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GRETTIR'S LITTLE SWORD: OUTLAWRY, CHILDHOOD AND MASCULINITY IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND[1]

Satt er þat, sem mælt er, at engi maðr skapar sik sjálfr[2]
Grettir *sterki* Ásmundarson

Introduction

Grettir *sterki,* the most famous outlaw from the saga-corpus, was considered the strongest man of the Icelandic Commonwealth. At the end of his biography, he is said to have been the *sterkastr á landinu sinna jafnaldra* ("strongest in the land for his age")[3]. He is renowned for his overbearing force and extraordinary deeds of strength against creatures from the Nordic supernatural world (trolls, *draugar* or *berserkir*) and landmarked actions such as the carrying of a huge stone at a young age (*Grettishaf*). Still nowadays, a festival (*Grettistak*) is held to honour him at *Grettisból* in Iceland where men can come and test their strength in Grettir-like fashion.

Yet, if we pay attention to some less heroic scenes from his saga, his masculinity may be challenged. For instance, after his vigorous swim between Drangey and Reykjanes, a female-servant discovers him asleep in the hall at Reykir. His clothes

[1] This article is the result of a presentation for the "Constructing Masculinity in Old Norse Society" International Old Norse Conference at the University of Rzeszów in March 2015 and thus reflects the state of scholarship at that time.

[2] References to the sagas are all from the Íslenzk Fornrit editions, except if mentioned otherwise. *Grettis saga* ed. by G. Jónsson, B. Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavik 1964, p. 137. "It is true what they say, that no one shapes himself", *The Saga of Grettir*, [in:] *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas: The Saga of Gisli, The Saga of Grettir, The Saga of Hord*, ed. by A. Faulkes, G. Johnston, London 2004, p. 160.

[3] *Grettis saga*, p. 289; A. Faulkes, *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 263.

had fallen to the floor. Recognizing the famous outcast, the servant-woman tells the farmer's daughter: *Svá vil ek heil, systir, hér er kominn Grettir Ásmundarson, ok þykki mér raunar skammrifjamikill vera, ok liggr berr. En þat þykki mér fádoemi, hversu lítt hann er vaxinn niðri, ok ferr þetta eigi eptir gildleika hans* ǫðrum ("My goodness, sister, this is Grettir Ásmundarson here, and he looks really big about the ribs, lying there with nothing on. But it seems to me very strange how little he has developed between the legs, and it is not in keeping with his size elsewhere")[4].

She laughed and taunted Grettir until he decides to attack her, uttering a verse in defence of what he calls (in a poetic way) his "little sword" (*Sverðlítinn*):

> *Sverðlítinn kvað sæti,*
> *saumskorða, mik orðinn;*
> *Hrist hefir hreðja kvista*
> *hoelin satt at mæla;*
> *alllengi má ungum,*
> *Eyleggjar bíð Freyja,*
> *lágr í læra skógi,*
> *lotu, faxi mér vaxa*[5].
>
> "The woman says I am short-sworded, that seam-prop [= woman]; the boasting Hrist of the twigs of the testicles [= goddess of penises = woman] speaks the truth; but for a long time a small horse [literally "mane"] can grow in the forest of my young thighs: prepare for trouble, Freyja of the leg of the island [= goddess of the stone = woman]!"[6].

Grettir's masculine attribute is diminished and mocked, and this attack contrasts with the picture of the violent warrior, the larger-than-life outcast hero ready to cleanse the land from all kinds of creatures. The servant-woman, after being asked to shut up, confirms how unexpected this discovery is: *"Eigi má ek hljóð vera um þetta, sæl systirin", segir griðkona, "því at þessu hefða ek eigi trúat, þó at nǫkkurr hefði sagt mér"* ("I cannot be quiet about this, dear sister", says the serving-girl, "because I wouldn't have believed if anyone had told me")[7].

Grettir's "little sword" has not triggered much scholarly attention so far, perhaps because of the striking assault following the servant-woman's statement[8]. Also, sources do not agree on this particular aspect, as in *Grettisfærsla*, Grettir seems to be

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[4] *Grettis saga*, p. 240; A. Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 228.

[5] This vísa and the previous one are missing in AM 556 A, 4to., which is the manuscript containing Grettisfærsla. Discussed below.

[6] C. Phelpstead, *Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders*, "Exemplaria" 19:3 (Fall 2007), p. 429.

[7] *Grettis saga*, pp. 240–241; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 228.

[8] On another occasion, Grettir protects women from being raped by a group of berserkir (*Grettis saga*, chapter 19), which adds to the ambivalence of Grettir's character, being at the same time protective and abusive towards women.

rather well off in all aspects, stating for example that "stórt er hans reður"[9]. Moreover, the scene is episodic and does not have any consequences for the main plot. Nevertheless, after such an insult – which Grettir does not deny – we may begin to question Grettir's masculinity: was Grettir *sterki* considered manly after all? What kind of masculinity was he associated with? Was, in fact, what we read nowadays as an extreme display of masculinity – sometimes called hypermasculinity[10] – considered as such by the saga-authors and/or by their contemporary audience?

Through a description of his childhood, and its consequences in his adult years, we will argue that Grettir the outlaw is not only associated with wild or monstrous creatures, as is often mentioned by scholars[11], but also with childish traits. Adding some parallels with other outlaw figures, such as Gísli Súrsson (*Gísla saga*) and Hǫrðr Grimkelsson (*Harðar saga)*, we will define a type of incomplete adulthood that some outlaws may have been associated with. This will help to characterise the lesser outlawry penalty – a three-year exile abroad – as a social structure generated by a stateless society to give a last chance of integration to these childish men.

Failing childhood

Childhood, and more specifically teenagehood, is a key feature in the shaping of gender identities[12]. *Grettis saga* shows a great deal of interest into Grettir's childhood and teenagehood. In general, interest in children is rare in medieval lit-

[9] *Grettisfærsla* "The Handing of Grettir", a poem of sexual jokes inserted at the end of the "outlaw manuscript" AM556 4to, gives a different characterization of Grettir's skills. Unlike the saga, the poem states that *Margt kann Grettir vel at vinna* ("Grettir can work many things well") which include indiscriminately farm work, women, bishops, old ladies or popes. Among other excessive deeds and attributes, *stórt er hans reður* (v. 85) – "His dick is big". See K. Heslop, *Grettisfærsla: The Handing of Grettir*, "Saga-book" 30 (2006), pp. 80–83. Even though there might be an identity mistake between this Grettir and Grettir sterki as pointed out by Ólafur Halldórsson (Ólafur Halldórsson, *Grettisfærsla*, "Opuscula" 1(BA 20) (1960), pp. 49–77), the association of this hypersexual Grettir and the saga-age namesake displays a different discourse on the outlaw's masculine attributes in popular culture, linking his physical strengh and violence to sexual demeasure and deeds.

[10] The concept of "hypermasculinity" is first mentioned by D. Mosher for men having harsh behaviour toward women, believing that violence is manly and those who experience danger as exciting. See D. Mosher, M. Sirkin, *Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation*, "Journal of Research in Personality" 18 (1984), pp. 150–163.

[11] Ármann Jakobsson, *The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in Grettis saga*, "Folklore" 120 (2009), pp. 307–316. J. Hawes, *The Monstruosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider*, "Scandinavian Studies" 80 (2008), pp. 19–50; R. Merkelbach, *The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, "Quaestio Insularis" 15 (2014), pp. 22–37. *Monstruous Families, Familiar Monsters: On the Use of Stories about Outlaw Heroes in the Íslendingasögur*. Paper presented at Miðaldastofa Háskóla Íslands, Reykjavík, Iceland, March 26, 2015.

[12] C. Callow, *Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society*, [in:] *Children, Childhood and Society*, ed. by S. Crawford, G. Shepherd, Birmingham 2007, pp. 45–55.

erature, which led scholars to question the issue in the past century with regard to general medieval history, or, more specifically, medieval Scandinavia. This lack of descriptions could be summarized in a stricking rhetorical question: "Did medieval children exist?"

In the sagas, the most significant descriptions of children belong to extremes, andare often used to explainspecific traits in adulthood, as in the prefiguration process that defined the genre of the *Íslendingasögur*. These children are either extremely precocious or extremely slow for their age (or both), but never truly normal. The most discussed example is probably that of Egill Skalla-Grímssonwho is described as a precocious child able to compose poetry and kill at a very youngage, a kind of "hero in the making". Another type of characters described as children in a positive though unrealistic way are some Icelandic saints and bishops.

Much as the famous Egill, Grettir seems to be a difficult child, though not as prolific. He was "*mjǫk ódæll í uppvexti sínum, fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum*" but "*ekki bráðgǫr, meðan hann var á barnsaldri*"[13]. In the same chapter, at the age of ten, he refuses to complete tasks ordered by his father. He does not only stay passive by refusing to work, but he is described as mutilating and killing the animals he was in charge of, out of rage, in a description uncannily similar to psychological research explaining some children's cruelty towards animals. Like in Egill's case, his short temper will be the cause of several troubles to come.

These scenes were interpreted as signs of a cruel, unloving father, who is in part responsible for Grettir's behaviour, while Robert Cook stressed that a reader could be confused about who is to be blamed between the father and the son. However, the tasks assigned by the father were probably natural to ask from a boy his age (around 10 years old) in the medieval Icelandic context, and they appear as a logical way to integrate a growing boy into the farm life. Moreover, we could argue that the last task – taking care of the mare Kengala – has nothing cruel nor shaming, as it is labelled kalt *verk ok karlmannligt* ("...cold and manly work")[14], which indicates that it was suitable for a man, while the previous work seemed too low for his status[15]. Therefore, Grettir displays not only an unnecessary cruelty, but also a bad will on something that was expected from him as a growing man. The episode ends on a comment stating that he kept on doing *bernskubrǫgð* – usually translated as "childish pranks"[16] or "boyish tricks"[17] – and that he was

[13] *Grettis saga*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VII, Reykjavík 1936, p. 36.

[14] *Grettis saga*, p. 40; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas...*, p. 93.

[15] Both Egill and Grettir seem to consider some type of work too low for their social status and are longing for higher rank activites. See C. Larrington, *Awkward adolescents. Male Maturation in Norse Literature*, [in:] *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. by S. Lewis-Simpson, Leiden Boston 2008, pp. 151–166.

[16] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troublesome children in the Sagas of Icelanders*..., p. 17.

[17] Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 94.

extraordinary tall, though nobody knew exactly the extent of his force, which fits the idea of a "dangerous precocity"[18].

During his teenagehood, Grettir is again described as immature and short-tempered, this time going out of his household and dealing with an extended social group at a ball-game (*knattleikr*), animportant event which could be regarded as a public display of masculinity[19]. During the event (much as in the case of Egill), Grettir thinks that another teenager, Auðunn, is making fun of him and a fight breaks out, resulting in Grettir losing face[20]. This "childish feud"[21] leads to Grettir's killing Skeggi, and thus his first outlawry abroad. Moreover, it could be argued that his father even tries to give him a chance by sending him as his representative to the general assembly, because he finds Grettir intelligent enough to do that[22]. But Grettir fails again, and he is then described as a disproportioned child and teenager, both physically and mentally.

Even though Grettir and Egill have similar childhood experiences marked by a paternal conflict, Grettir is described as a slow child, in a way as a "failure in the making". Another outlaw and "failure in the making" in that aspectis Hǫrðr Grímkelsson. He is also said to be precocious, with an incredible strength, though he is unable to walk: *Hann var snemma mikill vexti ok vænn at áliti, en ekki dáliga bræðgerr fyrst í því, at hann gekk eigi einn saman, þá er hann var þrévetr at aldri* ("He was at an early age of great size and handsome in appearance, but not all precocious in this respect, that he could not walk on his own when he was three years old")[23], which makes him another unbalanced type of child, with manly traits and an uncommon weakness[24]. Precocious in some matters but slow in others, they are everything but normal children with a normal childhood.

Haunting childhood

Egill and Grettir also share the fact that they are both mocked and attacked on account of their lack of potency by women. Like Grettir, Egill reacts in skaldic verses:

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[18] A. Hansen, *The Precocious Child: A Difficult Thirteeth-Century Icelandic Saga Ideal*, [in:] *Scandinavia and Christian Europe in the Middle Ages: Papers of the 12th International Saga Conference, Bonn/Germany, 28th July – 2nd August 2003*, ed. by R. Simek, J. Meurer, Bonn, 2005, pp. 220–228.

[19] On games and comparison between men, see R. Gogosz in this collection (pp. 64–81).

[20] *Grettis saga*, pp. 43–44.

[21] C. Larrington, *Awkward adolescents*..., p. 163.

[22] *Grettis saga*, p. 45.

[23] *Harðar saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhálmsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavík 1991, pp. 15–16; A. Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., pp. 272–273.

[24] This association contributes to the creation of a tragic type of heroes. See A. Hansen, *The Precocious Child*..., p. 228.

Vals hefk vǫfur helsis;
váfallr em ek skalla;
blautr erum bergis fótar
borr, en hlust es þorrin.

"I have a shaking horse of the collar [=neck]; I am inclined to fall onto my bald head; my borer of the hill of the leg is soft, and my hearing has diminished"[25].

Yet, Egill is mocked in his old age[26], when such physical decline is to be expected. Grettir, on the other hand, is insulted with regard to his manhood at the height of his strength, after a vigorous swim. Ármann Jakobsson adds another difference between Egill and Grettir, saying that Egill remains the same childish egoistic character he was during his childhood, whereas Grettir, even though more cruel at first, evolves into a more mature version of himself, at least able to protect people from monsters[27]. I would rather nuance this point and argue that, on the contrary, Egill grows into a more normal adult, while Grettir does not[28]. Fears such as fear of the dark – rarely appear in the corpus. To the best of my knowledge, we can only once witness a contemporary distinction about fear in both Grettis saga and *Fóstbræðra saga*[29]. Only one instance, present in both, shows a classification of fear by saga-writers, where Þorgils compares three men and their fears:

Þorgils segir: *"Alla ætla ek þá fullrǫskva til hugar en þeir eru tveir at ek ætla hræðast kunna. Er þat þó ólíkt því at Þormóðr er maðr* ***guðhræddr*** *ok trúmaðr mikill en Grettir er svo* ***myrkfælinn*** *at hann þorir hvergi at fara þegar at myrkva tekr ef hann gerði eftir skapi sínu. En Þorgeir frænda minn hygg ek* ***ekki hræðast kunna****"* (emphasis mine).

Thorgils said, "I think they are all very valiant in heart, but there are two of them that I think do know what fear is. But there is a difference, for Thormod is a man with the fear of God and is a very religious person, but Grettir is so afraid of the dark that he dares go nowhere when it begins to get dark if he is left to himself. But my kinsman Thorgeir I think does not know what fear is[30].

The fear of God can be expected from Christian medieval men and in fact the word *guðhræddr* appears frequently in the religious textual corpus[31]. However,

[25] The interpretation is still debated on whether Egill refers to his poetic skills through his tongue, or to his potency as a man, though considering the poetic nature of the quote, it may be both at the same time. See C. Phelpstead, *Size Matters*..., p. 425.

[26] *Egils saga*, pp. 178–179.

[27] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troublesome children*..., p. 19.

[28] More recently, Egill's main problem has been interpreted as being mostly greed and not immaturity. See S. Barreiro, *Genealogy, Labour and Land: The Settlement of the Mýramenn in Egils saga*, "Network and Neighbours" 3:1 (2015), pp. 33–34

[29] *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 191. *From the Flateyjarbók redaction in Vestfirðingasǫgur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VI, Reykjavík 1943.

[30] *Grettis saga*, p. 163; A. Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 178.

[31] According to the Old Norse prose dictionary: http://onp.ku.dk/english/

the Old Norse adjective *myrkfælinn* or substantive *myrkfælni*, which seem to be rather unusual constructions, also appear seven times in *Grettis saga.* Because of this irrational fear, Grettir leaves the perfect hideout in Þórisdalr where he had had shelter, food, and half-giant women to spend time with[32]. All the needs of an outlaw have been fulfilled (food, shelter, personal safety and company)[33], yet Grettir becomes afraid of an angry sheep harassing him at night, and prefers to leave the place, which ultimately leads to his death on the island of Drangey.

Interestingly enough, fear of the dark reappears only one more time in the *Íslendingasögur* corpus[34]. The only other character from the family sagas who is said to be afraid of the dark is another outlaw, Gísli Súrsson. Both descriptions are fairly similar: Gísli, like Grettir, grew *svá myrkfælinn* "so afraid of the dark", that he could not stand to be alone anymore: Á því fann hann mikla muni, at hann var orðinn maðr svá myrkfælinn, at hann þorði hvergi at fara einn saman, þegar myrkva tók ("He noticed this great difference in himself, that he had become a person so afraid of the dark that he dared go nowhere on his own after it got dark")[35], compared to: *Nú gerðisk sva mikit um drauma Gísla at hann gerir svá myrkhræddan, at hann þorir hvergi einn saman at vera...* ("Now the dreams become so much for Gísli and he becomes so frightened of the dark, that he is afraid to be alone")[36].

We can interpret this similarity in two ways. On the one hand, the author of *Grettis saga* might have borrowed the motif from *Gísla saga* (supposedly an earlier redaction, even if Gísli is compared to Grettir in the preserved version[37]), which would support the idea of a continuity and influence between the two sagas, as it repeats motifs from the "outlaw saga" sub-genre. On the other hand, it might also show a glimpse of the Icelandic medieval understanding of irrational fears in extreme situations, namely outlawry. In both cases, it is impressive to see its accuracy with the modern description of the separation anxiety disorder experienced by young children. As Freud noticed, it is not the dark itself that children fear, but the anxiety of separation from the care-giver: "The first situation phobias of children are darkness and solitude; the former often persists throughout life; common to both is the absence of the dear nurse, the mother"[38]. In fact, Gret-

[32] *Grettis saga*, pp. 199–200.

[33] M. Poilvez, *Access to the Margins: Outlawry and Narrative spaces in medieval Icelandic outlaw sagas*, "Brathair" 12:1 (2012), p. 121.

[34] According to the Old Norse prose dictionary, it appears as a substantive in *Stjórn*, and as an adjective in *Sturlunga saga*. Although, the Cleasby dictionary only mentions *Grettis saga* and *Gísla saga* for instance.

[35] *Grettis saga*, pp. 122–123; A. Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 150.

[36] *Gísla saga*, [in:] *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson, Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VI, Reykjavík 1943, p. 104; A. Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 60.

[37] *Gísla saga*, p. 70.

[38] S. Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, p. 352

tir's reaction in front of Glámr is reminiscent of the phobias and dreams where the subject feels petrified or immobilized in the face of some threat[39]. Similarly, this interpretation would fit the idea of Glámr being a haunting reminiscence of Grettir's conflictive father[40].

Without forcing a too modern psychological approach on medieval texts[41], we can underline the fact that there might be some universality in children's and/or childish behaviours. For instance,once Gísli's parents are dead, he surrounds himself with female figures, such as Auðr and Guðrún and hides next to them, putting his life at risk on several occasions. Similarly, Grettir helps women throughout the saga[42] and cannot help seeing his loving mother one more time at Bjarg before heading to his final stay on Drangey[43]. Hǫrðr, though not afraid of the dark, is nonetheless rejected at a young age by his mother when he breaks her necklace in an attempt to walk[44], and brings with him in his outlawry his own wife Helga and young children (the only woman with children mentioned to live with the outlaw community on Geirshólmr). The connection between outlaws and women has already been stressed to some extent[45], thoughI would add that this very connection increases the childish aspects of the men who are supposed to be wild and fearless survivors, but in the end find themselves unable to part from the female care-taker figure. As an illustration, Grettir's expression of love for his mother in skaldic verse is striking: *at bezt es barni, benskóðs fyr gjǫf, móðir* ("a boy's best friend is his mother")[46].

Other childish aspects from *Gísla saga* could be his recurrent dreams. Dreams are not rare in saga-literature, though repeated and contradictory dreams such as those are quite exceptional for a saga of Icelanders. Dreams in general reveal an important event to come, a prophecy, but in Gísli's case, two women tell him different stories in them, denoting more of a torment, nightmares or night terrors in the modern sense. Though nightmares are not the children's prerogative – and in this particular case could belong to the wider literary visionary tradition[47] – their overwhelming occurrences could be associated with other uncommon motifs from

[39] R. Poole, *Myth, Psychology, and Society in Grettis saga*, "Alvíssmál" 11 (2004), p. 4

[40] T.H. Tulinius, *Framliðnir feður: um forneskju og frásagnarlist í Eyrbyggju, Eglu og Grettlu*, [in:] *Heiðin minni. Greinar um fornar bókmenntir*, ed. by Haraldur Bessason, Baldur Hafstað, Reykjavík 1999, pp. 283–315.

[41] The validity of a psychological approach to the father-son relationship in the sagas has already been assessed by Tulinius, *Framliðnir feður*..., p. 293, and Ármann Jakobsson, *Troublesome children*..., p. 13.

[42] *Grettis saga*, pp. 61–73 and 210–211.

[43] Ibidem, pp. 222–223.

[44] *Harðar saga*, 7, p. 16.

[45] J. Ahola, *Outlaws, women and violence. In the social margins of saga literature*, [in:] *Á Austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia*, ed. by A. Ney, H. Williams, F. Ljungqvist, Gävle 2009.

[46] *Grettis saga*, p. 50; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 99

[47] P. Langeslag, *The Dream Women in Gísla saga*, "Scandinavian Studies" 81:1 (2009), pp. 47–72.

Gísla saga. For instance, the fact that Gísli hides in beds[48] as a kind of re-enactment of his hidden crime in his sister's marital bed[49], or the fact that he seems to have high mimetic skills (*hermikráka*)[50] and imitates an idiot (*fífl*)[51] in Hergilsey in order to escape his enemies. This might be related to a childish characterization of Gísli, since the imitation or hiding in beds appear to be childish playful activities rather than adult ones.

Finally, almost as a mockery or comic reminder of his tragic condition, Grettir meets in Norway an unclean spirit (*óhreinn*) in the shape of a boy (*piltr*) who insults him and prevents him from passing an ordeal with King Óláfr[52], which could otherwise help him prove his innocence. Later on, this incident seals his fate as a full outlaw, as he cannot prove the accidental nature of his crime. The fact that a devilish child prevents Grettir from getting his status back into societyis not too obscure as a metaphor to interpret.

As a result of his murderous cruelty and physical strength in childhood, Grettir is then described as a man with serious mental issues as an adult, as if haunted by what modern readers could identify with childish aspects. We can only speculate whether a medieval audience would have also interpreted these aspects as childish.

Fixing childhood

Though it seems that Grettir fails at becoming a man, or, in other words, fails at getting rid of his childish traits, I believe that his saga reveals that he was given a chance to solve his problem. I would like to argue that medieval Icelandic society seems to have had a social structure for that type of profile, troublesome childish men[53], and would have given them a last chance before having to get rid of them through more extreme measures such as full outlawry.

In the first days of adult life, young men had to show their potential. In many sagas, youngsters appear eager to go abroad to prove themselves. In some cases,

[48] *Gísla saga*, 27, pp. 85–88. Bed-scenes regularly occur in the saga. First as a marital scenes in chapter 9, where the couple Ásgerðr-Þorkell argues and then reconciles in bed, and in contrast the couple Auðr-Gísli, resolving a conflict without fighting this time. In chapters 13 and 16, the intimate bed turns into a crime-scene twice. Thereafter, Gísli hides in Refr's bed, and most of his haunting dreams come to him when in bed with his wife Auðr.

[49] *Gísla saga*, 6, pp. 53–54.

[50] Apparently a hapax. *Gísla saga*, p. 85.

[51] *Gísla saga*, p. 82.

[52] *Grettis saga*, p. 133.

[53] I consider here outlawry during the saga-age as a man's business. To my knowledge, we do not have any examples of women outlawed in the sagas of Icelanders. For good or bad, they are often in the margins of public legal dealings.

it is to escape a bad situation at home, or a low position in society. One such case is the young Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* who says *er mér á því hugr, at fara útan* ("I have set my mind on going abroad")[54] and, for this purpose, delays his marriage with Guðrún, the most promising woman of the district, all despite her opinion on the matter. Another young character, Glúmr from *Víga-Glúms saga,* states very clearly to his mother the reason behind his wish to travel:*Glúmr segir móðr sinni að hann vill utan ráðast:* "*Sé ek at þroski minn vill engi verða en þat má vera at ek hljóti gæfu af gǫfgum frændum mínum* […]*" Þá var Glúmr fimmtán vetra er hann fýstist útan* ("Glúmr told his mother that he wanted to go abroad: "I can see that I'm not going to get anywhere here, but perhaps I may get some good luck from my noble relatives […] Glúmr was fifteen years old when he decided to go abroad")[55]. Many young men, including Grettir, develop similar desires: *Við þetta urðu glaðir margir ungir menn ok fýstusk til útanferðar. Ok svá sem Grettir spurði þessi tíðendi, gerðisk honum hugr á at sigla; vænti hann sér soemðar sem aðrir af konunginum* ("Many young men were very attracted by this and were keen to go abroad. And when Grettir heard all this, he developed a mind to sail. He was hoping for some advancement for himself from the king like other people")[56]. They seem to be bound to accomplish what we may identify as a "rite of passage" in the sense given by the anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner[57]. This voluntary and positive departure was initiatic, a symbolic transition from youth to adulthood. This move seems to have been almost mandatory and, by contrast, a man who stayed at home was *heimskr*, as angrily confirmed by Earl Hákon. *Þessir menn munu vera snápar ok hafa ekki komit fyrr í ǫnnur lǫnd* ("These men must be idiots who've never been to a foreign country before")[58]. They leave their home, accomplish some warrior deeds, commercial activities, integrate the court or *hirð* of the Norwegian king, and come back with more wealth or gifts (especially from the king). But more than just wealth or heroic fame, this rite of passage was supposed to give them a new status, as confirmed by the aging Glumr saying to his freed-slave: *Margir fara þeir útan, er ekki eru mannvænligri en þú ert at sjá; nú þoetti mér miklu skipta, at þú fengir heldr af fǫrinni sæmð ok mannvirðing en mikit fé, ef eigi er hvárstveggja kostr* ("Lots of people go abroad who are no more promising than you. Now it seems important to me that you should get

[54] *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by E. Ó. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit V, Reykjavík 1934, pp. 114–115.

[55] *Viga-Glúms saga*, p. 16, [in:] *Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by J. Kristjánsson, Íslenzk Fornrit IX, Reykjavík 1956; *Killer-Glum's Saga*, transl. by J. McKinnell, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II, ed. by V. Hreisson, Reykjavík 1997, p. 274,

[56] *Grettis saga*, p. 125; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 151.

[57] A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of passage*, London 1960, p. 11. See also V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca 1969.

[58] Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts, [in:] *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk Fornrit IX, Reykjavík 1956, p. 103; *The Tale of Ogmund Bash*, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II. p. 315.

honour and reputation from the journey rather than a lot of money, if you can't get both")[59]. The voyage was supposed to turn them into better adults, as confirmed by the return of Eyvindr Bjarnarson in *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*: *Þess er getit, at skip kom af hafi í Reyðarfjǫrð, ok var stýrimaðr Eyvindr Bjarnason. Hann hafði útan verit sjau vetr. Eyvindr hafði mikit við gengizk um menntir ok var orðinn inn vaskasti maðr* ("One summer a ship put in at Reydarfjord; its captain was Eyvind Bjarnason. He had been abroad for seven years and had greatly improved himself and now he was a highly successful man")[60]. These new men became ready to start a more adult life in Iceland, getting married and managing their (often) inherited property.

At a young age, Grettir loses his temper again in Iceland and kills a slave, Skeggi. As a result, he is sentenced to the *fjörbaugsgarðr*[61], often called "lesser outlawry", a three-year exile abroad. Although not clearly stated, Grettir is still probably a teenager at the time, the story happening after an episode where he is fourteen years old. Moreover, his reaction to his sentence at the *Alþing* is to lift a huge stone, which amazed the witnesses for he is *svá ungr maðr* ("such a young man")[62].

In theory, exile as a rite of passage and lesser outlawry are two different structures, one legal, and one social. In practice, however, there is not such a large difference. In both cases, the manleaves Iceland for Norway where he is free in his actions. He often makes some commercial expeditions or joins the court of the Norwegian king and accomplishes some deeds, waiting to be reintegrated and given back his status. The lesser outlawry penalty follows the same pattern of the rite of passage: separation-liminality-reintegration. The main difference lies in the sphere they belong to. One is forced by law, the other promoted by social norms. We should not forget that Greenland owes its discovery to a case of lesser outlawry: Eírikr the Red starts to look for a place to settle because he has been temporarily expelled from Iceland[63].

Therefore, it could be said that this legal penalty is an educational measure in disguise, a way to re-educate childish men, pushing them away for a time, and giving them an opportunity to make some accomplishments that will transform them

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[59] *Ǫgmundar þáttr dytts*, p. 102; *The Tale of Ogmund Bash*, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders,* Vol. II, p. 314,

[60] *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*, [in:] *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk Fornrit XI, Reykjavík 1950, p. 125; *Hrafnkel's Saga and other Icelandic stories*, ed. by Hermann Pálsson, London 1971, p. 62.

[61] *Grettis saga*, p. 48. *Fjörbaugr* is a fee paid in compensation, and *garðr* a fence: "within a fixed space), the convict was safe, having paid the life-money". See G. Turville-Petre, *Outlawry*, [in:] *Sjötíu Ritgerðir*, Reykjavík1977.

[62] *Grettis saga*, p. 48; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 98

[63] *Eiríks saga rauða*, [in:] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk Fornrit IV, Reykjavík 1935, pp. 198–202.

into better members of society, into complete men. In this aspect, it represents a difference of nature with the *skóggangr*, full outlawry, which was "virtually a death penalty"[64]. But is it an efficient measure? It seems that Grettir, during and after his lesser outlawry, in some way discovers his function in society. Being first unbearable on the boat shipping him to Norway, he then reveals himself very useful for the first time, or "responds positively" to the challenge given there by Hafliði[65]. Thereafter, he starts to become a monster-slayer during this lesser outlawry penalty, protecting farms and women from outsiders (as *berserkir*). On his coming back to Iceland, after 3 years of exile, it seems that the penalty has good effects. As soon as he returns, it is said that *fell vel á með þeim brœðrum* [*Grettir and Atli*] ("The brothers [Atli and Grettir] got on well together")[66]. Even if he remains an extremist of sorts, Grettir feels bumped up by possibilities: *Þá gerðisk ofsi Grettis svá mikill, at honum þótti sér ekki ófært* ("Grettir's self-conceit now grew so great that he thought nothing was beyond him")[67]. All his former teenage fellows are now grown up (*fullhraustir menn*), yet Grettir gets into another conflict with Auðunn, the same boy as during the games in his childhood[68]. However, this time, the fight is solved in a much more adult fashion, with a settlement. Similarly, Grettir is now said to treat a horse *af Kengálu kyni* ("from the same strain as Kengala")[69] in a more humane way, much unlikethe mare he previously tortured and mutilated[70]. Therefore, after his return from his lesser outlawry abroad, he faces similar situations, though this time they are solved with less violence. His temper may seem slightly improved, which is the key to what a rite of passage should bring: a place in society, even if it is a marginal one. In a similar way, Egill becomes a better member of society after his rite of passage abroad, when he establishes himself a chieftain, even though his temper remains rather difficult.

Nonetheless, it has to be stressed that this educational measure, be it legal or social, has its limits. First of all, much as in extreme cases such as that of Grettir, the outcome of the measure was expected to be some improvements in characters, though it was not automatic, and the social structure could fail, as in the case of Glúmr: *Ok litlu síðar sumars kom Glúmr út ok er litla hríð við skip, ferr til bús síns með auð fjár. En it sama skaplyndi hafði hann sem fyrr […] Hvern morgin svaf hann til dagmála ok annaðisk ekki um bú* ("A little later in the summer, Glum came out to Iceland, and after staying briefly with his ship, went to his farm with a lot of wealth. But he had the same nature as before […] Every morning he

[64] *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, ed. by A. Dennis, P. Foote, R. Perkins, Winnipeg 2006, p. 8.
[65] R. Cook, *The reader in Grettis saga*, "Saga-Book" 21 (1984–1985), p. 14.
[66] *Grettis saga*, p. 95; Faulkes, *Three outlaw sagas*..., p. 131.
[67] *Grettis saga*, p. 95
[68] Ibidem, pp. 42–44.
[69] Ibidem, p. 99; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 134.
[70] *Grettis saga*, pp. 40–41.

slept until breakfast time, and he did not bother about the farm")[71]. Secondly, the possibility to go abroad as a rite of passage was probably the prerogative of privileged men, like the luxury to refuse work or to act childishly. Historically, the violent behaviour of upper-class youth is a common source of concern and was often institutionalized or channelled through elite activities such as hunting, the defence of family honour, high-rank military service (it has been noted that musketeers were nothing more than "bullies with pedigree") or colonial adventures (such as the *conquistadores*)[72]. Not all Icelanders, nor the outlaws, had the means to set up an expedition abroad and meet with the Norwegian king, as Egill or Grettir did. Therefore, even though this may require more investigation, this may be showing that legal measures with pedagogical agendas, such as lesser outlawry, were mostly applied to a defined social group.

Conclusions: uninteresting child, *sǫguligr* outlaw?

In conclusion, we may say that the masculinity of the outlaws is one of unbalanced adult men. The outlaw is not only the *vargr* (a word that meant at the same time criminal and wolf[73]), associated with the wilderness and/or the monstrosity. He has indeed a larger-than-life strength or endurance, yet the sagas seem to associate him with childish weaknesses too, which prevent him for reaching complete manhood, and may be the reason for his outlawry. Moreover, this incomplete masculinity might be connected to the fact that Grettir and Gísli are unable to have children themselves[74], while, for instance, having children was a mark that confirmed the masculinity of Njáll[75].

Therefore, what does the example of the outlaw show us about the perception of masculinity in Old Norse society? Firstly, that one can fail to become a man. Grettir fails in a certain way. He was given a chance during his first outlawry abroad. The sagas seem to mirror the fact that medieval Icelandic society was very

[71] *Víga-glúms saga*, pp. 23–24; *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol 2, p. 278.

[72] E. Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, London 1969, p. 30.

[73] For a recent analysis of the vocabulary of outlawry and outlaws, see A.I. Riisøy, *Outlawry: From western Norway to England*, [in:] *New Approaches to Early Law in Scandinavia*, ed. by S. Brink, L. Collison, Turnhout 2014, pp. 101–129.

[74] Gísli only has a foster-child, Guðrún. Rumours said that Grettir seems to have had a son named Skeggi (the same name as the first man he killed), who died young (*Grettis saga*, p. 219).

[75] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, [in:] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ó. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 12, Reykjavík 1954, pp. 311–315. Njáll, being attacked again on account of his masculinity, his son Skarphéðinn answers that he is a man because he had sons with his wife. I thank here my colleague Yoav Tirosh to have drawn my attention to that fact. On Njáll's masculinity and relationship to his children, see Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics in Njáls saga*, "Viator" 38:1 (2007), pp. 191–215 and Y. Tirosh, *Víga-Njáll: A New Approach Toward Njáls saga*, "Scandinavian Studies" 86:2 (2004), pp. 208–226.

aware of that type of men, and tried to force them into sociability and manhood through travels, either socially promoted as a rite of passage at a young age, or as a legal obligation for the most reluctant ones, which was a last chance for them to "grow up".

Secondly, the outlaw, the stereotypical anti-social figure, shows by contrast the norms of masculinity in the saga-world and confirms Ármann Jakobsson's argument that "The lack of self-control is childish, while maturity should bring moderation"[76]. Extreme strength meant nothing if managed by a child's mind, and Grettir's disproportioned body and spirit is summed up in yet another scene from *Grettis saga*, where Grettir and Þorsteinn, his brother, compare the size of their arms. Grettir is again described in a disproportioned way, and he mocks his brother's skinny arms saying *ok varla ætla ek þik kvenstyrkvan* ("and I think that you can scarcely have the strength of a woman")[77]. His brother answers: "but you can be sure of this, that these slender arms of mine will avenge you" which will turn out true in the end of the saga when Þorsteinn becomes the actual role-model ending Grettir's story.

Nevertheless, how can we know that these weaknesses were perceived by Icelanders as childish traits, since we indeed lack descriptions of normal children in the corpus? Unfortunately, we can never know that. The sagas tell us about the exceptional, the *sǫguligr*, the worth-telling. Children with child-like traits were perhaps too normal to be told about, but grown-up men with childish traits on the other hand are out-of-the-norm, thus worth-mentionning because they are uncommon. Realistic descriptions of actual children may be lacking in the saga-corpus, yet we may say that through the tragic outlaws' characterization, we might have a glimpse of medieval Icelanders' perceptions of children and childhood.

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[76] Ármann Jakobsson, *Troublesome children*..., p. 12.

[77] *Grettis saga*, p. 138; Faulkes, *Three Outlaw Sagas*..., p. 160.

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MAŁY MIECZ GRETTIRA: BANICJA, DZIECIŃSTWO I MĘSKOŚĆ W ŚREDNIOWIECZNEJ ISLANDII

Streszczenie

Grettir „silny" Ásmundarson był prawdopodobnie najsilniejszym człowiekiem wymienionym w całym korpusie islandzkich sag. Jest znany ze swojej apodyktycznej siły i niezwykłych czynów przeciwko nadprzyrodzonym stworzeniom (trolle, draugar, berserkir). Jednak jego męskość jest kwestionowana przez niewolnicę w niezwykłej – i często pomijanej – scenie (*Saga o Grettirze*, rozdział 75), w której omawia wielkość jego atrybutów. Wcześniej w tej sadze jego odwaga poddana jest również próbie, kiedy opuszcza idealną kryjówkę w Þórisdalr z powodu gniewnych zjaw dręczących go w nocy. Dlatego możemy zapytać: czy Grettir był w końcu uważany za spełniającego męski ideał? Poprzez opis młodzieńczej banicji (*fjörbaugsgarðr*) jako rytuału przejścia i skupieniu się na dzieciństwie banitów ten artykuł ma na celu zbadanie cech męskości związanej z banitami. Tylko mężczyźni są wymieniani w sagach jako wyjęci spod prawa: czy to ma coś wspólnego z ich męskością? W szerszej perspektywie, ten artykuł ma na celu zbadanie islandzkiego wyjęcia spod prawa, mężczyzn, którzy nie spełnili kryteriów rytuału przejścia w dorosłość, gdyż dwóch z nich (Grettir i Gísli Súrsson) ma dziecinną słabość: strach przed ciemnością. Wreszcie, jeśli wyjęci spod prawa są postaciami, którym nie udaje się stać się ludźmi w sensie społecznym, narracje o wyjętych spod prawa mogą dać nam wskazówki, poprzez przeciwstawienie, co pojęcie męskości oznaczało w świecie sagi.