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The Precocious Child: A Difficult Thirteenth-Century Icelandic Saga Ideal

On the day before Ásgrímr plans to leave to go raiding, in *Þorsteins þátr tjaldstæðings*,¹ his wife, Þorkalta, gives birth to a baby boy. With no clear motivation for his action provided by the þátr, Ásgrímr decides to have the child exposed. He orders his slave to start preparing a grave for the body. The newborn child, however, has other ideas. He wants to live; and upon hearing his father's order, he expresses this desire, clearly and succinctly, in a well formulated verse. Ásgrímr's prompt response may not contain a direct expression of surprise, but nevertheless the precocious articulation of a verse from an infant who is less than a day old clearly has a profound effect upon him. He says, "Víst skaltu lifa, frændi, ok munt verða inn mesti merkismaðr af þessum fyrirburð."² In one brief moment, then, after a single, marvellous act performed by his son, Ásgrímr changes his attitude towards the infant. He progresses from wanting to kill him, to believing that he will grow up to be an exceptional man. Ásgrímr accepts his child, has him sprinkled with water, and names him Þorsteinn.³

The story of Þorsteinn Ásgrímsson's escape from exposure and his subsequent acceptance by his father underscores the value that thirteenth-century Icelanders placed on the characteristic of precocity in a child. Precocity, in fact, was one of the most esteemed attributes that a saga-child could possess.⁴ It was, however, an attribute laden with many difficulties. In the following paper, I intend to examine the ideal of the precocious child in thirteenth-century Iceland. Using the Icelandic sagas and *Grágás* as primary sources reflecting the culture of thirteenth-century Iceland,⁵ I will first show that precocity was considered in general to be an ideal trait for a child to display. I will then examine the complexity of precocity, showing that thirteenth-century Icelanders were aware enough of the multi-dimensional nature of this trait for saga writers to use it in order to develop unusual and ambiguous characters. Finally, I will examine the negative aspects of precocity to show that, although thirteenth century Icelanders valued it in a child, they were nevertheless aware of the problems which could occur if it developed unguided or in a misdirected way. Thus they attempted to place limits on the trait of precocity in a child, valuing it only to the extent that a child's behaviour remained congruent to those of normal children, but finding it problematic if it developed to the extent that a child attempted to claim the power held only by adults.

¹ "Þorsteins Þátr Tjaldstæðings," *Harðar Saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, vol. XIII, Íslenzk Fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritaflög, 1991), chapter 1.

² "Þorsteins Þátr Tjaldstæðings," chapter 1.

³ For a summary on the rite of child exposure, see the entry "Exposure of children" in Rudy Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Stuttgart: D.S. Brewer, 1993), p. 77; and Peter Foote, and David M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement* (London: Sidwick and Jackson, 1974), p. 114.

⁴ Foote, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 116.

⁵ I build my argument upon the conclusion argued by Torfi Tulinius that 'even a highly fictional narrative...can provide valuable information about thirteenth-century Iceland.' See Torfi H. Tulinius, "Inheritance, Ideology, and Literature: Hervarar Saga Ok Heiðreks," *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. Gisli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), p. 148.

The Old Icelandic term *bráð-görr*, a composite word formed from the combination of *bráð* meaning 'haste'⁶ and *görr*, the past participle of the verb *görra*, meaning 'skilled'⁷ can be described by the English term *precocity*.⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *precocity* as 'early maturity, premature development'.⁹ Precocity is a term, therefore, which relates the development of an individual, or a small group of individuals, to a norm. As precocity is a relative term, a culture can only possess a sense of it if the culture recognises a standardised means of measuring development. Concerning children, thirteenth-century Icelandic culture can be considered to have possessed such a means of measurement. Age was calculated according to the passage of years, and was expressed in terms of the number of complete winters through which one had lived.¹⁰ Precocity also requires a recognition of maturity and development; a transformation from one state to another over a period of time. Again, concerning children, thirteenth-century Icelandic culture can be considered to have recognised physical and mental changes experienced by a person from infancy to adulthood.¹¹ In early Icelandic society, then, precocity highlighted the possibility of occasional tension between the standardised means of measuring maturity, and the actual physical and mental transformation from childhood to adulthood of a minority of individuals, when that physical and mental transformation was faster than the norm.

In the world of the saga characters, the evidence suggests that this tension was valued. The children whose rate of maturity was faster than average were, in general, esteemed. In *Kormáks saga*, therefore, the description of Ásmundur as 'ungr at aldri ok bráðgörr'¹² is a positive one; as is the portrayal of Olof, in *Vígund's saga*, when she is described as being very courteous at a young age.¹³ *Finnboga saga* offers a good example of the value upon which precocity was placed in the saga-world. The eponymous hero of this saga, like the eponymous hero of *Þorsteins saga tjaldstæðings*, begins his life with the threat of exposure. Unlike Þorsteinn, however, Finnbogi is not saved by his father's last minute change of heart. He is left outside, most likely to die,¹⁴ and is saved from probable death by peasants who subsequently rear him as though he were

⁶ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 77.

⁷ Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 225.

⁸ It is defined by Cleasby/Vigfusson as 'early ripe.' See Cleasby, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 77.

⁹ William Little, H.W. Fowler, and Jessie Coulson, *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 1651.

¹⁰ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, ed., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás 2. The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), p. 30.

¹¹ Anna Hansen, "Parent Roles in Early Icelandic Society," Unpublished thesis, The University of Sydney, 2001, chapter 4.

¹² "Kormáks Saga," *Vatnsdæla Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939), chapter 7.

¹³ "Vígundar Saga," *Kjalnesinga Saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959), chapter 2.

¹⁴ For discussions on the nature and function of child exposure in early Icelandic society, see Carol J. Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Old Norse Society," *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988); Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Juha Pentikäinen, *The Nordic Dead-Child Tradition: A Study in Comparative Religion*, trans. Antony Landon, *Academia Scientiarum Fennica* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1968); John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 289; Jón Steffensen, "Aspects of Life in Iceland in the Heathen Period," *The Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 17 (1968), p. 197; Gert Kreutzer, *Kindheit Und Jugend in Der Altnordischen Literatur. Teil I: Schwangerschaft, Geburt Und Früheste Kindheit*. (Münster: Kleinheinrich, 1987); Nancy L. Wicker, "Selective Female Infanticide as Partial Explanation for the Death of Women in Viking Age Scandinavia," *Violence And Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998).

their own. When Finnbogi's biological parents become aware of his existence, his mother accepts him willingly, but his father, Ásbjörn, is initially reluctant to do so.¹⁵ Finnbogi, however, is a precocious child. He turns six winters old and the saga says that 'þá var hann eigi minni en þeir, at tólf vetra váru.'¹⁶ When he is twelve years old, Finnbogi fights with his bare hands and kills an exceptionally troublesome three year old bull. The saga reports that:

Öllum þótti þetta it mesta þrevirki orðit af tólf vetra gomlum manni. Nú fréttir þetta maðr frá manni, nær ok fjarri. Hann var fálátr hversdagliga; gaf hann at fám niutum gaum, utan fór með leik sínum bæði nætr ok daga. Gerist Ásbjörn við hann fleiri ok fleiri, svá sem hann sér, at hann er afbragð auðarra manna.¹⁷

Finnbogi's precocity wins him his father's respect. Following this incident, Ásbjörn is more willing to converse with his son, and even respects him enough to lend him a boat and some men in order to perform the rescue mission that leads to his meeting with the man who will confer his name upon him.¹⁸

If precocity was considered to be a positive trait for a saga-child to possess, the binary opposite of it, immaturity, was considered to be a negative trait. For example, in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Glúmr's lack of precocity is listed amongst other negative traits that are described accumulatively in order to portray him in a negative way:

En Glúmr skipti sér ekki af um bússýslu, þótti heldr óbráðgerr i uppruna. Hann var fámálugr ok fálátr jaðnan, hár maðr vexti ok rjúkkut skolbrúnn, hvítr á hár ok réthárr, krakkligr ok þótti heldr setnigr maðrinn, fór ekki til mannamóta.¹⁹

Another example of slow development described in a negative manner is that of Grettir in *Grettis saga*.²⁰

If precocity was considered by thirteenth century Icelanders to be, on the whole, a positive characteristic for a child to possess, it was nevertheless not a simple one to define. Precocity is a general term which compares the actual rate of growth of an individual to his or her expected rate of growth. The rate of growth of a human child, however, can be measured in a number of different areas.²¹ Physical growth is one such area, and can be assessed by measuring different aspects of it, such as height and weight, over a period of time. Intellectual growth is another possible area of growth, which has been historically assessed by measuring aspects of it, such as memory and the ability to reason.²² Thus it can be seen that it is not sufficient merely to suggest that a child is precocious; it is necessary to define the area, or even the specific characteristic, in which he or she is prodigious.

¹⁵ "Finnboga Saga," *Kjainesinga Saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, *Íslensk Fornrit XIV* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), chapter 6.

¹⁶ *Finnboga Saga*, chapter 4.

¹⁷ *Finnboga Saga*, chapter 7.

¹⁸ *Finnboga Saga*, chapter 8.

¹⁹ "Víga-Glúms Saga," *Eyfirðinga Sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslensk Fornrit IX* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), chapter 5.

²⁰ "Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar," *Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, *Íslensk Fornrit VII* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), chapter 14.

²¹ Some of the most famous examples of studies into child development have examined cognitive development. See Jean Piaget, "States of Cognitive Development," *Jean Piaget: The Man and His Ideas*, ed. R.I. Evans (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1973).

²² See, for example, Alfred Binet, *L'etude Experimentale De L'intelligence* (Paris: Schleicher Frères, 1903).

Thirteenth-century Icelanders recognised a large number of areas in which a saga-child could display aspects of precocity. The most common of these were described in the areas of physical growth and strength. For example, Óláfr in *Hávarðar Saga Ísfróðings* is 'mikill vexti, friðr sýnum';²³ and Ogmundr of *Kormáks saga* is 'snimma mikill ok sterkr'.²⁴ Precocious physical strength is such an important aspect of Þórólfr Skallagrímsson's character that, in *Egils saga*, it is prescribed to him twice in his introduction:

Þórólfr var langt um fram jafnaldra sína at afli;²⁵

and:

snimma var hann svá fullkominn at afli.²⁶

The aspects of precocity which Finnbogi in *Finnboga saga* displays are, as I have already shown, aspects of strength. Children could also display aspects of aesthetic precocity. Thus, Óláfr in the example from *Hávarðar Saga Ísfróðings* which I have quoted above is not only large but is handsome in appearance; and Bolli Bollason of *Laxdæla saga* is described as 'snimma mikill ok vænn'.²⁷ Children could also be considered precocious in terms of their skills. Þorsteinn Ásgrímsson of *Þorsteins þáttir Tjaldstæðings*, which I described earlier, displays the characteristic of linguistic precocity;²⁸ and Bjarni in *Grœnlendinga saga* shows an early talent for sailing and travel.²⁹ The example of Olof of *Víglands saga* shows that proper social interaction with other people, as well as treatment of others, could also be an area in which a child could display aspects of precocity.

With so many areas in which a saga-child was able to show rapid development, the feature of precocity in saga characters is better defined as a multi-dimensional trait. Theoretically, if precocity is multi-dimensional, then it is possible for some saga-characters to be precocious in one or two areas, and not precocious in others. For a number of saga-characters this does not seem to be the case, and quite a few of the saga-children seem to be good at everything. Sinfjötli of *Völsunga saga*, for example, displays precocity in the areas of physical growth, strength, appearance, and courage.³⁰ Þórólfr Skallagrímsson of *Egils saga* displays precocity in the areas of physical growth, strength, appearance, and social ability.³¹ Gunnlaugr of *Gunnlaugs saga*

²³ "Hávarðar Saga Ísfróðings," *Vestfirðinga Sögur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson, and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk Fornrit VI (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), chapter 1.

²⁴ *Kormáks Saga*, chapter 1.

²⁵ Sigurður Nordal, ed., *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslensk Fornrit II (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), chapter 31.

²⁶ *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 31.

²⁷ "Laxdæla Saga," *Laxdæla Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk Fornrit V (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), chapter 56.

²⁸ *Þorsteins Þáttir Tjaldstæðings*, chapter 1.

²⁹ "Grœnlendinga Saga," *Byrbyggja Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslensk Fornrit IV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), chapter 2.

³⁰ "Völsunga Saga," *Fornaldar Sögur norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, vol. I (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), chapter 6.

³¹ *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 31.

displays precocity in the areas of physical growth, strength, ambition, poetic ability, travel and exploration.³²

Although a large number of major saga characters display precocity in multiple areas, several also exhibit the feature of being precocious in many areas, whilst being notably immature in one. Hǫrǫr in *Harðar saga* is a good example of this. His infancy is described in the following passage:

Litlu síðar fæddi Signý sveinbarn; sá var Hǫrǫr nefndr. Hann var snemma mikill vexti ok vænn at áliti, en ekki dálíga bráðgerð fyrst í því, at hann gekk eigi eim saman, þá er hann var þrjúvetr at aldri; þetta þótti monnum kynligt ok eigi bráðgerviligt, svá sem hann var frágerðamaðr at öllu öðru.³³

When Hǫrǫr does begin to walk, his first steps end disastrously. He falls into the lap of his mother, Signý, and breaks her precious pendant, the only part of her property that had remained in her possession after she had given the bulk of it to her brother, and after her horse had died. The breaking of the pendant is symbolic, representing both Signý's isolation from her family and her unhappiness in marriage, as well as foreshadowing Hǫrǫr's future isolation from Signý's family. However, most important in this scene is Signý's prediction of her son's ill fortune. She says to Hǫrǫr:

"Ill varð þín ganga in fyrsta, ok munu hér margar illar optir fara, ok mun þó verst in síðasta."³⁴

The slow development of Hǫrǫr's ability to walk does, indeed, turn out to be prophetic. Bad luck in journeys haunts him for the rest of his life. The mass killing of his followers on Hólmr, for instance, is carried out by means of a duplicitous ferrying of his people from Hólmr to the mainland.³⁵ Most importantly, however, Hǫrǫr himself dies as a result of a strange affliction called 'herfjöturr' which seems to impede his ability to move³⁶ and allows him to be caught and killed by his enemies.³⁷

What is notable about Hǫrǫr's one aspect of immature growth amongst his multiple aspects of precocious growth is not so much the way that the one aspect of immature growth highlights a flaw in his character, a flaw which has deep ramifications for him throughout the remainder of the narrative, but is the way that the one aspect of immature growth interacts with the multiple aspects of precocious growth to produce a somewhat tragic figure. This can be seen clearly in one of the major turning points in the saga; the scene where Hǫrǫr faces Sóti in his burial mound. Hǫrǫr's meeting with Sóti can be considered to be one of the ill-fated journeys that Signý predicts for her son, which is foreshadowed by Hǫrǫr's immature ability to walk. By the end of the journey, Hǫrǫr is cursed by Sóti to die,³⁸ and he has also received the sword that will

³² "Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu," *Borgfirðinga Sögur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk Fornrit III (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritaálag, 1938), chapter 4.

³³ "Harðar Saga," *Harðar Saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson, and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslensk Fornrit XIII (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritaálag, 1991), chapter 7.

³⁴ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 7.

³⁵ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 34.

³⁶ Britt-Mari Näsström, "Healing Hands and Magical Spells," *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society. Proceedings from the 11th International Saga Conference. 2-7 July 2000. University of Sydney*, ed. Geraldine Barnes, and Margaret Chmies Ross (Sydney: Centre of Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), p. 358.

³⁷ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 36.

³⁸ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 15.

be the instrument he uses to commit the crime leading to his outlawry, the killing of Auðr.³⁹ If Hǫrðr's immature ability to walk has predicted the ill outcome of his journey to Sóti's burial mound, the adult traits of strength and courage predicted by the precocious strength and promising nature of his childhood have led him to undertake the journey in the first place. It is Hǫrðr's courage that inspires him to pledge himself to the journey.⁴⁰ It is Hǫrðr's sense of honour that leads him to continue with the journey, even when his companions wish to discontinue it,⁴¹ and it is a combination of honour and bravery that leads Hǫrðr to enter Sóti's mound alone, even though the *qusst* had not been his idea in the first place.⁴² Thus it can be seen that it is not just Hǫrðr's weakness – his fate to experience bad results on the journeys he makes – which lead to his downfall. It is an interplay of his strengths and weaknesses. For if Hǫrðr did not possess courage, strength and some of the positive aspects of saga characters, he would not have been tempted to initiate journeys in the first place, and would therefore not be able to experience the bad outcomes that are fated to be the results of such journeys.

The interplay of precocity and immaturity in saga characters as predictors of a lifelong interplay between character strengths and weaknesses is also apparent in the character of Egill in *Egils saga*. Egill is a character who displays precocity in size and physical strength. Like Finnbofi of *Finnboga saga*, his size and strength seem to develop at twice the normal rate, as

bá er hann var þrívetr, þá var hann mikill ok sterkr, svá sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er váru sex vetra eða sjau.⁴³

Egill is also precocious linguistically,⁴⁴ and as one of the great saga characters, his precocity is reported in a saga other than the one which has been named after him.⁴⁵ In *Gunnlaugs saga*, his precocity is reported as a standard against which his son's attributes can be measured. It is said of Þorsteinn, Egill's son, that 'engi var hann afrekamaðr um vöxt eða afl sem Egill, faðir hans.'⁴⁶ Despite the multiple areas in which Egill displays precocity, he displays a lack of precocity in his ability to interact with other people. It is said of him that 'heldr var hann illr viðreignar, er hann var í leikum með öðrum ungmennum.'⁴⁷ Thus the interplay between a positive character trait, physical strength, and a negative character trait, a bad temper, which leads to the death of the child Grímr in the ball game, is predicted by areas in which Egill has displayed precocity, and by the areas in which he has displayed immaturity.

Interplay of precocity and immaturity is by no means sufficient to explain Egill Skallagrímsson's character.⁴⁸ Despite being precocious in many areas, he is a difficult character, and

³⁹ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 21.

⁴⁰ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 14.

⁴¹ *Harðar Saga*, chapter 15.

⁴² *Harðar Saga*, chapter 15.

⁴³ *Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, chapter 31.

⁴⁴ *Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, chapter 31.

⁴⁵ Geraldine Barnes notes that personality is often revealed through 'the judgments of other characters.' See Geraldine Barnes, "Some Observations on Flóres Saga Ok Blankifútr," *Scandinavian Studies* 49 (1977), p. 51.

⁴⁶ *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, chapter 1.

⁴⁷ *Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, chapter 31.

⁴⁸ For example, Margaret Clunies Ross examines Egill's character in light of his poetic ability and notes that the 'character-portrait of the youthful Egill is presented mainly by the use of *exempla*, in which the saga-author links the boy's early manifestations of temperamental instability and reckless defiance of adult authority with the occasions of his earliest poetic compositions.' See Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Art of Poetry and the Figure of the Poet in Egils Saga," *Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. John Tucker (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1989), p. 138.

has a strained relationship with his father. There are, in fact, a number of other examples of precocious saga-children who experience strained relationships with their fathers and with society, and can be considered difficult children.⁴⁹ Gunnlaugr of *Gunnlaugs saga* is such a character. He is precocious in size, physical strength, ambition and linguistic skill. Despite his precocity, however, he is a difficult child.⁵⁰ Like Egill, he has a difficult relationship with his father; the relationship between Gunnlaugr and his father becomes so strained that Gunnlaugr leaves his father's home, and chooses his own residence elsewhere. Snorri Þorgrímsson (Snorri Goði) is another precocious character who is a difficult child. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, he displays aspects of precocity in wishing to begin his journeys abroad at the age of fourteen.⁵¹ Snorri does not have a difficult relationship with his father, who is dead, but he does have a difficult relationship with his stepfather, Þorkr.⁵²

In many of the examples in the sagas where precocious children are difficult children, the children are not difficult despite being precocious, but are difficult due to a side effect of precocity. It is the nature of precocity to act as a link between two states; for the purposes of this paper these two states are childhood and adulthood. Precocity is the rapid development in a child of characteristics that, when the child is an adult, will be fully developed. It is important, however, to note that the term precocity, when used to describe a child, indicates a characteristic that is still in a stage of development. Thus, when a saga-child is described as being precocious in a particular trait, he or she has not yet reached full development in that trait; they are simply developing at a rate faster than normal for children of their age. In the example of Egill, who has, at the age of three, the strength of a child aged six – or in the example of Finnþogi who, at the age of six has the strength of a child aged twelve – it is easy to see that the precocity that is admired in the child does not raise the level of that child's abilities to the point where he or she could be considered equal in capability to an adult. The child's capabilities ideally remain within the general capabilities of a child. The difficulty with the characteristic of precocity, however, is that a side-effect of it is the possibility that a child will develop adult capabilities while still being legally a minor; more troublesome than this possibility, however, is the possibility that a precocious child will not only develop the capabilities of an adult before he or she reaches the age of majority, but will attempt to seize the authority and power of adults.⁵³

In each of the cases of difficult, precocious children that I have described above, the child has attempted to do just that: to seize the power and authority of adulthood. In the case of Gunnlaugr, he has, as a child, organised his own residence, something which *Grágás* suggests only an adult is able to do for himself.⁵⁴ In the case of Snorri Goði, he wins wealth for himself whilst he is a child; something which, if not strictly an adult prerogative, was nevertheless generally considered to be so,

⁴⁹ For an analysis of Egill Skallagrímsson in the context of troublesome children in the sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders," *The Saga-Book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* (forthcoming), p. 7. Also in his paper, Jakobsson makes the important point that 'the authors of the Sagas of Icelanders were not only aware of the existence of children, but in some instances saw them as different, dangerous and unpredictable.' (p. 15).

⁵⁰ *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, chapter 4.

⁵¹ "Eyrbyggja Saga," *Eyrbyggja Saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, and Matías Þórðarson, Íslenskt Fornrit IV (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), chapter 13.

⁵² For example, *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 13.

⁵³ Carol Clover makes a distinction between the power of adults and the power of children when she writes that the binary opposition between *úmeð* (including children) and *með* is 'the binary, the one that cuts most deeply and the one that matters: between strong and weak, powerful and powerless or disempowered, swordworthy and unswordworthy, honored and unhonored or dishonored, winners and losers.' Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 68.2 (1993), p. 380.

⁵⁴ Vilhjálmur Finsens, ed., *Grágás*. *Konungsbók* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1974), p. 167.

to judge by the inheritance laws which held that property inherited by a child was to be cared for by the adult upon whom he was a dependent.⁵⁵ In Egill's case, Egill, as a child, takes upon himself the responsibility of avenging crimes that have been committed against him,⁵⁶ a responsibility that usually fell upon the father or guardian of a child.⁵⁷

The ideal of the precocious child in the sagas, therefore, is a complex one. Often used as a character-tag to herald the positive traits of a child, precocity could, nevertheless, have its negative aspects in the saga-world. Dangerous was the combination of precocious development in some traits, and immature development in others, as an interplay between the two could lead to disaster. From the adult perspective from which the sagas have been written, however, the most threatening aspect of precocity was the possibility of precocious children developing beyond the bounds of acceptable precocity into areas of dangerous precocity. This aspect of precocity could, it was feared, lead to an adults' authority being threatened.

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⁵⁵ Finsens, ed., Grágás. Konungsbók, p. 226.

⁵⁶ Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar, chapter 40.

⁵⁷ Finsens, ed., Grágás. Konungsbók, p. 166.

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