðr is to redirect his tendency to be socially disruptive, driven by his boredom with conventional social contexts, towards more impressive pursuits than his amorous endeavours in Iceland, which leave Þormóðr disfigured and with a poor reputation (see 5.3.1). The king and Þormóðr meet shortly after Þorgeirr’s death, when Óláfr informs Þormóðr of his grief at Þorgeirr’s death: *Víst máttu vita þat, at ek tel mér misboðit í vígi Þorgeirs, hirðmanns míns, ok þökk kynna ek þess, at hans yrði hefnt* ‘You may certainly know that I consider myself offended by the death of Þorgeirr, my retainer, and I would show thanks for it if he were avenged’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 213). Soon afterwards, Þormóðr travels to Greenland to take vengeance for Þorgeirr. The relationship between Óláfr and Þormóðr is similar to that between Óláfr and Þorgeirr, because Þorgeirr, as noted above, acts as the king’s assassin in order to take vengeance for another of Óláfr’s retainers. It is true that Þormóðr is already motivated to avenge his sworn-brother, but it is significant

that his urge to vengeance is also legitimated by the king's endorsement of that process.

Whilst Þormóðr's propensity for social disruption is seen as being acceptable within the context of Greenlandic society, which the saga depicts as a liminal topography (see 5.3.2), it is not appropriate in the context of Óláfr's Norwegian court, and Óláfr finds a different way to accommodate Þormóðr within society by encouraging his poetic side. Although Þormóðr often expresses antisocial thoughts in his poetry, his verses implicitly work as a way of containing these potentially violent ideas in a more communally palatable form. Gos (2009, 296–97) argues that both Óláfr and Katla, the mother of Kolbrún, ask Þormóðr to publicly recite his poetry before rewarding him with gold rings, 'thus allowing the usually pillaging Þormóðr to engage in a socially sanctioned economic transaction that is predicated on his established social position within their households'. Óláfr, however, also demonstrates how poetry can restrain antisocial behaviour from being actualised when he jokingly asks Þormóðr for his advice, later in the saga, after Óláfr hears that his enemies, the Inn-Þrændir, intend to besiege him (*Fóstbræðra*, 260–61):

Þá spurði konungr Þormóð í gamni ok mælti svá: 'Hvert myndi nú vera ráð þitt, ef þú værir höfðingi fyrir liði því, er vér höfum nú?'

Þormóðr kvað þá vísu:

Brennum öll fyr innan  
innin, þaus vér finnum  
—land skal herr með hjörvi—  
Hverbjörg—fyr gram verja;  
ýs, taki allra húsa  
Inn-Þrændir kol sinna,  
angr mun kveykt í klungri,  
köld, ef ek má valda.

Óláfr konungr mælti: 'Vera má, at þat hlýddi, at væri gort sem þú mælir; en annat ráð munu vér taka en brenna land vart sjálfra, en þó grunum vér ekki þik um, at þú myndir svá gera sem þú mælir.'

Then the king questioned Þormóðr in jest and spoke thus: 'What would your plan be now, if you were the leader over the troop that we now have?'

Þormóðr then spoke a verse:

Let us burn all the houses inside Hverbjörg, those that we find; the host must defend the land for the king with a sword! The Inn-Þrændir will take cold charcoal in exchange for all their houses, if I may decide it; the harm of the yew [= fire] will kindle the brambles [= forest].

King Óláfr spoke: 'It may be that it would work if it were done as you say, but I will take a different course than to burn my land myself, and yet I do not doubt it about you that you would have done just as you say.'

Óláfr allows Þormóðr to express his urge towards violence within a culturally acceptable form, but also rejects his advice, reminding Þormóðr of the damage that such antisocial behaviour would do to the king's lands despite Þormóðr's intention to protect it. Óláfr perceives poetry as a useful way of mediating Þormóðr's violence without encouraging him to be socially disruptive in the context of the court. Similarly, later that day, Óláfr commands Þormóðr to entertain the men; he recites the poem *Bjarkamál in fornu* 'the ancient lay of Bjarki', but in the Hauksbók version of the saga Óláfr renames the poem *Húskarlahvöt* 'the incitement of the king's men' (261–62).<sup>39</sup> Óláfr's renaming of the poem works to highlight the social usefulness of Þormóðr's poetry by emphasising the role that it plays in warfare, a culturally legitimate form of violence.

On a dynamic level, Gos is accurate in comparing Sigrfljóð and Þorbjörg to Óláfr, as all these figures are portrayed as effective mediators of extra-legal violence, who manage to control otherwise socially disruptive individuals. It is significant, however, that Óláfr's authority is less circumstantial than that displayed by the women. Sigrfljóð has to use humour to shame the sworn-brothers before they listen to her counsel, thereby relying on a form of coercion to obtain a measure of control; it is also significant that Þormóðr questions the validity of her advice, which leads Sigrfljóð to condemn him and Þorgeirr in more explicit terms. By contrast, Þorbjörg's authority in deciding Grettir's fate is recognised by the Ísafjörðr farmers, who show little resistance, but this marks Þorbjörg's only prominent appearance within the saga; her social power is largely dependent on the absence of her husband Vermundr, who is far more prominent in the action of the saga. The saga seems to approve of the authority shown by these two women, but such authority is only temporary within the established socio-legal structure of medieval Iceland, and the saga does not criticise the system itself—only the individuals who fail to uphold it properly.<sup>40</sup> King Óláfr's authority, by contrast, represents a more permanent solution to how society can control, and indeed benefit from, extra-legal violence.

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<sup>39</sup> In the Flateyjarbók version the kings' men, rather than Óláfr, rename the poem *Húskarlahvöt*, but it is still Óláfr who rewards Þormóðr for the poem (*Fóstbræðra*, 263–64).

<sup>40</sup> As regards the saga's approval of the office of chieftainship, despite its criticism of the individuals who fail to uphold the responsibilities accompanying the position properly, it is significant that this office is associated with Óláfr from the outset of the saga, at least as it is preserved in the first chapter of the Möðruvallabók version: *Á dögum ins helga Óláfs konungs váru margir hofðingjar undir hans konungdæmi, eigi at eins í Nóregi, heldr í öllum löndum, þeim er hans konungdómr stóð yfir* 'In the days of King Óláfr inn helgi, there were many chieftains under his rule as king, not only in Norway, but in all those countries over which his rule as king stood' (*Fóstbræðra*, 121).

It is also significant that Óláfr's authority is not based on coercion, unlike that of the Icelandic chieftains, or even on persuasion and shame, as Sigrfljóð's is. In fact, Óláfr is restrained in how he deals with the sworn-brothers—particularly Þorgeirr, whom he allows to leave his court despite his misgivings—and does not impede their violent characteristics, instead encouraging them to pursue violent action only in contexts where it has a positive effect for the king and his community. His restraint is highlighted in Flateyjarbók's preface to the saga, which argues that the narrative primarily shows *gæzku ok giftu Ólafs konungs, at hann veitti þat athald svá miklum óeirðarmönnum sem þeir vǫru fóstbræðr* 'the goodness and good luck of King Óláfr, in that he demonstrated this restraint to such very unruly men as those sworn-brothers were' (Flateyjarbók, II:170). Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (1998, 9–10) argues that 'the unruly sworn brothers synecdochically represent all of Olaf's Icelandic subjects', and that the preface works as a suggestion to other Norwegian kings as to how they should conceptualise their relationship with Iceland: they should favour the Icelanders without constraining their individualistic qualities. The saga does not criticise the institution of kingship, nor does it present Óláfr's authority in a comedic manner; rather, it is unquestionably the measure by which other forms of authority in the saga must be judged.

### 5.3 Social Distortion and Liminality in Greenland

The final section of this chapter discusses the concept of liminality in relation to Þormóðr, particularly in relation to how he uses his liminal status in Greenland to avenge successfully Þorgeirr's death. Vésteinn Ólason (1998, 145) argues that Þormóðr 'is somewhat overshadowed by his foster-brother' for much of the saga, primarily because of his 'undignified' affairs with women, but that he 'proves himself to be a mighty warrior' towards its conclusion. Þormóðr's adventures in Greenland, where he is outlawed, show the protagonist taking vengeance for his sworn-brother in a memorably bloody, excessive fashion, but in a way that emphasises the importance of his being an outsider to this society. In depicting Þormóðr as embracing his marginalisation to suit his purposes, the saga engages with the binary of normativity and Otherness underpinning how members of any community view both themselves and outsiders to the group. Þormóðr often confuses his enemies by subverting their familiar understanding of this binary, generally in

quite humorous ways, with the saga playfully suggesting that an unfamiliar individual can gain advantages over those in power by redefining the rules of engagement—in this case, by becoming Other when normative methods are unavailable, as the saga revels in Þormóðr’s use of his liminal status in Greenland to distort his enemies’ common conceptions of society. This section of the thesis details Þormóðr’s inadequacy within Icelandic society, before moving on to discuss how the Greenlandic context, a liminal topography from an Icelandic perspective, benefits Þormóðr, who is able to slip between the roles of normative and Other because he is not easily recognised there. Finally, it shows how Þormóðr uses his status as an outsider to disrupt his enemies’ conception of society in order to confuse them, thereby creating opportunities for him to take a brutal vengeance—opportunities, however, that are only possible within such a liminal context.

**5.3.1 Þormóðr’s early inadequacies.** In the early sections of *Fóstbræðra saga*, Þormóðr is defined by his similarity to Þorgeirr, his sworn-brother, but never quite measures up to his companion in terms of his physical or mental abilities in combat. Although the saga tells us that Þorgeirr and Þormóðr made their pact together because they were so like-minded, it also notes that they were not equal in their physical make-up: *Þormóðr var nokkuru ellri, en þó var Þorgeirr sterkari* ‘Þormóðr was somewhat older, but Þorgeirr was still stronger’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 125). In fact, Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson suggest that this age gap is wrong, as other sources indicate that Þormóðr is likelier to have been younger than Þorgeirr by a few years. Whether the saga-writer reversed the age difference between the men consciously or by mistake, perhaps because of a lack of sources—Björn and Guðni suggest that the saga is unusually lacking in familial and genealogical details because the saga-writer did not know or did not have access to *Landnámabók* (lxv–lxvi)—the wording emphasises that Þorgeirr was more developed in his young age than Þormóðr was, implicitly to the detriment of Þormóðr.

There is also a difference in how the two men are introduced as youths. Þorgeirr is described as *bráðgǫrr maðr ok mikill vexti ok sterkr ok kappsfullr* ‘a precocious lad and large in stature, strong and eager to excel’, who had *nam á unga aldri at hlífa sér með skildi ok vega með vápnum*, ‘learned at a young age to protect himself with a shield and to fight with weapons’, placing him in a heroic, martial role (123).

Þormóðr, however, is introduced in a comparatively unimpressive manner: *Hann var*

*þegar á unga aldri hvatr maðr ok hugprúðr, meðalmaðr vexti, svartr á hárlit ok hrokkinhærðr* ‘He was straightaway at a young age a vigorous and noble lad, an average-sized person, black in hair-colour and curly-haired’ (123–24). Whilst this description is generally positive, it is notable that Þormóðr is considerably less physically impressive than his counterpart, and set apart by his unusually dark, curly hair. Bragg (2004, 224) argues that the note about Þormóðr’s hair is intended to make him appear ‘ugly’, but it also plays a significant part later in the narrative during Þormóðr’s stay in Greenland, where Þormóðr’s enemies recognise him, despite him giving them a false-name, because he is *svartr maðr ok hrokkinhærðr* ‘a man with black and curly hair’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 250). In the initial stages of the narrative, however, it seems that the saga expects its audience to be impressed more by the young Þorgeirr than by his ostensibly similar companion.

This dynamic holds true in the sworn-brothers’ encounters with other people in the early parts of the narrative. When Þorgeirr avenges his father by killing the chieftain Jǫðurr, he does so alone, as is also the case when he kills the vagrant Butraldi, while Þormóðr is at home with his father. Both men are involved in the conflict with Ingólfr and Þorbrandr—these men are killed by Þormóðr and Þorgeirr respectively—but in the preceding conversation with Sigrfljóð, where she urges the sworn-brothers to take on the father and son, Þormóðr is notably more reluctant than Þorgeirr about the task, and initially reproaches Sigrfljóð: *Eigi veit ek, hversu heilráð þú ert oss nú, því at þeir eru vinir Vermundar, ok mun þat eigi laust eptir renna, ef þeim er nokkut til meins gort* ‘I do not know whether you are giving us sound counsel now, because they are Vermundr’s friends, and it will not run after it freely [*i.e.* pass over without consequences] if any harm is done to them’ (137). When Sigrfljóð consequently calls into question the sworn-brothers’ manliness, however, Þorgeirr is the first to respond, which reinforces the perception that he is, in reality, the leader of the group. This dynamic is also apparent when the sworn-brothers meet Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, who ask them which one of them is the leader. Þorgeirr’s answer suggests both he and Þormóðr are the leaders of the gang—*ef þér hafið heyrð getit Þorgeirs Hávarssonar eða Þormóðar Bersasonar, þá megu þér hér þá sjá* ‘if you have heard report of Þorgeirr Hávarsson or Þormóðr Bersason, you can see them here’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 137)—but, significantly, it is again Þorgeirr who speaks up in the first place. Gareth Lloyd Evans (2015, 70) highlights the awkward nature of the encounter, noting that Ingólfr and Þorbrandr must expect there to be only one man in

charge because of their use of the singular form of *foringi* ‘leader’. Despite Þorgeirr’s attempt to emphasise his and Þormóðr’s equal standing within their partnership, the saga itself undermines him by implicitly suggesting that he is the more dominant of the two. Even when Þormóðr breaks up his partnership with Þorgeirr, the Möðruvallabók version cannot resist a jibe at the expense of Þormóðr’s manliness. Þormóðr refers to his partnership with Þorgeirr as a *samvist*—usually translated as ‘cohabitation’, but which also refers to conjugal intercourse (*Zoëga*, 349)—and tells Þorgeirr they can no longer *vera ásamt* ‘stay together’, a phrase most commonly used of married couples (*Cleasby–Vigfússon*, 45).<sup>41</sup> The saga emphasises Þorgeirr’s dominance within the group throughout the early stages of the narrative, so it is likely that the saga’s audiences, if they indeed saw the sworn-brothers’ legal arrangement as having marital connotations, would have assumed that Þormóðr would fulfil the role normally played by the woman in marriage, and has therefore undermined his own manliness, perhaps unintentionally, through his choice of words.

From this point in the saga, Þormóðr comes to be defined less by his inferiority to Þorgeirr, but is still portrayed as a marginalised, even abnormal figure when his subsequent misadventures with women leave him physically disfigured and with a damaged reputation. After Þorgeirr is outlawed and leaves Iceland, the saga turns its attention to Þormóðr’s love-affairs with two women, Þórdís Grímudóttir and Þorbjörg Kolbrún; Þormóðr’s ill-fated relationship with Þorbjörg leads to him being given the nickname *Kolbrúnarskáld* ‘the poet of Kolbrún’. During his first affair with Þórdís, a rumour gets around that Þormóðr has been seducing the girl, leading Gríma, Þórdís’s mother, to demand that Þormóðr either marry Þórdís or cease his visits, because *þeir menn, er til hafa gørzk at biðja hennar, ef þeir vissi, at þú ert nokkut riðinn við hennar mál—má vera, at þeim sýnisk troll standa fyrir durum, þar sem þú ert* ‘if those men, who have set out to ask for her hand in marriage, know that you are somehow involved with her affairs—it may be that there will seem to them to be a troll standing before the door in the place where you are’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 161). The proverb that Gríma uses of *troll standa fyrir durum* is found elsewhere in the saga corpus—in the *konungasögur*, for example, a variant is used by the enemies of King

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<sup>41</sup> It is unclear whether these puns are intentionally made by Þormóðr himself, or whether the saga-writer includes these resonances, which Þormóðr presumably does not understand, to undermine the supposedly heroic nature of the sworn-brothers’ relationship. Þormóðr’s later reputation as a gifted poet suggests that he would be conscious of such connotations, given the attention to language that the role demands, but Þormóðr also has very little to gain from making jokes that cast aspersions over his own masculinity, so it is likelier that the saga intends him to seem unaware of these undertones.

Sverrir when they spot his mark, the Sigrflugan, at a potential landing-place (*Sverris*, 237), and is also used of Grettir in the first chapter of the Möðruvallabók version (*Fóstbræðra*, 121–22)—and refers to a dangerous obstacle being in one’s way. The common usage of the phrase, however, does not mean that its metaphorical comparison, comparing Þormóðr to a fearsome troll, should be read as a trivial use of monstrous imagery, with the comparison being detached from any serious intent. It is thematically significant that Gríma sees Þormóðr’s presence in her household as equivalent to that of a monstrous outsider, particularly given that she subsequently attempts to deal with him by violent methods.

Þormóðr refuses to marry Þórdís, but does stop his visits to her for a while, until the dullness of his father’s household leads him to renew his relationship with Þórdís. Gríma again tells Þormóðr to stop visiting her daughter, but he refuses, so Gríma enlists her slave Kolbagr to attack Þormóðr. The fight leaves Þormóðr badly wounded in his right arm, and his wounds heal so badly that the saga says he *var jafnan orvendr síðan, meðan hann lifði* ‘was always left-handed afterwards, as long as he lived’ (167). Bersi has Kolbagr outlawed, the prescribed legal outcome for a man having caused wounds to another (*Grágás K*, 145 [‡ 86]), but the saga suggests this is insufficient for Þormóðr to regain his honour, noting that *ekki honum vér heyrð getit, at Þormóðr hafi fengit meiri sæmð síns áverka en sekðir Kolbaks* ‘we have not heard it said that Þormóðr had got more redress for his bloody-wounds than Kolbagr’s outlawry’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 169). Indeed, Þormóðr’s disfigurement is of such a serious nature that Kolbagr’s being made an outlaw can be of little consolation to him; Bersi later tells his son that he has *orkuml þau, er [hann] verðr aldri heill maðr* ‘such lasting scars that he will never be a whole man’ (176). Bragg (2004, 228) notes that the word *orkum(b)l* is similarly used by Steingerðr in *Kormáks saga* to describe the ‘lasting stigma’ of her husband Bersi’s healed wound, caused during a duel when he is struck in the buttocks by a sword, which is then dragged down the full length of his thigh—a shameful wound, which Bragg suggests constitutes ‘not just an ordinary dueling loss, but a sexual humiliation of the sort that could never be erased’ (219). In a similar way, Þormóðr’s wounds signify his own sexual humiliation: his lack of respect for social norms leads to his mutilation, which makes him less capable of proving his manliness through combat, a male-dominated activity, as his left-handedness weakens his martial prowess. Þormóðr later claims that the death-blow he deals to Þorgrímr trolli *eigi hafi mikit orðit höggit, því at orvendr maðr hjó* ‘had



not been struck strongly, because a left-handed man struck it' (*Fóstbræðra*, 235), although the success of the blow in question means that this declaration is admittedly rather tongue-in-cheek.

Þormóðr's encounter with Kolbrún leaves him less physically scarred than his affair with Þórdís, but he is certainly not unblemished by it. Þormóðr stays for two weeks with Kolbrún and her mother Katla, and composes a series of verses called the *Kolbrúnarvísur* 'the verses about Kolbrún [= dark-brow]' before he leaves, for which Katla rewards him with a valuable ring and the epithet *Kolbrúnarskáld*. After Þormóðr returns to his father's house, he returns to his previous relationship with Þórdís; she is upset that he has composed verses for Kolbrún, however, which leads Þormóðr to claim he in fact composed the verses for Þórdís in the first place, and he renames them accordingly. Unfortunately for the caddish Þormóðr, Kolbrún seems to have supernatural powers, as she visits him in a dream and curses him for giving the poem to Þórdís. The curse causes Þormóðr to experience excruciating pain in his eyes, which Kolbrún warns him will continue until he restores the verses to their original form *fyrir alþýðu* 'in front of everyone [*i.e.* in public]' (175). That Þormóðr is afflicted with blindness is significant, as his inability to see cuts him off partially from interacting with other members of society, and it is telling that Kolbrún's curse requires Þormóðr to declare his culpability for the insult publicly; he must ensure his transgressions are known to the general public before he can be readmitted to that community. Þormóðr may not be left with any physical disfigurement as a result, but his shame lives on through his disgraced reputation, as this is the point in the saga from which the narrator begins to refer to Þormóðr by the epithet *Kolbrúnarskáld*; whilst this is a logical shift in any case, it also emphasises that Þormóðr's identity becomes associated primarily with the public knowledge of his scandal, that he was forced to confess before *morg vitni* 'many witnesses' to having been a liar and a two-timer (177). By the time he travels to Greenland to find Þorgeirr's killers, Þormóðr's inadequacies have been highlighted and reinforced by the saga, and his body and reputation have both been damaged by his inability to succeed either within normative society or within the parameters of the *fóstbræðralag* arrangement.

**5.3.2 Liminality and Greenland.** Whilst Þormóðr is Othered within an Icelandic context because of his physical disfigurements and shameful reputation, he finds these markers rather less problematic during his time in Greenland towards the end

of the narrative. The saga establishes a difference between Iceland and Norway on the one hand and Greenland on the other, the last country being set apart from those normative centres by its extreme distance from them. Although Greenland might not seem a likely candidate to be Othered in relation to Iceland, from where it was settled, it is often represented within Old Norse–Icelandic historical or didactic writings, including Ari’s *Íslendingabók*, *Konungs skuggsjá*, and *Historia Norwegiae*, and in some *Íslendingasögur* as a location in which the supernatural and fantastical are frequently encountered (Shafer 2010, 34–37). Shannon Lewis-Simpson (2006, 578–79) also argues that whereas Iceland was conceptualised as existing at the outer edge of the realm of Christendom, Greenland was often thought of as a heathen place beyond Christianity’s reach, thereby rendering it Other in relation to Iceland. Barraclough (2009, 99) suggests that saga-writers typically represented Greenland as ‘somewhere on the boundary between the known, familiar Norse world, and an unfamiliar exotic sphere beyond’: in other words, it is treated as a liminal location not completely Other, but not entirely normative either.<sup>42</sup>

This is particularly evident in *Fóstbræðra saga* from the difference that the saga draws between Þorgeirr’s killers, the companions Þórarinn ofsi and Þorgrímr trolli. Both men are characterised as being difficult individuals; Þórarinn’s nickname *ofsi* literally means ‘overbearing’, whilst the saga notes that *svá var ofsi Þorgríms mikill, at menn þorðu varla at mæla við hann* ‘Þorgrímr’s overbearing nature was so great that people hardly dared to talk with him’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 230). Yet despite these similarities, only Þorgrímr is painted as an Other through his nickname *trolli* ‘troll’, and it is notable that the saga introduces him by highlighting this alongside his foreignness: *Þorgrímr Einarsson réði fyrir skipinu, er kallaðr var trolli, grænlenzkr maðr* ‘Þorgrímr Einarsson, who was called “troll”, a Greenlandic man, had command over the ship’ (201–02).<sup>43</sup> The saga also mentions Þórarinn’s status as a *norðlenzkr*

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<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting here that the saga’s conception of Iceland’s relationship to Greenland as being defined primarily by difference does not necessarily reflect Icelandic legal perspectives on the subject. The Staðarhólsbók version of *Grágás*, for example, makes some distinctions between the countries, but declares that *ef maðr verðr sekr a grøna lande oc er huerr þeirra manna sekr her er þar er sekr* ‘if a person becomes outlawed in Greenland as well, each of those people is outlawed here who is outlawed there’ (*Grágás St*, 389 [‡ 374]; my translation), which indicates a closer cultural relationship between Iceland and Greenland, at least in the view of the compiler(s) of that law-code. This law is not found in the *Konungsbók* version of the laws, however, and it has no practical bearing on the narrative of *Fóstbræðra saga*.

<sup>43</sup> The Flateyjarbók version differs in its wording, but makes the same associations with Greenland and trollishness in its introduction of Þorgrímr: *Maðr grænlenzkr, sá er Þorgrímr trolli hét, réð fyrir*

*maðr* ‘a man from the north of Iceland’, which suggests the two are differentiated primarily because of their nationalities: both are overbearing individuals, but Þorgrímr’s status as a foreigner allows him to be seen from an Icelandic perspective as a more liminal, quasi-monstrous figure than his similarly troublesome companion. Such epithets are primarily important in revealing how people were perceived by others, particularly when they evoke the idea of monstrosity—as Ármann Jakobsson (2008, 51) points out, ‘being a troll is not a self-constructed identity’—and it seems that it was possible for Greenlanders to be painted as monstrous figures if, like Þorgrímr, they caused enough problems for Icelanders. It is quite wrong to suggest, however, that all the Greenlanders in the narrative are depicted as liminal figures in this way. Þormóðr’s friends Skúfr and Bjarni, for example, are consistently shown in a positive light, each of them being described at different times as *vitr maðr ok vinsæll* ‘a wise and popular man’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 214, 224). Both the Icelandic and Greenlandic societies of the saga contain female magic-users, including Gríma and Katla, Þorbjörg kolbrún, Þorgrímr trolli’s sister Þórdís, and a Greenlandic woman also named Gríma, so it would be inaccurate to characterise the Greenland of the saga as necessarily having more supernatural or fantastical elements than Iceland. Greenland is still, however, a topography far removed from the familiar community of Þormóðr’s homeland, and the binaries of normativity and Otherness, familiarity and unfamiliarity, are somewhat more blurred for Þormóðr in Greenland than they are in Icelandic society.

In this respect, it is significant that in the liminal topography of Greenland, the physical traits that make Þormóðr stand out from other people in Icelandic society do not set him apart amongst the Greenlanders. Þormóðr travels to Greenland soon after Þorgeirr’s death to kill Þorgrímr trolli, with Þórarinn ofsi having already been killed ignominiously in Iceland. Þormóðr kills Þorgrímr and manages to escape, despite his pursuers having encountered him in disguise, even though Þormóðr is physically and verbally marked as Other by his ugliness and his speech impediment: *Auðkenndr maðr em ek ... svartr maðr ok hrokkinhærðr ok málhaltr* ‘I am an easily recognisable man, a man with black and curly hair, and tongue-tied’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 236). Bragg (2004, 235) suggests that the revelation of Þormóðr being *málhaltr* at this point in the saga is unusual, as such physical ailments are typically mentioned in the sagas only

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*skipinu* ‘A Greenlandic man, who was called Þorgrímr trolli, had command over the ship’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 201).

when they are needed to explain an otherwise confusing episode; *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, for example, reveals the boil on Gunnlaugr’s foot only when it is necessary for Eiríkr jarl to ask about his limp, in order that Gunnlaugr can respond arrogantly to the question to start the conflict between the two men (*Gunnlaugs*, ch. 6). Bragg (2004, 235) argues that the detail about Þormóðr’s stammer is conversely revealed ‘precisely at the point where it will make an episode not comprehensible, but unbelievable’, as it suggests that his pursuers should have recognised him by his distinctive speech-pattern.

Þormóðr is also able to escape the poor reputation that he established in Iceland, as memorialised in his nickname *Kolbrúnarskáld*, as he frequently gives false names to conceal his true identity. Although he indicates his intentions through the names that he chooses, Þormóðr’s false names nevertheless succeed in tricking the Greenlanders, who have no prior knowledge of him. When Þorgrímr trolli asks him his name, Þormóðr introduces himself as *Ótryggr* ‘Untrustworthy’; when the suspicious Þorgrímr asks after his father, Þormóðr claims that he is *Tortryggsson* ‘the son of Tortryggr [lit. Difficult-to-Trust]’—at which point Þorgrímr recognises Þormóðr’s intention, but is killed before he can react (*Fóstbræðra*, 233). When Þorgrímr’s friends encounter the disguised Þormóðr soon afterwards and ask his name, Þormóðr claims to be called *Vígfúss* ‘Killing-Eager’; the men accept his false name and Þormóðr escapes (234).<sup>44</sup> Þormóðr also tells the vagrant Lúsa-Oddi that his name is *Torráðr* ‘Difficult-to-Rule’, which Oddi does not question (238).

Greenland is a liminal, difficult-to-know location from an Icelandic perspective, but Þormóðr plays a similar role from the standpoint of the Greenlanders. During his stay there, Þormóðr exists in a position of liminality; he is able to fit into the familiar structure of the community, but also stands apart from it as someone with no allegiance to or interest in maintaining its social order. If Þorgrímr appears trollish to Icelanders as a quarrelsome foreigner, Þormóðr must appear similarly monstrous to his enemies—and one does indeed describe him as *sakadólgi várum* ‘our crimes-devil’, making a clear association between his outlawry and his monstrousness (250).

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<sup>44</sup> The Flateyjarbók version of the saga uses the same names, but in a different pattern from Möðruvallabók; Þormóðr introduces himself to Þorgrímr as *Vígfúss Ótryggson*, and to his pursuers as *Tortryggr* (*Fóstbræðra*, 233–34). The failure of the pursuers to recognise Þormóðr makes more sense in the Möðruvallabók version, as Þormóðr also tells them that he is looking for Þorgrímr’s killer, which may lead them to understand the name he gives them of *Vígfúss* ‘Killing-Eager’ as referring to his supposed desire to avenge Þorgrímr. The Flateyjarbók version, by contrast, has the men seem rather more foolish, as they fail to question Þormóðr despite him hinting that he is *Tortryggr* ‘Difficult-to-Trust’.

Despite outlawing Þormóðr, his enemies are hardly able to recognise him on subsequent occasions; despite his posing a danger to them, it is often not clear to them in advance exactly *what* that danger is (see 5.3.3). As he acquires a reputation in Greenland, however, Þormóðr’s ability to go unrecognised is eventually compromised. In travelling to confront Þorgrímr’s nephew Ljótr, Þormóðr stops at a farm owned by Ljótr’s enemy Sigríðr, giving his name as *Ósvífr* ‘Unswerving’, only for Sigríðr to recognise him by the intentions underlying the name (249–50):

Sigríðr mælti: ‘Svá er hverr sem heitir. Vill Ósvífr vera hér í nótt?’

Hann svarar, kvezk þat vilja.

Um myrgininn kom Sigríðr at máli við hann ok spurði, hvern veg af stæðisk um ferðir hans.

Þormóðr mælti: ‘Satt var þat, at ek nefndumk Ósvífr í gær.’

Hon svarar: ‘Kenna þóttumk ek þik, þó at ek hefða ekki fyrri sét þik, at þú ert Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld.’

Hann svarar: ‘Eigi gerir at dylja, því at rétt kenndan hefir þú manninn.’

Sigríðr spoke: ‘Each one is just as he is named. Does Ósvífr want to stay here tonight?’

He answered, saying that he did want to.

In the morning Sigríðr came to speak with him, and asked from which way he was proceeding on his journey [*i.e.* what the purpose of his journey was].

Þormóðr replied, ‘It was true when I gave my name as Ósvífr yesterday.’

She replied, ‘I thought I knew, although I had not seen you before, that you were Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld.’

He replied, ‘It will not do to deny it, because you have correctly identified the man.’

From this point onwards, Þormóðr stops using false-names. When he arrives at Ljótr’s farm with Sigríðr’s son Sigurðr, neither of them gives their name to the woman who greets them, but she goes inside and tells Ljótr that she recognises only Sigurðr. Ljótr asks what the other man looks like, and she describes him as *svarttr maðr ok hrokkinhærðr* ‘a dark and curly haired man’—the exact words Þormóðr previously used to say that he was easy to recognise. Ljótr immediately declares that *líkan segir þú hann Þormóði, sakadólgi várum* ‘you describe him like he is Þormóðr, our crimes-devil [*i.e.* our outlaw]’ (250). Evidently, Þormóðr can no longer function as a comparatively unknown figure in this society once his reputation precedes him; his liminal status there is necessarily temporary.

**5.3.3 The shifting parameters of Otherness.** While he is still comparatively unknown in Greenland, Þormóðr uses his liminal status in relation to Greenlandic society to his advantage by using false names and disguises to conceal his intentions. These tropes are common to outlaw narratives in the *Íslendingasögur*—Gísli disguises himself as the idiot Helgi in order to escape Þorkr and his pursuers, whilst

Grettir dresses up in old clothing and calls himself *Gestr* ‘Guest’ to trick people into granting him temporary sanctuary at the *Hegranessþing* (*Gísla*, ch. 26; *Grettla*, ch. 72)—but Þormóðr uses them particularly frequently during his time in Greenland. Along with the false-names detailed in the previous section, Þormóðr uses his disguises to confuse the social expectations of others, thus taking advantage of his liminal status in relation to Greenlandic society. These episodes show how unrecognised outsiders can take more extreme kinds of vengeance than are available to more conventional opponents, although it is questionable as to how far the saga itself endorses such approaches.

The first scene of extreme vengeance is the killing of Þorgrímr trolli, whom Þormóðr approaches while wearing a two-sided cloak, black on the outer side and white on the inner. Þormóðr is accompanied by the idiot Egill, whom Þormóðr tells to run away if he hears a *vábrest* ‘a woe-crash [*i.e.* a sudden, portentous sound]’ (*Fóstbræðra*, 232)—which Egill duly does upon hearing the blow with which Þormóðr kills Þorgrímr. Þormóðr immediately cradles Þorgrímr’s body and calls out for help, before leaving on the pretence of looking for the killer. Once out of sight, as Þorgrímr’s friends chase the fleeing Egill, Þormóðr reverses the cloak, and his pursuers again fail to recognise him when they stumble across him in their pursuit. The boundaries between normative and Other are subtly blurred in this scene, as they generally are when saga characters don disguises to elude capture, as Þormóðr plays the roles of both friend and foe—not only in relation to Þorgrímr, but also as regards the terrified Egill, who is soon confirmed not to be the killer by his pursuers when they discover the extent of his fear. The dual colouration of the cloak, in this respect, symbolises Þormóðr’s ambivalent role in the proceedings. It is only after he has escaped that the people at the assembly recognise that the absent Þormóðr was responsible for the killing, and have him outlawed.

It is in Þormóðr’s next expedition, however, that the saga develops the concept of blurring those boundaries in a more complex manner. The now-outlawed protagonist sets out to attack Þórdís’s sons Bøðvarr, Þorkell, Þórðr, and Falgeirr, and on the way encounters a local vagrant named Lúsa-Oddi, who wears *verju saumaða saman af mǫrgum tǫtrum* ‘a cloak sewn together from many rags’: *Hon var feljótt sem laki ok hǫttr á upp með slíkri gørð; hon var ǫll lúsug* ‘It was rough like a sheep’s stomach, and had a hood on top made in the same way; it was entirely covered in lice’ (238). Þormóðr asks Oddi about himself, and Oddi details several of his key characteristics:

*Ek em einn göngumaðr, fastr á fótum ... neningarlauss maðr ok eigi allyginn, fróðr nokkut, ok hefí jafnan gott af góðum mönnum* ‘I am a lone vagrant, firm on my legs; a lazy man, but not completely dishonest; somewhat clever; and I am always treated well by good people’ (238). Þormóðr, by contrast, claims only to be called *Torráðr* ‘Difficult-to-Rule’. The saga draws a clear dichotomy between Þormóðr and Lúsa-Oddi in terms of how easily they can be conceptualised. Oddi is quick to give a great deal of information about himself and, crucially, how he is perceived by other people—who pejoratively nickname him Lúsa-Oddi, but who also generally accept his vagrancy, as he is ‘treated well by good people’. Oddi’s declaration to be *fastr á fótum*, probably meaning that his vagrancy is legally restricted to that particular district, is significant in this respect, as it indicates that although he lacks a fixed social position, his deviancy is also controlled by law: it is a known factor. Þormóðr, on the other hand, is deliberately vague about his identity, and misleads Oddi into thinking that he is a merchant. Even though Oddi has no fixed social standing in the community, the saga suggests that he has a fixed conceptual position for the people of the district as an outsider whom they know well, and whose Otherness is safely contained by the legal system. Þormóðr, by contrast, is entirely unfamiliar, and therefore entirely unpredictable.

Þormóðr asks to trade cloaks with Oddi, who is initially suspicious, but agrees to the deal. Now disguised as Oddi, a well-known social presence, Þormóðr proceeds towards Þórdís’s farm and meets her shepherd, where the saga finds it significant enough to remind the audience, after the two men speak, that *hugði smalamaðr, at hann væri Lúsa-Oddi* ‘the shepherd thought he [*i.e.* Þormóðr] was Lúsa-Oddi’ (239). The shepherd tells Þormóðr that the brothers, apart from Bøðvarr, are fishing, so Þormóðr hides himself in the nearby boathouse, emerging as their boat approaches the shore in the evening, at which point the saga says that *þykkjask þeir þar kenna Lúsa-Odda* ‘they thought that they recognised Lúsa-Oddi there’ (239). Both of these passages suggest that Þormóðr’s disguise is effective not because it enables him to go unnoticed, as is the case in the previous episode involving Þorgrímr trolli’s men, but rather because it ensures that he *is* noticed by the shepherd and the brothers, all of whom subsequently interpret his presence in accordance with their expectations of Lúsa-Oddi, a figure whose Otherness is familiar to them and is therefore coded as safe. Þormóðr quickly subverts the brothers’ expectations, however, as he pulls out his axe from within the cloak and cleaves Þorkell’s skull in two. In subverting the

stereotypical perceptions that the community have of Oddi, Þormóðr distorts the brothers' conceptualisation of their social structure by making that familiar Other, against whom they define themselves, suddenly appear unfamiliar, thereby gaining an advantage over his enemies by utterly confusing them. Rather than playing along with his opponents' ideas of what is normative or Other in order to blend in, as he does after killing Þorgrímr, Þormóðr instead destabilises their expectations of how figures of Otherness should operate. In other words, Þormóðr's attack works primarily because it suddenly distorts the brothers' assumption that they are safe within the familiarity of their established social landscape.

The literary effect of this distortion is to shift the narrative mode of the saga into becoming even more grimly comical, as the outnumbered Þormóðr kills the other brothers in notably ignominious ways. After he runs away from the scene, Þórðr and Falgeirr chase him; Þórðr follows the outlaw as he jumps down to a cliff-side cave to escape, but Þórðr's leg gives way underneath him and he is immediately dispatched by Þormóðr, who buries his axe in Þórðr's back. Falgeirr then begins wrestling with Þormóðr and the pair of them fall into the sea, where Þormóðr realises that Falgeirr is considerably stronger than he is. Falgeirr's belt snaps, however, and Þormóðr pulls his breeches down, causing Falgeirr to drown as his exposed buttocks pop up out of the water. Falgeirr's grotesque face then emerges from the water: *Var þá opinn muðrinn ok augun, ok var þá því líkast at sjá í andlit, sem þá er maðr glottir at nokkuru* 'His mouth and eyes were then open, and his face to look at then was most like when a man grins at something' (241). Lucy Keens (2016, 201–02) argues that the combination of Falgeirr's exposed buttocks and his grinning face suggests that the scene is meant to suggest that he has been made *argr* by Þormóðr, with the grin seeming 'to make him complicit with his own image of perversion', having been shamefully inverted from a feared warrior to a pathetic idiot: 'The grin makes Falgeirr's death more clownish ... He is as close as can be to an Old Norse fool.' Given the unusually grotesque nature of the scene, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the sudden inversion of Falgeirr's masculinity—from dominant combatant to *argr* man—is in some way connected to Þormóðr's own subversive actions in the events immediately preceding it.

When removed from a need to redirect such extra-legal violence towards socially beneficial ends, as in the saga's depictions of Icelandic society, the outlaw protagonist is able to disrupt the familiar society of his overbearing enemies in order



to defeat them. Such a strategy is not acceptable, however, outside this ambiguous, liminal context, as is apparent from Þormóðr's later having to justify his actions to Óláfr, despite the king's having expressed his desire for Þorgeirr to be avenged. When Óláfr asks Þormóðr why he killed so many men to avenge Þorgeirr, alluding to the principle of equivalence in feud (see **2.2.1**), Þormóðr claims his actions were in fact equivalent to the *níð*-insults his enemies made against him: *Illr þótti mér jafnaðr þeira vera við mik, því at þeir jöfnuðu mér til merar, tölðu mik svá vera með monnum sem meri með hestum* 'Their comparison of me seemed to me to be evil, because they equated me to a mare, saying I was among men just as a mare is among stallions' (*Fóstbræðra*, 259). Þormóðr's claim is misleading, as Þórdís does compare him to a mare, but only after Þormóðr has already performed all his killings in Greenland by that point. Yet the contradiction is not simply a rare instance of the astute Óláfr being duped by a tricky poet; rather, his acceptance of the explanation suggests that such violence can be legitimated in retrospect, even if it had not been legitimate beforehand.

This is likely to be a playful, rather than serious, suggestion by the saga, but it does accord with how Þormóðr achieves success in Greenland. When his opponents try to marginalise him and render him as Other, Þormóðr resists their attempts by blurring the boundaries between normativity and Otherness; when Þórdís uses a *níð*-insult to mark him permanently as Other, Þormóðr responds by re-contextualising his actions in such a way as to legitimise them and make them appear normative. Yet it is significant that Óláfr asks Þormóðr to provide a normalising explanation for his actions in the first place, as his behaviour is still unacceptable within the more familiar contexts of Norwegian and Icelandic society. Whilst the saga gleefully depicts Þormóðr's subversion of Greenlandic social structures, such actions must be given legitimacy on returning to society's centre. The saga appears to view Þormóðr's adventures in Greenland as a kind of escapist fantasy of vengeance, in which he embraces an excessive, individualistic heroism that can be enjoyed at a safe distance from the audience's own experience, albeit only if it is somehow justified, however tenuously. The outlawed hero provides the narrative with a means of release from the confinement of society's fixed parameters, but only if he can then be somehow re-assimilated into that system without disrupting it further.

It should be clear from the above analysis that *Fóstbræðra saga* is not simply a narrative of action, at least not in the sense that Andersson means it. The saga's interest in scenes of action is related to wider thematic concerns about how society frequently fails to deal with such violence, in terms of both the systemic violence that is shown to affect the weaker, more vulnerable members of Icelandic society and the socially disruptive violence practised by such extra-legal presences as the *fóstbræðr*. The saga also uses depictions of violence to explore how different types of authority can be used to contain or more successfully redirect the aggressive male figures that dominate the saga's Icelandic society, demonstrating how the saga's prominent women are able to address such problems temporarily, while also looking to the Norwegian Crown as a more permanent solution—but a solution that is expected to respect the unruly individualism that the text appears to associate with the Icelandic national character. Even in its most gleefully violent episodes, as Þormóðr avenges his sworn-brother in exceptionally excessive fashion, the saga does not simply show action for action's sake, but engages with the ideas of normativity and Otherness that fundamentally underpin how any group, and any society, constructs its identity. At the same time, the saga recognises that this exploration of Otherness can only ever be an escapist fantasy; Þormóðr might be the most hyperbolically violent of the outlaws described in this thesis, but he recognises the need for his actions to be re-assimilated into society and into the narrative itself. Þormóðr's vengeance may be enjoyed by the saga's audience, but it is significant that the text's conclusion turns back to the socially acceptable authority of Óláfr, the centre of its worldview.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Conclusion*

The sagas discussed in this thesis share a common principle that is encapsulated by a proverb that Grettir speaks to his brother, Þorsteinn drómundr: *Þat er satt, sem er mælt, at engi maðr skapar sik sjálf* ‘It is true, as is said, that no man shapes himself’ (*Grettla*, 137). This thought suggests the first and most important conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis in the previous chapters, which is that these outlaw narratives show how each of their protagonists, despite his desire to live on his own terms, has his life and fate primarily defined—or indeed created—by the other members of his community. Grettir is a prime example of this; his use of the proverb, in context, refers chiefly to the differences in physique and *gæfu* ‘fortune’ between himself and his scrawny yet lucky brother, but it carries a symbolic resonance in the narrative beyond the specifics of this episode. Grettir is labelled and categorised by the people around him as a troublemaker, an outlaw, and even a monster, and these labels in large part determine Grettir’s identity; after all, Grettir begins to act most like a criminal and a monstrous figure only after he has been classified in those ways (see 3.2.2). Grettir has his faults, but they are not enough in themselves to ensure his marginalisation without their being conveyed through the various social constructs that are used to identify difference. The process of labelling Grettir as an outsider fails to present him as the complex, contradictory person that the audience sees throughout the text; rather, it frames him as a reductively antithetical figure. As a result, other people can more easily, if inaccurately, comprehend the nature of their relationship with him than they could if they saw him as a complex individual (see 3.1). Grettir’s society is unwilling, perhaps even unable, to have him exist within its communal framework as an unconventional individual, and thus it takes an active role in creating the circumstances that cause Grettir to be shaped as—and consequently actually to become—a legal and symbolic Other. The saga inevitably

prompts the thought that Grettir's being labelled as different is what makes him actually different; this is a remarkable insight to be offered by a medieval text, and it is one that is more typical of how the subject of difference is treated in modern literature.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, *Harðar saga* shows its protagonist to be deeply conflicted about his identity as an outlaw, even as his situation as an outlaw causes him gradually to undertake activities that are increasingly criminal despite his misgivings (see **4.2.3**). In *Fóstbræðra saga*, on the other hand, Þormóðr deals with being classified as Other in Greenlandic society by embracing this status and turning it to his own advantage (see **5.3.2** and **5.3.3**).

With regard to active behaviour, rather than essential being, a second major consideration is that the narratives analysed here discuss the notion of individual agency by highlighting how the kinds of actions that their protagonists are able to undertake are significantly determined by their communal contexts. These sagas often depict communities that are structured in ways that either constrain the agency of their protagonists, or else motivate them to undertake actions that they would not otherwise have countenanced. The notion that a community does not always benefit its individual members, but can also cause internal conflicts or confusion within them about their personal impulses and behaviours, is a key anxiety underlying the texts' portrayal of Icelandic society. Hǫrðr offers a notable example: he is induced to act in an extra-legal way because he loses control of his social situation, and because his own view of where he stands in the hierarchy of the district differs considerably from his neighbour's perspective (see **4.1.3**). Similarly, Grettir's aspiration to become known as an impressive man conflicts with the social role that his father assigns to him when he is a child, as the role itself contravenes wider cultural norms; as a result, in order to avoid transgressing those norms, Grettir feels obliged to repudiate the role that his father assigns (see **3.1.2**). Gísli's room to 'lump' his loss, furthermore, in order to preserve his individual integrity by avoiding the communal expectations placed on him, is restricted by Þorkell's involvement in Vésteinn's death and Þorgrím's constant reminders that Gísli has failed to fulfil his social obligations (see **2.2.3**). All three of these outlaws find that their social contexts restrict them to the extent that acting in an extra-legal capacity is preferable to

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<sup>45</sup> James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), for example, offers extensive and subtle representations of how its black protagonists internalise the racial and sexual stereotypes that other people use to describe them (especially 'black whore'), to the extent that they suffer severe internal torment and anxiety as they resist those stereotypes and yet find themselves conforming to them.

accepting the position available to them in their community. *Fóstbræðra saga*, in addition, implies that even the comparatively simple structure of the sworn-brothers' dyadic community constrains the domineering Þorgeirr more than he would like, which fundamentally damages the dyad's social cohesion (see 5.1.2); the saga thus suggests that when the members of a community act beyond the parameters of their normative agency, they threaten the stability of the community itself.

The third conclusion to draw here, leading on from how Þorgeirr's actions affect his communal relationship with Þormóðr, is that these sagas are concerned not only with how the shape of a community affects its individual members, but also with the reciprocal effect that individuals have on the structuration and identity of their communities. Each of the saga narratives discussed in this thesis forces its audience to consider how the communities of which the protagonist is a member are defined by the tension between the desire of the individual to live on their own terms and the overriding impulse of the community to maintain a cohesive identity. In taking vengeance for Vésteinn, for example, Gísli lays bare the contradictory systems of legal and moral expectation that underlie his society, but his actions do not resolve the contradictions, for Icelandic society simply ostracises him in order to maintain its problematic communal identity (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2). Grettir is unwilling to compromise his individual integrity in order to maintain social cohesion, but his father Ásmundr, for his part, is similarly unwilling to alter the structure of their familial community to accommodate his son's objections (see 3.1.2). Hqrðr and the *fóstbræðr* attempt to circumvent the demands that normative society makes on their agency by creating extra-legal communities, but their groups are also defined by a tension between the desires of those individuals to act autonomously and the need for the new community to develop and maintain a stable identity. By implicitly setting themselves in opposition to their society as a result of their extra-legal *fóstbræðralag*, the sworn-brothers prioritise themselves at the expense of the other members of normative society, but they can do so only for a short time before the individual imbalance in their abilities overwhelms their common purpose (see 5.1.2). Yet *Harðar saga* suggests that the proliferation of communal bonds can be just as damaging to the wellbeing of individuals as the removal of their communal support structure; both the Hólmverjar and normative society are structured around systems of obligation that are shown to expand in such a way as to subsume the individuals that they involve (see 4.2.3, 4.3.1, and 4.3.2). This expansion in the two groups

means that individual members can have new obligations unexpectedly forced upon them, which leads them gradually to lose control over their decision-making.

The expansion of obligation systems in *Harðar saga*'s communities is connected to the next consideration to be noted in these conclusions, which is that the outlaw narratives discussed here depict the Icelandic Commonwealth and other communities not as fixed entities but as malleable systems that change and shift over time. These groups often adapt themselves in ways that ensure they maintain a cohesive communal identity but which prove problematic for some of their individual members, most notably the protagonists of the sagas. When Hǫrðr's ability to have a say over the structuration of his immediate communal experience is suddenly revoked, for example, his society's shifting parameters render him powerless (see **4.1.3**). The shifting system of familial obligations within normative society also causes significant problems for Hǫrðr, Torfi, and Grímkell, all of whom acquire, or are threatened with, unwanted kinship bonds through marriage or fosterage (see **4.3.1** and **4.3.2**). The complex system of kinship bonds is not exclusive, but can be expanded without requiring the individual to consent to that alteration; the system is therefore unstable for individuals who wish to restrict the number of people to whom they are legally bound. *Gísla saga*, for its part, implies that systems of obligation and expectation can be problematic when they come into conflict with one another, as happens in the period that the saga depicts, which is one of transition between the early settlement of Iceland and the bedding down of its legal system (see **2.1.1**). Gísli himself is aware of his society's changing character (see **2.1.2**) yet he is unable to reconcile within himself the contradictions created by the different sets of communal expectations, for blood vengeance or legal process, with which he is faced. *Fóstbræðra saga* suggests that ostensibly simpler communal systems can change significantly as well, as the character of the sworn-brothers' *fóstbræðralag* is altered by Þorgeirr's actions to the extent that it can no longer exist as a workable organisation (see **5.1.2**). The malleable nature of the communities depicted in the saga, however, enables the sworn-brothers to set themselves apart symbolically from normative society in the first place while still retaining their privileges and legal rights as members of the community; this causes problems for the other members of normative society, who are unsure about how to accommodate the pair (see **5.1.3**). Þormóðr also takes advantage of the protean nature of the saga's communities to shift his opponents' perception of normativity during his time in Greenland, where he

alters that society's parameters of Otherness to dislocate his enemies from their familiar social sphere (see **5.3.3**). The shifting centre of normativity at the heart of each community also allows Grettir's opponents to regard him as an outsider, rather than as a member of the community, when it is expedient for them to do so (see **3.1.3** and **3.2.1**).

These previous conclusions suggest another consideration, which is that the outlaw narratives discussed here do not depict a society that idealises peace and reconciliation above all else. Rather, the texts highlight the fundamental structural problems that lead the various communities they portray to exclude, marginalise, and Other those individuals who do not accord with the community's norms, actions that ineluctably lead to conflict and violence. *Fóstbræðra saga*'s depiction of an Icelandic Commonwealth characterised by masculine aggression (see **5.1.1**) and systemic violence against the more vulnerable members of society (see **5.1.3**) is particularly notable in this regard. The saga suggests that whilst certain elements of Icelandic society's structure, such as the institution of *goðorð*, are not necessarily problematic in themselves, they are easily abused by domineering individuals, and the failure of weak leaders to uphold their responsibilities also causes harm to those who are relatively powerless (see **5.2.1**). *Gísla saga*'s depiction of Þorkr, for example, problematises the notion that the normative legal process has greater validity than extra-legal blood-vengeance and that it provides a particularly just framework for dispute resolution, since he uses that legal process as only one amongst several means to obtain Gísli's death (see **2.3.1**). It can also be noted that *Grettis saga* portrays an Icelandic society that is more willing to see Grettir as an outsider, even a monster (see **3.1.4**), than it is to allow him to explain himself, or even to be properly represented, in a fair legal process (see **3.2.1**); this is hardly an image of a community that strives for peaceful resolution and arbitration. In a somewhat similar way, Hǫrðr's attempt to negotiate a legal case ends abruptly when he is simply excluded from the legal process (see **4.1.3**), whilst the system of normative kinship fails him to the extent that he cannot acquire legal representatives either (see **4.2.1**). In fact, Hǫrðr's sudden loss of communal power directly motivates him to choose desperate violence over reconciliation. In short, these sagas depict a society in which the law does not in fact have primacy but is regularly used as a tool, or simply set aside, in order to achieve a violent end.

It is also important to consider that these texts directly critique the effectiveness of making people outlaws, which is presented as a problematic way for the Icelandic Commonwealth to deal with its more troublesome members. *Grettis saga*, in particular, highlights how Icelandic society's outlawing of Grettir does little to address its general confusion about how to categorise Grettir's complex, often contradictory character (see 3.2.1). The saga not only suggests that Icelandic society's decision to outlaw Grettir is a reductive way of dealing with him, but also demonstrates how this approach leads society to relinquish any means it may have had of asserting some level of control over him (see 3.2.2). *Harðar saga* similarly shows how the failure of Hǫrðr's kinsmen to provide him with sufficient support leads him to be outlawed and subsequently to found a dangerous extra-legal community, which ultimately presents a much greater threat to normative society than Hǫrðr alone ever did (see 4.2.1). *Fóstbræðra saga*, furthermore, uses the sworn-brothers' decision to set themselves somewhat apart from society as *fóstbræðr*, with the extra-legal connotations that this status carries (see 5.1.2), to suggest that society's normative legal process lacks effective methods by which to control the brothers' behaviour, which is characterised as being socially disruptive (see 5.1.3). Þorgeirr's outlawry does little to change his propensity for violence, whilst Þormóðr uses the liminal status of outlawry to his advantage in Greenland on his mission to avenge Þorgeirr's death (see 5.3.2). The sworn-brothers are controlled to some extent by alternative methods that redirect their socially disruptive aggression (see 5.2.2), but normative society itself is implied to be incapable of controlling their extra-legal violence. *Gísla saga*, on the other hand, suggests that outlawry itself could be used to the same problematic ends as extra-legal feud in achieving blood-vengeance, and that it did not necessarily constitute a fairer way of resolving a dispute (see 2.3.1).

Finally, staying with Gísli and returning to the first consideration discussed in these conclusions, it is important to emphasise that *Gísla saga* implies that the outlawing of Gísli is an unsatisfactory resolution to the conflict that Þorgrímr's killing of Vésteinn engenders. The sentence of outlawry attributes the blame for the dispute solely to Gísli and does not acknowledge Þorgrímr's role in creating the circumstances of the feud (see 2.2.1). Gísli himself, however, suggests that his individual actions are embedded in a wider communal discourse, which determines the form and content of those actions—and this is the heart of what is being said in this thesis. He declares that *mæla verðr einhverr skapanna málum* (*Gísla*, 34),



which is conventionally translated as ‘someone must speak the words of what is fated’. Here *skop* refers to the external factors that shape one’s life, but Gísli is not necessarily referring to a mysterious supernatural decision-maker; that concept is usually represented in Old Norse–Icelandic texts by the term *orlog* ‘fortune’ (Cleasby–Vigfússon, 767). *Skop* is the plural of *skap* ‘shape, state, disposition’, which is cognate with the modern English word ‘shape’, and is etymologically related to the verb *skapa* ‘to shape, to create, to make’; this is the very word that Grettir uses in the proverb *engi maðr skapar sik sjálf*, which was discussed above. As Gísli uses the term, therefore, *skop* may well involve some sense of supernatural fate, but it can also be translated more literally as ‘what is shaped for one’ (537). In this sense, it can refer simply to the direction suggested by external factors, as in the idiomatic phrase *ef at skopum ferr* ‘if it goes according to the natural course of things’ (Zoëga, 386). The external factors to which Gísli refers may reasonably be taken to include the part that his community’s expectations have in creating the social role that he believes has been shaped for him, as a wronged kinsman obliged to seek revenge. Through Gísli’s speaking of this phrase, the saga encourages the thoughtful audience member to consider how its protagonist’s social role and identity have been defined for him by his communal context, and how this limits his individual capacity to shape his own life—an anxiety that is common to the outlaw narratives discussed here. Grettir’s proverb and Gísli’s idiom together encapsulate the most important concept embodied in these sagas, which is also the main concern of this thesis, that these apparently individualistic outlaws from society have in fact had their natures constituted by the very community that has cast them out.

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The outlaw narratives discussed in this thesis engage with the socio-political concept of the individual’s relationship to their community in ways that are very likely to be familiar to a modern reader, despite the significant temporal distance between our contemporary contexts and the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic societies that produced these texts. It is quite remarkable that even though these medieval works do not have the kind of theoretical and analytical language that modern scholarly disciplines have developed to elucidate these kinds of ideas, they nevertheless engage in a sustained and sophisticated manner with those societal

concerns. A thoughtful reader or member of the medieval audience would be bound by the terms of saga discourse to consider these topics, and yet methodological and other concerns in the history of Old Norse–Icelandic literary criticism have tended to obscure or subordinate these insights in much modern saga scholarship. It has been the purpose of this thesis to address this anomaly, and in doing so to reveal yet further reasons to believe that the sagas of Icelanders, in particular those that are characterised as outlaw narratives, constitute a truly exceptional body of work which grapples with issues and anxieties that remain current and important for the very different societies of our own day.

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