



REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDREN IN THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

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In his 1962 book, *Centuries of Childhood*, Philippe Ariès made the following assertion:

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking.¹

Although Ariès's views were accepted and elaborated upon by some scholars (Lloyd DeMause, for instance, characterised the medieval attitude towards children as one of indifference²) the opposition to his conclusions, especially from medieval scholars, has been intense. In particular, the last decade and a half has seen a number of studies produced to counter Ariès's claim. For example, Shulamith Shahar, in her 1990 book *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, argues that a concept of childhood existed in the Central and Late Middle Ages, that scholarly acknowledgement of the existence of several stages of childhood was not merely theoretical, and that parents invested both material and emotional resources in their offspring.³

Several other scholars have joined Shahar in producing evidence to suggest that a concept of childhood, as distinct from adulthood, existed in the Middle Ages,⁴ and the weight of their combined scholarship has led to an understanding that, although the fact of being a child is determined physiologically and is therefore a common experience amongst all peoples, the state of childhood – that is, the definition of a child, the experience of being a child, the treatment of children, and the adult attitudes towards children – is a cultural construction.⁵

If few scholars of Old Norse-Icelandic studies have engaged directly with the concept of childhood as a cultural construction in early Icelandic society,⁶ many have nevertheless contributed to such a discussion by examining those aspects of early Icelandic child-rearing methods which differed from the child-rearing methods which are today performed by parents living in a modern, Western society. These include the fostering of children;⁷ and the practice of child exposure;⁸ as well as methods of childbirth.⁹ Further emphasising the value of



examining the cultural construction of childhood in early Icelandic society is Jenny Jochens's analysis of motherhood as a cultural construction in Old Norse society,¹⁰ and Margaret Clunies Ross's study of Old Norse beliefs concerning procreation.¹¹

My paper contributes to the body of literature already completed concerning medieval Icelandic children and infants by examining directly the cultural construction of children and childhood in thirteenth century Iceland. I will do this by examining the legal criteria which distinguished children from adults, the biological criteria, and the social criteria. Showing that medieval Icelandic children acted within a space separate from that in which the medieval Icelandic adults acted, I will suggest that it is useful to consider children to have inhabited a conceptual subset of medieval Icelandic society which I will refer to as the world of children. Finally, I will examine one component of this world of children: the practice of game-play. I will show how a greater understanding of the cultural perceptions of children's play in medieval Iceland can help in the comprehension of the narrative of the sagas, and I will show this with particular reference to an episode in *Njáls saga*.¹²

In medieval Icelandic society the criteria which legally determined the maturity status of an individual depended upon the gender of that individual. According to *Grágás*, a male's legal maturity was determined solely by his age. A male reached legal adulthood at the age of sixteen winters; this was when he could, for example, legally claim and care for an inheritance (*Grágás. Konungsbók*. Ed. Vilhjálmur Finsens: 226); be the principal in a killing case, (Finsens, 1974: 167) give his mother in betrothal, (Finsens, 1974: 167) and arrange his own residence (Finsens, 1974: 167). A female's legal maturity, on the other hand, was determined according to her age and her marital status. Although the age of sixteen winters was a significant age for a medieval Icelandic woman, as the law states that:

mær a at taca arf er hon er sextán vetra gömol oc sva vöxto a sino fe, (Finsens, 1974: 226)

[A girl can take an inheritance when she is sixteen winters old and also the yield from her property,]

it was the age of twenty winters that signified her adulthood, as it was at this age that she was allowed to take responsibility for her own domicile (Finsens, 1974: 226) be the principal in a killing case (Finsens, 1974: 226), and arrange her own residence (Finsens, 1974: 226). Age, however, was not the most important criterion for determining a female's maturity, and the



age of twenty winters should only be considered the upper limit for entry into adulthood. Rather, the state of marriage was more noteworthy than age as the determinant for female maturity. Marriage gave a woman a number of adult rights. For example, the married woman, regardless of age, was able to claim an inheritance and care of other people's property (Finsens, 1974: 226) and she could act as principal in a killing case (Finsens, 1974: 226).

The fact that male progress from childhood to legal adulthood was contingent solely upon age, whereas female progress from childhood to legal adulthood was contingent upon marriage and age, is in part a consequence of the early Icelandic legal system, which did not offer a woman full access to the law, but rather gave her an indirect route to it through her father or her husband. Therefore a woman's legal maturity coincided with a change in the identity of her legal administrator from her father or her nearest kinsman before marriage, to her husband after marriage. Marriage, however, did not just change the identity of a woman's legal administrator; it changed a woman's legal maturity status at a more fundamental and permanent level, which can be seen by the fact that a married woman was able to claim an inheritance or have care of other people's property (Finsens, 1974: 226), and that these rights remained with her, even if her husband died. Marriage, therefore, did not only coincide with a change in a woman's social situation, it coincided with a perceived change in her own personal maturity, and therefore the difference between the criteria necessary for male adulthood and the criteria necessary for female adulthood should also be determined from the personal aspects of marriage; that is, as marriage heralded the beginning of a woman's sexual maturity and the start of her childbearing years, a female's maturity should be seen as having been contingent upon puberty. This means that, whereas the medieval Icelandic male's maturity was determined using a method of absolute chronology (the passing of years), a medieval Icelandic female's maturity was determined using relativistic methods.

The laws in *Grágás* do not simply offer a definition of a minor; they also provide the means of understanding the perceived differences between children and adults which made such a distinction necessary. For example, the following law describes the faculties that an individual needed to possess in order to be the principal in a killing case:

Sonr manz er aðile vig sacar sextán vetra gamall eða ellre frials borenn oc arfgengr sva hyggin at hann kunne fyrir raða (Finsens, 1974: 167).



[The son of a man is the principal in a killing case, sixteen winters old or older, freeborn, and a lawful heir, of such mental capacity that he can take charge of (his inheritance).]

Explicit in this law is the idea that mental ability was fundamental to being the principal in a killing case; implicit within this law is the idea that a man who was sixteen winters or older normally had that mental ability. Further evidence of the connection between age and mental ability can be found elsewhere in *Grágás*. For example *Grágás* states that:

Sa maþr er varðveitir inn yngja mann eþa inn øvitra oc létr hann eta kiot a faustu tíþum eþa ö æti þott eigi se fostu tíþir oc varþar honum sva við log sem hann æti sialfr enn ecci hinum er etr ef hann atti eigi vit til at sia við (Finsens, 1974: 35).

[The man who has guardianship of the younger man or the mentally deficient one and allows him to eat meat during times of fast or to eat forbidden foods outside times of fast is subject to legal penalty as though he himself had eaten it, but not the one who ate it if he had not the wits to refrain.]

This law makes it clear that a child was not to be made culpable for the consumption of forbidden foods as children were not considered to possess the sense or the mental ability to understand the need for abstinence.

Mental ability was not the only faculty in which a child was considered to be deficient. Children were also, in general, considered to be physically less capable than their adult counterparts. Examples of this can be found in *Grágás*. For instance, a child's physical weakness is alluded to in the following law:

Yngri maþr enn tólf vetra enn ellri enn siau togr era skylldr at fasta nema vili (Finsens, 1974: 35).

[A person younger than twelve winters or older than seventy is not required to fast unless he wants to.]

The reason that children under the age of twelve winters were not required to fast can be inferred from the line which precedes the above law: 'Heill maþr a at fasta log fostu enn eigi sa er siukr er' (Finsens, 1974: 35). 'A healthy person has to keep established fasts but not one who is sick'. The fact that medieval Icelandic children were distinguished from adults in terms of their strength, skills and wisdom meant, on the one hand, that they were subject to a restriction of power, as they were not able to represent themselves in legal cases. On the other hand, it also meant that less was expected of them and, consequently, they had a reduced



responsibility concerning their own actions. Children under the age of twelve winters were not, for instance, under legal penalty if they killed someone.¹³

The binary model of maturity which places childhood in opposition to adulthood was not, however, only an abstract division. There is some evidence in the sagas to suggest that children were considered to physically inhabit a space distinct from the space of adults. This space is hinted at in the ball-game of *Egils saga*, where a ball-game separate from that which is being played by the adults is established for the children.

En er þeir kómu á leikmótit, þá var mǫnnum skipt þar til leiks; þar var ok komit mart smásveina, ok gerðu þeir sér annan leik; var þar ok skipt til.¹⁴

[When they arrived at the play-meeting, the players were divided into teams; many small boys had also come there, and they were divided, too, for their own game.]

Njáls saga, which I will analyse in more depth later in this paper, is more emphatic about its creation of a ‘children’s space’. Thus at the beginning of the saga, the female child Hallgerðr is playing on the floor with some other children. When her father wishes to interact with her, he calls her and she goes to him.¹⁵ Later in the same saga, the children who are the wards of Þjóstólfr are also playing on the floor so that, within the context of *Njáls saga*, the floor seems to be part of a physical space which can be termed ‘children’s space’. It should be noted, however, that although in some sense the ‘children’s space’ can be seen as being distinct from its necessary counterpart, ‘adults’ space’, an overlap can certainly be detected between the two. For instance, in *Njáls saga*, the scene of play between Þjóstólfr’s wards includes some dialogue which can be considered to be the imitation of the words of adults (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954: 29).¹⁶ This scene would therefore suggest that the children were aware of the events that were taking place in the adult world, something that could only happen if there had been a considerable overlap between ‘children’s space’ and ‘adults’ space’. A similar scene of children imitating the thoughts and ideas of adults can be found in *Finnboga saga*, where the two children of Finnbogi insult Þorvaldr by repeating the invectives which they overhear adults speaking.¹⁷ Similarly, adults must be able to affect children’s space, as it is the adults who are responsible for the maintenance of children.

The distinctions between children and adults in terms of strength, skills, wisdom, legal power, and the sense of a ‘children’s space’ which exists in opposition to an ‘adult’s space’ allow me to suggest that medieval Icelandic children lived within a world governed by rules different



from the rules which governed the adult world. I will henceforth refer to this world as the ‘world of children’. A number of characteristics can be considered features of the ‘world of children’. However, aside from the ones which I have already discussed, it is necessary at this stage in my paper to only note one other characteristic and that is the activity of play. Although games are not always played by children, children in the *Íslendingasögur* are often described as playing games. I will mention only a small number of examples here. In *Bolla þátrr Bollasonar*, the character of Óláfr, Þorðr’s son, is described as being at play in the following paragraph:

Óláfr, sonr hans, var þá sjau vetra eða átta. Hann fór af bænum með leik sínum ok gerði sér hús, sem börnum er títt.¹⁸

[Óláfr, his son, was then seven or eight winters old. He went from the farm to play and build himself a house, as it is customary for children to do.]

Finnbogi’s children, Álfr and Gunnbjörn, in *Finnboga saga*, are described as being at play in the following paragraph:

Líða nú stundir, þar til er Finnbogi hefir búit at Borg svá lengi, at son hans var annarr fimm vetra, en annarr þrjúvetr. Váru þeir báðir efniligir. Var Álfr hávaði mikill, en Gunnbjörn kyrrláttr mjök. Þat höfðu þeir til gamans jafnan, at þeir fóru í Garðshorn ok glettust við Þorvald ok gerðu honum marga bellvísi.¹⁹

[Now time passed, until Finnbogi had lived at Borg so long that one of his sons was five winters and the other three winters. They were both promising. Álfr was very loud and Gunnbjörn very calm. They had a regular game. They went to Garðshorn and taunted Þorvaldr and they played many tricks on him.]

Króka-Refs saga offers an example of a toy:

Austmanns son hafði sér at leiku skip þat.²⁰

[The Norwegian’s son had for a playing a ship.]

Games, and the possibility of injuries being inflicted as a consequence of those games, feature as a concern in *Grágás*. Thus *Grágás* states:

Hvar þess er maðr gengr til fangs at vilia sinom eða leics oc se hann eigi lengr at enn hann vill þa scal hann sialfr sic abyrgiaz ef hinn vill honom eigi mein gera nema hann fae örkuml eða bana oc metz þa sem engi leicr se.²¹

[Whenever a man goes to a contest or to play a game of his own accord, let him be at it no longer than he wishes. Then he shall be responsible for himself as long as harm is not done to him; but if he receives lasting injury or death then it is assessed as if it were not a game.]



This law suggests that actions which were conducted within the context of game-play were not to be considered in the same serious light as actions which were conducted outside game-play, provided that any action conducted within the context of game-play and any consequence of that action remained entirely within the boundaries of the game world. The consequence of such a law is that game-play, whether it was the ball-game of *Egils saga* or the role-playing game of *Njáls saga*, provided an environment for its players which was, to a certain extent, protected from the repercussions of the law. For children, then, the ramifications of the medieval Icelandic definition of game-play allowed them, at least in theory, to create for themselves circumstances in which they could practice the skills – both physical and social – necessary to be learnt in order to develop into fully capable adults, without the fear of their actions having consequences in the wider world. The *Íslendingasögur*, however, provide a number of examples where this is not the case. For example, the game-play of the children's taunts of Þorvaldr in *Finnboga saga*, mentioned above, ends with the deaths of those children.²² Although these deaths can partly be explained by the fact that Þorvaldr, who kills the boys, is a social outsider who does not observe social norms in general, the scene concerning the boys' deaths also suggests that when the world of children encroaches on the world of adults, tension ensues.

Understanding the cultural perception of children and children's play in medieval Icelandic society can help to understand the actions of the characters in an important scene in *Njáls saga*. At the end of chapter eight, Hrútr and his brother, Hǫskuldr, journey home from the Alþing, where Hrútr's former father-in-law has just unsuccessfully petitioned Hrútr for the return of Unnr's dowry. They stay overnight in Lund, the home of Þjóstólfr. The rain has brought the members of the household, including Hrútr and Hǫskuldr, into close proximity with one another, and many of the adults of the household are watching three children who are on the floor, or in the children's space, playing a role-playing game which mimics the events which transpired at the recent Alþing. The game unfolds in the following manner:

Þjóstólfr bóndi sat í meðal þeira Hǫskulds ok Hrúts, en sveinar tveir léku á gólfinu, - þat vǫru veizlusveinar Þjóstólfs, - ok lék mǫr ein hjá þeim; þeir vǫru mǫlgir mjök, því at þeir vǫru óvitrir. Annarr þeira mǫlti: "Ek skal þér Mǫrðr vera ok stefna þér af konunni ok finna þat til foráttu, at þú hafir ekki sorðit hana." Annarr svaraði: "Ek skal þér Hrútr vera; tel ek þik af allri fjárheimtunni, ef þú þorir eigi at berjask við mik." Þetta mǫltu þeir nǫkkurum sinnum; þá gerðisk hlátr mikill af heimamǫnnum.²³



[Þjóstólfr the householder sat between Hǫskuldr and Hrútr, and two boys were playing on the floor – charity boys in Þjóstólfr’s care – and a girl played beside them; they were talking a lot, because they were foolish. One of them [the children] said, ‘I shall be Mǫrðr and divorce you from your wife on the grounds that you have not had intercourse with her.’ The other replied, ‘I shall be Hrútr and invalidate you from your dowry-claim if you dare not fight me.’ They repeated this a number of times, and then much laughter arose in the household.]

This scene of game-play in *Njáls saga* acts as a microcosm of the larger adult world. It firstly illustrates that Hrútr’s conflict with Mǫrðr has become a matter for public gossip and, as Ursula Dronke points out, it also shows “how quickly gossip travelled.”²⁴ Furthermore, it signifies the fact that Hrútr’s inability to perform sexually, formerly a private matter between him, his wife and, of course, known by Gunnhildr, has entered public knowledge. More than acting as a symbol for the transmission of knowledge, however, the game also creates an environment which allows for the exploration of the inner emotions of both Hrútr and Hǫskuldr. The game can clearly be viewed as a mockery of the events at the Alþing; this can be seen by the fact that many members of the household laugh in response to the children’s impersonations. (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 29) However, whereas within the legal sphere of the Alþing, Mǫrðr had been the object of mockery (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 29), within the domestic sphere of Þjóstólfr’s household, it is Hrútr and his inability to perform sexually which incites derision. Although Hrútr is the one being directly ridiculed by the children’s game, however, it is Hǫskuldr who reacts with violence. In response to the children’s game:

Þá reiddisk Hǫskuldr ok laust sveininn með sprotu, þann er Mǫrðr nefndisk, en sprotinn kom í andlitit, ok sprakk fyrir (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 29).

[Hǫskuldr became angry and struck the boy with a stick, the one who called himself Mǫrðr, and the stick struck him in the face, and sprang back.]

Hǫskuldr’s action is clearly a violation of the children’s world. Hǫskuldr has entered the children’s space and has reacted with violence to an action carried out during game-play. Hǫskuldr’s impetuous action highlights the strength of his anger; but his anger should not just be seen as anger at the child for mocking him within the household; it should also be seen as displaced anger for the real Mǫrðr. The intensity of Hǫskuldr’s anger during the scene of child’s play suggests that his anger towards the real Mǫrðr is not only caused by the fact that Mǫrðr sued for Unnr’s dowry. If that were the case, the fact that Hrútr won the dispute should result in the diminishment of Hǫskuldr’s anger; rather, the scene of child’s play emphasises



the idea that Hǫskuldr's anger stems from the fact that Hrútr's inability to consummate his marriage has become public knowledge.

Hrútr, on the other hand, does not act with the same spontaneous passion as displayed by his brother. Rather, Hrútr is calm. He does not forget that the children's mockery is part of a game. He reacts to the children's impersonations by calling the child playing Mǫrðr to him; by doing so he thus invites the child to move from the children's space into the adults' space, he does not invade the children's space himself. He gives the child a 'fingrgull' (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 29) (a gold finger ring). This action wins him much praise. Although Hrútr does not forget that the child before him is not Mǫrðr, the final line of this chapter, 'ok er nú lokit þætti þeira Marðar' (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 29) ('and so ends the dispute between them, Hrútr and Mǫrðr') suggests that the child can still be seen as a symbolic Mǫrðr. By giving the gold ring to the child playing Mǫrðr, Hrútr is able to be symbolically generous to the real Mǫrðr, something which he could not do within the context of the wider adult world without losing his honour and his masculine reputation. By accepting the ring, the child Mǫrðr symbolises Hrútr's wish that the real Mǫrðr had dealt with him fairly and without greed, a sentiment he actually expresses during the lawsuit when he says,

“Meir sækir þú þetta mál með fjár-ágirnd ok kappi, er heyrir til dóttur þinnar, heldr en með góðvild eða drengskap (*Brennu-Njáls Saga*, p. 27).”

[“You are prosecuting this case concerning your daughter with greed and ardour rather than goodwill and nobility.”]

Through the child playing Mǫrðr, then, Hrútr is able to act out in fantasy the transaction with Mǫrðr that he wished had been able to occur in reality.

In conclusion, then, the evidence presented by *Grágás* and the *Íslendingasögur* suggest that in medieval Icelandic society a concept of the child, as being distinct from the adult, did exist. Children were considered to be less skilled, less experienced and physically weaker than their adult counterparts. As a consequence, they had less power in terms of financial independence and they did not have a direct recourse to the law; however, also consequential to the idea that children's skills and physical strength were less than that of adults was the fact that children had a reduced responsibility for their actions. These perceived characteristics of children, coupled with the idea that children were often associated with game-play, meant that children could be used, in the context of narrative, as effective truth-tellers. In the role-playing game of



Njáls saga, this is precisely what the children are doing: they are recreating in fantasy form the real world of Hrútr's conflict with Mǫrðr, allowing the saga audience to experience an unvarnished retelling of events that have taken place in the adult world of legal negotiation and power-play.

NOTES

¹ Ariès, 1962: 128.

² DeMause, 1974.

³ Shahar, 1992: 1.

⁴ These include Crawford, 1999; Hanawalt, 1993; Hanawalt, 2002; Lett, 1997; Nelson, 1994; Orme, 1984; Orme, 200).

⁵ In Nelson, 1994, Nelson makes a similar assertion. 'Although the stages of a child's development are biological, physiological, perhaps psychological givens, and genetically programmed, childhood itself is a construct, culturally determined'. (p. 81).

⁶ A recent exception is Ármann Jakobsson.

⁷ Kreutzer, 1987.

⁸ Clover, 1988; Boswell, 1988; Pentikäinen, 1968.

⁹ Cormack, 2000. Jochens, 1995: 79-80.

¹⁰ Jochens, 1996.

¹¹ Clunies Ross, 1991 and Clunies Ross, 1994.

¹² For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the law-code *Grágás* as a primary source for constructing a historical context against which episodes from the *Íslendingasögur* will be read. My approach to the *Íslendingasögur* will be to analyse the individual sagas as narratives which reflect the cultural world of the time and place of writing; that is the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Iceland.



¹³ Finsens, 1974: 226. It should be noted that Dennis, Foote and Perkins have made a note concerning this law, that the Staðarhólsbók manuscript has preserved the age 'younger than sixteen winters'. See Dennis, et al., 1980: 166.

¹⁴ Nordal, 1933: 99.

¹⁵ *Brennu-Njáls Saga*. Ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: 6-7.

¹⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954: 29.

¹⁷ "Finnboga Saga." *Kjalnesinga Saga*. Ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson: 300.

¹⁸ "Bolla þátrr Bollasonar." *Íslendinga Sögur*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson: 244.

¹⁹ "Finnboga Saga." *Kjalnesinga Saga*. Ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson: 299.

²⁰ "Króka-Refs Saga." *Kjalnesinga Saga*. Ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson: 129.

²¹ *Grágás. Konungsbók*: 167.

²² "Finnboga Saga." *Kjalnesinga Saga*: 300.

²³ *Brennu-Njáls Saga*. Ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: 29.

²⁴ Dronke, 1980: 10.

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