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Cover Page Footnote

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Gísli's Súrsson's Saga: A Conversion Case Study

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Abstract

This paper examines an Icelandic Saga, *Gísli Súrsson's Saga*, with the aid of key readings in liminal space theory, medieval Christian philosophy, and *The King's Two Bodies* by Ernst Kantorowicz. Building on prior scholarship by William I. Miller and other scholars of medieval outlawry, the paper will focus on Gísli's symbolic status as a break from Iceland's pagan background due to his liminal state, outlawry, apparent belief systems and values, and suggested relation to medieval Christian philosophy. Gísli is an outlier, but he is also a precursor to Iceland's eventual conversion to Christianity because of his negotiation of boundaries, turn from paganism, and acceptance of his fate. Through Gísli, I argue the presence of a hyperreality or axis mundi, a spiritual bridge, within the presentation of Iceland's conversion to Christianity. This argument is relevant to current issues regarding colliding ethnic backgrounds and the liminal space between people and ideas and furthers the study of Iceland's sagas as examples of historical immigration narratives and texts of spiritual significance.

Keywords: Icelandic Sagas, Outlaws, Christianity, Conversion, Liminal Space

1. Introduction

In a set of scenes in *Gísli Súrsson's Saga*, Gísli, outlawed and far from home, awakes from prophetic nightmares beside his loyal wife, Aud. He is no stranger to visions and

premonitions, but these dreams are different and so, filled with dread, he explains to his wife what he's seen. Visited by two dream women, one good and one bad, Gísli was bathed in blood, shown an unfamiliar afterlife, and told that he has seven years left to live, that he must abandon his old faith and his old ways, and that "He who rules all has sent [him] / alone from [his] house / to explore the other world" (Ólason 60). In a saga featuring a character whose outlawry forces him to do away with all wealth and property, *Gísli Súrsson's Saga*, up until this point, has already had a number of moments that show just how far removed the main character, Gísli, is from his home and all that he's ever known. This is typical for an outlaw narrative, and even more so for the outlaws featured within the canon of *Íslendingasögur*, or the Sagas of Icelanders, as Icelandic outlaws often lose their birth-right and must come to terms with a different kind of reality in order to survive. However, *Gísli Súrsson's Saga* is an outlier as Gísli's outlawry and the incidents that lead to it don't solely rest in outlaw acts. Presented primarily as a man of reaction, Gísli faces an outlawry defined by spiritual and ritualistic acts that are described with negatively toned prose and word choice towards the aforementioned "old faith," or rather, Norse heathenism, on the part of the saga author. This negative framing suggests a space for study as *Gísli Súrsson's Saga* takes place several decades before the Icelandic conversion to Christianity. He is, in a sense, connected to a higher power—Christianity—that he wouldn't have been otherwise. In an effort to explore this connection, comparing Gísli to the medieval conception of kings as bridges between the spiritual and the non-spiritual, specifically through the lens of the Christian kings as defined in Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory*, allows Gísli to be linked to another trope in Icelandic sagas—that of the hidden monarch or the visit to a neighboring king. Much like the outlaw, monarchs dwell on the outskirts of the sagas but their inclusion is notable as this motif implies a search for

grounding and an attempt to equalize the Icelanders of old with their historical contemporaries in Norway in retaliation to the ongoing encroachment of Norway onto the Icelandic national identity. Therefore, in drawing on these ideas as well as prior scholarship and connections to the Christian Bible, this paper shows how Gísli's outlaw status allows him to break from Iceland's pagan background through the liminal state of outlawry and his relation to Christian philosophy.

2. Historical Background

Before analyzing Gísli's saga, it is necessary to make clear the context in which it was written as well as the context of the conversion and the view of sovereigns at the time. Required of Icelanders by the king of Norway, Ólafur Tryggvason, in 1000 C.E., the conversion to Christianity, while presented as a choice and some did convert willingly, wasn't by choice for every Icelander. A number of sagas deal with this issue, but *Íslendingabók, Kristnisaga: The Book of Icelanders, the Story of the Conversion* is what's considered the most useful historical account. Within it the Icelanders' acceptance to convert as a country is explained— it's based on the wish to not tear the country apart.¹ Once the Icelanders converted, open pagan practice would result in being charged with lesser outlawry and so many of the heathen traditions were only immortalized in the saga literature that would come at least two centuries later, which, despite holding different beliefs, are notoriously fair in the narratives they present. All of this said; the conversion and the role it plays in the sagas presents an example of the fraught relationship between Iceland and Norway, but more specifically, Icelanders and Norway's kings. Many of the sagas begin by recounting the reign of Harald Fair-Hair (r. 870–930), who was the first of the Norwegian kings to have all of Norway under his control. This goal of unification resulted in

¹ At the Althing, a general assembly where laws and disputes were discussed, in 999, a law-speaker and Godi (essentially a chieftain) chosen by the people to make the decision, Thorgeir Thorkelsson, proposed ““Let us all have the same law and the same religion. It will prove true that if we tear apart the law, we will also tear apart the peace”” (Grønlie 9).

many of the petty kings, wealthy landholders, and others at the time leaving Norway to instead found Iceland, as, if they'd stayed, they'd have to swear fealty to Harald Fair-Hair. So, a splitting of this kind is what Icelanders were trying to avoid with the conversion, as, due to the natural landscape— Iceland's volcanic activity and sparse forests, among other things— Icelanders had to convert as they heavily relied upon the resources that Norway provided. It is then interesting that in sagas like *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *Egil's Saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* and many others, kings continually show up. Sometimes it's as antagonists, but often kings and other monarchs lend weight and prestige to the actions of saga characters². However, none of this is the case for *Gísli's saga*. Like most of the Icelandic family sagas, *Gísli's saga* was written by literate Christian authors in the mid-13th century, but the events of this particular saga all transpire before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 1000 C.E. This is unusual as most sagas engage directly with the conversion, often showing a before and after of the events and how it affects the characters. Therefore, the saga and the events of the conversion do not overlap. But that's not to say that the author wasn't keeping the conversion in mind as, as I'll describe, the Christian influences are still present, and truly, even though the beginning of the saga doesn't harken back to Harald Fair-Hair, it sets up a more mythic family history.

² For instance, in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, one of the characters, Kjartan, has a swimming competition with someone he assumes to be a local man. Both impressed by the other's skill, the two exit the water, with the local man asking Kjartan if he knew who he was and Kjartan replies that he doesn't care. The local man said in turn, "You're not only highly capable, but highly confident of yourself as well; but I intend to tell you my name, all the same, and who it is you have been swimming against. You have before you King Olaf Tryggvason" (Smiley 348). This is the same king that brought about the Icelandic conversion to Christianity, and in the saga, he gives Kjartan a fine cloak and later a battle of wits between them takes place in regards to the conversion and it's noted that not only was Kjartan the king's favorite, but "never had a man come from Iceland who could compare with Kjartan" (Smiley 352).

3. The Narrative: Family Context

Like all Icelandic family sagas, *Gísli Súrsson's Saga* begins with a chronicle of family ancestry. Telling where the family is from, the first chapters of the saga details a feud between Gísli's uncles, Ari and Gísli Thorkelsson, against a berserker³. Due to their strength and their supernatural status, defeating a berserker necessitates feats of heroism and often equally supernatural tools. This fight against a berserker sets the tone for the saga as in retaliation to the death of his brother, Ari, Gísli Thorkelsson takes an unbeatable sword, Grasiða, from his deceased brother's wife's slave, Kol, to use against the berserker. It is notable that the sword was not also offered to Ari, as Ari's wife states that "[she] did not marry Ari because [she] preferred him to [Gísli]" (Ólason 3-4). Kol lends the sword unwillingly and Gísli Thorkelsson succeeds in killing the berserker, marrying Ari's wife and taking all of his possessions in the process. When Kol demands the return of Grasiða, Gísli Thorkelsson refuses, and the two fight to the death. Grasiða shatters as a result of the battle. The property of Ari and Gísli Thorkelsson is then transferred to Thorbjorn Thorkelsson, Gísli Surrson's father. This taking of the sword and of Ari's wife and property introduces two main ideas that continue throughout the saga. The first is the implication that fighting supernatural forces with supernatural tactics (or consorting with them at all) ends in death or ruin for those involved, while the second implies the ongoing issue of the unjust trading of possessions between kin. Both of these features recur in the rest of the saga and connect to larger Christian themes, especially when put in conversation with the effects of these actions.

The latter theme reappears immediately with the introduction of the Súrsson siblings, the children of Thorbjorn Thorkelsson. Thordis, Thorkel, Gísli, and the little mentioned Ari, are the

³ The berserker, a warrior that has "worked himself into an animal-like frenzy, which hugely increased his strength and made him apparently immune to the effect of blows from weapons" (Smiley 741) is a common stock character in Icelandic sagas.

next generation of the family and tensions are fraught between them. Gísli is the second son, but he's favored by their father Thorbjorn and so before the main conflict begins, Gísli and Thorkel, the eldest son, are already at odds. This is exacerbated when Gísli kills Thorkel's friend in order to defend Thordis's honor, and Gísli jeers to Thorkel, "We'll swap swords [...] then you'll have the one with the better bite" (Ólason 5), once again alluding to the earlier trading of swords between brothers. But unlike his namesake, Gísli is otherwise presented as a fair, upstanding citizen. He runs his farm well, he's a fair master and a good foster father, he participates in society, he is close with his wife and often attempts to act as both protector and peacemaker. Unfortunately, Gísli's outlawry is arguably caused by his positive character traits— especially his loyalty and role as negotiator and guard. This loyalty is why he kills Thorkel's friend in the first place, out of loyalty to his sister and father, although not to his brother. At his core, he deeply values the protection and well-being of his family. Due to this and his loyalty, when Gísli hears a report from Gest Oddleifson— a prophetic and wise man who appears in other sagas like *Njal's Saga* and *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* and has Odinic echoes due to his gift of foresight and the likeness he has to the god— that his family will be led to ruin, he seeks to stop it from happening. He plans to do this by creating a blood brotherhood between him, Thorkel, Vestein (his wife's brother), and Thorgrim (his sister's husband). And so, in retaliation to Gest's advice Gísli vows, "We four will make our bond of friendship even stronger than before by pledging our sworn brotherhood" (Ólason 11). This attempt at establishing and maintaining honor is interwoven with Gísli's first and one of his only forays into ritual on his terms. It's also the only time he tries to barter with fate or use Pagan beliefs to his advantage and involves the sharing of blood, an arch of turf, and a long-damascened blade. All of these elements are important as the blood alludes to kin and sacrifice, the turf is a nod to the Icelandic homestead, and the blade

foreshadows the fate of Grasiða and nods to the structure of the saga in general⁴. This ritual is the start of Gísli's spiritual connection to a higher religious order and shows Gísli turning to a higher power and his society's heathen beliefs to help him as "[they] all fell to their knees and swore an oath that each would avenge the other as if they were brothers, and they called on all the gods as their witnesses" (Ólason 11). But the ritual fails as Thorgrim refuses to bind to Vestein. When put in conjecture with the rest of the saga, it begins to appear that it doesn't work because it simply can't. It's a pagan ritual and Gísli's saga is full of Christian themes, and while the author isn't openly hostile to pagan practice, pagan practices, as noted later, never work as intended.

After the ritual, factions start to form, but the negative tone surrounding pagan practices never abates and the ties between the brothers and brothers-in-law become further strained as a conversation overheard between wives leads to jealousy on Thorkel's part. In retaliation for his wife's one-time fondness for Vestein, Thorkel demands his share of the family heritage, even though Gísli has done all of the work on their homestead, and he goes to live with Thordis and Thorgrim at a farm nearby, taking with him the broken shards of Grasiða. Once again, the question of who rightfully owns what possessions is brought into the foreground, and it's brought forward again as Vestein attempts to give Thorgrim and Thorkel tapestries for a feast but Thorgrim and Thorkel refuse, all while Gísli looks on trying to appease all sides. The pattern of violence, revenge, and the supernatural continues on as well, as yet another Thorgrim is introduced in the form of a sorcerer, Thorgrim Nef. Thorkel and Thorgrim turn to Thorgrim Nef in an effort to have Grasiða transformed into a spear even though Thorgrim Nef is framed as "the worst kind of sorcerer imaginable" by the narrator. This is as Thorgrim Nef "was versed in all

⁴ A damascened blade is one forged by hammering a pattern and then reforging over and over again, and this becomes relevant to the structure of feud in the saga. It's never as simple as an argument ending, as it ends when everyone dies, and the complex pattern is all that remains.

manner of spells and magic” (Ólason 18), making it possible for him to recast the sword as a spear—supposedly with it still being unbeatable—and later, his knowledge and status as a sorcerer allows him to put a curse on Gísli that’s described as Thorgrim Nef “practic[ing] his obscene and black art in devilish perversity” (Ólason 30), making it so Gísli can have help from no one, or so it seems.

4. The Narrative: Dreams and Prophecy

Meanwhile, Gísli begins to have prophetic nightmares about Vestein dying. In them, he sees “that a viper wriggled out from a certain farm and stung Vestein to death, and, on the second night [...] a wolf ran out from under the same farm and bit Vestein to death” (Ólason 23). When contextualized by significant Icelandic texts like the *Saga of the Volsungs*, “The Sayings of the High One”, and *The Prose Edda*, these dreams become something more complex as wolves and vipers are portrayed as untrustworthy and associated with a long history of danger and magic. Looking at the *Saga of the Volsungs*, instances with both appear, both with an overly strong she-wolf that was once a sorceress herself that kills the uncles of the hero of the piece, Sigurd, and the crafty dragon, Fafnir. Further, in “Hávamál”, wolves and snakes are referenced as well, as the text warns never to trust “a yawning wolf” or “a serpent coiled.” Both are mentioned in the Eddas as well, with Loki’s children Fenrir, Loki’s wolf son, and the Midgard serpent. Magic seems to always be involved too, as Fenrir, Fafnir, and the Midgard serpent are all of supernatural strength and origins and in “Hávamál,” the reader is told to beware of “witch’s flattery” and to listen close, “lest the wights [supernatural beings] bewitch thee with spells” (*Hávamál*, 128.4-5). Assuming the author of Gísli’s Saga was aware of these cultural connotations, and that Gísli was made aware of the same, that means that his nightmares are

more daunting than they seem at first glance. They're not just warnings of those from neighboring farms, but of betrayal and magic relating to it.

Further, as William I. Miller notes in "Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland", "Telling a dream is not a neutral act, especially in the world of the sagas. Dreams often held a key to the future, or at least many people thought they did. The belief in the predictive power of dreams is a social fact that can be manipulated by social beings" (Miller 105), and so it's important that Gísli doesn't tell anyone his dreams until after the semi-predicted events come to pass. Also, given this context, it's telling that Gísli's dread manifests in these forms, as sure enough, Vestein is killed in the middle of the night by Thorgrim with the magic spear. As Miller points out, "Vésteinn has been killed secretly, not quite a murder says the saga, but a *launvig*, a concealed killing" (Miller 103), making it not as simple as just calling out the killer. Yet, Thorgrim's guilt is heavily implied by his comments at Vestein's funeral as Thorgrim ties the customary *Hel*-shoes, or "special shoes tied to the feet of a dead man" (Ólason 202), saying, "if these come loose then I don't know how to bind *Hel*-Shoes" (Ólason 23), and his later jeers at the local games where he states in verse, "Spear screeched in his wound / sorely- I cannot be sorry" (Ólason 25). Further, an honorable death was highly valued and so an unjust one (i.e. murder) could only be rectified by a monetary compensation, outlawry of the killer, or the death of the killer at the hands of the family of the one slain. By killing in the dead of night, unseen, Thorgrim makes none of these options possible as it protects him from blame and so also from open action⁵. So, as there are no witnesses to Vestein's death, even with Thorgrim's words, and due to the bad blood between the men already and the nature of

⁵ As William Miller explains, "Before blaming can take place, a wrong must be perceived; or, if someone wishes to blame without cause, in order, say, to provide a basis for future trouble, in other words, to pick a fight, he will still need to convince others that a wrong occurred, even though the wrong may be purely imagined or contrived" (Miller 102).

the killing, Gísli doesn't pursue the issue legally. In a sense, Gísli has to retaliate by killing Thorgrim in return in the exact same way, even if it's morally wrong in the world of the sagas, as due to being Vestein's brother-in-law and being the one to pull the spear from Vestein's wound, he has to take revenge. But, because Thorgrim is also his brother-in-law, Gísli must also murder in the dead of night, sneaking in so as not to get caught even if it's against his own beliefs.

Continuing, Gísli's prophetic dreams regarding Vestein and Thorgrim adds to the confrontation of pagan elements that's dealt with throughout the saga. This is especially true in the case of the two Thorgrims. One is a sorcerer while the other is so valued by Frey, the god he sacrifices to, that his burial mound doesn't frost over. By both Thorgrims being associated with heathenism and having a hand in the murder that Gísli cannot react to honorably, the Thorgrims are problematic. While on some level, it seems to be the fate of anyone named Thorgrim to be untrustworthy, given that their names mean to be masked, in the Penguin Classic edition of the saga with notes by Vestein Ólason, it's noted that Grim is another name for Odin. So two pagan Gods are being invoked by the name Thorgrim, both in the context of an antagonistic relationship with Gísli. But this is just one instance where Odin appears in the saga⁶. Gest also brings along an accomplice in the form of his mother, as she often gives sanctuary to outlaws and Gísli finds himself seeking aid from her later on. This allows for the inciting conflict of the saga— that of the feud between the four men— to be surrounded by repeating references to pagan gods, but Gísli himself doesn't take note of them in the same ways his brother-in-law Thorgrim did. Before his eventual outlawry, Gísli doesn't give the largest feasts, thinks nothing of lending a tapestry, and befriends the son of Thorgrim Nef's sister, also a sorcerer. It's stated plainly as the

⁶ He comes forward first in Gest Oddleifson, as mentioned earlier, as Gest is another name for Odin although he also functions as a saintly figure that foretells the future and the coming of Christianity in sagas like *Njal's Saga* and *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*.

saga notes, "Gísli no longer sacrificed after he left Viborg [in Denmark], but he still held feasts and showed the same magnanimity as before" (Ólason 17). As far as pagan practice goes, he's fair with those connected to it, but he doesn't interact with it.

5. Outlawry and Christianity

At least, he doesn't until he becomes an outlaw legally and has recurring dreams of "good" and "bad" dream women. With the former presented as fair and kind, and the latter as dark and cruel, it's no wonder as to the reasoning behind their names, but there is more to their presence than simply their appearance as here is where the themes of Christianity start to appear most plainly. In the following passage, the "good" dream-woman tells Gísli his future as well as what he must do.

There were seven fires, some of them almost burned out and some burning very bright.

Then my good dream-woman came in and said that this signified how many years I had left to live, and she advised me to stop following the old faith for the rest of my life, and to refrain from studying any ancient charms or lore. And she told me to be kind to the deaf and the lame and the poor and the helpless. (Ólason 40)

This passage implies that in the last years of his life, he should do away with heathenism and to be kind to those that may have seemed less than him before. It also can be gathered that if he doesn't do this, his life will be worse. All of this amounts to a very Christian sentiment and evokes the Bible as these are also common messages in a number of Biblical passages. For the majority of the excerpt from the saga, it brings to mind the book of Peter 3.8-3.12.

And in fine, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, being lovers of the brotherhood, merciful, modest, humble: / Not rendering evil for evil, nor railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing: for unto this are you called, that you may inherit a

blessing. / For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile. / [...]" (Vulgate, 1 Peter 3:8-11).

And this is also referenced in Leviticus 19.14-19.17.

Thou shalt not speak evil of the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind: but thou shalt fear the Lord thy God, because I am the Lord / Thou shalt not do that which is unjust, nor judge unjustly. Respect not the person of the poor: nor honour the countenance of the mighty. But judge thy neighbour according to justice. / Thou shalt not be a detractor nor a whisperer among the people. Thou shalt not stand against the blood of thy neighbour. I am the Lord. / Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: But reprove him openly, lest thou incur sin through him. (Lev. 19.14-19.17)

The parallels presented here and in the passage from Peter are the message of being fair and kind to those impoverished, and also, when the good dream woman's words and the events of the saga are viewed through the lens of these passages, more comes to light as well. For instance, "judging thy neighbor according to justice" or not being a "whisperer among the people." Much of the saga conflict happens because of injustices between neighbors and words overheard. And so, through the good dream woman's warning, it appears that this sentiment is mirrored, especially in having compassion for one another and letting "him refrain his tongue from evil," which parallels exactly the "refrain from studying charms" (Ólason 40), given that in some translations, "evil" is understood as sorcery. In the saga, the reader sees what happens to the characters that don't refrain from speaking evil or studying charms and given that the brothers are neighbors, it's no great wonder that their insistence on feud ends in death. The bad dream woman is also mirrored in the biblical passages above, given "He who rules all has sent you / alone from your house / to explore the other world" is similar to "for unto this you are called,"

providing Gísli with a holy purpose that he wouldn't have had otherwise. This adds to the conflict between the Christian ideals and the pagan beliefs being shown here as once again, Gísli, an arguably heathen character up until this point is being faced with obvious Christian themes and purposes in a pre-conversion world. His saga has become a stage for the conflict between the two belief systems, but this isn't a surprise.

One could argue that Gísli presents the perfect battleground for tension between Christianity and paganism because of his status as an outlaw, but also the kind of outlaw that he is. In the introduction to *Medieval Outlaws: Twelve Tales in Modern English Translation* Thomas H. Ohlgren describes the "good outlaw" archetype. These characters:

Pose the paradoxical problem of being outlaws, having committed real crimes, but they are admired and supported by the people. Their outlawry does not bring shame upon them, but instead proves them to be superior to their opponents, both in martial prowess and, most important, in moral integrity [...] [as] God honoured them more than others, even working a miracle for them, or by describing how the outlaws' victory over their outnumbering enemies was part of a mission they were destined to fulfill. (Ohlgren xxxviii)

This is the case for Gísli as, although he did kill more than once, his life shows moral integrity and his death shows martial prowess, as even though he's faced by fifteen men, the saga makes clear that "he never once retreated, and as far as anyone could see his last blow was no weaker than his first" (Ólason 68). It's also said that the men he wounded that recovered "gained nothing but dishonour" (Ólason 68). But beyond this, Gísli is an outlaw that stands out even from

Icelandic ones⁷. He builds a home with his wife, Aud, and he has a very strong bond with Aud and his foster-daughter. Yes, he leaves home technically, as he leaves the farm he inherited, but even though Thorgrim Nef's curse makes it so no one can help him unless they're either Gest's mother or an island-dweller, Gísli remains close with his wife as much as he can. Gísli is also more of a reaction-based outlaw as he responds to aggression and acts against him only if he's provoked. While he does go after his sister's suitors at the beginning of the saga, for the most part, he only acts out in violence if someone acts that way to him. He doesn't kill Thorgrim without a reason, he doesn't fight back against Eyjolf and his men without them attacking first. He only commits outlaw acts in the dead of night or while donning someone else's clothes, never as himself in broad daylight. And so, as a good outlaw, he never gives up the moral high ground, but unlike the typical good outlaw, his outlawry is less due to an actual legal issue and more focused on his relationship with liminal space.

In a sense, Gísli is an outlaw because of this relationship. He is constantly between things. He hides under houses, in forests, and on islands and he dwells in dream and prophecy. His life, when he becomes an outlaw, becomes so liminal that he can't even live on the mainland because of Thorgrim Nef's curse, his status as an outlaw, and Eyjolf's hunting of him. This dwelling in liminal space, specifically in regard to the dream women, makes his saga the perfect place for a clashing of beliefs, as with his character, the outlying themes of Christianity can be brought in that wouldn't have worked otherwise. Further, in harkening back to the motif of the kings present in the sagas, it becomes abundantly clear that Gísli functions like a bridge between his narrative and Christianity. Because of this Gísli is more similar to a typical medieval king or

⁷ Normally, most outlaws in Icelandic sagas are required to leave home— This is why it's an issue in *Njal's Saga* when Gunnar doesn't, and in one of the other outlaw sagas, *Grettir Asmundarson's Saga*, Grettir arguably never has a home. But Gísli is a different sort.

maybe even a priest than the run of the mill Icelandic outlaw. This is not to say that other Icelandic outlaws do not share a connection with something beyond their usual realm, but rather to say that in Gísli, it's Christianity specifically that's linked. This is most easily seen in Gísli's dualism— his way of living both in religious dreamscape and the stark landscape of the outlaw. To expand further, the medieval king is a dual person composed of both the physical man in time and the metaphysical construct due to his connection to and ordinance by God. As is referenced in *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory* by Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, the king is recognized as “a twin person, one descended from nature, the other from grace. [...] Concerning one personality, he was, by nature, an individual man; concerning his other personality, he was, by grace, a *Christus*, that is, a God-man” (Kantorowicz 46). And indeed, he has to be more than what he is. This is similar to the traditional idea of the pontifex, or priest, of which the etymology is “bridge” and “make,” as, in order to hold a position of power, someone in the pre-modern world must act as a bridge between the physical and the metaphysical or spiritual. As Armann Jakobsson explains in “The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in *Morkinskinna*”, “The king was thus at once human and super-human. He was not merely any person but a king and consequently combined in him the image of God and Christ, the king of heaven. Thus, every king was assessed both as an individual and in relation to an ideal” (Jakobsson 5). Applying this to the saga, Gísli embodies this concept due to his moral tendencies— his relationship to the ideal— as these make him more than human, especially when put into the context of them existing on a dream-plane. His outlawry, being liminal in his dream-state, is metaphysical more so than actual. Also, as he has been sent out purposefully by a higher power (as noted by the bad dream woman) but continuously returns to the household of another higher power, both in the form of the hall of the good dream woman and the home of Gest's

mother (who is established as his kinsman, after his death), while still existing and living with his wife, he is a go-between. And, when one considers his role in conflict as the peace-maker and the protector between and of his family, this role becomes clearer. Also, ideologically, the fact that he is kind to the poor, to the point of urging his friend to free his slaves, he doesn't partake in sorcery, he's fair to others, and sacrifices himself in the end for the sake of his plight makes him as close to an "impersonator" of Christ as there can be in an Icelandic saga before the conversion.

Therefore, in finding root in Gísli, Christianity is presented as liminal but also sovereign, not in that he's a king, but because his ideology is presented as higher but more accessible through him. It too, becomes the outlaw, the one subjected to the choices and whims of stronger, more powerful pagan characters, while maintaining the moral high ground by being connected to the character in the right. And really, in the context of other outlaw works, this is common. You see it in Robin Hood with his connection to the Virgin Mary, and in others as well. However, in Iceland in the 13th century, Christianity is not the underdog. At the time these sagas were being written, Iceland was soon to become fully under the rule of Norway. In a time when resources were scarce, saga writers were reimagining and bringing life to their country's history—reminding the people of their noble and heroic past, and grounding it more in the nobility of their present. So this becomes a kind of revisionist history. It brings Christianity, the more powerful religion, to Iceland earlier and lends itself to the kind of themes present in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* when kings and secret princesses are introduced to lend the saga more prestige. Gísli's Saga, then, like *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, raises itself up through linking the saga to forces beyond Iceland. Iceland, therefore, was always great and will remain so because it didn't need Norway to make it formidable or spiritually aware. Given the

circumstances of Gísli's existence, his navigations of liminal space, the way he acts as a bridge between Christianity and the mortal plane while still being so very Icelandic and not having been converted, this allows Icelanders to be seen as similar to the kings they happened to meet— both in significance and liminality. In being presented thusly, the saga and Gísli's character highlights the background of the Icelandic outlaw and how they function as something much closer to a bridge between past and present, providing an avenue for understanding, rather than a character archetype.

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