



The Role of Emotion and Curses in the Revenants of *Eyrbyggja Saga* and *Eiríks Saga Rauða*

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Cross-cultural studies indicate that medieval Icelanders conceptualised mental conditions, such as emotions and madness, as being not always distinguished from corporal conditions.¹ The heart was envisioned as the seat of feeling, making emotions inherently physical and excessive emotion able to cause bodily illness.² This essay focuses on emotional illness as the product of malintent realised through curses. This is approached through the framework of bodily porosity, where the minds of strong-willed people are able to penetrate the minds of others, resulting in illness and emotions.³ I will first consider two narratives within *Eyrbyggja saga*, suggesting that the realisation of curses facilitates disease-like narratives of revenants, infecting those they kill with reanimation. I will then apply this approach to *Eiríks saga rauða*, offering a new reading of the hauntings that further develops their didactic function within a narrative of Christian faith adoption.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Katla curses Thorolf Lam-foot to be *illr* 'ill, evil, bad', which manifests itself as an intense emotional experience culminating in Thorolf's death.⁴ *Illr* is used several times in the following speech given by Katla:

¹ Kirsi Kanerva, 'Disturbances of the Mind and Body', in *Mental (Dis)Order in Later Medieval Europe*, ed. By Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Susanna Niiranen (Brill, 2014) pp. 221-242.

² Kirsi Kanerva, *Porous Bodies, Porous Minds: Emotions and the Supernatural in the Íslendingasögur*, (PhD Thesis, University of Turku, 2015).

³ Kanerva, *Porous Bodies, Porous Minds*.

⁴ Geir Zoëga, '*illr* adj.', in *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, (Clarendon Press, 1910).

‘Katla mælti: "Vera má vist, at hann eigi eigi góða móður, en eigi hlýtr hann af því illt af mér, at ek vilda þat, en þat væri vili minn, at þér hlytið allir illt af mér [...] En þú, Arnkell," segir hon, "mátt eigi af þinni móður illt hljóta, er þú átt enga á lífi, en um þat, vilda ek, at mín ákvæði stæðist, at þú hlytir því verra af feðr þínum en Oddr hefir af mér [...] Vænti ek ok, at þat sé mælt, áðr lýkr, at þú eigir illan föður."’⁵

(“Maybe he doesn’t have a good mother,” said Katla, “but I never wished him to get such an evil end because of me. It’s my will that you all get an evil end because of me, and I expect that will be the case [...] And you Arnkel,” she said, “cannot get an evil end from your own mother because she’s no longer alive, but I want my curse to work on you so that you come off worse because of your father than Odd has because of me [...]. I expect it will be said before long that you have an evil father.”)⁶

The repetition of *illr* demonstrates this as a key element of Katla’s speech. This speech thus functions as a curse, as stated by Katla – ‘I want my curse to work on you’. This is affirmed by its later impact on Thorolf Lam-foot. Through Katla’s curse, the dissemination of *illr* is shown as spreading from her to Thorolf, functioning like a disease.

When Thorolf Lam-foot is re-introduced in the narrative, after Katla’s curse, he is depicted as *gerðist illr ok æfr við ellina ok mjök ójafnaðarfullr*, ‘growing more ill-natured, violent and unjust with the years’ (*SPE*, p. 124). The text recalls the previous curse from Katla, with repeated use of the word *illr* making it evident that his worsening temperament and following demise is tied to this. Ármann Jakobsson states that “old age is a definite starting point for the further deterioration of Thorolf’s character”, however the realisation of Katla’s prophecy demonstrates that this cannot be taken as definitive.⁷ Thorolf’s old age may make him susceptible to malignant forces such as Katla’s curse, as individuals with weaker bodies, and

⁵ All Old Norse quotations for *Eyrbyggja saga* are taken from: ‘Eyrbyggja saga’, *Heimskringla*, 5 January 2022 <https://heimskringla.no/wiki/Eyrbyggja_saga> [Accessed 5 May 2024].

⁶ ‘The Saga of the People of Eyri’, in *Gisli Sursson’s Saga and The Saga of the People of Eyri*, trans. by Judy Quinn (Penguin Books, 2003) pp. 73-199, pp. 105-106, hereafter *SPE*. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the main text.

⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104.3 (2005), pp. 297–325.

therefore weaker minds, can be penetrated by supernatural agents and forces, resulting in illness and emotions.⁸ Despite old age being a possible contributing factor, the impact of Katla's curse clearly indicates the starting point of Thorolf's deterioration as much earlier in the narrative.

Though *illr* is not inherently emotional, the usage of *illr* throughout Thorolf's narrative exemplifies that its use in *Eyrbyggja saga* is loaded with emotional connotations. Both in the usage of *illr* and surrounding descriptions, Thorolf is shown to be constantly experiencing negative emotions. In this re-introduction, Thorolf's worsening temperament is described with *æfr* 'angry'.⁹ Alongside this, several of Thorolf's descriptions focus on his emotional state, including: 'Thorolf was feeling worse' (*SPE*, p. 129) and 'an extremely bad mood' (*SPE*, p. 132). The Sagas are notorious for their lack of emotional displays, making these descriptions additionally potent.¹⁰

There are more depictions of Thorolf's internal state that can be inferred through his actions. Thorolf uses 'violent language' and becomes 'very difficult to deal with' (*SPE*, p. 126), indexing his negative emotional state. Thorolf is noted as not eating on two occasions, the first of which follows Thorolf being described as 'not at all happy' (*SPE*, p. 127). The saga states 'Thorolf said he did not need to eat his [Snorri's] food' (*SPE*, p. 127). The inclusion of Thorolf denying food communicates to the reader that he is not well, inspiring connotations of physical illness intertwined with his emotional state. Medieval medical treatises include loss of appetite as a main symptom of melancholy.¹¹ Although Thorolf's emotionality does not align with melancholy, the refusal of eating communicates a similar state of emotional and internal

⁸ Kanerva, *Porous Bodies, Porous Minds*.

⁹ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, 'æfr adj.', in *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Clarendon Press, 1957).

¹⁰ Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, 'Medieval Emotionality: The *Feeling* Subject in Medieval Literature', *Comparative Literature*, 69.1 (2017), pp. 74–90, doi:[10.1215/00104124-3794619](https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-3794619).

¹¹ Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in Egils Saga' in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. By Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 147-166.

disequilibrium. This is later reinforced when, prior to Thorolf's death, he 'sat down in his high seat and did not eat anything all evening' (*SPE*, p. 133).

In chapter thirty-three, just prior to Thorolf's death, he is described using lexemes *allillu* 'very bad', *illgirmi* 'ill-nature' and *stórilla* 'very badly'.¹² The use of compounds and repetition of *illr* demonstrate the increased intensity of the emotions that have been depicted throughout Thorolf's narrative. The intensity of Thorolf's emotions illustrate that in his subsequent death, they have become fatal. The cardiovascular framework envisions intense emotions as pressure around the heart, with anger well attested within the Old Norse literary corpus as capable of physical consequences such as death, if not soothed or released.¹³ The physicality of emotional experience is made evident. Much like a modern conceptualisation of physical illness, the emotional experience of Thorolf functions as a fatal sickness. The use of *illr* compounds invokes a continuum that begins with Katla's curse and subsequently evidences its effect on Thorolf's emotional state, eventually culminating in his death. One of these occurrences, *illgirmi* 'ill-nature' is spoken by Arnkel to Thorolf where he says 'your maliciousness' (*SPE*, p. 132).¹⁴ Katla's original prediction – 'I expect it will be said before long that you have an *illr* father' is therefore realised by Arnkel himself. With the final use of an *illr* compound, *stórilla*, Thorolf arrives home, sits in the high seat and dies (*SPE*, p. 133). The realisation of Katla's curse becomes as fatal as the emotions she has infected him with.

Much like in Thorolf's life, his ill-nature continues to cause strife for those around him after he dies, when it becomes clear that 'Thorolf was not resting in peace' (*SPE*, p. 133). Thorolf then infects several beings; Thorolf's ghost 'killed some men [...] all those people who died were then seen in Thorolf's company' (*SPE*, p. 134). Thorolf's death functions as disease as his reanimated-self causes those around him to die, subsequently enabling them in

¹² Geir Zoëga, '*allillu* adj.', '*illgirmi* n.' and '*stórilla* adv.', in *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, (Clarendon Press, 1910).

¹³ Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Grotesque Emotions in Old Norse Literature: Swelling Bodies, Spurting Fluids, Tears of Hail', in *Emotional Alterity in the Medieval North Sea World*, ed. by Erin Sebo, Matthew Firth, and Daniel Anlezark, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 17–42.

¹⁴ *Illgirmi* is translated as 'maliciousness'.

reanimating alongside him. This has been referred to as ‘vampirism’, due to its similarity to East-European vampires.¹⁵

A second example of intense negative emotions facilitating the violent, restless dead is present in chapter fifty-three of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Here, a shepherd appears ‘very downcast’ (SPE, p. 172), placing emotions at the forefront of the narrative. The Old Norse *með hljóðleikum miklum* can also be translated as ‘with great sadness’.¹⁶ This is followed with people believing ‘he must have been bewitched’ (SPE, p. 172), reinforcing the conceptualisation of magic causing intense emotions. The emotionality of the shepherd is construed in ‘this went on for some time’ (SPE, p. 172), eventually culminating in him being found dead, demonstrating these emotions as the cause of death.

A clear link between the emotional cause of death and the reanimation of the shepherd is made, as the narrative continues with ‘soon after that serious hauntings began’ (SPE, p. 172). Much like Thorolf, the shepherd is able to infect the living, causing death and reanimation. The shepherd fights Thorir Wood-leg, after which he becomes ‘ill because of this, and died’ (SPE, p. 172). The physical contact resulting in Thorir’s illness resembles disease as although Thorir sustains injury, the use of *sótt* ‘ill’ invokes the idea of sickness that appears separate from his injuries. This illness is inherently intertwined with emotion due to it being caused by the shepherd, after his own emotions become fatal.

The shepherd’s sudden emotionality comes at a time of supernatural upheaval in Froða. In chapter fifty-one, Thorgunna tells Thorodd ‘things will turn out just as I say. [...] little good will come of disregarding what I say’ (SPE, p. 168). Amongst Thorgunna’s demands are ‘I want my bed and bedclothes to be burnt’ (SPE, p. 169). This is not obeyed, with Thorodd’s wife convincing him to let her ‘keep the quilt and the sheets and the whole canopy’ (SPE, p. 169). This begins a chain of supernatural occurrences, starting with Thorgunna’s ghost

¹⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead’, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 110.3 (2011), pp. 281–300, doi:[10.5406/jenglgermphil.110.3.0281](https://doi.org/10.5406/jenglgermphil.110.3.0281).

¹⁶ This is my own translation.

appearing (*SPE*, p. 170). Scott argues that Thorgunna's wish that her bedclothes be burnt forms a curse.¹⁷ Thorgunna's words become true, functioning as Katla's curse did in earlier chapters. Although Thorgunna is a Christian, the effect of this curse mirrors Katla's magical practices. The consequential supernatural occurrences, including the shepherd and his hauntings, are clearly linked to Thorgunna's bed clothes, which are recommended to be burnt by a priest (*SPE*, p. 175). After they are burnt and the revenants are dismissed, Froða is rid of supernatural happenings (*SPE*, p. 176), demonstrating the connection between these occurrences and Thorgunna's curse.

Laxdæla saga depicts an instance of negative emotion facilitating reanimation, however the key difference is that this has no supernatural origin. In this narrative, Hrapp is depicted negatively with descriptions such as 'aggressive' and 'difficult' paralleling the descriptions of Thorolf.¹⁸ Descriptions like these infer feelings through the tangible. In death, Hrapp returns as a violent revenant where he is depicted as 'as difficult to deal with as he was when he lived, it got to be much worse now that he was dead' (*LS*, p. 191). Though Hrapp and Thorolf's characters demonstrate similarities in emotionality, Hrapp's reanimated form is not able to 'infect' the people he kills with reanimation. This suggests that the curse origin of negative emotions may be what facilitates disease-like narratives of the undead in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Though strong emotion can facilitate reanimation, the emotional sickness caused by cursing may facilitate further infection to those around the reanimated dead.

Considering the depictions of emotions, hauntings and curses in *Eyrbyggja saga*, a more detailed picture of the hauntings in *Eiríks saga rauða* can be inferred. *Eiríks saga rauða* contains a similar depiction of hauntings spreading like disease. There is a demonstration of intertextuality between the sagas, where *Eiríks saga rauða* references 'the hauntings at

¹⁷ Forrest S. Scott, 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of Eyrbyggja Saga', in *The Cold Counsel*, ed. by Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson, (Routledge, 2001), pp. 241-260.

¹⁸ 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal', in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. by Keneva Kunz, ed. by Jane Smiley (Penguin, 2005), pp. 178-255, p. 191, hereafter *LS*. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the main text.

Froða'.¹⁹ The awareness of such may indicate that the following narrative is to be understood alongside the hauntings of *Eyrbyggja saga* and particularly those following Thorgunna's curse. Considering the role of curses in the infectious reanimation of *Eyrbyggja Saga*, the occurrence of infectious reanimation in *Eiríks saga rauða* could be interpreted as having an implied magical or curse origin.

The hauntings of *Eiríks saga rauða* begin with the introduction of a man named Gardi, who is the first of several people to die. This is introduced as 'sickness struck the farm shortly after the beginning of winter'.²⁰ 'Sickness' is translated from *sótt*, which is specified as the cause of death for Thorir after being infected by the shepherd. Gardi is described as *ekki vinsæll*, literally 'not much liked'.²¹ The unpopularity of Gardi being specified suggests that this is an important detail to the narrative and sickness, as his introduction is post-death. Gardi being not much liked could suggest behaviour similar to Thorolf and Hrapp, with *Laxdæla saga* stating that 'most people cared little for Hrapp' (LS, p. 185). After Gardi dies, 'it was not long until the inhabitants caught the sickness, one after the other and died' (ERS, p. 36). This is similar to the hauntings caused by the shepherd, where the people of Froða become ill one after the other. Though it is not stated during the period of sickness and hauntings, it is acknowledged after that 'he has caused all the hauntings' (ERS, p. 38). Therefore, when Sigrid observes 'those who are dead are standing there before the door' (ERS, p. 37), it is evident that Gardi has been facilitated in both reanimation and the infection of others. The sickness, originating from Gardi, produces the same symptom after death as Thorolf's ghost and the shepherd, both of whom were caused to experience fatal emotions caused by curses.

The hauntings of *Eiríks saga rauða* are implemented didactically, presenting this as a reason for the importance of Christian conversion. Themes of such are also present in *Eyrbyggja saga*, particularly in the hauntings of Froða which are resolved by a priest. As

¹⁹ All Old Norse quotations for *Eiríks saga rauða* are taken from: 'Eiríks saga rauða', *Heimskringla*, 24 May 2020 <https://heimskringla.no/wiki/Eir%C3%ADks_saga_rau%C3%B0a> [Accessed 5 May 2024].

²⁰ 'Erik the Red's Saga', in *The Vinland Sagas*, trans. by Keneva Kunz (Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 23-50, p. 36, hereafter ERS. Subsequent references are given in parenthesis in the main text.

²¹ This is my own translation.

Musharbash notes, monsters, including revenants, are “always bound to specific socio-cultural contexts, and within them, signify the issue that most matters to the people they haunt”.²² As these sagas are composed after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity, they primarily reflect how the contemporary, Christian writers viewed the experiences and lives of their ancestors. The involvement of magic and cursing, culturally pre-Christian, being intertwined with both the suffering of individuals in life and in death works to present the damage of pagan belief as transcendent. The illustration of this damage being transcendent of life portrays a cultural fear of suffering after death, with the proposed reason being not adhering to the Christian belief. When Thorstein tells Gudrid ‘those men rejoiced who kept their faith well and it brought mercy and salvation. Yet he said many kept their faith poorly’ (*ERS*, p. 38), he clearly connects Gardi’s hauntings to the absence of Christian belief. Gardi’s hauntings, alongside those in *Eyrbyggja saga*, could be intended to demonstrate the suffering of those who do not keep their faith, envisioned through a narrative that employs culturally pagan ideas and practices as a sickness that continues after death. The infection of the living can be viewed metaphorically as commentary on the dangers of an individual in a community defying Christian faith. Those in defiance are able to influence those around them to practise faith poorly and subsequently starve them of mercy and salvation. The experiences of those infected remains grounded in the living, with their lack of faith envisioned as sickness. This then facilitates the resolution being presented as Christian faith.

Both haunting narratives in *Eyrbyggja saga* demonstrate a complicated ideology in which magic, emotion, health and reanimation merge. Katla and Thorgunna are shown as capable of inducing intense emotional experiences through curses. The ability to haunt and infect the living suggests a conceptualisation of curses that both facilitates physical power after death and prevents the deceased individuals from resting. The adoption of Christian faith as a theme throughout these sagas allows for interpretations of these narratives as criticisms

²² Yasmine Musharbash, ‘Introduction: Monsters, Anthropology, and Monster Studies’, In *Monster Anthropology in Australasia and Beyond*, ed. Yasmine Musharbash and Geir Henning Presterudstuen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 1-24, p. 12.

of pagan practices, demonstrative of a cultural anxiety in which these beliefs could have individual and social consequences.

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