

HÖFUNDARNAFN

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OUTLAWS IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND  
AND ICELAND

VARIOUS studies have been made of the similarities between early English and Icelandic outlaw legends. These have generally concentrated on similarities of incident and story-motif. In what follows I have tried to go further into the attitudes to outlaws and outlawry in the two traditions.

For some years there has been controversy among English historians about the Robin Hood legends (a continuation of the dispute begun between R. H. Hilton in 'The Origins of Robin Hood', *Past and Present* 14 (1958), pp. 30–44, and J. C. Holt in 'The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood', in *Past and Present* 18 (1960), pp. 89–110). The dispute was not primarily about the historicity of Robin Hood — it is more or less agreed that the name is a generic one and that the legends, insofar as they had any historical foundation, were based on stories about various English outlaws — or about his date: he is first mentioned in *Piers Plowman* (about 1377) and the earliest surviving ballads about him are from the fifteenth century, so there may have existed ballads about him from any time after 1300, and the historical figures underlying the ballads may have been from as early as 1200 down to the time of the extant texts. The controversy was about his social position. Literary historians have inclined to the view that he was of yeoman or even aristocratic status, while many social historians have wanted him to be a representative of the peasant class, and the stories to have reflected the increasing conflict between peasants and landowners in medieval England. It is likely that in the Middle Ages, different ballad-makers and different audiences would have interpreted Robin Hood's conflict with the establishment in various ways according to their own political affiliations, but the fact that many early ballads seem to have been used as entertainment in the halls of local nobility make it rather unlikely that the idealised figure of the outlaw in them was often identified with the peasantry, while the earliest full account of Robin Hood's life, the *Geste of Robin*

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*Hood*, was first published as part of a volume in about 1500, and other ballads about him were printed as broadsides, and may therefore have appealed to romantic alienated readers in towns.

There have been no such controversies about the outlaws of medieval Iceland. The heroes of the three major sagas of outlaws (*Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Harðar saga*) were well-known historical figures who lived in the second half of the tenth century (Gísli and Hörðr), while Iceland was still pagan, or in the first half of the eleventh century (Grettir), during the Christian period. *Gísla saga* was probably written about 1230 and *Harðar saga* and *Grettis saga* in the fourteenth or even fifteenth century, by which time Iceland was no longer an independent commonwealth. Of course, not all the stories told of these outlaws can have been historical (all three sagas contain some supernatural elements), but the main outlines of their careers were. Since the three heroes all lived before the advent of literacy to Iceland, the sagas about them must be largely based on oral traditions of some kind, but there were no ballads of the European type in Iceland then and the traditions are likely to have been prose ones (the fragments claimed to be of ballads from thirteenth-century Iceland are all from lyric poems, like the early references to *dansar*, and there is no trace of narrative poetry in ballad form in medieval Iceland). Nor can there be much disagreement about the social status of these outlaws. There was little social stratification in early Iceland, but all three outlaws came from independent landowning farmer families, as did almost everyone else in the country at that time. There were no authorities and no ruling class or government. The law was administered by local courts presided over by local chieftains or by the Alþing, a general assembly attended by the 36 (later 39) local chieftains from the whole of Iceland, who appointed judges for each case and chose one of themselves to preside over the whole assembly for terms of 3 years (known as the lawspeaker), and their followers, who were able to choose which chieftain they allied themselves with. The Alþing met for a fortnight each summer in the open air. There were no permanent officers or lawyers in the system, and all lawsuits had to be brought by individuals and the verdicts implemented by them too.

The law of medieval Iceland was set up with the establishment of the Alþing in 930. It is said to have been based on the laws in parts of Norway, but the constitution had the fundamental difference that Iceland had no king (until, that is, 1262–4, when Iceland accepted the rule of the king of Norway). It was oral (and had to be recited by the lawspeaker over his three-year

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term of office) until the early twelfth century, when it was written down on the initiative of the then lawspeaker. The law at that time was not objectified as something imposed on the people from above; it embodied their culture, their customs, their way of life. It defined their society and their identity. There was no concept of 'breaking the law' in medieval Iceland. The penalties imposed by the courts were seen not as punishments or deterrents. They were perceived as compensation to others who had been injured in some way, either physically or in some abstract way. That is, the offences were against another's person or property or honour, and all offences that were acknowledged could be compensated for. (One major difference in Icelandic law from all other European law systems was that the compensation for a death, the wergild, was the same for all free persons: there was no distinction made for the social status either of the injured party or of the perpetrator.)

There were three sanctions for offences in early Icelandic law: fines, which could be paid partly to the injured person and his family, partly to the lawspeaker; the lesser outlawry, which was for three years; and full outlawry, which was permanent (though some sagas say that full outlawry was suspended after 20 years). The fines were graded according to the severity of the injury to someone's person or honour, and were seen as atonement or compensation. The outlawry was designed to prevent the violence and hostility from perpetuating itself. An outlawed person normally went abroad for the term of his outlawry; he was allowed time to get abroad, but if he failed to go by the allotted time he could be killed with impunity by the person who brought the case against him. It was also illegal for anyone to help, feed or shelter an outlaw. He thus ceased to have any social existence in Iceland and had no protection from the law and no rights and could own no property. It also followed that he could not be prosecuted for further offences committed while he was an outlaw. The only way for an outlaw to continue a normal life was to go abroad.

Nevertheless, the three heroes of the outlaw sagas stayed in Iceland until they were killed, Grettir for 19 years, Gísli for 13 and Hörðr for 5, and the sagas mention many other outlaws who lived in the waste places in the middle of the country. They rarely formed a community anything like Robin Hood's band of merry men, but a group of outlaws and malcontents gathered around Hörðr (and his wife and children) and lived with him for a while on a small island in Hvalfjörðr in western Iceland (one can compare Hereward the Wake with his followers on an island in the Fens). They lived on

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food, mainly sheep, raided from the mainland farmers, and it was this raiding that caused a group of farmers to organise an invasion and capture, leading to the execution of the whole group. Gísli spent his outlawry alone, but was for periods sheltered, sometimes in an underground hideout, by his wife or various farmer friends in the north-west of Iceland. Grettir was also most of his 19 years alone, being only for very short periods able to stay with powerful sympathisers, but he was at times joined by other outlaws who wanted to benefit from his protection, though these generally turned out to be traitors to him, paid by his enemies to betray him. In his last years, which he spent on the little island of Drangey in Skagafjörður in northern Iceland, he was joined by his young brother, who died defending him, when he himself was too ill to fight, from an attack of his enemies, a group of farmers who were tired of his stealing their sheep and banded together to attack him on the island.

The Icelandic interior is an inhospitable place. The climate in summer is not much worse than the north of Scotland, but there is little food available except the sheep that were allowed to roam over the mountains; there were fish in the rivers and lakes and plenty of birds, including geese, but they were difficult to catch without equipment that outlaws rarely possessed. They would also have had little opportunity to cook meat: Grettir managed to keep a fire going on Drangey (he had on one occasion to swim to a mainland farm to get fire) and there were in some places hot springs that could be used for cooking. The winters can be very unpleasant, with the average temperature about freezing point, and very wet and windy. No one in their right mind would voluntarily go and live there for long. There were woods in a few places, but mainly of birch and willow which rarely grew large enough to provide any shelter. In some places there are caves in the lava, and these could be used as secret hideouts. If an outlaw constructed a hut, he would be seen from miles away and his enemies would be able to find him and kill him. Their only means of transport would be stolen horses. But Grettir is said to have found a warm valley high up between the glaciers which was sheltered and fertile, where there were hot springs and many sheep there for the taking and fish easily caught. There he was befriended by a troll-like half-human solitary who lived there with his daughters. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folk-stories there are many accounts of such *útilegumenn* (out-lying men, men who lived in the waste places); these were not necessarily *útlagar* (outlaws, people outside the law), and they are sometimes described as living in communities separate from nor-

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mal human ones in ideal surroundings up in the mountains. These legends then merge with those of trolls and elves, who similarly had communities, and sometimes even their own churches and villages, parallel to human society but kinder and happier than humans; they used to steal men and women — particularly girls — from human societies to take to live with them, and these sometimes did not wish to return (Maid Marion, whoever she was, does not appear in medieval stories of Robin Hood). There are also stories of humans who voluntarily went to live with the trolls or elves, though relations were more often hostile. These stories come closest to the romantic ideal of life in the greenwood as it appears in later ballads in England and in some of Shakespeare's plays (*As you like it*, *Midsummer night's dream*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; compare also *The Tempest* for an island refuge). In Iceland these stories are all post-medieval. There, in the Middle Ages, the forest (the world 'outside'; Latin *foris* 'beyond the threshold') was a wild, dangerous, frightening place, full of strange beings, as in Old English literature (the usual term for an outlaw in Old Icelandic is *skógarmaðr*, 'man of the forest'). It was opposed to the social world of men who were protected by their laws and their relationships. In Anglo-Saxon England and in medieval Iceland, it was a misfortune to have to go out into the forest, and anyone who was forced to would try as hard as he could to get back into the safety of human society again. This misfortune is described in Old English poems like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, where unnamed men, perhaps outlaws, are described as suffering immense hardships in their exile. It may be only with the development of towns and cities in western Europe in the fifteenth century that the countryside outside the towns came to be idealised as a place to escape to, kinder and less dangerous than the wicked and unjustly organised concentrations of people in urban areas. In this, renaissance European tradition harks back to the romantic ideals of the classical pastoral. Only in early medieval Ireland are the waste places idealised as refuges for hermits, some of whom evidently actually went to Iceland on their coracles to escape the perils of human society; they all left when the vikings turned up there in the late ninth century.

In fact, the Icelandic outlaw sagas share more motifs with Old English literature than with the contemporary Middle English narratives. The short Anglo-Saxon poem *Wulf and Edwacer*, as far as its context can be understood from the surviving text, seems to be about a man (called *Wulf*; Icelandic outlaws were often referred to as *vargar* 'wolves') who got into a feud and was outlawed and separated from his sorrowing wife, just like

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Gísli in tenth-century Iceland. But it is in *Grettis saga* that the closest analogy with an Old English poem is found. In his wanderings in the wastes he meets many alien creatures, often described as trolls, which originally was a term describing any monstrous or non-human creatures, who were in many cases transformed revenants of wicked men who have died. One is the evil Swedish shepherd, Glámr, who is haunting a remote farm. Grettir manages to haul him out of the buildings, and there is mesmerised by the creature's eyes seen by moonlight, and he is cursed by Glámr before he manages to destroy him and is forever afterwards afraid of the dark — very inconvenient for an outlaw living out of doors in Iceland in the winter. Another is the troll-wife of Bárðardalur, whom Grettir similarly hauls out of the building after most of the interior has been smashed in their wrestling. He then severs her arm, and she escapes under a waterfall. Grettir dives down and finds a giant in the cave behind the waterfall and kills him. This is so similar to Beowulf's fight with Grendel and Grendel's mother (even though the male and female monsters have exchanged roles), the similarity including the verbal correspondence of weapons described respectively as *heptisax* and *hæftmece*, that some sort of relationship has to be assumed. Possibly both stories derived from an early Scandinavian heroic lay about the exploits of a bear-like hero, a figure who turns up quite often in Icelandic and Danish tradition (e.g. Hrólfr kraki). Not only the incidents in the two works, but also the roles of the two heroes are similar. Grettir, like Beowulf, is a protective hero who successfully goes into the other world of alien creatures and cleanses the world of men from their depredations; they are saviour figures, able to cross the threshold out of the world of human society and conquer the forces of the other world, though in the end they succumb and are defeated themselves by it in a sort of retribution. In this aspect of his situation, Grettir's outlawry could be seen as incidental, but it is this that forces him to leave the world of men and invade the wastelands. And Grettir, with his huge strength and his inability to accommodate himself to human society, already half belongs to the world of monsters before his outlawry. He was an outsider from his childhood, refusing to cooperate with his father and breaking everything he touched, and like Hörðr, with an ungovernable temper.

There are some striking similarities between incidents in the Icelandic outlaw sagas and those in the Robin Hood ballads. Both Grettir and Gísli are adept at disguising themselves and tricking their enemies, and thus repeatedly escape capture; Grettir, like Robin Hood, enters the communities of

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men in disguise to take part in games, which of course, he always wins. Unlike Robin Hood, none of the Icelandic outlaws shows much devotion to either Christ or the Virgin Mary, but Grettir, though he will not accept his sentence of outlawry, is devoted to King (later Saint) Óláfr of Norway, just as Robin Hood rejects the authority of the sheriff of Nottingham but submits to the king of England. Grettir goes to Norway to meet King Óláfr and protest his innocence, and offers to prove it by ordeal. The king agrees to this, and is inclined to favour the outlaw, but a devil in the congregation of the church provokes Grettir to violence within the sanctuary, preventing the trial from taking place — another example of retribution by an other-world creature for the hero's having crossed the border into the other world, to which he now irretrievably belongs. Grettir and Hörðr are killed in a last fight with their enemies after being betrayed by someone they trusted, and Robin's death is caused by a prioress, a cousin, to whom he had gone for medical treatment.

But the differences between the English and Icelandic stories are greater than these occasional similarities, which are anyway not of motifs specially characteristic of outlaw stories — they are rather general story-motifs that can be found in a wide variety of narratives. The first major difference is in the medium. All the early references to Robin Hood are to him as the subject of ballads and the earliest surviving texts are ballads, usually printed, though they were presumably originally transmitted orally. They are mostly quite short and comprise one episode in Robin's life, though the *Geste* approaches epic proportions and contains four episodes. In these respects the traditions of Hereward the Wake are quite different. Hereward's story is first told in Latin prose monastic chronicles, and he rapidly became an embodiment of Saxon resistance to the Norman conquerors, though not for a long time among the unlearned. The Icelandic narratives are all in lengthy written prose sagas which are virtually biographies of the heroes, only *Gísla saga* not giving an account of the hero's childhood (it does tell of the early exploits of Gísli, who originated with his family in Norway). They may be based on oral traditions, but are not now thought to have existed as oral prose narratives in anything like their present form; nor were stories told of these heroes in verse until after the sagas were written. Narrative ballads, as already stated, were not cultivated in medieval Iceland. The *rímur* that do exist are of epic proportions, though they are in ballad-like metres, and are mostly of literary and post-medieval origin. Neither the sagas nor the *rímur* are in any sense folk-literature. The sagas are best regarded as imaginative,

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though realistic reconstructions of historical traditions.

The reasons for Robin Hood's outlawry are nowhere made clear, but his main enemy is the sheriff of Nottingham; his victims are wealthy churchmen and other establishment figures; he favours poor people and low-ranking yeomen and artisans. The Icelandic heroes are outlawed as a result of killing men in feuds of various kinds, and their enemies are often part of their own or their wife's kin-group. They are often on good terms with certain chieftains and with the lawspeaker (the lawspeakers in Grettir's last years tried hard to get him released from outlawry). Their outlawry does not result from unprovoked crimes, and they could all have atoned for what they had done if the lawsuits against them had gone as they should, but in these they were unlucky. All three are outlawed in their absence, Gísli and Hörðr being let down by the relatives or friends who were supposed to defend them. They are *ógæfumenn*, unlucky men, more sinned against than sinning, though they also have defects of character that lead to their misfortunes. They are tragic figures who bring suffering upon themselves that is disproportionate to their sins. There are comic episodes in the outlaw sagas, but on the whole they are serious studies of gifted men who seem fated to meet opposition greater than they can cope with, though fate is not a concept often invoked in the sagas. Grettir sometimes robs rich and arrogant men, but only those who have deliberately sought him out; the three outlaws generally rob only to survive. They are all let down by those they trust. Those they seek help from, like their enemies, are nearly all men morally inferior to themselves.

In the accounts of the childhood and youth of Grettir and Hörðr there seem to be some attempts to explain the antisocial behaviour which develops as one of their chief characteristics in later life. Hörðr's mother Signý was married against her will and that of her brother to an old and unpleasant man. Relations between her and her husband were not good. Before her son was born she had a dream of a great and beautiful tree that grew out of her marital bed, but bore little blossom. The child was physically precocious, becoming large for his age and handsome, but at the age of three he still did not walk. His mother was sitting admiring her beautiful necklace which was on her knees when Hörðr took his first stumbling steps. He went towards her and fell on her lap, breaking the necklace. She was angry and said:

‘Ill varð þín ganga in fyrsta, ok munu hér margar illar eptir fara, ok mun þó verst in síðasta.’ (Evil were your first steps and many other evil ones



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will follow this one, but your last ones will be worst.)

At fifteen he goes to Norway and then Sweden, and there breaks into a Viking grave-mound, winning a sword and helmet and a ring which has a curse on it. Thus, like Grettir, he invades the world of the dead and is punished for it.

He returns to Iceland and settles down to farm, having married the daughter of an earl in Gautland (which is, incidentally, where Beowulf came from). Most of Hörðr's troubles thereafter result from his association with the rogue Helgi, son of the vagrant Sigurðr, whom Hörðr, against his better judgment, had allowed himself to take pity on, letting him enter his household as a servant. There was a dispute with a neighbour, Auðr, about horses from the two farms being allowed to mix. Helgi quarrelled with Auðr's son and killed him, and then Hörðr quarrelled with Auðr over the compensation, which he was willing to pay but Auðr refused, delegating the case to Hörðr's alienated maternal uncle Torfi. After considerable provocation, Hörðr lost his temper and killed Auðr. He sent Helgi to ask his brother-in-law to defend him at the Alþing, but Helgi handles the negotiation badly, and both he and Hörðr are outlawed.

During his outlawry, Hörðr continually, but unsuccessfully, tries to restrain the villains who gather round him from unnecessary depredations on the countryside for their supplies. The farmers of the district band together and send an emissary to their island hideout, who tricks many of the outlaws into leaving for the mainland under a false promise of safe conduct. Hörðr is unconvinced, but when he is accused of cowardice he goes, and finds that all his friends had been slaughtered as soon as they reached the shore. He puts up a heroic defence, but three times a *herfjöturr* 'war-fetter' (panic paralysis) afflicts him, which he attributes to witchcraft. Helgi is wounded, and Hörðr carries him on his back and kills thirteen of his attackers before succumbing, but he kills Helgi with his own hands, saying he was not going to allow his foster-brother to be killed before his very eyes.

After his death, his wife Helga heroically swims from the island to the shore with their two young sons; all three survive to achieve vengeance for Hörðr.

In all his adventures and troubles, Hörðr is depicted as a well-intentioned man afflicted with a violent temper, who is able to see clearly through magical deception and treachery but is unable to avoid the consequences. His failures and eventual death are brought about by the gullibility and wickedness of his friends and relations.

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Gísli's troubles arise from a feud between himself and his sister's husband Þorgrímr. A prophecy is made that they will become enemies, and to avert this, Gísli sets up an oath of foster-brotherhood between himself, his brother Þorkell, his wife's brother Vésteinn and his sister's husband Þorgrímr. Such an oath imposes a duty of revenge on the participators towards each other which was equivalent to the duty to a natural brother. At the last moment Þorgrímr refuses to take part. He overhears some gossip between the women involving his wife and Vésteinn, and during a storm at night he enters Gísli's farm and secretly kills Vésteinn. A secret killing (that is, one where the killer did not formally announce his responsibility in public) leads to full outlawry and cannot be compensated for. Þorgrímr's responsibility for this killing is never made public; but this does not make the story a whodunnit, since it is apparent that it was he, and saga-authors characteristically narrate only public reaction to events, never giving their own interpretations. Gísli secretly kills Þorgrímr (as he was compelled to do by his oath) and buries him in a manner mimicking Vésteinn's death and burial. His secret is guessed by his sister, and she betrays him to Börkr, her dead husband's brother, whom she has now married. He has meanwhile paid a sorcerer to put a curse on whoever killed his brother that he shall never get help or shelter from anyone in Iceland. Gísli is outlawed by Börkr. His brother Þorkell fails to support Gísli at the Althing, and though subsequently asked on several occasions for help, gives Gísli only minimal support. He is helped on various occasions by farmers living on islands not covered by the curse, and also by his wife Auðr, who actually takes part in the fighting at Gísli's last stand on a lone bluff in Geirþjófsfjörðr, having insultingly refused a bribe to betray him. After Gísli's death, his sister injures one of his attackers and divorces her husband (as any Icelandic woman was easily able to do by a simple ceremony of declaring her divorce before witnesses) after he has offered compensation for this injury.

During his outlawry Gísli has dreams prefiguring his death and also the new religion, Christianity, which arrives in Iceland some years after his death. All his killings, including those committed in Norway before his family's emigration to Iceland, were carried out in defence of his own or his sister's honour, or in fulfilment of his oath of brotherhood, though he is persuaded to renounce vengeance in the case of the sons of Vésteinn's killing of his brother Þorkell. He is not depicted as a bloodthirsty man. Among other things, the story seems to illustrate the transition, presumably under the influence of Christianity, from a person's primary duty being to

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(his or her) blood family (and sworn brothers) to one to his or her spouse and spouse's family; and also the transition from the requirement of vengeance for damage to one's own honour to that of forgiveness towards those who defend their own honour.

In *Grettis saga*, the hero only makes his appearance in chapter 14. The first 13 chapters are about the earlier history of his forebears, at first in Norway, later in Iceland. It is implied that Grettir, a big, very strong and violent man and a poet, and his brother Þorsteinn drómundr, handsome, kind and gentle, inherited their characteristics from two strains with contrasting characteristics running in the family. As a child Grettir is described as *mjök ódæll ... fátalaðr ok óþýðr, bellinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum* 'very unmanageable ... not very talkative and not a great mixer, antagonistic in both words and deeds'. He is his mother's favourite but is not loved by his father, on whom he plays some cruel and violent tricks when asked to contribute to the work of the household. His first killing is of a farm-hand from a farm in a neighbouring valley, after a dispute about the ownership of a lost knapsack. He is condemned to lesser outlawry (for three years). On his journey to Norway he is shipwrecked on an island off the coast there, and while staying with the local farmer invades and robs an ancient grave-mound — the first of his invasions of the other world (the world of the dead). He then saves his host's wife and daughter from some marauding berserks who attack the farm at Christmas — the first of his many acts of altruistic heroism, in the role of saviour of people belonging to ordinary human society from the depredations of antisocial outsider figures. He has many more adventures of both kinds, sometimes in the double role of saviour and invader of the other world. His full outlawry resulted from his second journey to Norway (he had returned to Iceland for a year after serving his first term abroad for three years), when, again shipwrecked, he saves the lives of the ship's crew by swimming a sound to fetch fire to warm them. When he got across the sound, he entered a hall where some men were having a party, and when they they saw this huge ugly creature with ice all over his clothes, looking like a troll, they thought it was an *óvætt*, 'evil creature' or monster. They threw brands from the fire at him, and he picked one up and swam back to his companions with it, but one of the other brands set fire to the hall and all the men in it were burned to death. He was unable to convince anyone that he had not killed them deliberately, and so he was made full outlaw.

He killed a great number of people during his outlawry, usually with some provocation, and robbed many farmers for food and some others to

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punish them for presumption. He was greatly liked by his friends and family, and much hated and feared by those who had become his enemies.

The chief explanation expressly offered by the saga-writer of Grettir's fate is that he was an *ógæfumaðr*. *Gæfa* is 'a disposition to success', its contrary *ógæfa* is 'a disposition to failure'. *Gæfa* is sometimes personified as an influence, almost like a guardian angel (or a malicious demon) attaching itself to individuals or families, which they could lose if they transgressed certain boundaries of behaviour. It is in some ways similar to the classical conception of Fortuna - it is arbitrary in whom it attaches itself to, and there is often irony in the way in which attempts to overcome it can have a contrary effect. It is a little bit like 'Sod's Law' (or Murphy's Law), which operates on people arbitrarily if they are subject to it.

These Icelandic outlaw sagas differ from English outlaw ballads (and, incidentally, from the Swiss legends of William Tell) in very fundamental ways. Firstly in the medium — long prose written narratives, as opposed to comparatively short oral ballads. Secondly in the historical, social and legal background — a commonwealth of free and equal farmers without any government or executive, with a traditional law system embodying the culture and identity of a small homogeneous population, as opposed to a monarchy with an alien government and a law imposed from above on an increasingly alienated peasantry. Thirdly in the moral assumptions behind the stories. The Icelandic heroes are caught up in feuds not of their own making, obliged to defend the native conception of honour, but surrounded by people motivated by envy and greed who are uninhibited by any concern for abstract justice and lacking in human charity, as opposed to the rather simplistic situation of an alienated aristocrat (or yeoman) rejecting normal society because of its injustice, avenging himself on an alien administration and establishment by robbing the rich to benefit the poor. It is the detail of the characterisation and the meticulous concern to explain the actions of the hero, which can easily be seen to be cruel and heartless, in the best possible light that give a special quality to the Icelandic sagas. While the English ballads are basically romances about alienated groups creating an alternative ideal society in a mythical greenwood, the Icelandic sagas are realistic attempts to show how basically well-motivated people can run foul of their society's conventions and unwittingly find themselves outcast in spite of their best endeavours to reintegrate themselves and atone for their mistakes. They are tragedies in the true sense of the term.

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Grettir, in particular, has seemed, not only to Icelanders, to embody the situation of a lonely person struggling to accommodate himself to a society from which he finds himself increasingly alienated. Indeed many Icelanders have seen him as a sort of symbolic representative of the Icelandic nation, misunderstood and despised by other nations, but with a fierce determination not to abandon its traditional values and independence in spite of its isolation and lack of means to exist independently. Among foreign devotees, William Morris has best encapsulated a characteristic feeling of affinity that some readers find with Icelandic outlaws. He wrote of Grettir:

A life scarce worth the living, a poor fame  
 Scarce worth the winning, in a wretched land,  
 Where fear and pain go upon either hand,  
 As toward the end men fare without an aim  
 Unto the dull grey dark from whence they came:  
 Let them alone, the unshadowed sheer rocks stand  
 Over the twilight graves of that poor band,  
 Who count so little in the great world's game!

Nay, with the dead I deal not; this man lives,  
 And that which carried him through good and ill,  
 Stern against fate while his voice echoed still  
 From rock to rock, now he lies silent, strives  
 With wasting time, and through its long lapse gives  
 Another friend to me, life's void to fill.

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