

## Understanding Grettir as an Ethical Hero: Comparing *Havamal* and *Grettir's Saga* -Patricia Lafayllve

The Icelandic family sagas are replete with heroes, fighting men and strong women who stood with their teeth to the wind and carved a life for themselves out of an inhospitable world. *Grettir's Saga* is no exception to this. However, the saga was written relatively late, probably around 1325 (Fox vii), and definitely shows the influence of Christianity on Northern European culture. The main character, Grettir, is often seen as “an obsessional character, repeating time and again the same actions” (Fox ix) and even as “lacking in some of the ordinary human qualities which make for survival” (Fox ix). Seen from a Christian standpoint this may well be true, and it is certainly true that Grettir is a violent man and that he rejects the society which, in its turn, rejects him. At the same time, viewing Grettir as a thug limits his true scope. Grettir is not an anti-hero but instead a man “born too late, and into a Christian and civilized world, where the heroic virtues are no longer sufficient” (Fox viii-ix). Examining the saga through the lens provided by the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of poems dating from the pre-Christian era or so-called “Viking Age,” brings Grettir into clearer focus. Analyzing the ethics promoted by the *Havamal*, or the “Sayings of the High One” (Larrington 14-38) reveals Grettir's nature. This paper intends to conceptualize Grettir as a man whose ethical system remains closely tied to Viking Age heroic ideals.

A systematic reading of *Grettir's Saga* as a whole, while undoubtedly useful to proving my point, is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead I have chosen to perform a close reading of Chapter 19. It is here that Grettir begins to reveal himself as a hero worthy of the Viking Age, and here that we begin to see Grettir not just as a violent thug but also as a man with a distinct set of values best encapsulated by the Poetic Edda's *Havamal*. Translational accuracy is a key factor in any analysis of works not originally written in one's native tongue. Therefore, while I have chosen to use the Fox and Pálsson translation of *Grettir's Saga*, I have also decided to cite three different translations of the *Havamal*. Caroline Larrington, Lee M. Hollander, and Henry Adams Bellows' translations are all readily available for further study, and each shows distinct variations from the other. Citing multiple translations of the same Old Norse work can at times provide a deeper level of understanding, and since I am attempting to engage in a thorough analysis of Grettir while using only one chapter from the saga it is only appropriate to provide as much context as possible.

In order to set the stage for Chapter 19, a brief overview of saga events is required. Grettir enters the saga as a child. He is full of pride and refuses to do the work his father sets for him, and then fights with Audun during a ball game. When separated from his antagonist, Grettir utters the first in a saga-wide series of proverbs: “Only a slave avenges himself at once; and only a coward never” (Fox 28). Already we see his belief in righteous and even violent vengeance when he deems it necessary to maintain his pride and position. The second act of violence follows on the heels of the first. Grettir gets into an argument with a servant named Skeggi over the ownership of a lost food-bag. Grettir kills Skeggi in self-defense, and as a result is sentenced to lesser outlawry – he is banished from Iceland and must spend three years abroad (Fox 29-31). Grettir sails to Norway and, after being shipwrecked, is taken in by Thorfinn, a “great chieftain” (Fox 35) who owns a farm on Harams Isle. Thorfinn shows him hospitality

and gratitude for returning the treasures Grettir found while battling the undead mound-dweller, Kar. Thorfinn also tells Grettir that he must “do something worthy of fame” (Fox 38) in order to earn a short sword Grettir particularly desires.

As Chapter 19 opens, we learn that Earl Eirik Hakonarson, along with several ruling chieftains, has declared all duels illegal and further has sentenced all robbers and berserkers “who caused trouble” to outlawry (Fox 38-39). Thorfinn was instrumental in getting these decrees passed, which has earned him the enmity of two specific berserkers, the brothers Thorir Paunch and Ogmund the Evil (Fox 39). Just before Christmas, Thorfinn leaves his farm to go to another one he owns on the mainland at Slysford. He leaves his wife, daughter, and eight of his servants behind at the Harams Isle farm, and we are told that Grettir remains with them (Fox 39).

Toward the end of the day, on Christmas Eve, Grettir is outside watching ships sail up and down along the coast. He sees a small ship heading toward the island, and it makes for Thorfinn’s boat shed. We are told that Grettir notices twelve men jump overboard as soon as they ground their ship. His immediate impression is succinct: “[t]hey did not strike him as being very peacable” (Fox 39). Up until now the saga author has not spent a lot of time dealing with Grettir’s observational qualities. He does not waste time here, either, instead choosing to reveal this observation and move right back to the action of the chapter. However, a careful reading of this sentence brings the *Havamal* to mind. Stanza 18, translated by Carolyne Larrington, reads as follows:

Only that man who travels widely  
And has journeyed a great deal knows  
What sort of mind each man has in his control;  
He who’s sharp in his wits. (16)

The stanza lends a careful reader some insight. We can see Grettir, even at this stage in the saga, as a man who has traveled widely not only across Iceland but into Norway. This has given him a broader perspective, and as the stanza relates this can be a useful thing to have. Henry Adams Bellows gives us this translation of the same stanza:

He alone is aware      who has wandered wide,  
And far abroad has fared,  
How great a mind      is guided by him  
That wealth of wisdom has. (33)

While Larrington’s translation of the first two lines is clearer, here we see that travel has another implication. Bellows’ translation implies that wisdom leads to a “great mind” and that only those who have traveled truly understand just how much wisdom can be gained through experience. While this does fit Grettir – as the saga progresses he learns a great deal, with tragic consequences - the stanza still seems to focus on wisdom. At this point in the narrative thread Grettir has not yet fully developed, and we have certainly seen him act more rashly than wisely. This is where an examination of Lee M. Hollander’s translation of Stanza 18 is particularly helpful. He relates:

Only he is aware      who hath wandered much,  
And far hath been afield,  
What manner of man be he whom he meets,  
If himself be not wanting in wit. (17)

The key lies in Hollander’s translation of the third line. The stanza is not talking about wisdom, per se, but rather about insight into the character of other men. In short,

Grettir's experiences in his travels have brought him into contact with many types of men, and therefore he can more easily discern their character. Since Grettir is intelligent, he is capable of making assessments about these newcomers based on his prior experiences.

Ultimately his judgment of these men proves true. They rush to Thorfinn's boat shed and drag out his much larger ship. Grettir watches these proceedings. Important to note here is that Thorfinn's ship is quite large and heavy. "It had always taken at least thirty men to launch it, but these twelve pulled it at once to the shingle. Then they lifted their own ship and carried it into the shed" (Fox 40). Here the reader, and Grettir, learns two important pieces of information. One, these men are indeed thieves out to steal the larger boat. We will discuss this in more detail below. The second piece of information impacts Grettir's response to these men: they are all very strong. The reader is given a sense that these men move the great ship with ease. They are only twelve in number, but they are twelve to Grettir's one. As strong as he is, we can still imagine Grettir pausing to assess how best to overcome this challenge.

We are not given any further insight into Grettir's thoughts. The saga author points out: "Grettir saw that they were intending to offer themselves hospitality" (Fox 40). This sentence is very sly and shows a subtle understanding of the importance of hospitality to Scandinavian people. Normally the host's duty is to provide warm welcome, food and drink to all travelers. Indeed, the *Havamal* spends several stanzas on the rules of hospitality, some of which I will discuss as this paper progresses. Here, though, the men are taking for themselves without being welcomed. We can assume this is because they are thieves, but it is also important to remember that these are Thorfinn's sworn enemies and, more importantly, Thorfinn is not there to give them the welcome they deserve. Instead it is Grettir who first waits to see what these men are really up to and then goes "down to meet them, welcom[ing] them warmly, and ask[ing] who they were and what the name of their leader was" (Fox 40).

Upon learning the identity of the berserkers, Grettir praises them. He calls them "men of great luck" (Fox 40) since Thorfinn and his men are not at home, and even identifies with their situation, saying "If I thought I had any grudge to repay, this is exactly how I would have wished to come, for here is everything you need, both ale and pleasures" (Fox 40). In short, Grettir appears to be siding with the outlaws instead of defending the property of the man who has sheltered him all winter. Thorir Paunch clearly believes Grettir, saying that "I had it in mind to take vengeance on Thorfinn for having had us outlawed. This man has good news to tell us, and we don't have to drag every word out of him" (40). The author of the saga is setting up narrative tension and giving the reader Grettir's actions with no explanation as to their motives. However, a careful reading reveals Grettir's intentions.

We must pay attention to every word that Grettir says from this moment on. "'Every man chooses his own words,' said Grettir, 'and I shall give you such assistance as I can; now come with me'" (40). On its face we have another of Grettir's many proverbs, and it would be easy to dismiss Grettir's words as just that. This may, in fact, be the saga author's intent, although what seems clear is that Grettir has something on his mind and that he is not sharing his thoughts with anyone. On the surface Grettir is offering his assistance to the criminals, which puts him firmly on the wrong side of the

law. However, taking a look at the *Havamal* gives us a deeper insight. Carolyne Larrington's translation of stanza 42 reveals a great deal:

To his friend a man should be a friend  
And repay gifts with gifts;  
Laughter a man should give for laughter  
And repay treachery with lies. (42)

In the case of stanza 42, Larrington's translation is the most concise. For the sake of thoroughness, however, I will cite the other two translators as well, then discuss the implications of Stanza 42. First, Henry Adams Bellows:

To his friend a man    a friend shall prove,  
And gifts with gifts requite;  
But men shall mocking        with mockery answer,  
And fraud with falsehood meet. (37)

Secondly, the more obscure translation provided by Lee M. Hollander:

With his friend a man should be friends ever,  
And pay back gift for gift;  
Laughter for laughter he learn to give,  
And eke lesing for lies. (21)

Taking aside such archaic phrases as "eke lesing" (Hollander 21), what becomes clear is that in the Viking Age system of ethics lying to those who were your enemies was not only acceptable, it was the preferred method of dealing with them. Additionally, and importantly, maintaining loyalty to one's friends was equally encouraged. Looking at Grettir's comment with this stanza in mind, it becomes clear that he is not merely reciting another proverb. He is letting on that he is choosing his words carefully in the presence of these men, and we can assume that he has his friendship with Thorfinn in his mind as he offers them his assistance. We must remember that Grettir has already watched these twelve men replace Thorfinn's boat with their own, and that he knows not only who these men are but that Thorir is seeking vengeance against Thorfinn. This places Grettir, as a Viking Age ethical hero, on firm ground. He should maintain his friendship with Thorfinn, but it is clear that these men could overwhelm him despite his own impressive strength. Therefore, we can surmise that by paying back "fraud with falsehood" (Bellows 37) Grettir is acting in his own and his friend's best interests.

Therefore, it becomes important for Grettir to bide his time until an opportunity presents itself. He cannot let anyone in on his intentions, since that might endanger the lives of everyone present. Thus when Thorfinn's wife, who is never named, upbraids Grettir for allowing these berserkers into her home, he can only listen to her abuse. The wife fulfills a role common to women in the saga record and chides Grettir in an attempt to force him into action. She ends her speech by telling Grettir that he repays "Thorfinn badly for taking you destitute from a shipwreck and keeping you here this winter as a free man" (Fox 41).

Here, Grettir repays her mockery with mocking. At the same time, we can read into his words based on our growing understanding of Viking Age ethical standards. What Grettir says to Thorfinn's housewife is straightforward. "It would be better now," he tells her, "to help the guests off with their wet clothes instead of reproaching me; there will be an opportunity for that later" (Fox 40-41). This sentence directly echoes two

stanzas in the *Havamal*. First we'll examine Stanza 3. I will cite the translations one after another:

Fire is needful for someone who's come in  
And who's chilled to the knee;  
Food and clothing are necessary for the man  
Who's journeyed over the mountains. (Larrington 14)

Fire he needs who with frozen knees  
Has come from the cold without;  
Food and clothes must the farer have,  
The man from the mountains come. (Bellows 30)

The warmth seeketh who hath wandered long  
And is numb about his knees;  
Meat and dry clothes the man needeth  
Over the fells who hath fared. (Hollander 15)

In Scandinavian countries, as in most northern climates, pre-industrial human cultures based themselves around the importance of community ties as a means of survival. By reminding Thorfinn's wife of her duties as a hostess Grettir is censuring her for her neglect of them. At the same time, he is expressing a sentiment vital to not just Viking Age but also post-Conversion Medieval Scandinavian peoples. He is also dissembling in front of Thorfinn's enemies. His opening phrase, "it would be better now" (Fox 40) might be read as a hint, once which the housewife misses, that her action will not affect the outcome of this encounter.

*Havamal*'s Stanza 4 also discusses hospitality. Here, though, we need to examine each of the three translations closely in order to fully develop the intent of the stanza's advice. First, Carolyn Larrington:

Water is needful for someone who comes to a meal,  
A towel and a warm welcome,  
A disposition, if he can get it, for good words  
And silence in return. (14)

If our examination stopped here, we could surmise that this is yet another reminder to give one's guests all that they require. Since Grettir reminds the housewife specifically about the wet clothes of the berserkers, we could point to line two as reinforcing what is needed – a "towel and a warm welcome" (Larrington 14). More problematic are the third and fourth lines. As translated they seem to imply that hosts should provide the guests with good disposition and silence. In modern terms this could well be a hint to hosts that they should be "on their best behavior."

However, Henry Adams Bellows reads this stanza differently. His translation reads:

Water and towels and welcoming speech  
Should he find who comes to the feast;  
If renown he would get, and again be greeted,  
Wisely and well must he act. (30)

Lee M. Hollander's translation, although again filled with archaic language, supports Bellows. Hollander's translation is as follows:

A drink needeth        to full dishes who cometh,  
                                 A towel, and the prayer to partake;  
 Good bearing eke,      to be well liked  
                                 And be bidden to banquet again. (15)

Both translations echo Larrington's in the first two lines – guests should be provided with drink if thirsty, food if hungry, a towel to dry off with and good, welcoming speech. However, the third and fourth lines clearly refer to the guest and not the host. In short, a guest should be well-behaved if he or she expects to get an invitation to return. Hospitality, therefore, is not all-encompassing. It can be revoked, and a guest should be careful to remember that and behave appropriately.

Returning to the events of Chapter 19, Thorir responds to Thorfinn's housewife in plainly threatening words. He says: "Don't be upset, lady. You won't be any the worse off for your husband's absence, since you'll get a man in his place – and so will your daughter and all the other women, too" (Fox 41). The only way to read this is that the women will be raped by the warriors, and that there is nothing the women can do about it. One can only imagine the ribald laughter following such words by a clear villain and the shocked horror of the household.

Again, Grettir equivocates. "Spoken like a true man," he says. "The women will have no cause for complaint" (41). The saga author clearly wants this to be read as Grettir siding with Thorir Paunch, which means Grettir is condoning rape and further violating the trust of those who have offered him their friendship. At this point, however, we have already explored stanza 42, which blatantly states that a Viking Age ethical system includes lying to one's enemies. The *Havamal* goes further into its exploration of the ways to treat enemies. As we see in Stanza 45:

If you've another, whom you don't trust,  
 But from whom you want nothing but good,  
 Speak fairly to him but think falsely  
 And repay treachery with lies. (Larrington 20)

If another thou hast    whom thou hardly wilt trust,  
                                 Yet good from him wouldst get,  
 Thou shalt speak him fair,    but falsely think,  
                                 And fraud with falsehood requite. (Bellows 40)

If another there be    whom ill thou trustest,  
                                 Yet would'st get from him gain:  
 Speak fair to him        though false thou meanest,  
                                 And pay him lesing for lies. (Hollander 21)

The three translators agree with the intentions of the original Old Norse here. Their specific language choices vary but the message is the same: feel free to dissemble. At the same time, however, we see another, deeper nuance. Key in this stanza is the second line. This is not just a reminder to repay lies with lies, but also a means of "getting good" or gaining something from one's enemies. Again, a careful reading of Grettir's words, compared with the stanzas of the *Havamal*, reveals what Grettir is up to. He is looking to gain something out of all this, and using Thorfinn's enemies to do it. Precisely what it is Grettir is seeking shall become clear as we continue.

In any event, Thorir Paunch decides that he likes Grettir and wants to take Grettir “into his confidence” (Fox 41). Once again Grettir dissembles, deliberately choosing his words so that the warnings he is giving are clear to anyone paying attention. “That is for you to decide,” Grettir says to Thorir. “But I myself do not treat all men alike” (Fox 41). One thing that becomes clear in any study of the *Havamal* is that important lessons will be repeated in several stanzas. While I will not discuss stanza 131 in as great detail as I have stanzas 42 and 45, the speaker of the *Havamal* advises Loddafnir to be cautious of ale, other men’s wives, and to “watch out that thieves don’t beguile you” (Larrington 33). Again, we see another layer to add to the ethical treatment of an enemy. Keeping one’s wits is advice repeated throughout the *Havamal*, and that includes being careful when in the presence of one’s foes. Using stanza 131, we can see that Grettir is not just playing the berserkers for fools, he is being extremely careful not to be outwitted by them. He uses his comments to test Thorir and his men, and when they respond by offering him friendship Grettir knows that his ploys are succeeding.

Grettir continues to play the new ally and good host, urging the men to enter the hall, sit, and drink. He even serves the berserkers cup after cup of “the strongest ale he could find” (Fox 41). “At the same time he told them a lot of funny stories, so that altogether there was a great deal of noise” (Fox 41). It is obvious that Grettir is trying to get these men drunk, and once again the *Havamal* has a great deal to say. Time and again the stanzas in the *Havamal* urge moderation, particularly when imbibing alcohol. It is worth examining one stanza as translated by our three scholars. Stanza 12 reads:

It isn’t as good as it’s said to be,  
Ale, for the sons of men;  
For the more he drinks, the less he knows  
About the nature of men. (Larrington 16)

Here the caution is clear – drink can befuddle the wits and cause a man (or, one presumes, a woman) to mistake the intentions of others. At the same time, Bellows and Hollander once again shift the perspective of the final two lines:

Less good there lies than most believe  
In ale for mortal men;  
For the more he drinks the less does man  
Of his mind the mastery hold. (Bellows 31)

For good is not, though good it is thought,  
Mead for the sons of men;  
The deeper he drinks the dimmer grows  
The mind of many a man. (Hollander 16)

In other words, what heavy drinking does is not just limit one’s understanding about another’s nature or intentions, it also loosens one’s own self-control. This is common knowledge, as any human who has consumed alcohol to excess can attest. However, what becomes important here is that Grettir, posing as a new-found ally, is plying these men with drink. Thorir and his warriors, in contrast, imbibe without compunction and without control. This is where Grettir’s true motives and plans begin to be clear to the saga’s audience. Indeed, as they continue to drink Grettir offers his friendship. Thorir and the berserkers agree to the offer and want to swear binding oaths to one another on the spot. Grettir once again tests the berserkers to see how they will respond. He

supplies another proverb: “Ale makes another man” (Fox 41) and urges them to wait until they are all sober to swear the bonds of friendship with one another.

Once again, the *Havamal* has something to say about friendship and its bonds.

Stanza 51 reveals:

Hotter than fire between bad friends  
Burns affection for five days;  
But it dies down when the sixth day comes,  
And all that friendship goes to the bad. (Larrington 21)

Or, as in this case, people who swear oaths of friendship to one another in haste may prove to be false friends in the long run. Again, Grettir is showing an understanding of Viking Age ethics while the berserkers are not. This is one of the stanzas where the variance between the three translations is not great. All speak of approximately five days of fast, consuming friendship before a cooling of affection on the sixth day, although Bellows finishes the stanza with “and ended is all the love” (39) while Hollander is slightly less specific, saying that “then all sweetness turns to sour” (42).

The men continue on in this way until night falls and Grettir sees that the berserkers are “becoming stupefied by the drink” (Fox 41). Realizing that what *Havamal*’s stanza 13 refers to as “the heron of heedlessness” (Hollander 17) has “[stolen] the minds of men” (Bellows 32), Grettir urges them all to bed. Thorir calls for Thorfinn’s wife and she once again reproaches Grettir for condoning rape. This time Grettir takes swift action. He turns to Thorir Paunch and says “Let’s go outside, and I’ll show you Thorfinn’s stores of clothes” (Fox 42). Thorir agrees and the men head out to Thorfinn’s storage building.

This event may be puzzling to the modern reader and deserves a closer look. While it is clear that there are other valuables in the outbuilding, what grabs the attention of the berserkers is not gold or weapons, but clothing. When examining this, and the obscurely written stanza 49 in the *Havamal*, it is vital to understand the importance of linen in the Viking Age, particularly in Iceland. Growing flax and processing it, then spinning the result into threads that would in their turn be woven into linen, all took up a great deal of valuable time and resources. Typically a woman’s task, the production of cloth was a never-ending labor. The Viking Age Icelandic monetary system was based not on the gold standard but rather on a cloth standard – all values were listed in terms of their worth in ells of cloth. Clothing, then, was both necessity and luxury item, with wealthy people alone being able to afford multiple sets of clothes.

Stanza 49 has puzzled scholars and still defies clear explanation. Larrington’s translation reads as follows:

My clothes I gave along the way  
To two wooden men;  
Champions they thought themselves when they had clothing,  
The naked man is ashamed. (21)

The final line, which is translated more or less in the same manner by both Bellows and Hollander, clearly points to the shame of nakedness. Some scholars have used this to extrapolate the modesty of Viking Age men and women. The term “wooden men” causes a great deal of puzzlement. Bellows translates the second line differently:

My garments once in a field I gave  
To a pair of carven poles;

Heroes they seemed when clothes they had,  
But the naked man is nought. (38)

“Carven poles” is intriguing because heathens erected god-posts to honor their gods and goddesses. While very little surviving archeological evidence exists, it seems clear that these were poles or trunks of trees that had been stripped of their branches, carved into the likenesses of various deities, then raised upright and planted into the ground. Bellows’ use of “carven poles,” then, could be an indication of a forgotten heathen practice of “dressing” the god-posts or adorning them with rich cloth and/or jewelry. Hollander’s translation returns us to the phrase “wooden men,” but adds two strange derivations:

In the fields as I fared, (for fun) I hung  
My weeds on two wooden men;  
They were reckoned folks when the rags they wore:  
Naked, a man is naught. (21)

If we take “weeds” to be another word for “clothing,” Hollander’s translation falls into line with the other two. However, he has added the parenthetical “for fun,” which implies a lark rather than a sacred occasion, and says that the wooden men were “reckoned folks” once they were dressed. This has led some to speculate that the wooden men were scarecrows. Regardless, what the stanza definitely points to is not merely the shame involved in being naked, but to the importance of clothing to determine a man’s worth in the world. This harkens directly back to the ell as a standard unit used to measure monetary value, and in turn reveals why Thorir Paunch and his men were so excited by the prospect of Thorfinn’s clothing that they were willing to forego the rape of Thorfinn’s women in order to examine the contents of the storage building.

Once Grettir lures the berserkers into the storage building, events move quickly. He rushes outside and locks the men in. Consumed with greed they pay no real attention at first. This gives Grettir time to run to Thorfinn’s wife and ask about weapons. In a classic move found throughout the saga record and even in heroic literature generally she outfits Grettir in a helmet and a coat of mail, then shows him to the “great spear” belonging to Kar the Old, and to the short sword he has been admiring since he rescued it from the mound-dweller. She adds: “These weapons won’t fail you unless your courage does” (Fox 42), a clear nod at heroic ethics. At the same time she calls her servants and asks them to help Grettir. Four do join Grettir, at least at first, and four elect to stay indoors and avoid the fight. The berserkers break free of the storage area, finally realizing Grettir’s treachery. With an act worthy of any Viking Age hero Grettir throws the spear and impales both Thorir Paunch and Ogmund the Evil at the same time. Both die at once, and Grettir slays the other berserkers one at a time as they run at him.

As for the servants, they “attack the berserks while they were retreating, but when they turned around the servants ran back to the house” (Fox 43). They later brag about their performance, but refuse to return outside to help Grettir. He kills all but two of the berserkers, then returns to the farm wounded and stiff. The wife has left lights burning in windows “as a beacon” (Fox 43) and it is these which guide Grettir back to safety. What happens next is crucial to understanding Grettir’s ethical system. When he came in the door the housewife came to him and welcomed him warmly. “You have won great fame,” she said, “and you have kept me and my household from a great disgrace-if you had not saved us, we would never have found any help” (43-44).

This is the gain Grettir has been seeking all along. In pursuing glory Grettir is acting precisely in line with the Viking Age heroic ideal and the *Havamal* has this to say:

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
The self must also die;  
But glory never dies,  
For the man who is able to achieve it. (Larrington 24)

In other words, by attempting and succeeding in great deeds, Grettir is in a sense assuring his own immortality. Bellows translates the stanza similarly although he lists it as Stanza 77, with the last two lines reading: “One thing I know that never dies,/The fame of a dead man’s deeds” (44). Hollander’s translation reinforces the concept. He translates the final lines as “But fair fame will fade never,/I ween, for him who wins it” (25). Here the *Havamal*’s lesson provides depth to understanding Grettir’s actions. He does need to do something to gain the short sword he found in his fight with the mound-dweller Kar, and a surface reading of Chapter 19 suggests he takes action against Thorir Paunch and his band for selfish reasons. This is most likely true. However, it is also true that he defends the property of a friend, proving his loyalty and acting as the ethical system proposed in the *Havamal* suggests. Further, Grettir acts in accordance with what the *Havamal* itself promotes as correct ethical action – he disassembles, he repays lies with lies, and keeps his wits about him until he can defeat his enemies. In the end, when Thorfinn’s wife is praising him for his success, he says, “I seem to myself much the same man as I was in the evening, when you were heaping abuse on me (Fox 44).” She replies with an admission: “We had not then found out that you were so valiant a man” (Fox 44). She offers him anything in the farm that he could want, and says that her husband will formalize her action when he returns.

Grettir then says, “There is little need to discuss rewards now, but I shall accept your offer until your husband comes back. I think you can sleep in peace, as far as the berserks are concerned” (44). However, Grettir himself does not rest but instead waits at the ready, in case the two remaining berserkers return to the farm. The saga’s author tells us: “Grettir drank little that night, and lay down with his weapons beside him” (44). We have already seen the *Havamal*’s repeated urging toward moderation. Stanza 38 also offers this piece of advice:

From his weapons on the open road  
No man should step one pace away;  
You don’t know for certain when you’re out on the road  
When you might have need of your spear. (Larrington 19)

While Grettir is at this point not in the open road but inside a farm, it is clear that he is once again operating within a practical system of ethics that identify him with the heroic ideals of the Viking Age.

In the morning, Grettir and the servants go looking for the remaining berserkers. They are found dead of their wounds and exposure. In a practice clearly taken not from the *Havamal* but from Christian law codes, the two men are “taken down to the shore and buried under a heap of stones at the tide-mark” (Fox 44). Thorfinn’s wife “puts [Grettir] in the seat of honour and treat[s] him well in every way” (Fox 44) and it is clear that Grettir feels this is how he deserves to be treated. As Chapter 19 closes, he chants a loose verse:

By the breakers there lie buried

Twelve warriors with burning swords;  
 Alone and gladly I worked it all.  
 What act of a man's can now be valued,  
 Noble lady, graceful with gold,  
 If such a work is counted small? [italics removed] (Fox 44)

Ultimately Grettir is doomed to failure. He continues to act in accordance with an ethic that no longer applies to the culture he finds himself in, and as violence piles upon violence he is once again outlawed, and returns to Iceland. There the pattern continues and he is sentenced to full outlawry. Rejected by the larger society Grettir ends up forced to live completely alone or in the company of other outlaws, many of whom seek to assassinate him. He is undone at the last by magic, which is also condemned by the culture that no longer feels such actions are appropriate.

It is my hope that by engaging in this detailed comparative analysis I have shown that Grettir is no simple character. He is violent, to be certain, and acts in ways which the society around him can only condemn. At the same time, Grettir is not without an ethical system. He holds true to a practical way of life where respect must be first earned and then maintained, where actions make a man, and where the seeking of glory through conquest is paramount. Grettir is not interested in his eternal soul, he is interested in being well-remembered. We can only speculate as to the saga author's familiarity with the *Havamal* itself, and it is clear that *Grettir's Saga* is written from a Christian perspective that is intended to paint Grettir as something of a fossil from a bygone era, a type of man no longer considered culturally acceptable. Yet, Grettir shines up from the pages of his saga as a Viking Age hero. His struggle to survive despite trial after trial renders him sympathetic. His actions betray his sense of loyalty, his ability to use his wits and his strength, and he embodies the heroic ideal of his ancestors in Iceland. Seeing Grettir in this light, and as a character that is still being talked about some centuries after his demise, we can argue that in the end, Grettir achieved his goal. He won his fame, and that has rendered him immortal.

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