

Myth, Psychology, and Society in *Grettis saga*

The saga of Grettir Ásmundarson is exceptionally rich in both psychological and mythological terms. Its account of the protagonist shows a diversity of forces combating within him (Hreinsson 1992, 105).¹ 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, something even of Þjelvar, bringer of fire to islands in *Guta saga*. Reference to this saga would readily support 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 1994–98, 2:23; cf. Nordal 1998, 221). 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 1994–98, 2:24). His story, 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.² 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.³

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. Glámr’s most arresting feature is his gaze, which issues from dark blue, wide-open eyes

1. I should like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the Eleventh International Saga Conference at the University of Sydney, 2–7 July 2000, where an abridged version of this paper was presented, and to participants who offered feedback on that occasion and subsequently.

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

3. 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*.

(chap. 32). “Þórhalli brá nokkut í brún, er hann sá þenna mann” [Þórhallr was somewhat taken aback when he saw that man] (Jónsson 1936, 110; cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, 71).⁴ Here “Þórhalli brá nokkut í brún” could be more closely translated as “it caused to Þórhallr his eyebrows to rise,” suggesting that Glámr’s is a gaze that compels reciprocation, as if in recognition.⁵ It is when the moon appears from behind a cloud that his and Grettir’s gazes disastrously meet (chap. 35):

Tunglskin var mikit úti ok gluggapykkn; hratt stundum fyrir, en stundum dró frá. Nú í því er Glámr fell, rak skýit frá tunglinu, en Glámr hvessti augun upp í móti, ok svá hefir Grettir sagt sjálf, at þá eina sýn hafi hann sét svá, at honum brygði við. Þá sigaði svá at honum af öllu saman, mœði ok því, er hann sá, at Glámr gaut sínum sjónum harðliga, at hann gat eigi brugðið saxinu ok lá nálíga í milli heims og heljar. (Jónsson 1936, 121)

[Outside there was intense moonlight and clouds with openings, which now scudded in front of the moon, now moved on. At the very moment when Glámr fell, the cloud moved away from the moon, and Glámr glared up at it, and Grettir himself has said that that was the only sight he ever saw which frightened him. Then he was overcome so powerfully, by exhaustion and the fact that he could see Glámr gazing so fiercely and penetratingly, that he could not draw his short sword and lay almost between this world and hell.] (cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, 78–79)

This description is reminiscent of phobias and dreams where the subject feels petrified or immobilized in the face of some threat.

Glámr goes on to pronounce his curse. From now on 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, 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 ek þat á við þik, at þessi augu sé þér jafnan fyrir sjónum, sem ek ber eptir, ok mun þér þá erfitt þykkja einum at vera, ok þat mun þér til dauða draga” [I also lay this curse on you, that these eyes that I bring to bear on you will always be in your sight, and you will find it hard to be on your own, and this will bring you to your death] (Jónsson 1936, 121; cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, 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 (chap. 35), especially outside inhabited districts.

To round out the evidence for Glámr’s meaning, it is important to consider his name. So unfamiliar a 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. An influence in this respect may be the prominent use of *ofljóst* in *kviðuháttir* 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”; phallic overtones have been inferred from the

4. Translations of prose from the saga are largely my own, but references are appended to Fox and Pálsson 1974; translations of the verse are my own.

5. For the suggestion that Grettir and Glámr are *doppelgänger* of a kind, see Tulinius 1999, 305.

fragmentary poem *Grettisfærsla* (Halldórsson 1960).⁶ The mythic associations of Þorbjörg's name are invoked 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 (chap. 21). Þorbjörn glaumr's nickname is explicitly linked with his temperament (chap. 69). Spes, the wife of Grettir's half brother, I shall mention presently.

To the name *Glámr* an assortment of loosely related meanings has been ascribed. Finnur Jónsson (1913–16, s.v. "glámr") cites it in two *pulur* which list respectively names of giants and of the moon. De Vries (1977, s.v. "glámr") 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. 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 night⁷—and go on to propose that that fear is systematically linked with his significance for the narrative.

I turn now to consider the psychological and social implications of the fears of darkness and solitude imposed on Grettir by Glámr's curse. It goes without saying that while McCreesh is undeniably right to reckon with the spiritual significance of darkness in the context of this saga (1981, 184), the literal meaning must be attended to as well. Modern empirical literature on fear of the dark tells us that it is a classic childhood anxiety. Nearly all children experience it, and particularly intensely at ages four to six. 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. They can, however, persist. In a typical modern case study, 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. A case 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).

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

6. I have also profited from recent presentations on *Grettisfærsla* by Dr. Kate Heslop.

7. 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 (1900, XLII).

possible relation to fourteenth-century Icelandic culture. 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 on the Internet for playschool teachers, it still does nowadays. Also, the transcultural incidence of phobias and anxiety disorders is a recognized phenomenon, despite the acknowledged fact that types of anxiety across cultures differ systematically, in significant correlation with different child-rearing methods (Tan 1980). To take a phenomenologically related affliction, the concept of the evil eye (*mal ojo*) is quite 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).

In his struggles with his fear, Grettir exhibits avoidance behaviour, just as is typical of modern victims of anxiety disorders. A central fear is that of being alone away from home, a predicament that an outlaw like Grettir can scarcely avert. Modern agoraphobics counter this fear by ensuring that when they go out they do so accompanied by a trusted person, and Grettir likewise attempts to enlist reliable companions, even when it involves the certain loss of his younger brother's life. The end of the saga ushers the audience towards a Christian transcendence of the fear of solitude, 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 an immured form of solitude where no avoidance is possible (cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, XIII).

Avoidance behaviour is apt to rebound against phobic persons, who typically incur criticism, anger, forfeiture of sympathy, and challenges to confront the object of fear. In the saga narrative empathy for Grettir seems equivocal. Take the sentence "sýndisk honum þá hvers kyns skrípi" [all kinds of phantoms appeared to him then] (Jónsson 1936, 123; Fox and Pálsson 1974, 80). Significant here is that although *skrípi* is a recognized expression for "monster" or "phantom," it carries a connotation of unreality (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, s.v. "skrípi"). 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.

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. Like Grettir himself, Glámr is notably polysemous. To express the matter differently, an element of overdetermination enters into the text. As an *óhreinndi* [unclean spirit] (Jónsson 1936, 122), Glámr can be associated with the ancestors who insisted on their pagan affiliations and allegiances and whose *ógæfa* [ill fortune] lives on to plague the hero in a newly Christian society (cf. Jónsson 1936, 133–34;

McCreesh 1981, 180, 182–83). Connotations of the devil and the diabolic are readily discernible in the text. Undeniably it embodies a strongly Christian ideology.

Simultaneously, however, and this, as stated above, is the proposition that I shall develop in this paper, Glámr can be interpreted as the hypostasis of forces that operate within Grettir and his primary group. By reducing Grettir to helplessness in the face of terrors classically associated with the childhood years, the effect of Glámr is to perpetuate the hero's dependence. More than that, Glámr's role in the scheme of the narrative could be formulated as that of overdetermining characteristics of Grettir that have already manifested themselves in the hero's heritage and upbringing.⁸ Since these characteristics are dominantly formed through and by his mother, Ásdís, I shall first elaborate on her role before going on to discuss Grettir's father.

As to heritage, it is through Ásdís 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 nonhuman kinds. In addition to the link through her father, the saga mentions (chap. 13) that Ásdís is descended from Ketill hængr on her mother's side (Halldórsson 1982, 30). Although, to be sure, Grettir is 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 pedigree supplied in this saga (Ciklamini 1966, 137). It is true that we could easily modify or supplement this tracing of his paternal lineage by appealing to other sources, in an act of scholarly conflation, but it is important not to fall into that temptation. What matters here is not historical accuracy but the construction of Grettir specific to this text. As the text presents things, the mythical antecedents to his unruliness are supplied by his mother's kin rather than his father's.

Grettir 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), and Grettir's mother keeps holding up to him the example of Jökull and other Vatnsdœlir. The idea of Grettir as the scion of his maternal ancestors is further reinforced through the commonalities between him and the various nonhuman adversaries he encounters. In chapter 21 he looks and acts a bit like the bear he is fighting, and in chapter 38, having swum an icy channel to fetch fire, he is mistaken for a troll or other evil creature. With his vast size and icy garb, apprehensions of a veritable frost giant would be fully understandable.

The saga's restriction of mythical nonhuman 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 are seen as bringing with them destructive, nonhuman influences. In conformity with that ideology, we might con-

8. Cf. Fox and Pálsson, who comment that Glámr is in literary terms "a manifestation of Grettir's own character" (1974, xi).

strue the text's linkage of Ásdís with nonhuman types as reflecting a communal anxiety about maternal dominance.⁹ At the same time, though, we should in no way lose sight of the countervailing view that “the world of the giants represents a potential store of qualities which are important in the world of gods and men” (Mundal 1990, 18). So, in effect, does the heritage brought by the mother. Where maternal dominance is concerned, we are dealing with a contest of attitudes in society, not with a single overriding ideology.

Grettir is indeed exceptional for his expressions of attachment to his mother. One of the embedded skaldic stanzas sums it up:

Hygg ek, at heiman byggir
heldr auðigir snauðan,
blakkþollr byrjar skikkju,
beiðendr móins leiðar;
enn réð orðskvið sanna
auðnorn við mik fornan
ern, at bezt es barni,
benskóðs fyr gjöf, móðir.

(Jónsson 1936, 50, verse 12)

[Seafaring man, I think that some rich people equipped me poorly for my departure. But by presenting me with this sword, a strong woman (*auð-Norn*) proved the truth of the old saying that “the mother is best for the child.”]

Ásdís for her part loves him dearly, “unni honum mikit” (Jónsson 1936, 36). More than that, she has been lauded as the most famous and best loved mother to have lived in Iceland (Kristjánsson 1978, 19, 23).¹⁰ 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 *Qndóttir kráka*. 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 *Vatnsdœlir* (chap. 17), and thus underlining the importance of his maternal heritage when the paternal one has been withheld.

9. To cite a possible analogue in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, 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 1994–98, 2:119–20).

10. “Frá því hin fyrsta móðir á Íslandi fæddi afkvæmi sitt hefur móðurástin 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 veikir er fæddur og skammt á að lifa” [From the time the first mother in Iceland bore her offspring, mother-love has been the protection and succour that has provided fragile life with strength and the chance to flourish, the radiant light that has dispelled fears of the dark and feelings of insecurity and has warded off the eyes of Glámur, which so often lie in wait for somebody who is frail at birth and has only a short time to live] (Kristjánsson 1978, 23).

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: “brúðr strýkr horsk, ef hræðumk, / hvarma” [If I am afraid, the wise woman wipes her eyes] (Jónsson 1936, 177, 177–78 note to verse 45). She certainly sheds tears in chapter 69, when she sacrifices her youngest son Illugi for Grettir’s sake. “Er svá nú komit, at ek sé, at tvennum vandræðum gegnir; ek þykkjumk eigi Illuga missa mega, en ek veit, at svá mikil atkvæði eru at um hagi Grettis, at hann verður eitthvert ór at ráða” [It has come to the point that I see a painful choice must be faced up to: I do not feel I can bear to lose Illugi, but I know there are such grim portents concerning Grettir’s plight that he must be rescued in some way] (Jónsson 1936, 223; cf. Fox and Páls-son 1974, 144). In sum, as chapter 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. She is so implicated in his destiny that the use of the kenning *auð-Norn* (literally “wealth-Norn”) in verse 12, as seen above, strikes us as uncannily apt.

But while in no way wishing to cast aspersions on Ásdís’s reputation, I would reiterate the suggestion made above, that there is a characteristic contest of ideologies concerning such sentiments as the proverb cited by Grettir in his stanza: playfulness with proverb citations and adaptations in the saga has been widely noted by scholars (cf. 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. We could even argue for a play of heteroglossia on the word *Norn* in the kenning, since Norns are customarily cast as baleful in their machinations. In various ways, then, we are led to question Grettir’s attachment to his mother.

Equally contestable in its modern empirical formulation, 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 nine to eighteen months (Bowlby 1982, 244). Although attachment behaviour begins to wane at about the age of three, it maintains a place in the human psyche throughout life (Taylor and Arnou 1988, 21). We might even associate Grettir’s “grinning” name and mannerisms with this behaviour, as similarly the characteristic grinning of Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, another quasi-mythic, problematic hero whose aberrant behaviour could be construed as an expression of strong attachment in the technical sense.

Grettir’s father competes with this resolute mother for dominance in their son’s upbringing, and it is he whose influence has been more generally noted in the scholarship on this saga. Torfi Tulinius has suggested that Glámr’s effect on Grettir can be interpreted as a negative version of paternal influence (1999, 305–6). Thus when Glámr withholds the attainment of full strength from Grettir he appears to

complement Ásmundr's earlier withholding of the sword. In the symbolic potential of this quintessentially male weapon, phallic sexuality (cf. Grettir's verse 64 [Jónsson 1936, 240], with its mention of "sverð í hári" [the sword in the hair]) is conjoined with patrilineal property rights (cf. the quest of the father's sword in *Hervararkviða*). In Grettir's case the implication is that both sexual potency and patrilineal propertyship are compromised.

Anxieties and resentments regarding the paterfamilias can be presumed to have manifested themselves systematically in a strongly patriarchal society, where often sons had to wait long years for their inheritance, particularly a viable farm, and meanwhile depended upon their fathers to provide them with the wherewithal for trading expeditions or more bellicose ventures. We note inter alia Þorfinnr's comment in chapter 18 that his father Kárr inn gamli, whose grave-mound Grettir has just explored, had withheld his sword from his son as long as he lived (Jónsson 1936, 60). It is hardly surprising that a preoccupation with the jealous, grudging father inscribes itself in semimythic form upon our saga texts, often in the shape of undead and other malignant beings whose precise effect is to destroy property and thus render it unavailable to the legitimate user or successor. Sometimes the father, appearing in the shape of a revenant, is directly represented in the narrative, as here and in *Egils saga*, but sometimes too, as in the Glámr episode of *Grettis saga*, we could argue for a more covertly symbolic realization of cultural anxiety and resentment. The foreignness of Glámr, as a Swede, effectively veils his negatively paternal characteristics and significance. Jameson 1981 provides the locus classicus for discussion of the process whereby resentment inscribes itself within a text by indirection of one kind or another.

In true Lacanian fashion, Ásmundr stands for the Law and for control. Accordingly, he is not exactly pragmatic or tactful in his style of male acculturation of his son, especially with regard to the allocation of tasks. At first glance that might seem strange, since he himself has had to make the transition from a work-shy youth, unpopular with his father, to a sterling farmer (cf. Thorsson 1990, 103), but the point is that Ásmundr has assumed the role of the archetypal father. In chapter 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 of these tardy fowl. We shall have reason to return to this neck-wringing motif later. Ásmundr next gives Grettir an even more demeaning, unmanly indoor job, that of rubbing his back. Objecting to the excessive heat, since this is a hearth-side activity, Grettir takes his revenge by scraping his father's back with the carding comb—an action that looks like a distinct foreshadowing of the sequel. Ásmundr's final job allocation takes Grettir out into the cold, minding the horses. Grettir is initially pleased to receive this colder, therefore intrinsically more manly, assignment. But he proves unable to stand the full rigours of the cold, and when Ásmundr's self-willed mare Kengála persists in her rambles to exposed

places, Grettir checks her in the most drastic possible fashion—by flaying the hide off her back. The discovery of this enormity leads to a suspension of chores. Even so, Ásdís maintains an evenhanded approach: “Eigi veit ek, hvárt mér þykkir meir frá móti, at þú skipar honum jafnan starfa, eða hitt, at hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi” [I don’t know which I think more immoderate, that you are always giving him jobs, or the fact that he carries them all out in the same way] (Jónsson 1936, 41–42; cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, 27), she tells Ásmundr. A modern assessment would probably be less litotic and more inclined to a diagnosis of sadism or pathological cruelty, arising from anger that, instead of being directed toward a parent or other member of the primary group, becomes deflected toward secondary targets (cf. Bowlby 1973, chap. 17, esp. 245, 256). The deeper significance of the flaying of Kengála becomes apparent when considered in these terms, especially in view of its immediate narrative context. Heathcliff’s renowned sadism towards horses, dogs, birds, and so forth, in *Wuthering Heights* lends itself to interpretation in essentially similar fashion.

As a result of this complex and toxic familial dynamic the acculturation process has failed. What makes Ásmundr’s attempts at enforcement and coercion virtually unavailing is Grettir’s marked and enduring distaste for sustained, routine work. 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, or to confirm his place in, the warrior, not the farmer class. 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 (chapters 30, 38, 58, 59, and 75) and the narrative significantly omits to rationalize them.

His alienation from farmers continues to manifest itself intermittently in episodes of his adulthood (e.g., chapters 52, 60, and 71). At the same time, as the mutual mockery between Grettir and Sveinn, one of these farmers, in *Sqðulkollu-vísur* tends to demonstrate, this alienation is double-edged, since the audience might well sympathize with the farmers who find Grettir’s presence counterproductive. Again, when a disinclination to assist with routine blacksmithing work, which certainly demands strength (in hammering) but without the opportunity to show off, leads to Grettir’s ejection from Þorsteinn Kuggason’s homestead (chap. 53), our sense of his marginal social and economic utility is reinforced. The precise social relationship and precedence between high-status males and smiths (particularly part-time silver- and goldsmiths who had other claims on high status) may have constituted an area of traditional contestation, a notion that gains some support from *Reginismál* and *Völundarkviða*. What underlies all this,

textually speaking, might well be an anxiety in the culture about the relevance of higher-class people such as Grettir to the economy and the polity.

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. Altogether, in a culture that also consumed versions of *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*, with their accounts of and emphasis upon archaic forms of homosocial bonding, *Grettis saga* displays decided ambivalence on the score of male socialization and its value. The solemn declamation of the *Tryggðamál* at the Hegranessþing in chapter 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 (chap. 62) but, as if once again to foreground the notorious trickiness of proverbs, Guðmundr advises Grettir, "trú þú engum svá vel, at þú trúir eigi bezt sjálfum þér" [Trust no one so well that you do not trust yourself best] (Jónsson 1936, 218; cf. Fox and Pálsson 1974, 141). Grettir's behaviour shows the same ambivalence. He is very dependent on companionship, but the bonding in the small followings that he tends to cultivate is all too often fragile and compromised by disloyalty and treachery (e.g., chap. 55) or sometimes simple negligence. Grettir is literally "let down" on two occasions when supposed helpers fail to maintain their *festarhald* [hold on the rope] (chaps. 18 and 66; cf. Halldórsson 1982, 14). Equally, his characteristically cryptic and delphic manner of speech falls short of linguistic cooperativeness and tends to weaken the solidarity of others with his ventures.

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, though, they fall short of their desired effect with Grettir. He is not fairly matched in the games, his opponent being Auðunn Ásgeirsson, who is several years older than fourteen-year-old Grettir, and their contest collapses into a brawl which does nothing to foster goodwill, though eventually reconciliation is effected (chap. 15). Soon afterwards we see Grettir in his lair under the boat on Hafliði's ship (chap. 17), declining either to share in the work or to buy himself off from working. Instead he foments discord and sabotages the homosocial bonding on board with satirical verses. Compounding the ill will are his attentions to the young wife of Bárðr, who stitches up his sleeves to hold the warmth in. His behaviour here looks 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 the Grettir of this episode with the *kolbíttr* type, though earlier he was described as not one to recline beside the hearth (chap. 14). But in a sudden change of heart, when the ship gets more leaky and Grettir sees the dire necessity of contributing to the common cause, his idleness is supplanted by Herculean

exertion, leaving the crew deeply impressed. That is in accord with the spasmodic and exhibitionistic work patterns I have already noted.

The protagonist, then, is typically seen enacting resistance to male homosociality, not solidarity with it. That pattern reaches its dramatic high point in a series of scenes where 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, in the style of death inflicted on 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 narration of the episode, is also presented as a form of strangulation—an ironic counterpart to Grettir's own violence on the goslings. 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 prescribed in Grágás though occasionally exacted on thieves (Nordal 1998, 200–201), might lead us to speculate that the saga in invoking this route to death is harking back to atavistic fears triggered by male homosocial oppression. The depredations we see inflicted by bands of berserks in chapters 19 and 40, though stereotypical and a feature of many if not most sagas, may constitute one realization of an anxiety about the negative outcomes of an ethos of male bonding, especially where entry to the *Männerbund* is concerned. 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. 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 1994–98, 1:225–26). But such atavistic fears must have been complemented by tensions concerning the gang mentality in contemporary society.

Correspondingly, Grettir exhibits marked ambivalence with regard to heterosexual associations. They 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 (chap. 75). He has a son, if local gossip is correct, by Steinvör, the housewife at Sandhaugar (chaps. 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 that incapacity and thus succeeds to full and positive fatherhood: as if to underline this point, the details of the transferral of their property rights are carefully noted in the text.

Altogether, the emphasis in this saga upon 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.¹¹ Parceval, like Grettir, has points of commonality with the *kolbíttr* type, 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). A more distant analogue is the fourteenth-century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the homosociality of Arthur's court is associated with the childhood state.

Let us now try to bring some of these threads together. Grettir's character can be formulated as a series of antitheses, to include the following:

He possesses human status, yet is partly nonhuman in lineage and associations.

He possesses ample energy and initiative, yet is hampered by a besetting dependence.

He possesses great courage and indomitability, yet is afflicted with a characteristically childhood phobia.

He possesses great physical strength, yet evidently has not reached his full maturation.

He possesses sexual capacities and attractiveness, yet has no enduring relationships, hetero- or homosexual, and is not the founder of a family.

He possesses high rank and skill in combat, yet is not affiliated with, or the leader of, a cohesive social or regional group or faction.

He possesses marked adroitness in language, yet is not cooperative in the modern sociolinguistic sense.

He possesses definite inclinations towards helpfulness, yet is capable of everything from casual mischief to pathological cruelty, even sadism.

From these observations I can make a few propositions about his character as an element in the fourteenth-century social dynamic and therefore by inference his mythic appeal and significance for the contemporary audience. His interactions with the community are typically double-edged. Where the *routine* operations of society are concerned, both in Norway and in Iceland, he is thoroughly unreliable (cf. Halldórsson 1977, 635). Instead, he takes on the role of a carnivalesque disrupter of normal social and economic processes—a trickster, a jester, a gadfly. If we posit an audience that was resentfully uneasy about all forms of authority, whether imposed externally by Norwegian magnates or locally by homegrown Icelandic *bændr* or even high-status Icelanders like Grettir himself, we can easily extrapolate to the notion that Grettir enacts communal impulses of restlessness and rebelliousness. Simultaneously, however, where society finds itself in *nonroutine* circum-

11. The comparison has been made on a somewhat different basis by Torfi Tulinius (1999, 306).

stances, Grettir's very liabilities as it were change valency, transforming themselves into special powers to help. His helpfulness centres on rescuing human lives and property interests by entering at self-sacrificial cost into a halfway world between human and nonhuman, the quick and the dead. His prowess in this halfway, twilight realm is all the more extraordinary because the hero is extraordinarily vulnerable to fear. It is arguable, though hard to prove, that for contemporary Icelanders that realm was intensely real, a reification of deep-seated fears that Grettir enacts and to that extent helps to dispel.

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