



“Socially Unfit or Unfit Society?: Identifying Monstrosity in Medieval Scandinavian Literature”

by Ryan Kamkar

The term “monster” defines an individual who has an unusual or unacceptable behavior or appearance.<sup>1</sup> With this definition, the word is used by society as a label to alienate those who do not fit into its criteria of normalcy. As such, it seems natural for monsters to strive to dismantle the oppressive society and establish a new social order—one in which they would no longer be defined as monsters. This brings into question what a monster truly is within the context of society, and under what circumstances one may be able to escape from such discrimination. Upon dissecting the role of monsters in medieval works including a cursed werewolf in *Bisclaretz Ljoð*, a family of rebellious trolls in *Ála Flekks Saga* and a domesticated beast in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, we may then gain insight into the foundation of contemporary Western society’s battle against monstrosity.

In order to contemplate the tenets of social monstrosity, we must seek to elicit the underlying mechanisms of human judgment that lead to the regular discrimination of monsters. With its implicit repulsiveness and inferiority,

monstrosity has been regarded as taboo throughout history. Labels that suggested monstrosity, such as “troll” and “witch,” were often equivalent to contemporary derogatory slurs as ways to insult an individual and undermine their social merit.<sup>2</sup> The status of a monster was fundamentally low and often indicative of someone who offered little to no value to society. Such devaluation resulted in the dismissal of this class as unfit for society, along with social rejection to the extent of avoidance and even fear. Indeed, labelling an individual as a monster would successfully warrant their expulsion from society.

Given the profound capacity of medieval society to discriminate against an individual through the criminalization of monstrosity, some underlying motives of this prejudice should be investigated. As independent, unrestrained creatures, monsters are recognized as anti-Christian symbols of evil and sin, and thus serve as a foil to the righteousness of religion and civilization.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, members of society fixate on this nonconformity and ostracize these individuals in order to bolster their own self-image of rectitude. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> “Merriam Webster Online.”

<sup>2</sup> Lindow, “Medieval Trolls,” 39.

<sup>3</sup> Classen, “The Monster Outside and within: Medieval Literary Reflections on Ethical Epistemology.

From *Beowulf* to *Marie de France*, the *Nibelunglied*, and *Thüring von Ringoltinger’s Melusine*,” 525.

humans detach themselves from monsters by categorizing these beings with a sense of “otherness.”<sup>4</sup> People exclude monsters in order to develop a closer connection to their own community and gain a sense of self-identity, as they define morality and civilization to be against the nature of the monsters. By regarding monstrosity as an evil entity to be antagonized, humans create a common enemy which allows themselves to form closer relationships with others who also adhere to their own standards of normalcy, thus establishing a more cohesive society.

Monsters are, by definition, those who are excluded. Therefore, they attempt to uproot the current social structure in order to gain more inclusion and acceptance, as shown in various medieval Scandinavian works. Most notably, in *Ála Flekks Saga*, Blue-tooth is a troll who segregates prince Ali, a member of royalty, from his kingdom and coerces him into marrying one of her siblings in her troll family.<sup>5</sup> In this example, Blue-tooth aims to dismantle society by isolating an important leader of the kingdom and forcing him into matrimony with a troll. Blue-tooth’s motivation for attacking Ali lies in the fact that he is the

son of the king and can thereby change the society that rejects them. Furthermore, Jotunoxi, one of Blue-tooth’s brothers, performs a similar stunt in pursuit of marrying Thornbjarg, a maiden-king.<sup>6</sup> Such marriages not only prevent Ali and Thornbjarg from producing heirs, but they also secure a valuable element of humanity into the otherwise socially worthless family of monsters. The objective of the family of trolls to marry a currently esteemed leader of society exemplifies the ambition of monsters to create a new society in which they are unconditionally included. Essentially, they aim to normalize themselves by establishing a new integrated social order in which they are integrated, such as by kinship to a previous leader. If the family of trolls were to successfully create a new society with norms in accordance to their own acceptance, then nobility from the former society may be potentially unwelcome. This would result in the vicious cycle repeating, in which a new group of individuals is labelled as monsters, according to their inability to conform to the new social standards.

We now realize that the term “monster” is subjective depending on the

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<sup>4</sup> Classen, 539.

<sup>5</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, “Six Old Icelandic Sagas,” 45.

<sup>6</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, 56.

society to which it is being applied. One great example of this phenomenon is illustrated in the Pixar film *Monster's Inc.*, which portrays a society wherein individuals whom humans would perceive as monsters are normalized and humans themselves are formidable.<sup>7</sup> In this apparent parallel universe, the labels of “monster” and “citizen” have interchanged according to the counterintuitive standards that were established. A human who might have been highly valued according to our society's standards of civility and morality would not deserve any social worth in this alternate reality. In light of this consideration, the definition of a monster can be refined to refer to someone who does not have social merit within a particular group of focus. This new definition sheds light onto an important matter relating to the automatic assumptions that humans generally make in order to identify a monster. Namely, members of Western society associate unsightly physical characteristics and savagery with monstrosity. We must question whether these metrics are accurate determinants for social monstrosity.

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<sup>7</sup> Docter, Silverman, and Unkrich, *Monsters, Inc.*

Although monstrosity refers to one's relative lack of social merit, we will evaluate whether physical abnormalities serve as harbingers of those who are classified as monsters. This will, in turn, signify whether an unusual physical appearance can be acknowledged as a tell-tale sign to identify a monster. In *Ála Flekks Saga*, Ali is overwhelmed with horror and dread as he is forced to marry Nott, the troll.<sup>8</sup> The prospect of marrying this troll, marked for her revolting appearance, is particularly daunting to Ali; as a prince with good looks, he feels threatened that marrying an ugly troll could lower his social status. If Nott had a notably more attractive physical appearance, Ali would not so desperately yearn to escape her grasp and resist their marriage. Hence, Nott would not be rejected as a worthless monster, but instead might be more likely to win over Ali's love and establish her own position in society without derision. Essentially, ugliness is a classification of physical abnormalities that defy the standards of beauty within human society. Because these physical characteristics do not conform to medieval Scandinavian society's standards,

<sup>8</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, “Six Old Icelandic Sagas,” 45.

they place the individuals in a low status that causes alienation. Hence, they become monsters in the eyes of society. In conclusion, these unsightly physical characteristics are not necessarily an indicator of a monster. Rather, they are features devalued by the standards of society, often to the point of monstrosity.

We can extend this principle to assess our aversion to individuals who exhibit savagery by deviating from civilization in terms of physical behavior. In addition to physical appearance, the presentation of an individual's habits in society determines their identity as a monster. In the case of Nott, her grotesque manner of eating horses and other food taboos prompted Ali to grant her the title of a monster.<sup>9</sup> Thus, barbarism is viewed as a monstrous and inhumane quality because it implies lack of culture, intrinsically provoking disgust in the same way that an unkempt appearance would. Considering that one may be regarded as a monster if one exhibits any conspicuous barbaric practices, it is logical to measure the extent that non-physical (i.e. social) and often subtle savagery would also lead being identified as a monster. Surely, it would be most appropriate to diagnose a monster through social merit upon gauging

their propensity for antagonizing society. However, in *Bisclaretz Ljoð*, this criteria often prove unrealistic given the context of a character whose monstrous appearance hides his civility.

It is perhaps necessary at this point to cite the case of *Bisclaret* himself, the focus of the tale as well as the obvious exception to the previous claim. In summary, as a bestial figure who exhibits no signs of social savagery and consequently manages to escape the fate of monstrosity, he exemplifies this ideal of challenging prejudices. Although his physical manifestation as a wolf noticeably contrasts that of a human, he practices civility through subordination to the king.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, *Bisclaret* is neither classified nor treated as a monster by the people in the kingdom, because his cordiality overshadows his physical abnormalities. However, the tale's anagnorisis celebrates an unexpected occurrence of an ideal scenario in which the general public is capable of redressing their preconceived notions of a suspected monster.

To provide a holistic interpretation of this phenomenon, it is crucial to discuss other cases throughout *Bisclaretz Ljoðin* which society's initial judgments of one's apparent conformity to social

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<sup>9</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Cook and Tvetaine, "Bisclaret."

standards lead to a miscalculation of one's compliance with society. For example, Bisclaret's unfaithful wife is not initially regarded as a monster because she has no apparent ugliness, despite demonstrating cruelty toward her husband. In this case, Bisclaret's wife avoids the label of a monster due to her high status in society and unoffending appearance, which wards off suspicion of her betrayal. When Bisclaret attacks her and removes her nose, he effectively gives her a physical attribute that allows others to label her as a monster. Furthermore, her children are born without noses as well, and are thus also recognized as pariahs.<sup>11</sup> If the children had noses, they would not be easily identified as monsters and would likely be able to adopt a role in society. Essentially, these children are labeled as monsters due to their noselessness, regardless of their individual morality or behavior. In light of these examples, it is evident that our ability to accurately determine the true monsters that antagonize our society is compromised by our own misconceptions about the physical appearances of monsters. Therefore, monstrosity is actually measured not against the standards of society, but according to its members' ability to

accurately make judgments from these standards. If these judgments cannot be fairly made, the label of "monster" may be arbitrarily assigned time after time.

In modern society, people continue to casually attribute greater social merit to those who conform to certain standards involving wealth, gender, and race, among other judgments of appearance and behavior. Naturally, these standards divide a population into social ranks, defined by individuals' abilities to conform to the group's expectations. According to a study of perceived wealth on social influence, men who represent wealthier members of society seem to be more readily trusted by the general population when offering help. Conversely, men with less apparent financial success have increased difficulty earning the trust and appreciation of others when offering the same.<sup>12</sup> Through judgments continually made based on values of wealth, a large percentage of individuals who fall short of meeting this standard are in turn dramatically undervalued by society.

Furthermore, an alarming issue of monstrosity arises from society's impulse to demonize extreme cases of poverty by their nonconformity to the standard. An ethnographic study of the

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<sup>11</sup> Cook and Tvetaine, 97–98.

<sup>12</sup> Morse, "Help, Likability, and Social Influence."

roots of mass incarceration in homeless men elicits a “frequently voiced claim that homeless men are serious and dangerous criminals,” and reveals that policemen are far more willing to arrest men with unkempt appearances who commit the same illegal act as “cleaner” men, whom are often let off with a warning. Additionally, discriminatory laws that undermine legitimate efforts of homeless people to earn money and secure a place of shelter cause many of them to resort to criminal activities in order to survive.<sup>13</sup> The demonization of homeless men is evidently a misguided precaution aimed to protect more highly valued members of society by identifying the non-conforming individuals as suspected threats to society. In reality, this prejudice fundamentally serves to reinforce society’s values of wealth, though its inherent injustices also merit retaliation among its victims. Even if we hold firm to our monetary values that regard homeless people as inferior, this does not warrant us to label each of them as a criminal, a formidable onus—similar to monstrosity—that definitively results in expulsion from

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<sup>13</sup> Snow, Baker, and Anderson, “Criminality and Homeless Men: An Empirical Assessment.” 543-545.

<sup>14</sup> Classen, “The Monster Outside and within: Medieval Literary Reflections on Ethical Epistemology.

society. Social rejection has the power to produce monsters and negatively impact the security of members. With this frame of reference, a society full of prejudice and mistreatment of its members may itself be considered a monstrosity.

Assuming that society manages to reevaluate its own prejudices in order to correctly identify monsters, one social issue remains apposite: People excluded by society generally aim to dismantle society for their own benefit. As members of society who feel threatened by this potential social change, people may aim to eliminate such danger. In turn, they may resolve to defeat every monster for the survival of our own society.<sup>14</sup> The seemingly most logical way to destroy monsters is to kill them. In *Ála Flekks Saga*, Ali reacts to Blue-tooth’s attempt to force him into marriage by fatally cursing her.<sup>15</sup> This method initially appears to be a successful way to liberate Ali from the threat of this monster. However, Ali ultimately faces the consequences for his deed when Blue-tooth’s brother Glodarauga seeks vengeance for her demise and curses Ali to turn into a wolf.<sup>16</sup> The inevitable purgatory and

From *Beowulf* to *Marie de France*, the *Nibelunglied*, and *Thüring von Ringoltinger’s Melusine*,” 531.

<sup>15</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, “Six Old Icelandic Sagas,” 45.

<sup>16</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, 50.

guilt that haunts a murderer justifies the impracticality of this resolution.

One should not arrange to kill monsters without assuming the consequent burden of guilt and repentance. We are then led to question the author's intention to prompt Ali to unabashedly resolve to murder the monster he faces. Ali's choice to murder Blue-tooth seems to directly result from her attack on his social status. Blue-tooth does not threaten Ali's life. Hence, Ali's choice to kill this monster is arguably undue and ultimately leads to his own misfortune. With the retribution that the protagonist faces after slaying a monster that had not threatened his life, the author implies that the slayer of monsters may be an unjustified way to resolve the danger they bring to members of society.

As we rule out the viability of slaying the monster, it becomes crucial to determine the safest way to allow for the existence of monsters within society, without the threat of the monster attacking its members. One way to eliminate the danger of a monster attacking society is to force the monster to conform to the standards and expectations of society, and effectively convert it into a benign state. The monster is often

considered a good candidate to be cured in this fashion and incorporated into society if its own social values are not diametrically opposed to that of the current society.<sup>17</sup> This practice is exemplified in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, in which St. Francis deliberately manipulates the soul of a feral wolf in order to transform it into a docile creature whose existence is more conducive to society.<sup>18</sup> St. Francis performs nothing short of a miracle in baptizing and domesticating the wolf in a manner that allows it to more closely fit into the social standards of the town. Despite this success, it remains significant that the rest of the townspeople do not seem to exhibit the necessary energy or skills to initiate this act of curing by themselves. Thus, reliance on this method of conversion to defend against monsters costs an incredible amount of skill for the society to execute.

Given the impracticality of subduing every monster that does not conform to society's standards, perhaps a more realistic way to eradicate the threat of monsters may be to incite societal adaptations that eliminate the potential for the propagation of monstrosity. This principle is exemplified in *Bisclaretz Ljoð*, as

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<sup>17</sup> Merkelbach, *Dólgr í Byggðinni: The Literary Construction and Cultural Use of Social Monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Di Monte Santa Maria, "Chapter 21: Of the Most Holy Miracle Which St. Francis Wrought When He Converted the Firece Wolf of Gubbio."



the king chooses to accept Bisclaret into his kingdom, thus fostering his return to a human state.<sup>19</sup> By forgiving his bestial appearance and behavior, attributes which would generally cause rejection by society due to a failure to conform to its standards, the king transforms Bisclaret back into his human self. In a similar instance in *Ála Flekks Saga*, Ali is able to return to a human state after his foster mother, Hild, recognizes his social value in spite of his bestial form.<sup>20</sup> Hild demonstrates a critical ability to expand one's own societal standards in order to foster a community in which conformity is not expected, ergo monstrosity is irrelevant. In both of these cases, the social construct of monstrosity is effectively destroyed when members of society adjust their own standards in order to be more inclusive of the monster. Just as social acceptance of a monster induces civility, this theory can be expanded to a universal scale of acceptance in order to uproot all monstrosity.

Returning to modern life, we see that this ideal of universal acceptance yields promising results in our continual battle against monstrosity. Mass incarceration, for instance, remains a

significant issue in which social rejection propagates the threat of monstrosity. While the imprisonment of minor offenders leads to recidivism, critical prisoner reentry programs significantly decrease criminalization rates within a community.<sup>21</sup> As we create opportunities that allow a prior criminal to regain merit in society, we begin to see that the label of a monster does not serve as a permanent fixture to one's identity. Universal acceptance, distinctly independent of expectations for conversion, appeals to the virtues of human nature to strive for self-improvement and belonging. It requires us to trust that all people deserve to be accommodated by society and thus should not be identified as monsters. Through the eyes of an inclusive society, we finally illuminate our view of the darkness in which we learned to fear monsters.

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<sup>19</sup> Cook and Tvetaine, "Bisclaret," 97.

<sup>20</sup> Bachman and Erlingsson, "Six Old Icelandic Sagas," 52.

<sup>21</sup> Jonson and Cullen, "Prisoner Reentry Programs."

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