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Received 6 Nov 2016 | Accepted 8 Feb 2017 | Published 2 Mar 2017

DOI: 10.1057/palcomms.2017.12

OPEN

What manner of man is this? Representations of monstrosity, identity and world view in early medieval narrative

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ABSTRACT This article considers the representation of monstrous characters in three Icelandic sagas, examining the influence that period, setting and genre have upon the nature of that presentation. In two cases, the characters presented are essentially human (though present inhuman, or non-human characteristics that place them outside the spectrum of normal human behaviour); in the third case, the character presented is semi-human, having a family background that includes non-human ancestry (trolls). In all cases, the focus of interest is upon the acceptability of that character within the social context of the saga, and the extent to which their monstrosity is seen as out-of-place, socially awkward, or severely threatening to those around them. The central consideration of the article is that presentation has less to do with genre and setting, and is more a part of an overall theme within much saga narrative, which considers the individual in relation to their society, and the tensions that emerge from strong characteristics which may not always have a place within their social context. Essentially, as Icelandic society develops, and the sense of Icelandic national identity becomes more stabilised, there is a distinct tension between those who are skilled in combat (but who, because of this, can present a threat to others) and those who are skilled with words (often exemplified through success in legal exchanges). The former might be deemed more useful in an emergent “frontier” society, the latter, when that society becomes more “polite”. In presenting this analysis, the paper explores the traditional consideration of sagas and their society through the lens of social acceptability. Do these (often quite comical, as well as perceptibly threatening) characters represent a type and, if so, does the extent of their monstrosity really matter? Is a troll, in one setting, any different to a thuggish human, in another? The article pursues this discussion through the analysis of three scenes from separate sagas, set against a brief discussion of the historical and literary backgrounds of saga narrative, more generally. The first, from *Njáls Saga*, presents a straightforward “historical” presentation; the second, from *Ketils Saga Hængs*, a straightforward “mythical” setting. The final presentation, from *Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar*, presents a hybrid model, which blurs the relationship between the historical and the fantastic through the character of Grettir, who inhabits both the human and non-human environments of the saga with equal

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discomfort. He is a character somewhat out of place, and out of time, and his liminality is representative of the uncertainty of the saga in presenting what might be deemed to be “acceptable” within contemporary society. The article concludes that such considerations are important in gaining an understanding of the relationships between individual saga characters and their social environment, and can provide a context for analysis which overcomes considerations of genre, history, or fantasy. This article is published as part of a collection on gothic and horror.

Introduction

Monsters take many forms. In the transition from folktale to literary narrative (whether prose or poetry) in early medieval culture, the presentation of that which might be deemed as “monstrous” can vary tremendously. These presentations can range from, in the most moderate sense, mere awkwardness, to the extreme of non-humanity, presenting a pronounced threat to those we define as “human”. In most cases, portrayal of monstrosity focuses on the portrayal of a sense of “the other”, those characteristics which present a character as awkward, taciturn, unconstrained by the mores of society or simply “not one of us”. In some cases, “other” characterises what we might perceive as the unnecessary, old-fashioned, awkward, or no-longer-relevant for the contemporary reader. Elsewhere “other” may be thought of as far more threatening; antisocial, dangerous, malignant or simply evil.

The thesis of this article is that such presentations (whether they are naturalistic or fantastic) focus upon the world view that the narrative wishes to present, and the extent to which such presentation is aimed at promotion of that world view. In some cases (particularly where the presentation is fantastic, and the characters presented are extremes of such concepts as good and evil) depiction of the monstrous is straightforward and lacks nuance. In others (particularly where the monstrosity of an individual is a matter of character, rather than species or type) the narrative can often be seen to present a tension, or crisis, in its depiction. Monstrosity, in this context, can be laudable, as well as potentially disruptive or threatening.

This tendency is particularly noticeable when the narrative context is entirely naturalistic, or event quasi-historical in presentation. Often the tension presented is one of “old world” and “new world” and the characters whose monstrosity is deemed to be the cause of difficulty are only really guilty of operating in a manner that no longer fits the mores of contemporary society. What becomes interesting is that such presentations are really only naturalistic versions of much more clearly defined versions of the monstrous, where beings such as trolls, ogres (and even dragons) are representative of a bygone era, where value systems were different and priorities changed.

These tensions can be viewed as ways in which early medieval narratives seek to characterise those aspects of individual behaviour which can be said to fit in to a modern world view and, in so doing, to reinforce the values which that world view presents. This tendency becomes particularly interesting (and relevant) when the society in which the narrative exists is one which is, itself, under tension, or subject to a changing environment. For that reason, much of the discussion on this article will focus on medieval Iceland during the period AD 950–1400. This period can be sub-divided into two, presenting different aspects of Icelandic national identity: the *söguöld* (or “saga age”, the period of time that is the focus of the majority of the saga narratives that are located in Iceland itself), from 950–1200 and the (slightly overlapping) age of saga writing, from 1130–1400, or thereabouts. That narratives written in this period should concern

themselves with an historical period of time (yet one within reasonably recent history) is itself interesting. That they should be doing so at a time when the very identity of Iceland as an independent nation is in question, is entirely fascinating.

In pursuing this discussion, I will adapt the stylistic technique presented by Erich Auerbach (Auerbach and Said, 2003) and developed by Pizarro (1989) of analysis of three separate scenes in saga narrative: Chapters 119 and 120 of *Njáls Saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954), Chapter 2 of *Ketils Saga Hængs* (Jónsson, 1959), and Chapters 34 and 35 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Jónsson, 1936).

Each of these discussions will focus upon the presentation of monstrosity, in a human or non-human form, within the context of the perceived genre within which that presentation operates. The chapter from *Njáls Saga* has been selected to provide a straightforward realistic presentation (within the context of the *Íslendingasögur*). That from *Ketils Saga Hængs* provides a straightforward presentation of the fantastic (within the context of the *Fornaldarsögur*). *Grettis Saga* is more problematic, in that it both blurs generic boundaries and adopts a hybrid approach to the presentation of monstrosity. Through analysis of each scene, within its own context, as well as across the intertextual presentation of all four scenes, I will consider the representation of individual traits of monstrosity and their cumulative effect upon our understanding of the society which both generated, and received, the narrative.

Each discussion will necessitate the need to quote from the sagas themselves and, as this discussion is for a non-specialist audience, I will include those quotations as English translations. In two cases (*Njáls Saga* and *Grettis Saga*), I will use the most readily available translation (Fox and Pálsson, 1974; Cook, 2001). In the case of *Ketils Saga Hængs*, I will provide a translation of the original text.

Text and context: setting the scene

This is neither the time, nor the place, to enter into a long discussion of the history of medieval Iceland (an approachable, though now perhaps a little dated, history in English may be found in Jóhannesson and Bessason, 2006). However, it is useful, at this stage, to set out some very basic characteristics of that time and place which will underpin the textual analysis which follows. Essentially, these are that:

- Iceland was a largely uninhabited island prior to the late ninth century (the date generally proposed is AD 874) when it was settled from the mainland of Scandinavia over a period of some 150 years. It is suggested in the sagas that much of the force behind this settlement derived from the settlers’ desire to move away from an increasingly centralized system of kingship in Norway.
- During that period, Icelandic society became gradually more and more organised, with a codification of laws, establishment of a rudimentary parliamentary system and structuring of

society. Largely, the formalisation of structure reflected the need for structure; as society became more complex it became more organised.

- In AD 1000 Iceland adopted Christianity as a common religion. It is suggested in the sagas that this was a peaceful process endorsed by the *Alþing* (the Icelandic parliament).
- In 1262-4, Iceland fell under the rule of the Norwegian royal house.
- In 1380, when Norway was, itself, annexed by Denmark, Iceland came under Danish rule.

These characteristics contain both “facts” (matters of some historical record) and assertions, chiefly assertions made within saga narratives. The nature of these assertion is, itself, indicative of the way in which the sagas generally tend to portray the Icelanders.

- They are strong self-willed characters (they do not wish to be ruled by a king).
- They have a strong sense of family (settlement generally happened by the gradual movement of kinship groups into particular regions of the country).
- They are essentially moral (they adopt Christianity without much argument).
- They maintain an organised and just society, codified by law and supported by a common structure of assembly (*þing*) and parliament (*alþing*).

It is also an inescapable conclusion that, at some point between AD874 and AD1262, those people living on the island of Iceland began to think of themselves as “Icelandic” and it is this feature of that society which renders it particular within a medieval European context. There is no such entity as an “aboriginal Icelander” and all Icelanders are, therefore settlers (or, to adopt a more modern sensibility, immigrants). There is also no long secular prose form in medieval European literary culture which provides such an overview of its society as the many and varied forms of the Icelandic saga. Hastrup (1990) has argued that these sagas were one way in which Icelanders began to capture and examine that sense of nationhood, or national identity, and it is this possibility that I will explore further.

The sagas themselves do not present a single generic model, or entity. This has seen much discussion elsewhere (Cardew, 2000) and I do not intend to repeat that discussion at length. However, in order to provide, once again, a context within which to place further discussion in this article, the following characteristics are those which I would present as most salient:

- Sagas are most commonly categorised through their subject matter, though there are also approaches which reflect upon the contemporaneity of their subject matter to the proposed date of writing (down) (Sigurður Nordal, 1952).
- There has been some discussion of the validity of the categorisations used, which has tended to focus upon their existence as “analytical categories”, emanating from scholarly discussion of the sagas, rather than as “ethnic genres” used within their contemporary society (Allen and Ben-Amos, 1978).
- The genres proposed by Nordal (1952) and most commonly used are:
 - *Byskupa Sögur* (Sagas of Bishops)
 - *Konunga Sögur* (Sagas of Kings)
 - *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders, also referred to as Family Sagas)
 - *Fornaldarsögur* (Legendary Sagas)

- *Riddara Sögur* (Chivalric Sagas, most commonly translations of other European texts)

- Of these, it could safely be argued that the *Íslendingasögur* have received most attention, particularly as they present a realistic (some have argued historical) presentation of medieval Icelandic society.
- At the same time, the *Fornaldarsögur*, although increasingly receiving more attention (see, for example, Torfi H. Tulinius and Eldevik, 2002), have never retained the same status in terms of their literary merit, being famously referred to by Klaus Von See as “mere childish fantasies”.
- The *Fornaldarsögur* present narratives which are: a) set further in the past than those of the *Íslendingasögur*; b) overtly more “fantastic” in their characterisation and use of non-human actors. However, as Ármann Jakobsson (1998–2001) has argued it would be wrong to assume that medieval Icelanders viewed representations of the fantastic as any less believable than more mundane day-to-day matters.
- Within these narratives, the non-human characters (particularly trolls) are often presented in a way common within Scandinavian folktale (Simpson, 1988) as representatives of a “bygone age”.

The proposition that will underpin this discussion is that, during this time of settlement, establishment, and focus on identity, two competing tendencies make themselves apparent throughout many saga narratives. On the one hand, there is the strong will and “fierce independence” of the individual Icelanders, which manifests itself in a tendency to localised disruption and dispute (see, for example, [Byock, 1982]). On the other, there is a tendency towards the transformation of physical argument into legal dispute (discussed most ably by Miller, 1990) often with an escalation of legal dispute which, itself, reverts once again to physical conflict, there being no policing agent, or executive arm of the legal system, to enforce the decisions of the court.

These tendencies could equally well be viewed in the context of that which is suitable for a “settlement age” (a modern comparison being the “frontier spirit” exhibited in narratives of the settlement of the United States, such as James Fenimore Cooper’s “leatherstocking” novels most famously exhibited in *The Last of the Mohicans* [Cooper, 2009]) and that which is necessary for “established” society, the “modern age” of medieval Iceland. Thus, narratives which focus upon the taciturn individualist and the wily lawyer (such as *Hrafnkels Saga* [Jónsson, 1945]) present colliding world views, as well as escalating feuds.

As is often the case in early literary (and folktale) narratives, fantastic beings can be used to symbolise a range of human characteristics or character types (Brewer, 1980). Thus, discussion of narratives presenting surly and self-contained curmudgeons dealing with upstart lawyers may well contrast (and present a similar world view) as those which present non-human and human interaction. In this respect, monstrosity is that which does not fit in, and might be seen to be threatening, to everyday society.

Establishing a realistic reference point: *Njáls Saga* chapter 119

Njáls Saga presents an archetype of the *Íslendinga Sögur*. The most “classical” of the “classical family sagas”, it has received much attention, on account of its significant contribution to the corpus, the intricacy of its narrative, its perceived historicity and its focus on the period around the Christianisation of Iceland (and presentation of a Christian hero, in the figure of Njáll Þorgeirsson).

The period of Christianisation provides an interesting context within which to present concepts of “old” and “new” within society. Taken at its most simplistic, it is easy to view Christian society as “new”, representing the way forward for a society which is viewing the events of the saga from some distance (the period of writing down being separated from the events portrayed by some two hundred years or so). However, the Christian hero, Njáll, is also, to some extent, unable to satisfactorily exist within the society of which he is a part. He becomes a martyr, which may be laudable from a Christian perspective (although he is not martyred on account of his Christianity, but simply because he ultimately refuses to defend himself), but which does not show him to be particularly successful within his own world. He is, perhaps, a man before his time.

If that is true, then the figure of Skarphéðinn, Njáll's eldest son and a significant “bit part player” in the Saga, is definitely looking backward, rather than forward.

The sons of Njal must now be named. Skarphedin was the eldest, a big and strong man and a good fighter. He swam like a seal and was swift of foot, quick to make up his mind and sure of himself; he spoke to the point and was quick to do so, though mostly he was even tempered. His hair was reddish-brown and curled and he had fine eyes; his face was pale and sharp-featured, with a bent nose, a broad row of upper teeth and an ugly mouth, and yet he was very like a warrior. (Cook, 2001: 43–44)

This opening description of Skarphéðinn sums up his character as being essentially focused on those aspects of behaviour and accomplishment that might be perceived as beneficial within a society where dependence on physical prowess and skill in arms are essential for dominance. Indeed, during the narrative that follows, it is most often Skarphéðinn that drives forward the physical action, taking up the fights, enacting vengeance when he, or his family, is wronged, and persistently contributing to the escalation of conflict. His part in the narrative is not central, but he is, yet, a major figure, and without his actions the saga would not grow to the climax of the banishment of Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (which, of course, then leads to his killing, and the need to avenge his killing, where, in chapter 78, Skarphéðinn plays the major part. This, in its turn, leads finally to the burning of Njáll and his family at Bergþorshvöll).

It is noteworthy, however, that the opening description of Skarphéðinn focuses also upon his way with words, both in terms of a quick tongue and an acerbic turn of phrase. On a number of occasions, it is Skarphéðinn who causes confrontation with his willingness to take the offensive in speech, as well as physical activity.

Skarhedin said, “Welcome to all of us!”

Hallgerd was standing on the porch and had whispered something to Hrapp.

She spoke: “No one standing here will say you are welcome.”

Skarphedin spoke: “Your words don’t count, for you’re either a cast-off hag or a whore.” (Cook, 2001: 155)

Chapter 119 of the saga leads us to a point in the narrative where, after the killing of Höskuldur Dala-Kollsson, and the whipping-up of revenge by his widow Hildigunnar, the Njálssons are canvassing support for a lawsuit at the Alþingi. This leads them into conversations with a number of powerful Icelanders, any of whom might be seen as significant allies. They are assisted, and counselled by Ásgrímur Elliða-Grímsson, who accompanies them to help make the case for support.

Initially, matters go well, and their first meeting, with Gizurr the White, leads to harmony and an offer of support. Next, however, they visit Skapti Þóroddsson, who is less willing to take up the offensive on their behalf. Matters become less cordial when Skapti comes into dispute with Skarphéðinn:

“Who’s that man,” said Skafti, “who goes fifth in line, a big man with a pale and luckless look about him, but fierce and troll-like?”

He answered, “My name is Skarphedin, and you have often seen me here at the Thing, but I must be smarter than you because I don’t need to ask your name. You’re Skafti Thoroddsson, but you called yourself Brush-head after you killed Ketil of Elda; you shaved your head and smeared tar on it. Then you paid slaves to cut some turf and prop it up so you could crawl under it for the night. Later you went to Thorolf Loftsson at Eyrar, and he took you in and smuggled you abroad in his flour sacks. (Cook, 2001: 200)

This scene is played out another four times: with Snorri the Priest, Hafur the wealthy, Guðmundur the Powerful and Þorkell Braggart. Each time, the powerful chieftain the group are visiting picks out Skarphéðinn from the group and asks about his nature and character. Each time, Skarphéðinn answers in such a way as to cause offence, escalating to the final encounter with Þorkell. By this time in the narrative, Skarphéðinn has been almost begged to keep silent:

We must watch our every step, for he is headstrong and obstinate. I must ask you, Skarphedin, not to take part in our conversation. (Cook, 2001: 203)

This encounter, however, goes no better than the others. As has become formulaic in this episode, Þorkell asks after the fifth man in the line-up:

Thorkel spoke: “Who is that big and frightening man who goes fifth in line, pale-looking and sharp-featured, with a wicked and luckless look about him?”

Skarphedin spoke: “My name is Skarphedin and there’s no need for you [to] pick out insulting words for me, an innocent man. It’s never happened that I threatened my own father or fought him, as you did with your father. Also, you haven’t come to the Althing often or taken part in lawsuits, and you’re probably handier at dirty work amidst your little household at Oxara. You really ought to pick from your teeth the pieces from the mare’s arse you ate before riding to the Thing—your shepherd watched you and was shocked that you could do such a filthy thing.” (Cook, 2001: 204)

It is this encounter that comes the nearest to physical aggression, as, following this exchange, both participants face up to one another, weapons drawn. It is Skarphéðinn’s raw aggression and physicality that ultimately takes the wind out of Þorkell’s sails:

With that [Skarphedin] broke away from his brothers and Kari and rushed towards Thorkel.

Then he spoke: “You have two choices, Thorkel Bully; sheathe your sword or sit down, or I’ll smash this axe into your head and split it down to your shoulders.”

Thorkel sheathed his sword at once and sat down; such a thing had never happened to him before or after. (Cook, 2001: 204)

Significantly, the outcome of these encounters is positive, rather than negative. Upon hearing of the encounter between Skarphéðinn and Þorkell, Guðmundur the Powerful becomes more kindly disposed to the Njálssons and decides to give them support after all.

Gudmund the Powerful learned what had happened between Skarphedin and Thorkel and had this to say: “You are all aware how things have gone between us and the people at Ljosavatn, but I’ve never had as much humiliation from them as Thorkel had just now from Skarphedin, and it’s good that it happened.”

Then Gudmund spoke to his brother Einar of Thvera: “Go along with all my men and help the Njalssons when the court convenes, and if they need help next summer, I’ll give it myself”. (Cook, 2001: 205)

This series of encounters shows Skarphéðinn as something of a conundrum. He is essentially impossible to manage, quick tempered and threatening to those around him. He draws attention upon himself, both through his physical presence and through his inherent ugliness (his outward aspect, perhaps, mirroring his inner character). Once questioned, he quickly bridles and causes the utmost offence he is capable of (though he tempers that offence with some antagonists, Snorri the Priest, for example). It seems, throughout the episode, that he is going to be the cause of trouble, and will ultimately lead to the Njálssons having no support in their legal dispute. Yet, in the end, it is the escalation of the encounters to the point of near violence, with Þorkell, that leads to resolution and an offer of support from possibly the most useful (and most powerful) quarter. Of most significance to this discussion is the portrayal of Skarphéðinn as something essentially monstrous in character. He is not non-human, but, at the same time, he is not a “civilized” being, and presents a dangerous edge in his engagement with others. It is notable that Skapti Þóroddsson refers to him as “tröllslegur” [troll-like] for it is this aspect which most places him in another era.

In their collection of Scandinavian folk tales Kvideland and Sehmsdorf (1988) include a number of examples of stories of trolls, which reveal them as inhabitants of a bygone age, somewhat slow-witted, inestimably powerful, but ultimately outwitted by the quicker, less physical, but more intelligent humans. The trolls of these tales are powerful, but not fitted to human society. They are a danger, but, at the same time, easily outwitted. This balance, emphasising the attributes needed to survive in a by-gone age against those needed for contemporary society, nicely mirror the representations of *Njáls Saga*. Here, as in many other sagas, physical force comes up against the force of law. It is good to be powerful, but power can be gained in a number of ways, and, increasingly, it is political and social power, achieved through status and the manipulation of others, that has the most relevance and chance of success.

Skarphéðinn epitomises the crisis of this dichotomy. He is undoubtedly a physically imposing individual. He is, equally, quick with his words but often, it seems, does not think too carefully before he speaks. Yet, in this episode of *Njáls Saga* it is a combination of word and action that finally wins support from Guðmundur. Skarphéðinn contributes in both arenas, but it is his sheer aggression in facing down Þorkell that prevents the situation escalating into violence (though we have no doubt he could have dealt with it, if it had). An escalation into violence would have placed the mission of the Njálssons on a completely different footing as, particularly at the location of the Alþingi, any violent act would have been insupportable, and brought retribution upon them.

His very death, and its aftermath, is enigmatic, and reinforces the somewhat syncretic nature of the saga, hovering on the verges between paganism and Christianity. Skarphéðinn, along with the rest of Njáll’s family, burns in the farm at Bergþórshvöll. While Njáll accepts his fate with equanimity, lying down with his wife under an ox hide and succumbing to the smoke and flames (though their bodies are unharmed when they are later found), Skarphéðinn, typically, fights until the last, but is ultimately trapped within the burning building.

When he is found:

... he had been standing up against the gable wall, and his legs were burned off almost up to the knees, but the rest of him was unburned. He had bitten into his upper lip. His eyes were open and not swollen. He had driven his axe into the gable wall so hard that half the blade was buried, and it had not lost its temper. (Cook, 2001: 230)

Skarphéðinn, in death, presents a familiar aspect: fierce, brave, unflinching and combative. He is as potentially dangerous as a corpse as he was when alive. However, the Saga is at pains to “lay him to rest” within its Christian setting:

Skarpedin was then stripped of his clothes, they had not been burned away. He had folded his arms in a cross, with the right arm above, and they found two marks on him, one between his shoulders and the other on his chest, and in both places a cross had been burned, and people thought he had probably burned these marks himself. Everybody said that it was easier to be in the presence of the dead Skarphedin than they had expected, for no one was afraid of him. (Cook, 2001: 230)

In this context (and at this moment) Skarphéðinn’s danger diminishes, and he finally becomes “at peace” with the next context in which he has found himself. He has existed within a world (at the point of the Christianisation of Iceland) where, to some extent, his physical prowess has been sufficiently valuable to those around him for them to live with his dangerous and problematic nature. Equally, at the point of the sagas’s writing and reception, this value may well have diminished and it is laid to rest by his seeming acceptance of the symbols of Christianity at the moment of his death.

Establishing a fantastic reference point: Ketils Saga Hængs

Of far less significance in the canon of the sagas, *Ketils Saga Hængs* is generally classified as a *fornaldarsaga* or legendary saga. It is the opening saga in a sequence often referred to as the *Hrafnistumanna Sögur* (the sagas about the inhabitants of the island of Hrafnista, somewhere off the coast of Norway). The sagas continue with narratives focusing on Ketill’s descendants Grímr “hairy cheek”, “Arrow”Oddr and Án “bow bender”. In choosing one of the *fornaldarsögur* I am seeking to establish a reference point at the other end of the historical/fantastic continuum to *Njáls Saga*. There is nothing remotely historical about the landscape of *Ketils Saga*; it is inhabited by trolls, giants, and magical events and is set in a period of pre-history which, surely, can have no direct relevance to the society in which it is presented for consumption.

At the same time, it is useful to note that parallels between the character of Ketill Hængr and Skarphéðinn do exist, not least in their relationship with (or, perhaps, to) the figure of a troll. Whilst Skarphéðinn is referred to as “troll-like”, Ketill’s father Hallbjörn is characterised as a “half troll” (which, in its turn, would seem to designate Ketill as a quarter-troll, assuming a human mother). Throughout the *Hrafnistumanna Sögur* the

question of troll-human relations (and relationships) is a constant theme and, indeed, it is the relationship with the much more overtly inhuman that forms the basis for chapter 2 of the Saga, the focus of this discussion.

Chapter 2 of *Ketils Saga* follows a reasonably predictable introductory chapter which establishes Ketill as a character. In this opening chapter we learn that:

- Ketill is the son of Hallbjörn the “half troll”. Ketill has an uneasy relationship with his father, preferring his mother.
- Ketill is an unpromising youth. Something of an archetypal “coal-biter” unwilling to do much except laze in front of the fire.
- However, when pushed into action, Ketill can perform the most extraordinary physical feats (such as bringing in the harvest almost single-handedly).

Chapter 2 of the saga is a short vignette, almost a separate tale in its own right, which relates the events of fishing trips that Ketill undertakes in 2 successive years. In brief, the narrative is this:

- There is a famine in the area and Ketill wishes to go fishing.
- Hallbjörn offers to accompany him, but is rebuffed.
- Hallbjörn then tells Ketill of three fjords in the area: Næstifjörður ([the] Next, or Nearest, Fjord), Miðfjörður (Middle Fjord), and Vitaðsgjafi (Sure-Giver). He gives Ketill to understand that he has visited these fjords and left in good stead with their occupants.
- In the first year, Ketill visit the Middle Fjord. Here he finds a cave and by the cave a store of food. He ransacks the store and scatters its contents. At the bottom he finds “salted man-meat”.
- Ketill waits and in the evening hears the noise of a “farmer” rowing towards the shore. The farmer lands and discovers the mess Ketill has made. He seems to understand that it is Ketill who has taken this action and makes direct (and disparaging) reference to him.
- Ketill strikes at “the giant” as he enters the cave, beheading him. He then goes home. Nothing is said of what happens when he gets home.
- The next summer Ketill travels out again, this time to Sure-Giver. He finds another cave, but no occupant, so he camps there. He discovers that in this fjord “a man may catch fish with his hands” and gets a good catch.
- The next morning, when he awakes, his catch is gone.
- On the second night, Ketill is awakened and sees a giant heading towards the boathouse with a large burden on his back. He strikes the giant in the back with his axe, which is trapped in the wound. (We learn the giant is called Kaldrani).
- Kaldrani escapes and gets to his cave. Ketill follows.
- When Kaldrani enters the cave there are trolls inside, sitting by the fire. The trolls laugh at Kaldrani who declares he needs some ointment for his wound.
- Ketill enters and pretends he is a doctor and calls for ointment and something with which to bind the wound. The troll disappears further inside the cave and while he is there Ketill pulls the axe out of the wound and deals Kaldrani his “death blow”.
- Ketill then goes home. This time Hallbjörn asks him if he “saw anyone about”?
- Ketill simply replies “Yes” and that concludes the chapter.

The narrative has an internal logic and identity to it, which has little to do with the rest of the saga. It establishes a heroic aspect to Ketill, but, at the same time, confirms that his father’s nickname of “half-troll” might represent reality, rather than interpretation of character. In this respect, it places Ketill in a

liminal relationship with the troll/human split that his father seems to embody. He could, in effect “go either way” and this tendency is demonstrated in the narrative that follows (which shows him in two liaisons, the first with a Lapp woman, Hrafnhildr, an imposing woman with a “face an ell wide” (an ell being the distance between the elbow and the end of the middle finger, about 18 inches) and the second with his human bride, Sigríðr, a match somewhat imposed upon him by his father.

The first of these liaisons produces a son, Grímr “hairy cheek”, who is the subject of the second of the *Hrafnistumanna Sögur*. The second, a daughter named (somewhat tactlessly one might suppose), Hrafnhildr, whose marriage becomes the focus of the last section of the saga. These two liaisons give shape and embodiment to the tendency each of the sagas in the series has, to move forward against a force that seems to drag their central characters back into the past, into an age of monsters, of trolls and giants, where choice of action is presented in a straightforward human/non-human relationship, rather than the balance of social/anti-social (or even good/evil).

Chapter 2 of the Saga is essential in establishing this tension. It shows Ketill as the son of a character who seems happy to inhabit the “old world” (and who is recognised as a “friend” of that world) but who, himself, presents a threat to that world. This threat is real, and physical, in that Ketill kills its inhabitants; at the same time, the old world can be perceived as threatening to the world of the saga’s audience (the contemporary, “new” or human world of medieval Iceland). The *jötunn* (giant) Surtr has salted “man meat” in his larder, and it is obvious that all inhabitants of the fjords present a challenge to humanity, a challenge, perhaps, epitomised by the very fact that they have food when there is a famine in Hrafnista.

Perhaps more interestingly, the episode maintains the sense of the old world and new world being separated by the quickness and agility of their inhabitants. Just as, in *Njáls Saga*, we saw a world where mental accomplishment (ability in the law) often outweighed physical prowess, in *Ketils Saga* the slightly lumbering, and perhaps “none too bright” giants and trolls are outwitted, and ultimately, dispatched, by the physically less-imposing, but quicker and “smarter” human. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the final scene of the episode, where Ketill chases the giant Kaldrani into a cave.

The next night Ketill was awoken. Then he saw a giant go into the boathouse and then tie up a large bundle. Ketill attached him and struck at his shoulders and the bundle was dropped. The giant jerked away so suddenly, when he was injured, that Ketill lost hold of the axe and it was stuck fast in the wound. The giant was called Kaldrani. He rushed inland towards the fjord-head and into his cave, and Ketill after [him]. There trolls sat by the fire, and [they] laughed a great deal, and declared that Kaldrani had received a fitting punishment for his deeds. Kaldrani said his wound was more in need of ointment than chiding. Then Ketill entered the cave and declared himself to be a doctor and asked them to get some ointment for him, saying that he would treat his wound. The trolls went further into the cave. Then Ketill seized the axe from the wound and struck the giant his deathblow. He went back afterwards to the hut, and loaded his boat, and went home and Hallbjörn received him well and asked if anything had happened that was worth [talking about]. Ketill declared that was far from the case.

This scene has more than a touch of humour, even “slapstick comedy” about it. Whilst essentially enigmatic, in common with much of the narrative of the *fornaldarsögur*, it contains so many incidental *non sequiturs* as to make it virtually impossible

to interpret within the overall context of the narrative. However, the humour serves to reinforce the dichotomy between Ketill and his adversaries, and the relationship between human antagonist and giant “threat” played out to the audience of a pair of cackling trolls, is a perfect *exemplum* for the old world/new world split of the human and non-human environments of the Saga.

The hybrid environment of *Grettis Saga*

Grettis Saga is generally presented as one of the later of the “classical” *Íslendinga Sögur*, probably written down in the first half of the fourteenth century (during the period when Iceland was in the first phase of rule from abroad, after the sovereignty of Norway had been established, but before the Danish annexation). It is referred to by Hermann Pálsson and Denton Fox as “one of the longest, most profound, and most unorthodox of the sagas” (Fox and Pálsson, 1974).

The early part of the Saga establishes the character of Grettir. In chapter 14 we are presented with a vignette about his relationship with his father, Asmund (which is entirely reminiscent of the relationship between Ketill and Hallbjörn, in *Ketils Saga*). Grettir is presented as “self-willed, taciturn and harsh, sardonic and mischievous” (Fox and Pálsson, 1974) and unwilling to perform simple tasks set by his father that could be considered as generally supporting the family. When asked to tend the geese he kills them. When asked to rub his father’s back by the fire, in the evenings, he quickly becomes bored and scratches him instead with a comb used for untangling wool, drawing blood. When tasked with tending horses, he ends up by skinning one of them alive. This, not unsurprisingly, sets him on a poor footing with his father.

In Chapter 15, we are presented with a narrative of Grettir being involved in winter sports, playing some form of ice hockey on a frozen lake. Grettir is set against an older man, Auðunn, who the saga describes as “an honest and kind-hearted man” (Fox and Pálsson, 1974). Grettir becomes annoyed by Auðunn’s game-playing tactics and a fight ensues. However, this is not allowed to escalate into serious hostility, due to a family relationship between Grettir and Auðunn, and the Saga later tells us that they become firmly reconciled.

In Chapter 16, Grettir is involved in another fight, this time with a servant, Skeggi, (who he believes has stolen his food bag) on the way to the *Alþingi*. This time the dispute ends with Grettir killing Skeggi, and, as a result, Grettir is tried and subjected to “lesser outlawry” (for a period of only three years). The chapter ends with a typically enigmatic account.

When the Althing broke up, the leading men journeyed together for a while before they parted, and they stopped for a rest under Sleda Ridge. It was on that occasion that Grettir lifted the boulder which still lies there in the grass and is now called Grettir’s Lift. Many of the men came up to look at the boulder, and everyone thought it very remarkable indeed that so young a man could lift so huge a rock. Then Grettir rode home to Bjarg and told about his travels. Asmund was not very pleased, and he said that Grettir would turn out to be a brawler. (Fox and Pálsson, 1974: 31)

Two aspects of this account are pertinent to our discussion, here. The first is the impressive, but seemingly pointless, capacity Grettir has for lifting large boulders. This is an excellent demonstration of his physical prowess (and provides a tangible memorial, in that it is relatively easy to identify a suitable boulder in the vicinity as “Grettir’s lift”) but otherwise serves no purpose, and certainly is of no value to Grettir’s society. Rather, as the end

of the account reveals (and the consistent narrative of Grettir’s youth has related) it is Grettir’s capacity to be a “brawler” which epitomises his character, and will turn out to be his ultimate undoing.

However, one, very famous, scene in the saga, in Chapters 34 and 35, presents a more positive use for Grettir’s prodigious strength, whilst also positioning the saga in a liminal environment, balanced between reality and myth. This is the narrative of the struggle between Grettir and the un-dead shepherd Glámr, who has been terrorising the region around Þorhallstaðir. Glámr has been presented, in the preceding chapters, in a quite straightforward and undramatic way. He was hired as a shepherd for an area which is presented as being haunted (though it is not said by what). He dies under mysterious circumstances and, when his body is found, it proves impossible to remove it to a place of Christian burial (Iceland, by this time, being firmly established as a Christian environment). So, a cairn is built up around Glámr’s body, but he does not lie easily in his grave and continues to haunt the farmstead, and surrounding area, sitting astride the farmhouse and riding it like a horse.

In Chapters 34 and 35 of the saga, Grettir happens to stay with his uncle Jökull Barðarsson and learns of these events. Jökull also warns him against getting involved:

“That would be tempting fate,” he said. “Your kinsmen have much at stake where you are concerned, for we feel that now there is no young man to compare with you. From evil beings like Glam only evil can be gained, and it is always better to deal with human beings than with monsters of this kind.” (Fox and Pálsson, 1974: 76)

This does not dissuade Grettir, however, and he goes on to Þorhallstaðir. He takes a little time to encounter Glámr, but when he does, the encounter ends with a struggle between the two. Grettir has hidden himself inside a fur cloak and Glámr has come into the farmhouse, with the intention of making his usual mayhem. He pulls at the cloak and eventually tears it from Grettir, and the two struggle together and they end up outside the house.

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 Glam fell, the clouds cleared away, and Glam glared up at the moon. Grettir himself once said that that was the only sight he ever saw which frightened him. Then, because of exhaustion and the sight of Glam rolling his eyes so fiercely, Grettir was overcome by such a faintness that he could not draw his short sword, and so he remained there closer to death than to life.

Glam, who was endowed with more power for evil than any other revenant, then spoke the following words:

You have been very determined to meet me, Grettir, but it will hardly surprise you if you do not get much luck from me. I will tell you this: you have acquired by now only half the strength and vigour which you were destined to get if you had not met me. I cannot take away from you what you already have, but I can see to it that you will never be stronger than you are now, and yet you are strong enough, as many will find to their cost. Up until now your deeds have brought you fame, but from now on outlawry and slaughter will come your way, and most of your acts will bring you ill luck and misfortune. You will be made an outlaw and forced to live by yourself. I also lay this curse on you: you will always see before you these eyes of mine, and they will make your solitude unbearable, and this shall drag you to your death.

As soon as Glam had spoken these words the faintness that had come over Grettir left him. He drew his short sword, cut off Glam's head, and placed it against his buttocks. (Fox and Pálsson, 1974: 78-9)

This is one of the most famous moments in saga narrative, and certainly colours the rest of *Grettis Saga* as Glámr's curse does, indeed, prove to be true, and Grettir becomes increasingly isolated, outlawed and hunted to a miserable ending.

Grettir, then, both presents himself as an individual from the "old world", both through his reliance on physical strength and confrontation to get his own way (or to make his mark within society) and in his willingness to confront that which is "other" within his society, a more tangible "other" than within a narrative such as *Njáls Saga*, which relies on being more overtly historical in outlook. *Grettis Saga's* adoption of a world in which family feud sits easily alongside giants and mound-dwelling revenants presents an environment which is a hybrid of *Íslendinga Sögur* and *fornaldarsögur*; tellingly, this is a world where "old" values may appear to be useful, but still lead to problems for those who adopt them.

Grettir's fight with Glámr, perhaps, epitomises this. Essentially, he is providing aid to his community. Like Beowulf (and in an episode that does, indeed, present a "Bear's Son Folk Tale" analogue), he is the only member of his society prepared, or able, to confront a monstrous being that presents a threat to those around him. He is able to do this because, to some extent, he occupies the same world as his adversary, a world in which physical prowess wins the day. However, in confronting this adversary he brings upon himself a curse which destinies him to be outcast within his contemporary, modern, society. Ultimately, his "sort" is not wanted by those around him and he is outlawed, hunted down and killed like some feral beast that, in itself, continues to threaten those around him.

This is a powerful image, made more powerful by the contrasts of other narratives in which either an individual (usually a man) or a being (often a troll or giant) is "out of his time" and thus ceases to fit in with his peers. This is not a presentation that is unique to the sagas, but they do present a case wherein the monstrous (either temperamentally or actually) epitomises the rift between that which is desirable and that which is threatening.

Conclusion

Our three saga scenes show a situation common in medieval narrative, where the boundaries of behaviour are explored in order to demonstrate the acceptable, or commonplace, within "polite" society. The sagas, however, concentrate this portrayal not simply in social, but also in physical and generic differentiation. They do so in order to present a world view which seems to value the lithe and nimble "modern mind" skilled in legal dispute and political intrigue, and no longer dependent on physical strength and brute force to win the day; however, at the same time they still seem to value (perhaps grudgingly) the essence of the "old world" view of life, an inherited world where power and authority derived from physical strength and prowess.

This is, perhaps, not surprising, given what we know of the political and social establishment of Iceland as a nation, of which it is repeatedly reflected, has possibly one of the oldest parliamentary systems in Europe, and has never had a standing army (or, in the Middle Ages, any executive arm of the state to enforce the law, a problem in many sagas), or a king. This is, as we have reflected above, a society born of other, older and different societies, particularly those of Norway and Denmark, where royal authority was becoming ever more established

through unification and annexation over the period of saga writing.

It is tempting to suggest that these two forces within Icelandic society are, to some extent, intertwined, and that the narrative dilemmas of the sagas present a real identity crisis in a national sense. In this respect, although it may be pushing the limits of suggestion too far, it is even more tempting to suggest that, as the reality of Norwegian (and then Danish) annexation became more pressing, the tendency to present, question, and debate, the balance between the old and new worlds became more prevalent (and more likely to be iterated symbolically, through a fantasy that connected the Icelandic environment to its mainland folklore past). The balance of society was not so much in tension, as a part of the continuation of the society from which the Icelandic nation was established, and to which it eventually returned.

In common with much in saga narrative, this presentation is neither simplistic nor entirely indicative of a closed and logical social, or narrative, structure. Characters with common traits can inhabit different worlds, genres, eras and geographical spaces and it is, indeed, the liminality and fluidity of the presentations themselves (which are often entirely unconcerned with their generic identity), which supports our evaluation of character and characteristic. Wherever these characters reside, their force, power and danger stems from an unpredictability which can be as a result of personal trait, pure inhumanity (in the simple sense of not being human) or a balance between the two. They are in tension just as their society is in tension, working out its own characteristics and exploring identity as a means of evaluating the negative, and thus exemplifying the positive. Wherever we find the "monstrous" (and whether in overt or subliminal form) we are led towards the character as anachronistic, out of time and out of place, and no longer needed in the modern world.

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Data availability

Data sharing not applicable to this paper as no datasets were analysed or generated.

Additional information

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial interests.

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How to cite this article: Cardew P (2017) What manner of man is this? Representations of monstrosity, identity and world view in early medieval narrative. *Palgrave Communications*. 3:17012 doi: 10.1057/palcomms.2017.12.



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