

Old Norse/Icelandic Myth in Relation to *Grettis saga*

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1. *Grettis saga* is exceptionally rich in both psychological and mythological terms. Its account of the protagonist shows a diversity of forces combating within him (Viðar Hreinsson 1992:105). Equally, it is replete with allusions to mythological figures. In this respect Grettir is notably polysemous (cf. Hastrup 1986:310), having in his composition something of Óðinn, something of Þórr, something of Loki, something of the giants. The proposition that the pre-Christian mythic world continued to form an implicit frame of reference for medieval Icelanders as they sought to understand and represent human life and behaviour (Clunies Ross 1998:23; cf. Guðrún Nordal 1998:221) can readily be supported with reference to this saga. Just like the gods and giants upon whom he is styled, Grettir behaves in ways that are more extreme and more flamboyant than people allowed themselves in their quotidian existence (cf. Clunies Ross 1998:24). The story of Grettir, in its extant realizations, can be understood, I shall argue, as a fourteenth-century mythicization of tensions and pressures, fears and

desires, within Icelandic culture.¹ Here I propose to concentrate on familial relationships within Grettir's "primary group", developing the proposition that the figure of Glámr personifies crucial aspects of that dynamic.²

2. The unfolding of Glámr's character within the story can be summed up if we describe him as at first a merely reckless and godless Swedish stranger, come to labour on the farm of one Þorhallr; then an "undead" who disrupts property and lives; and finally the pronouncer of a decisive curse upon Grettir.

- 2.1. Glámr's most arresting feature is his gaze, which issues from dark-blue, wide-open eyes (ch. 32). "Þórhalli brá nokkuð í brún er hann sá þenna mann" (82), "Þorhallr was somewhat taken aback at the sight of Glámr" (71).³ Here "brá nokkuð í brún" could be more closely translated as "caused his eyebrows to rise", suggesting that Glámr's is a gaze that compels reciprocation, as if in recognition. It is when the moon appears from behind a cloud that his and Grettir's gazes disastrously meet (ch. 35). "Tunglskin var mikið úti og gluggaþykkn. Hratt stundum fyrir en stundum dró frá. Nú í því er Glámur féll rak skýið frá tunglinu en Glámur hvessti augun upp í móti. Og svo hefir Grettir sagt sjálfur að þá eina sýn hafi hann séð svo að honum brygði við. Þá sigaði svo að honum af öllu saman, mæði og því er hann sá að Glámur gaut sínum sjónum harðlega, að hann gat eigi brugðið saxinu og lá nálega í milli heims og heljar" (90-91). "Outside the moonlight was bright but intermittent, for there were dark clouds which passed before the moon and then went away. At the very moment when Glámr fell, the clouds cleared away, and Glámr glared up at the moon. Grettir himself once said that was the only sight he ever saw which frightened him. Then, because of exhaustion and the sight of Glámr rolling his eyes so fiercely ["looking piercingly" would be a closer translation], Grettir was overcome by such a faintness that he could not draw his short sword, and so he remained there lying closer to death than to life" (78-79). This description is reminiscent of phobias and dreams where the subject feels petrified or immobilized in the face of some threat.

- 2.2. Glámr goes on to pronounce his curse. From now Grettir will develop no further, having attained only half the strength he might have had – mighty though his works have been and will continue to be. Moreover,

¹ For the dating of the extant saga see Sigurður Nordal 1938, along with references there given; also Nordland 1953:38 and Óskar Halldórsson 1977:639, n. 25.

² In concentrating upon the family I am to some extent taking my cue from recent studies by Marianne Kalinke (1997) and Torfi Tulinius (1997), who have argued for a focus on familial, especially paternal and father-like, relationships in analyses of *Hallfreðar saga* and *Egils saga*.

³ Unless otherwise stated, citations from *Grettis saga* are from the 1996 edition; translations of prose from the saga are taken from Fox and Hermann Pálsson 1974; translations of the verse are my own.

he will incur outlawry and be forced to live in solitude. As others have already foreseen, he is a man whose luck will run out. “Þá legg eg það á við þig að þessi augu séu þér jafnan fyrir sjónum sem eg ber eftir og mun þér erfitt þykja einum að vera. Og það mun þér til dauða draga” (91). “I also lay this curse on you: you will always see before you these eyes of mine, and they will make your solitude unbearable, and this shall drag you to your death” (79). In the aftermath, Grettir’s already difficult temperament deteriorates further and he finds himself burdened by disabling anxieties about being alone at the approach of darkness (ch. 35), especially outside inhabited districts.

- 2.3. To round out the evidence for Glámr’s meaning, it is important to consider his name. This unfamiliar name is likely, despite Magnús Fjalldal (1998:25), to have been thematized in some way in the saga, consistent with the author’s transparent handling of a series of other names, which may to some extent be influenced by the characteristic use of *ofljóst* in *kviðuháttr* verses like those included in this saga. Grettir, for instance, has the mannerism of “grinning” and also, as an outcast, traits in common with “snakes”, while Þorbjörg gains a mythic dimension when she is described providing “rescue” for a “Þórr”-like Grettir. Björn, Grettir’s self-proclaimed rival in tackling a bear, makes the equation between himself and his namesake (ch. 21). Þorbjörn glámr’s nickname is explicitly linked with his temperament (ch. 69). Spes I shall mention presently. To the name Glámr an assortment of loosely related meanings has been ascribed. *Lexicon Poeticum* (s.v.) cites it in two *þulur* which list respectively names of giants and of the moon. De Vries 1977 (s.v.) compares Modern Icelandic *glámur* “horse with white marking on forehead”, Modern Norwegian *glaama* “bluish mark on the hide”, and other semantically and phonologically similar words. Taken together, the sense of this group of words wavers between “dark” and “light” (cf. Hermann Pálsson 1980:101), meanings combined in OE *glom*, *glomung* “gloaming, twilight, dusk, dim light before dawn”. Taking all the evidence together, we may connect Glámr’s name with the liminality and doubleness of the twilight – a feared borderland between the safety of day and the danger of night⁴ – and go on to propose that he represents a hypostasis of that fear.
3. I turn now to consider the psychological and social implications of the fears of darkness and solitude imposed on Grettir by Glámr’s curse.
 - 3.1. Modern empirical literature on fear of the dark tells us that it is a classic childhood anxiety. Nearly all children experience it, and

⁴ We can compare Boer’s suggestion that Glámr is the personification of winter moonlight, a treacherous illumination that shows the way but also leads travellers astray (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 1900:xlii).

particularly intensely at ages 4 to 6. It is often accompanied by fears of storms, thunder, strange events, animals, monsters, witches, or other fantasy images. Over time, these normal fears fade in normal people, although they can persist. One psychologist chronicles the therapy of a client presenting at age 25 with fear of the dark and other disabling phobias (Zane 1982). Often such anxieties are associated with the loss (temporary or permanent) of a member of the subject's primary group – typically, though not necessarily, the mother. One case study of insomnia, nightmares, night terrors, and fear of the dark in an eleven-year-old boy occurred as a result of severe injury and hospitalization away from his family (Howsam 1999).

- 3.2. It might seem absurd to apply modern clinical terminology and case studies to a literary work that dates from many centuries ago and that purports to describe a protagonist who lived several centuries earlier again. I am of course making no truth claims for the saga insofar as it purports to describe a historical personage. What is of interest to me here is the psychological predicament, in its possible relation to fourteenth-century Icelandic culture. Now it is acknowledged that the characteristic types of anxiety across cultures differ systematically, in correlation with the different child-rearing methods (Tan 1980). Nevertheless, Icelandic folk literature, with its copious tales of ghosts, revenants, and spooks of every kind, offers good reason to believe that fear of the dark, along with related anxieties, would have possessed decided resonances with the contemporary audience, as, to judge from Icelandic distance teaching materials for playschool teachers on the Internet, it still does nowadays. Also, the transcultural incidence of phobias and anxiety disorders is a recognized phenomenon. To take a somewhat related affliction, the concept of the “evil eye” (*mal ojo*) is fairly common among people of Mediterranean cultural origin. Manifestations include emotional disturbances, unexplained illnesses, and in particular a phobia for certain groups of people or types of situations. Strangers or women are ascribed special powers in inflicting the evil eye and children frequently figure as victims (Tan 1980).
- 3.3. In his struggles with his fear, Grettir exhibits avoidance behaviour, just as is typical of modern victims of anxiety disorders. A central fear is precisely that of being alone, a contingency almost inevitable for an outlaw. Modern agoraphobics counter this fear by ensuring that when they go out they do so accompanied by a trusted person, and that is what Grettir contrives too, even when it involves the certain loss of his younger brother's life. The end of the saga ushers the audience towards a transcendence of that fear, as Þorsteinn drómundr (the half-brother of Grettir – on his father's side, be it noted) and Spes (his strong, “hope”-full wife) dedicate themselves serenely to a sanctified and immured

version of solitude where no avoidance is possible (cf. Fox and Hermann Pálsson 1974:xiii).

- 3.4. Avoidance behaviour is apt to rebound against sufferers in the shape of loss of empathy, criticism, anger, and urging of confrontation with the object of fear. In the saga narrative empathy for Grettir seems equivocal. Take the sentence “Sýndist honum þá hvers kyns skrípi”, “All kinds of phantoms appeared to him then” (ch. 35). Significant here is that although *skrípi* is a recognized expression for “monster” or “phantom”, it carries a connotation of unreality (Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v.). That, together with the notion that a person afflicted with *glámsýni* hallucinates or sees things otherwise than they really are, suggests narratorial ambivalence concerning the realistic basis for Grettir’s fears. So too, possibly, does the incident in ch. 61 where the bleating of a ewe on a roof at night prevents the hero from sleeping – fitting punishment because he has slaughtered her lamb (cf. De Looze 1991:91).
4. As already stated, I would interpret Glámr as the hypostasis of forces that operate within Grettir and his primary group. Here is a case where an anterior mythic type – in the shape of an “undead” who wreaks havoc on persons and property – has gained new meaning. In reducing Grettir to helplessness in the face of terrors classically associated with the childhood years, the effect of Glámr is to perpetuate his dependence. More than that, Glámr’s role in the scheme of the narrative could be formulated as overdetermining characteristics of Grettir that have already manifested themselves in his heritage and upbringing.⁵ These characteristics are dominantly formed through and by his mother.
 - 4.1. First, it is through her that Grettir claims kinship with the Hrafnistumenn – descendants of the prehistoric Úlfr inn óargi who came from the island of Hrafnista in Norway – and therefore ultimately with giants and other non-human kinds. In addition to the link through her father, the saga mentions (ch. 13) that Ásdís is descended from Ketill hængur on her mother’s side (Óskar Halldórsson 1982:30). Although Grettir is certainly also shown as connected with the Hrafnistumenn by marriages among his paternal ancestors, he has no genetic link with them on his father’s side if we adhere strictly to the tracing of his pedigree that this saga supplies (Ciklamini 1966:137). It is true that that version of his paternal lineage could easily be modified or supplemented from other sources, but it is important not to fall into that temptation. What matters here is not historical accuracy but the saga’s construction of Grettir in such a way that the mythical

⁵ Cf. Fox and Hermann Pálsson, who comment that Glámr is in literary terms “a manifestation of Grettir’s own character” (1974:xii).

dimension to his unruliness is supplied by his mother's kin rather than his father's. He bears a particular resemblance in point of strength and aggressiveness to his mother's brother, Jökull Bárðarson, Jökull being a giant name (Ciklamini 1966:141). For her part, Grettir's mother keeps holding up to him the example of Jökull and other Vatnsdælir. The idea of Grettir as the scion of his maternal ancestors is further reinforced through the commonalities between him and the various non-human adversaries he encounters. In ch. 21 he looks and acts a bit like the bear he is fighting and in ch. 38, having swum an icy channel to fetch fire, he is mistaken for a troll (perhaps even a frost giant). The saga's restriction of mythical non-human types to the maternal line may indicate that operative here in some way is the mythological pattern where Æsir males marry the daughters of giants, who bring with them destructive, non-human influences. We might see the linkage of Ásdís with non-human types as reflecting a communal anxiety about maternal dominance.⁶ At the same time, though, we should bear in mind the countervailing view that "the world of the giants represents a potential store of qualities that are important in the world of gods and men" (Mundal 1990:18). We are dealing with heteroglossia, a contest of attitudes in society, not with dogma.

- 4.2. Secondly, Grettir is exceptional for his expressions of attachment to his mother. One of the embedded skaldic stanzas sums it up: "As a sea-faring man, sail set/ for a following wind, let me/ tell you that some rich people/ equipped me poorly for this trip./ A strong woman bettered my lot/ When she made this sword her gift:/ Once more the saying's borne out/ That 'the mother is best for the child'" (v. 11). She for her part loves him dearly, "unni honum mikið" (ch.14: p. 25). A modern Icelander gives eloquent expression to this attachment (Ólafur H. Kristjánsson 1978:23).⁷ In modern scientific terms the concept of "attachment" has been classically theorized by the developmental psychologist John Bowlby. Five patterns of behaviour – sucking, clinging, following, crying, and smiling – all function to maintain the child's proximity to his or her mother from about 9 to 18 months (Bowlby 1982:244). Attachment behaviour begins to wane in human beings at about the age of three, although it continues to be important

⁶ To cite a possible analogue in *Bárðar saga*, Helga's sudden removal of young Gestr to be her foster son is a commonplace of giantess behaviour in *fornaldarsögur*. It has been suggested that the episode could be interpreted psychoanalytically as reflecting collective parental (and particularly maternal) anxiety at the removal of children into fosterage (Clunies Ross 1998:119-20).

⁷ "Frá því hin fyrsta móðir á Íslandi fæddi afkvæmi sitt hefur móðurastin verið sú vernd og skjól, er veitt hefur veiki lífi þrótt og þroskamöguleika, sá ljósgeisli, sem rofið hefur myrkur ótta og öryggisleysis, bægt frá Glámsaugunum, sem svo oft verða á vegi þess sem veikur er fæddur og skammt á að lifa."

throughout life (Taylor and Arnow 1988:21).

5. Ásdís is no ordinary mother: indeed, she has been lauded as the most famous and best loved mother to have lived in Iceland (Ólafur H. Kristjánsson 1978:19). The text conveys the esteem she enjoys with the community before and after the deaths of her sons and admits into the story line other examples of strong women safeguarding the interests of their offspring. We hear in particular of Auðr in *djúpúðga* and of Signý, the widow of *Öndóttir kráka*. But while in no way wishing to cast aspersions on Ásdís's reputation, I would suggest that there is a characteristic play of heteroglossia around the proverb cited by Grettir in his stanza, as around other proverb citations and adaptations in the saga (Örnólfur Thorsson 1994:79; De Looze 1991:95). Rather than simply dogmatizing that the mother is best for the child, the text leaves it open how far maternal dominance has good outcomes.
 - 5.1. Although she does not simply condone Grettir's numerous offences, Ásdís's role is on the whole protective. She sets him up as a warrior when his father refuses to do so, presenting him with a fine sword that belonged to her grandfather Jökull, along with other *Vatnsdælir* (ch. 17), and thus underlining the importance of his maternal heritage. In a rather obscure and textually difficult stanza it may be implied that the thought of Ásdís weeping in sympathy sustains Grettir if he feels fear (ch. 54: ÍF 7:177 and n. ad loc.): "brúðr strýkr horsk, ef hræðumk,/ hvarma", "if I am afraid, the wise woman wipes her eyes." She certainly sheds tears in ch. 69, when she sacrifices her youngest son Illugi for Grettir's sake. "Er svo nú komið að eg sé að tvennum vandræðum gegnir. Eg þykist ekki Illuga missa mega en eg veit að svo mikil atkvæði eru að um hagi Grettis að hann verður eitthvert úr að ráða" (169-70). "So it has come to this. I am now trapped between two griefs: I cannot bear to lose Illugi, but I know Grettir's plight has become so serious that something must be done for him" (144). In sum, as ch. 69 shows with special vividness, Grettir's peculiar anxieties mean that maternal protectiveness cannot be phased out in a normal way; instead, his dependence on and attachment to his mother remains essential to his adult welfare, indeed to his very survival.
 - 5.2. Grettir's father competes with this resolute mother for dominance in their son's upbringing. What makes his task virtually impossible is Grettir's marked and enduring distaste for work. At the same time, Ásmundr is not exactly pragmatic or tactful in the allocation of tasks, which, psychologically speaking, might seem remarkable when he himself has had to make the transition from a work-shy youth, unpopular with his father, to a sterling farmer (cf. Guðmundur Andri Thorsson 1990:103). In ch. 14 we are presented with an incremental series of three examples that positively cry out for the attentions of a

structuralist. First assigned the demeaning task of minding geese and goslings, Grettir loses patience and wrings the necks of some. Ásmundr next gives Grettir an even more demeaning, unmanly indoor job, that of rubbing his back as he sits by the fire. Grettir objects to the excessive heat and eventually takes his revenge by scraping his father's back with the carding comb – an action that foreshadows a flaying. Ásmundr's final job allocation takes Grettir out into the cold, minding the horses. Grettir is pleased to receive this colder, therefore more manly assignment, which suggests that if Ásmundr is attempting to acculturate his son to the farmer's livelihood then his efforts are enjoying some measure of responsiveness. But, unable to stand the full rigours of the cold, Grettir checks Ásmundr's self-willed mare Kengála in her rambles to exposed places by flaying the hide off her back. The discovery of this enormity leads to a suspension of chores. Even then, Ásdís maintains an even-handed approach: "Eigi veit eg hvort mér þykir meir frá móti, að þú skipar honum jafnan starfa eða hitt að hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi" (29). "I don't know which I think more immoderate, that you are always giving him jobs, or the fact that he discharges them all in the same way" (my translation). A modern assessment would probably be less litotic and more receptive to a diagnosis of sadism or pathological cruelty, arising from anger that instead of being directed toward a parent becomes deflected toward other targets (cf. Bowlby 1975:199-200).

6. As a result of this complex and toxic familial dynamic the acculturation process has failed. In one sense, then, Grettir remains less of a man than his father, but in another sense he becomes more of a man, since the logic of the narrative seems to be to propel him into the warrior, not the farmer class. His alienation from farmers continues to manifest itself intermittently in episodes of his adulthood (e.g. chs 52, 60, and 71). At the same time, as the mutual mockery between Grettir and Sveinn, the farmer, in *Söðulkolluvísur* tends to demonstrate, this alienation is double-edged. What underlies it, textually speaking, might well be an anxiety in the culture about the relevance of higher-class people such as himself to the economy and the polity. Unlike a farmer, who must work day in day out, making hay or mucking out cow stalls, Grettir adopts the patterns of the Vikings or the Arthurian knights, celebrated in fourteenth-century Icelandic culture, by deploying his copious stocks of energy and ability in a spasmodic fashion. His raids and quests, like theirs, are punctuated by periods of marked inactivity. He disdains chores and embraces exploits. Some of them, such as the marathon swims, are on definite missions; others, such as the mighty lifts, do not necessarily have any clear purpose (chs 30, 38, 58, 59, and 75). A disinclination to assist with routine blacksmithing work, which certainly demands strength (in hammering) but without the opportunity to show off,

leads to his ejection from Þorsteinn Kuggason's homestead (ch. 53) and thus adds to our sense of his marginal social and economic utility.

7. As we have already started to note, Grettir exhibits reluctance to form homosocial associations and functions deficiently within them. The obvious exception, his unexpected alliance, after an inauspicious start, with Hallmundr, tends to confirm the tendency, since Hallmundr is not fully human.
 - 7.1. In a culture that also consumed versions of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*, with their emphasis upon archaic forms of homosocial bonding, *Grettis saga* displays some ambivalence on the score of socialization and its value. The solemn declamation of the *Tryggðamál* at the Hegranessþing in ch. 72 is made to look foolish in the sequel and yet the author also insists on the nobility with which the farmers held this pledge in the face of Grettir's provocation. Hallmundr affirms that no man can trust in his own strength (ch. 62). But Guðmundr advises Grettir, "trú þú öngum svo vel að þú trúir eigi best sjálfum þér" (ch. 67: 166), "trust no one so well that you do not trust yourself [best]" (141). Grettir's behaviour shows the same ambivalence. The bonding in the small followings that he tends to cultivate is often fragile and compromised by disloyalty and treachery (e.g. ch. 55) or sometimes simple negligence. Grettir is literally "let down" on two occasions when supposed helpers fail to maintain their "festarhaldinu", "hold on the rope" (chs 18 and 66; cf. Óskar Halldórsson 1982:14). Equally, his characteristically cryptic and delphic manner of speech falls short of linguistic cooperativeness.
 - 7.2. Games with other young males are classically an avenue towards socialization and they are depicted in this saga as an event for the whole wider community. Characteristically, in a process I shall examine later in this paper, Grettir is not fairly matched in his game, his opponent being Auðunn Ásgeirsson, who is several years older than fourteen-year-old Grettir. Between them they fall into a fight which does nothing to foster goodwill, though eventually reconciliation is effected (ch. 15). Soon afterwards we see him in his lair under the boat on Hafliði's ship (ch. 17), declining either to share in the work or to buy himself off from working. Instead he foments discord with satirical verses. His attentions to the young wife of Bárðr, who stitches up his sleeves to hold the warmth in, look like a case of persisting attachment to a surrogate maternal figure, though of course a sexual element is hinted at as well. The combination of indolence and a desire to be coddled and kept warm is another trait tending to identify Grettir with the *kolbíttr* type in this episode, though earlier he was described as not one to recline beside the fire in the hall (ch. 14). On the other hand, as the ship gets more leaky and Grettir sees the dire necessity of

contributing to the common cause his efforts are Herculean and leave the rest of the crew deeply impressed. That is in accord with the spasmodic and exhibitionistic work patterns I have already noted.

- 7.3. The protagonist in this saga is typically seen enacting resistance to male homosociality, not solidarity with it. In a series of scenes Grettir is shown forcibly held by a hostile male crowd. At Ísafjörður a group of older lower-class men tries to hang him in the forest, after the style of Víkarr and other mythic victims, until the protective female figure of Þorbjörg comes to his rescue. Auðunn's violence against the adolescent Grettir, on two of its mentions in the saga, though not in the initial context, is also presented as a form of strangulation. Possibly this motif is reinforced by the status of "Auðunn" as a name for Óðinn, the god specifically associated with hanging and the gallows. Now the fact that hanging appears to have been a rather archaic penalty by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not mentioned in *Grágás* though occasionally exacted on thieves (Guðrún Nordal 1998:200-01), might lead us to speculate that the saga in invoking this route to death is harking back to atavistic fears – fears triggered by male homosocial oppression of the kind we see inflicted by bands of berserks in chs 19 and 40. Classically, initiatory rites evoke fear among the initiands. In traditional societies senior males remove young males from their nurturing female kin and subject them to symbolic death, often in the form of physical torture or sensory deprivation, so as to bring them to new life as fully adult members of male cult groups (Clunies Ross 1994:225). From the viewpoint of the initiand, these trials appear sacrificial, with himself as the victim. He fears that he is going to die and that his tormentors are enemies rather than male relatives dressed up to terrify him (Clunies Ross 1994:225-26). Analogous points could be made about college and gang initiations in New Zealand and other nations. It is this adversarial viewpoint on male socialization that seems recurrently to underlie the saga narration.
- 7.4. Correspondingly, Grettir's heterosexual associations are constructed as of short duration or little enduring consequence. His sexual feats, like his other feats, are spasmodic and exhibitionistic and there is even anatomical reason to doubt his full maturation (ch. 75). He has a child, if local gossip is correct, by Steinvör, the housewife at Sandhaugar (chs. 64-67), but no marriage is contemplated and the liaison is short-lived. The saga seems to underline that society does not achieve propagation of an enduring kind through the likes of Grettir when it reports that the son died at the age of seventeen and that there are no sagas about him. Again, it is his half-brother Þorsteinn, with Spes, who transcends this incapacity.
- 7.5. The emphasis on persisting childhood attachments and limitations

might prompt us to a comparison with *Parcevals saga*, which, in common with other *riddarasögur*, must have been incorporated into the Icelandic ethos to some degree by the fourteenth century. Parceval, like Grettir, would have been readily explicable as a *kolbíttr*, and whereas in Chrétien's telling of the story the resolution of the Fisher King mystery brings him to full maturation, such a conclusive moment of transition never arrives in the extant Scandinavian version (Weber 1986:442).

8. To summarize, the saga constructs Grettir as dominated by his maternal heritage and upbringing. Because of the nature of that input, his interactions with the community are typically double-edged. Where the routine operations of society are concerned, he is shown as an unreliable member (cf. Óskar Halldórsson 1977:635). Instead, his function is as a carnivalesque disrupter of normal social and economic processes – a trickster, a jester, a gadfly. If we posit an audience that covertly resented externally imposed authority and found its sense of independence compromised (as it well might in fourteenth-century economic and political circumstances), we can easily extrapolate to the appeal of such a role. Simultaneously, however, where society finds itself in non-routine circumstances, Grettir possesses special powers to help. His helpfulness centres on rescuing human lives and property interests by entering at sacrificial cost into a halfway world between human and non-human kinds. It is at least arguable, though hard to prove, that for contemporary Icelanders this halfway world was intensely real, a reification of deep-seated fears that Grettir enacts and to that extent helps to dispel.

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