



**UNIVERSITY
OF ICELAND**

**Master's thesis
in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies**

Fate, Fortune, and the Question of Potential in *Grettis saga
Ásmundarsonar*

Kornél Leonard Purkarthofer

June 2022

FACULTY OF ICELANDIC AND COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDIES

**Fate, Fortune, and the Question of Potential in *Grettis saga*
*Ásmundarsonar***

Kornél Leonard Purkarthofer
Kennitala: 270695-5669

Master's thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies
Supervisor: dr. Ármann Jakobsson, Professor in Old Icelandic Literature

Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies
School of Humanities, University of Iceland

June 2022

Fate, Fortune, and the Question of Potential in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*

This thesis satisfies 30 credits towards an MA
in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies in the Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative
Cultural Studies, School of Humanities, University of Iceland

© Kornél Leonard Purkarthofer, 2022

This thesis may not be copied in any form without author permission.

Ágrip

Í þessari ritgerð er fjallað um gæfu og örlög í Íslendingasögum, einkum í Grettis sögu Ásmundarsonar. Rannsóknin beinist að félagslegu, bókmenntalegu og leikrænu hlutverki þessara hugtaka þar og í öðrum Íslendingasögum. Eftir stutta kynningu á textanum sjálfum og fyrri rannsóknum á ógæfu Grettis er fjallað um goðsagnalegan, menningarlegan og bókmenntalegan bakgrunn hugtakanna örlög, gæfu og ógæfu í fornsögunum. Rætt er um helstu orðin sem notuð eru um fyrirbærin í Grettis sögu og einkum farið rækilega í samfélagslegsleg gildi orðsins ógæfumaður sem er lykilhugtak um heiður og velgengni í lífinu og samfélaginu. Þá er rætt um hugtökin hamingja, (ó)gæfa, (ó)gæfumaður og hverfanda hvel – hamingjuhjólið – en þó ekki rækilega um trúarlegt hlutverk þeirra. Auk orðalagsins verður rætt um bókmenntaleg einkenni eins og forspá, fyrirboða, endurtekningar, hliðstæður og andstæður og hvaða áhrif þessir þættir hafa á því hvernig viðtakendur skynja persónu og gjörðir Grettis. Þó að flestir fræðimenn séu á einu máli um ógæfu og harmræn örlög Grettis tekur þessi rannsókn aðra stefnu, dregur fram heppni Grettis og rökstutt er að jafnvel óheppni og harmleikur Grettis eigi sér gæfuríka hlið: ógæfa Grettis er takmarkandi en ekki aðeins með því að koma í veg fyrir að hann nái fullum styrk en kemur einnig í veg fyrir að hann verði ofurmennskt skrímsl sem ekki á heima í samfélaginu. Gæfulaus barátta Grettis gegn náttúrunni, samfélaginu og eigin sjálfseyðandi eðli og óheppni eru lesin hér sem einkenni einstakrar söguhetju sem er fulltrúi mannlegra veikleika og útlegðar. Einnig er rætt um óhetjulega stöðu Grettis og hvaða merkingu hún hefur fyrir nútímalesendur.

Abstract

The paper intends to present the concept and roles of fate and fortune in the *Íslendingasögur*, focusing on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, from a literary point of view. The social, literary, and dramatic functions of these concepts are examined and compared with other Icelandic sagas. The brief introduction to the text itself and previous scholarship regarding the nature of Grettir's misfortune is followed by the survey of the mythological, cultural, and literary background of the concept of fate, destiny, and good and ill fortune in saga literature. The paper discusses the main vocabulary of *Grettis saga* regarding fate and fortune and presents different social aspects of the *(ó)gæfumaðr*, a term which is strongly connected to one's honour and success in society and life. The terms *hamingja*, *(ó)gæfa*, *(ó)gæfumaðr*, and the *hvervandi hvel* – the Wheel of Fortune – are explored, though their religious aspect is not discussed in detail. In addition to the language of *Grettis saga* thematising fate and fortune, literary devices such as foreshadowing, prophecies, repetitions, parallels, and contrasts will be discussed, as well as their influence over the reader's perception of Grettir's character and his deeds. Though there is a general agreement among scholars about Grettir's ill-lucked nature and tragic fate, the paper provides a different reading, presenting the lucky side of Grettir and arguing that even his truly unlucky and tragic endeavours can be seen as fortunate: Grettir's misfortune is presented as a limiting force, which not only prevents Grettir from reaching his full potential, but also from becoming superhuman, a monster who truly belongs outside of society. Grettir's defiant but futile fight against nature, society, and his own self-destructive nature and bad luck are read here as qualities of a unique type of protagonist, incorporating human vulnerability and out-of-placeness. The paper also discusses Grettir's (un)heroic status and surveys the possible messages it can convey to the modern reader.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Chapter 1: <i>Grettis saga</i>	9
A story about human fallibility in “a series of unfortunate events”	9
The “hermeneutic pendulum” keeps swinging	11
Chapter 2: The Concept of Fate and Fortune in the Sagas	13
Terminology.....	17
Contagious and heritable fortune	20
Acceptance and rebellion.....	24
Chapter 3: The Literary Tools of Fate and Fortune in <i>Grettis saga</i>	28
Language: vocabulary and proverbs	28
Personification and materialization of fate and fortune.....	32
Women as facilitators of fate	34
Parallels and contrasts.....	36
Foreshadowing and prophecies.....	40
Chapter 4: “Því at mér þykkir á mjök hverfanda hjóli um hans hagi” – The Dual Nature of Grettir’s Fortune	44
Grettir – gæfumaðrinn.....	46
Grettir’s tragedy.....	53
Chapter 5: We Were Never Meant to be Heroes	60
I’m No Superman.....	62
Beautiful Loser.....	65
Conclusion	69
References	72

Introduction

In Chapter 52 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*¹, Grettir the outlaw enters Langadalr to spend a period of his exile in its surroundings. He begins stealing food, clothes, and “slíkt sem han vildi” (‘such things which he wanted’)² from the farmers and crofters, further angering them with his threats and misbehaviour, which causes general discontentment in the region. As Grettir’s harsh treatment of the farmers increases, so ceases his prudence, and finally the people of the nearby settlements decide to act on their grievance and round up Grettir, capture him, and intend to kill him by hanging, to make sure that “þeir mundu eigi gera happ sitt at óhappi” (‘they will not turn their good fortune into misfortune’), that is Grettir will not cause more harm. Moments before the hanging happens, lady Þorbjörg digra appears and interrogates Grettir about his business in the dale. Grettir responds with the somewhat insolent but apt phrase ”Eigi má nú við öllu sjá; vera varð ek nökkur” (‘Everything can’t be taken care of; I had to be somewhere’), not only as a way of showing stoic acceptance of his bad luck for being captured as the person at the wrong time in the wrong place, but also hinting on his predicament, namely that out of existential necessity, he is simply bound to *be* somewhere, despite not being allowed to be anywhere in his outlaw status. Upon this existential remark reminiscent of being thrown into the world and abandoned, Þorbjörg pronounces that ”Slíkt er mikit gæfuleysi [...], at vesalmenni þessi skyldi taka þik, svá at ekki lagðisk fyrir þik” (‘Such a thing is very misfortunate [...], that these wretched men should capture you so easily.’), but decides to save Grettir from the farmers, arguing that “hann er maðr frægr ok stórættaðr, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr” (‘he is a renowned man with a great family, even though he is not a man of good fortune’).³

Þorbjörg is not the first – and by far the last – person to call Grettir or his endeavour *ógæfumaðr/gæfuleyst*, that is “lack of good fortune”, and Grettir, once again, seems to accept the unlucky situation without much surprise or defiance, as also expressed in the verse he later composes in answer to questions by Vermundr, Þorbjörg’s husband and esteemed farmer of the Vatnsfjörðr,

¹ In the following: *Grettis saga* in the running text and *Gr.* as reference in the footnotes, following the index of Degnboel, Helle et al.: *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog : Registre / A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose : Indices, udgivet af Den arnamagnæanske kommission*. Copenhagen: The Arnamagnæan Commission, 1989

² All English translations in parenthesis are my own, unless indicated otherwise.

³ Guðni Jónsson (ed.): *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar. Íslensk fornrit VII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936; p. 169.

blaming his bad luck for the bad things that happened to him.⁴ Somehow, Grettir tends to end up in situations out of his control throughout the saga, and he is generally considered by characters of the text and readers alike to be the epitome of the *Íslendingasögur*'s *ógæfumaðr*, “a man of ill fortune”.

Fate, (mis)fortune, tragedy, and the character flaws that lead Grettir to his tragic end have been subject to wide scholarly interest, mostly regarding Grettir's lucklessness. What is usually not mentioned, neither by scholars nor Þorbjörg in Chapter 52, is the great luck Grettir owes to the sudden appearance and the clever reasoning of Þorbjörg in the nick of time – scarcely Grettir's only miraculous escape by an unforeseen turn of events –, and why we take it for granted that his fate is more tragic than other major saga-characters' who tend to share a fair proportion of Grettir's bad luck, when the saga clearly states that he is restored into society after his death and is remembered as one of the greatest, most valiant Icelanders.

In this paper, I am going to argue that fate and fortune is an explicit and ubiquitous theme in *Grettis saga*, accompanied by many literary devices connected to it that help the reader navigate through Grettir's controversial character and story. I am going to survey how the concepts of fate and fortune manifest in the text and what role they play in the story and in the shaping of Grettir as a literary character to convey existential messages to the reader. The historical value of the *Íslendingasögur* has often been questioned, and in the second half of the 20th century, their literary qualities and the history-altering power of the narrative have been emphasized more and more. In his survey of the sagas' and the saga-characters' historical validity, Ármann Jakobsson points out that even though the sagas originate in life and historical events, they are “mostly a linguistic expression of the past, shaped first by experience, then memory and eventually tradition, each functioning as an intermediary between these lived affairs and history.”⁵ In this paper, I will follow this approach, and the basis of this survey will be similar to most modern readings of the saga: I will look at this medieval text as fictionalised history and its characters as literary, consciously composed figures and stories incorporating aspects of human life that still, after half a millennium, appeal to the modern reader's mind and can make us contemplate the meaning of it all.

⁴ *Gr.*, p. 170.

⁵ Ármann Jakobsson: “Tradition and Individual Talent: The “Historical Figure” in the Medieval Sagas, A Case Study.” In: *Viator*. Vol. 45, No. 3, 2014; p. 103.

The matter of examination will be carried out from a reader-response perspective and its nature will be twofold. Firstly, I will present the concepts of fate and fortune in the saga at hand and see in what specific forms they surface in the text through narrative tools employed by the author. Secondly, I will attempt to show that the concept of fate and fortune so richly expressed in *Grettis saga* frames a story about limitations and unfulfilled potential which lead to the protagonist's physical downfall but spiritual victory. I will address the questions whether Grettir truly is as unlucky as he is traditionally considered to be, and in what sense his tale can be read as a redemption story.

Chapter 1: *Grettis saga*

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar is among the younger Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*), previously regarded as the very last *classical* one,⁶ nowadays rather as the best known *post-classical* saga,⁷ a peculiar mixture of many genre-specific elements of not only the so-called *outlaw sagas* but also the more fantastic Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and the younger Chivalric Sagas (*riddarasögur*). The saga and its protagonist are among the most popular Icelandic sagas and saga-heroes, and its popularity is also mirrored in the wide and varied academic interest in its layered nature, exploring among others genre, monstrosity, the supernatural, heroism, masculinity, landscape, and folklore. It is a complex *Íslendingasa* due to its richness in social and human themes, its narrational technique that points to the birth of the modern novel, and the range of similarities with other saga-genres and European literature. In the introduction to the Penguin Classics edition, Örnólfur Thorsson calls the saga “a defiant and glorious last stand before the dawn of the Renaissance” which is in continuous dialogue with the whole Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus.⁸ Portraying the swift rise, exile(s), and prolonged fall of an outlaw-turned-hero (or perhaps anti-hero), *Grettis saga* is a well-composed literary journey from the heroic to the unheroic, from honour and bloodthirsty valour to the Christian virtues of humility and cunning, from the hunter’s prowess to the hunted’s harsh fight for survival. Incorporating the best of the sagas, the reader meets Viking heroes, Christian knights, monsters, monster-slayers, friendship, love, magic, humour, honour and vengeance, and stories about what it means and takes to be human.

A story about human fallibility in “a series of unfortunate events”

Grettis saga is nonetheless a gloomy story even for an Icelandic saga: it portrays a world of decadence which, in Sigurður Nordal’s words, “through its pessimistic distinction between ‘good luck and good

⁶ Nordal, Sigurður: *Nordisk Kultur VIII:B. Litteraturhistorie. Norge og Island*. Stockholm, Copenhagen & Oslo, Albert Bonniers förlag/J. H. Schultz forlag/H. Aschehoug & Co.s forlag, 1953; p. 265.

⁷ Callow, Chris: „Dating and Origins.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York, London: Routledge, 2017; p. 26.

⁸ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (translated by Bernard Scudder). London: Penguin Books, 2005; p. xiii.

skills' has been in conformity with the Icelanders' perception of life during the most difficult times.”⁹ The dark tone of fatalism and hopelessness combined with the protagonist's tossing between fortune and misfortune, his failed attempts at being accepted by others, and his long-drawn descending into sheer lucklessness culminating in his tragic death have been subject to attention from readers both with scholarly interests and with no particular background in Old Norse literature. *Grettis saga* offers a unique story with a deep understanding for human vulnerability and the matter of the hero who is not fit for his own time, place, and ambitions. This unique story of some highs and many lows can easily absorb even the lay reader with a modern mindset through raising fundamental questions about purpose and capacity in life, proving oneself, fitting in, surviving, taking chances, and putting up an obstinate fight against the odds when no other choice is left, and no victory can be expected.

Grettir is generally considered to be the most unfortunate and tragic saga-hero. Accordingly, the scholarly discussions of the last few decades have extensively analysed the reason(s) for his tragic fate and bad luck. The Glámr-scene, where Grettir fights against a monster and is cursed, has been widely regarded as the climax and turning point of the saga, after which Grettir's fortune deserts him and he begins a long and desperate journey toward his unheroic death through unfortunate episodes where chance drives him further into lucklessness.¹⁰ In a recent study, Slavica Ranković introduces the term “hermeneutic pendulum” to illustrate the debate about whether Grettir's misfortune is due to external or internal causes.¹¹ Ranković shows how opinions regarding Grettir's character have been constantly oscillating between the two extremes. Although the main concern of this paper will not be the cause of Grettir's misfortune, I will start with a short presentation of previous readings of Grettir's misfortunate nature before turning to the textual analysis of fate and fortune in the saga.

⁹ Nordal, p. 265. My translation from Danish.

¹⁰ Hastrup, Kirsten: “Tracing Tradition – an Anthropological Perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.” In Lindow, John et al. (eds.): *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 1986; p. 288.

¹¹ Ranković, Slavica: “The Exquisite Tempers of Grettir the Strong.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 89, No. 3, Fall 2017; p. 375.

The “hermeneutic pendulum” keeps swinging

Though we can clearly see different, often opposing approaches to what makes Grettir a perfect model for the unlucky hero, most theories have one thing in common: they all agree that Grettir is inherently misfortunate and doomed to a tragic fate either because of his own doings or because of external forces that happen to torture him with bad luck. In the 1960s, Peter Foote and Hermann Pálsson approached the question of Grettir’s downfall from a Christian point of view, identifying Grettir’s temper and other character flaws as the inner cause for his unfortunate fate.¹² Recently, the idea has been further explored by Andrew Hamer and Janice Hawes, who argue that Grettir’s lack of self-control and sins against society and humanity are an offence against God. This is why he remains “unclean” and – as opposed to the other famous outlaw, Gíslir¹³ – is denied a heroic last stand and salvation before his death, dying the tragic death of a sinner.¹⁴

Other scholars have interpreted Grettir in a more positive view. In her article from 1974, Kathryn Hume agrees with Peter Foote in that the author actively seeks the causes for Grettir’s demise but argues that Grettir is not entirely responsible for his own misfortune. Hume points out that despite Grettir’s many negative qualities that often get him into trouble, it is witchcraft and supernatural *ís* that seal his fate, against which Grettir – as a human being – is helpless.¹⁵

A decade later Robert Cook turned back to the “inner cause” reading, arguing that Grettir’s misfortune does not begin with Glámr’s curse but is a result of his character flaws and him disregarding good counsel and the right values by always looking for greater challenges, since it is not in his nature to fulfil his potential by fighting “*mennska men*” (‘men of human proportions’, ‘human men’). However, Cook dismisses the Christian interpretation, believing that Glámr’s curse is the price Grettir pays for taking high risks, and not a retribution for sins in the eye of God. He is also pointing out that even though Grettir commits occasional acts of crime, “his most significant deeds as an outlaw are

¹² Ranković, p. 375–376.

¹³ See: Gropper, Stefanie: “Fate.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 201.

¹⁴ Ranković, pp. 378–379, 401–402.

¹⁵ Hume, Kathryn: “The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*.” In: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. Vol. 73, No. 4, October 1974; pp. 475–476.

unselfish fights against the foes of mankind, performed without thought of reward". It is this, which grants him the image of a positive and capable hero.¹⁶

One point that both Hume and Cook agree on is the nature of Grettir's tragedy, namely that he is out of place and time. While Hume claims that Grettir's greatest misfortune is being born after the time of the heroic ideals (his great-grandfather, Öundur tréfoþr's time) and is thus incapable of fitting into the society and values of his own time, Cook argues that "Grettir is an outsider to society because his figure has deep roots in the timeless world of myth and folklore – rather than, as some have assumed, in the Viking world of Öundur tréfoþr."¹⁷

In my analysis of Grettir's outsider position, I will adopt Cook's suggestion that Grettir might not have thrived as much in the so-called Saga Age, as many readers of the saga suppose. Instead, Grettir can be viewed as a hero without clear purposes and goals, lacking either the right values or the right means and place to express them. His heroic deeds grant him neither lasting satisfaction nor a desired meaning in his life. Moreover, his aspiration to become even more superior in strength and power to everyone else is compromised by curses, magic, and chance. In the following, we will take a closer look at the literary elements of fate and fortune in the saga and raise the questions whether Grettir truly is an especially unfortunate saga-hero, and if so, in what sense.

¹⁶ Cook, Robert: "The Reader in *Grettis Saga*." In: *Saga-Book*. Vol. XXI, (1982–1985), Viking Society for Northern Research, London: University College London, 1984–1985; pp. 148–149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Chapter 2: The Concept of Fate and Fortune in the Sagas

In the scene recaptured in the introduction, Þorbjörg presents Grettir as a man of renowned family, using the statement to convince the angry farmers that killing Grettir would be a bad idea. Killing a member of a notable family brings often bad luck to the killers, and as the farmers are keen on avoiding turning their fortune to misfortune, they grant Þorbjörg's wish and let Grettir go. Þorbjörg also mentions that fortune does not favour Grettir, *despite* his family relations – a crucial statement implying an important contrast, namely that we would normally expect a member of a renowned family to be blessed with good luck.

Fate – even by our modern standards – is a complex concept that can be approached from different angles. The word *fate* derives from Latin 'fatum', literally 'what has been spoken', which gives connotations of a prophecy about something that has been externally decided: inevitable – and often adverse – outcomes unaffected by the individual's power and efforts. Though it has many nuances (destiny, lot, doom), fate generally encapsulates tragedy, in medieval texts almost exclusively death. Fortune (from the Roman goddess of chance, *Fortuna*) and luck can be described as forces that unpredictably, either favourably or unfavourably determine events, and have a generally wide range of meaning that has to do with turns of events that lack discernible human intention and cause.¹⁸

In the *Íslendingasögur*, these concepts are often seen as a personal power strongly connected to birth, family, and name, and they are not clearly separated notions, since both concern the individual's potential and success in life. There is, however, a distinction between the individual fate in a neutral sense, usually described with the words *forloð*, *sköð*, *auðna*, and that aspect of fate which is dependent upon chance and one's familial luck or good fortune, the *hamingja*, which leads an individual to either misfortune and tragic death (in this case: *óhamingja*), or to success, wealth, honour, and prosperity.¹⁹ As we will see, these words are quite rare in *Grettis saga*, where another word sharing the personal aspects of individual luck dominates the language: *gæfa* or in some cases its synonym *gipta*. The meaning of these words, as we will discuss later, seems to have merged with that of *hamingja* in younger

¹⁸ Eidinow, Esther: *Luck, Fate & Fortune*. London/New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2011; pp. 2–4.

¹⁹ Gropper, Stefanie: "Fate." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 204.

Íslendingasögur, and relate more to good fortune and success in a social perspective than to the mythological origin of *hamingja* which can be regarded as a personified form of fate, following one from birth, and sometimes appearing as a physical quality.

Good luck or fortune is clearly an important part of one's *fate*, but it is problematic to differentiate between the layers of Old Norse words describing fate and good or bad fortune, because the meanings and use of the words denoting these concepts have probably changed greatly in the centuries between the sagas' composition and the events they describe. In our discussion, we will thus not differentiate between the two, as our survey is interested in all forms of textual representation of fate and fortune. Instead, they will be discussed as one theme, assuming that good or bad fortune is simply a practical aspect of fate, pushing the protagonist toward a certain, seemingly inevitable destination in his life, having a common influence over Grettir's life.

As Stefanie Gropper notes, scholarly saga-research has mostly looked at the religious aspects of fate and fortune in the sagas, not their social-literary functions.²⁰ The distinction between the two is important for us: religious aspects of fate and fortune are mainly found in eddic poetry and *fornaldarsögur*, while the social-literary aspects are more characteristic for the *Íslendingasögur*, where we have to assume that the authors' Christian perception of the changed meaning behind the same words influenced their way of using the terminology of fate and fortune as narrative tools in the sagas.

The lucky or unlucky biography of a saga-hero is expressed in many ways in the *Íslendingasögur*, such as dreams, prophecies, magic, or things with symbolic meaning. Their main literary function is to guide the reader. As Gropper puts it, "there is a tendency to predict the future from the past: step by step, characters gain knowledge of their destiny, culminating in the death scene. Literary biographies are structured as necessarily causal chains, for each cause is not enough to indicate fate in and of itself."²¹

Time and death are important aspects of fate and fortune in saga literature. According to Anthony Winterbourne, the link between time and fate is causality, that is the reason and the order of the events that lead up to the tragic death of the hero (or his sublime victory), and the awareness of this causality

²⁰ Gropper, p. 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

is what makes the sagas' concept of fate very modern to the reader.²² The fact that a hero's future is predictable based on narrative tools of fate and fortune is especially evident in *Grettis saga*, where the author tends to exhibit qualities of the unreliable narrator, making Grettir's story seem more misfortunate in the reader's mind than the actual events and episodes suggest.

The connection between fate and death is also a complicated theme in the sagas. In the Norse mythological tradition, the final consequence of fate is death, and the truly human existence is one determined by fate, that is the time and circumstances of one's death: *auðna*, *skopp*, or *orlog*. These are produced by female deities of fate, the *nornir* (Urðr, Skuld, Verðandi), weaving the threads of fate at the sacred springs at the roots of the world tree, Yggdrasill. The image of fate that the *nornir* weave and their "servants", the *dísir* distribute to each person at birth, is dominated by a dark tone of inevitable doom and death. In eddic poetry this is usually represented by expressions such as "kviðr norna" ('verdict of the Norns') in *Hamðismál* and "dómr norna" ('judgement of the Norns') in *Hlöðskviða*.²³

This image of fate would have changed with Christianity, though it is often still traceable in the *Íslendingasögur*, assuming that the superhuman external force that determines the course of one's life has been replaced by God and his will. We must bear in mind that the vast majority of our sources of pagandom – such as the all-important texts by Snorri Sturluson – are Christian reflections on what pagan life might have been in the Viking Age, and are not pagan themselves. We must also remind ourselves that death is not necessarily tragic, and that an ill fate does not always equal death and tragedy in the sagas, since then most saga-heroes would be considered just as tragic and unfortunate as Grettir. Instead, fate and fortune have to do with one's position in society and one's power to control his own fate, despite the notion of its inescapability: a man blessed with good fortune can challenge the inevitable and form his own fate.

Peter Hallberg defines good fortune outside the religious context as *success in life*.²⁴ Success – another possible translation of *gæfa* in numerous contexts – is, of course, measured through the eyes

²² Winterbourne, Anthony: *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*. Madison / Teaneck, USA: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004; p. 15.

²³ Ström, Folke: *Nordisk hedendom: Tro och sed i förkristen tid*. Lund: Akademiförlaget, 1967; p. 200.

²⁴ Hallberg, 1973; p. 161.

of others in an honour-based society, where one's fate and success in life depends on one's honour: honour in sagas is knowing and doing what fate demands.²⁵ An honourable death is therefore not as tragic if the hero can redeem his honour before he dies. This would be the case of a *heroic death*, such as Gísli's in *Gísla saga* where the ill-lucked hero gets the chance to defend or restore his honour against his wrong-doers before dying, as opposed to Grettir, whose heroic status proclaimed by the author after the death-scene contradicts Grettir's actual fate.²⁶

As opposed to the religious aspects of Old Norse fate, the *Íslendingasögur* show a more nuanced social aspect, where fate and free will are not contradictions. As Stefanie Gropper formulates it, "neither fate nor luck is depicted as a power which completely overrides man's free will. Instead, fate or luck complements a man's personality; while they may determine the outcome of a man's action, they do not determine whether a person is respected and honoured by society."²⁷ Questions of success and the judgement of others' deeds and respect are crucial in a society where "the people's view" determines one's social standing and honour, which, with William Ian Miller's words, was a matter of social mathematics, always acquired at someone else's expense.²⁸ In this context, fate and fortune play an important role as a *limiting power*: fortunate or misfortunate turns of fate are considered to be a necessity "to ensure that an individual or a family does not enjoy too much luck or success because this would destabilize society,"²⁹ that is the zero-sum game of social interactions and feuds.³⁰ Fate plays thus a very important role as social and literary equalizer in the sagas, as it is responsible for not letting a single saga-hero get out of human proportions – a function that is especially present in *Grettis saga*.

²⁵ Gropper, p. 199.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205–206.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁸ Miller, William Ian: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990; p. 30.

²⁹ Gropper, p. 202.

³⁰ See: Miller, pp. 26–34.

Terminology

The Old Norse words generally used to express these forces are the following (without their privatives and derivatives): *auðna* ('fate', 'good fortune')³¹, *hamingja* ('guardian spirit', 'luck', 'good fortune'), *gæfa* ('good luck'), *gipta* ('good luck'), *tími* ('luck', 'prosperity'), *farsæla* ('prosperity', 'peace and happiness'), *forlög* ('fate', 'destiny'), *sköp* ('fate', 'doom'), *lukka* ('luck', 'good fortune'), *heill* ('luck', 'omen', 'foreboding'), *heppni* ('luck'), *happ* ('good fortune'), *lán* ('fate', 'fortune', 'what is given').³² Defining the exact connotations of these words seems to be difficult enough, not to mention guessing the concepts behind them as seen by the 10–11th-century Icelanders portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* and by the Christian authors of the 13–15th century whose world view must have greatly influenced the values, ideas, and motivations of the characters. In his 1973 article, "The Concept of *gipta-gæfa-hamingja* in Old Norse Literature", Peter Hallberg examines the main vocabulary connected to fate and fortune in saga literature, and points out, that while "fate/fortune words"³³ are regular elements of the sagas, their use varies greatly depending on the context of the saga: sometimes they are used in a sense of metaphysical powers affecting the whole life of the characters, other times, even in the same text, as a simple figure of speech, much like the way we would talk about good or bad luck today. Hallberg also challenges Walter Baetke's idea that essentially the whole concept of fate and fortune in the sagas has a Christian origin and is mainly connected to religion, arguing that the most "fate/fortune words" are used to describe Christian kings, Óláfr Haraldsson (later saint) and Óláfr Tryggvason. Hallberg points out that this vocabulary is hardly found in specifically Christian texts, such as saints' lives (*Heilagra manna sögur*) or homilies (*Hómilíubók*), which suggests that Christian authors supposed that this vocabulary was more fitting a pagan society.³⁴

We must also remember that most of the *Íslendingasögur* were written in the 13–14th centuries (*Grettis saga* perhaps as late as the 15th century) and had a strong oral tradition behind them. The

³¹ The parentheses in this section contain the most frequent English translations of the words based on Geir T. Zoëga's *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* and the *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (onp.ku.dk).

³² Kanerva, Kirsi T.: "Ógæfa as an Emotion in Thirteenth-Century Iceland." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 2012; p. 1.

³³ Following Peter Hallberg's tradition, I will use the term "fate/fortune words" to denote the vocabulary which in one way or another connects to the concept of fate, fortune, luck, destiny, chance, providence.

³⁴ Hallberg, Peter: "The Concept of *gipta-gæfa-hamingja* in Old Norse Literature." In: Foote, Peter G.; Hermann Pálsson & Slay, Desmond (eds.): *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*. University of Edinburgh, 1971, University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973; pp. 160–162.

problem with oral transmission in our case is that the old words themselves might not have changed at all, though their meaning and a more general concept behind them could have been deeply influenced by new ideologies: the contemporary audience would make sense of the old words by simply understanding them in a new context, with a different meaning behind them, but we can in most instances no longer differentiate between pagan and Christian uses of the described vocabulary.³⁵

On the other hand, it has been also suggested that when it comes to external forces that steer one's life – whether it is a personified fortune-god(dess), God, or simply a mythological power that accompanies one through one's life –, there is little difference between the particular ways of thinking about fate, as the same questions about inevitability, blessing or curse, and one's own power over one's destiny would arise in either case.³⁶ To be succinct, I will in my present survey not take a side in the debate regarding the pagan or Christian nature of the concepts of fate and fortune, rather focus on their literary role in the saga. Similarly, I will now only discuss two of those words connected to fate and fortune that actually appear in *Grettis* saga, *hamingja* and *gæfa* – with further elements of the vocabulary discussed in Chapter 3 –, since these two words are most relevant to the discussion of the concept in saga literature.

The word *hamingja* derives from *hamr*, and old word meaning 'outer clothing, hide, skin, shape', but also 'afterbirth, caul, fetal membrane' – something very physical and wearable, and also fundamentally connected to birth, especially visible when it comes to Christian kings.³⁷ As mentioned above, the word supposedly had the old meaning 'guardian spirit', a usually animal-shaped *fylgja* in Norse mythology that joins one at birth and then follows one through life, mentioned mostly in the *fornaldarsögur*.³⁸ The reason behind the word becoming a more general and less personified term for 'fate' and 'fortune' (as it is most often translated in English saga translations), is possibly the influence of antique culture that arrived to Iceland through Christianity. Grzegorz Bartusik argues that Old Norse words – above all *hamingja* – acquired semantic meanings from Latin: *hamingja* began to be identified with *Fortuna*, the ancient Roman goddess of fortune and fate after the Christianization and

³⁵ Hallberg, Peter: *The Icelandic Saga* (trans. Paul Schach). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962; p. 55.

³⁶ Gropper, p. 202.

³⁷ Ström, p. 204.

³⁸ On the forms and aspects of *fylgjur*, see: Friesen, William: *Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Saga*. In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 87, No. 2, Summer 2015; pp. 255–280.

lost its connection to a more physical form of good fortune in shape of a *fylgja* from the pagan tradition.³⁹

The word *gæfa* ('luck', 'fortune', 'success') is the single most used "fate/fortune word" in *Grettis saga*, which indicates that the word *gæfa* and its derivatives such as *ógæfa* ('unluck', 'misfortune') and *(ó)gæfumaðr* ('man of good/ill fortune') are the main tool of the author's vocabulary to express fate and fortune in this saga. By describing a character as a man of good/ill fortune – either directly or indirectly through other characters' utterances –, the author establishes a dialogue with the reader, which directs the reader's associations and expectations concerning the future events of the character in question: once someone is introduced as an *ógæfumaðr*, there usually is no way for that character to avoid the unfortunate things that come to pass later in the saga, and the reader will be expecting these events.

Although *gæfa* is similar to *hamingja* in that it is also associated with personal fate and character rather than fate or destiny in a more neutral meaning, it differs from it by having a stronger literary and aesthetic function in most of the texts, and having fewer religious connotations: Mogens Brøndsted argues that the concept of *ógæfa* or *ógæfumaðr* is the dominating aspect of fate in the sagas of Icelanders, where *ógæfa* is the narrator's judgement on events and characters.⁴⁰ This might serve as an explanation for why *Grettis saga* is filled with *gæfa* and its derivatives, but lacks the frequent use of *hamingja*, which exclusively appears in curses and creates connotations with pagan times. We might also conclude that the reader eagerly accepts the view that Grettir's tragic fate truly is unavoidable for the lack of *gæfa* in Grettir, because he is so often called a 'man of ill fortune' by others. Interestingly, *gæfa* seems to have less to do with family and heritage than individual character and character-flaws, but more with affecting other people in one's surrounding. This is shown by the fact that Grettir is from a traditionally very fortunate family but is still considered an *ógæfumaðr* by most characters throughout the saga. Let's take a closer look at how *hamingja* and *gæfa* is used as interaction between individuals and families in the sagas, while keeping the focus on *Grettis saga*.

³⁹ Bartusik, Grzegorz: "Cultural Transfer of Cognitive Structures of Fortune in the Latin and Old Icelandic Literatures and Languages: The Case of the Metaphor Fortune is a Wheel." Chapter in: Morawiec, Jakub; Jochymek, Aleksandra & Bartusik, Grzegorz (eds.): *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*. Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press, 2019; p. 113.

⁴⁰ Gropper, p. 200.

Contagious and heritable fortune

Name and family are often associated with a person's *hamingja*: naming a child after a not too distant ancestor was seen as a way of passing the good fortune of the family to the next generation.⁴¹ Theodore M. Andersson illustrates the theme with examples from *Vatnsdæla saga*, the saga which is most known for thematizing fate and its extensive use of “fate/fortune words”.⁴² When Þorsteinn visits jarl Ingimundr, his wife proclaims that “þú ert giptuvænligr maðr at sjá” (‘Your appearance promises good fortune’),⁴³ to which the jarl later adds that he will allow Þorsteinn to stay with them, because “Eigi vil ek því afneita, því at vera má, at þat sé til hamingju várrar ættar, en ek vil þú sér með oss” (‘I will not refuse that, because it may happen, that it will be of good fortune to our family, and I want that you stay with us’),⁴⁴ expecting the presence of Þorsteinn and his good fortune to affect his company. Andersson notes, that “Thorstein clearly has good fortune written on his features,⁴⁵ and that is destined to become the hallmark of his family.”⁴⁶ Two chapters later, we find a most explicit instance of the idea that a name can spread the family fortune to the next generation: when Þorsteinn’s son is born, Þorsteinn declares that “Sjá sveinn skal heita Ingimundr eptir móðurfeðr sínum, ok vænti ek honum hamingju sakar nafns” (‘This boy shall be named Ingimundr after his mother’s father, and I expect good fortune for him on account of his name’).⁴⁷ Andersson adds that the good fortune predicted to children of great families usually manifests in making the right political choices for the prosperity of one’s family, putting the emphasis on the more practical social matters of fate and fortune.⁴⁸ Fortune is thus an indicator of one’s success and accomplishment in the worldly matters of society, just like ‘fortune’ as ‘wealth’, ‘riches’ in modern English and many other languages.

⁴¹ Gropper, p. 200.

⁴² See: Hallberg, 1973; pp. 148, 166.

⁴³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Vatnsdæla saga*. Íslensk fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939; p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Good or bad fortune as a visible feature is discussed in detail in Kirsi Kanerva’s analysis of *ógæfa* as an emotion. See: Kanerva, Kirsi T.: “*Ógæfa* as an Emotion in Thirteenth-Century Iceland.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 2012; p. 5.

⁴⁶ Andersson, Theodore M.: *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2006; pp. 155–156.

⁴⁷ *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Andersson, 2006; pp. 156–157.

We see the same idea surfacing in *Grettis saga* as well: Grettir is the descendant of the traditionally prosperous and successful family from Vatnsdalr, and so he is in theory entitled good fortune.⁴⁹ In Chapter 3, an ancestor of Grettir is introduced, Ófeigr, whose nickname was 'grettir', that is 'snake'. Ófeigr grettir, Qnundr tréfótr's father-in-law, is presented as a Viking warrior and raider, renowned family-man and settler, killed in a feud and heavily compensated for ("ok kómu miklar bætr fyrir vígin")⁵⁰ – in one word, a typical case of the *gæfumadr*. We might assume that the legendary Viking-settler ideal, Qnundr tréfótr named one of his sons Ófeigr grettir out of respect for his father-in-law, hoping that the name would bring good luck to the second Ófeigr grettir – who also lived an honourable life, was killed, and dearly compensated: "var bættr miklu fé".⁵¹ Following the tradition, the reader has all the reasons to assume, that the protagonist Grettir would also be blessed with good fortune and a respectable fate. This is not the case, however.

Succession within family is not the only way of interacting with other people's fate and fortune. These concepts are often depicted as something very physical, a personal power that can even take form in physical appearance. Åke Ström argues for a primitive concept of fate in Old Norse-Icelandic society, that does not clearly distinguish itself from personality: though fate is a doom difficult to escape, it can also be altered or influenced, as it is often part of the expression of free will, personal choices and potential, and an opportunity for self-realization.⁵²

Based on the sagas, different people had different amounts of *hamingja* and *gæfa*. Some kings, such as Haraldr inn hárfagri, held so much of them, that his opponents would not stand a chance against them.⁵³ The idea is exhibited in Chapter 62 of *Grettis saga*, when the dying Hallmundr tells his daughter, that he will probably not be avenged, for the killer, Grímr has such good fortune, that Grettir wouldn't be able to defeat him: "en ekki mun hægt at ganga í móti gæfu þessa manns, því at honum mun mikit lagit verða." ('but it won't be easy to fight the good fortune of this man, because he will achieve much.').⁵⁴ King Óláfr Tryggvason and king Óláfr (helgi) Haraldsson are the usual

⁴⁹ Davidson, H. R. Ellis: "Folklore and Literature." In: *Folklore*. Vol. 86, No. 2, 1975; p. 85.

⁵⁰ See: *Gr.*, Chapter 10, p. 24.

⁵¹ See: *Gr.*, Chapter 12, p. 32.

⁵² Gropper, p. 199.

⁵³ Ström, p. 204.

⁵⁴ *Gr.*, p. 205.

examples of kings in the sagas who are especially rich in *hamingja* and *gæfa*, and who are often willing to *share* their royal good fortune with lesser men.⁵⁵ In Chapter 39 of *Grettis saga*, when Grettir, after failing to go through the ordeal to prove his innocence, begs king Óláfr helgi to let him prove himself and become the king's retainer, Óláfr replies that “Mikill ógæfumaðr ertu, Grettir. [...] ok mun eigi hægt at gera við ógæfu þinni.” (‘You are a very misfortunate man, Grettir. [...] and little can be done about your ill-fortune.’). The king, though he would like to have Grettir as his retainer, is not willing to let him spread his misfortune among his men, arguing that “miklu ertu meiri ógæfumaðr en þú megir fyrir þat með oss vera” (‘you are much more misfortunate than it would allow you to be with us’).⁵⁶

A further example is found in Chapter 31, when Þórarinn tells Barði that “muntu þess þurfa, at eigi sé allir ógæfumenn í þinni ferð” (‘it will be necessary for you that not everyone is a man of ill-fortune on your journey’)⁵⁷, before the company sets off to a skirmish which Grettir had intended to participate in. It seems like Þórarinn supposes, that even one *gæfumaðr* would be capable of keeping the good luck of a company where everyone else is a man of ill fortune.

In other cases, the text implies that fortune and misfortune can be interacted with physically. In Chapter 68, when Snorri goði's son Þóroddr attacks Grettir, he asks: “hefir þú eigi frétt þat, at ek hefi orðit lítil heillaþúfa um at þreifa flestum mǫnnum?” (‘haven't you heard that I have been of small amount of good luck to most men who touch me?’). The notion of bad luck (in this case: ‘heillaþúfa’, that is “heap of good luck”, a very rare expression in saga literature) being contagious through physical contact might be just a figure of speech here, but throughout the saga we can clearly see that whoever joins Grettir's company is indeed affected by Grettir's bad luck, and often meet a dire end, such as Hallmundr, Illugi, and Glaumr. Even Grettir's enemies are affected: after cutting off Grettir's head and claiming lasting glory for his deed, Þorbjǫrn is generally despised for his methods, and is outlawed and later killed by Grettir's half-brother. Þorbjǫrg warning about the bad fortune following the killing a member of a fortunate family seems to come true. The only exceptions are Þorsteinn drómundr and Þorgils, who spend longer periods of time together with Grettir and support him, but no misfortune

⁵⁵ Hallberg, 1973; p. 159.

⁵⁶ *Gr.*, p. 134.

⁵⁷ *Gr.*, pp. 104–105.

ever befalls them. We might add that they are both openly addressed as men of good fortune⁵⁸ – it seems that their good fortune was strong enough to counter Grettir’s bad luck.

Kathryn Hume suggests a possible reading of Glámr’s curse of *hamingjuleysi* as something very physical: *hamingja*, as we have seen, was originally an actual luck-spirit, who in this case departs bodily from Grettir, leaving him exposed to ill fortune.⁵⁹ It is a different question whether this concept still existed by the time of the saga’s composition. And if this is the case, to what extent, especially if we consider how rarely the word *hamingja* occurs in *Grettis saga* as opposed to much older sagas, such as *Vatsndæla saga*. However, it may have been a conscious literary device from the author’s part.

It is also interesting to observe that Grettir’s real downfall and sheer lucklessness only begins after two of his supporters – both *gæfumenn* –, Snorri goði and Skapti the Lawspeaker die in Chapter 76. At this time, Grettir has already settled on Drangey, his final destination after a lifetime of travelling and avoiding the fate he was repeatedly foretold. Snorri calls Grettir a wise man for controlling his temper and choosing the right thing to do (not to kill unless necessary) when his son attacked him, and promises his to help Grettir in trying to annul his outlawry, and “var jafnan vinr hans síðan í tillögum sínum” (‘was his constant friend afterwards in all his counsels’).⁶⁰ After Snorri’s death, Grettir’s chances of escaping outlawry vanish. Similarly, the death of Skapti has dire consequences on Grettir’s fate:

Á þessum vetri andaðisk Skapti lögmaðr Þóroddsson. Var Gretti þat skaði mikill, því at hann hafði heitit at ganga fyrir um syknu hans, þegar Grettir hefði tuttugu vetri í sekð verit, en sjá var inn níjtjándi sekðar hans, er nú var frá sagt um hríð. Um várit andaðisk Snorri goði, ok mart bar til tíðenda á þessum misserum, þat sem ekki kemr við þessi sögu.⁶¹

[This winter Skapti Þóroddsson, the lawspeaker passed away. That was great harm for Grettir, because he had promised to help with Grettir’s acquittal as soon as he had been in outlawry for twenty winters, and that was the nineteenth of his outlawry, when the described events happened. In the spring Snorri the goði passed away and much happened in this year which does not concern this story.]

⁵⁸ In the saga’s closing passage, Þorsteinn is called a *giptumaðr*, “a man exceptionally favoured by fortune”, and in Chapter 50, Þorgils is said to be man of good fortune for being able to restrain the three violent outlaws. See: *Gr.*, p. 162.

⁵⁹ Hume, 1974; p. 481.

⁶⁰ *Gr.*, p. 222.

⁶¹ *Gr.*, p. 243.

Though it has been argued that Skapti does not support Grettir's case as much as he could, he still honourably defends Grettir's innocence when he is accused of deliberately burning Þórir's sons. Grettir's misfortune may lie in the fact that his most influential supporters die before they could help him being acquitted in his legal cases.⁶²

Acceptance and rebellion

Grettis saga, more than any other *Íslendingasaga*, is filled with proverbs and proverbial sayings about the inevitability of one's fate or doom, such as Grímr's utterance when he sees the wounded Hallmundr: "verðr hverr þá at fara, er hann er feigr" ('each one has to depart, when he is fated to die', or in Bernard Scudder's translation: 'no one lives beyond their fated day').⁶³ When Grettir and Illugi depart for Drangey, their mother, Ásdís prophesies their doom and claims that "má engi renna undan því, sem honum er skapat" ('no one can avoid what is destined to him').⁶⁴ Similar proclamations certainly add dramatic tension to the narrative, and they do paint a deterministic, stoic outlook on individual life, but we cannot say that the saga-heroes usually live by these rules: though the question of inevitability and causality are central in the *Íslendingasögur*, fate and free will are generally not considered contradictions, and many saga-characters tend to actively pursue their predicted doom. In Western literature (up to today), the rejection of fate is an important aspect of the hero's career, an opportunity to rebel against a dictatorial, unwanted, and unjust force.⁶⁵ In medieval Christian terms, as opposed to the pagan mythological concept, fate is not absolute: in the sagas, one's destiny could be re-written with faith and merciful providence, leaving room for the realization of free will and personal choice.⁶⁶ This view differs greatly from the much more fatalistic view of the older heroic sagas and the eddic and skaldic poetry. In *Grettis saga*, the inevitable and unconquerable destiny is a central theme, where Grettir's fated and constant misfortune is overly emphasized, but the main focus seems

⁶² Ármann Jakobsson, 2014; pp. 121–122.

⁶³ *Gr.*, p. 205.

⁶⁴ *Gr.*, p. 223.

⁶⁵ Eidinow, p. 54.

⁶⁶ Foote, Peter G.: *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983; p. 431.

to lie on Grettir's defiant efforts against such an indomitable power, and Grettir is often praised for his fight against the odds – despite them being futile in the sense that he meets an illogical, unheroic death.⁶⁷

The same contrast can be found in the way Grettir relates to fate. In his language, he usually presents a stoic acceptance of fate. We have already seen a good example of this in the introductory scene, and we find the same spirit in the episodes when Þorsteinn drómundr reminds Grettir of his good abilities but bad luck: “Slyngt yrði þér um mart, frændi, ef eigi fylgði slysin með” (‘You would be capable in much, kinsman, if mishaps did not follow you’). Grettir replies that “Þess verður þó getit, sem górt er.” (‘What is done will be told anyway.’)⁶⁸ There is a visible tendency in Grettir's discontentment with others' predictions concerning his future misfortunes. When his mother, Ásdís foretells his and his brother's death on Drangey, Grettir has no reaction (nor a change of plans) besides reassuring his mother that even if the prophecy will be true, there will be no shame in their death: “Grát þú eigi, móðir; þat skal sagt, at þú hafir sonu átt, en eigi dætr, ef vit erum með vápnum sóttir” (‘Don't cry, mother; it will be said that you have had sons and not daughters, if we are overcome by weapons’).⁶⁹ Later, when Þorbjörn ǫngull visits Drangey for the third time and offers Grettir to leave the island with no harm done, Grettir decides to stay anyway and take the risk of going to war with Þorbjörn, saying “Munu þér þat at gera, sem þér vilið, en hér mun ek bíða þess, sem at höndum kemr.” (‘You may do what you want, but I'll wait here for whatever comes to pass.’)⁷⁰ His attitude is the same even when the trouble already has happened: In Chapter 80, Illugi reminds Grettir that he has warned him about Þuríður's magic, and Grettir simply replies “Allt mun fyrir eitt koma” (‘It will happen all the same’).⁷¹

At one point, Grettir's dislike for others' warnings is expressed with visible annoyance: in Chapter 34, the following dialogue takes place between Grettir and his uncle Jökull regarding the dangers of going and looking for Glámr:

⁶⁷ Felce, Ian: *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*. Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2018; pp. 84–85.

⁶⁸ *Gr.*, p. 137.

⁶⁹ *Gr.*, p. 224.

⁷⁰ *Gr.*, p. 247.

⁷¹ *Gr.*, p. 252.

Jökull mælti: „Sé ek nú, at eigi tjáir at letja þik, en satt er þat, sem mælt er, at sitt er hvárt, gæfa eða görvogleikr.” „Þá er qðrum vá fyrir durum, er qðrum er inn um komit, ok hygg at, hversu þér mun fara sjálfum, áðr lýkr,” kvað Grettir. Jökull svarar: “Vera kann, at vit sjáim báðir nqkkut fram, en hvárrgi fáí við gort.” Eptir þat skilðu þeir, ok líkaði hvárigum annars spár.⁷²

[Jokul said, ‘I can see there’s no point in trying to dissuade you, but the saying is true that fate and fortune do not always go hand-in-hand.’

‘Peril waits at a man’s door, though another goes in before,’ said Grettir. ‘You should consider what fate you yourself will meet in the end.’

Jokul replied, ‘We both may have some insight into the future, but neither of us can prevent it happening.’

After that they parted ways and neither was pleased with the other’s predictions.]⁷³

The scene is not only about discussing chance and the inescapability of fate. We might assume that the author makes a reference to the unfortunate fate of Jökull through Grettir: Jökull is executed by Óláfr Haraldsson after having captured him in a fight against jarl Hákon, whom Jökull supported, in 1030.⁷⁴ These events took place shortly before Grettir’s own death on Drangey,⁷⁵ which suggests that Grettir’s line is both a reference to Jökull’s fate, and a way of saying “mind your own business” to the insufferable uncle.

However, Grettir’s actual deeds do not often attest to his stoic utterances regarding his fate and his willingness to accept things as they are: in his actions and decisions, we see a constant, defiant rebellion against fate, curse, and misfortune predicted by prophecies. This is a usual trait of the sagas, where the power of fate is not something one simply accepts – even if they agree on its inevitability – but rather a force to confront, to prove that human significance can be achieved despite the workings of fate and chance.⁷⁶ In some cases, Grettir’s willingness to challenge fate manifests in bold actions (or bad decisions) in an explicit way, such as deciding to fetch the fire for his shipmates in Chapter 38 despite suspecting that “eigi segir mér vænt hugr um, at ek hafa gott at sqk hér fyrir” (‘I don’t have a hopeful expectation that I will gain good credit from it’),⁷⁷ or (for the first and last time in his life) begging king Óláfr to let him undertake the compromised ordeal and prove himself worthy of being the king’s retainer in Chapter 39. As Robert Cook shows in detail, Grettir is always up for a challenge

⁷² *Gr.*, p. 117.

⁷³ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, p. 82.

⁷⁴ *Gr.*, pp. 117–118.

⁷⁵ See: Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.): *Heimskringla, vol. II. Íslenzk fornrit XXVII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1945; pp. 331–332.

⁷⁶ Gropper, p. 200.

⁷⁷ *Gr.*, p. 130.

where he feels that he can put his real strength and character to the test or earn someone's respect for who he really is, even if this often brings him trouble.⁷⁸

At other times, his rebellion against his fate comes in a less direct way: both before and after Glámr's curse, Grettir is keen on helping out people in trouble (saving the women from the *berserker*, slaying monsters and trolls, helping another woman cross the ford with her daughter to reach the church, etc.), thus being useful to the very society that casts him out, as if to prove it to himself and others that he is unreasonably outlawed. The fact that he manages to survive 19 years of outlawry is a proof of Grettir's resoluteness about doing his best to avoid the fate others foretold him, but more than this, he is a character who never gives up, and tries to get on his feet and protect himself even when he is poisoned with a deadly curse and his enemies outnumber him. What Ian Felce calls a "dignified acceptance with the reality of human vulnerability"⁷⁹ is only true about his statements concerning his view on fate – he is neither a martyr nor a stoic who accepts fate and puts up no fight against it when the time comes, as opposed to the famous martyr-like death of Njáll. Though we can agree with the author's statement towards the end of the saga saying that "sá hann flest fyrir, þó at hann gæti eigi at gørt" ('He foresaw most events, even though he had no influence over them.'),⁸⁰ we must add that it was not for lack of trying.

To sum up this chapter, I have presented some aspects of the concept of fate and fortune in the sagas, with a focus on the *Íslendingasögur*. I have shortly discussed the origin and the meanings of two of the most important "fate/fortune words", *hamingja* and *gæfa*, the latter of which dominates the vocabulary in *Grettis saga*. I have argued that the concept of fate as an external force is not entirely distinguished from one's individual fortune, both of which are strongly connected to birth, family, and power. We have seen examples of how one's good or bad fortune can be shared or spread through interactions with others in the sagas, as well as examples of the saga-characters' ambivalent relationship to accepting and fighting against their destiny. Here I have argued that while the language of the sagas often advocates for a stoic acceptance of fate, the deeds and efforts of the heroes' rarely display true and willing acceptance: fate is seen as a force to be honourably confronted.

⁷⁸ Cook, 1984–1985; p. 140.

⁷⁹ Felce, p. 91.

⁸⁰ *Gr.*, p. 262.

Chapter 3: The Literary Tools of Fate and Fortune in *Grettis saga*

We have seen the nature and some of the most prominent aspects of fate and fortune in saga literature, focusing on *Grettis saga*, where these concepts create an overarching theme throughout the whole story. It is now time to see how this theme manifests in specific literary and narrative elements in the text itself, and how they govern the reader's analysis of Grettir's character and career.

Language: vocabulary and proverbs

Language is all-powerful in a literary text. In *Grettis saga*, the reader meets a great deal of poetry, proverbs, witty dialogues, and retorts merged in a general sense of confronting society and destiny with the use of language throughout the saga. Most of the time we form our opinion about the characters based on what words the narrator or other characters use to describe them with. As is the case in other sagas, *Grettis saga* also shows the most direct expression of concepts about fate, fortune, luck, and chance in the vocabulary that covers these terms. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the sagas offer a great quantity of words for and proverbial sayings about fate and fortune, though the exact meaning of many of them is uncertain, whether because they are used differently in different contexts, or because the concept behind the words was influenced or changed after the Christianization.⁸¹ We will now take a closer look at the vocabulary concerning fate and fortune in *Grettis saga*, comparing it to the general saga-vocabulary presented above.

To start with the statistics, let's see which "fate/fortune word" appear in the standard edition of *Grettis saga* and how high their frequency is. The calculation has partly already been done by Peter Hallberg, who looked for instances of the words *auðna*, *gæfa*, *gipta*, and *hamingja* and their derivatives in the *Íslendingasögur* and other genres. According to Hallberg, the reader finds 0 instances of *auðna* (as a noun), 1 instance of *gipta*, 1 of *hamingja*, and 12 instances of *gæfa* and its derivatives. This places *Grettis saga* among the sagas with average to high frequency of fortune words.⁸² While it is true that *Grettis saga* shows low frequency of the words *auðna*, *gipta*, and *hamingja*, the reader finds other words

⁸¹ See: Hallberg, 1973 | Bartusik

⁸² Hallberg, 1973; p. 178.

with similar meanings and higher frequency instead, making *Grettis saga* a saga particularly rich in “fate/fortune words”. This is not surprising if we accept Hallberg’s argument that the words *auðna*, *hamingja*, *forloq*, *skop*, and *orloq* connect strongly to the pagan concept of fate,⁸³ while the author of *Grettis saga* (a very young saga) must have been greatly influenced by new, Christian concepts behind the words themselves.

The absence of “fate/fortune words” that are most often used in older heroic stories, and eddic and skaldic poetry is striking: we find no instances of the words *auðna*, *forloq*, *orloq*, denoting fate in a more neutral sense, mostly regarding death and doom,⁸⁴ and only a couple of instances of *heppni*, *hamingja* (interestingly, only in the curses by Glámr and Þuríðr), *gipt*, *skop*. Instead, other synonyms of these “fate/fortune words” are preferred by the author: *heill* (also used as ‘health’, ‘healthy’), *happ*, *auðr* (a close relative of *auðna*, but most frequently used as ‘fortune’, ‘success’, ‘riches’, ‘wealth’, and only in a secondary meaning as ‘fate’, ‘to be allotted by fate’), *slys* (‘mistake’, ‘mishap’, ‘misfortune’), and above all *gæfa*. With 29 instances in the saga, the word *gæfa* is the most used “fate/fortune word” and the most complex one, with a great range of meanings from ‘fate’, ‘fortune’, ‘luck’ to ‘success’, ‘accomplishment’, ‘prudence’. As discussed above, fate and fortune in Christian times were more concerned with the personal aspects, and the extensive use of the word *gæfa* seems to confirm that fate and fortune in *Grettis saga* surface on an individual level and deal with personal luck and events in one’s life, not necessarily the tragic death of the hero as the final and inescapable consequence of fate. The *gæfa*, or rather *ógæfa* of the individual is a concept that fundamentally defines the plot, and by not using the more neutral “fate/fortune words”, the text creates a more personal sense of Grettir’s misfortune, which has a strong effect upon the reader trying to relate to Grettir.

The following table shows the most prevalent Old Norse “fate/fortune words” and their frequency in *Grettis saga* according to my counting:

⁸³ Ibid., p. 162.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

Word	Instances	Page numbers	Translated by Scudder as
auðna	0	-	-
forlög	0	-	-
ørlog	0	-	-
heppni	1	p. 92.	fate
hamingja	2	pp. 121 (hamingjuleysi), 247 (hamingjulauss).	improvidence, misfortune
gípt	2	pp. 247, 290.	fortune, luck
sköp	2	pp. 207, 252.	(not direct translations)
slys	4	pp. 122, 137, 247, 251.	misfortune, mishap, harm
happ	5	pp. 51, 121, 131, 168 twice	luck
auðr	13	pp. 3, 4, 50 twice, 108, 115, 132, 134, 198, 205, 256, 272, 274.	fortune, wealth, richness, fate, allotted by fate
heill	17	pp. 10, 45, 76, 104, 105, 118, 133, 203, 221, 223, 246, 247, 249, 250, 251, 257, 289.	fortune/fortunate, luck/lucky healthy
gæfa	29	pp. 16, 36, 43, 63, 83, 95, 97, 105, 117 twice, 121, 125, 132, 133, 134 twice, 137, 143, 162, 167, 169 twice, 170, 205, 228, 247, 285, 289 twice	fortune, luck, providence

Altogether 75 occurrences of words (including compounds) connected to fate and fortune appear in *Grettis saga*, which is a high enough frequency to claim that fate and fortune as a central theme pronouncedly appears in the vocabulary of the text, that is the outmost and most direct level of the language.

We may also point out, that many old, more neutral “fate/fortune words”, such as *sköp*, *happ*, and *heppni* appear almost exclusively in the skaldic verses of the saga, which might be another evidence of the author’s judgement of the right place of these words: as Hallberg points out, many old “fate/fortune words” might have been associated with pagan times and society, and have thus ended up mostly in quotes and verses (direct speech), as to indicate the distance a Christian author takes

from the pagan concepts, which might have been considered old fashioned or weakened in their own time.⁸⁵

One must also be aware of the misleading translations, as the English texts usually show more instances of the words ‘fate’ and ‘fortune’ than the original text, such as *görvicleikr* (‘accomplishment’, ‘achievement’, ‘success’) translated as ‘fate’ by Bernard Scudder in Jökull’s and Grettir’s dialogue in Chapter 34. In many instances, frequently used impersonal constructions such as “eitt skal yfir oss ganga” (word for word: “one shall it go for us”=‘we will meet the same fate’) and “mér varð auðit” (‘it was allotted by fate to me’, usually translated as ‘I was fated to...’) are rendered to English as ‘fate’, even though these are much more neutral expressions in the original text. There are six instances of the verb *auðna* in such impersonal constructions in *Grettis saga*, so *auðna* is not completely absent from the text.

Many of these words appear in general utterances regarding fate and fortune, either in forms of proverbs or proverbial sayings, which the language of *Grettis saga* is exceptionally rich in.⁸⁶ Many of them are attributed to Grettir himself and usually illustrate the stoic side of his attitude to fate and destiny, such as the very early utterance “verðr þat, er varir, ok svá hit, er eigi varir” (‘The foreseeable happens, and so does the unforeseeable’) in Chapter 14, or the often quoted “engi maðr skapar sik sjálf” (‘no man creates himself’) in Chapter 41, which then he tries to disprove through every action he takes. A similarly warning tone hides in Ásdís’ already quoted line “má engi renna undan því, sem honum er skapat” (‘no one can avoid what is destined to him’), and in Jökull’s saying about good luck and good fate in Chapter 34: “satt er þat, sem mælt er, at sitt er hvárt, gæfa eða görvicleikr” (‘it is true, as it is said, that good fortune and accomplishments are two different things’). The latter seems to indicate that Grettir’s good abilities would not necessarily help him reaching his goals, or at least not the ones he pursues. These proverbs do not always seem logical or relevant statements in their contexts, and Sigurður Nordal points out that as opposed to other wise saga-heroes known for their famous proverbs – such as Njáll, who tries to help others with his wisdom –, Grettir makes no use of the wisdom encapsulated in his proverbs and sayings, which serve a humorous and decorative function

⁸⁵ Hallberg, 1973; pp. 150–151.

⁸⁶ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, p. xx.

rather than practical use in the plot.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, they have a strong influence on the reader's view of the text and the unfolding of the events. Grettir's many proverbs concerning the nature of misfortune also emphasize his own proneness to bad luck and the unfortunate turns of events which lie outside the reach of his power, such as "svá skal þol bæta, at bíða annat meira" ('one misfortune shall be treated by suffering a greater one').⁸⁸ They do not influence Grettir's motivations and actions, but they do have a psychological effect upon the reader as they are creating an image of Grettir.

Richard Harris points out that while *Grettis saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* (often dated to ca. 1280) are both particularly rich in vocabulary and proverbs regarding fate and fortune, the latter showcases an extensive use of proverbs containing the words *hamingja*, *forlög*, and *skopp*, which, as we have discussed, are not prevalent in *Grettis saga* where *gæfa/ógæfa* dominates the vocabulary and the theme. This might also serve as a proof of the later authors' preference regarding the outdated vocabulary of the 14th or 15th century, and "fate/fortune words" that still fitted well into the Christian concepts, probably due to the change in their meanings in the contemporary language.⁸⁹

Personification and materialization of fate and fortune

In Chapter 2 we discussed that fate and fortune are not connected to a single supernatural being or a god(dess) in the pagan North: the belief in fate is possibly younger than belief in the Germanic gods, and Óðinn as a god of fate might be a rather late poetic invention, not visible in the *Íslendingasögur*. In *Grettis saga*, similarly to most other sagas where fate and fortune are thematised, these concepts are mostly experienced through physical objects, dreams, people and their prophecies, and things with symbolic meaning. Though we find no such images as the Roman *Fortuna* or the Greek *Tyche* in the sagas and there is no clear god(des) of fate in Old Norse literature besides mythical beings connected

⁸⁷ Nordal, p. 265.

⁸⁸ *Gr.*, p. 153.

⁸⁹ Harris, Richard L.: "The Proverbs of *Vatnsdæla saga*, the Sword of Jokull and the Fate of Grettir: Examining an Instance of Conscious Intertextuality in *Grettis saga*." In: Weldon, James & Waugh, Robin (eds.): *The Hero Recovered: Essays in Honor of George Clark*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institution Publications, 2010; pp. 3–6.

to fate from the old pagan tradition such as *nornir*, *dísir*, and *fylgjur*, many episodes incorporate personified or materialized forms of fate even in the younger *Íslendingasögur*.⁹⁰

One such instance in *Grettis saga* is Glámr's curse of *hamingjuleysi*, discussed above: According to Hume, this curse can be read as a connection to the pagan idea of physical fortune, a *fylgja* or luck-spirit that physically dissociates from Grettir, making him more prone to misfortune.

The most obvious example of personified fate is the evil child (or demonic spirit according to some voices in the saga) appearing out of nowhere in the church of Trondheim before Grettir's ordeal. Robert Cook describes the scene as the “most dramatic instance of fated bad luck, sheer and unexpected *ógæfa* coming from the outside and not motivated by Grettir's actions and character”.⁹¹ Such a *deus ex machina* of bad luck seems to serve a single literary purpose: to hinder Grettir from redeeming himself and to push him towards his presupposed tragic fate. *Grettis saga* is particularly rich in similar *deus ex machina* events with dramatic function, and not only to the disadvantage of the protagonist: sheer and unexpected *gæfa* comes from the outside when Þorbjörg saves Grettir from hanging, as we have seen in our introductory scene, and a similarly lucky turn of events takes place in Chapter 57, when Hallmundr appears out of nowhere and saves Grettir from Þórir's men.⁹² Hallmundr is not entirely human in his nature, just like the evil child, and plays the role of personified fate when he magically appears.⁹³

But fate and fortune can also manifest itself in objects. Grettir receives his great-grandfather Jökull's sword (*Jökulsnautr* or *Ættertangi*) from his mother, Ásdís before he begins his first outlawry. Richard Harris analyses the fate of the owners of the sword in *Vatnsdæla saga*, and comes to the conclusion that despite the Vatnsdal-family's great fortune, their *hamingja* seems to be lacking in the family members called Jökull, and this bad luck is recognized in the sword as well: both Grettir and his brother Atli, the next owner of the sword meet an unfortunate end, similarly to the Jökull appearing in *Grettis saga* (Ásdís' brother).⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Gropper, pp. 198–199.

⁹¹ Cook, 1984–1985; p. 151.

⁹² See: *Gr.*, pp. 183–184.

⁹³ Poole, Russell: “Myth, Psychology, and Society in *Grettis saga*.” In: *Alvíssmál 11.*, 2004; p. 12.

⁹⁴ Harris, pp. 9–14.

Another object which incorporates bad fortune is the famous bewitched tree in Chapter 79. The tree which finally manages to weaken Grettir through magic and indirectly cause his death is an especially unfortunate manifestation of bad luck: Grettir successfully avoids the tree twice and warns his companions about its evil nature, but the third time he encounters it after the good-for-nothing Glaumr has brought it back as firewood, he loses his temper and hews at it, causing the cursed wound on his leg. The event is a true misfortune not only because Grettir loses his temper – which he very seldomly does, but then usually in the most trivial situations and the greatest negative effect upon his fate⁹⁵ –, but also because it serves the purpose of realizing Þórarinn's prophecy in Chapter 31 about not being able to defeat Grettir as long as he keeps his good health (or fortune): “ok seint mun hann vápnum verða sótt, ef hann er heill.” (‘and it will take a long time to defeat him by weapons if he keeps his good health’).⁹⁶ The role of this unfortunate turn made by magic will be further discussed in the analysis of Grettir's limitations.

Women as facilitators of fate

We have seen that active fate and good or bad luck come in many forms in *Grettis saga*, one of which is an actual person, sometimes with an air of supernatural powers around them. We have also discussed that fate often manifests through prophecies, dreams, or – quite frequently – goading by women in the sagas. Compared to other major sagas, *Grettis saga* is considered to include few prominent female characters, and even their role is frequently understated.⁹⁷ However, if we look at the characters whose interventions have a direct and major impact on Grettir's fate, we find the opposite, namely that *Grettis saga* features several prominent female characters, whose influence over Grettir's fate is usually greater than that of men's. These women are not as directly personified concepts of fate and fortune as the Roman *Fortuna* – a concept which undoubtedly reached Iceland in Christian times⁹⁸ –, they do

⁹⁵ Ranković, p. 408.

⁹⁶ *Gr.*, p. 104.

⁹⁷ Phelpstead, Carl: *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders: New Perspectives on Medieval Literature: Authors and Traditions*. Gainesville etc.: University Press of Florida, 2020; pp. 131–132.

⁹⁸ Bartusik, p. 106.

nevertheless act as facilitators of fate, not only in the usual indirect way well-known from Hallgerðr and Bergþóra of *Njáls saga*, Guðrún of *Laxdæla saga*, and the servant woman urging Hrafnkell to “be a man” and take actions in *Hrafnkels saga*, but also through direct actions.

We have already met Þorbjörg in our introduction, whose intervention miraculously saves Grettir from the farmers – only to allow him to meet an even grimmer end. Þorbjörg is described as “skörungr mikill ok stórvitr” (‘prominent and very wise’),⁹⁹ which tells the reader that she has good reasons for what she does: the idea that wisdom and foresight often go hand-in-hand in the sagas also surfaces in a proverb in *Grettis saga*, when Barði proclaims that “spá er spaks geta” (‘a wise man’s guess is a prophesy’)¹⁰⁰ in Chapter 31. The reader might assume therefore that Þorbjörg sees that Grettir is not fated to die there and then, and, not unlike a tutelary goddess, governs his life in a different direction even though she acknowledges that Grettir would deserve to die. With other words, she acts against the rules of society to interfere with Grettir’s fate. A similar character is Spes at the end of the saga, who clearly governs her own and Þorsteinn’s fate according to her will, because she wants that “eitt gengi yfir okkr bæði” (‘both of us to meet the same fate’)¹⁰¹ – by divine providence, cunning, and good fortune, also appearing in Þorsteinn’s life at a dire moment, when no other way of surviving was available to the hero. The latter makes a nice parallel between the miraculous escapes of the two brothers by intervention of wise women.

Another important woman of the saga is Ásdís, Grettir’s mother. Russell Poole argues that Ásdís – representing the heroic values of the Vatnsdalr-family – plays the most defining role in forming Grettir and setting him up as a warrior when she takes over the role of the father, Ásmundr, and passes the family-sword to Grettir. Not only does she set the course of his fate, she is also presented as a loving mother, assuming a protective role in which she goes to such lengths as letting her other son Illugi join Grettir and die with him on Drangey. Ásdís is even called an *auðnorn* (“fortune-norn”; in the translation ‘woman of calibre’) by Grettir in a verse, suggesting a connection to mythic power which allows her to govern fate.¹⁰² This mythic power can also be read as a reference to the female

⁹⁹ *Gr.*, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰ *Gr.*, p. 104.

¹⁰¹ *Gr.*, p. 287.

¹⁰² Poole, pp. 7–9.

fylgjur or *disir*, traditionally viewed as protective family spirits, whose appearance often foreshadows upcoming negative events, and who are most frequently employed as literary tools, functioning as other types of prophecies.¹⁰³ Though the word *fylgja* does not appear in *Grettis saga*, both Ásdís and Þorbjörg display foreshadowing and protective qualities associated with these mythical beings of fate.

A negative counterpart of women manipulating fate in *Grettis saga* is Þuríðr, the witch, whose curse, similarly to Glámr's, is considered the most aggressive way of manipulating one's fate, since curses in the sagas are understood as binding and irrevocable. In Ásdís' and Þuríðr's person we meet a different kind of fate-facilitator than Þorbjörg and Spes: Ásdís' *norn*-like role and Þuríðr's magic belong to a pagan past and have little to do with the Christian concept of fate and fortune (i.e. God's will and divine providence), since they make a more direct impact on Grettir's life, which represents a more deterministic outlook on fate and inevitability.¹⁰⁴ Ármann Jakobsson draws attention to the importance of Þuríðr's advanced age: she was born well before Iceland's adoption of Christianity, and her old age is associated with a strong, ancient power, rendering her monstrous and dangerous in the narrative, despite being seemingly fragile, a "helpless, nearly forgotten relic from the past".¹⁰⁵ It is usually this kind of ancient and malevolent magic against which Grettir is powerless.

Parallels and contrasts

Another striking narrative device of *Grettis saga* which creates dialogue between the text and the reader is the frequent use of parallels and contrasts. Not only do they let the reader guess the direction in which the story proceeds, but they also help us contextualize the tragic nature of Grettir's seemingly undeserved death.

The most impactful of these parallels and contrasts are those that define Grettir's position within and without his own family and society. The first fourteen chapters of the saga introduce Grettir's

¹⁰³ Stankovitsová, Zuzana: "Following up on Female *fylgjur*: A Re-Examination of the Concept of Female *fylgjur* in Old Icelandic Literature." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Mayburd, Miriam: *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*. Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2020; p. 247.

¹⁰⁴ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir: "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur'." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 81, No. 4, Winter 2009; pp. 420–424.

¹⁰⁵ Ármann Jakobsson: *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*. Punctum Books, 2017; p. 149.

family and their history, focusing a great deal on his forefather, Qnundr tréfótr. Qnundr is a typical representant of the *gæfumaðr*, a hero of both the Viking Age and the time of settlements in Iceland: he is integrated into society, arranges weddings, prosecutes lawsuits, is a welcome guest at most farms, and has an ideal friendship with Þrándr,¹⁰⁶ portrayed in detail in the first chapters of the saga. All this sets the context for Grettir's later tragic fate: this kind of success will never be his lot, and his exile can be read as an out-of-placeness in time as well, since the reader knows that those times of Qnundr are over, and Grettir won't be able to achieve a similarly high standing in the contemporary society in the same manner.¹⁰⁷ The contrast between successful and unsuccessful members of society is constantly present throughout the saga.

A parallel Grettir shares with Qnundr is the leg-wound. Qnundr loses a leg in battle and becomes *tréfótr* ('tree-leg'), but his good fortune never leaves him: his leg-wound turns out to be a blessing in the end, unlike Grettir's, which brings him the greatest misfortune of his life: not only is it an indirect cause of his death, the poisoning also prevents him from putting up a heroic last stand and redeeming his honour himself.

Haki Antonsson points out a binary pattern in the narrative concerning the *ógæfumaðr* Grettir and the *gæfumaðr* Þorsteinn drómundr: Christianity is introduced to the saga when Þorsteinn drómundr appears on the scene, and from this moment on, the trajectories of the half-brothers' contrasting career helps us define the two very different types of heroes: the strong, stubborn, controversial Grettir burdened with grim fate and seemingly lacking God's mercy, and Þorsteinn, the Christian hero of the new times, physically weaker than the pagan ideal, but blessed with good fortune and divine providence, that leads him to honour and glory – though not always in the most honourable way.¹⁰⁸ Another interesting parallel is the self-imposed form of outlawry that Þorsteinn and his wife Spes take upon themselves at the end of the saga: hermitage almost appears as an ideal form of exile, which is presented in a very different light than Grettir's final days of exile on Drangey. We might also notice

¹⁰⁶ Homosocial bonds were an important indicator of one's honour and success in society. Grettir tends to fail in creating these ties due to character flaws, discussed by Gareth Lloyd Evans. See: Evans, Gareth Lloyd: *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019; pp. 107–143.

¹⁰⁷ Cook, Robert: "Reading for Character in *Grettis saga*." Chapter in: Tucker, John (ed.): *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*. New York/London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989; p. 234.

¹⁰⁸ Haki Antonsson: *Damnation and Salvation in Old Norse Literature*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018; p. 124.

a consciously constructed contrast between the three different types of heroes in three different times: Qnundr of the Viking Age, favoured by fortune despite his physical disability; Þorsteinn, the cunning, patient hero of Christianity and chivalric literature, also favoured by providence; and Grettir, the one in-between the two worlds, incorporating the goals of both worlds, but failing at achieving being part of either. Here we might also add a third family member contrasting Grettir, his brother Atli: in Chapter 37, Atli takes complete charge of running the farm after Ásmundr, and is described as “gæfr ok forsjáll” (‘fortunate and foresighted/prudent’), a typical example of a member of the Vatnsdalr-family, and the opposite of Grettir.

Many scholars have examined the parallels and contrasts between Glámr and Grettir. Both of them are considered as representants of older times and values, defined by their marginality, and their failed attempt at mastering the threatening wilderness and the supernatural powers harming society.¹⁰⁹ Ármann Jakobsson points out the connection between Grettir and Glámr, both proficient monster slayers and victims of dark supernatural powers, sharing their marginality and anti-social nature, though Grettir puts up a fight for his humanity and sanity, which separates him from the genuinely sinister monster Glámr has become.¹¹⁰ Russell Poole sees a parallel between Glámr’s withholding the attainment of Grettir’s full potential and Ásmundr’s withholding of the family-sword,¹¹¹ and argues that Glámr’s *ógæfa*, which lives on to plague the Christian society, infects Grettir and transmits Christian connotations with the devil (which Grettir is also called once: “sjálfan fjándann”, ‘the Devil himself’, in Chapter 59).¹¹²

Poole also draws attention to the many contrasting elements in Grettir’s own character, arguing that it is essentially formulated as a series of antitheses where human status is contrasted with nonhuman associations, ample energy and initiative with besetting dependence, courage with phobia, physical strength with his supposed full potential and maturation, marked adroitness in language with ineffective sociolinguistic cooperation, genuine helpfulness and good intentions with pathological

¹⁰⁹ Bandlien, Bjørn: “Marginality.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 255.

¹¹⁰ Ármann Jakobsson: “The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in *Grettis Saga*.” In: *Folklore*. Vol. 120, No. 3, December 2009; pp. 311–313.

¹¹¹ Poole, p. 10.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

cruelty, sadism.¹¹³ Though these elements add more to Grettir's ambivalent character than to his fate, it is interesting to see the many contrasts within Grettir and the narrative, since both are meant as guidance for the reader in interpreting the contradictions of the story itself: such a controversial figure can be expected to have a controversial fate and have controversial experience with chance.

Parallels are also found in repeated scenes, another apparent feature of *Grettis saga*. Such repeated episodes affirm the reader's expectations regarding Grettir's future, and further nuance his role(s) in and outside society. Good examples of repeated scenes are Grettir's fights with *berserkir*, his journeys in disguise using the name Gestr, his trips to Norway, or acquiring treasure from mounds.¹¹⁴ The most notable repeated scene is the fire-fetching episode of Chapter 35, replayed in Chapter 74, both of which bring further bad fortune to Grettir, but also attribute a new role to him: the culture hero of mythic proportions, reminiscent of Prometheus' theft of fire.¹¹⁵

Even more striking is the ubiquitous presence of events occurring three times, a typical folklore and fairy tale-element. In Chapter 88, Spes claims that "hér mun koma at því, sem mælt er, at þrisvar hefir allt orðit forðum" ('this goes to prove, as it is said, that all things have always happened in threes').¹¹⁶ Though Spes' utterance seems to belong more to the chivalric tales, the formulaic number three appears remarkably often in *Grettis saga*. This is possibly a conscious choice by the author to add suspense and dramatic force to the episodes: the reader might expect a turn of events at or after the third encounter, after having met the same structure so many times before. Such events are Grettir's three tasks from and tricks on Ásmundr in his childhood, his three exiles, the three mentions of Grettir lifting heavy stones (his most famous demonstrations of almost superhuman strength), Hallmundr's three fish-thefts from Grímr before he is killed by the latter, Þorbjörn ǫngull's three visits to Drangey, Glaumr's three mistakes on Drangey which lead to their death, Grettir's three encounters with the bewitched log, Þorsteinn's and Spes' three tricks on Sigurðr during their affair and the latter's three unsuccessful attempts to expose the crime, and three reasons for Grettir being the most renowned outlaw according to Sturla the Lawspeaker. All these events add to the dramatics of the text, but they

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹⁴ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, p. 236.

¹¹⁵ Hastrup, pp. 291–294.

¹¹⁶ *Gr.*, p. 280.

also govern the reader's expectations by foreshadowing the future. Now let's turn to other forms of foreshadowing, which create in the reader the unique feeling of always heading toward the inevitable and tragic end so characteristic of this saga.

Foreshadowing and prophecies

One thing that all saga-readers soon realize about the expectations regarding the fate of a saga-character is that the texts are usually full of foreshadowing which frequently hints on what is going to happen, similar to a folktale. In Chapter 55 of *Njáls saga*, Njáll tells Gunnar “veg þú aldri meir í inn sama knérunn en um sinn ok rjúf aldri sætt þá, er góðir men gera meðal þín ok annarra, ok þó sízt á því máli” (‘never kill in the same lineage more than once, and never break agreements which good men make between you and others’) and warns him that “en þó skaltú svá um þitt mál hugsa, ef þetta berr saman, at þá munt þú skammt eiga ólifat, en ella munt þú verða gamall maðr” (‘and yet you shall remember that if this happens, you will shortly die, but otherwise you will become an old man’).¹¹⁷ Even the unexperienced saga-reader can suspect, that Gunnar will not live to be an old man, on the contrary: he is going to kill two people of the same bloodline and break a settlement, which will then lead to his death – as prophesised. Warnings and prophecies are usually a sure way of knowing what mistakes the protagonists are going to make, and it is markedly so in *Grettis saga* as well.

Jökull's warning about the difference between good fortune and good fate – i.e. success, good accomplishments – is but one of many warnings Grettir receives from wise characters who seem to be blessed with foresight. Some of these are so explicit, that the reader can only wonder at Grettir's determined willingness to provoke the foretold events. Óláfr Haraldsson, after having cancelled the ordeal of bearing hot iron, rejects Grettir's wish to take him into his court, saying that “Nú skaltu fara í friði fyrir mér, hvert er þú vill, vetrarlangt, en at sumri far þú út til Íslands, því at þar mun þér auðit verða þín bein at bera” (‘Now you shall go in peace as far as I am concerned, wherever you want, for the winter, but in the summer you shall travel out to Iceland, because you are fated to rest your bones

¹¹⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Brennu-Njáls saga. Íslensk fornrit XII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954; p. 139.

there').¹¹⁸ Grettir returns indeed to Iceland where he later dies. Similarly, Ásdís warns Grettir that he and his brother will be killed on Drangey, and even adds that “sjái þit vel fyrir svikum” (‘you two shall watch out for treachery’) and “fátt er rammara en forneskjan” (‘few things are more powerful than ancient magic’),¹¹⁹ foreshadowing Glaumr’s unintentional but fatal treachery and Þuríðr’s sorcery. Grettir himself sees the potential threat in Glaumr’s mistakes, and though he warns him that “ef þik hendir it þriðja slys, þá verður þat þinn bani ok várr allra” (‘if you make a third mistake, that will be the death of you and all of us’),¹²⁰ he is unable to steer future events in a different direction.

A similarly strong foreshadowing takes place in a dialogue between Grettir and Þorvaldr in Chapter 35, where Þorvaldr warns Grettir that he must “hafa sik spakan, – ‘ok mun þá vel duga, en ella mun þér slysgjarnt verða’” (‘keep himself well-tempered – “and that will serve you well, but otherwise you will be prone to misfortune’’’). The reader is not surprised to see later that Grettir’s downfall is directly connected to not keeping his temper in check when he encounters the evil child in the church, Þuríðr in the boat, and the bewitched tree on Drangey. An equally strong indication of fate lies in Glámr’s curse, but also in Þórarinn’s prophecy about the difficulty of defeating Grettir while he keeps his good health, as well as in Skapti’s warning about the dangers of trusting one’s own strength: “hefir þat mǫrgum at bana orðit, at hann hefir oftryggr verit” (‘being overconfident has become the death of many’).¹²¹ This fits well to Hallmundr’s proclamation that “at sínu má | engi maðr | afli treysta, | þvít svá bregzk | á banadægri | hǫlða hugr | sem heill bilar” (‘his own strength may no man trust, because men’s resolve falls short on the day of death as one’s fortune fails’).¹²²

Here we must remind ourselves of the complex question of accepting but at the same time challenging one’s fate (discussed in Chapter 2) and of the fact that these utterances are mainly literary devices, aimed at the reader. The fact that prophesising characters rarely have anything to gain or lose by their prophecies also confirms that their main role is plot determined.¹²³

¹¹⁸ *Gr.*, p. 134.

¹¹⁹ *Gr.*, p. 224.

¹²⁰ *Gr.*, p. 251.

¹²¹ *Gr.*, p. 178.

¹²² *Gr.*, p. 203.

¹²³ Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, p. 425.

There are traces of other, less explicit elements of foreshadowing characteristic for the sagas, such as the notorious dreams with prophetic qualities, well known from *Gísla saga*, *Njáls saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*, represented here by Ásdís' dreams about treachery and black magic that will bring death to her sons on Drangey. Another interesting foreshadowing is the description of the hero's death: both Grettir and his brother Atli fall forward when they die ("fallinn áfram" and "fell hann fram"),¹²⁴ which is typically a sign that the dead will be avenged, as it in fact happens in both cases in *Grettis saga*.¹²⁵

In Chapter 3 I have presented some of the narrative elements and literary devices used by the author of *Grettis saga* to express the theme of fate and fortune throughout the saga and to navigate the reader's expectations and attitude towards the text, the plot, and the characters. I have argued that the rich vocabulary of the saga contributes greatly to the reader's general judgement about Grettir's misfortune, and that the proverbs connected to fate and fortune in the saga have a similar function, rather than truly expressing motivations and actual deeds of the characters. While the language of the saga often suggests a stoic acceptance of one's destiny, Grettir is less willing to simply accept his predicaments than to fight the unfair circumstances with all the power he has.

I have also argued that while a personified god or goddess of fate and fortune such as the Roman Fortuna is not found in the mythological background of the sagas, the concepts are often experienced through physical objects and people with symbolic meaning. *Grettis saga* displays a variety of objects and semi-supernatural human beings actively interacting with the protagonist's fortune and personifying an external force of chance which inevitably pushes the hero in one direction or another. Examples of such objects are the ancestral sword of Grettir's family and the bewitched tree which indirectly causes Grettir's death through a truly unfortunate accident. Besides supernatural beings such as the evil spirit appearing as a child in the church, I have also presented female characters provided with roles and mythic powers reminiscent of the *nornir*, *fylgjur* or *dísir*, such as Ásdís and Þorbjörg, whose protective nature and foresight have a defining role in Grettir's career, and who can thus be seen as active facilitators of fate.

¹²⁴ *Gr.*, pp. 261, 146.

¹²⁵ Ranković, p. 403.

Other literary devices discussed in this chapter were repetitions, parallels, and contrasts throughout the saga which serve the purpose of defining Grettir within society and his family. Similarly to prophecies and curses, many of these parallels and contrasts have foreshadowing qualities which openly tell the reader what events are going to take place in the following, implying the inevitability of the protagonist's fate. These elements have often less direct impact on the plot itself than the reader's interpretation of Grettir's character and status, though they distinctly thematise fate and fortune in *Grettis saga* and serve an important narratological purpose in the presentation of the story.

Now we will turn to a more plot-based analysis, and discuss the actual events described in the saga which denote that the protagonist is not as unlucky and tragic a character as many of the occasionally unreliable narrator's literary tools paint him.

Chapter 4: “Því at mér þykkir á mjök hverfanda hjóli um hans hagi”

– The Dual Nature of Grettir’s Fortune

As we have seen, Grettir is frequently – probably more often than any other saga-hero – described as an *ógæfumaðr*, and even his language indicates an awareness of his unfortunate nature and willingness to accept things as they are. The reader is not necessarily encouraged to challenge the idea, since the text is so abundant in vocabulary and narrative elements connected to ill fate and fortune, and also because most of Grettir’s negative character-judgement comes from other characters of high authority, such as Óláfr Haraldsson in Chapter 39, one of the eternal and most noble hero-kings of the sagas, who utters a prophecy and judgement of bad luck and short temper, both confirming Glámr’s harsh curse and foreshadowing Þuríðr’s black magic. Both Grettir and the reader is willing to accept the irrevocability of curses and prophecies by saints and monsters or witches with supernatural power. But I would like to argue that the reader is sometimes tricked by the language and a somewhat unreliable narrator: if we take a closer look at what actually happens to Grettir in the episodes, we find that the curses and prophecies have more to do with justifying Grettir’s fate than forming it. In her narratological analysis of the Glámr-scene, Sarah Eriksen shows how the quick shift in narrative technique and the internal focalization of Grettir’s fights with the undead (both Kárr and Glámr) affect the reader as well, and argues that the text curses the reader with “Glámr’s sight” as much as Grettir when the narrative scope “zooms out” and changes from human to cosmos.¹²⁶ I would like to borrow the idea and further extend it by arguing that not only Glámr’s curse, but also the other prophecies and foreshadowing utterances by neutral, trustworthy characters – such as Ásdís, Þorbjörg, Þorsteinn, Óláfr – affect the reader and make us pay more attention to the language than the actual events of the plot.

Grettir’s character is not changed as much as the dire curse implies; in fact, his proneness to misfortune and his ambiguous position in society is established long before his outlawry and Glámr’s curse, and he is marked out early on by his prodigious abilities and socially disruptive tendencies, as

¹²⁶ Eriksen, Sarah B.: “Traversing the Uncanny Valley: Glámr in Narratological Space.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Mayburd, Miriam: *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*. Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2020; pp. 94–97.

if the author intended to stigmatize him.¹²⁷ One of the first characters who realizes this and passes condemning judgement to Grettir is his father Ásmundr, who has a crucial observation about Grettir's fate and fortune later on in Chapter 42, when he is old and ill and addresses his sons in a will-like statement before his death:

“en uggir mik,” sagði Ásmundr, “at þú megir varla í kyrrðum sitja fyrir ójafnaði; en þat vilda ek, at allir mínir tengðamenn sinnaði honum sem best. En til Grettis kann ek ekki at leggja, því at mér þykkir á mjök hverfanda hjóli um hans hagi, ok þó at hann sé sterkr maðr, þá uggir mik, at hann eigi meir um vandræði at véla en fulltingja frændum sínum. En þótt Illugi sé ungr, þá mun hann þó verða þroskamaðr, ef hann heldr sér heilum.”¹²⁸

[“but I fear,” said Ásmundr, “that injustices will hardly let you sit in peace, and I want all my relatives to support him as best they can. But to Grettir I cannot tell anything, because to me his affairs seem to depend much on the wheel of fortune, and though he is a strong man, I fear that he will have more trouble to deal with than to lend help to his kinsmen. And even though Illugi is young, he will become a vigorous man if he keeps his health/fortune.”]

Knowing of the foreshadowing employed in the saga, the reader can already suspect that Illugi will not keep out of harm's way. But there is a unique side to Ásmundr's last speech: instead of calling Grettir a man of ill fortune with any of the discussed “fate/fortune words” of the typical vocabulary of the saga, he mentions the ‘hverfandi hvel’ (or ‘hverfandi hjól’, also known from the 84th verse of *Hávamál* and Chapter 21 of *Fóstbræðra saga*),¹²⁹ that is the ‘Wheel of Fortune’. We did not discuss this term as part of the “fate/fortune words” of the sagas, because it has a complicated nature and is not at all a conventional phrase of the *Íslendingasögur*, though it has much to do with the concept of fate and fortune in *Grettis saga*. Grzegorz Bartusik argues that the whole concept of the “rota Fortuna”, also appearing as *hamingjuhvel*, *hamingjuhjól*, *auðynuhvel*, and *auðynuhjól* in the sagas, was assimilated into Old Norse culture and worldview. Not only did the “fate/fortune words” acquire semantic meanings of “luck” from Latin and Greek, but the concept of neutral chance and changing good and bad luck was transplanted into the sagas.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Barraclough, Eleanor Rosamund: “Inside Outlawry in “*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*” and “*Gísla saga Súrssonar*”: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 82, No. 4, Winter 2010; pp. 368–369.

¹²⁸ *Gr.*, pp. 138–139.

¹²⁹ See: *Gr.*, p. 138. footnotes

¹³⁰ Bartusik, pp. 113–114.

Ásmundr's statement about the Wheel of Fortune is a more precise prophecy about Grettir's future than those that describe Grettir as an *ógæfumaðr*: quick and often unexplainable shifts between good and bad luck seem to fit Grettir's career more than the continuous, inherent bad luck he is traditionally attributed. This is also in accordance with the mixed fortune of the Vatnsdal-family, traditionally considered one of the most fortunate families, but in effect consisting of exceptionally unlucky and unsuccessful members as well.¹³¹

In the following subchapter, I will present the “dark side of the wheel of Fortune”, that is the fortunate side of Grettir and his fate, which is usually not mentioned in the surveys of his character.

Grettir – gæfumaðrinn

Let us return to our introductory scene once again: in Chapter 52, Grettir deeply infuriates the farmers of the Vestfirðir by terrorizing and threatening them, stealing their food, cloth, and weapons, and living as a parasite around the Vatnsfjörðr, even though he, as an outlaw, is strictly prohibited from living there and can be freely killed by anyone. He even “fór nú djarfliga ok hafði engi varðhald á sér” (‘went about boldly and was not at all on his guard’), a capital offence in a society where one always has to be alert and ready to defend one's honour and life, and an unfortunate habit of Grettir.¹³² It is difficult to argue that Grettir is truly unlucky when he is captured by the farmers and faces execution, one could rather say that “he had it coming”. In this context, the sudden appearance of Þorbjörg is just miraculuous as the evil child's appearance in the church of Trondheim – only this time the *deus ex machina* saves Grettir's life in a most unexpected and fortunate turn of fate.

A similar miracle takes place in Chapter 57, when Grettir is caught in a pass by Þórir and his company. In the middle of the fight, seemingly unnoticed by either party, Hallmundr turns up and takes Grettir's side in the fight, killing twelve men and saving Grettir's life. The episode does not offer any explanation as to why and how Hallmundr happened to be there, but in what follows Hallmundr

¹³¹ Harris, pp. 11–12.

¹³² Andersson, Theodore M.: “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas.” In: *Speculum*. Vol. 45, No. 4, October 1970; p. 576.

turns out to be a loyal and good companion to Grettir until his death. Grettir's first encounter with the mysterious Hallmundr (under the pseudonym 'Loptr') in Chapter 54 also foreshadows the discussed scene: Hallmundr is the only character in the saga who seems to be stronger than Grettir, and he is the one who later utters the warning that one can never trust his own strength alone – the mistake the over-confident Grettir typically makes in the saga. As suggested before, Hallmundr's contact with the supernatural seems to indicate that only a superhuman power can be a satisfying enough challenge for Grettir, which we will later come back to.

Other times, chance makes sure that Grettir does not become a brutal murderer and lose the reader's sympathy: the initial vengeance he wanted to have on Auðunn (a childhood trauma for Grettir's honour) in Chapter 28 turns into a comic event instead when Grettir falls asleep and Auðunn stumbles in his leg, covering Grettir in whey, which leads to their wrestling match. The scene ends without a killing but with a proof of Grettir's superior strength, and later on Grettir and Auðunn are presented as friends, giving gifts to each other,¹³³ proving Robert Cook's conclusion that Grettir "is not a typical overbearing man bent on killing those who have offended him", and that what honour dictates is not always Grettir's true goal.¹³⁴ Though falling asleep is a doing of chance ruining Grettir's ambush, this bad luck ultimately turns out in his favour. The reader is also satisfied to witness a comic and wholesome episode instead of senseless bloodshed. A similar accidental redemption of Grettir's human side is implicated in Chapter 52, when the farmers capture Grettir: lowering his guard and not taking enough care leads to trouble, but we must remind ourselves that without this stroke of bad luck, Grettir might have killed many (or all) of the farmers, as it has already been established in the beginning of the chapter that they are no match for him. Instead of a killer, we find a Grettir who suffers for his sins – and not too much either, since lady Þorbjörg digra miraculously and perhaps unjustly saves him, as shown in our introduction.

Another instance of bad fortune contributing to final outcomes of chance-encounters is the use of magic which finally kills Grettir: he is truly unfortunate with the bewitched tree and for losing his temper at the wrong moment. This, in the end, costs him his life, but the reader is pleased to find that

¹³³ See: *Gr.*, Chapter 28 and Chapter 34.

¹³⁴ Cook, 1984–1985; p. 145.

the plan backfires at the villain Þorbjörn ǫngull. In the end, Grettir is reinstated in the public opinion, and his killer is outlawed and shamed, and finally killed by Grettir's brother. These turns of events derive from bad luck, but eventually serve the purpose of keeping Grettir a human, fallible, and likeable character, and as such, they seem to be a greater good fortune in the long run than their negative effect at the moment of their occurrence.

Regarding his family, Grettir can be said to be exceptionally fortunate: apart from his father, he enjoys the love and benevolence of his mother and all his brothers, all of whom are remarkably faithful: Ásdís is directly responsible for giving Grettir a chance in life when she passes on the ancestral sword before he leaves Iceland to begin his first exile, while his two brothers, Illugi and Þorsteinn fulfil all obligations of honour: Illugi gives his life for Grettir on Drangey, and Þorsteinn avenges him in Constantinople, earning everlasting fame for the both of them. In addition to his family, Grettir enjoys the support of many loyal friends, such as Hallmundr, Auðunn, Arnbjörn, Snorri goði, and Skapti the Lawspeaker, so he does indeed experience successful and honourable social relationships. Though the text suggests that part of Grettir's tragic fate is his loneliness, he is seldom alone, and seems to have a wide group of true supporters, and though they cannot prevent his outlawry and death, such friendship and support provided by wise and esteemed members of society are often typical traits of a *gæfumaðr*.

Another note we may add here is the striking absence of the word *feigr* regarding Grettir. *Feigr*, usually translated as 'fated to die', 'doomed', 'fey', 'with ill fortune', is another "fate/fortune word" that frequently appears in the sagas. However, it only makes a single appearance in *Grettis saga* (Chapter 62), and it does so in a proverb: the wounded Hallmundr claims that "verðr hverr þá at fara, er hann er feigr" ('no one lives beyond their fated day'). While we might suspect the author's changed concept of the word itself and preference for other "fate/fortune words" that better fitted concepts of the Christian times, it is also interesting to observe that Grettir is never described as being "fated to die". On the contrary, it is mentioned on several occasions that he *deserves to die*, for instance by jarl Sveinn (Chapter 24) and Þorbjörg (Chapter 52). This suggests a more social and less religious-philosophical interpretation of Grettir's fate, as *deserving death* has to do with social justice and consequences of one's deeds, and so it lacks the tragic nature of being fated to die by an unconquerable

supernatural force. For the larger part, Grettir's misfortune seems to move on a social scale, not a metaphysical one.

There is one more crucial aspect in which Grettir should doubtlessly be considered a *gæfumaðr*: fame. Grettir's purposes, goals, and values are ambivalent, and he himself claims in the famous *berserkir*-scene that "eigi geri ek mér alla men jafna" ('I don't treat all men equally'),¹³⁵ discriminating between tasks, challenges, and people alike, lacking a comprehensive system of values that guides all his actions.¹³⁶ He either doesn't find the right place or time that fits his purpose or doesn't find the right purpose fitting his place and time, but he shares nonetheless the single most common desire of the typical saga-hero: fame in life and death.¹³⁷ In the saga, he is often referred to as the greatest, the strongest, the most accomplished, or the most valiant man living in Iceland, and after his death it is made clear that his fame will live on, not only because he was the strongest man, but also because of how far away his brother avenged him, and because he survived almost twenty years as an outlaw, displaying such great endurance and stubbornness in defying fate that it can hardly be seen a trait of a typical *ógæfumaðr*. To be sure, Grettir's heroic status is diminished after Glámr's curse – he has to endure bad weather, steal sheep, food, clothing, prey on farmers, and fume over petty drudgery – but, as we have seen, he keeps performing useful services for society, and experiences a great deal of sheer good luck in addition to the bad.¹³⁸ We have already discussed how success is an indicator of one's fortune, and in this sense, Grettir shows many qualities of a *gæfumaðr*.

The importance of fame is a vast topic that lies outside the scope of the present discussion, but it is worth noting that the Viking concept of the immortality of one's name and fame presented in *Hávamál* ("Wealth dies | kinsmen die | a man dies likewise himself | but fame dies never | for him who gets good fortune") is a strong driving force in the *Íslendingasögur*, where the greatest fortune and success a hero can achieve on the social scale is fame.¹³⁹ Grettir is no exception, and against the

¹³⁵ *Gr.*, p. 65.

¹³⁶ Cook, 1984–1985; p. 140.

¹³⁷ Hawes, Janice: "The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 80, No. 1, Spring 2008; p. 32.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹³⁹ Foote, pp. 431–432.

background of his varying fortune, it seems that out of all his aspirations, fame is the only one he achieves in both life and death. Furthermore, unjust as his outlawry and persecution might seem (all the more so as time passes), his honour and fame only increase, not solely because of his ability to survive and fight society's threats, but also because he defeats assassins trying to gain honour by killing the most famous outlaw: killing an outlaw was naturally considered an honourable deed, but failing an attempt to kill an outlaw was dishonourable and increased the esteem of the outlaw.¹⁴⁰ We see this principle manifest several times in the saga, probably best displayed in Grettir's encounter with Snorri goði's son Þóroddr: sparing the son's life earns Grettir great respect and Snorri's friendship, which adds both to Grettir's fame (regarding both the saga and its later reception) and the reader's liking of the character.

We have now seen in which social, honour-bound aspects Grettir is fortunate, but we have also touched upon his apparent misfortune: he does not enjoy the success of the esteemed members of society, unlike Qnundr and Þorsteinn, and he is unable to "do what honour dictates", to reach his full potential, to challenge fate in order to establish himself and realize his capacity. He gets neither the chance in life to redeem his honour and return to society, nor the opportunity to make a heroic last stand and meet Gísli's, the other famous misfortunate outlaw-hero's fate. The usual explanation is that Glámr's curse deprives Grettir from all future good fortune and success, but not even Glámr's curse can prevent Grettir from achieving fame. We should ask the questions: is Glámr's curse truly as influential in the plot as its phrasing suggests, and to what degree does it affect Grettir, and to what degree the reader? Let's take a closer look at the curse and what it actually changes in Grettir's fate.

The curse goes as follows:

"Mikit kapp hefir þú á lagit, Grettir," sagði hann, "at finna mik, en þat mun eigi undarligt þykkja, þó at þú hljótir ekki mikit happ af mér. En þat má ek segja þér, at þú hefir nú fengit helming afls þess ok þroska, er þér var ætlaðr, ef þú hefðir mik ekki fundit; nú fæ ek þat afl eigi af þér tekit, er þú hefir áðr hreppt, en því má ek ráða, at þú verðr aldri sterkari en nú ertu, ok ertu þó nógu sterkr, ok at því mun mǫrgum verða. Þú hefir frægr orðit hér til af verkum þínum, en heðan af munu falla til þín sekðir ok vígaferli, en flest ǫll verk þín snúask þér til ógæfu ok hamingjuleysis. Þú munt verða útlægr gorr ok hljóta jafnan úti at búa einn samt. 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."¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Bandlien, Björn: "Marginality." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 255.

¹⁴¹ *Gr.*, p. 121.

[“You were very eager, Grettir,” he said, “to meet me, but it will not seem surprising if you will not gain much good fortune from me. And I can tell you, that you have now acquired half the physical strength and manhood that was meant for you, if you had not met me; now I cannot take that strength away from you which you have previously obtained, but I can command so that you will never be stronger than you are now, though you are strong enough, and many will find out about this. You have become renowned for your deeds until now, but from now on outlawry and manslaughter will be your lot, and most of your doings will bring you failure and misfortune. You will be made an outlaw and forced outdoors to live alone. And I lay this unto you, that these eyes, which I bear, will constantly be before your sight, and then you will find it difficult to be alone, and this will bring you to death.”]

Based on the curse, there seems to be no hope for Grettir. But as Robert Cook points out, Grettir keeps performing useful services for society even after Glámr’s curse,¹⁴² and several scholars have argued that Grettir shows most character-flaws and disadvantageous qualities mentioned in Glámr’s curse long before the event which does not change as much as the text itself wants us to believe.¹⁴³ Already as child, Grettir acts in unpredictable ways, showcasing meaningless and uncalculated violence and cruelty,¹⁴⁴ anti-social tendencies, treated unjustly by various members of his family and society,¹⁴⁵ and his lack of good fortune or prudence is pointed out by Ásdís after the wool-comb trick Grettir plays on his father, Ásmundr.¹⁴⁶ He rebels against all forms of establishment, challenging the authority of his father, esteemed men of the district, the rules of society, the concept of courtly life in Norway (though indirectly), the family traditions by passing on the ancestral sword of Jøkull, even the very institution of outlawry and exile by constantly challenging its effect and travelling to different settlements (twice in disguise, as ‘Gestr’, a “visitor”), mostly looking for trouble and addressing the problems of man in community and of human personality.¹⁴⁷

Grettir is already a misfit in society and an outlaw by the time he encounters Glámr, but many of his great deeds come only after the monster-slaying: the fire-fetching episodes (with mixed fortune), the killing of Snækollr the *berserkr* in Chapter 40, avenging his brother Atli in Chapter 48, overcoming the two outlaws in different humorous episodes of trials of strength and character in Chapter 50, defeating the troll in Chapter 65, in addition to feats of genuine humanity and mercy, such as helping

¹⁴² Cook, 1984–1985; p. 148.

¹⁴³ Hawes, p. 21.

¹⁴⁴ Ármann Jakobsson: “Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders.” In: *Saga-Book*. Vol. XXVII, Viking Society for Northern Research, London: University College London, 2003; p. 17.

¹⁴⁵ Cook, 1984–1985; p. 143.

¹⁴⁶ See: *Gr.*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁷ Davidson, pp. 85–87.

Steinvör cross the ford to reach the Christmas mass in Chapter 64, or the patience and mercy he shows to his attackers, for instance Snorri goði's son, Þóroddr in Chapter 68, earning him great honour. Though Glámr's curse clearly states that Grettir will become a brutal killer (a man-slaughterer), scholars have pointed out that the opposite is in fact true: Grettir never kills in blind range, and even when provoked – by the evil child, the farmers, or assassins like Þóroddr trying to gain honour by killing him – he prefers to knock his opponents out or disarm them in a similar fashion, using strength but avoiding killing them.¹⁴⁸ The same can be seen in the Auðunn-episode described above. Though honour and the desire of fame would often dictate otherwise, Grettir prefers peace over bloodshed, showcasing a willingness to compromise in spite of what honour dictates.

Another proof of Grettir's peaceful intentions is the fact that the author of *Grettis saga* presents the burning and killing of Þórir's sons in Chapter 38 as an accident: while *Landnámabók* (a source for *Grettis saga*) only mentions that Grettir murdered (*myrða*) the people inside the hut when he fetched the fire, the author of *Grettis saga* makes an intervention and presents the scene as an accidental killing (*víg*), which is a lesser crime. Marion Poilvez points out that the *Íslendingasögur* tend to excuse some violent deeds by their protagonists, or at least describe them as more understandable compared to the concise versions presented in *Landnámabók*.¹⁴⁹ It is clear that the author wants us to empathize with Grettir and seeks explanations of his fate, an attitude which easily spreads to the reader.

Improvvidence and short-temperedness are also part of Glámr's curse, but this is no new aspect of Grettir's character either: already in Chapter 14, Grettir is introduced by the narrator as “hann var lítill skapdeildarmaðr” (‘he was not master of his own temper’), which his mother later confirms. Curiously enough, looking at Grettir's actions, we find that he in fact showcases temperance and patience more often than not. Ranković analyses the so-called “no reaction” formula that tends to govern Grettir's life¹⁵⁰ – whether it concerns waiting for the right moment to redeem his honour, strike at his opponents, or accepting his predicament –, and points out that Grettir very seldomly loses his temper,

¹⁴⁸ Ranković, p. 406–407.

¹⁴⁹ Poilvez, Marion: “Those Who Kill: Wrong Undone in the Sagas of Icelanders.” In: Hahn, Daniela & Schmidt Andreas (eds.): *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*. München: Herbert Utz Verlag GmbH, 2016; p. 23.

¹⁵⁰ See: Ranković, pp. 390–394.

though these few occasions have major negative effect upon his fate, such as hitting the child in the church or hewing at the bewitched log.¹⁵¹

The only part of the curse that truly brings a change to Grettir's life is the fear of darkness, though this element seems to be another effective literary tool of foreshadowing, since it only indirectly causes trouble for Grettir: never before Drangey does Grettir have such a hard time being alone or in the dark. William Ian Miller points out another important psychological function of the fear of darkness in the two outlaws', Gísli's and Grettir's case:

“The sagas of the outlaws are in-depth social and psychological studies of what people imagined it meant to be alone, without support, to have autonomy thrust upon you. There is a nice paradox here. The conditions for the denial of social life just might produce the conditions for the deepest psychological life. Our saga outlaws dream obsessively; they have nightmares that terrorize them; they fear the dark; they long for kin and companionship; they suffer from an almost existential-style angst. It may well be that part of the real terror of outlawry is that it forces psychic depth upon you, with depth here meaning the capacity to be self-concerned, self-aware, self-making and neurasthenically self-involved. You are now and individual like it or not.”¹⁵²

To conclude our survey of Glámr's curse, we can say that it is less of a starting point for the chain of causality that leads Grettir to his fated downfall, and more of a way to express acknowledgment, emphasis, and justification: both Grettir and the reader become aware of Grettir's ambiguous character and limitations, and henceforth this image will dominate the filter through which the reader views the events. The reader is thus also “cursed by Glámr” and becomes less eager to see patterns in the plot which show a very different image of Grettir and his fortune than the one painted by the curse. Let's continue our discussion with the survey of the tragic nature of Grettir's fate.

Grettir's tragedy

Now we have seen that Grettir is neither inherently unlucky, nor is he and his fate completely impaired by Glámr's curse. The tragic side of his death is, nonetheless, apparent to the modern, Western reader. As Hans Egon Holthusen argues, ever since Aristotle, the Western mind has been aware of the tragedy

¹⁵¹ Ranković, p. 398.

¹⁵² Miller, William Ian: “Deep Inner Lives, Individualism and People of Honour.” In: *History of Political Thought*. Vol. 16, No. 2, Imprint Academic Ltd., Summer 1995; p. 203.

of inescapability and the insuperability of reality, the notion of living only once. The tragic hero, according to Aristotle, must be an ambiguous one, neither a villain nor a virtuous man, whose misfortune and fate is the result of human fallibility.¹⁵³ The ‘tragic’ is a defining dramatic element in the sagas as well, following the tradition of epic poetry and classical tragedy: the heroic pattern in the sagas focus often on the failure of the protagonists, whose imperfection render their inevitable fate tragic.¹⁵⁴ All the more so when the fate of the hero seems unfair or unmotivated to the reader. Grettir’s tragedy fits well into this pattern, but it is also seen as deeper than most other tragic fates in the *Íslendingasögur*. A great part of Grettir’s tragedy derives from his ambiguities, the collision within the individual himself. This is a prevalent trait of the modern tragic, as opposed to the concept of the ancient tragic, that is an unavoidable collision of a protagonist with external circumstances or forces. Though the latter is an important part of scholarly debate about the nature of Grettir’s tragedy, the individualistic approach explains why Grettir is often read as a modern character – a quite early instance in the history of literature or the history of mind. However, there are more elements of Grettir’s tragedy which follow a different pattern than most other saga-heroes’ tragedies.

Peter Hallberg points out that while Guðrún’s and Njáll’s tragedy has a well-constructed, gradual arch of misfortune,¹⁵⁵ Grettir’s bad (and as we have seen, good) luck often comes in forms of *deus ex machina*: unforeseen, inexplicable, spontaneous events that unavoidably push him towards his death despite his effort and awareness of the risks. Guðrún does not die a tragic death, and in a way she finds peace and acceptance when she utters the final tragic words “Þeim var ek verst, sem ek unna mest.” (‘I treated him worst, whom I loved most.’).¹⁵⁶ Njáll is well aware of how the events will unfold, as he is wise and sees the future, but he chooses the martyr-like death in stoic acceptance, after declining the opportunity to save his life, arguing that life would not hold anything for him anyway in his old age and frailty.¹⁵⁷ Grettir, on the other hand, puts up a continuous fight against his fate, so much in

¹⁵³ Holthusen, Hans Egon: “Meaning and Destiny in European Literature.” In: *Chicago Review*. Vol. 14, No. 4, Spring, 1961; p. 10.

¹⁵⁴ Rohrbach, Lena: “Drama and Performativity.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 141.

¹⁵⁵ Hallberg, 1962; p. 91.

¹⁵⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Laxdæla saga. Íslensk fornrit V*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934; p. 228.

¹⁵⁷ *Njáls saga*, Chapter 129.

fact, that Kirsten Hastrup suggests that “his fame rests more on his enduring than on his deeds”,¹⁵⁸ though this enduring is never passive: even in his complete powerlessness, he dies gripping his sword so tightly that his killer must cut off his hand to free the sword.¹⁵⁹ The futility of Grettir’s immense efforts and the dire circumstances of his death emphasize his incapability against impossible odds set by supernatural forces, which does indeed create a deeply tragic tone in the text.¹⁶⁰

Robert Cook points out that Grettir is also considered an especially tragic figure, because we like and pity him: by not being “a typical overbearing man bent on killing those who have offended him”,¹⁶¹ Grettir enjoys our sympathy, and makes a perfect example of the controversial and complex saga-hero whom the reader, with Cook’s words, at times admires, at others feels sorry for, and occasionally is disappointed in or outraged by.¹⁶² The fact that Grettir seldom gets the opportunity to defend himself – either because of his lack of sociolinguistic skills, or at least his unwillingness to communicate and explain his actions and emotions, or because of his arrogance towards people he does not respect – also makes the reader pity his tossing between good intentions and unfortunate results. As William Ian Miller wisely notes, in the sagas’ world, “if you tripped over someone’s legs it was not for you to say it was an accident”¹⁶³ – and Grettir is not one for arguing and explaining his innocence in his predicaments instead of accepting the principle of the “people’s view” and letting his future actions speak for him, well-illustrated by his resigned behaviour with the merchants accusing him of murder after fetching fire and accidentally burning Þórir’s sons, where instead of explaining the situation “Grettir kvað nú þat fram komit, er hann grunaði, at þeir myndi honum illa eldsóknina launa, ok segir illt ódrengrjum lið at veita” (‘Grettir said then that it came to pass what he had suspected, that they would reward him badly for the fire-fetching, and says that it is wrong to help a dishonourable company of men’).¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Hastrup, p. 473.

¹⁵⁹ *Gr.*, Chapter 82, p. 261.

¹⁶⁰ Andersson, Theodore M.: *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967; p. 18.

¹⁶¹ Cook, 1984–1985; pp. 145–146.

¹⁶² Cook, 1989; p. 240.

¹⁶³ Miller, 1995; p. 204.

¹⁶⁴ *Gr.*, p. 131.

Kirsi Kanerva adds that the saga-hero's *ógæfa* can be seen as a sign of guilt and the capability of suffering deep pangs of conscience: the recognition of shame, guilt, or remorse makes the reader sympathize with ill lucked saga-heroes who experience a discrepancy between their values and their deeds.¹⁶⁵ Though there is no word for feelings such as shame, guilt, frustration, or embarrassment in the sagas,¹⁶⁶ *ógæfa* does seem to affect Grettir on a self-reflective, psychological level as well, in addition to the unlucky results of some of his actions. This indicates that he himself is aware of the ambiguous nature of his character and deeds, further enhancing the reader's admiration for Grettir's human vulnerability.

All in all, the circumstances of Grettir's death are tragic. But we may also analyse the tragic features of Grettir's character, and see what his true, absolute misfortune is, independent of the *hverfandi hvel* which sometimes favours, sometimes mistreats him. Stefanie Gropper states that "fate is interwoven with man's purpose from both within and without",¹⁶⁷ and I would like to argue here, that the question of purpose is all-important in Grettir's case. We have already discussed that scholars generally accept the theory that Grettir is a hero late for his time, but there is nothing that indicates that the Viking Age would have granted him the opportunity to fulfil his purpose. As Robert Cook points out, Grettir's episodic adventures are all about looking for ever greater challenges, both human and superhuman ones, and though he is well aware of his own superiority, he lacks a clear system of moral and heroic value: he discriminates between tasks and people based on his respect towards them and his mood, and not based on the heroic code of the Viking warriors – he cannot function when he is unmotivated, and one of his prime motivators throughout the saga is boredom.¹⁶⁸ Much of Grettir's misfortunate endeavours could have been avoided if he had not grown bored: he does not stay and thrive in Þórisdalr, the valley of plenty, and neither does he avoid the confrontations with the undead or the people who end up becoming his victims. These adventures were not motivated by restoring honour, but by unnecessary boldness and the desire for fame, foreshadowed by the warnings of Jökull and Þorbjörn about the dangers of not heeding good advice. Grettir does not take good advice which

¹⁶⁵ Kanerva, pp. 8–10.

¹⁶⁶ Miller, William Ian: *Humiliation – And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993; p. 100.

¹⁶⁷ Gropper, p. 199.

¹⁶⁸ Cook, 1984–1985; pp. 140–141.

he is offered, because he does not play by the rules of any establishment – whether it is his own or a different time’s. Boredom as a fuel in the society obsessed with fame and honour is discussed by William Ian Miller, who notes that the sagas clearly indicate that “the heroes who are one’s contemporaries are never quite as heroic as the heroes of the past.”¹⁶⁹ Grettir seems to lack an all-defining purpose, a goal in life which, if he could reach it, would grant him satisfaction and a sense of fulfilled potential, the same way as Þorsteinn and Qnundr fulfil the desired purposes of their own time. Instead, he is inherently bored with others’ values and judgement of the heroic, and looks for different ways of achieving different goals: to defeat human and supernatural enemies of society (the *berserkir*, the bear, the undead, and the trolls), to be an accepted member of a group (king Óláfr’s court, normative society – as Gestr –, or the community of other outlaws and misfits), to take vengeance on people who wrong his honour (for instance Auðunn), or to disprove those who prophesy misfortune for him. Though in the different episodes Grettir manages to reach these goals in some fashion, it is clear that his success is not enough for him: he lacks a single existential goal to fulfil his desired potential and find meaning and satisfaction in his life like his kinsmen do.

Carl Phelpstead points out that Qnundr has clear goals and a meaning in his life which he pursues in order to establish himself one way or another, but Grettir lacks his great-grandfather’s awareness of the value and means of belonging.¹⁷⁰ Qnundr leaves Norway after the defeat against Haraldr hárfagri, for he and many others have no intention of “gerask konungsþræll ok biðja þess, er hann átti áðr, kvezk heldr munu leita sér annarra forráða” (‘becoming a slave of a king and beg for what he had owned before, and said that he would rather find himself another place to manage’),¹⁷¹ but Grettir has neither such a clear meaning in life nor the opportunity to establish himself in any way besides pursuing fame – he simply “has to be somewhere”, and that somewhere never really suits his potential, since he cannot adjust his purpose to society. Though he is often described as a culture hero akin to Prometheus and Heracles, one might also see him as Sisyphus: capable of doing great feats of strength, but the purpose and benefits of these achievements are questionable from both society’s and his own perspective. Still, Grettir does what he can do, what he has to do, and where he has to do it, not by

¹⁶⁹ Miller, 1995; pp. 194–195.

¹⁷⁰ Phelpstead, p. 126.

¹⁷¹ *Gr.*, p. 7.

choice but by necessity, whether he likes it or not, never stopping to question the sense of it all and never giving up on a challenge, no matter how overwhelming, as long as he has a say in it. One might think about Albert Camus' interpretation of Sisyphus: because the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart, one must imagine Sisyphus happy. Whether it is Sisyphus rolling a huge boulder endlessly up a steep hill in Hades or Grettir, relentlessly lifting huge boulders in Iceland, maybe not far away from the entrance to the underworld, one might imagine both men happy (or fortunate), though they seem to be trapped in an existence of purposelessness.

Grettir never achieves the potential and superiority which was intended to him, apparently because of Glámr's curse that prevents him from becoming any stronger than he already is. We might note, however, that Grettir is already the strongest man and remains so until his death, according to the saga, it is therefore difficult to argue that Glámr's curse has any immediate effect on Grettir, since it is not the lack of his strength that brings about his death but magic, and since it seems irrelevant exactly *how much* stronger he is than everyone else. At least in human terms. Whether or not Glámr's curse truly affects Grettir or rather his and the reader's perception, it is clear that Grettir's is very much limited by his fortune. He lacks character arch, and never really outgrows the "Bear's son" qualities he displays in his childhood in Chapter 14: rebellion against establishment and eagerness to look for challenges worthy of his abilities and capacity remain his defining features throughout his career,¹⁷² almost as if he was the protagonist of a reverse Bildungsroman, where the hero never overcomes his own nature, only tempts chance and fate until it's too late for change. Some scholars have called this arrogance, and argue that Glámr's curse is the price Grettir pays for not knowing boundaries when it comes to ever increasing challenges, others place the emphasis on the religious context in which Grettir is punished for his sins and lack of self-restraint, and is doomed to remain unclean at the moment of his death, bringing him damnation,¹⁷³ but the author's heroic description of Grettir's life and esteem in Chapter 82 as well as his restoration to society when his and his brother's bones are taken from Drangey to the church of Reykir indicate that Grettir's failure in realizing his potential is also seen as a victory, possibly even as spiritual salvation in Christian terms.¹⁷⁴ Which brings us to our

¹⁷² Davidson, pp. 85–87.

¹⁷³ Ranković, pp. 376–379.

¹⁷⁴ Haki Antonsson, p. 128.

final enquiry: to see how Grettir's limiting misfortune and unfulfilled potential can be read as success or even redemption in the eye of the reader and the author's society. Finally, Grettir's success outside his saga will also be discussed in form of a short overview of his popularity throughout the centuries.

Chapter 5: We Were Never Meant to be Heroes

In two of the four available medieval manuscripts of the saga, we find the following commemoration of Grettir's life after his unheroic death:

Lét Grettir þann veg líf sitt, inn vaskasti maðr, er verit hefir á Íslandi; var honum vetri fátt í hálfmimmtofum, er han var veginn; en þá var hann fjórtán, er hann vá Skeggja, it fyrsta víg, ok þá gekk honum allt til vegs framan til þess, er hann átti við Glám þræl, ok var hann þá tuttugu vetra. En er hann fell í útlegð, var hann hálfþrítögr, en í sekð var hann vel nítján vetr ok kom opt í stórar mannaunir ok helt ávallt vel trúa sína, ór því sem ráða var; sá hann flest fyrir, þó at hann gæti eigi at gørt.¹⁷⁵

[Grettir lost his life in this way, the most valiant man who has ever lived in Iceland; one winter short of forty-five, when he was killed, and he was fourteen when he killed Skeggi, the first manslaughter, and everything went well for him until he fought the wretch Glámr, and he was then twenty winters old. And when he was outlawed, he was twenty-five, and he was in outlawry for more than nineteen winters, and came often upon great challenges and always kept his faith well, as far as he could; he foresaw most events, even though he could not do anything about it.]

While the forgiveness and Grettir's hero-status indicated at the end of the saga hints at a redemption story, his reputation, as Bernard Scudder puts it, "is built neither in the service of kings nor in battle, but in low-life, 'fringe' heroics",¹⁷⁶ and the great contrasts in Grettir's qualities and actions may puzzle the modern reader's feelings and moral judgment about him as a true hero. Gareth Lloyd Evans analyses Grettir's hypermasculine traits, and claims that the violent acts he performs without apparent purpose and the pointless activities he indulges in such as lifting heavy rocks and displaying spectacular feats of strength to prove his superiority are not considered heroic, rather excessive and unwelcome acts, even signs of inability to match the masculine norms of society.¹⁷⁷ These acts of heroic masculinity limit Grettir, as they set him apart from the homosocial norms of society, a tendency which Evans reads as the innate nature of Grettir's lucklessness: unsuccessful attempts at creating homosocial ties.¹⁷⁸ Limitation is a key theme in *Grettis saga*, and it has also been argued that limiting the hero is one of the most important role of monstrosity and the supernatural in the *Íslendingasögur*: Kathryn Hume shows that human saga-heroes' encounters with supernatural monsters often serve the purpose of "cutting the hero down to size": a hero who reaches a superhuman state is evidently condemned by

¹⁷⁵ *Gr.*, p. 262.

¹⁷⁶ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, p. xxiv.

¹⁷⁷ Evans, Gareth Lloyd: *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019; p. 121.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

the saga-authors.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, an excessive hypermasculinity is looked down upon or seen as a threat to society akin to monstrosity.

If we take a closer look at Grettir's misfortune and tragic fate, we can see a pattern: he often faces the opportunity to realize his superior masculinity and become superhuman, but chance – in form of either good or bad luck – prevents him in this. Grettir is as much limited by his fate and fortune as he is by monsters and curses, and his failings in adapting to accepted norms in society.

However, it is exactly this limitation that prevents him from truly becoming the monster his surrounding sometimes takes him to be. As Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough argues, Grettir is “caught between his human fragility and his stunted potential for a solely supernatural existence”,¹⁸⁰ and the reader might suspect that without a constantly limiting force around him, Grettir would eventually cross the border between human and superhuman, as he partially does when he slays Glámr – in accordance with the common and tragic fate of the monster-slayer who becomes a monster in the process, as it happened with Glámr.¹⁸¹ In this sense, Glámr's curse limiting Grettir's full strength is rather a blessing: the full potential Grettir could have reached – suggested by Glámr – is the world of the supernatural and monstrous, a supernatural existence, and as Kathryn Hume points out, such strength is a threat to society. Not many who possess this power choose not to harm society in saga literature.¹⁸² Grettir does not become superhuman, because he is unable to attain his full potential due to his bad luck governed by supernatural forces. Instead, he is forced to remain within his human boundaries and dies a human death – this way he is redeemed in the eyes of the author and is granted the possibility to be remembered for his human feats and his human nature. Let us now examine how Grettir is limited by fate and fortune, and how this turns out to his favour in the end.

¹⁷⁹ Hume, Kathryn: “From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature.” In: *Studies in Philology*. Vol. 77, No. 1, Winter 1980; p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ Barraclough, p. 369.

¹⁸¹ Ármann Jakobsson, 2009; p. 311.

¹⁸² Hume, 1980; p. 11.

I'm No Superman

Though Grettir is pronouncedly not destined to fulfil his potential by fighting “við mennska men” (‘men of human proportions’),¹⁸³ the fight with Glámr and the curse of Þuríðr prove that his luck notably fails him against sorcery and the supernatural forces, since the *Íslendingasögur*’s hero of human proportions generally cannot fight the superhuman without himself *becoming* superhuman.¹⁸⁴ In this sense, Grettir’s unfulfilled potential is his greatest fortune in metaphysical terms: though he lacks character development, his failure at overcoming himself and his fate corrupted by supernatural forces become the reason for him becoming a hero – a hero in a positive sense, who remains within human proportions, and is thus accepted. He never lives up to the expectations set for him by those who claim that he is the greatest and most accomplished of all men living in Iceland, as suggested by Þórarinn in Chapter 31 or the commemorating note about Grettir’s life presented in the beginning of this chapter. But it is exactly through failing, he becomes a positive hero in the eye of the author and the reader.

It is indisputable that Grettir has a high risk of getting truly larger than life and thus a harmful component in a modern society where heroism and superhuman qualities are not tolerated.¹⁸⁵ He is often considered a monster, mostly almost physically infected by Glámr, and even his “human” superiority is well documented in the saga, as previously stated. Grettir himself shows clear awareness of his strength throughout the saga: he clearly strives for such a superhuman state, but the value he seems to attribute to fame achieved through becoming more than what is acceptable in a human being is rejected by the author.¹⁸⁶ The real misfortune of Grettir would be the tragedy of irrevocably becoming the monster he sometimes is seen as by society, thus validating his outlawry and depriving him from the empathy both the author and the reader feels for him due to the injustice he suffers.

Grettir *dies* as a human, it is clear, but *in life* he is often referred to as a monster (or troll or the Devil), and there are only a few occasions in the saga where characters of insight clearly differentiate between the man and the monster in Grettir, suggesting the authors’ views behind these characters’ utterances. A good example would be the scene when Grettir – in the role of Gestr – carries Steinvör

¹⁸³ See: Cook, 1984–1985; p. 149.

¹⁸⁴ Phelpsstead, p. 125.

¹⁸⁵ Hume, 1974; p. 477.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 484.

and her daughter over the river to the Christmas mass in Chapter 64. After arriving, Steinvör, as many others, questions Grettir's human nature by saying that she didn't know "hvárt hana hefði yfir flutt maðr eða troll" ('whether a man or a troll had carried her over'). The priest replies: "[...] mann víst vera mundu, – þó at fára maki sé, ok látum hljótt yfir," sagði hann; "má vera, at hann sé ætlaðr til at vinna bót á vandræðum þínum" ('it was definitely a man, – though few are a match for him, and let us be silent about this'), he said; "it is possible that he is intended to bring remedy to your troubles."¹⁸⁷ The priest, as a man of God and divine truth, seems to have an insight of higher authority when he categorically declares Grettir to be *human*, willing to help those in need, though in possession of a great power, so it is better not to mention it lest it brings ill fortune to either Grettir or the community. Perhaps this is a way for the Christian author to mediate his judgement of Grettir, emphasizing both the dangerous and the kind, human side of his character.

Many of the (mis)fortunate, fateful turns in the saga serve the function of preventing Grettir from becoming more than he is supposed to be as a hero of human proportions. Kathryn Hume points out that the heroic stand with Hallmundr in the pass is not only a lucky invention of chance, but also clearly reduces the "superhero" features in Grettir: Hallmundr kills a dozen men, while Grettir only half as much. Hallmundr has a touch of the supernatural about him: he appears out of nowhere and is not seen by either Grettir or the attackers until the fight is over. His intervention deprives Grettir of the opportunity to either kill eighteen men alone (a truly superhuman feat) or to die a heroic death in a last stand (probably a more favourable way compared to black magic, sickness, and helplessness on Drangey).¹⁸⁸ Though Hallmundr saves Grettir, his appearance also limits Grettir's potential.

Another chance for him to become a superior and harmful force is taken from him by another unfortunate turn of fate in Chapter 52: we have already discussed how his lucklessness prevents Grettir from killing the farmers who capture him, but Þorbjörg, a "facilitator of fate" further limits Grettir by making him promise not to take revenge on the farmers. Grettir does so indeed, though "kvað hann mest bundizk hafa at sínu skaplyndi" ('he said that he had to control his temper the hardest'), and thus shows that he values his life over dishonour – an unacceptable notion of the typical saga-hero, but a

¹⁸⁷ *Gr.*, pp. 211–212.

¹⁸⁸ Hume, 1980; p. 5.

welcome one for the reader seeing the human in Grettir, and the author not interested in the heroic ethics of the old times, urging one to eagerly throw away their life in an attempt to avoid shame and dishonour.¹⁸⁹

Even the fateful appearance of the evil child in the Trondheim church serves a limiting function: if no one had stopped Grettir from proving his innocence and superiority in strength and character over everyone else, him being part of king Óláfr's company would jeopardize the status of the saint king, as no human hero should surpass or challenge the integrity and authority of a latent saint.

As Stefanie Gropper puts it, fate in the *Íslendingasögur* "is the possibility of becoming a hero, a chance to live up to all possibilities with which one has born",¹⁹⁰ but in Grettir's case we find the opposite: Grettir is a hero whose heroics lie in his human nature: his vulnerability and fallibility preclude the possibilities which he might have been granted, had he not been dogged by ill fortune. Grettir overcomes himself by *not* overcoming himself: he cannot fulfil the potential which would lead him to a superhuman existence he seemingly longs for, but this way he never truly becomes a monster, no matter how much the encounter with Glámr affects him. In this sense, the saga can be read as a temptation story where Grettir resists temptation not because he wants to or because he actively fights for it, but because chance halts him. Bad luck limits Grettir in his goals and potential, but it grants him redemption on a social scale. His failure allows him to be regarded as a positive character, in accordance with Kathryn Hume's analysis of society's problem with appreciating the heroes who truly overcome their human proportions: by the time of the saga's composition, "Iceland's social patterns had shrunk to such a narrow range of permitted behavior, and to such an unexciting round of trivial – if necessary – tasks, that a hero had no place within them. If by freakish chance one appears, he is rejected, and his potential for good is largely transformed into destructiveness."¹⁹¹ We can perhaps add that it is not simply the "heroic" which is unacceptable, but the heroic of superhuman nature: Grettir's heroic deeds in the service of society are accepted and valued, but his confrontations with the supernatural are controversial and affect him in a negative way, drawing him further away from his human nature towards superhuman powers and existence represented by the undead of the saga – a

¹⁸⁹ Ranković, p. 392.

¹⁹⁰ Gropper, p. 202.

¹⁹¹ Hume, 1974; p. 477.

particularly dangerous risk, because Grettir already is superior in strength and a rebel against society's establishments. However, he is redeemed by remaining within human boundaries and not reaching the state of the true outsider, the superhuman being: a monster. Glámr's curse of limited potential is Grettir's gateway to social redemption, portraying a perfect example of the saga-hero who, in Víðar Pálsson's words, "is not larger than life but dramatic and tragic on a human scale, acting misguidedly on emotional impulsiveness while not governed by base motives."¹⁹² Chance and misfortunate events keep Grettir within the realm of the positive heroes of the *Íslendingasögur*, and his story conveys an important message about the necessity of failure and limitations in order to remain human.

Beautiful Loser

As we have seen, Grettir is not the typical Icelandic hero who, after having made a name abroad, returns to Iceland to settle down and live an honourable life in good fortune and high esteem (like his father Ásmundr), nor is he a regular outlaw suffering for his wrongdoings against society but finally redeeming himself through his own actions. His fights are not only against nature and society (for survival) but also against himself, his boredom, his lack of purpose, and his proneness to be the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is torn between ethics of different times and communities, between his skills and his self-destructive nature, and between his faith in his own capability and the fate that is foretold for him. He lacks a single goal to pursue, and his efforts to become stronger than he is supposed to be are compromised by chance and supernatural powers. Grettir incorporates the contradictions of the man formed by and depending on chance rather than his own values, intentions, and deeds. He is a saga-hero who never reaches his full potential, who due to his unfavourable qualities stands in his own way while unsuccessfully trying to conform to the norms set by others, stubbornly putting up a fight against a fate which he already has accepted after the fashion of the stoic saga-mentality. His resolute defiance in the face of inevitability and strong kinship with the tragic still appeals to the modern reader who realises that Grettir's incapability, fallibility, and

¹⁹² Víðar Pálsson: "Heroism." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; p. 221.

his desperate fight against unconquerable forces define his life and memory more than his good deeds for the people of a society that needs and shuns him at the same time, both celebrating him as a monster-slayer and hunting him as a monster.

Grettir's complex character and its semantic richness is said to have had a stronger grip on the imagination of the Icelanders than any other saga-figure,¹⁹³ and his influence stretches beyond the *Íslendingasögur*: he has had a strong influence in European literature, being sometimes compared to great figures of Western literature such as Heracles, Oedipus, or Don Quixote, exposing the futility of heroism and rebellion against superhuman powers such as one's fate,¹⁹⁴ and it is probably no coincidence that it was among the first sagas to gain international attention, witnessed by the saga's several translations starting with William Morris' English translation from as early as 1869.

Grettir's influence as a hero of popular culture is nevertheless most prominent on domestic ground. In modern times, Grettir has been celebrated as a symbol of the Icelandic nation and, and the renowned Nobel laureate, Halldór Laxness called him a special national saint (*sérlegur þjóðardýrlingur*), while he is also associated with humorous and lewd entertainment represented by the poem *Grettisfærsla* ('Grettir-moving') partly preserved in the oldest manuscript, attributed to the farmers unable to decide who should guard the captured Grettir in Chapter 52, referring to a fertility rite where an animal's penis ('grettir') was handed around.¹⁹⁵ However, the history of Grettir's popularity started already in the early 16th century: in AM 152 fol., the second oldest source for *Grettis saga*, the text is adorned with "emotionally charged comments" by a contemporary reader, expressing clear sympathy for Grettir, and contempt towards his enemy, Þorbjörn ǫngull, such as *góður kall var Grettir* ("a good man, that Grettir" or "Grettir was a brave man"), *margt var Gretti vel gefið* ("Grettir was well-gifted in many ways"), *vei og sve(i) öngli* ("woe and fie unto ǫngull"), or *illu er öngull* ("ǫngull is bad").¹⁹⁶ The 16th-century reader's admiration and pity toward Grettir is a good starting point for the modern reader who is inclined to read the story in a similar manner. In the following centuries, Grettir's popularity only grew, as presented by Kirsten Hastrup in her anthropological analysis of the

¹⁹³ Ranković, p. 379.

¹⁹⁴ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, p. xxxiv.

¹⁹⁵ Guðmundur Andri Thorsson: "Grettla." In: *Skáldskaparmál*. No. 1, 1990; pp. 100, 115.

The Saga of Grettir the Strong, p. xxx.

¹⁹⁶ Viðar Pálsson, p. 218. | Hastrup, p. 286. English translations by the authors of the articles.

long tradition of literary and cultural adaptation of Grettir's figure in tales (*þjóðsögur*) and verses (*rímur*) from the 16th century on.¹⁹⁷

Like *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga* also has its own nickname, *Grettla*, and this story has been called “one of the most popular of all stories” by Guðni Jónsson.¹⁹⁸ We know of toys and games inspired by Grettir Ásmundarson documented already in the 19th century,¹⁹⁹ and even in contemporary culture we find traces of him, such as his appearance as the knave of spades in the Icelandic historical playing cards *Íslensk spil*,²⁰⁰ his name being used for Garfield the cat in Iceland, or the 1980 musical adaptation of his saga, *Grettir* by Egill Ólafsson and Ólaf Hauk Símonarson, with lead singer Kjartan Ragnarsson.²⁰¹

Grettir is without doubt a good and inspiring literary character, standing close to our modern feelings. Kirsten Hastrup asserts that “no single label exhausts the complexity of Grettir's character”, adding that Grettir is a particular kind of hero, caught between two worlds, the human and the supernatural, and that he transcends the boundaries of the Icelandic saga-hero and becomes something more general, relating to universal matters of myth and ritual, which still holds our interest.²⁰² One can wonder why this particular saga and character seems to be so different in many aspects from the rest of saga literature. It is perhaps not wrong to assume that it also has to do with the circumstances of the saga's composition. Assuming the young age of the saga, possibly as late as the 15th century as Örnólfur Thorsson suggests, we might find answers in the great changes the Renaissance brought to sciences, humanities, and the general world view. At this time, modern characters started to appear in Western literature, questions of religion and purpose, or indeed the *lack of purpose* in life were raised, humanity, society, and the individual were viewed from a new perspective. This might also imply a new Icelandic approach to outlawry, human potential, and the individual as the centre of a story, which are perhaps mirrored in *Grettis saga*. Kathryn Hume also points out that until the 14th century, the real “hero” of the sagas was society, and individualism only appeared on a few occasions. *Grettis saga* is,

¹⁹⁷ See: Hastrup, pp. 295–304.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁹⁹ Jón Karl Helgason: “Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times.” Chapter in: McTurk, Rory (ed.): *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005; p. 68.

²⁰⁰ Hastrup, p. 304.

²⁰¹ Ólafur Jónsson: “Slá í gegn hann megnar.” Article in: *Dagblaðið*, 18.11.1980; p. 6.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 289–290.

however, all about the individual: there is no single conflict that must be solved, no equilibrium to be reached, which also attests to the supposedly late composition of the saga.²⁰³

Furthermore, the pessimistic tone of the saga and the Icelander's eager self-identification with Grettir is also understandable if we think of the hardship and oppression Iceland had to endure from Norway and Denmark from the 13th century on, culminating in the 15-16th centuries, further darkened by the two plague epidemics in the 14th century. Grettir thus resembles the man fighting the dark forces threatening from outside, which grants him the "one of us"-feeling Icelanders have been associating with him.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Hume, 1974; p. 483.

²⁰⁴ Hastrup, p. 307.

Conclusion

Fate, (mis)fortune, destiny, chance, and (un)fulfilled potential through honourable or despicable deeds are recurrent literary elements in many *Íslendingasögur*, but their defining role as a central theme and their deep influence upon the reader's interpretation of the story and its characters supported by a wide range of literary devices is especially perceptible in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. In several senses, Grettir and his personal, often metaphysical fights against society and superhuman forces are unmatched in saga literature. His frequently foretold fate and bad luck in his endeavours incorporate several philosophical, psychological, and social anthropological elements that render this medieval text still relevant for modern literature and history of thought.

In this paper, I have discussed how the concept of fate and fortune is represented in the *Íslendingasögur*, with a special focus on *Grettis saga*. I have observed these concepts' defining role in society, which is closely related to family, success, and human relations. In addition to presenting the lucky side of Grettir, I have also discussed the nature of his tragedy, tightly connected to boredom and his lack of purpose which make him an outsider in several senses. I have noted the attraction of the tragic and Grettir's lasting success in popular culture, arguing that Grettir's character has been liked for its ambiguity and his display of human fallibility, vulnerability, and endurance despite evil circumstances and against unconquerable forces, which are often expressed in forms of foreshadowing, prophecies, and curses in the text. Let me now sum up the most important points I have attempted to make in this paper:

- 1) *Grettis saga* is among the few sagas which explicitly thematise fate and fortune, both in the plot and the language of the saga. Regarding the many-layered meaning and the origin of the "fate/fortune words" in saga literature, I have looked at fortune – mostly represented by the word *gæfa* in *Grettis saga* – from a social and literary aspect. The mythological and religious background of the concepts was not discussed beyond the most necessary statements, but I have noted that we must assume that the notions of fate and fortune were deeply influenced by Christianity, as also suggested by the different use of the Old Icelandic vocabulary connected to fate and fortune in *Grettis saga* compared to older *Íslendingasögur* which thematise these concepts.

- 2) I have argued that the power of language is especially perceptible in the case of *Grettis saga*, where the contrast between accepting and rebelling against one's fate is central, visible in the difference between the characters' utterances and their actual deeds. Fate is seen as an opportunity for the hero to fulfil his potential, and the stoic statements and empty proverbs regarding fate and fortune – which this saga is particularly rich in – reflect a more abstract view of fate, possibly attributed by the Christian author to the people's supposed concepts from the pagan era.
- 3) I have also discussed other narrative elements and strategies employed by the author to direct the reader's expectations and interpretations of Grettir's character and to mark his place and status within society. These were the parallels, repetitions, and contrasts in the structure of the saga, as well as female characters interfering with Grettir's destiny. I have argued that these elements play a strong literary role and have a deep immediate effect upon the reader, quite frequently a deeper one than on the plot of the saga itself. These literary tools foreshadow future events and form the reader's expectations and interpretations of Grettir, and paint a more misfortunate picture of him than his adventures in the plot itself. Similarly, I have argued that curses and prophecies regarding Grettir more frequently acknowledge and justify his fate and bad luck rather than form or influence it, and should therefore be regarded as narratological tools employed by the author to influence the reader's perception of the events that actually take place in the saga.
- 4) Though our short discussion of previous scholarship showed that Grettir is often considered the most unlucky and tragic saga character with an inherent proneness to misfortune, I have tried to challenge the idea by presenting the more fortunate sides of Grettir and his career – both regarding events in the saga itself and Grettir's luck in a metaphysical sense, arguing that seemingly unlucky turns of fate contribute to Grettir's redemption as a human being by preventing him from overcoming his human boundaries and becoming what is seen as a monster in his (or the author's) society.
- 5) I have shortly presented Grettir's lasting success in popular culture through centuries, owing greatly to the contradictions, at times showing true humanity and intentions to help those in need, at other times committing obnoxious and morally condemnable deeds, often interpreted as signs of general human flaws, such as hypermasculinity, impatience, arrogance, and boredom.

These flaws not only move the plot in the saga, but also add to the complex character of the protagonist, which points to a new trend in the younger saga literature: the individualistic approach by the authors, where more emphasis lies on the protagonist and his personal fights than on the usual conflicts within society that needs to be solved by the end of the saga. In this sense, *Grettis saga* is truly the saga of one protagonist, Grettir – an individualistic trait which is nowadays seen as a proof of the saga's late origin and the beginnings of a new type of medieval European literature and modern genres such as the European novel.

- 6) Similarly to monstrosity and the supernatural, bad luck in *Grettis saga* often surfaces as a limiting power, preventing Grettir from fulfilling his superhuman potential indicated by himself, the author, and other characters in the saga as well. By not being able to overcome human boundaries and reach a purely supernatural existence, Grettir – as opposed to Glámr, his strongest superhuman adversary – emerges as a winner against monstrosity from a human point of view. Based on this argument, I have presented Grettir's story as a redemption story where the hero overcomes – or is forced to overcome, regardless of his intentions – the temptation of becoming superhuman: Grettir is restored to the society that cast him out, though this happens by accident, rather than by his own doing.
- 7) I have presented a reading of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* as a human story about being exposed to and defying inevitable and invincible forces; a fitting narrative of fate in Iceland where human life happens against the odds, *despite* the circumstances, in a nature and society where virtue, strength, wisdom, and bravery are not enough for survival and for reaching the hero's goals and mastering his own fate if he happens to be unlucky. However, misfortune and the power of chance is also responsible for keeping the larger-than-life heroes in check, limiting their superhuman tendencies and potentials in order to emphasize their human nature and to render them acceptable in the eyes of society – and the reader. I have argued that it is this aspect of celebrating the flaws of human proportions and appreciating the tragic fate of a controversial but likeable character that has followed *Grettis saga* through the centuries, and that still engages the modern reader's mind.

References

Primary sources:

Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.): *Heimskringla, vol. II. Íslensk fornrit XXVII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1945

Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Laxdæla saga. Íslensk fornrit V*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934

Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Brennu-Njáls saga. Íslensk fornrit XII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954

Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.): *Vatnsdæla saga. Íslensk fornrit VIII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939

Guðni Jónsson (ed.): *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar. Íslensk fornrit VII*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936

Secondary sources:

Andersson, Theodore M.: "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas." In: *Speculum*. Vol. 45, No. 4, October 1970; pp. 575–593.

Andersson, Theodore M.: *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2006

Andersson, Theodore M.: *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967

Ármann Jakobsson: "The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in *Grettis Saga*." In: *Folklore*. Vol. 120, No. 3, December 2009; pp. 307–316.

Ármann Jakobsson: *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*. Punctum Books, 2017

Ármann Jakobsson: “Tradition and Individual Talent: The “Historical Figure” in the Medieval Sagas, A Case Study.” In: *Viator*. Vol. 45, No. 3, 2014; pp. 101–123.

Ármann Jakobsson: “Troublesome Children in the Sagas of Icelanders.” In: *Saga-Book*. Vol. XXVII, Viking Society for Northern Research, London: University College London, 2003; pp. 5–24.

Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017

Bandlien, Bjørn: “Marginality.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; pp. 253–264.

Barraclough, Eleanor Rosamund: “Inside Outlawry in “*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*” and “*Gísla saga Súrssonar*”: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 82, No. 4, Winter 2010; pp. 365–388.

Bartusik, Grzegorz: “Cultural Transfer of Cognitive Structures of Fortune in the Latin and Old Icelandic Literatures and Languages: The Case of the Metaphor *Fortune is a Wheel*.” Chapter in: Morawiec, Jakub; Jochymek, Aleksandra & Bartusik, Grzegorz (eds.): *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*. Amsterdam: ARC Humanities Press, 2019; pp. 103–138.

Cook, Robert: “Reading for Character in *Grettis saga*.” Chapter in: Tucker, John (ed.): *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*. New York/London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989; pp. 226–240.

Cook, Robert: “The Reader in *Grettis Saga*.” In: *Saga-Book*. Vol. XXI, (1982–1985), Viking Society for Northern Research, London: University College London, 1984–1985; pp. 133–154.

Davidson, H. R. Ellis: “Folklore and Literature.” In: *Folklore*. Vol. 86, No. 2, 1975; pp. 74–93.
(Published online: 2012)

Degnbol, Helle et al.: *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: Registre / A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose: Indices, udgivet af Den arnamagnæanske kommission*. Copenhagen: The Arnamagnæan Commission, 1989

Eidinow, Esther: *Luck, Fate & Fortune: Antiquity and its Legacy*. London/New York: I.B. Tauris&Co. Ltd., 2011

Eriksen, Sarah B.: “Traversing the Uncanny Valley: Glámr in Narratological Space.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Mayburd, Miriam: *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*. Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2020; pp. 89–108.

Evans, Gareth Lloyd: *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019

Felce, Ian: *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*. Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2018

Foote, Peter G.: *The Viking Achievement: The Society and Culture of Early Medieval Scandinavia*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983

Friesen, William: *Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal Fylgjur in Icelandic Saga*. In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 87, No. 2, Summer 2015; pp. 255–280.

Geir T. Zoëga: *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2004 [1910]

Gropper, Stefanie: “Fate.” Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; pp. 198–209.

Guðmundur Andri Thorsson: “Grettla.” In: *Skáldskaparmál*. No. 1, 1990; pp. 100–117.

Haki Antonsson: *Damnation and Salvation in Old Norse Literature*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018

Hallberg, Peter: *The Icelandic Saga* (translated by Paul Schach). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962

Hallberg, Peter: “The Concept of *gipta-gæfa-hamingja* in Old Norse Literature.” In: Foote, Peter G.; Hermann Pálsson & Slay, Desmond (eds.): *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*, University of Edinburgh, 1971, University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973; pp. 143–183.

Harris, Richard L.: “The Proverbs of *Vatnsdæla saga*, the Sword of Jokull and the Fate of Grettir: Examining an Instance of Conscious Intertextuality in *Grettis saga*.” In: Weldon, James & Waugh, Robin (eds.): *The Hero Recovered: Essays in Honor of George Clark*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institution Publications, 2010; pp. 150–170.

Hastrup, Kirsten: “Tracing Tradition – an Anthropological Perspective on *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.” In Lindow, John; Lönnroth, Lars & Weber, Gerd Wolfgang (eds.): *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 1986; pp. 281–313.

Hawes, Janice: “The Monstrosity of Heroism: Grettir Ásmundarson as an Outsider.” In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 80, No. 1, Spring 2008; pp. 19–50.

Holthusen, Hans Egon: "Meaning and Destiny in European Literature." In: *Chicago Review*. Vol. 14, No. 4, Spring 1961; pp. 1–19.

Hume, Kathryn: "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature." In: *Studies in Philology*. Vol. 77, No. 1, Winter 1980; pp. 1–25.

Hume, Kathryn: "The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*." In: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. Vol. 73, No. 4, October 1974; pp. 469–486.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir: "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the 'Íslendingasögur'." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 81, No. 4, Winter 2009; pp. 409–436.

Jón Karl Helgason: "Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times." Chapter in: McTurk, Rory (ed.) (2005): *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005; pp. 64–81.

Kanerva, Kirsi T.: "*Ógæfa* as an Emotion in Thirteenth-Century Iceland." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 84, No. 1, Spring 2012; pp. 1–26.

McTurk, Rory (ed.): *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005

Miller, William Ian: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990

Miller, William Ian: "Deep Inner Lives, Individualism and People of Honour." In: *History of Political Thought*. Vol. 16, No. 2, Imprint Academic Ltd., Summer 1995; pp. 190–207.

Miller, William Ian: *Humiliation – And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993

Nordal, Sigurður: *Nordisk Kultur VIII:B. Litteraturhistorie. Norge og Island*. Stockholm, Copenhagen & Oslo: Albert Bonniers förlag / J. H. Schultz forlag / H. Aschehoug & Co.s forlag, 1953

Ólafur Jónsson: "Slá í gegn hann megnar." Article in: *Dagblaðið*, 18.11.1980

Phelpstead, Carl: *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders: New Perspectives on Medieval Literature: Authors and Traditions*. Gainesville / Tallahassee / Tampa / Boca Raton / Pensacola / Orlando / Miami / Jacksonville / Ft. Myers / Sarasota: University Press of Florida, 2020

Poilvez, Marion: "Those Who Kill: Wrong Undone in the Sagas of Icelanders." In: Hahn, Daniela & Schmidt Andreas (eds.): *Bad Boys and Wicked Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*. München: Herbert Utz Verlag GmbH, 2016; pp. 21–58.

Poole, Russell: "Myth, Psychology, and Society in *Grettis saga*." In: *Alvíssmál 11*, 2004; pp. 3–16.

Ranković, Slavica: "The Exquisite Tempers of Grettir the Strong." In: *Scandinavian Studies*. Vol. 89, No. 3, Fall 2017; pp. 375–412.

Rohrbach, Lena: "Drama and Performativity." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017

Stankovitsová, Zuzana: "Following up on Female *fylgjur*: A Re-Examination of the Concept of Female *fylgjur* in Old Icelandic Literature." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Mayburd, Miriam: *Paranormal Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400*. Boston/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2020; pp. 245–262.

Ström, Folke: *Nordisk hedendom: Tro och sed i förkristen tid*. Lund: Akademiförlaget, 1967

The Saga of Grettir the Strong (translated by Bernard Scudder). London: Penguin Books, 2005

Víðar Pálsson: "Heroism." Chapter in: Ármann Jakobsson & Sverrir Jakobsson (eds.): *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. New York/London: Routledge, 2017; pp. 218–225.

Winterbourne, Anthony: *When the Norns Have Spoken: Time and Fate in Germanic Paganism*. Madison/Teaneck, USA: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004