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BOOK REVIEW

Merkelbach, Rebecca. 2019. *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland* (Berlin: De Gruyter)

Peggy Gilbert

Rebecca Merkelbach's first monograph is one of the latest in a line of recent studies to examine the links between medieval monsters and the societies that created them. The irresistible draw of the uncanny and the monstrous has permeated through centuries of literature, from its earliest surviving manuscripts to contemporary fiction. Twenty-first-century scholarship in monster studies, in particular, has flourished, and Merkelbach uses this momentum to expand on developing theories of monstrosity, further showcasing the link between literary monsters and society. Building on the work of scholars such as Jennifer Neville (*Monsters and Criminals*, 2001), and Dana M. Oswald (*Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, 2010), she explores what it is that truly makes a monster monstrous. Merkelbach, in this publication, aims to address the social anxieties in medieval Icelandic society and explore how they are expressed through the social monsters in the literature. Applying J.J. Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996) to these monstrous characters further emphasises that the value of interpreting and reading medieval monsters is becoming more and more apparent, and culturally relevant. They are a valuable source for, as Cohen posits, 'reading cultures from the monsters they engender' (1996: p.3). Many Old English monsters have had their representations investigated in this manner, from *Beowulf's* Grendel to the many *Wonders of the East*.

It is notable, however, that a cohesive study of the monstrous characters and their functions in the Icelandic sagas is considerably lacking in current scholarship. Merkelbach

addresses that gap with this publication, identifying the monstrous characters in the *Íslendingasögur,* then establishing their key traits and the effects that they have on society. Firmly placing these monsters in a social context, she examines their role in the texts.

In her introduction, Merkelbach offers her own interpretation of monster studies, as well as the means by which monster scholarship may be enhanced and furthered through reference to the *Íslendingasögur*. She redefines the monstrous 'as that which borders on both the realist and the fantastic' (p. 2) and asserts that both Cohen and Neville's studies of monstrosity in Old English literature can help inform the study of medieval Icelandic monsters. This study, in turn, can then give us a valuable insight into how the *Íslendingasögur* work to elucidate issues in society, by looking at the past through this literary lens.

Society, as it was, is the crux of Merkelbach's study. Somewhat controversially — as acknowledged by the author — this study deviates from other scholarship in that it also classifies the Icelandic outlaws as monstrous beings. She gives due justification for her approach and emphasises how this study focuses on these marginalised characters in the sagas having at least the potential for monstrosity and explores how it gets fulfilled to various degrees. This results in the potential monstrous diagnosis of those who might have evaded such a damning verdict in the past. Through an in-depth study of individuals on the edges of society in the *Íslendingasögur* — revenants, outlaws, *berserkir*, and practitioners of magic — the author establishes social monstrosity as a spectrum. Eliminating the overly simplistic approach to monstrosity as something one either is or is not, Merkelbach posits the notion that 'the monsters of this literature are therefore firmly embedded in the social fabric, even though they move along its margins: without a society to perceive its disruption, there would be no monster' (p. 167). She identifies the key factors necessary for an individual to traverse the line of monstrosity, and discusses how far along it particular characters can, and indeed do, travel. These monsters are socially disruptive: they destabilise society by infecting others and have detrimental effects on the economy and prosperity of the community. As such, this study is focused on the social, rather than the physical, nature of monstrosity.

Pivotal to this approach is studying the interactions and reactions between society and the liminal characters who transgress into monstrosity. Taking the revenants as her first subject, the author begins by delving into what it is that makes these terrifying characters particularly disruptive to society, establishing a base from which to judge and recognise other, less obvious societal monstrosities. In chapter two, the author highlights the key factors that contribute to a social monster in medieval Icelandic society: hybridity and transgression,

contagion, and economic impact. It is clear that the revenants are certainly hybrid and transgressive in that they are dead, yet mobile. They transgress the line between life and death, which in itself unnerves society. Furthermore, they disrupt society by causing harm to its members, attacking them physically and mentally, and often driving individuals mad; at the same time, they take over and damage property, causing severe economic injury. Through a closer study of such characters as Hrappr and Þórólfr, the reader is shown how revenants express their hybrid nature in many ways, not only by being somehow both alive and dead, but also by their ability to shapeshift and control animals. Undertaking a case study of both individual and group hauntings by revenants on an unsuspecting medieval Icelandic society, Merkelbach clearly establishes the social upheaval caused by these monsters.

There is also consideration given to how the monstrous figure of the revenant is to be removed from society effectively and permanently, and this is then compared to the other monstrous figures in this book. The monster often needs to be dismembered and reconnected with the natural world in order to truly banish them. Merkelbach uses this observation both to connect her other subjects with monstrosity, and in studying how society reacts to social monsters in chapter six. Indeed, she makes the point that society's perception of a marginalised individual as monstrous could be manipulated in some instances. For example, Styrr and Snorri treat Halli and Leiknir in the same way one would treat a monstrous body (by steaming them to the brink of death and burying them in a marginal area), which then works to sway society's opinion of them, making Styrr and Snorri's acts of violence seem more justifiable.

Having established the parameters necessary to qualify as a social monster in the *Íslendingasögur,* Merkelbach then systematically takes the other three qualifying monstrous figures — outlaws, *berserkir*, and magic-users — and determines where they fall on the monstrous spectrum that she intends to establish. The fluid nature of social monstrosity truly becomes apparent in chapters three to five as the complicated and nuanced nature of each character's liminality is revealed.

For example, in the case of the outlaw, the author establishes a 'marginalization process' (p. 52) that leads to his ultimate classification as a monster. Once outlawed, these characters dwell on the edges of society, are banished from the community, and are essentially left in the wild. However, this physically liminal position is not what Merkelbach deems to be the formative factor of the monstrous outlaw; rather, it is his disruptive behaviour, along with the largely negative impact he has on society, that truly ostracises him. Interestingly,

chapter two begins with a study of the youth of three main outlaws chosen for the discussion — Grettir, Gísli, and Hörðr — and pinpoints particular incidences and relationships that could be responsible for the early onset of their socially disruptive behaviours. This section gives a fascinating insight to psychological and experiential factors that affect an individual during their early years. Monstrous potential, and the danger of its realisation, is vital to consider. The idea that some of these monsters were created by the society that ultimately rejected them is developed fully in chapter six.

When addressing the threat of the ferocious *berserkir*, Merkelbach engages with the existing scholarship, and convincingly justifies her digression from the well-trodden path of classifying *berserkir* primarily on their shape-shifting abilities. Focusing not on what they *are*, but instead on what they *do*, the author ties her investigation of *berserkir* in with her own concept of social monstrosity, as she notes that '*berserkir* behave like animals rather than turning into them, and this is in keeping with my observations about the action-based nature of social monstrosity more generally' (p. 106). Using the monstrous prerequisites formulated in earlier chapters, Merkelbach comments on the clear transgressiveness of *berserkir*, while also asserting that it is their sexually violent nature that truly makes the *berserkir* dangerous to both individuals and society. In the aggressive rape of Icelandic women, the *berserkr* not only damages the woman physically and emotionally, but also has a drastically negative impact on society as a whole: he challenges the 'honor and status' (p. 112) of a woman's male guardian, along with the rest of the family and their power and possessions. This monstrosity is clearly shown by Merkelbach to be fearfully contagious, as this sexual attack would be liable to produce monstrous offspring, and also taint the woman and her family with monstrous association long after the transgressive act is performed. This association is then a gateway to monstrosity — the author notes that Yngvildr's contamination through sex with Klaufi pushes her away from society and towards monstrosity, so she can as a result be punished in more brutal ways that would not usually befall women.

In fact, Merkelbach illuminates the value of using the *Íslendingasögur* for more than mere entertainment. She makes the point that portraying the *berserkir* and their sexual abuse of women in the *Íslendingasögur* allowed Icelanders to distance themselves from the sexually transgressive figures inherent in their society, in an attempt to externalise and explore it in an innocuous way. As Merkelbach demonstrates, the writers of these texts used the past to closely examine the present.

The last marginalised group that Merkelbach addresses in this monograph is that of the practitioners of magic. The study of medieval magic is briefly introduced as being of interest to a wide variety of scholars, from scholars of literature, to anthropologists and historians of religion, due to the sheer volume of figures with magical knowledge depicted in the literature. Merkelbach asserts that the existing scholarship, however, focuses too much on what magic is, and less on what it does. She remedies this omission in chapter five, as she turns her focus to 'who practices magic, and to what purpose — on the action and direction of magical practice rather than on its nature' (p. 125). These medieval Icelandic magic-users are discussed in detail and are noted as the most ambiguously monstrous beings discussed in the study.

In addition, Merkelbach acknowledges the importance of 'differentiating between divinatory and efficatory magic' (p. 127), a separation that was originally proposed by Clive Tolley (1995). Focusing on efficatory magic, in keeping with the general process of studying the actions and reactions of the monstrous subjects in this investigation, produces an interesting observation. Practitioners of magic are deemed monstrous if the impact of their magic is damaging to society; on the other hand, magic-users may also benefit society if their magic produces a positive result. This emphasises the author's theory of monstrosity as a fluid spectrum that an individual can tread along — sometimes lingering in society, and sometimes transgressing fully into monstrosity. The practice of magic is connected with a desire for power and control, and this traditionally poses a threat to society. The author shows how even when magic-users have shown no evidence of foul play, malicious rumours about them will still be readily believed by the public, as evidenced by the treatment of Geirríðr in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

In a succinct and effective conclusion to the work, Merkelbach gives a considered range of suggestions for directions in which her findings could be taken in the future. In doing so, she cements the place of both herself and her work firmly in the field, as she clearly outlines the gap she has filled, and also directs the reader to where scholarship can go next, taking the theories explored in this work into account. This text presents the reader with a well-structured and clear argument, with effective signposting throughout and strong engagement with primary textual evidence to support the author's ideas. Merkelbach has not shied away from challenging existing scholarship, and has thus developed a gripping argument, and a new lens through which the *Íslendingasögur* can be studied. However, she acknowledges that there is much more to be done to expand on her theory of social

monstrosity. As this monograph covers a very broad subject matter, the potential for various closer studies is vast. This book, although focusing on the monsters of the *Íslendingasögur,* is certainly a valuable resource for any scholar of medieval monsters, particularly when examining the monster in relation to the society it haunts. As Merkelbach acknowledges, the monster exists to point towards something, and so too does this text. It opens the door towards future discussion on the theory of social monstrosity, and suggests that the revenants, outlaws, *berserkir,* and magic-users could be traced across the other Icelandic saga genres. After this work, the triangulation of the individual, the paranormal, and society in connection to the monstrous can now be extended and developed by application to the *Íslendingasögur,* but also to medieval literature at large.

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