Don’t Feed the Trolls

In facing Þorbjǫrg’s attack on his eye Sturla is thus aligned with several other figures found in Icelandic saga writing facing attempted or actual social exile and demonisation. Þorbjǫrg mostly allows her knife to do the talking for her and though she does invoke Óðinn, she never directly calls Sturla a troll or accuses him of ergi. Such accusations are not necessary. Óðinn is a witch and that means that he is a troll and that his actions include ergi. The intimacy of this vocabulary is exemplified in Gísla saga, wherein the necromancer Þorgrímr Nose (see “The Witchfather”) is said to perform his seiðr ritual with “ergi” which is later also referred to in the saga as “trollskapr.” The trollish and the queer are inseparable, just as witches and vampires are, intertwined in a demonic mass of enmity. Which means, of course, that when referring to someone as a troll, one is not just kidding but making uncompromising ontological statements. In effect Þorbjǫrg is suggesting through her actions that Sturla, like Örvar-Oddr’s aforementioned nemesis Ögmundr (see “Unreal Fauna”), may be more spirit than man, a genuine troll that haunts the human like a demonic shadow.

To those of the enlightened nineteenth century, with science slowly becoming the dominating thought paradigm, it was the animal that so easily became the shadow of humanity, its pursuing demon. “I am not an animal! I am a human being,” cried John Merrick to his persecutors in David Lynch’s The Elephant Man (1980). In the medieval sagas, dominated by Christianity, the natural pursuing demon is the troll, humanity’s nebulous double and antagonist. In
the sagas, in lieu of the beasts of the animal kingdom, the primary metaphor for bestiality is precisely the troll, and a saga hero may be accused of being one by frightened members of the public. This is perhaps most famously done to Grettir, the protagonist of Grettis saga, whose tale is characterised by the ambiguity of his place in the universe. Trollhunter, vampire slayer, and ghostbuster, Grettir is frequently confused for the very trolls against whom he defends humanity, possibly unfairly tainted by the association, possibly on account of his dubious status as an outlawed man of noble blood.

Both the professional trollhunter and the outlaw are essentially liminal figures and Grettir complicates the matter with his generally unruly behaviour and by frequently acting out the part of a trickster of uncertain allegiance. After his great swimming feat in Norway, for example, Grettir looks enormous in the darkness, “sem troll væri” (like it was a troll), thus leading to his tragic accidental brawl with the sons of Þórir of Garðr. Some time later a woman he carries over Eyjardalsá in Bárðardalr is similarly uncertain whether she has been transported by “maðr eða troll” (a man or a troll). This ambiguity haunts Grettir, a human with special abilities in a community replete with hostile and dangerous trolls. His real business in Bárðardalr is to fight the zombies of the valley, but despite their reliance upon his special skills the civilized world is frequently unsettled by his strength. Their fear is not unreasonable, though, as the story of Glámr in the same saga provides an example of how those brought into a community to fight the ogres that threaten it may easily metamorphose into far more dangerous monsters themselves.

Given the broad significance of the term troll, it is impossible to know whether or not the woman that Grettir helps across the river is worried about him being a witch, an undead or a different kind of troll. Such a consideration may not be that relevant, indeed she probably does not really care about unearthing his true nature. She likely cares
only about herself and her own safety in the presence of a
troll whose demonic magic might put her at great risk.

One of Grettir’s primary antagonists, Þórir of Garðr, had
earlier in the saga remarked that Grettir is not only strong
but “fjölkunnigr” (sorcerous), which to him means that
“hér er við troll að eiga, en ekki við menn” (we are dealing
with trolls here rather than humans).\textsuperscript{255} Perhaps those of a
sore loser, his comments serve to stigmatise and demonise
his opponent and deny him his humanity, but Þórir is per-
haps also bewildered by Grettir’s accomplishments and in
genuine terror of this strange adversary.

Grettir is not the only such figure in the sagas thus de-
onised for political gain. The same might be also said
of Skarphéðinn Njálsson of \textit{Njál’s saga} who, once while
partaking in the civilized business of parliament, goes
to plead with various magnates of Iceland and is taunted
by all of them. The first, Skapti Þóroddsson, describes
him as “mikill maðr ok féleitr, ógæfusamliðr, hardliðr
ok trollslíðr” (a large man and pale, unfortunate looking,
harsh and trollish), and not only does Skapti refuse to
come to the aid of Skarphéðinn and his brothers, he also
pretends not to recognise Skarphéðinn, and he insinuates,
albeit without trying to actually gouge his eye out with a
knife, that Skarphéðinn is a demon, perhaps not Óðinn but
perhaps something not too far off.\textsuperscript{256}

Thus, in spite of Njál’s fundamental association with
law and order, even his sons may occasionally appear de-
monic to other Icelanders, reminding us of the caprices of
fortune. When someone is branded a troll, accusations of
ergi may not trail far behind. Indeed a major theme in \textit{Njál’s
saga} is how gender is used in certain power struggles,\textsuperscript{257}
including, perhaps more covertly, the dangerous relation-
ship between gender and magic.