Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature

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Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature

Edited by
Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Medieval Thought and Shapeshifting

Santiago Barreiro and Luciana Cordo Russo

> Sed et quidam adserunt *Strigas* ex hominibus fieri. Ad multa enim latrocinia figurae sceleratorum mutantur, et sive magicis cantibus, sive herbarum veneficio totis corporibus in feras transeunt. Siquidem et per naturam pleraque mutationem recipiunt, et corrupta in diversas species transformantur...[1]
>
> [Some people claim that *witches* were transformed from humans. With regard to many types of crimes, the appearance of the miscreants is changed, and they wholly metamorphose into wild animals, by means of either magic charms or poisonous herbs. Indeed, many creatures naturally undergo mutation and, when they decay, are transformed into different species...]

This passage, from the section *De Transformatis* in the eleventh book of Isidore's *Etymologies*, reveals three ways in which medieval learning explained shapeshifting: it could derive from moral causes (miscreants transformed due to crimes), from magic (the reference to charms) or it could be caused by natural action (as with poisonous herbs and decay). These three causes are paralleled in other thinkers, such as Arnulf of Orléans, who thought that metamorphoses were caused by natural, artificial, magical, or spiritual reasons.[2]

Arnulf and Isidore are characteristic of a frequent medieval worldview which could be described as conceiving the different aspects of the universal order as closely interconnected with each other (and as stemming from

1 San Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XI.iv.2–3, emphasis added. We follow the translation in Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*.

2 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 99.

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God). This view logically considered the natural aspects of order as more fluid than a modern, post-Linnean view, and was dominant in the whole medieval period, or at least until the intellectual transformations brought about through neo-Aristotelian thought from the central Middle Ages onwards.[3] In such a medieval mode of thought the change expressed through metamorphosis was an integral part of the created world, even if frequently circumscribed to remote geographical corners, or the effect of the work of specific agents, be they divine or demonic.

It is not difficult to imagine why the medieval multidimensional ideas about causation, nature, and transformation of beings were often also concerned with shapeshifters: these appear almost as embodiments of this fluid, interconnected image of reality. While our focus in this book is in its literary manifestations in Northern European contexts, the multitude of werewolves, swan-maidens, bear- and boar-men that appear in medieval narratives should not be thought as remnants of 'primitive' or 'folk' mentalities: shapeshifters were a core element of medieval cultures and were a concern even for the clerical, learned elite.[4] Fascination with shapeshifting and metamorphoses in general, with the possibilities they opened for treating a wide range of topics (such as taboos; fear of the 'other', whether monsters, foreigners, or marginal peoples; and socially disruptive attitudes) reveal the kinds of ideas that medieval societies had about, among other things, nature, causality, change, morality, and divine and human agency.

In fact, alongside such a 'naturalistic' perspective there coexisted a very pervasive theological view from Saint Augustine that condemned metamorphosis as *ludificatio daemonum*, 'trick of demons'.[5] Harf-Lancner considers that, for the theologians, the belief in stories about metamorphosis

3 The Argentinian historian of science Miguel de Asúa synthesized the main trends in medieval natural thought. Ultimately rooted in a dual beginning in Classical Antiquity, there was a precise, analytical trend (represented by Aristotle) and a comprehensive yet diffuse view of natural phenomena (expressed by Pliny the Elder). In the following centuries, the Aristotelian tradition was mostly retaken by Arab thinkers such as Avicenna, while Christian Europe followed the Plinian view, chiefly through its use in Isidore's *Etymologiae*. A (later) third trend, represented by the bestiaries (the *Physiologus* being the main model) represents a moralising trend, which was often conflated with the Plinean-Isidorian stance, especially in the encyclopedic treatises of the twelfth and thirteenth century, such as those by Alexander Neckam and Vincent of Beauvais. These typically depict living beings as moral-allegorical types; it was only with Albert the Great (and his *De Animalibus*) the Aristotelian mode of thought reappeared in Western animal knowledge (Asúa, 'Alberto Magno', pp. 407–411.)

4 This interest of learned men, of course, did not exclude a broader interest in the topic and an aesthetic pleasure in otherness, which 'has exercised a huge power of attraction' historically (Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 20) and was 'highly popular' (*ibid.*, p. 27).

5 *La Ciudad de Dios*, xviii, 18.1.

expressed a regrettable survival of pagan superstitions that cast doubts on God's power as Creator.[6] In Latin and Greco-Latin mythologies, the transformation of the individual concretised an already-present link between man and animal, vegetable, or mineral, highlighting the dual nature of being: men or women turned into something that revealed or showed a trait or skill that was part of them before. The passing from one realm to another thus manifested the proximity of men to nature and the continuity of the hierarchy that goes from animal to the divine, and this posed a serious theological problem: if man were created in the image and likeness of God, how can Christians conceive the passing of humans into animals? How can that be part of God's creation?

As Harf-Lancner argued, Saint Augustine's answer was that metamorphosis interpreted as a change in nature is inadmissible and therefore explained it as diabolical illusion: 'La métamorphose est donc liée à quatre registres dont les frontières s'entrepénètrent sans cesse dans l'imaginaire médiéval: celui du diabolique; celui de la magie; celui de l'illusion; celui du rêve.' ('Metamorphosis is thus related to four registers, whose borders constantly entwine in the medieval imaginary: that of the diabolic, that of magic, that of illusion and that of dreams').[7] Hence shapeshifting was seen as unreal; it was associated with mental illness, a deviation of the senses, and a product of the imagination or dreams generated by the agency of demons, who play with men because they have no power to create or alter God's creation. The demonising of transformation takes the medieval theory about metamorphosis to the heart of a general discussion of witchcraft and sorcery, which was to have a profound impact on narrative literature.

However, the contexts of production of the texts in the contributions to this volume are somewhat paradoxical: while undoubtedly integrated in Latin Christendom, some of these Northern lands were peripheral to the core of Latin civilisation. For example, the rich culture revealed by the vernacular literature of Iceland reveals both a recurrent concern for the place of Icelanders within Christianity and a complex yet recurrent re-appropriation of themes which hail back to pre-Christian times.[8] Undoubtedly, these and other local specificities are also relevant for the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon societies (and their literatures) that are studied here, and the interplay between the ecclesiastical, learned, and Latin views and local

6 'Introduction', 'La métamorphose'.

7 'La métamorphose', p. 212.

8 Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*. See also the excellent collection of articles in *Gripla*, 20.

elements undoubtedly enriched the variety of literary responses to the issue of shapeshifting.

In fact, this can be readily seen with regard to the variety of traditions about shapeshifting that circulated since Antiquity, in particular the very influential (and paramount) model represented by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Throughout the Middle Ages this work received historical, moral, allegorical, and philological readings that informed the work of many authors.[9] Of course, in the Middle Ages moral or allegorical interpretations predominated to ease the acceptability of Ovid's text within Christian societies. Ovid celebrated fluidity, mutability as power and possibility, 'the principle of organic vitality';[10] and nature was viewed as perpetual transformation and return.[11]

The twelfth century saw a twofold change with respect to Ovid. On the one hand, *Metamorphoses* became the subject of a series of *accessi* and commentaries as part of the schools' curricula, such as that of Arnulf of Orléans, John of Garland, and the 'Vulgate' commentator (produced in the Loire Valley *c.* 1250), to take the French masters as examples, which revealed the multifaceted approaches to the poem: philological and utilitarian, or as a moral, historical or euhemeristic allegory.[12] These commentaries 'prefigure the fuller Christianising treatment the poem will undergo in the fourteenth century in the *Ovidius moralizatus* of Pierre Bersuire and the French vernacular *Ovide moralisé*'.[13] On the other hand, Ovid's stories influenced an explosion of narratives that treated of metamorphosis, especially of one kind, known as the 'werewolf renaissance'.[14] This renewed interest in metamorphosis in the twelfth century was, according to several authors, also due to the reception of Celtic and Nordic literatures.[15] However, the precise impact on continental literature of texts such as those discussed in this book is rather difficult to assess. Inversely, the influence of Ovidian ideas or those of his Latin commentators in Norse and Celtic traditions is also hard to pinpoint, although they were likely present as part of Latin-influenced learning.[16]

9 Keith and Rupp, 'After Ovid', pp. 16–26.
10 Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*, p. 2.
11 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 178.
12 Coulson, 'Ovid's Transformations'.
13 *ibid.*, p. 54.
14 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 94.
15 See Noacco, 'Repères historiques'.
16 For example, for Wales, Sims-Williams has demonstrated the presence of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* in the early *Fontes Cambrensis* ('Uses of Writing'). See also Russell, '"Go and Look in the Latin

Shapeshifters, metamorphoses, and monsters

Shapeshifters as a group have not been subject to much specific attention by medievalists, even while they have been considered in studies about broader topics concerning the boundaries of the human and the natural world. The hallmark studies are the widely read Caroline Walker Bynum's *Metamorphosis and Identity*, which we have already mentioned, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory*, and Marina Warner's *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds. Ways of Telling the Self*. These volumes provide a useful framework for defining shapeshifting and are stepping stones for more nuanced and specific analyses of particular corpora.[17]

The third ('The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis') and fourth ('The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference') of Cohen's seven theses on monsters provide good starting points. They both insist on difference and ambiguity: the third thesis highlights the impossibility of the monster to fit inside an Aristotelian or modern taxonomy, while the fourth holds that it 'is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us."[18] The way Cohen considers the monster is also very fruitful when considering shapeshifters, who are indeed taxonomy-breaking beings who embody difference, but they do so (unlike most other monsters) through *time*. A man who turns into a wolf is not a taxonomy-breaking entity in either shape *per se*, but is so when he moves through both of them in an unexpected way (even if this effect could be as subtle as keeping human traits, such as the ability to speak, in a fully animal form). Its difference lies, essentially, not in (synchronic) hybridity, but in (diachronic) transformation: this transformation speaks less of a stable difference or hybridity than of an unstable existence.[19] It thus can be said, paraphrasing Cohen, that the shapeshifter is ambivalence made flesh.

However, what is said above does not preclude hybrid intermediate stages in some cases, but these are not crucial elements in medieval shapeshifter narratives. The hybridity of a modern movie or video-game werewolf

Books'"; we have not been able to see his last volume (*Reading Ovid in Medieval Wales*), which will surely cast more light on this issue.

17 Albrecht Classen criticised Cohen's approach as too generic ('The monster outside and within', p. 523). While certainly this conceptual generality is helpful as a broad frame of reference it almost necessarily limits the depth of its explicative power. A possible solution for specific contexts is to use native categories and analyse them conceptually (for example, Ármann Jakobsson's study of Icelandic troll notions, *The Troll Inside You*).

18 Cohen, *Monster Theory*, p. 7.

19 Shapeshifters, as a specific class of metamorphosis, are typically human beings that turn into animals (or animals that acquire human traits). Frequently, they can reverse into human form after some time.

(who appears often as a wolf-headed, furry humanoid) is not prominent (and frequently not even present) in its medieval equivalent. For example, medieval Icelandic sources mention several werewolves, but these do not appear to have intermediate 'wolf-man' stages. Interestingly, what the transformation often implies is a cruel or aggressive turn in their behaviour.[20] These hints of shapeshifting are less horrifying because of the breaking of 'natural' taxonomies (be they Aristotelian, Plinian, or Linnean) than they are morally condemnable.

That leads us back to Isidore and the moral causes of shapeshifting, which are potentially also their consequences, given the reversible nature of the process. Following on the previous example, cruelty is linked with the Norse werewolf in the same way that greed is linked with the man who turns into a dragon in the same tradition. However, moral (or sociological) causes are not the only literary reasons for shapeshifters to exist: in some cases, the metamorphosis appears as a plot device (for example, in the many shapeshifting events of the trickster god Loki) for the purpose of narrative advance, a function perhaps not surprising giving that shapeshifting is intrinsically entwined with time and change.

Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literatures

Studies about medieval shapeshifting can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, with the comprehensive investigations of Sabine Baring-Gould and Kirby Smith.[21] These endeavours have often been inspired by scholarly traditions close to folklore, which tended to mix sources from an extremely wide temporal and spatial arc. At the same time, they set a trend which has been fruitful for the study of the two main figures of shapeshifting in the Middle Ages: the werewolf and the berserker. While the first is attested in a broad range of medieval cultures, the second appears as a characteristically Norse phenomenon, even if it shows similarities with figures of ecstatic warriors in other traditions. These two topics have been particularly productive, and several works have analysed them. Furthermore, studies of shapeshifting in Celtic sources have been almost entirely focused on Medieval Irish sources and on Gerald of Wales' account of Irish werewolves. For the Welsh sources, comments about metamorphosis have been rather sparse.

20 Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf'.

21 *The Book of Werewolves* and 'An Historical Study of the Werewolf in Literature', respectively.

The essays compiled in this book address questions of shapeshifting in connection with supernatural agency, voluntary metamorphoses, social meaning, literary representations and motifs in different languages and cultural environments. Each essay will cover different spatial and literary spheres of the North Atlantic contexts, including Icelandic, Welsh, Irish, Anglo-Saxon and Hiberno-Latin sources. This book aims to inscribe itself within a tradition of studies focused on the socio-cultural aspects of specific medieval literatures, rather than on broad comparative studies of a figure, theme or motif.

In the first chapter, Rafał Borysławski discusses how shapeshifting in Old-English riddles is treated both as subject and as creative procedure. Grounded in theoretical analysis of shapeshifting from folklore studies and psychology and linking it with monstrosity and with trickster figures, the author proposes that riddles mirror the essential trait of shapeshifting: its inherent ambiguity and gnomic significance both disappear as entities when their mystery is disclosed. A solved riddle ceases to be a riddle and a monster stops being a monster once it is understood and assimilated. Focusing on the artistry and poetics of riddles, Borysławski reveals the remarkable meta-shapeshifting character of this type of composition: narrative content about metamorphosis interplays with linguistic and visual transformations.

Ármann Jakobsson moves the focus of attention to one of the *Íslendingasögur,* a corpus of medieval Icelandic prose texts about the early settlers of the North Atlantic country. He analyses an example of a villain in *Vatnsdœla saga,* Þórólfr, who is aided by a herd of demonic cats. The saga avoids discussing how the cats turned demonic, but the vocabulary indicates that the shift is due to the magical skills possessed by Þórólfr. Ármann notices that this uncertainty about the backstory of the cats is inherent to the medieval Icelandic discussions of paranormal motifs and events: shapeshifting is liminal and is the essence of a *troll*. Physical marks are not evident, which leads Ármann to remark that conceiving monstrosity in terms of races and species is an effect of nineteenth-century scholarly paradigms rather than of medieval attitudes to transformations, a fact well illustrated by the use of the same trollish categories for beasts and men, and even for heroes. In a similar vein, Santiago Barreiro explores medieval conceptions of dragons found in a variety of Icelandic texts in his discussion of Fáfnir, the shapeshifted worm that is the main antagonist of the Vǫlsung hero Sigurðr during his youth. The author argues that the shapeshifting of the villain from man to dragon should be seen as an effect of his will to keep the treasure, narrated through the motif of an active cursed hoard. Barreiro compares this form of conceiving dragons (expressed in a range of Norse texts and with notable

parallels in Old English literature) with the more naturalistic conceptions expressed in translated Latin learning and allegorical and moral reading in hagiographical literature. In Fáfnir's case the transformation is physical and tied with socially disruptive behaviour: his tale can easily be read as a normative rejection of greedy, hoarding behaviour.

In the next chapter, Rebecca Merkelbach returns to the *Íslendingasögur* to examine the tie between shapeshifting and the *berserkir*. She argues that the shift is not physical, but rather behavioural and psychological. Moreover, the change of shape seems to express an inheritable nature within the *berserkr*. Merkelbach shows that while *berserkir* are indeed monstrous and display animality, it is not because they are not of human shape, but because their actions show them as antisocial. As with other monstrous beings in these sagas, such as revenants, disruption of the social order (expressed in economic harm, but primarily in sexual misconduct) is of prime importance, while the physical manifestations of it are secondary. Their literary otherness, plainly seen in the fact that most *berserkir* are not Icelanders, but foreigners, may thus be understood as a way for society to distance itself from such antisocial characters, but also to allow society to explore issues of sexual violence.

Camilla With Pedersen's contribution moves the discussion to a comparative analysis of involuntary metamorphoses in Old Norse and early medieval Irish texts, with a focus on transformations performed through curses. By analysing the story of Bran and Sceolang, and Étaín, on the one hand, and Fáfnir and Hrólfr, on the other, the author reveals similarities in the use of Christian imagery and philosophical ideas about metamorphosis. Furthermore, in her discussion of the undead in Old Norse texts, Pedersen proposes an element of voluntary transformation that strongly links inner self and appearance, hence marking a contrast to the Irish ghostly figures. In this way, the link she proposes between Fáfnir and the undead as protectors of treasure (in the case of the latter, represented by land) contributes to the discussions in Barreiro and Merkelbach's chapters.

Santiago Disalvo's contribution, '*Unde sunt aues istae?*: Notes on Bird-Shapeshifting, Bird Messengers, and Early Medieval Hagiography' looks at shapeshifting and the use of birds in early Celtic hagiography. Disalvo examines the narrative role of shapeshifting birds in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, extending the analysis to other medieval Irish texts, especially *immrama* or voyage tales, and posing parallels with Middle Welsh compositions, Anglo-Saxon poems, and the Galician-Portuguese *cantigas*. The author recognises four main functions of metamorphosed birds: as messengers and helpers, or destroyers; as rational beings, keeping

human abilities; as liminal animals that traverse and blur the boundaries to the otherworld; and as wonderful singers, bearers of a marvellous voice. By bringing to the fore marked similarities in bird imagery and behaviour, as well as on the importance of musical experience, in both secular and religious texts, Disalvo's findings anticipate an aspect discussed in the last contribution.

Finally, Luciana Cordo Russo, on her chapter entitled 'Sin, Punishment, and Magic: Changing Form in Medieval Welsh Literature', explores all the instances of shapeshifting in a corpus of medieval prose literature in Middle Welsh and Latin. Punitive metamorphoses are the most numerous examples, and the author finds striking similarities with miraculous transformations inflicted by Welsh saints in hagiographic discourse. This study reveals the intrinsic fluidity between the animal and human spheres, and the remarkably unthreatening character of shapeshifters, set within the natural world of *mirabilia*. In this way, she argues for continuities between 'original' and 'shapeshifted' forms, linking medieval Welsh secular and religious literature to common thinking on shapeshifting.

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About the Authors

Santiago Barreiro holds a PhD in History at the University of Buenos Aires, and works as a researcher at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. His works focuses on social and economical issues in Medieval Icelandic literature. He has recently published the first Spanish translation of *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* and two shorter texts as *Tres Relatos Medievales Nórdicos*, and co-edited (with Renan Birro) an introductory handbook on the medieval north, *El mundo nórdico medieval: una introducción*, plus numerous articles and book chapters.

Luciana Cordo Russo completed her PhD in Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. She also teaches Literary Theory and Criticism and Medieval Literature at the University of San Martín. Her current research focuses on the dissemination and translation of the legend of Charlemagne in Wales. An important contribution on this topic will appear in *Charlemagne in the Norse and Celtic Worlds*, edited by Sif Rikhardsdottir and Helen Fulton. She translated for the first time into Spanish the eleven Middle Welsh prose tales commonly known as *Mabinogion*, for which she won the Wales Literature Exchange Translation Award. She has published several articles and book chapters, as well as co-edited two books on medieval literature.

1. *Wundor wearð on wege* 'a wonder happened on the way'

Shifting shapes and meanings in Old English Riddles

Rafał Borysławski

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to discuss both individual instances and mechanisms of shapeshifting present among the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book as well as to emphasize the fact that shapeshifting is the fundamental compositional principle of the riddle form. The essence of literary shapeshifters and the essence of riddles lie in the elusiveness of their meanings and in the intention to deceive those that come in contact with them. Much as narrative shapeshifters require action from those whom they encounter, the Old English riddles invite their audiences to interact with their protean meanings. In doing so, both narrative shapeshifters and riddles provide a heightened sense of awareness and a deeper insight into the elements of reality they respectively affect and attempt to depict.

Keywords: Old English, Exeter Book, riddle, shapeshifting, linguistic transformation, trickery

Shapeshifting is manifestly ingrained in Old English culture, both visually and textually. Lines and patterns, as well as words and meanings, appear to be not only in motion, but they also seem to blend and morph into one another and into other forms and senses. Geometric shapes of numerous Old English carvings, filigree, and manuscript illuminations weave themselves into phyto-, zoo- and anthropomorphic figures in which it is impossible to state where precisely one shape or outline becomes another. The elusiveness and fluidity of the designs present in Old English visual culture on the one hand, and the distinct fascination with the interlace art on the other

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have been noted to resemble structural patterns of Old English poetry, at least since John Leyerle's 1967 essay on the interlace structure of *Beowulf*,[1] and critical discussions of the visual aesthetics as reflected in Old English literature continue to be penned and continue to offer varied angles on Old English poetics.[2] Notably, however, the surviving Old English literature lacks the kind of shapeshifting which may be found for instance in Old Norse texts, that is it possesses few examples of the literal shapeshifting occurring in narrative poetry. Partly responsible for it may be the fact that its themes are overwhelmingly Christian and therefore we will not find among them any of the shapeshifting figures familiar from, for instance, Eddic poetry, or, say, the *draugar* familiar from the sagas. Perhaps the closest we may get to such type of shapeshifting are the figures of the wandering scop from the Exeter Book's poem *Widsith*, who appears to be travelling through time and spaces, and the cross narrating the *Dream of the Rood*, which is described as *wendanwædum and bleom* ('changing its clothes and colours' (l. 22) from the cross of shame to the cross of glory. Nevertheless, even such instances are few and are far from being self-evident cases of narrative shapeshifting. This chapter, therefore, offers a take on a different type of shapeshifting from those dominating in other parts of the present volume. Instead of focusing on the examples of literal shapeshifting of the kind present on the level of narration, I intend to consider it in its dimension of a literary vehicle fundamental for the Old English riddle tradition.

Examined from the level of Old English visual and textual design, shapeshifting may be figuratively seen as one of the important principles which underlie what John D. Niles calls 'the play of the text' in the title of his book on Old English enigmatic poems. Niles points to the quality that is discernible among a large group of Old English poems, that is, to their deliberate and at times playful vagueness:

> Old English poetry is a good deal more playful than is often acknowledged, so that the art of interpreting it can require a kind of 'game strategy' whereby riddling authors match their wits against adventurous readers who are always hoped to be up to the task. Whether or not a text is playful, however, the act of reading it demands attention not only to the possible nuances of meaning of every word, but also to the spaces where no words are written and no story is told.[3]

1 Leyerle, 'The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*'.
2 See, for instance, Head, *Representation and Design*; Taylor, *Old English Poetics*.
3 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, p. 4.

The meaning, or, rather, meanings, are therefore weaving themselves throughout such Old English texts in the manner resembling the linear designs of the visual ornamentation that at once appear within a sensory grasp only to gradually entwine themselves into distinctly different shapes, while the precise moment of transition cannot be located. It is between such an understanding of Old English poems as often deliberately elusive, where meaning morphs from one aspect to another, and between the form and content of the poetic riddle that I locate the Old English textual shapeshifting.

This chapter examines its instances and mechanisms and the Old English riddles from two complementary perspectives. Firstly, more broadly, shapeshifting is viewed here as an anthropological phenomenon serving as the very method and essence of what riddles are as a literary genre. Thus, the chapter begins with a consideration of the roles of wonder and bafflement, of trickery, playfulness and wisdom, and of the connections between the narratives containing shapeshifting and hence often monstrous figures with riddles, which themselves often rely on turning familiar objects into monstrosities. Then, in the second part of this chapter, I discuss it as a motif frequently employed by the Old English riddles and encapsulated in the transformations that their objects narratively experience in the riddle poems. The Exeter Book riddles, which shall serve as primary texts in this respect,[4] abound in instances whose intended solutions are fashioned and disclosed through series of frequently internal transformations that are similar to near-supernatural shapeshifting undergone by the animated solutions to the riddles. From the theoretical standpoint, the shapeshifting that I intend to discuss here essentially corresponds to the nature of the poetic riddle as a literary form, since the manner in which riddles are constructed relies upon simultaneous and multiple acts of transforming the identity of the riddled subject. In their instantaneous revealing and concealing, riddles are literary shapeshifters, not just moving between the subject's veiled and transformed identity and the way in which this veiling and transformation is performed. They also shapeshift in the process of posing a question about their solutions, evoking the functions that connect shapeshifting with both the serious and the playful.

4 It should be noted that the Anglo-Latin *Aenigmata* of Aldhelm, that are among the likely indirect inspirations for the Exeter Book riddles, are (as necessitated by the form of the riddle itself) also instances of texts whose subjects undergo the transformations that may be likened to shapeshifting. They are not analysed here, however, as the chapter's focus is on the poetry composed in Old English. As 'texts of transformation' I have discussed them elsewhere in Borysławski, 'Candida sanctarum sic floret gloria rerum'.

Before discussing several individual yet characteristic instances of shapeshifting among the Old English riddles, I shall single out shapeshifting's essential traits which are mirrored in the form of the poetic riddle. I shall first discuss shapeshifting as a narrative phenomenon present in folktales and myths, with its important connections to the sphere of trickery and deception combined with its gnomic significance, in order to subsequently relate it to early medieval notions of monstrosity. This will prepare the ground for a discussion of affinities between narrative monstrosities and shapeshifting and the genre of the poetic riddle; for a consideration of early medieval literary riddle contests and their relations to shapeshifting; and, eventually, for examinations of several instances of the Exeter Book riddles where shapeshifting is an element that is inherent to them narratively and structurally. The riddles that will serve here as the main examples of the occurrences of shapeshifting include Riddle 40 'Creation' and Riddle 26 'The Bible', where shapeshifting is, respectively, internal and external, and Riddle 24 'Magpie', where it is present in the manner which may be described as metanarrative.

On the broadest level, narratives of shapeshifting should be understood as narratives of transformations of one body into another which involve some supernatural agency and which either happen in some unusual circumstances or presage something of specific and ominous significance.[5] In the 2011 *Encyclopaedia of Folklore*, Graham Seale adds to this also the ever-present grotesque aspect of shapeshifting and speaks of its appearance in folklore as transmogrification, thus expanding it to a wider array of transformations aside from just those which involve animal forms, that are the most emblematic manifestations of such literary changes. Shapeshifters, Seale notes, 'change themselves into animal, vegetable, mineral, and supernatural forms',[6] and he stresses that shapeshifting itself is a typical element of the narratives containing trickster figures.[7] This was noted already by Carl Gustav Jung, who devoted considerable attention to the connection between the trickster hero and shapeshifting in his *Der gottisch Schelm* ('On the Psychology of the Trickster-Figure'), about whom he wrote: 'he is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness'.[8] Whatever metamor-

5 On shapeshifting in general see, for instance, Guiley, 'Shape-shifting'.

6 Seale, 'Shape-Shifters', p. 1144.

7 *ibid.*, pp. 1144–1145.

8 Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p. 263.

phosis such shapeshifting entails, it is, effectively, a transformation of one identity into another and, consequently, a transformation of one meaning into another meaning. Put differently, just as one body morphs into another, its original meaning is reconfigured into a different, previously unnoticed or hidden aspect. What is, however, typical of shapeshifting narratives in myth, folklore and legend, is the possibility or necessity of the reversal of the process. Carl Jung affirms the liberating aspect of the shapeshifting trickster that 'contains within it the seed of an enantiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite',[9] and in numerous narratives of shapeshifting such a reversal is an essential element which precipitates the transformation not of the hero, but of the narrative's audience. Although there is no testimony for copies of the famous *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius, known also as *Asinus aureus*, *The Golden Ass*, to have existed in the Anglo-Saxon period,[10] this classic tale of shapeshifting from the second century CE opens with a well-known statement of Apuleius's intention which speaks of the true wonder of shapeshifting as relying not merely upon the transformation, but also upon its reversal: 'figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursum mutuo nexu refectas, ut mireris' ('I want you to feel wonder at the transformations of men's shapes and destinies into alien forms, and their reversion by a chain of interconnection to their own').[11]

The apparent purpose of his *Metamorphoses*, as stated by Apuleius in the short passage cited above, furnishes a perspective on shapeshifting which, by analogy, may be applied to the discussion of the Old English riddles. I use the idea of shapeshifting here as both a metaphor for the fact that by resetting the focus on meanings the riddles are vehicles of linguistic transformation, and also in its literal sense of narrative transformations with which the enigmatised objects describe the changes they undergo. In both literal and figurative senses of shapeshifting, the riddles display all the traits that are associated with it in folklore, myth and legend. And so, much as the shapeshifting of heroes in narratives involves (apart from the changed physical form and abilities) the elements of the grotesque, monstrosity, deception, playfulness and wisdom, combined with a degree of the supernatural and the possibility of reversing the process, similar features may be singled out as observable in the form and the content of the Old English riddles. They are textual shapeshifters which both transform descriptions of their objects into new semantic dimensions and which often

9 *ibid.*, p. 272.
10 Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English*, pp. 75–76.
11 Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, p. 1.

speak of their objects in terms of the transformations they experience; they adroitly employ grotesqueness; and, by their very nature, they are meant to be at the same time deceptive, playful, and, not infrequently, gnomic in offering various dimensions of didacticism.[12] Furthermore, in their depictions of transformations, much like the shapeshifters familiar from folklore traditions, the objects hidden in riddles are often described in manners akin to depictions of monstrosities, baffling 'the solver by naming an impossible conjunction of body parts',[13] to use one of the most evident connections between the riddle form and monstrosity mentioned by Niles.

That shapeshifters are most frequently monstrous is universally attested in the narratives where they appear;[14] the monstrosity of riddles, however, may seem a little less obvious. Nevertheless, the connection between shapeshifting and monstrosity is present among and within them. It can be argued that riddles are both monstrous and monsters, or shapeshifters, as well as enigmatic in their literary depictions, since the assumptions upon which they are constructed are analogous. Both riddles and shapeshifters can be argued as emanations of a universal fascination with that which is unknown, secretive and mysterious: both are among the oldest and originally solemn and sacred textual[15] and visual forms; both are present in folklore and have been studied as its important emanations;[16] and by their unusual, bizarre and unexpected relations to reality, they both demand a confrontation.

Riddles, by their nature, are to be tackled in the act of guessing, while monsters and shapeshifters are either to be tackled as threats or comprehended as elements of new knowledge, and thus they both demand answers. Furthermore, when a riddle is solved it ceases to be a riddle and, similarly, the moment a monster is understood and becomes assimilated into one's ken, it ceases to be monstrous. In this sense, dispensing with a monster is akin to solving a riddle, and, similarly, rendering a shapeshifter powerless or harmless happens after the shapeshifting process has been decrypted and thereby deprived of

12 For a discussion of the gnomic element in riddles and of riddles as wisdom literature see: Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, pp. 126–152; and Cavill, *The Maxims in Old English Poetry*, pp. 60–81.

13 Niles, 'Introduction', p. 10.

14 See, for instance, Hufford, 'Assault, Supernatural', p. 180.

15 Archer Taylor discusses the tradition of riddling going back to ancient Mesopotamia and India in *The Literary Riddle Before 1600*, pp. 11–17; and Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes instances of Sumerian proverbs and maxims which appear to be unsolved riddles, in *The Solomon Complex*, pp. 15–16.

16 On the folkloristic aspects and appearances of riddles see, for instance, the fundamental essays by Taylor, 'The Riddle'; Georges and Dundes, 'Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle'; and Frye, 'Charms and Riddles'.

its magical and unexpected aspect.[17] Last, but not least, yet another trait is correspondingly present in the narratives of shapeshifting and in the way in which riddles are construed, namely, the fact that transformations in both may, and do, undergo reversals. Wondrous and terrifying transformations that are the essence of both riddles and literary accounts of shapeshifting indeed are protean and reversible: in narrative terms, shapeshifters may be brought back to their original form by heroic or daring feats of their adversaries, whereas the reversal in riddles is textual. It is present in the ultimate discovery of the original identity of a riddle's subject, a process that may be later recreated either by introducing the riddle to a new audience or by a mental reversal of the process of transformation in the riddle, that is, by working the meaning out backwards, from the solution to what its original cryptic clues were.

If there is one general context that the narratives of shapeshifting share with riddles, it is by the making of striking statements: in the narratives of shapeshifting this is related to astonishing changes in physical appearances of shapeshifters, while in riddles to astonishing transformations of meanings. Put differently, it is the context of bringing those who interact with them to some more acute awareness and passing-on of knowledge about what previously remained hidden. Shapeshifters either appear as monstrosities or offer important signs that bring to mind either folklore associations with omens, or the early Christian understanding of monstrosities formulated in the encyclopaedic approach to nature by Isidore of Seville in Book XI of his *Etymologies*. Since, as has been made evident above, shapeshifters and monstrosities are either alike or have numerous common characteristics, let us re-examine briefly their functions as indications or forewarning of events. The monstrosities and the deformations they display, which Isidore catalogues under the heading of portents, are not unnatural, despite the claims of ancient writers. Instead, Isidore is adamant that on the one hand they are the proof of the inadequacy of human perception and knowledge, and, on the other, they are said to offer mystifying indications as to the course of future events:

> Portenta esse Varro ait quae contra naturam nata videntur: sed non sunt contra naturam, quia divina voluntate fiunt, cum voluntas Creatoris cuiusque conditae rei natura sit. […] Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura. […] Monstra vero a monitu

17 In folk- and fairy tales, shapeshifters are rendered powerless or brought back to their primeval shape once a key to their transformations is identified, such as when the animal skin or bird feathers of heroes turned to animals or birds are destroyed or stolen in European fairy tales. See, for instance, 'The Swan Maiden'; 'The Twelve Brothers' and 'Bearskin'.

> dicta, quod aliquid significando demonstrent, sive quod statim monstrent quid appareat…[18]
>
> [Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. […] A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature. […] But omens derive their name from admonition, because in giving a sign they indicate something, or else because they instantly show what may appear…]

Isidore's understandings of the purposes and meanings behind monstrosities are cognate with the mechanisms and purposes of riddles. Both monstrosities and riddles may manifest themselves in a variety of forms which, even if not apparently endless, are understood to be limited only by, respectively, divine creation and human imagination, the latter ultimately also a product of the former. Their multiplicity of forms on the one hand and, on the other, the interpretative interactions which they enforce are their essential and shared qualities. In other words, the riddle is a monstrous text and the monster is a textual riddle, and, to quote Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writing on giants and monsters, they are 'humanity writ large, a text literally too big to ignore'.[19] Neither form is then unnatural, as nothing created may be deemed so: in fact both riddles and monstrosities, and with them their specific variant of shapeshifters, are natural in their unnaturalness. Consequently, the fact that they surprise their audiences with their manifestations is not surprising in itself, but it is, as a matter of fact, expected of them.

The creative mechanisms with which monsters, shapeshifters, and riddles are contrived are similar as well. Monsters are brought into their fantastic existence by either of three elements or their fusion: an absence of some bodily element, its surplus or magnification, and a combination of elements originally found in different creatures, as is the case of hybrid deformations. Shapeshifters, meanwhile, are created by exchanging one identity or form for another. All of these types of deformations and transformations are to be found in riddles whose defamiliarizations are also formulated either by omissions of certain features of the riddled object, by emphasizing and enhancing some features beyond their original extent, by combining

18 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, XI. iii. 1–3. Translation from *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XI, iii, p. 244.

19 Cohen, *Of Giants*, p. xii.

elements that appear to belong to another object, and/or by replacing one object with another. These mechanisms, in the case of riddles, operate also, so to speak, in a way which may be called inside out and which is essentially hypostatic. The objects, ideas, and creatures which the riddles describe are presented by means of references to their hypostases, that is, to their essential nature instead of their attributes. This is visible in the focus laid upon their inner workings, processes, and purposes. It is here that deformity or transformation take place in riddles: while monsters are predominantly deformed externally, the deformations in riddles, as indeed in shapeshifters as well, are mainly internal or hypostatic, oriented towards their innate capacities. The moment the meaning is grasped and the riddled object returns to its 'external' shape, its deformity ceases to surprise and instead leads the audience to the essence of the object's nature. Among the Exeter Book riddles, the minuscule, inconclusively resolved (as 'ice', 'iceberg' or 'Christ walking on water')[20] and *haiku*-like Riddle 68 serves as a convenient illustration of all the above parallels between the physical and textual deformations. In several ways, it could be employed both to describe a monstrous creature or a surprising shapeshifter, as well as a riddle:

> Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;
> heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed.
> Wundor wearð on wege: wæter wearð to bane.[21]
>
> [I saw a creature move away; it was curiously furnished with wonder. A wonder happened on the way: water became bone.]

The elements common to both riddles and shapeshifters are present here: a hidden identity of the riddled creature arises from a sense of encountering something both wondrous and meaningful, and from a transformation of one form into another indicated twice by the verb *weorð* 'became', instilling a sense of a double becoming, that is, of seeing strangeness in solidified water and of seeing in it an emanation of a transformative will.

Having discussed the general principles of wonder and bafflement, of trickery, playfulness and wisdom, and the connections between monstrosity and enigmaticity which conjoin the narratives of shapeshifting with poetic

20 For a comprehensive list and bibliography of the solutions to the Exeter Book riddles suggested by scholars ad translators until 1981 see: Fry, 'Exeter Book Riddle Solutions'.

21 *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, p. 366. All subsequent citations of the Exeter Book riddles as well as their numbering are based on this edition. Translations are my own.

riddles, in the second part of this chapter we shall turn to specific examples of shapeshifting among the riddles of the Exeter Book. The shapeshifting mechanisms there are manifold and they escape exact categorisations, similar to the way shapeshifters do. The space of this chapter naturally does not allow for a detailed examination of each and every of their instances. Instead I shall draw attention to two broad types of shapeshifting present among the riddles: one in which shapeshifting of the enigmatised object appears to be taking place of its own accord and due to its own qualities, and the other, in which shapeshifting is caused by some external factor or agent. Such a division is, perhaps, similar to the division of shapeshifting in narratives, where the first group may be seen as corresponding to the stories where gods or supernatural beings display the propensity to shift shapes because of their internal abilities, whereas the other group corresponds to those narratives of shapeshifting where transformations are caused by external factors, most frequently of magical provenance.

As an epigraph to the second section of the chapter we may turn to the comment made on the poetic riddle genre by Kevin Crossley-Holland and Lawrence Sail, who in 1999 commemorated the symbolic millennium from the creation of the Exeter Book by inviting one hundred contemporary British poets to celebrate the manuscript, each with an original contemporary riddle poem. In the foreword to *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*, the editors, who made their names as, respectively, a translator of Old English poetry, and an award-winning poet, acknowledged the shapeshifting quality of the poetic riddle, the multiplicity of forms that the poetic riddles encapsulated, and the adaptability that springs from the riddle's concern with transformations: '[i]t is the most adaptable of forms, a shape-changer that is at one moment a tricksy one-liner loved by young children, and at the next an extended and sophisticated metaphor. […] And the tone of the riddle: it is typically teasing, sometimes shocking, sometimes bawdy, ruminative, mysterious, elegiac.'[22] Curiously, it is also within the Old English lexical concept for a riddle that we may find the capacity for changing sense and form, or, rather, the capacity for a variety of overlapping meanings: the word *gied*, aside from its meaning of 'riddle', encompasses such semantic fields as 'lay', 'poem', 'song', 'proverb', 'sermon', and, more generally, 'metrical speech'.[23]

In the culture of the medieval North, two examples of texts directly conjoining shapeshifting with riddling may immediately spring to mind:

22 *The New Exeter Book of Riddles*, p. 13.

23 *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 474.

Vafþrúðnismál ('The Sayings of Vafþrúðnir') from the *Poetic Edda*,[24] and the legendary *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* ('The Saga of Hervǫr and Heiðrekr'),[25] both of which combine the form of the riddle contest of wits with the appearance of Óðinn, under assumed identities. The respective contests, first between the giant Vafþrúðnir and Óðinn presenting himself as Gangráðr ('Journey Advisor'), and second between King Heiðrekr and Óðinn disguised as Gestumblindi ('Blind Guest'), exemplify the features connecting riddles with shapeshifting which have already been pointed out above and which are going to be examined in the remaining part of the chapter, devoted to the analysis of the Old English riddles proper. Not only do the Old Norse accounts intertwine riddles with the obvious transformations of their subjects, not only do they involve the transformation of a god into a seemingly helpless wanderer, but they ultimately lead to transformations of the other contestants who must ascertain the god's superiority in their respective riddling contests, which are ultimately comprised of what folklore studies call *Halsrätseln* ('capital riddles'),[26] requiring solutions in order to save one's life. The gnomic element is therefore crucial to both contests, as are their references to monstrosity and abnormality; as much as shapeshifting is ominous in narratives, so is this kind of riddling.

Poetic narratives of such direct contests of riddles and wits which involve transformations of their participants do not exist in the extant Old English literary tradition, save for two dialogue poems found in two separate Corpus Christi College manuscripts in Cambridge, the so-called *First* and *Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*.[27] In both poetic dialogues, Saturn, a Chaldean prince, confronts the biblical King Solomon about the mysteries of the *Pater Noster* in the *First Dialogue*, and in the *Second Dialogue*, about a range of issues, asking riddle-like questions about books and wisdom, old age, transience, human misery, fate, and Christian doctrine. While straightforward comparison with the Old Norse contests of wits in *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Hervarar saga* are not possible in the case of the Solomon dialogues, an indirect connection appears conceivable because of the previously mentioned motif of the teasing trickster figure that Saturn encapsulates.[28] In his study of *Vafþrúðnismál,* Ármann Jakobsson draws a

24 *Vafþrúðnismál*.

25 *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*.

26 Huizinga, 'Playing and Knowing' in *Homo Ludens*, p. 131.

27 So far, the most exhaustive edition remains *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*. See also O'Neill, 'On the Date, Provenance and Relationship'.

28 Various versions of the dialogues between Solomon and Saturn can be associated with later medieval dialogues between King Solomon and the so-called Marolf/Marchiandus/Marcolphus,

parallel between the figure of Óðinn confronting Vafþrúðnir in the guise of Gangráðr and the deceptive and sprightly Saturn.[29] However, while in *Vafþrúðnismál* the shapeshifting of Óðinn is self-evident, it is less so in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn* dialogues, although it is not entirely absent, as Solomon's wisdom leads Saturn to experience a transformation which takes place after his ignorance has been put to shame by the king:

> Hæfde ða se snotra sunu Dauides
> forcumen and forcyðed Caldea eorl.
> Hwæðre was on sælum se ðe of siðe cwom
> feorran gefered; næfre ær his ferhð ahlog.[30] (ll. 175–178)
>
> [Then had the wise son of David surpassed and rebuked with his knowledge the Chaldean prince. However he who had come on that journey from far away was glad; never before his spirit had laughed.]

The laughter at the end is curious and it is not without both transformative and incendiary undertones; the overpowered Saturn seems to be still in possession of some of his potential for jesting as well as for subversion.

Setting the riddle dialogues and contests aside, perhaps the symbolic key to all the shapeshifting carried by the Exeter Book riddles is held by one particular riddle: Riddle 40. The majority of this riddle is fashioned from shapes that morph into other shapes and which have the effect of setting an overarching theme of mutability upon those of the riddles in which defamiliarization of the object is founded upon the idea of replacing one identity with another. Riddle 40, whose conceit resembles Aldhelm's Enigma C '*De Creatura*',[31] is a depiction of the transformative and transforming essence of the divine creation which permeates every visible and invisible aspect of the world and which speaks of itself as holding the world in an invisible embrace of the creator's Logos:

that is, disputes between the sage king and a plebeian smart aleck who cleverly solves the riddles posed by the king and manages to ridicule him. A 16th c. version of the dispute circulated under the title *Disputationes quas dicuntur habuisse inter se mutuo rex Salomon sapientissimus et Marcolphus facie deformis et turpissimus, tamen- ut fertur- eloquentissimus*, translated into Polish by Jan of Koszyczki as *Rozmowy, które miał król Salomon mądry z Marchołtem grubym i sprośnym, a wszakoż, jako o nim powiadają, barzo zwymownym, z figurami i gadkami śmiesznymi*, published by Hieronim Wietor in Kraków, in 1521. See: *Solomon and Morcolf*.

29 Ármann Jakobsson, 'A Contest of Cosmic Fathers', p. 269.

30 'Solomon and Saturn' in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, pp. 37–38.

31 On the correspondences between the two riddles see: O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The Text of Aldhelm's Enigma No. C.'.

swa ic mid waldendes worde ealne
þisne ymbhwyrft utan ymbclyppe. (Riddle 40, ll. 14–15)

[how I with the wielder's word always hold around this circular course a tight embrace.]

The central idea at play in this longest of all Exeter Book riddles is not only the omniscience of the divine creation, but its constant becoming and endless mutations, the world as invariably in the making. The main body of the riddle describes an idea which is composed from a series of opposites and antithetical attributes of tangible and intangible reality: moving from sleep to wakefulness, at once timidly fearful and bold and raging as a boar (ll. 16–19); fragrant as a rose and reeking of the stench of decay (ll. 23–32); higher and greater than heaven and present in undergrounds pits of evil spirits (ll. 38–41); older than the universe and born the previous day (ll. 42–45); more beautiful than the ornaments of filigree and as ugly as slimy wood (ll. 46–49); and greater than everything yet small enough to be held in three fingers (ll. 50–53). The disparities continue throughout and move from hot to cold, sweetness to bitterness, voraciousness to fasting, speed to sluggishness, weight to lightness, softness to hardness, a power greater than anything and anyone and yet subject to the rule of the creator, strength to weakness, and hairiness to baldness. In all of the incandescent dissimilarities the riddle resembles the vision of the cross from *The Dream of the Rood* as simultaneously the cross of shame and glory, immediately transforming from one into the other and back again. At the same time, the seemingly haphazard order in which the contrasts of Riddle 40 are presented may be serving a deeper purpose of unpredictability of the transformations and the fact that they elude any expected order, as indeed the command of the divine creation eludes human categories. The one principle which governs all other principles is that of unpredictability, surprise and ceaseless transmogrification:

Eal ic under heofones hwearfte recce,
swa me leof fæder lærde æt frymþe,
þæt ic þa mid ryhte reccan moste
þicce ond þynne; þinga gehwylces
onlicnesse æghwær healde. (Riddle 40, ll. 33–37)

[I extend over everything under heaven as my beloved father taught me at the beginning, that I rule with righteousness over thick and thin; and hold everywhere the likeness of all things.]

These mutations in divine creation come both from within itself and yet, since creation does not exist outside the divine, they are also the effect of it being set into constant motion by its divine father; they resemble in this way a combination of both internal and external instigation of shapeshifting. The gnomic aspect of these statements of endless mutations and of the endless shapeshifting of creation is thus made evident. In a subversive way this aspect may be additionally enhanced by the playfulness and trickery which are also present in the riddle, since the juxtapositions often refer to the categories that are refined and sublime only to be sharply contrasted with those that are base and repulsive.

Such contradictions are also potentially present in the double-entendre riddles, whose solutions are, understandably, double: both their erotic and non-erotic objects are their legitimate and fully functional answers. In Riddle 40, in a genuinely shapeshifting manner, a fragrance becomes a stench, and ornamented gold becomes rotten wood:

Ic eom fægerre	frætwum goldes,
þeah hit mon awerge	wirum utan;
ic eom wyrslicre	þonne þes wudu fula
oððe þis waroð	þe her aworpen ligeð. (Riddle 40, ll. 46–49)

[I am fairer than the ornamented gold that men with wires adorn; I am more vile than this foul wood or this sea-weed that lies cast on the shore.]

If Riddle 40 is an example of a riddle where the shapeshifting is caused by the object's internal characteristic, Riddle 26, solved as the Bible, is an equally momentous riddle referring to the transformation of shapes, although in this case the conversion is caused by external agency. The riddle is an example of the type of materially inside-out and hypostatic description, mentioned above. The Bible is its indisputable solution, but the riddle only partially focuses on the powers and qualities of the Scripture as holy Logos. Instead, the enigmatic potential is revealed from the description of the transformation, that is, a gradual shapeshifting, described in the tortuous and torturous process of how an animal is first transformed into parchment, then how the parchment takes the physical form of the book, which, in turn, becomes the Holy Scripture.[32]

32 For a discussion of the theme of 'the flesh made into word' among the Exeter Book riddles see: Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, pp.170–190.

Mec feonda sum
woruldstrenga binom,
dyfde on wætre,
sette on sunnan,
herum þam þe ic hæfde.
snað seaxses ecg,
fingras feoldan,
geond speddropum
ofer brunne brerd,
streames dæle,
siþade sweartlast.
hæleð hleobordum,
gierede mec mid golde;
wrætlic weorc smiþa,
Nu þa gereno
ond þa wuldorgesteald
dryhtfolca helm,
feore besnyþede,
wætte siþþan,
dyde eft þonan,
þær ic swiþe beleas
Heard mec siþþan
sindrum begrunden;
ond mec fugles wyn
spyrede geneahhe,
beamtelge swealg,
stop eft on mec,
Mec siþþan wrah
hyde beþenede,
forþon me gliwedon
wire bifongen.
ond se reada telg
wide mære
nales dol wite. (Riddle 26, ll. 1–17)

[Some foe deprived me of my physical strength, wetted and dipped me in water, did it again, set me in the sun, where I lost all the hair that I had. Then a hard edge of a long knife cleaned me of impurities, fingers folded me and the bird's joy struck abundantly over my brown brim with successful drops, swallowing tree-dye mixed with some water, stepping often on me, leaving dark traces. A brave man then bound me with protective boards, covered with hide, clothed me with gold; with that I was ornamented with the wondrous work of smiths, wrapped around with wire. Now the decoration and the red dye, and my glorious possessions affirm the wide fame of the lord of multitudes, not the foolish sins.]

All of these transformations are narrated in the first person, which, as is evident, is not meant to represent one speaking body or object, but many: an animal, its hide, the vellum made from it, the book and, eventually, the Bible. In all likelihood, the gnomic aspect related to the shapeshifting which is being described is meant to hermeneutically mirror the process of the transformation experienced by those who are being changed for the better by the powers of the Scriptures and are to become healthier, more courageous, happier, and surrounded with friends (ll. 18–26). Ultimately, then, the shapeshifting which is present here is meant to be experienced externally by the riddle's audience as much as it is experienced through what may be called an anagogic reflection of Christ's sacrifice and

transformation in the sacrifice and transformation of an animal into the holy book.

The narrative of the riddle opens with a seemingly startling revelation that its speaking object is already dead and yet, despite this, not only is it able to communicate with the audience, but it is eventually able to heal people's minds and bodies, the promise is that *hy beoð þy gesundran* ('they will be sounder', l. 19) if they use it well. The shapeshifting and deformation take place on several levels. At first the object is described as a hybrid possessing the qualities of the living and of the dead. Absence and magnification may also be said to operate on this level, since the process of preparing the vellum and of writing upon it lacks the human agent and is instead performed by an animated long knife (the *seax*, l. 6) and then a feather, kenninged into a *fugles wyn* ('bird's joy', l. 7). Once the whole is seen as the Bible, the absence of the scribe may be hyperbolised into the presence of God, the ultimate agent behind any change, since the text, as the Holy Writ, is divinely inspired. The man, however, appears the moment the object speaks of being bound with boards and decorated with gold (ll. 11–14). Intriguingly, the action of binding and adorning the book is a form of deformation and shapeshifting as well, since it clearly would not be applied to any living creature which the object presents itself as. We reach here the crucial understanding of the transformations, as their goal appears to be to point to the Bible's hypostasis, that is, to its transformative potency and its power to turn death into life, not only that of the animal whose hide was used to produce the physical Bible, but also of mortal men once they choose to follow it. This transformation may only take place, the riddle seems to be saying, after a transformative deformation has taken effect, mirroring in this the sacrificial, life-giving and shapeshifting death of Christ.

Again, as was the case with Riddle 40, the element of trickery is not entirely absent from the context of Riddle 26. However, it is not present in the Bible riddle itself, but in its relation to the riddle preceding it, and whose solutions are simultaneously 'onion' and 'penis':

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,
neahbuendum nyt;
burgsittendra,
Staþol min is steapheah,
neoþan ruh nathwær.
ful cyrtenu
modwlonc meowle,
ræseð mec on reodne,
wifum on hyhte,
nængum sceþþe
nymþe bonan anum.
stonde ic on bedde,
Neþeð hwilum
ceorles dohtor,
þæt heo on mec gripeð,
reafað min heafod,

fegeð mec on fæsten. Feleþ sona
mines gemotes, seo þe mec nearwað,
wif wundenlocc. Wæt bið þæt eage. (Riddle 25)

[I am a wonderful being, a woman's joy, of advantage to neighbours; I do not hurt any city-dweller except my own killer. My stem is very high, I stand in bed, my root is shaggy. Sometimes a beautiful daughter of a freeman, a proud maiden, grabs me, rushes my redness violently, claims my head, binds my in tight place. Immediately will the curly-haired woman who grabs me feel our coming together. Her eye is wet.]

As one of the double-entendre riddles, Riddle 25 is a shapeshifter per se, as its two solutions, in other words its two identities and two shapes, operate concurrently, one becoming the other the moment the reader's perception or point of view is shifted from one way of looking at its clues to the other. Granted, as with all other double-entendre riddles, and as with the jokes of such type, the focus is chiefly located upon the erotic solution which leads to the comical effect of the riddle, but the peculiarity of this effect is enhanced precisely because of the location of this riddle next to Riddle 26. I have argued elsewhere that the only logical explanation for the immediate proximity between the two may be in the fact that both of them may be understood as fundamentally concerned with the perpetuation of life; physical, in the case of Riddle 25 and spiritual, in the case of Riddle 26.[33]

Although it is, as I have already said, beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse the examples and categories of all the Old English riddles that refer to shapeshifting, the final instance among the Exeter Book riddles which I propose for consideration in this chapter is what I shall call here an example of meta-shapeshifting, that is, a transformation which, as well as occurring on the level of the riddle's narrative description, is additionally located within a linguistic and visual transformation. The first example of this type is found among the several riddles which employ the runic script to encode their solutions.[34] Three of them resort to a reshuffling of the characters that spell the name of the object they enigmatise: the cryptic Riddle 19 *Snacc* ('a sailing vessel'), Riddle 23 'Bow' and Riddle 24 'Magpie'. The runic characters which appear in these riddles, when properly rearranged, either hint at the solution or they spell it. The former method is used in Riddle

33 Borysławski, *The Old English Riddles*, pp. 159–160.

34 On the use of runic characters in Exeter Book riddles see: Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book'; DiNapoli, 'Odd Characters'; and Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, pp. 83–97.

19 where the characters present backwards spellings of *hors* 'horse', *mon* 'man', *wegar* 'spear', and *haofoc* 'hawk'. Together, as Mark Griffith argues, they appear to describe a military sailing vessel, a *snacc*.[35] In Riddles 23 and 24 the solution is more straightforward as they both contain only one set of runes respectively spelling *agof*, a miswritten rendering of *boga* 'bow', and *higora* 'magpie'. It is, however, in Riddle 24 that the shapeshifting is located on several levels:

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,
hwilum beorce swa hund,
hwilum græde swa gos,
hwilum ic onhyrge
guðfugles hleoþor,
muþe gemæne,
þær ic glado sitte.
swylce .Æ. ond .R.
.H. ond .I.
swa þa siex stafas
wræsne mine stefne,
hwilum blæte swa gat,
hwilum gielle swa hafoc,
þone haswan earn,
hwilum glidan reorde
hwilum mæwes song,
.G. mec nemnað,
.O. fullesteð,
Nu ic haten eom
sweotule becnaþ. (Riddle 24)[36]

[I am a wonderful being, I change my voice, at times I bark like a dog, at times I bleat like a goat, at times I cry like a goose, at times I scream like a hawk, at times I imitate that grey eagle, with the cry of a battle-bird, at times I speak with the tongue of a kite, at times with the song of a sea-gull, where I remain gladly. G names me, and also Æ and R. O upholds H and I. Now I am named as these six letters manifestly signify.]

The association of magpies with trickery and the ability to imitate and change voices, as noted by Isidore of Seville,[37] forms the most external level of shapeshifting whereby the bird is a trickster swiftly moving between the false identities that the riddle mentions: a dog, goat, goose, hawk, eagle, kite, and gull. The ability to change voices and thus to pass unrecognized as all of these creatures one after another may be seen as an aspect of shapeshifting here, but the literal change of the shape takes place at the level of language, with *higora*, as the name of the bird, morphing into an apparently unrecognizable lexical form of *gærohi* in ll. 7–10 of the riddle.

35 See: Griffith, 'Riddle 19 of the Exeter Book', pp. 15–16.

36 The runic characters are rendered here (and in Muir) by the letters signifying their respective phonetic values.

37 *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, XII, vii, p. 267.

A new shape is formed from an earlier shape, mirroring the bird's ability to change its voice since, naturally, the new spelling reads differently. Moreover, just as the bird would speak with the voices of other creatures, the scattered signs invite new readings, ranging from the possibilities brought by the combinations between the runes and their semantic values of G *gyfu* 'gift', Æ *æsc* 'ash', R *rad* 'road', O *os* 'mouth', H *hægl* 'hail', and I *is* 'ice'; an invitation to form anagrams. On an even more general plane, the runes scattered in the closing lines of the riddle may visually invite images of runic shapes, the Latin insular script letters and animal shapes coiling and uncoiling, morphing into one another in the manner of zoomorphic ornaments and interlace art.

In conclusion, let us reiterate the fact that the number of individual examples of shapeshifting present in the content and clues to the Exeter Book riddles vastly exceeds the space of this chapter. They are indeed manifold and include such diverse transformations as natural phenomena, such as those of the 'Storm' and 'Earthquake' in Riddles 1, 2 and 3, of the iceberg and ice in Riddles 33 and 69, and of water in Riddle 84. The riddles of the avian group, nos. 7, 8, 9 and 10, along with the above analysed Riddle 24 are yet another set with shapeshifting at their core. Shapeshifting is likewise to be found in the riddles which describe the speaking, personified, man-made objects, especially those related to the sphere of warfare, such as the sword of Riddle 20, the mail-coat of Riddle 35 and the battering ram of Riddle 53, as well as those related to the phenomenon of *muðleas sprǽc* 'mouthless speech', that is writing and writing implements, such as the rune-stave of Riddle 60, and the inkhorns of Riddles 88 and 93. As mentioned earlier, all the jocular double-entendre riddles are also obvious shapeshifters and so is the playful Riddle 86 'One-Eyed Seller of Garlic', inspired by a Latin riddle by Symphosius, whose solution is at once monstrous and humorous. As is evident, any attempt at a more detailed treatment of all the instances of shapeshifting among the Exeter Book riddles would exceed the limited space of a book chapter. Therefore two approaches to the theme of shapeshifting in the Old English riddles are possible. One could be an in-depth analysis of its selected aspect manifested by a chosen riddle poem. The other has been chosen as the method of this essay, in which I have endeavoured to present those of the elements of shapeshifting which connect this narrative motif with the chief principles and mechanisms of the poetic riddle. It is by contemplating their different, yet also remarkably similar ways and functions, that the cognitive and creative instruments of the early Middle Ages are brought to, and benefit from the heightened attention they require.

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About the Author

Rafał Borysławski, Ph.D., D.Litt., is an Associate Professor in the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures, University of Silesia, Poland, and his research focuses mainly on Old English culture and literature. He has published a book on the idea of enigmaticity in Old English literature and over forty papers discussing topics devoted to Old English philosophical and cultural outlooks, Middle English romances and fabliaux, and Old French literature and visual culture. He has also co-edited four volumes of scholarly papers related to medieval studies and intersections of history, historiography and philology and he has co-authored a project resulting in a book of his poetry and computer art inspired by medieval culture.

2. The Big Black Cats of Vatnsdalr and Other Trolls

Talking about shapeshifting in medieval Iceland

Ármann Jakobsson

Abstract
This study examines the ambiguity and mutability of magic in the Middle Ages and the close relationship between magic and shapeshifting. The medieval shapeshifting discourse is vague and leaves much of the creation of meaning to the audience, both concerning what is shape, what does a metamorphosis entail and what are the connotations of magical metamorphosis. Furthermore, it is examined how the state of troll is much beholden to the point of view of the beholder.

Keywords: Magic, paranormal, transmogrification, Iceland, sagas

The great cat massacre

In chapter 28 of *Vatnsdœla saga*, the audience is introduced to a man called Þórólfr the Hammer who became a great troublemaker, thief and a general nuisance ('inn mesti óspekðarmaðr, bæði var hann þjófr ok þó um annat stórilla fallinn').[1] His company is unwanted by all and even though he is

1 *Vatnsdœla saga* exists in late fourteenth-century manuscripts and has been dated to the 13th century by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and other scholars (see e.g. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Formáli', pp. li–lvi; he opts for *c.* 1270). Such dating is bound to be imprecise, especially in this case when there are no references to the period of writing in the text itself, and it has in any case very little bearing for this study if *Vatnsdœla saga* is regarded as a 13th or a 14th-century text. Of course, various scenes and narratives within the saga might well be even older (in written or more probably oral form) though there is no surviving attestation of this particular scene before the saga.

Barreiro, S. and L. Cordo Russo (eds), *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019
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not aided in his reign of terror by a human posse of impressive size, he does possess another weapon 'tuttugu kettir; þeir váru ákafliga stórir ok allir svartir ok mjǫk trylldir' (twenty cats; they were extremely large and all black and much entrolled).[2] In the face of this demonic presence, the people of the region eventually turn to the local magnate Þorsteinn Ingimundarson to complain about Þórólfr's looting. They tell him that it is a question of honour for him to cleanse his region of this bandit, even though Þorsteinn is somewhat reluctant to sacrifice his men in combat with the 'entrolled' cats.

Certainly, when Þorsteinn arrives with a great army at Þórólfr's abode, Sleggjustaðir, the latter is as unperturbed as modern supervillains also tend to be in the face of adversity. He gloats that he will defend his house with the fiendish cats: 'Síðan magnaði hann þá mjǫk, ok váru þeir þá stórum illiligir með emjun ok augnaskotum' ('Then he greatly infused them with magic and they became very sinister with their wailing and eye-rolling'). Þorsteinn's only recourse is to burn down the house, urging his men to keep safe from the cats. The villainous Þórólfr, again in perfect harmony with modern pop culture narratives featuring supervillains, eventually escapes the fire with his silver and is chased by a fearless Norwegian; a chase which ends with them both sinking into a mire. After the fire Þórólfr's farm becomes desolate, but it is remarked that ever since people have been known to see cats there.[3] This spectral coda to the tale of the entrolled feline beasts is indeed particularly noteworthy since it is so often the undead who are referred to as trollish in the sagas.[4]

The entrolled cats of Sleggjustaðir are typical of medieval Icelandic shapeshifting in that their actual metamorphosis is never explained nor described in detail nor elaborated on in any way in the narrative. For example, the audience will not know if they are permanently demonic or just able to transform into that state at will. Rather, it is left to the imagination of the saga audience, intended to be active participants in the creation of meaning of these texts. It is stated that they are 'trylldir' and later Þórólfr

2 See below for a discussion of the usage of this word.

3 *Vatnsdœla saga*, pp. 72–75. On the purpose of this episode in the saga and its relationship with the larger narrative, see Bernadine McCreesh, 'The Structure of Vatnsdœla saga'.

4 In the sagas of Icelanders, I have found four examples of the word 'trollsligr' (trollish), one in *Vatnsdœla saga* itself and others in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In *Vatnsdœla saga* example, it is a witch (Ljót) who is referred to as trollish, in *Eyrbyggja saga* a ghost/vampire, in *Kjalnesinga saga* a monstrous 'blámaðr' and in *Njáls saga* it is used in reference to Skarphéðinn Njálsson to suggest that he is a paranormal other (possibly related to magic) as will be discussed later in this study. I discuss the other examples in much more detail in a forthcoming article, 'The Troll'. On the figure of the *blámaðr* ('black man') see Richard Cole 'Racial Thinking in Old Norse Literature'.

'magnaði' them. The verb *magna* refers to power (*megin*), its literal meaning would be 'to empower', or 'to be empowered', and the word frequently makes an appearance when magic is mentioned in the sagas.[5] It is thus clearly indicated that this particular empowering is due to the magical power of the witch Þórólfr.

Trylldir is an opaque word that needs to be dissected by the modern scholar. I translated it above as 'entrolled', to mean more specifically 'metamorphosing into a troll',[6] which does not necessarily explain much since we still are in the dark about what such a metamorphosis entails. The word is not uncommonly used in saga narratives but is never explicitly defined and neither are the accompanying descriptions lengthy nor specific enough to remove the considerable ambiguity about what actually happens in such an 'entrolling'. In this, the Icelandic great cat massacre story is typical and a good starting point for a discussion of the concept of the troll, and of the action of 'entrolling'. At the same time, it offers some insights into the mysteries of paranormal shapeshifting, for example, the question of how cats can transubstantiate into trolls, and how can we conceptualise the beasts that emerge from the trolling?

What is happening?

Paranormal shapeshifting can never be easily defined, partly because most narratives that depict it seem extremely vague from the point of view of the technical modern world with its many detailed instruction manuals. Far from being scientific in any way, either clinical or technical, Old Norse shapeshifting narratives normally leave the audience only with the sense of terror and dread that they can imagine the brave humans confronting such horrors as the cat-shaped trolls must have felt. The occult should perhaps not be too visible since that will only serve to reduce its terror.

In the tale of the Sleggjustaðir horror, what is left unstated is how exactly the cats are different from ordinary cats. The shapeshifting of the cats is

5 These examples are too frequent to be discussed in detail, but, for example, include *Heimskringla*, p. 312, *Fóstbrœðra* saga, p. 164, and *Grettis saga*, p. 256, in all cases exemplifying how the word is commonplace in saga descriptions of magic.

6 A good example of this is found in *Bárðar saga*, p. 113, where Bárðr's companions during the settlement of Iceland, Svalr and Þúfa, vanish up to the mountain and 'tryllduskþar bæði' ('both became entrolled there'). After this, they become a nuisance in the region 'sakir trǫlldóms' ('because of magic'), much like Þórólfr the Hammer, until Bárðr wrestles with both of them and kills them, cleansing the land of the evil of these trolls.

conveyed merely with the words 'trylldir' and 'magnaðir' and the mention of fairly vague symptoms in their eyes and their wailing voices ('emjun ok augnskotum'); it is less clear if their black hue and impressive size are parts of the magical state. We can but imagine their crazed eyes and the terrible sounds they make but there is no exact rendering either. We know that the cats transform but not exactly how or what they transform into, or even why, though magic is clearly indicated by the word 'trylldir'.

These monsters are still cats but they are also the 'other' into which they have transmogrified. The nature of the shapeshifter is to be a liminal creature, two things at once, not simply to leave one state to enter definitively into another. As monsters, these cats must seem uncanny to the humans facing them. A cat, even in the distant age before the emergence of the digital phenomenon of cat pictures and videos, is the most familiar of animals, in its own way friendly and harmless. And yet cats are also undeniably bloodthirsty hunters and killers, and still retain in their facial features and physique a strong resemblance to their far bigger and more dangerous relatives, such as the lion. Though it is hard to say how well acquainted a late medieval Icelandic audience would be with the big cats of other continents, knowledge of some of this natural uncanny quality may still have influenced the tale of Þórólfr's paranormal cats.[7]

Going beyond the signification of cats, this case study may lead us to further questions pertinent to shapeshifting in the Old Norse sagas and medieval Icelandic culture in general, questions such as: what happened? What kind of trolls did Þorsteinn and his men see and hear at Sleggjustaðir? And, furthermore: what is the essence of shape and how does it shift? What is primary there, the body or the soul? Did people clearly distinguish between the two, even in such folk narratives? Such questions can be asked, though there may not be conclusive answers.

Shapeshifting as the essence of a troll

Þórólfr the Hammer's entrolled cats may serve as a reminder that the state of troll is fundamentally dynamic, with the verbs 'trylla' and 'tryllask' and the participle or adjective 'trylldr' being just as commonly seen in the medieval texts as the nominative 'troll'. Thus, troll narratives are inherently stories

7 The demonic possibilities of cats in the Middle Ages are well attested, see Irina Metzler, 'Heretical Cats'. Apart from *Vatnsdœla saga*, *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* features a demonic cat (pp. 415–417). This narrative is usually seen as younger than *Vatnsdœla saga*.

about paranormal shapeshifting, whether the troll in question is a paranormal warrior, a ghost, a magician or a possessed beast, such as Þórólfr's cats.[8] Magic is usually involved, explicitly or implicitly: some occult and impenetrable powers are needed to facilitate this shapeshifting. A cat may be just a cat but Þórólfr's demonic cats are far from typical. Due to their empowerment by Þórólfr, they are now something else; in essence, they are trolls. Apart from their wailing and eye-rolling, they may still somehow bear an uncanny resemblance to cats, and yet their shape is now clearly different. There is no doubt about their transformation, although which of their typical feline traits they retain and precisely which new monstrous features they have assumed is not entirely clear and is left to the imagination of the saga audience.

The common occurrence of these verb forms might indicate that no being necessarily starts its existence as a troll but that they become trolls through the application of magic. That would mean that shapeshifting is essential to the troll, and that a troll is always some kind of a shapeshifter. No narrative suggests an absolute transformation of appearance but rather, they indicate an uncanny change in which the altered being still retains some semblance of its own previous untrollish visage and yet the trollish state is still highly visible.

In the last two centuries or so, scholarly thinking about trolls has been conducted within the parameters of scholarly thinking about races and species. There is little evidence to suggest, though, that medieval trolls were ever thought of as a distinct race or species in the modern sense. The word was used for various kinds of magical beings, whether we are discussing the magicians themselves or some other creature that they had infused with their magic, or possibly an undead or, as in *Vatnsdœla saga*, a posse of large black cats. However, not only animals could be trolls; many of them were human. This includes both the undead and normal humans from the everyday life who may possibly be magicians, such as the wise and benevolent Geirríðr from *Eyrbyggja saga*, whom her rival magician and adversary Katla once maliciously refers to as 'Geirríðr trollit'.[9]

In medieval Iceland, the troll is a ubiquitous enemy. It is not merely confined to a given type of location, such as the mountains, and neither is it necessarily a clearly definable 'other'. The troll may already be or yet become your neighbour, or even his cat. Magic can conceal itself everywhere. There is no relief, and the vigilance must be constant.

8 For further discussion of the parametres of the medieval Northern troll, see Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You*.

9 *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 53.

The hero as shapeshifter

Saga narratives not only introduce their audience to such unlikely trolls as the black cats of Sleggjustaðir. They also surreptitiously tell us that the very concept of the troll depends on one's point of view. This is demonstrated in narratives where the protagonists themselves are referred to as trolls or troll-like, such as when Skarpheðinn Njálsson, son of *Njáls saga*'s eponymous protagonist, is referred to as 'trǫllsligr' when in the company of his brothers and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson at the *alþing*.[10]

Is there a difference between being a troll and being troll-like? Possibly the difference lies in the stance of the beholder who cannot be positive as to whether what they see is a troll. The word 'trǫllsligr' leaves the audience without firm certainty but when it comes to the person thus described, there may not be any fundamental difference between troll and troll-like. The troll-like person does not merely innocently resemble a troll; they are under suspicion of being a troll.

The magnate who uses this term, Skapti Þóroddsson, does not want to give any aid to the Njálssons and compounds his refusal by suggesting that Skarphéðinn is a demon, inferring this apparently only from Skarhéðinn's haggard looks.[11] Though usually exhibiting some notable visual features, the troll is nevertheless always defined by its actions and thus the use of the word could suggest that Skarpheðinn is guilty of some unstated abominable acts.[12] It seems logical that the audience is expected to be indignant: Skarpheðinn is randomly and wrongly accused of trollish behaviour when he is in fact a noble man who, more or less, behaves honourably in the saga.

Shortly after the slanderous accusation, Skarpheðinn is faced with another mocking magnate, Þorkell the Bully ('hákr'). As he indeed does every time, he fights back with gradually accelerating insults, culminating in the insinuation that Þorkell's shepherd has seen his master eat 'razgarnarendann merarinnar' ('the arse of the mare') before he rode to

10 The Icelandic general assembly, that in the early period had legislative and judiciary functions, and served as one of the main centres of social and political activities of the country.

11 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 298.

12 In a previous episode in the saga, other enemies suggest that the beards of Skarpheðinn and his brothers are magical and originate from the smearing faeces in their faces (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 113–14). The relationship between the anus, excrement and the demonic is well established and thus the suggestion is far from innocent or simply grotesque. Much like in the words of the magnate at the *alþing*, the indirect suggestion from this accusation (calling him 'dungface') is that Skarpheðinn is, in fact, a creature of the night, a demon.

parliament.[13] The insult causes Þorkell to fly off his seat in rage, perhaps understandably because Skarpheðinn seems to be insinuating both sodomy (it is not just any part of the mare that Þorkell is supposed to have eaten),[14] and a violation of the ban against eating horse-meat associated with the Christianization of Iceland around the turn of the first millennium.[15] But he does not say that Þorkell is trollish or uncanny or that he is no longer fully human. This may be because he does not need to: the heinous act referred to connects Þorkell with the nether regions of the body that are closely connected with the devil in the European culture of the period.[16] Thus Skarpheðinn, having been called troll-like, pays the insult forward by also indirectly calling Þorkell a troll.

When Skarpheðinn is accused of having the look of a troll about him, the accuser means that he is not merely a human but also a troll, which means that he, too, can metamorphose. This is not a good quality, as it makes him less human. Þorkell, when allegedly eating the horse's rear end, is also transforming and losing some of his humanity. In the accusation, both noble men are no better than the wailing cats of Vatnsdalr: all are part as the same fiendish otherworld which is ungodly and thus demonic.

Skarpheðinn and Þorkell's skirmish illustrates the essentially negative image of magic, shapeshifting and trollishness in the sagas. The protagonist may be accused of exercising transformative powers, but he will defend himself and, as in the case of Skarpheðinn, cleverly place the demonic otherness elsewhere. Only Gull-Þórir, hero of the atypical *Þorskfirðinga saga*,[17] after having battled draconic shapeshifters in his youth, vanishes in his old age when people believe he turned into a dragon. The coda of his story eerily resembles the end of the *Vatnsdœla saga* cat episode: '[Þ]at hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka orðit ok hafi lagizt á gullkistur sínar. Helzt þat ok lengi síðan, at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan um þeim megin frá Þórisstǫðum' ('People see it as true that he turned into a dragon to rest on

13 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 305.

14 In fact he is turning the old accusation against himself (of his beard originating from the produce of the rear end) against Þorkell: both are essentially accused of eating the arse.

15 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 305.

16 And also, in Iceland, see e.g. Davíð Erlingsson, 'Frá hrópi til saurs'.

17 *Þorskfirðinga saga* is usually categorised among the 'youngish' Sagas of Icelanders, composed in the early 14th century, although recently Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir has suggested that it is the work of Sturla Þórðarson ('Hvem skrev Þorskfirðinga saga?'; cf. Daniel Sävborg, 'Den efterklassiska islänningasagan och dess ålder', at pp. 43–45 and 49–53). It has received scant scholarly attention, apart from a brief insightful article published in 2004 (Phil Cardew, 'The Question of Genre in the Late Íslendinga sögur').

his chests of gold. For a long while people saw a dragon flying in the air on that side of Þórisstaðir').[18]

In Vatnsdalur, people still see cats. In Þorskafjörður, a dragon may be spotted high in the air. In the sagas, the normal and the paranormal exist side by side and so do humans and animals. However, magic and entrolling may create an uncanny and inexplicable entrance for the two to conflate.

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18 *Þorskfirðinga saga*, p. 226. Phil Cardew has suggested that we should regard the saga's treatment of shapeshifting as ironic ('Hamhleypur in Þorskfirðinga saga') and it is certainly unusual.

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About the author

Ármann Jakobsson is professor of early Icelandic literature at the University of Iceland and the author of *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (2017), *Íslendingaþættir: Saga hugmyndar* (2014), *A Sense of Belonging: Morkinskinna and Icelandic Identity c. 1220* (2014), and *Nine Saga Studies: The Critical Interpretation of the Icelandic Sagas* (2013). He has also edited *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (with Sverrir Jakobsson, 2017) and Morkinskinna in two volumes in the Íslenzk fornrit series (with Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, 2011). He has also published several other books and articles.

3. The Hoard Makes the Dragon

Fáfnir as a Shapeshifter[1]

Santiago Barreiro

Abstract
This text analyses the link between treasure hoarding and shapeshifting in the stories about Fáfnir, the main antagonist of the young Sigurðr and keeper of the cursed hoard of Andvari. I examine the motif of a man who metamorphoses into a dragon in the Old Norse corpus and compare it with similar Anglo-Saxon figures, such as the Dragon in *Beowulf* and in the *Maxims*. Moreover, I argue that the native categories about dragons are different from those derived from Christian and Classical learning as known in thirteenth-century Iceland (the dragon as an allegory of evil and the dragon as a large serpent) being closely entwined with the social and literary rejection of greed and immobilised wealth.

Keywords: Dragons, Greed, Old Norse Literature, Vǫlsungar, Fáfnir.

Introduction

Fáfnir is undoubtedly the most famous dragon in Norse literature, and certainly one of the most famous in the literatures written in Germanic languages during the Middle Ages, arguably on par with the nameless beast in *Beowulf*. Dragons are not as abundant as popularly imagined in these literatures, although they are not as rare as Tolkien suggested, as Paul Acker has shown.[2] Moreover, Fáfnir is arguably less stereotypically

1 I want to thank Katarzyna Kapitan, Richard Cole, Elsa Rodríguez Cidre, Esteban Greif, Lisbeth Heidemann Torfing, Ryder Patzuk-Russell, Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir and Werner Schäfke for their help with bibliography and comments to this text.
2 Acker, 'Death by Dragons'.

Barreiro, S. and L. Cordo Russo (eds), *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019
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dragonesque than his Old English fire-breathing cousin, for a simple reason:[3] he lives for a good portion of his life in bipedal, humanoid form together with his relatives, quite a different life from the seemingly lonely existence experienced by Beowulf's last antagonist.[4] In simple terms, Fáfnir is not a dragon, but (initially) a man.

However, his family displays a noticeable tendency towards ontological ambiguity.[5] His relatives are described in much more detail in the Norse sources than in the English or German: we know of his brothers Reginn and Otr, his father Hreiðmarr and of two elusive sisters, Lyngheiðr and Lofnheiðr. Both the eddic poetry of the Sigurðr cycle in *Snorra Edda*, and *Vǫlsunga saga* convey a good picture of his immediate kin. For example, Reginn describes his brothers in these terms:

> Otr, bróðir minn, hafði aðra iðn ok náttúru. Hann var veiðimaðr mikill ok um fram aðra menn ok var í otrs líki um daga ok var jafnan í ánni ok bar upp fiska með munni sér. Veiðifǫngin færði hann feðr sínum, ok var honum þat mikill styrkr. Mjǫk hefir hann otrs líki á sér, kom síð heim ok át blundandi ok einn saman, því at hann mátti eigi sjá, at þyrri. Fáfnir var miklu mestr ok grimmastr ok vildi sitt eitt kalla láta allt þat, er var.[6]
>
> [Otr, my brother, had another occupation and nature. He was a great fisherman, more skilled than other men, and was in the shape of an otter during the day and he was always in the river and caught fish with his mouth. He brought the catch for his father, and that was of much help for him. He had much of an otter in him, he came late home, ate closing his eyes and alone, because he could not see the food diminish. Fáfnir

3 Unless the monster in *Beowulf* is also a shapeshifted man, an issue discussed later in this article.

4 On the Beowulfian dragon and its link with hoards, see Evans, 'Semiotics and Traditional Lore', Symons, 'Wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah'.

5 This likely reflects an old tradition in the Norse world: discussing migration era and viking-age representations, one finds that 'the depictions not only cross the boundaries between various animal species but also the boundary between animals and humans' (Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, p. 74). See also Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, pp. 189–195), who mentions that the representation of serpentine animals in Scandinavia is common, and began in the Late Bronze Age. It is interesting to remark that several serpents depicted in runestones have been interpreted as protective of the boundaries of the inherited land (*ibid.*, pp. 209–211).

6 *Vǫlsunga saga,* ch. 14, p. 25. Primary sources are quoted by chapter, line or stanza and page number in the quoted edition, with the exception of the Old English Maxims and Skaldic poems, which are available online in the *Anglo-Saxon poetic records* and the Skaldic Poetry of the *Scandinavian Middle Ages databases*. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted. Eddic poetry is quoted from Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólasson, *Eddukvæði.*

was the by far the biggest and fiercest and he wanted to claim everything as his own.]

Otr is otter-like in behaviour and he shapeshifts easily into an otter; the presentation of Fáfnir as large, fierce and possessive perhaps hints at his later transformation.[7]

Across the Norse literary corpus such details of presentation often suggest that these characters are of both social and narrative importance. It is infrequent that a significant character in a long saga fails to be given a detailed genealogy. When he or she does lack it, it is often remarked that he is antisocial and thus a potentially problematic or dislikeable person.[8] Indeed, we can imagine that the Beowulfian dragon would not have been given a similarly prominent presentation if he were a saga character, as he (unlike Grendel) is 'nameless and without parentage'.[9]

However, by other narrative devices *Beowulf* certainly informs us about the previous owners of the treasure:

Ealle hīe dēað fornam / ærran mælum, ond sē ān ðā ġēn / lēoda duguðe, sē ðær lenġest hwearf, weard wineġeōmor, wēnde þæs ylcan.[10]

[Death took them all in earlier times, and now that one who remained of the warriors of the people, the one who longest remained, the friend-grieving warden, expected that same fate.]

This loner had no choice but to abandon the treasure, which is the cause of the coming of the dragon. He became devoid of social ties when his companions died, and limited himself to guarding his gold while waiting for death.

I think that a similar line of inquire can help us explain Fáfnir's shapeshifting, especially because the link between loneliness and hoarding present in *Beowulf* reappears in medieval Icelandic literature, for example in a wonderful and bizarre story known as the *Dalafífla þáttr* ('The tale of the fools of the valley'), included in *Gautreks saga* (1–2: III, 3–14). In that tale,

7 The prose introducing *Reginsmál* and the retelling in *Snorra Edda* say nothing about Otr's nature, and thus in strict terms my argument here only applies to *Vǫlsunga saga*, not to the whole cycle.

8 A paradigmatic example is the contrast between Hœnsa-Þórir and the other characters (such as Blund-Ketill and Tungu-Oddr) who are introduced in the first chapter of his saga.

9 Beekman Taylor, 'The Dragon's treasure in Beowulf', p. 236.

10 *Beowulf*, vv. 2236–2239, p. 76.

an endogamic family of misers prefers to suicide than to share any of their wealth with outsiders, and they also fear creating progeny.[11] Of course, in the warlord-and-retainer world of the loner in *Beowulf*, the ties to (not) be reproduced are not those of kinship (as in the *þáttr*), but social, martial and masculine ones. These ties of the *comitatus* must be reproduced through reciprocity and redistribution,[12] which, however, also operate at the family level, as argued by anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins,[13] and this connects the theme in both narratives. Inversely, bonds between humans are thus severed by hoarding and greed.

The tale of Fáfnir, like *Dalafífla þáttr,* is one of a dysfunctional family[14] disrupted by unexpected visitors, and like the final part of *Beowulf*, it is one of an unshared treasure guarded by a reptilian monster. Moreover, in both stories, the dragon appears as an effect of the treasure.[15] After killing his father[16] and scaring away his younger brother Reginn, *Snorra Edda* informs us that:

> Fáfnir fór upp á Gnitaheiði ok gerði sér þar ból ok brásk í orms líki ok lagðisk á gullit.[17]
>
> [Fáfnir went up to Gnita's heath and made himself a dwelling there and changed into the shape of an *ormr* and laid on the gold.]

11 Kalinke, 'Endogamy as the Crux'.

12 Bazelmanns, *By Weapons Made Worthy*.

13 *Stone Age Economics*.

14 This is not the only tale in Old Norse literature marked by the theme (See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Egils saga and Empathy').

15 There is an interesting hint of this in the epithet *Fáfnisbani*. It is usually attached to Sigurðr, the literal bane of Fáfnir. But it can also refer to the treasure which ultimately lead to his death, as for example in some versions of the Icelandic rune poem(s), which use it to name the letter ᚠ, 'fé' meaning 'cattle, wealth' (see Symons, '"Wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah"', p. 82). Interestingly, Finch notices that the treasure is not associated with the dragon in the German material of the Vǫlsungar/Nibelungs cycle but with dwarfs. In his opinion, 'The original monster probably had no treasure' (*Vǫlsunga saga*, introduction, p.XXVIII). Hilda Ellis-Davidson ('The Hoard of the Nibelungs') discussed the variations between the German and Norse versions of the epic cycle in their depiction of the hoard.

16 *Vǫlsunga saga* is expectably more detailed: '"Síðan drap Fáfnir fǫður sinn," segir Reginn, "ok myrði hann, ok náða ek engu af fénu. Hann gerðisk svá illr, at hann lagðisk út ok unni engum at njóta fjárins nema sér ok varð síðan at inum versta ormi ok liggr nú á því fé."' ('"Then Fáfnir killed his father", says Reginn, "and murdered him [this is, he hid the corpse and the deed] and I did not get any of the wealth. He became so bad, that he established himself outside [in the wilderness], and did not let anyone but himself to enjoy the treasure and later became the worst dragon and now lies on the wealth"').

17 *Skáldskaparmál* II, p. 46.

Eddic poetry informs us of this only when Reginn tells about it to the young Sigurðr:

> [Reginn] sagði hann Sigurði at Fáfnir lá á Gnitaheiði ok var í orms líki. Hann átti œgishjálm er ǫll kvikvendi hræddusk við.[18]
>
> [[Reginn] told Sigurðr that Fáfnir lay at Gnita's heath and was in the shape of an *ormr*. He owned the frightening helm that made all the creatures afraid.]

The shapeshifting of man into *wyrm* is here explicit, while in *Beowulf* it is either suggested or absent. This is not an isolated case and there are several other examples in the saga corpus which require some comment.

Shapeshifting dragons in Icelandic sagas

While Fáfnir is the best-known example, there are several other cases of men turning draconic, a frequent trait in dragon stories in Norse literature.[19] The first and most obvious parallel with Fáfnir is Reginn in *Þiðreks saga* (163: 231–232), but this is clearly part of the Vǫlsungar cycle, except that the names of the brothers are changed, with Reginn playing the Fáfnir role and the smith being named Mímir. Interestingly, in this version of the story, the shapeshifting is explicitly attributed to the use of sorcery.[20]

Daniel Sävborg discussed two other examples of the shapeshifting motif (Búi from *Jómsvíkinga saga* and Þórir from *Þorskfirðinga saga*). Both Búi and Þórir turn into dragons to guard their hoard, but (unlike Fáfnir) they are heroes. Sävborg interprets this as 'a device that allows the saga authors to make a link between the heroic events of the distant past and the present day, when the dragons, it is said, can still be seen',[21] and the location of the

18 *Reginsmál*, prose, p. 300.

19 Evans, 'Semiotics and Traditional Lore', pp. 104–105. Hedeager (*Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, pp. 85–86) gives some possible reasons of why snakes (that is, *ormar*) are the most common shapeshifting animal in the Norse sources.

20 See Lionarons, 'The Sign of a Hero', p. 51. About the link between magicians and shapeshifting, see the discussion by Dillmann (*Les magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne*, pp. 244–261), who associates shapeshifting with a subtype of detachable soul that allows certain people to take different forms. Dillmann suggests that these beliefs are very likely of pre-Christian origin, even if the evidence given to support this stance is rather meagre (*ibid.*, p. 244, footnote 24) and the examples discussed in this section belong firmly in literature from the Christian period.

21 'Búi the Dragon', p. 95.

episodes at the end of the sagas supports his conclusion. *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar* repeats the same motif, as Valr and his sons also transform to guard the gold. However, specialists agree that this episode derives from *Þorskfirðinga saga*.[22] Moreover, Sävborg convincingly argues that the *Þorskfirðinga saga* episode derives from the Búi story of the Jómsvikings, present in both the saga and the *drápa* about them.[23] I should remark that it is the possession of a treasure that seems to trigger the transformation in both cases, albeit with some differences of detail: Þórir is depicted as greedy throughout his saga, whereas Búi is not.[24]

Yet the legendary *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar* has another man who shapeshifts into a dragon, namely king Hárekr of Bjarmaland (Permia). It says that, facing jarl Skúli, 'Þá varð Hárekr at flugdreka, ok sló Skúla með sporðinum, svâ hann lá í óviti' ('then Hárekr turned into a flying dragon and killed Skúli with his tail, so that he fell senseless').[25] The king, turned dragon, then killed another man named Grubs, before the hero Hálfdan killed him. A scene in the also legendary *Sǫrla saga sterka* is not markedly different. In this example the hero killed his antagonist, Tófi, who, when he was wounded, 'brást hann þá í dreka líkíng, af því at hann var mjök hamrammaðr' ('he shifted into the shape of a dragon, because he was a great shapeshifter').[26] As with Hálfdanr, Sǫrli managed to overcome and kill heroically the transformed antagonist.

An even more detailed episode occurs in another of the *fornaldarsögur*. *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* tells of a demonic villain, Grímr, who also shapeshifts into a *flugdreki* for battle. He is remarkably skilled at metamorphosis: 'hafði hann verit stundum flugdreki, en stundum ormr, göltr ok griðúngr eða önnur skaðsamlig skrípi, þau er mönnum eru meinsamligust' ('he had sometimes been a flying dragon, but others a serpent, a boar, a bull or any other dangerous beast, those that are the most noxious to men').[27] There is interesting and detailed background information about Grímr: he is the foster brother of the villainous and trollish king Eiríkr, and has an uncertain origin, as he had been found ashore in Hlésey ('Hlér's island', modern day

22 Finlay, 'Comments on Daniel Sävborg's Paper', p. 121; Sävborg, 'Búi the Dragon', p. 105, note 10.

23 *ibid.*, pp. 107–109.

24 Finlay, 'Comments on Daniel Sävborg's Paper', p. 121.

25 *Hálfdanar saga* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, ch. 20, v. III, p. 550.

26 *Sǫrla saga* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, ch. 8, v. III, p. 424.

27 *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, ch. 33, v. III, p. 342. Later in the same chapter he spews both venom and fire to the hero ('Grímr spjó stundum eitri, stundum eldi á Hrólf'). Moreover, an ally warns the hero to not cut the limbs of the demon while killing him, as they will turn into 'poisonous serpents' (*eitrormar*).

Læsø) by a sorceress called Gróa, who trained him in witchcraft. The saga tells us that Grímr knows how to travel unharmed underwater and thus gets nicknamed Ægir, the name of the pagan god of the sea. The god Ægir is the Hlér who names the island of Hlésey, and the author is obviously playing here with this mythic material as the name Gróa reminds the reader of the sorcerer of the same name in the eddic poem *Grógaldr*.[28]

Grímr has all the traits of a true villain: he is 'thoroughly evil' (*ǫllu illr*), drinks the blood and raw meat of both livestock and men, and can quickly shapeshift into many bestial forms. He is also covetous, persuading Eiríkr to attack king Hreggviðr saying that if they defeat him: 'þá viljum vér hér staðfestast, ok vil ek þiggja einn land til yfirsóknar ok jarlsnafn' ('then we will establish ourselves there, and I will want to claim a certain land to rule over and the title of Jarl').[29] Thus Grímr has many draconic traits: fiery and poisonous breath, a close association with water, and magical powers. He can (at will, it seems) shapeshift into both flying dragon and serpentine forms. However, his metamorphosis, unlike that of Fáfnir (and Þórir, Búi and Valr), is temporary, martial and instrumental, like Tófi and Hárekr. While he is greedy, he remains basically human and thus covets objects fitting a greedy aristocrat: a land to rule and a title. His avarice is not an end in itself, but a means to the typically human goal of upwards social mobility.

By contrast, we can see that in the temporary shapeshifting cases, the hoard-and-mound motif is absent, and this suggests that such a motif embodies an *inhuman* desire for wealth: a lust for useless wealth. 'Dragons may not have much real use for all their wealth', wrote J.R.R. Tolkien about Smaug, his most detailed rendering of the hoarding *wyrm* theme.[30] He was likely echoing one of the Old English *Maxims*, which also stresses the futility of these expectations: 'he [a dragon] must seek out a hoard in the earth where, old in winters, he guards heathen gold, though he is no better by it' ('he gesecean sceall hord on hrusan, þær he hæden gold warað wintrum frod, ne byð him wihte ðy sel').[31]

It could be argued that such behaviour is more inhuman than the barbaric raw-meat-eating, blood-drinking cannibalism of the demonic Grímr (or of Grendel) because it is not taboo-breaking (and thus literarily taboo-reinforcing), but simply pointless from a human perspective. The

28 It should be noted that this poem is not found in the main manuscript for eddic Poetry, GKS 2365 4º from c. 1270, but in seventeenth century paper copies, such as Stockh. papp. 8vo 15 and AM 738 4to.

29 *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*, ch. 3, v. III, p. 243.

30 Tolkien and Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit*, p. 272.

31 *Maxims* (II, 2275–2277). The saying is discussed in Beekman-Taylor, 'The Traditional Language', pp. 202–203.

monstrosity here is alien,[32] not in an absolute, Lovecraftian way, but as the effect of the transformation. If, for Fáfnir, greed becomes an end in itself, Grímr's avarice is still a means to achieve social status, to play the game of aspiring lord in both literary and historical reality. He therefore resembles a fantastic version of the more mundane villains of the *Íslendingasögur*, like Hœnsa-Þórir in his own saga, or Óspakr in the later part of *Eyrbyggja saga*. By contrast, both Fáfnir and the dragon in *Beowulf* want to keep the treasure for its own sake; greed appears as their essence or nature.

The categories of a medieval culture and the nature of dragons

In several recent studies, Ármann Jakobsson has discussed the way in which Norse literature classifies supernatural beings, warning against using contemporary categories of the supernatural when analysing the Middle Ages. For example, a medieval troll is not necessarily what a nineteenth-century folklorist (or a twentieth-century fantasy writer) would have imagined, and the medieval use of such terms can refer to a rather large variety of entities.[33] Unsurprisingly, this warning also applies to dragons. This becomes obvious primarily through the fact that a good number of Norse dragons, Fáfnir included, are actually some kind of huge worm or serpent rather than Smaug lookalikes, and this has been repeatedly emphasised in scholarship.

However, I would try to go one step further and suggest that we should try not to apply *at all* a post-Linnean, naturalist approach to classification when discussing the beast: the shape of the dragon is not as important in understanding the figure.[34] Ármann wrote that his preferred way to

32 I draw on the distinction by Ármann Jakobsson: 'There is, on the one hand, the monster which is the complete Other and for which no affinity with man seems possible, a monster that is more beast than man (…). The other type is the monster as our double: the human monster, and all speaking monsters belong in some way to this category' (Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enter the Dragon', p. 48). However, Ármann considers that Fáfnir, being a shapeshifter, is 'not as utterly alien as he seemed at first' (*ibid.*, p. 49). I would instead hold that the treasure turns him into an utter alien, for the gold ceases to appear to him as a product of human effort which serves human needs, becoming an absolute end in itself which holds inherent, final meaning. In terms of the continuum proposed by Rebecca Merkelbach, he slides from the human to the monstrous end; his case is, in a certain sense, comparable to the transition of Þórólfr *bægifótr* ('the lame') in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who changes shape and becomes worse after death (see Merkelbach, 'The Monster in Me', pp. 23–25).

33 Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Trollish Acts', pp. 44–48.

34 See also the useful discussion on the fluid barriers between humans and animals in Hedeager (*Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, pp. 99–103), who however focuses on an earlier period. The

approach *draugar* was to 'focus on the function of actual mediaeval Icelandic undead in order better to understand the essence of their being',[35] and we can apply the same principle to understanding Norse dragons. In fact, Jakob Grimm already did so two centuries ago. Jonathan Evans noted that

> Grimm recognized two important motifs —that of dragons guarding treasures and that of dragons as metamorphosed humans— which provide probably the best clues to the function of the dragon in primitive Germanic mythology.[36]

Fáfnir, Búi, Þórir and Valr represent both motifs whereas Grímr, Tófi and Valr fit under the second; non-shapeshifted, treasure-hoarding dragons such as the one in *Ragnars saga lóðbrókar* only fulfil the first.[37] A third main function of dragons, to embody fear, has been proposed and analysed in detail by Ármann Jakobsson.[38]

Moreover, I would argue that, in practical terms, essence (or nature) often equates with function in this literature. In other words, that *doing dragonesque things* is the same as *being a dragon*, much in the same way that Otr was an otter because he acted like one. Therefore, such shapeshifting occurs as an extension of this lack of distinction, and is thus not better understood as a biological mutation (this is, a transformation based on a change of natural traits), but instead as a sign of the essentially unstable way in which the (literary) existence of these beings was conceived,[39] provoked by

considerable mutations in visual representations of dragons are described by Acker ('Dragons in the Eddas').

35 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', p. 281.

36 Evans, 'As Rare As They are Dire', p. 209.

37 *Ragnars saga lóðbrókar* in *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda*, ch. 1–2, v. I, pp. 237–240. For an overview of dragons in the Norse corpus, see Evans, 'As Rare As They are Dire', pp. 236–248, and Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*. On the little *lyngormr* in *Ragnars saga*, see Larrington, 'Þóra and Áslaug'.

38 This is indeed out of question for Fáfnir, whose terror is 'over-obviously symbolised by the Helmet of Fear' (Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enter the Dragon', p. 43). However, the fear-inspiring function is not mutually contradictory with the idea that dragons embody greed: 'A dragon can, of course, be seen as an embodiment both of its own savage greed and of other's fear' (*ibid.*, p. 44). In any case, fear does not appear directly linked with the hoard or with shape-shifting in the literature, and thus I see little need to comment further on this issue.

39 We should therefore be wary of the modern tendency of scholars and translators to 'monstrify' the beings in medieval texts, as Signe Carlson has shown while discussing modern interpretations of the vocabulary about the antagonists in *Beowulf* (especially Grendel). But we should also be wary of naturalising them through an biologicist, environmental agenda which would see them as distorted depictions of animals or men: it is difficult not to smile at sentences such as 'a study

a certain agent. For example, Otr is shapeshifted to improve his fishing skill, and Andvari is shapeshifted by a curse cast on him by a norn.[40] In the case of Fáfnir, what provokes the change is the cursed treasure which he covets.[41] Readers familiar with theoretical anthropology might see an echo of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory in my stance. However, and unlike Latour, I think that a perspective that assigns agency to objects is better understood as a specific ideological and cultural stance expressed by a fictional narrative rather than as an actual depiction of how social relationships work.[42] In other words, it is from an emic, internal perspective that hoards act and their effect can be to turn men into dragons,[43] while when seen in external, etic terms, this is little but the internal logic of literature and/or of myth. In short, I think that what defines Fáfnir as a dragon is his unavoidable link to an extreme, inhuman level of greed, triggered (or at least amplified) by the cursed hoard. Against this definition, his shape and physical traits appear as irrelevant or at best as concomitant effects of his greed.

However, some medieval authors considered that the physical shape of dragons was an important element of defining and categorising them. When we look at medieval bestiaries (which often describe beasts by their physical traits), we observe a form of knowledge which is remarkably different from post-Linnean categorisations: the physical nature (what constitutes nowadays the domain of biological science), while important, was secondary to its moral meaning.[44] This tradition hails back to Aesop's fables and continues through

of climatic changes and the rapidly declining numbers of many species of wildlife in Europe and elsewhere during the last two thousand years may lead to more insight into the existence and plight of the dragon' (Carlson, 'The Monsters of Beowulf', p. 363).

40 *Reginsmál,* v.II, st. 2, p. 297.

41 The curse originates in the original owner, the *dvergr* Andvari: 'Dvergrinn gekk í steininn ok mælti, at hverjum skyldi at bana verða, er þann gullhring ætti ok svá allt gullit' ('The *dvergr* walked into the stone and said, that to possess the ring or any of the gold, shall become the bane for anyone'. *Vǫlsunga saga, c*h. 14, p. 26, follows the eddic poem *Reginsmál* closely).

42 The risk is to be mystified and confuse native (in this case, medieval) representations with actual scientific explanations. A well-known case is the perplexing explanation of the theoretical need for reciprocity in gift-giving by Marcel Mauss and his seemingly uncritical acceptance of the Maori theory of the spirit in the gift (*Hau*). For a discussion of the issue, read the fascinating book by Godelier, *L'Enigme du Don*.

43 It can also lead men into undeath. Ármann Jakobsson ('Vampires and Watchmen', p. 289) notices that both certain undead and dragons share two main traits: watching over a treasure and creating fear in men. On the causes of undeath in the sagas, including greed, see Baier and Schäfke, 'When the Dead No Longer Rest'; on the evolution of their depiction, see Kanerva, 'From Powerful Agents to Subordinate Objects?'.

44 Stannard, 'Natural History', p. 435.

the Middle Ages,[45] in which the physical shape was seen as an effect of a deeper moral nature,[46] and it seems only perfectly logical that if the second changes, the first can do so accordingly, regardless of how unlikely the shift seems to us in biological terms. We could interpret this change as just a metaphor or allegory, but that would be anachronic (or learned).[47] In the Nordic societies of the Iron Age, which were likely already telling stories about Fáfnir (as the Sigurðr picture-stones suggests), 'shape shifting was dangerous and it was real; it was not just a symbolic action'.[48] I see no reason to imagine that this way of thinking would not have lingered on to some extent during the Middle Ages, at least for part of the population, when retelling heroic legend.

Considered in this way shapeshifting can only be labelled as certainly metaphorical if we take for granted a general mentality which assumes a system of knowledge which asserts, for example, that a primate cannot turn into a reptilian. The Norse literary sources do not say much on such speculative and classificatory matters,[49] but encyclopaedic texts do, and these were of prime interest to learned men drawing on Latin texts.[50] In consequence, it appears important to consider the learned opinion of the era about the classification of beings before depicting shapeshifting as 'monstrous', 'metaphorical' or 'unnatural' for medieval audiences. In short, the question is: where did the dragons get classified in medieval Icelandic *scientia*?

45 Clough, 'Putting animals in their place', p. 212. Curley ('Introduction', pp. XI-XII) thinks this form of thought originates in Plutarch, but he refers more precisely to theological allegory

46 Here the vocabulary is revealing. By the beginning of the Christian era, in other words, in both the Latin and the Greek worlds, *Φυσιολογία* had acquired a range of meaning extending from early Greek speculative zoology and physics to the occult religious practices of exotic peoples (Curley, *ibid.*, p. XI). Nor did the word *φυσιολόγος* ever meant simply 'the naturalist' as we understand the term, as should now be evident, but one who interpreted metaphysically, morally, and, finally, mystically the transcendent significance of the natural world (*ibid.*, p. XV).

47 See the introduction to this volume.

48 Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, p. 84.

49 Speculative theological thought was not of prime interest to medieval Icelandic authors, who seem to instead have expressed religious and philosophical concepts through mythic narratives (Clunies-Ross, 'Medieval Icelandic Textual Culture', pp. 173–174).

50 The well-known image of the dragon as a representation of the devil coexists with this view, but space constraints prevent me from delving into it here. The imagery indeed appears in Norse sources, for example in *Margrétar saga*, about the *passio* of Margaret of Antioch. On the issue, see Asdís Egilsdóttir, 'Drekar, slöngur og heilög Margrét'. For a general overview of the link between saints and dragons, see Riches, 'Encountering the Monstrous'. The most obvious statement of this tradition in the Icelandic corpus comes from the saga on the Archangel Michael, which explains: 'Antikristus kallaz dreki' ('The Anti-Christ is called a dragon'. *Mikjáls saga* 29, 712). The association between snake-like beings in Christianity begins, of course, in the Genesis.

The fourteenth century manuscript AM 194 8vo counted *draco/dreki* among other serpentiform animals (*ormar*)*: basiliskus*, *difsa*, *ipialis*, *emorvis*, *seps*, *prestir*, *aspis*, *amphisbena*, *cerastes*, *scitalis*, *rimotrix*.[51] AM 731 4to (known as *Rímbegla*, dated *c.* 1600–1650) also lists *sirena* and *salamandra*.[52] These names indicate a Latin source, likely Isidore's *Etymologies* or a text derived from it.[53] His *De Serpentibus* section in the *De Animalibus* book is much longer than the Icelandic entry, but it includes all the snakes mentioned in the Icelandic texts.[54] On the dragon, he says:

> Draco maior cunctorum serpentium, sive omnium animantium super terram. Hunc Graeci δράκοντα vocant; unde et derivatum est in Latinum ut draco diceretur. Qui saepe ab speluncis abstractus fertur in aerem, concitaturque propter eum aer. Est autem cristatus, ore parvo, et artis fistulis, per quas trahit spiritum et linguam exerat. Vim autem non in dentibus, sed in cauda habet, et verbere potius quam rictu nocet. Innoxius autem est a venenis, sed ideo huic ad mortem faciendam venena non esse necessaria, quia si quem ligarit occidit. A quo nec elephans tutus est sui corporis magnitudine; nam circa semitas delitescens, per quas elephanti soliti gradiuntur, crura eorum nodis inligat, ac suffocatos perimit. Gignitur autem in Aethiopia et India in ipso incendio iugis aestus.[55]
>
> [The dragon (*draco*) is the largest of all the snakes, or of all the animals on earth. The Greeks call it δράκοντα, whence the term is borrowed into Latin so that we say *draco*. It is often drawn out of caves and soars aloft, and disturbs the air. It is crested and has a small mouth and narrow

51 *Álfræði Íslenzk*, v. I, p. 39–40.

52 *Álfræði Íslenzk,* v. III, p. 10.

53 Isidore's entry on the etymologies is translated in the compilation of learned and Biblical material known as *Stjórn* as part of an extended version of the Pentateuch (*Stjórn*, st. 25, pp. 95–96).

54 The full list given by Isidore is: anguis, serpens, **draco**, **basiliscus**, vipera, **aspis** (including subtypes: **dipsas**, **hypnalis**, **haemorrois**, **prester** and **seps**), **cerastes**, **scytale**, **ampisbaena**, enydris, hydros, hydra, chelydros, **natrix***, cenchris, boas, iaculus, *sirena*, ophites, salpuga, caecula, centupeda, lacertus, botrax, *salamandra*, saura, stellio, ammodytae, elephantiae, chamaedracontes. Some of these are repeated, and some are given several names, often including its Greek version. The names in **bold** correspond to those also present in the Icelandic Ormar entry in AM 194 8vo; the two in *italics* also appear in *Rímbegla*. *The single missing name in the Latin original, yet present in the Icelandic sources, *rimotrix/rimatrix*, is likely the effect of misreading from "et natrix" (see *Álfræði Íslenzk*, v. III, p. 10).

55 *San Isidoro de Sevilla, Etimologías II,* XII, iv, 4–5, p. 80. Translation is from *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, p. 255.

> pipes through which it draws breath and sticks out its tongue. It has its strength not in its teeth but in its tail, and it causes injury more by its lashing tail than with its jaws. Also, it does not harm with poison; poison is not needed for this animal to kill, because it kills whatever it wraps itself around. Even the elephant with his huge body is not safe from the dragon, for it lurks around the paths along which the elephants are accustomed to walk, and wraps around their legs in coils and kills them by suffocating them. It is born in Ethiopia and India in the fiery intensity of perpetual heat.]

The Icelandic text in AM 194 8vo says:

> [D]raco heitir dreki, hann er stor sem ormar ok hefir sva mikit afl i spordi, ath ecki er sva sterkt dyr, ath eigi fai bana, ef hann gettr spordingum vafit um, bědi ma hann fliuga ok ganga, hans hǫfut skulu ener gaufgustu menn æ Blalandi út hafa t[il] fęzlu, ef na, ok þickir gott til manvitz…[56]

> [Draco is called a dragon; it is big like serpents and it has so much strength in the tail, that there is no such strong beast, that does not find its bane, if it is surrounded by the tail; it may both fly and walk; the noblest men of Bláland would have its head for food, if they caught it, and think [that eating it] is good for understanding…]

While not identical, the entries clearly belong to a common genre, and the information on the dragon repeats key elements: a linguistic comparison (Latin and Greek in Isidore; Icelandic and Latin in the Norse text), the main strength attributed to the tail, and a link with tropical Africa (Ethiopia; Bláland).[57] The idea that men from those lands eat dragons might be related to a statement in Albert the Great's *De Animalibus*, who stated that 'Dicunt etiam quidam carnes draconis esse esibiles Ethyopibus: eo quod infrigident eos' ('Some say that the meat of dragon is edible for the Ethiopians: it is because it makes them cold').[58]

This evidence, admittedly limited to learned circles relying on Latin sources, highlights that some Icelanders considered dragons as part of a

56 *Álfrœði Íslenzk,* v. I, p.39.

57 *Bláland* is the land of the *blámenn* ('Black men'), usually somewhere in Africa, even if this is not always the case. According to *Heimskringla*, it is a land of burning sun (see Cole, 'Racial thinking', especially pp. 28–29).

58 *De Animalibus*, p. 1566.

serpentine group of beasts, a group not too different from what we label today as reptiles.[59] In this conception a dragon is not a shapeshifted man, but a large constricting snake, an image inherited from Greco-Roman learned tradition.[60]

However, other learned texts depart from such an 'oversized anaconda' explanation and return us to the literary imagery of hoards and greed. The manuscript known as *Heynesbók*, which contains a copy of the *Jónsbók* lawcode, has a marginal drawing of a dragon decorated with the following legend, illustrating the section on inheritances: 'Sem ormuren elskar gullit, svo elskar hinn agiarne ranfeingit fe' ('As the *ormr* loves the gold, so the greedy loves wealth taken forcefully').[61] According to Evans, who analysed the reference in detail, 'the scribal marginalia here represent a critique of human avarice, a negative attribute often operative in circumstances where inheritance claims are contested'.[62]

Heynesbók is a late medieval manuscript, dated to the first half of the fifteenth century. It reuses the depiction of the dragon as a greedy hoarder, which was by then more than half a millennium old, as evidenced by the frequent use of *kenningar* for 'gold' in skaldic poetry which associate it with dragons, for example *ormsetr* ('the seat of the *ormr*')[63] and *ormalátr* ('the lair of the *ormar*'),[64] both in poetry composed for the two co-rulers of Norway (Magnús the good and Haraldr *harðráði*) by Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson in the middle of the eleventh century. Some *kenningar* even refer explicitly to Fáfnir: the kenning *Fáfnis miðgarð* ('the middle-earth of Fáfnir') appears in the fragmentary *Bjarkamál in fornu* ('The Old Speech of Bjarki'), preserved in *Snorra Edda* and of uncertain composition date. A *lausavísa* ('loose strophe') by Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, active in the early eleventh century, calls gold *látr, þats Fáfnir átti* ('a dwelling, that which Fáfnir owned').[65] To call a serpentine creature by the given name

59 Except for our certainty that some of these beings are mythical (such as the basilisk).

60 Senter, Mattox and Haddad, 'Snake to Monster', p. 68. The association of dragons with untamed nature appears to be a feature of ancient Mediterranean and Near-Eastern civilizations (Felton, 'Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous', pp. 113–114), as a contrast to their abundant civilising heroes (for example, the Hydra). They can also play the role of bestial guardians (for example, Ladon).

61 Quoted in Evans, 'The *Heynesbók* Dragon', p. 465. He translates: 'As the ormr loves the gold, so loves the greedy ill-gotten goods.'

62 *ibid.*, p. 480.

63 *Magnússdrápa* 1.

64 *Haraldsdrápa* 12.

65 Inversely, the dragon can be metaphorically called the 'hoard-guardian', a common epithet in *Beowulf*. Lincoln ('Further on Envy and Greed', p. 325) lists *hordweard* ('hoard-guardian'),

of a famous dragon is listed as a possibility in the lists called *Orma heiti* ('Synonyms for *ormar*') which list Fáfnir, the apocalyptic Níðhǫggr and the world-serpent Miðgarðsormr. Moreover, that greed was associated with this image is confirmed, by contrast, through the many circumlocutions meaning 'generous man' which are varieties of 'the harmer of the land of the serpent',[66] which in turn are an extended version of the simpler kennings for generosity such as *rýrir hodda* ('diminisher of hoards'). It is interesting to note that many of the references to this imagery appear in poetry on Christian topics: for example, the complex *stríðandi látrs ins døkkva hrøkkviseiðs lyngs* ('the enemy of the lair of the dark coiling fish of the heather') is the epithet (meaning, again, 'generous') used in Einarr Skúlason's poem *Geisli* (stanza 16) to refer to king Ólafr the saint while ascending to heaven. In short, the image of dragons as hoarders, which appears in texts from the pre-literary, pre-conversion period to late-medieval learned utilitarian texts, enjoyed widespread vitality in Medieval Iceland.

The hoard

I will now shift back my attention to the hoard which arguably turns Fáfnir from man to monster. The story is familiar to most readers of Norse literature: the treasure originates from a *dvergr* called Andvari, and is forcefully taken from him by three gods (Óðinn, Hœnir and Loki). They need it to compensate for their unwitting killing of a metamorphosed being, Fáfnir's brother, who is aptly named Otr ('Otter') and shapeshifted into an otter. Loki comes up with the plan of obtaining gold from the hoarder stone-dweller, whom they

goldweard ('gold-guardian'), *frætwa hyrde* ('guardian of the treasure'), and *beorges hyrde* ('barrow guardian'). The last epithet appears also in the Norse *heiti* for *ormar* as *haugvarðr*. It is interesting to note that these metaphors can also apply to men: in *Beowulf* 'hordweard hæleþa' (v. 1047, p. 37) refers to the king of the Danes, but *hordweard* alone refers repeatedly to the dragon (vv. 2293, 2302, 2554, 2593; pp. 79, 79, 87, 89). Interestingly, *geymir hodda* ('keeper of hoards') appears in the Icelandic poem *Plácitusdrápa*, st. 4, and means 'man'.

66 A search in the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* project database yields: *linna láðbrjótr* ('the breaker of the land of snakes'), *ýti vallar orms* ('the impeller of the plain of the serpent'), *hrjóðr storðar móins* ('the destroyer of the ground of the serpent '), *stríðir ormalátrs* ('the foe of the reptiles' lair'), *hati ormsetrs* ('the hater of the reptile's home'), *tǫpuð naðrbings* ('the destroyer of the snake-lair'), *stríðandi látrs ins døkkva hrøkkviseiðs lyngs* ('the enemy of the lair of the dark coiling fish of the heather'), *gjafi linnbóls*, ('bestower of the snake-lair'), *hvern þann brjót orma leiðar*, ('every breaker of the serpent's path'), *Hneigiþollr túna ǫglis* ('the giving tree of the homefields of the snake'), *hati ormláðs* ('hater of the snake-land').

capture while he is swimming, shapeshifted, in fish-form. The threatened Andvari yields his treasure, but he wishes to keep a ring. Loki extorts him, and the *dvergr* curses the ring before giving it away. The gold is given to Otr's father, Hreiðmarr, who does not wish to share it with his two surviving sons, Fáfnir and Reginn. Fáfnir kills him and scares Reginn away, threatening him with death, turns into a dragon and nests over the gold. In turn, years later Reginn incites his foster-son, the young hero Sigurðr, to kill and recover the treasure from the *ormr*. By the powers obtained by consuming the heart of the monster, Sigurðr discovers that his mentor aims to betray him, and thus he kills Reginn. The later story of Sigurðr and his relatives is also closely tied to the treasure, as depicted in the many versions of the Vǫlsungar-Nibelungs cycle.

We have some descriptions of the hoard after the hero's victory. *Vǫlsunga saga* says:

> Sigurðr fann þar stórmikit gull ok sverðit Hrotta, ok þar tók hann ægishjálm ok gullbrynjuna ok marga dýrgripi. Hann fann þar svá mikit gull, at honum þótti ván, at eigi mundi meira bera tveir hestar eða þrír.[67]
>
> [Sigurðr found there much gold and the sword Hrotti ('Coarse, Rough'?), and there he took the helm-of-terror and the golden coat of mail and many valuable jewels. He found so much gold that it seemed unlikely to him to load it in less than two or three horses.]

The prose at the end of *Fáfnismál* says:

> Þar fann Sigurðr stórmikit gull ok fylldi þar tvær kistur. Þar tók hann ægishjálm ok gullbrynju ok sverðit Hrotta ok marga dýrgripi ok klyfjaði þar með Grana, en hestrinn vildi eigi fram ganga, fyrr en Sigurðr steig á bak hánum.[68]
>
> [There Sigurðr found much gold and filled up two chests [with it]. There he took the helm-of-terror and a golden coat of mail and many valuable jewels, and loaded them on Grani, but the horse will not walk, before Sigurðr rode it.]

67 *Vǫlsunga saga,* ch. 20, p. 34.
68 *Fafnismál,* v.II, prose, p. 312.

Snorra Edda is less detailed,[69] saying:

> [Sigurðr] tók þá upp gullit ok batt í klyfjar ok lagði upp á bak Grana ok steig upp sjálfr ok reið þá leið sína. Nú er þat sagt hver saga til er þess, gullit er kallat ból eða bygð Fáfnis eða málmr Gnitaheiðar eða byrðr Grana.[70]
>
> [[Sigurðr] then took the gold and loaded it and placed in the back of Grani and got on horseback and went his way. Because of this story it is said now that the gold is called the farm or abode of Fáfnir or the metal of Gnitaheiði or the burden of Grani.]

It is interesting to note that in none of these accounts the ring *Andvaranautr*[71] is mentioned, while it is important in the early part of the story, as it is Loki's insistence to possess the whole treasure of Andvari, including that ring, that triggers the *dvergr* curse on it. Moreover, it also appears in the later part of the epic cycle (the *Dráp Niflunga* fragment),[72] in which it is sent by Guðrún to Hǫgni as a warning of the treachery of king Atli. By contrast, the treasure reappears frequently in the whole cycle.

We know very little of either the origin of the treasure and who was its original owner. After being dispossessed, Andvari mentions that a certain Gustr owned it before him, but he may be referring to himself.[73] He mentions his father was a certain Óinn, which is possibly the name of one of the *dvergar* in the *dvergatal* list in *Vǫluspá* and one of the names in the list of *dverga heiti*, but also a poetic synonym listed in the *Orma heiti* strophes. It is not the only case of shared names: we also have *grímr*, *óri* and *níðhǫggr* appearing in both lists. Moreover, some names appear appropriate for the other group of beings: *steinbúi* ('stone-dweller') is an *ormr*-name but describes the typical den of *dvergar*, while *eitri* ('poisonous one') is a name for a *dvergr* that describes a common trait of serpentine beings. It is thus possible to imagine that Óinn could also have been a dragon, or that he might have turned into one.

69 However, mention of the sword Hrotti and the helm-of-terror is made earlier, just after Fáfnir kills his father (*Skaldskaparmál*, ch. 40, p. 46).

70 *Skaldskaparamál*, ch. 40, p. 47.

71 'Andvari's companion' or 'Andvari's joy'. I discuss the word *nautr* later in this text. Lisbeth Heidemann Torfıng (*Genstandsnavne, genstandsliv*) has analysed in detail many *nautr* type objects, focusing in examples taken from the legendary sagas.

72 *Guðrúnarkviða* II, v.II, prose, p. 352.

73 It is likely just wordplay, given that Andvari means 'a slight breeze', and Gustr means 'a gust' (see *Eddukvæði* II, p. 48, footnote 28).

In less speculative terms, this superposition of names between *ormar* and *dvergar* could be rooted in their most salient shared trait: their greed to hoard gold under the earth. While there are noticeable differences, the most obvious being that *dvergar* typically produce their wealth (and sometimes exchange it willingly) while *ormar* simply seize it from others (and store it), it is clear that both share a close connection with material goods. Under this perspective the character of Reginn, who is described as a *dvergr*,[74] as the brother of Fáfnir becomes less surprising. Their core difference is the smith's productivity, which Reginn himself highlights when stating his contribution to the death of Fáfnir:

> Lengi liggja / létir þú þann lyngvi í / inn aldna jǫtun, / ef þú sverðs né nytir, / þess er ek sjálfr gørða, / ok þíns ins hvassa hjǫrs.[75]
>
> [Longer would you have left the old *jǫtunn* lying in the heath, if you had not enjoyed the sword which I made myself, and the sharp blade of yours.]

In contrast to the pride shown by Reginn in his craft, the anonymity surrounding Fáfnir's hoard makes it appear as non-produced. It could have been created by Andvari, who could had been a smith like many *dvergar*, or inherited from his father, who could have created it for the same reasons (assuming he was also a *dvergr* and/or a smith) or who could have acquired it and hoarded it (if he was an *ormr*). This obscure origin has a double narrative effect. Firstly, it associates the treasure with many owners, and thus it can be named *Fáfnis arf*, 'the inheritance of Fáfnir' in the *Dráp Niflunga* fragment[76] and *hodd Niflunga,* 'the hoard of the Niflungar'.[77] It can even be associated with a carrier (rather than an owner) as in *Oddrúnargrátr*, which names it *hliðfarm Grana* ('Grani's side-burden'), an epithet whose variations were a frequent kenning for gold.[78] Except for the Andvaranautr ring, the hoard is not thus firmly attached to any specific owner.

74 He is said to be *dvergr of vǫxt* ('a dvergr in shape/size/condition'. *Reginsmál,* v.II, prose introduction, p. 296). For a discussion of the meanings of *vǫxt* in this sentence, see Mikučionis, 'Recognizing a dvergr', pp. 82–88. His name also appears in the *Dverga heiti* list and in the *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók* redactions of *Vǫluspá* (v.I, st. 12, p. 294, 310), which suggests that he could be thought of as one of these beings.

75 *Fáfnismál,* v.II, st. 29, p. 308.

76 *Guðrúnarkviða*, introduction, p. 352.

77 *Atlakviða,* v.II, st.27, p. 378.

78 *Oddrúnargrátr*, v.II, st. 21, p. 369.

However, its many names also reveal a complex 'item biography' which is characteristic of important goods that regularly change hands.[79] A good example in the Norse corpus is the sword Dragvandill.[80] Its recurrent transfers embody the friendship between Arinbjǫrn and Egill and the good ties between their families.[81] The hoard represents the negative mirror image of this kind of goods. It appears as produced by no-one and owned by no-one (yet possessed by many) and it spreads disgrace to its possessors.

Very similar associations appear in the language of hoarded treasure in *Beowulf*, as Paul Beekman Taylor has analysed in detail. He writes that 'there is a conventional stock of etymological associations between treasure goods and the life-forces believed to reside in them, and that these associations are discernible in the poetic style of Old English traditional poetry'.[82] The author also mentions that *hord* only alliterates with two words of moral implication, 'hæþen' and 'hatan' (the author surely meant 'hatian').[83] These two alliterations (*hatode* 'hated' in v. 2319 and *haéðnum* 'heathen' in v. 2216, to which I may add alliterations with *hettendum* 'despised' v. 3004 and *hýnde* 'humiliated' also in v. 2318) all appear in the context of the dragon-fight. This is coherent with the fact that '*gold* has unfavourable alliterative links in the description of the dragon's hoard'.[84]

The ideas surrounding the dragon-hoard in *Beowulf* and its equivalent in the Vǫlsung cycle are very similar.[85] Comparing Fáfnir's murderous theft of the gold which turns him into a dragon and the cursed nature of the Beowulfian dragon hoard, Victoria Symons summarises that 'dragon treasure … is a treasure that is hidden and secret, at best redundant to human society and at worst a source of significant menace'.[86] However, there is a core point of difference: Fáfnir is a shapeshifted man, but the *wyrm*

79 See Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.

80 *Egils saga,* ch. 61, pp. 194–195. Sigurðr's sword, Gramr, plays a similar role in his lineage (see Heidemann Torfing, *Genstandsnavne, genstandsliv*, pp. 157–164).

81 Sayers, 'Generational Models', pp. 160–161.

82 'The Traditional Language', p. 197.

83 *ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

84 *ibid.*, p. 198, paraphrasing Randolph Quirk.

85 One of the Old English *Maxims* (I, pp. 154–156) preaches a Christian view of the use of treasure: 'maþþum oþres weord, gold mon sceal gifan. Mæg god syllan eadgum hte ond eft niman.' ('Treasure becomes another's, a man must give gold, God can give goods to the wealthy, and take them back again'. See Beekman Taylor, 'The Traditional Language', p. 202). This short line remarks both the omnipotence of the Divinity and the temporary nature of all worldly goods. These two can be compared with numerous similar statements in the eddic poem *Hávamál* (for example st. 40–42, p. 330 and st. 77–78, p. 337), which however have a secular tone.

86 Symons, '"Wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah"', p. 79.

in *Beowulf* appears not to be, and these might be related to the different natures of their hoards.

Fáfnir as a shapeshifter

In a recent text on the perception on monstrosity in the Icelandic sagas, Rebecca Merkelbach states that 'having a negative economic impact could be called a trait that brings a human closer to monstrosity'.[87] Following Jennifer Neville,[88] she notes that this transition from marginal to monster is mirrored in the Old English *Maxims*, which compare a thief with a monstrous *þyrs* (equivalent to Icelandic *þurs*). While Fáfnir originates in poetry and not in saga prose, Rebecca's statement suits him perfectly: Fáfnir's hoarding prevents the hoard from reaching its expected economic use, and this turns him into a monster in every possible way. He is not only transformed physically, but becomes fully isolated from any contact with society.

The situation in *Beowulf* is similar, but there are some significant differences. Firstly, Fáfnir remains an isolationist, relying on his 'helmet of terror' and the fear it causes in all living creatures ('hann átti ægishjálm er ǫll kvikvendi hræddusk við').[89] As a consequence, he does not attack society like the dragon in *Beowulf*, but keeps a rather more passive profile, hiding in his barrow in Gnitaheiði until death.

Moreover, while Fáfnir is undoubtedly a shapeshifter, the dragon in *Beowulf* is at least more ambiguous in this aspect: the idea that he is the metamorphosed last owner of the treasure has been proposed, but is generally rejected by the specialists.[90] Thirdly, they differ in how they acquire their wealth: the Anglo-Saxon beast peacefully seized an abandoned treasure, while Fáfnir violently obtains it from both his relatives, killing his father, scaring away his brother Reginn (and presumably his two sisters),[91] and thus monopolising by force Hreiðmarr's inheritance.

Finally, the hoard itself is different: in *Beowulf*, it is clearly stated that it belonged to a dying lineage of men, whose last member dies while trying to enjoy the treasure a bit longer ('þæt hē lȳtel fæc longġestrēona brūcan

87 Merkelbach, 'The Monster in Me', p. 34.

88 'Monsters and Criminals'.

89 *Reginsmál,* v.II, prose, p. 300.

90 Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, pp. 39–40.

91 Lyngheiðr and Lofnheiðr, who are rather tangential characters in *Reginsmál* and absent in both *Snorra Edda* and *Vǫlsunga saga*.

moste')[92] and it is then found by the dragon who proceeds to guard it for three centuries until a thief steals a cup from him. The treasure, however, stays with the dragon and it only changes hands when Beowulf and Wiglaf defeat the beast. This is a rather simpler 'item biography' than the complex story behind the treasure in the Vǫlsungar cycle, and while it seems that both have a first-named possessor (the dying men in *Beowulf* and Andvari in the Norse texts), the possibility that the first named owner, Gustr, is someone other than Andvari adds another ring of ambiguity to its ownership, thus further expanding the lack of ownership suggested by its frequent change of hands.

Can these differences be related to the shapeshifting of Fáfnir? That dragons are dangerous, antisocial hostile monsters is admitted in both the vernacular, secular heroic tradition and in some learned Latin traditions, such as those present in the *Physiologus* (which has the dragon as enemy of the *panther*, said to be friend to all creatures) and obviously in narratives that equate it with the Apocalyptic Beast or the Devil. Even in the most neutral, naturalistic Latin tradition, the dragon is still large and dangerous, even if nothing but a beast and thus not particularly evil or antisocial.

Fáfnir is indeed dangerous and antisocial, but also a heinous criminal, a parricide and a robber. His treasure is also rather strongly morally marked. By contrast, the treasure in *Beowulf* also appears cursed 'not because it is taken away from its rightful owner, but because the last possessor of it would keep it from its intended use in the occupations of men', and thus the serpentine guardian in *Beowulf* can be seen as the 'embodiment of a cursed artefact'.[93] When Fáfnir obtains his hoard, it had been taken away (twice) from its rightful owners (Andavari, Hreiðmarr), kept from its intended use (for example, to be transferred as Hreiðmarr's inheritance), cursed explicitly and prophesied to be harmful by Andvari, and obtained by forceful means both by Loki and by Fáfnir.

This hints that it is perhaps the treasure and its loaded 'biography' that transforms Fáfnir. Even his own heinous deed appears partly as the effect of the compulsion to harm embodied by the cursed hoard, which first affects his father, who realises the gold paid to him by the gods is cursed.[94] Immediately after, he refuses to share it with his sons, and this makes Fáfnir murder him:

92 *Beowulf*, vv. 2240–2241, p. 77.

93 Beekman Taylor, 'The Dragon's treasure in Beowulf', p. 230.

94 *Reginsmál*, v.II, st. 7, p. 298. I have discussed this stanza in detail elsewhere (Barreiro, 'Ástgjafar').

> Fáfnir ok Reginn krǫfðu Hreiðmar niðgjalda eptir Otr, bróður sinn. Hann kvað nei við. En Fáfnir lagði sverdi Hreiðmar fǫður sinn sofanda.[95]
>
> [Fáfnir and Reginn asked Hreiðmarr for compensation for Otr, their brother. He said no. But Fáfnir struck Hreiðmarr his father with a sword while sleeping.]

Hreiðmarr is conscious that the gold is evil and dangerous, yet he fails to do anything to prevent the risks coming from it, and it causes his death, almost immediately. Fáfnir knows the same and warns Sigurðr about it just before dying: 'it gjalla gull ok it glóðrauða fé þér verða þeir baugar at bana' ('the yelling gold and the red-glowing wealth, its rings will become your bane').[96] It is, again, all in vain: like their father, Fáfnir and Reginn (and later Sigurðr) die because of the cursed treasure, which they paradoxically know to be cursed with death and yet covet to own.

The vocabulary shows an underlying metaphor of inversion, as explicitly noted by Andvari's final words, cursing it before disappearing back into his stone:

> Þat skall gull er Gustr átti / brœðrum tveim at bana verða / ok ǫðlingum átta at rógi; / *mun míns fjár manngi njóta*.[97]
>
> [The gold that Gustr owned will become the bane of two brothers and cause strife between eight princes; *no one will enjoy my wealth*.]

The ironic inversion is that the ring, which functions as a synecdoche of the whole hoard, is named Andvari's *nautr*. The ring 'has a tendency to kill its owners' ('har en tendens til at dræbe sine ejere')[98] that extends into the treasure where it belongs. *Nautr* is the substantive form of the same verb *njóta* ('to use, to enjoy'), which in etymological terms appears to have originally meant 'he who uses (possesses, enjoys) something with another or others' ('den, som bruger [besidder, nyder] noget sammen med en anden eller andres')[99] and which usually refers to a companion or marks a special gift which is valuable and exhibited. Thus, the man turned into dragon does

95 *Reginsmál,* v.II, prose, p. 298.
96 *Fáfnismál,* v.II, st. 20, p. 307.
97 *Reginsmál,* v.II, st. 5, p. 297. Emphasis is mine.
98 Heidemann Torfing, *Genstandsnavne, genstandsliv*, p. 231.
99 Bugge, 'Oldnorske Sammensætninger paa -nautr', p. 26.

not enjoy his treasure but it cannot happen otherwise, because his treasure cannot be enjoyed. It appears, ironically, a *nautr* that is no companion but causes isolation, promotes hiding rather than exhibition, and gives no joy to any owner, who has no use for it. Furthermore, it is a gift that does not create social ties, but destroys them. Symmetrically, this dragon is an effect of the cursed hoard,[100] and of the deeds that the greed to keep it compel their possessors to do. The dragon thus embodies the traits held by that same inversion inherent to the hoard.

Conclusion

I have described three main ways of conceiving dragons that can be found in medieval Icelandic texts: first, a secular tradition hailing back (at least) to skaldic verse, which sees dragons as either embodiments of greed (and as frightening antagonists), and which often are shapeshifted men. Then, I have described two related traditions derived from continental culture: the dragon as the devil (an embodiment of evil) derived from Biblical roots (on which I barely touched upon) and the dragon as a serpentine beast, derived from learned *scientia*.[101] The last one seems less alien to our modern understanding as its existence and traits are basically physical and somewhat reptilian, and yet it is this last one which appears further apart from a figure such as Fáfnir, because in it a dragon does not embody moral implication, unlike the vernacular and the Christian imageries.[102]

100 The association between hoards, greed and dragons can avoid human agents to cause death. In the *Gesta Danorum* (viii.14.16: I 608–609) precious objects in a hoard (an armlet, an auroch horn and a tusk from a rare beast) turn directly into a serpent, a dragon, a serpent and a sword and kill the greedy men who seized them. Here the dragon is not even the effect of the hoard, but the hoard itself.

101 The relationship between dragons and Biblical allegory of evil is a rather large topic, which would exceed the possibilities of this article. A good introduction to the topic is Nicolas Kiessling's classical article *Antecedents of the Medieval Dragon in Sacred History*, which traces back the origin of the medieval imagery of dragons as symbols of sin and evil to early Christian authors and to the Hebrew Old Testament. For the Anglo-Saxon context, see Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, 52–88. As far as I know, there is no detailed study of the issue for Old Norse contexts, but for the case of Fáfnir and Christian symbolism, see the following footnote.

102 The reappropiation of Sigurðr as a dragonslayer, which appears in both visual and textual sources, focuses on the hero's role as a slayer of evil (and thus a possible prefiguration of Christ's victory over Satan. See Ashman Rowe, 'Qvid Sigvardus cum Christo'). The connection of the monster with greed does not appear to be crucial in these cases. This explains his presence in obviously ecclesiastical contexts such as depictions in stave churches.

It is however interesting to remark that the dragon as a hoarder became a popular image in Iceland even in texts which owe much to Christian institutions, such as the Christian monarchy behind the lawcode (as in *Heynesbók*) or the skaldic poetry on religious topics (as in *Geisli*), and that this image depends upon issues of greed and generosity. While the element stems from stories which antedate the conversion, the imagery of an evil hoarder can easily be incorporated within Christian themes.[103] Moreover, the poetic uses should come as no surprise as skaldic verse depends to a great extent on imagery present in mythical narratives. However, the adage illustrating the *Heynesbók* proves that the function of greed still lived in the mind of men discussing wealth distribution in the late Middle Ages, much in the same way that in an earlier period, Fáfnir and his analogues shapeshifted into dragons because of their hoards. They became inhuman for their refusal to act as humans are expected, for their love to keep what should be given away,[104] much like the negative characterisation of a bad lord in *Beowulf*,

> þinċeð him tō lȳtel þæt hē tō lange hēold / ġȳtsað gromhȳdiġ / nallas on ġylp seleð / fætte bēagas[105]
>
> [To him it seems little what he held too long, with a cruel mind, he covets; in arrogance, he never bestows ornamented rings.]

103 In the continent, a rejection of unused, hoarded wealth was elaborated theologically in the same thirteenth century in which *Vǫlsunga saga*, *Snorra Edda* and the main manuscript of eddic poetry were compiled. According to Todeschini, 'the immobilised monetary wealth of laics, in fact, tends to appear in theological-moral textuality (…) as a concrete manifestation of the avarice, namely, of a transgression of official Christianity that nearly identified it with simony, this is, with the *infidelitas* to Roman Catholicism' ('La razionalità monetaria cristiana', p. 376. My translation). The Italian historian notes that this appeared as a double rejection of the hoarder as opposed both to the risk-taking merchant and to the supraindividual, institutionalised wealth of the Church, that share an aversion to immobilised, individually-owned riches.

104 The rejection of hoarding appears even in law. The *Grágás* says 'if a man buries property of his in the ground for safekeeping, gold or silver, the penalty for that is lesser outlawry (loss of all property and three-year exile). The case lies with anyone who wishes to prosecute' (*Grágás* Ib 75, section 171, v. II, p.222; section 182 adds 'and other valuable objects'. See Miller and Vogt, 'Finding, sharing and risk of loss', p. 42). See also Lionarons, *The Medieval Dragon*, and Lincoln, 'Further on Envy and Greed'.

105 *Beowulf*, vv. 1748–1750, p. 59.

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About the Author

Santiago Barreiro holds a PhD in History at the University of Buenos Aires, and works as a researcher at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. His works focuses on social and economical issues in Medieval Icelandic literature. He has recently published the first Spanish translation of *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* and two shorter texts as *Tres Relatos Medievales Nórdicos*, and co-edited (with Renan Birro) an introductory handbook on the medieval north, *El mundo nórdico medieval: una introducción*, plus numerous articles and book chapters.

4. *Eigi í mannligu eðli*

Shape, Monstrosity and Berserkism in the *Íslendingasögur*

Rebecca Merkelbach

Abstract
The *berserkir* of Old Norse literature have been argued to be able to transform into wolves or bears when *berserksgangr*, or battle rage, is upon them. However, while an animalistic association cannot be denied, not all genres of saga literature depict *berserkir* as true shapechangers. This, however, does not mean that they are not ontologically ambiguous — that they are not monstrous. Reading the *berserkir* of the *Íslendingasögur* through the lens of monster theory offers a new perspective on this much-studied character type that reveals that, rather than being physically hybrid, they are socially disruptive: especially in their relationships with women, *berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur* reveal their monstrosity. Ultimately, this reading contributes both to our understanding of *berserkir*, and to our knowledge of their place in the medieval Icelandic imagination.

Keywords: *Íslendingasögur*; *berserkir*; monstrosity; monster studies

Of all the paranormally connoted opponents a hero can face in medieval Icelandic literature, the *berserkr* is one of the most frequently appearing monstrous antagonists. The chances of encountering one are equally high in the *fornaldarsögur* and the *Íslendingasögur*,[1] and beyond these genres they appear in *Heimskringla*, *Snorra Edda* and both eddic and skaldic poetry. In addition to these high and late medieval narratives, scholars have found them reflected in diverse sources from antiquity to the Viking Age, ranging from Tacitus's *Germania* to Migration Age bracteates and Viking Age rune

1 All references to the *Íslendingasögur* are to the Íslenzk fornrit editions, unless otherwise stated, as in the case of the S version of *Gísla saga* (ed. Loth). All translations are my own.

Barreiro, S. and L. Cordo Russo (eds), *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019
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stones.[2] Drawing on all of these sources, scholars have tried to paint a coherent and cohesive picture of these inconsistently depicted figures, arguing for instance that they reflect remnants of Odinic *Männerbünde*,[3] or of human-animal shapeshifting. It is this latter concept that this article will focus on, trying to revise some of the assumptions that have been made about *berserkir* and their relationship to shapeshifting and monstrosity.[4]

One of the problems of previous work on *berserkir* is that, in many cases, scholars do not adequately differentiate between *berserkir* appearing in different genres of saga literature.[5] It is, however, important to distinguish between different kinds of *berserkir*: in the *fornaldarsögur*, for example, some *berserkir* can change shape physically, whereas — as I will argue below — this does not happen in the *Íslendingasögur*.[6] In a courtly context, their role changes drastically, and they lose some of their horror when they appear in massive armies,[7] whereas in the *Íslendingasögur*, a small group of *berserkir* is sufficient to cause terror in the community. I would therefore argue that, even in discussions of the character-type across Norse literature and culture, it is important to examine the *berserkr* as he appears in any given generic and narrative context. It is for this reason that my reading will focus on the *Íslendingasögur* exclusively.

I will also limit my discussion to those characters that are referred to as *berserkir* or are described as exhibiting *berserksgangr* by the narrator or a character of a given saga, the only exception being Egill and his ancestors. It seems that *Egils saga* carefully avoids the term *berserkr* in relation to them, and therefore they offer an interesting comparative perspective. Some scholars have assumed all characters who *hamask* ('shift'), or are *eigi einhamr* ('not of one shape'), or *hamrammr* ('shape-strong'), and/or who fight duels are *berserkir*,[8] but in my opinion one should not make this assumption. Gerard Breen laments that the terms *berserkr* and *berserksgangr* do not provide a 'reliable yardstick' for our understanding of the *berserkr* since characters who

2 Three recent doctoral theses discuss the appearances of *berserkir* in Old Norse culture: Dale, *Berserkir,* traces their transhistorical representations from Norse literature and Viking Age material culture to modern popular culture. An earlier thesis by Breen, *Berserkr*, examines motifs related to *berserkir* mostly across the literary canon. Samson's *Les Berserkir* also mostly discusses literary history, but devotes a chapter to the material record.

3 All-male warrior bands. For summaries of the arguments, see Breen, *Berserkr*, pp. 113–116; Dale, *Berserkir*, pp. 98–110.

4 For an earlier discussion of the monstrosity of *berserkir*, see Hume, 'From Saga to Romance'.

5 An exception is Zitzelsberger, '*Berserkir* in the *fornaldarsögur*',

6 See Breen, *Berserkr*, p. 26.

7 *ibid*., p. 113.

8 See Breen, *Berserkr*, p. 19; Dale, *Berserkir*, p. 134; Beard, '*Berserkir*', p. 100.

are not referred to as *berserkir* sometimes behave like them, and because of the variability of meaning denoted by both terms.[9] However, I would argue that because of this lack of a precise meaning (due to the monster's 'propensity to shift')[10] one should be careful about making assumptions as to which of 'these figures were intended to be identified by the contemporary audience as *berserkir*'.[11] Instead, it is significant if a saga chooses *not* to refer to someone who *hamask*,[12] is unpopular or abducts women as a *berserkr*.

In this article, I revisit the argument about *berserkir* and their ability to shift shape. I will argue that, rather than a physical shift in shape that is somehow connected to them being *eigi einhamir* ('not of one shape'), it is more beneficial to consider *berserksgangr* as a behavioural or psychological shift. Moreover, understanding *berserksgangr* in this way also makes sense in the context of monstrosity in which the *berserkr* appears in this genre: monstrosity in the *Íslendingasögur* is not focused on physical Otherness, hybridity or deformity, but on social disruption, and *berserkir* are easily understood as monstrous within this framework, as I will show. I will therefore introduce the concept of social monstrosity and, in the final section, consider the *berserkr* in this context (and beyond). This will not only explain why physical shapeshifting would not be effective in this genre of medieval Icelandic literature, but will also contribute a new perspective to the study of *berserkir*, one that highlights their actions and interactions rather than their being.

Shape

Much of the earlier scholarship on *berserkir* focused either on the etymology of their name, or on the nature of *berserksgangr*. Since, as stated above, I am more interested in behaviour than nature, I will not discuss what *berserksgangr is*, but will instead examine below what a *berserkr does*. However, the question of the etymology of the word *berserkr* as either derived from *berr*, 'bare',[13] or from a lost noun **beri*, 'bear',[14] provides a starting point for the discussion of shapeshifting since it allows *berserkir* to be read either

9 *Berserkr*, p. 1.

10 Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 5.

11 Dale, *Berserkir*, p. 134.

12 I will use *hamask* throughout. I fully recognise that it might be jarring in the context of an English sentence. However, due to the problematic nature of the term, I prefer not to translate it, and the form remains grammatically appropriate in the contexts used.

13 See Noreen, 'Ordet *bärsärk*', p. 253, and Kuhn, 'Kämpen und Berserker', p. 222.

14 See von See, 'Berserker', p. 133.

as fighting bare, as Snorri envisaged them in *Ynglinga saga*,[15] or as warriors wearing bear-skins, and thus as crossing into the animalistic. Since there are valid reasons for both etymologies, I agree with Roderick Dale that, probably, a multiplicity of meanings related to the term existed across time and space.[16] However, the 'bear' etymology has the advantage that it offers a parallel construction to the often connected term *úlfheðinn*,[17] and this connection opens up readings into *berserkir* as cultic animal-warriors with parallels in other Indo-European societies.[18] Combined with the fact that some *berserkir* are also said to be *eigi einhamir* or *hamrammir* in the sagas, this has led to the conjecture that *berserkir* change shape, or that they represent the residue of a belief in the shapeshifting abilities of animal warriors.[19]

Several scholars, however, noted that *berserkir*, at least in the *Íslendingasögur*, do not actually change shape,[20] and while some of their points are questionable,[21] I agree with the general argument that the 'shifting' of the *Íslendingasögur berserkir* is not a literal, physical one. Because this problematic argument about the nature of the *berserkir*'s 'shifting' has frequently been made on the basis of a connection between *berserksgangr* and other 'shifting' practices, it is necessary to take a closer look at those people who are said to be *hamrammr*, *eigi einhamr* or who *hamask*.[22]

Such *ham*-compounds have been connected to an episode in *Vǫlsunga saga* in which Sigmundr and Sinfjǫtli put on *úlfahamir*, 'wolf-shapes' or 'wolf-hides', and metamorphose into wolves.[23] This episode, however, occurs

15 *Ynglinga saga*, p. 17: '[Óðins] menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjǫldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr' ('Óðinn's men went without armour and were as crazed as dogs or wolves; they bit into their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed everyone, but neither fire nor iron could hurt them. That is called going berserk.').

16 *Berserkir*, p. 109. He summarises the arguments for both etymologies on pp. 57–71. Dale, Breen and Samson all conclude that the bear-etymology is the most likely.

17 This connection first appears in what is probably the oldest recorded instance of the word *berserkr* in Þorbjǫrn hornklofi's *Haraldskvæði*, st. 8: 'Grenjuðu *berserkir* [...] / emjuðu úlfheðnar' ('Berserks bellowed [...] / wolf-skins howled'); Whaley, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas I*, p. 102. *Grettis saga*, p. 5, and *Vatnsdœla saga*, p. 24, also make the connection.

18 See McKone, 'Hund, Wolf und Krieger'; van Zanten, 'Going Berserk'; Speidel, 'Mad Warriors'.

19 Breen, *Berserkr*, p. 48.

20 Beard, *'Berserkir'*, p. 100; Grundy, 'Shapeshifting', p. 104; p. 117; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man', p. 34.

21 e.g. Grundy, 'Shapeshifting', p. 117, who believes that *ham*-associated men and *berserkir* could access some kind of metaphysical animal hide to *hamask* or go into *berserksgangr*.

22 On these terms and related concepts, see Böldl, *Eigi einhamr*, pp. 109–114.

23 *Vǫlsunga saga*, p. 15. See Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'Werewolf', pp. 280 and 284–285; Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness*, p. 181; Ellis Davidson, 'Shape-Changing', p. 135.

not only in a *fornaldarsaga* in which other figures also shift shape, but is also an isolated instance of such physical metamorphosis through the use of an animal skin. Here, the *hamr* is a physical entity that can be put on and taken off, but there is little suggestion of this idea of a physical shape or skin informing the cases of *hamrammir* or *eigi einhamir* characters in the *Íslendingasögur*. There are sixteen men in these sagas who are connected to such *ham*-compounds without being called *berserkir*,[24] and while some of them can be problematic or even disruptive,[25] only two of them behave in ways that might be associated with shapeshifting: Gunnsteinn and Sveinungr in *Fljótsdæla saga* are said to *tryllast* ('turn trollish, become mad') in battle, but even here there is no allusion to a physical change of shape.[26] In other characters, their *ham*-associations are connected to great strength,[27] but there is no suggestion that they physically change shape. They are not even shown to project their animal spirit into battle as Þorsteinn svǫrfuðr (who is not *ham*-associated) does.[28]

Moreover, of the twenty-one named *berserkir* who appear in the *Íslendingasögur*,[29] only four are also connected with *ham*-compounds: Halli and Leiknir in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga*, Bárekr, who appears in *Brot af Þórðar sögu hreðu*, and Svartr from *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*.

24 Þrándr, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 165; Þorkell, *Bárðar saga*, p. 118; Skeljungr, *Bárðar saga*, p. 130; Þorkell silfri, *Vatnsdœla saga*, pp. 110–112; Vígi, *Kormáks saga*, pp. 226–227; Þórir, *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 220; Galti, *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 220; Gunnsteinn and Sveinungr, *Fljótsdæla saga*, pp. 279–280; Þorvaldr, *Finnboga saga*, pp. 299–300; Þormóðr, *Hávarðar saga*, p. 293; Torfi, *Harðar saga*, p. 28; Úlfhamr, *Harðar saga*, p. 46; Óláfr tvennumbrúni, *Flóamanna saga*, p. 265; Kveld-Úlfr, *Egils saga*, pp. 4 and 69–70; Skalla-Grímr, *Egils saga*, pp. 69 and 101.

25 e.g. Þorvaldr in *Finnboga saga*, who kills Finnbogi's sons; pp. 299–300.

26 *Fljótsdæla saga*, pp. 279–280.

27 e.g. the fight of the two *hamrammir* men Þórir and Galti is said to be 'inn harðasti', 'the hardest'; *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 221.

28 *Svarfdœla saga*, pp. 181–182. A similar episode is *Landnámabók*, pp. 355–356, the fight of the spirit animals of Dufþakr and Stórolfr.

29 Moldi, *Svarfdœla saga*, pp. 142–147; Klaufi, *Svarfdœla saga*, passim; Ljótr inn bleiki, *Egils saga*, 200–206; the Haukar, *Vatnsdœla saga*, pp. 124–125; Þórir Ingimundarson, *Vatnsdœla saga*, pp. 83 and 97–98; Þórir þǫmb and Qgmundr illi, *Grettis saga*, pp. 61–70; Snækollr, *Grettis saga*, pp. 135–136; Gautr, *Gull-Þóris saga*, p. 191; Surtr jarnhauss, *Flóamanna saga*, pp. 259–261; Ótryggr, *Njáls saga*, pp. 267–268; Ásgautr, *Víga-Glúms saga*, pp. 10–12; Bjǫrn jarnhauss, *Víga-Glums saga*, pp. 17–19; Bjǫrn inn bleiki, *Gísla saga*, pp. 4–5 (*Gísla saga*, ed. Loth, pp. 4–6); Þórormr, *Gunnlaugs saga*, pp. 71–73; Halli and Leiknir, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 61–64 and 70–75 (*Heiðarvíga saga*, pp. 217–224); Bárekr, *Þórðar saga hreðu*, pp. 234–235; Svartr, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, pp. 369–372; Þorsteinn, *Reykdœla saga*, pp. 211–212. I have excluded Jǫkull Ingimundarson (*Vatnsdœla saga*, p. 89) and Helgi Harðbeinsson (*Laxdœla saga*, p. 180) from this number since they are called *berserkr* by characters for the effect this has on others, i.e. they are declared to be monstrous to fit the agenda of those who perceive them as such. See Merkelbach, 'Volkes Stimme', p. 271.

Additionally, a passage in *Egils saga* connects men who are *hamrammr* and men who exhibit *berserksgangr*, but even there, it is not a direct equation. Rather, the saga carefully avoids turning Kveld-Úlfr into an outright *berserkr* by stating '[s]vá er sagt, at þeim mǫnnum væri farit, er hamrammir eru, *eða þeim*, er berserksgangr var á, at meðan þat var framit, þá váru þeir svá sterkir, at ekki helzk við þeim' ('This is said of those men, who are shape-strong, *or of those* who exhibit *berserksgangr*, that while this was performed, they were so strong that nothing could withstand them').[30] Moreover, while it has been assumed that Kveld-Úlfr goes berserk every night,[31] the one case in which he demonstrably *hamask* (accessing the rage and strength necessary for his fight against Hallvarðr and his men) is so exhausting that he dies shortly afterwards.[32]

In many of the above-mentioned cases, *ham*-association seems to be connected with strength greater than that of ordinary humans, and this is made explicit when *Finnboga saga* states of its protagonist that 'fáir eða engir muni sterkari verit hafa á Íslandi, þeira er einhamir hafa verit'('few people or none have been stronger in Iceland among those who were of one shape').[33] Thus, rather than denoting a shift in shape, being *hamrammr* or *eigi einhamr* denotes the ability to draw on powers that ordinary humans cannot access. It appears to be a battle boost rather than the ability to shift shape, thus rendering it a psychological or behavioural shift which impacts physical capacity.[34] This shift can coincide with the other psychological and behavioural shift known as *berserksgangr*, but there is no basis for Breen's assessment that '[t]hese *ham*-terms are so frequently applied to *berserkir* that they become almost synonymous with the term *berserksgangr*.'[35] Rather, a spectrum of psychological instability is opened up through those terms, and *berserksgangr* only seems to be the most specific, and perhaps most extreme, case of behavioural shifting.[36]

30 *Egils saga*, p. 70. Emphasis mine. Note again the focus on strength.

31 Grundy, 'Shapeshifting', p. 113.

32 *Egils saga*, p. 71.

33 *Finnboga saga*, p. 318.

34 This does of course not exclude the possibility that beliefs in physical shapeshifting once existed. However, by the time the sagas were composed and transmitted, few remains of such beliefs are to be found in the *Íslendingasögur*. The only exception is potentially the association of some people, especially Hebrideans, with sea mammals; examples of this are Hrappr in *Laxdœla saga*, p. 41, Þórveig in *Kormáks saga*, p. pp. 265–266, and possibly Þorgunna, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 147.

35 *Berserkr*, p. 33.

36 This spectrum can perhaps be extended to include those people who, like Hrolleifr in *Vatnsdœla saga*, pp. 50–70 (who is disruptive and a sexual predator), behave like *berserkir* without being referred to as such.

For, while *berserksgangr* is also associated with increased strength,[37] it is connected with another shift: a crossing into the animalistic. One of the most common features of *berserkir* is their seemingly bizarre behaviour when *berserksgangr* comes over them. The case of Ljótr inn bleiki is symptomatic: when 'kom á hann berserksgangr, tók hann þá at grenja illiliga ok beit í skjǫld sínn' ('*berserksgangr* came over him; he then began to howl hideously and bit into his shield').[38] Similarly, when Halli and Leiknir are introduced in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the narrator states of them that 'þeir gengu berserksgang ok váru þá eigi í mannligu eðli, er þeir váru reiðir, ok fóru galnir sem hundar ok óttuðusk hvárki eld né járn' ('they went berserk and were not of human nature when they were enraged; they went around crazed like dogs and feared neither fire nor iron').[39] The howling of Ljótr and the dog-like behaviour of Halli and Leiknir are linked in characters like Þórir þǫmb and Qgmundr illi who, when they go berserk, 'grenja sem hundar' ('howl like dogs').[40] Thus, howling and animalistic behaviour are inherent features of *berserksgangr*, underlining that, even though they may not physically shift shape, *berserkir* are inherently hybrid. None of these episodes, however, suggests that this crossing is to be understood literally, or that these men physically turn into the animals whose behaviour they emulate. Instead, through their animalistic behaviour during *berserksgangr*, they cross the ontological boundary between human and animal that should not be crossed, thus rendering *berserkir* into animalistic hybrids with a psychological ability to shift.

The question arises as to what enables this crossing into the animalistic. Two sagas offer a possible explanation: in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Halli and Leiknir are said to be 'eigi í mannligu eðli er þeir váru reiðir' ('not of human nature when they were enraged'),[41] and in *Vatnsdœla saga*, this is underlined by Þorsteinn's assessment of Þórir's situation: 'þú ert eigi í *eðli* þínu sem aðrir menn'('you are not in your *nature* like other men').[42] This change in a person's *eðli*, 'nature', is therefore what seems to facilitate *berserksgangr* and with it the transgression of ontological boundaries between human and animal; we are therefore literally concerned with the *nature* of *berserksgangr*. This

37 cf. Þórir þǫmb and Qgmundr illi, who are 'meiri ok sterkari enn aðrir menn' ('bigger and stronger than other men') *Grettis saga*, p. 62; the same is said of Halli and Leiknir, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61

38 *Egils saga*, p. 202.

39 *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61.

40 *Grettis saga*, pp. 67–68. Also see the Haukar in *Vatnsdœlasaga*, p. 124.

41 *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61.

42 *Vatnsdœla saga*, p. 97. Emphasis mine.

appears to be another argument against a literal reading of *berserksgangr* as shapeshifting: it is a person's nature, their character and behaviour, that is at stake when a *berserkr* goes berserk and it is this internal aspect that shifts. Moreover, that *berserkir* seem to be different in their *eðli* from ordinary people also underlines their hybridity: there is something in the fabric of their very being which enables them to cross into the animalistic. This crossing is then made visible, transposed from the mental to the physical, in the signs of *berserksgangr*, through howling and shield-biting. The crossing itself is therefore one of action rather than being, with *berserkir* behaving like animals rather than turning into them.

On the basis of these observations, I argue that *berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur* do not shift their physical shape but instead shift into a different psychological or behavioural state enabled by their difference in nature. This focus on action over being, on behaviour over shape, however, is not due to the fact that the *Íslendingasögur*'s realism would not allow for a change in physical form to occur as Grundy believes;[43] after all, magic-users can change the appearance of things and people through illusion magic (*sjónhverfingar*), and they can permanently alter the landscape through efficatory magic.[44] Rather, it is in keeping with the genre's focus on the social dimensions of the paranormal and monstrous that I argue to be the dominant expression of monstrosity in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Monstrosity

Medieval literature is, to a large part, concerned with physical monstrosity: deformed hybrids populate both the pages of manuscripts as well as the learned discourse of writers like Isidore and Augustine.[45] In travel accounts, these monsters embody difference and limitations, policing, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen states, the borders of the possible.[46] In romance literature, giants challenge conceptions of chivalry.[47] These observations can, to some extent, be applied to those genres of medieval Icelandic literature that were inspired

43 'Shapeshifting', p. 108.

44 Magic that effects a change in the world, as opposed to divinatory magic. See Tolley, 'Helping Spirits', p. 58.

45 For a detailed discussion of this type of monstrosity, see Friedman, *Monstrous Races*. An alternative approach using the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius is Williams, *Deformed Discourse*. A concise introduction is Hurley, 'Monsters'.

46 Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 12.

47 Cohen, *Of Giants*.

and influenced by continental discourses: physical monstrosity is prominent in *fornaldar-* and *riddarasögur*. From the *Íslendingasögur*, however, both learned as well as more general physical monstrosity are largely absent. With the exception of the *einfætingr* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, creatures that can be read as monstrous in Plinian, Augustinian and Isidorean discourse do not appear in these narratives, and physical Otherness does not play much of a role beyond comments on the size of characters like Grettir and Egill. This, however, does not equal an absence of monstrosity from the *Íslendingasögur* as a whole; it only means that monstrosity needs to be conceived of differently.

Since the *Íslendingasögur* are above all concerned with human interactions and conflicts, and with the formation of society, approaching monstrosity from this angle of social interaction is most productive. Using a similar approach to Old English literature, Jennifer Neville postulated that '[m]onsters intrude into and threaten human society. This is important: monsters do not threaten individuals only but society as a whole'.[48] This observation forms the core of what I term social monstrosity, a monstrosity that operates through social disruption rather than physical Otherness. What is apparent in Neville's statement is not only the social dimension of monstrosity, but also the fact that monstrosity is based on action and interaction: the monster intrudes and threatens, and society responds. This focus on interaction is confirmed by Asa Simon Mittman, who argues that 'a monster is not really known through observation; how could it be? How could the viewer distinguish between "normally" terrifying phenomena and abnormally terrifying monstrosity? Rather, I submit, the monster is known through its *effect*, its impact.'[49] Thus, one ultimately has to observe the way society, threatened by the monster, responds to the monster's intrusion and disruption.[50] In the following, however, I will be more concerned with the monster's side of the interaction, asking the question what gives a character the potential to be viewed as monstrously disruptive by the communities on whose margins he moves.

One of the main features of physical monstrosity is the transgressive and hybrid body of the monster that allows it to do its cultural work and enables it to embody the concerns and anxieties of the culture in which it arises.[51] Thus, according to Cohen, the monstrous races and monstrous births

48 'Monsters and Criminals', p. 112.

49 'Impact of Monsters', p. 6; emphasis original.

50 I explore this in detail in my article, 'Volkes Stimme'.

51 See Cohen, 'Monster Culture', esp. pp. 4–7

of learned antique, medieval and early modern discourse are 'disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration.'[52] Because of this hybridity, this 'propensity to shift',[53] the monster's greatest threat is its transgression of boundaries, its disruption of binaries, laws and norms, and in this, the social dimension to monstrosity becomes apparent. For social monsters are transgressive in breaking the norms and structures of ordinary human society, crossing into the paranormal realms beyond it as well as into spaces not permitted to ordinary members of society, and through this, potentially monstrous characters can be identified. The most obvious example are revenants, who, in their undead state, are literally traversing a line that should not (and indeed cannot) be crossed by ordinary humans, and I will use them as a test case on which to develop the other features of social monstrosity necessary for the discussion of *berserkir* below.

In addition to transgressing the laws of nature, revenants also transgress the laws of society by turning against the living. Glámr in *Grettis saga* kills both livestock and farmhands,[54] and the same is true of Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*.[55] Hrappr in *Laxdœla saga* even causes his own son to go mad and die,[56] while the revenants at Fróðá, again in *Eyrbyggja saga*,[57] take over the hall of the living, making it impossible for them to enjoy the warmth and community needed for human survival. Paranormal hybridity and social transgression are therefore features necessary to establish a character's potential to monstrosity. What also becomes apparent at this point is the economic dimension of the revenants' intrusion into human society. By killing or driving away those on whom the medieval Icelandic farming community depends (animals and those who work with them) revenants actively disrupt economic stability and undercut the local community's prosperity. When they take over an area, all human life, all social interaction between the living and thus all that human society stands for, effectively comes to an end. Therefore, the undead display the absolute extreme of disruptive behaviour we see from human monsters in the *Íslendingasögur*. They make ordinary life impossible for the people in their vicinity, by confining the living to certain spaces, by forcing them to leave, or quite literally by ending their lives (and dead people cannot work on a farm). This is what Sayers

52 *ibid.*, p. 6.
53 *ibid.*, p. 5.
54 *Grettis saga*, pp. 107–123.
55 *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 90–95 and 169–176.
56 *Laxdœla saga*, pp. 39–43 and 66–69.
57 *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 137–152.

refers to as the 'economic dimension of revenant activity',[58] and it is a key feature of their monstrous disruption.

No less important, however, is the fact that revenants are often contagious. Glámr turns into a revenant after fighting against the *meinvættr* of Forsæludalr, and he curses Grettir who develops a potential to monstrosity in his own right.[59] Sayers terms this the 'chain of malign supernatural activity' in Forsæludalr,[60] and similar chains of revenant contagion can likewise be observed in *Eyrbyggja saga* in the case of Þórólfr, and especially in the Fróðá hauntings. Contagion feeds back into disruption, augmenting the effect monsters have on the communities on whose margins they move: the more monsters there are, after all, the bigger is the threat to social stability. Thus, in the *Íslendingasögur*, the combination of paranormal hybridity and societal transgressiveness, contagion and economic disruption gives a person the potential to monstrosity. Due to this focus on the societal dimension of monstrosity, I would argue that the consequences of *berserkr* disruption also need to be understood as societal in nature. Physical shapeshifting is therefore not only not indicated in the sagas, but also would be secondary in rendering *berserkir* monstrous.

Berserkism

To illustrate this, I will finally turn to how the sagas ascribe monstrous potential to *berserkir*, that is, in what way the central features of social monstrosity (hybridity and transgression, contagion, and economic and societal disruption) are exhibited by these characters. In this, their ability to shift will be important, but it will also emerge that, in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, behavioural shifting is much more dangerous than physical shifting could ever be.

As I have shown, *berserkir* can certainly be considered paranormal hybrids: due to their behaviour during *berserksgangr*, they become associated with the animalistic, crossing ontological boundaries that should not be crossed. According to Aleksander Pluskowski, such a connection with the bestial was in itself associated with monstrosity in medieval culture, and comparing someone to an animal served to dehumanise them.[61] Thus, the

58 Sayers, 'Unquiet Dead', p. 249.
59 See my article, 'Monstrosity, Familial Disruption, and Cultural Relevance'.
60 'Unquiet Dead', p. 251.
61 *Wolves and the Wilderness*, p. 172.

animalistic connotations of *berserksgangr* establish the *berserkr*'s association with the monstrous by rendering him a potential hybrid who transgresses the boundary between human and animal. This, then, enables them to transgress societal boundaries, as their behavioural shift gives them the superior strength and aggression they use to dominate others.

I also demonstrated that this ability to shift is something that arises out of a *berserkr*'s *eðli* ('nature'). Thus, due to its close connection with behaviour and personality, the ability to go berserk appears to be an innate quality. However, if berserkism is innate, one can assume that it can also be passed on, and this hypothesis is supported by saga narratives. The main way through which *berserkir* infect others with their monstrosity is through descent; berserkism, the ability to *berserksgangr*, seems to be a genetic condition that is passed on from father to son.[62] This is highlighted, for example, in the encounters involving pairs of *berserkr* brothers: Halli and Leiknir[63] and Þórir þǫmb and Ǫgmundr illi[64] are said to be brothers as well as *berserkir*, and they operate together. The family of Egill Skalla-Grímsson has also been drawn on in discussions of the hereditary nature of berserkism, and although both Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr are associated with *ham*-compounds, the case is a bit more tenuous with Egill himself. The ability to *hamask* in this family therefore seems to become diluted over time, and since none of the men involved is ever referred to as a *berserkr*, *Egils saga* does not provide conclusive evidence.

A clearer case of a *berserkr* descent line, however, is presented in *Svarfdæla saga*. It is introduced in the figure of Ljótr inn bleiki whom 'bíti eigi vápn' ('weapons do not bite'),[65] but who is not called a *berserkr*. Moldi, however, a 'víkingr eðr hálfberserkr' ('viking or half-*berserkr*'),[66] turns out to be Ljótr's brother. It is therefore reasonable to assume that there is a streak of berserkism running in the family, and while Þorsteinn manages to overcome them both, this does not end the *berserkr* problem. After the big lacuna that makes it difficult to trace the exact genealogies, Þorsteinn svǫrfuðr's sister Þórarna appears, revealing that she 'var hertekin af Snækolli Ljótssyni, ok hann á bǫrn þessi við mér' ('was abducted by Snækollr Ljótsson, and he has these children [Klaufi and Sigríðr] with me').[67] Because of the lacuna, there is no direct link between Snækollr and Ljótr inn bleiki, but it is reasonable to

62 See Breen, *Berserkr*, pp. 31–32; Samson, *Les Berserkir*, p. 151.
63 *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 61.
64 *Grettis saga*, p. 62.
65 *Svarfdæla saga*, p. 135.
66 *ibid.*, p. 142.
67 *ibid.*, p. 154.

assume that they are father and son.[68] *Berserkir* are never introduced with their patronymics, and that Snækollr's descent is mentioned establishes a connection between the viking Ljótr (and his *hálfberserkr* brother Moldi) and Snækollr who, as an abductor and rapist, behaves in manner stereotypical of *berserkir*, as I will show below. It is thus not surprising that Snækollr's son Klaufi, too, soon betrays *berserkr*-like tendencies, forcing Yngvildr into a sexual relationship and bullying those who do not conform to his will. Eventually, the saga states outright that 'var þá kominn at honum berserksgangr' ('*berserksgangr* had then come over him'),[69] confirming that Klaufi has inherited the *berserkr* traits of his father's family. However, while these traits seem to decline in Egill's family, they have grown stronger in Klaufi's case: whereas both Ljótr and Moldi are presented as mostly honourable characters who do not want to fight against Þorsteinn, Snækollr already conforms to the role of the abductor and rapist. Klaufi then exhibits the full 'clinical picture' of berserkism.

Berserkism as an innate characteristic or ability is therefore consistently presented as a hereditary condition in the *Íslendingasögur*, and one with great disruptive potential. In order to 'infect' others with his monstrosity, a *berserkr* must produce offspring, but this offspring then has the ability to fragment society from the inside. This infection through procreation, and the ensuing disruption of society, however, is not a rare occurrence: since the *berserkr*'s primary threat is of a sexual nature, it has serious implications for both individuals as well as society as a whole.

For, while *berserkir* do have a negative economic impact on the communities they terrorise, it is almost always bound up with the sexual threat they pose. This is illustrated by the following passage in *Grettis saga*, the introduction of the *berserkir* Þórir þǫmb and Ǫgmundr illi: 'úthlaupsmenn eða berserkir skoruðu á hólm gǫfga menn til fjár eða kvenna […]. Fengu margir af þessu smán ok fjármissu, en sumir líftjón með ǫllu' ('raiders or *berserkir* challenged honourable men to duels over money or women […] Many got shame from this, or lost their property, and some even lost their lives completely').[70] What is important in this passage is the focus on *fjármissa*, 'loss of property', and *líftjón*, 'loss of life', for this is a recurring feature in *berserkr* episodes. The men whom *berserkir* challenge to duels

68 Rask 37 supplies the episode in which Þórarna is abducted by Snækollr and refers to him as Ljótr inn bleiki's son; his motivation for the abduction is vengeance for his father's death. *Svarfdæla saga*, pp. 210–211.

69 *ibid.*, p. 171.

70 *Grettis saga*, p. 61.

(and who are not saved by a conveniently present hero) lose their lives, and thus their families lose their primary provider. Such loss of life also affects wider society if a sufficient number of those who contribute to its economy are killed. However, what is even more notable is that, from the beginning, the focus is on 'fé *eða konur*', 'money *or women*', and later in the episode, it shifts to women only: Þórir þǫmb and Qgmundr illi are above all said to take 'á brott konur manna ok dœtr' ('away men's wives or daughters').[71] This underlines the sexual threat posed by *berserkir*: in most cases they are not, as Benjamin Blaney called them, 'berserk suitors' but rather 'berserk rapists'.

Thus, in other episodes, the exclusive emphasis on the *berserkr*'s sexual threat is present from the beginning, as exemplified in the introduction of Bjǫrn inn blakki in the S version of *Gísla saga*:

> Sá maðr er nefndr til sǫgunnar, er Bjǫrn hét, hann var kallaðr Bjǫrn inn blakki. Hann var berserkr ok hólmgǫngumaðr mikill. […] Hann var óþokkasæll við alþýðu. Setisk hann í bú manna, þar er honum sýndisk, en lagði í rekkju hjá sér konur þeira ok dœtr ok hafði við hǫnd sér slíka stund sem honum sýndisk.[72]
>
> [That man is introduced to the saga whose name was Bjǫrn, he was called Bjǫrn inn blakki. He was a *berserkr* and a great dueller. […] He was unpopular with everyone. He occupied people's farms where he wanted, and took into his bed their wives and daughters and kept them with him for as long as he pleased.]

Bjǫrn's unpopularity is therefore intimately linked to his status as a rapist. This constitutes the key to his disruptiveness, even more than the fact that he is a *berserkr* and a dueller, which merely facilitate this disruption. Without his ability to shift into *berserksgangr*, men like Bjǫrn would not be able to dominate other men and take away and abuse their women. Thus, dominance over ordinary men is another widespread pattern in *berserkr* episodes: Snækollr, for instance, 'skoraði á Einar bónda, at hann skyldi leggja upp við hann dóttur sína' ('Snækollr challenged the farmer Einarr to hand over his daughter'),[73] while the case of Þórir þǫmb and Qgmundr illi highlights the way the *berserkir*'s sexual threat was perceived by those affected by it. The women of Háramarsey swear at Grettir for having brought

71 *ibid.*, p. 62.
72 *Gísla saga*, ed. Loth, p. 4.
73 *Grettis saga*, p. 135.

'"inir verstu ránsmenn ok illvirkjar"'('"the worst robbers and evildoers"') into the house,[74] and 'sló á þær óhug miklum ok gráti' ('they were seized with great despair and crying') at the prospect of abuse.[75] Similarly, the crying of the unnamed sister of Fríðgeirr draws Egill's attention to the impending assault by Ljótr inn bleiki.[76]

These episodes thus make it clear that rape is not purely depicted as a matter of the personal violation and abuse of a woman's body and autonomy; this aspect is not the only problem presented by the sexual threat of the *berserkr*. For the *berserkr*, sexual violence is as much an issue of 'sexual gratification'[77] as it is of control, and in the challenge of the *berserkr*, an element of male power over other men is always present; after all, the *berserkr* challenges the woman's kinsmen, and they are the ones who suffer shame. For instance, in the case of Bjǫrn inn blakki cited above, as soon as Bjǫrn encounters resistance, the focus shifts from his demand of Ingibjǫrg to his challenge to Ari: 'Ek vil skora þér á hólm, at þú berisk við mik, *ef þú treystisk*, á þriggja nátta fresti, ok skal þá reyna, hvárr okkar skal eiga Ingibjǫrgu' ('I will challenge you to a duel, that you shall fight with me, *if you dare*, in three nights. Then we will find out who of us will possess Ingibjǫrg').[78] Similarly, Snækollr emphasises that the farmer Einarr should defend his daughter 'ef hann þœttisk maðr til' ('if he considered himself man enough').[79] Thus, through the shift from a matter of sexual assault to male dominance over other men and the women they control, the *berserkr*'s threat emerges as an issue of personal as well as family honour: the *berserkr* directly impacts not only the physical but also the social survival (through honour and status) of a woman's guardian, proving his physical superiority over the man either by killing him, or by raping the women of his family.[80] One can therefore assume that the impact of the *berserkr*'s sexual threat is mostly conceived of in terms of male honour and control over a man's belongings (which include women, thus linking the *berserkr*'s sexual to his economic impact) rather than female violation.[81]

However, while these episodes of sexual violence and violations of body and honour dominate, there are also several instances in which *berserkir* ask

74 *ibid*., p. 64.
75 *ibid*., p. 65.
76 *Egils saga*, p. 201.
77 Dale, *Berserkir*, p. 177.
78 *Gísla saga*, ed. Loth, p. 4. Emphasis mine.
79 *Grettis saga*, p. 135.
80 cf. Jochens, 'Illicit Love Visit', p. 366.
81 Ljunqvist, 'Rape in the Icelandic Sagas', p. 437.

for a woman in marriage rather than abducting and raping her. These berserk suitors are uniformly rejected, and only after the rejection a challenge is introduced. Thus, while these *berserkir* can still be read as sexual predators, they also try to conform to social expectations by proposing marriage, and the question of why their request is denied needs to be addressed.

The most prominent example of *berserkir* wanting to marry are Halli and Leiknir. According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, almost as soon as they arrive in Iceland, Halli asks Vermundr to find him a wife, but Vermundr 'þóttisk eigi vita ván þeirar konu af góðum ættum, er sik myndi binda við berserk' ('did not expect to find a woman of good family who would want to bind herself to a *berserkr*').[82] Later, when Halli falls in love with the daughter of Styrr, the problem has to be addressed: it seems unthinkable for a *berserkr* to marry into a prominent (Icelandic) family. The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, it is necessary to go back to the idea of berserkism as something that, as *Eyrbyggja saga* highlights,[83] is inherent in a man's *eðli*, and as something that is therefore genetically transmitted. If Halli or Leiknir (or Ljótr inn bleiki, or Moldi) married into the society on whose margins they ordinarily move, they would produce offspring that carried the 'berserk gene', altering their *eðli*, making them psychologically unstable, and enabling them to fragment society from within. That this is a very real possibility (and not just for *berserkir* who marry into society, but also for those who are, according to Breen, 'merely rapists'[84]) emerges in *Svarfdæla saga* in the figure of Klaufi who, in his monstrosity, profoundly disrupts social stability. Because of these risks, the production of *berserkr* offspring has to be prevented at all cost: as Carl Phelpstead puts it, '[the *berserkr*'s] threat to an ontological boundary cannot be tolerated',[85] and his potential to contagious reproduction has to be curbed for the benefit of social stability.

Monsters in Society

It is thus, above all, the social consequences of the *berserkr*'s shifting that render him monstrous: his hybrid *eðli*, his ability to access strength inaccessible to ordinary men, enables him to challenge, dominate, raid and kill. It also enables him to threaten a man's most valuable social good, his

82 *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 63.
83 *ibid.*, p. 61.
84 *Berserkr*, p. 121.
85 'Ecocriticism', p. 14.

honour, by abducting and violating the women of his household, potentially impregnating them in the process and thus perpetuating the potential for monstrosity innate to him. This berserk offspring in turn poses a threat to social stability: it will be born to a Norwegian or Icelandic family and thus will initially be part of society, unlike his father, who moves on society's margins. The consequences of having a berserk child grow up in the family of a powerful man are explored in *Svarfdæla saga*, with Klaufi's attempts at gaining control over the men — and women — around him initiating the fragmentation of the district's power structures. The social dimension of the monstrous threat is thus very much foregrounded in these episodes, highlighting the danger inherent to the *berserkr*'s ability to behavioural or psychological shifting. Moreover, it is possible to direct this ability into societally beneficial channels, and this is why *berserkir* who are part of the retinue of a ruler are generally less problematic than those who roam the land looking for money and sex. This is again visible in the case of Halli and Leiknir, who seem fairly harmless while their monstrous potential is held in check by Jarl Hákon. Only in Iceland, and lacking the control and occupation necessary to hold their shifting ability in check, do they turn into a problem that ultimately has to be removed.

Thus, the threat posed by a figure who has the ability to shift into a different psychological or behavioural state, enabling them to access superhuman, animalistic, strength and to use it to dominate others, is far greater than the threat posed by someone who 'merely', to echo Breen's rhetoric, shifts their physical shape. In the story-world of the *Íslendingasögur* that is focused on interactions and social conflicts, physical monstrosity and with it physical shapeshifting do not hold the same potential for terror as the socially monstrous berserk rapist. Through this figure, moreover, socio-cultural concerns and anxieties relevant to medieval Icelanders could be explored. For the monster, as a figure that transgresses the boundaries of time to communicate across them, allows the exploration of something beyond its own being.[86] From the moment at which it arises, the monster exists to be read by the time that receives it:[87] the time that created the sagas, the time that transmitted them, and the present day in which they are analysed and interpreted in scholarly discourse. I would therefore suggest that the socially disruptive *berserkr*, in a monstrosity that is ultimately explored in the way he penetrates society through the women he assaults, enabled medieval Icelanders to explore anxieties around the structures of

86 Cohen, 'Monster Culture', p. 4.
87 *ibid*., p. 5.

marriage and sexuality, structures fundamental to the (re-)production of society. Marriage is, after all, not simply the union between two individuals. Rather, it connects two existing families, or kin groups:[88] 'It reunites human society'[89] by forming ties of affinal kinship, and thus alliances and obligations, between these two groups.

Due to the foundational nature of the marriage dynamic, disrupting the formation of marriage ties would have been a destabilising act with wide repercussions for the social fabric. However, this is essentially what the *berserkr* does: his intrusion into a family and his violent penetration of that family's integrity through rape have a disruptive effect both on the family's as well as the woman's honour.[90] Both affect her social status and therefore, in the case of an unmarried woman, her value on the 'marriage market'.[91] Thus, the *berserkr*'s sexual assault would severely impact not only her future prospects, but also her male kin's ability to form ties with other kin groups through their kinswoman's marriage. Moreover, the *berserkr*'s rape could also disrupt social reproduction more directly if it resulted in a *berserkr* child. The spread of berserkism through one's offspring holds serious potential for social disruption, as these children could fragment society from the inside when they grow up. *Berserkir* therefore not only disrupt the reproduction of society through marriage before it can take place; they target social production directly, causing a breakdown of the structures of group formation essential to Icelandic society.

The social monstrosity exhibited by the *berserkir* of the *Íslendingasögur* is thus not only more terrifying than mere physical shapeshifting, but also more relevant to the culture in which this monster arises. Sexual violence is a concern in many human societies, but it becomes even more of an issue when the perpetrator is socially marginal, an Other that contaminates those associated with him, passing his Otherness on to his children. The sexual threat of the *berserkr* is thus elevated from social concern to monstrous disruption; it becomes Other in itself. One of the features of rape culture, it has been argued, is that it tries to distance itself from rapists, excusing them as social anomalies that have no relation to ordinary men.[92] This is

88 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Ástir og völd', p. 6.

89 Herlihy, 'Medieval Family', p. 200.

90 There has been considerable debate regarding whether a woman's honour was separate from her male kin's or not. For a summary, see Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, pp. 86–89, who concludes that they were separate to some extent but overlapped considerably.

91 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 88.

92 While Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, p. 6, argues that the notion of rapists as deviant has been questioned, Valenti observed that this distancing still occurs in cultural mainstream;

what appears to be happening in the *Íslendingasögur*: by constructing the monstrous *berserkr* as rapist, non-monstrous men (even if they themselves are sexually violent) have a figure to point to and claim: 'this is the monster, I am not like it'. Miller's assessment is symptomatic: for him, '[r]apists […] lived mostly in Norway or Sweden and were berserks besides'.[93] Icelandic society apparently tried to externalise the sexual violence inherent in it, moving it to its margins by embodying it in the figure of the *berserkr*. Through his monstrosity, issues of sexual violence and lack of consent could then be explored — and this exploration is all the more poignant in a figure that appears fully human, and that shifts in ways subtler, and more destructive, than a shifting of the shape.

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93 'Enormities', p. 763.

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About the Author

Rebecca Merkelbach completed her PhD in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, and has since worked at the Universities of Zurich and Tübingen. In her dissertation, she investigated the theme of social monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders; the monograph is under contract with ARC Humanities Press. Her post-doctoral project at the University of Tübingen, which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), explores the so-called 'post-classical' Sagas of Icelanders, an understudied subgroup commonly dated to the late medieval period.

5. The Cursed and the Committed

A Study in Literary Representations of 'Involuntary' Shapeshifting in Early Medieval Irish and Old Norse Narrative Traditions

Camilla With Pedersen

Abstract

The literary representation of metamorphosis through a curse, or 'involuntary' shapeshifting, is found in both the Early Medieval Irish and Old Norse narrative traditions. Both show similarities with a wider worldview of the soul, the body, and transformation in general, and both, surprisingly, adhere to the tropes found in contemporary Christian thinking and writing. By examining the literary evidence, presenting cases of curses, as well as deliberate self-cursing, the study analyses the individual texts and attempts to place them in a wider context of philosophical and Christian ideas of the medieval period.

Keywords: Shapeshifting, curse, Early Irish, Old Norse, Undead

In the following study, which is part of a wider study of shapeshifting, the concept of 'involuntary' shapeshifting will be discussed and compared across literary evidence in Early Medieval Irish and Old Norse narrative traditions. The wider study also considers two other concepts of shapeshifting, namely 'voluntary' and 'genetic'. By categorising shapeshifting into these three categories, the literary evidence can be analysed and compared in a consistent way.

When examining shapeshifting, or metamorphosis, it is important to distinguish between metaphorical and literal changes. The *literal* representations are situations where a character is described as changing shape, not just assuming some animalistic traits. *Metaphorical* is defined as situations in which the author of a text has used animal imagery to describe or explain

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human behaviour. Caroline Walker Bynum has identified two types of shapeshifting, the first being *metempsychosis*, i.e. 'body hopping, body exchange, or body erasure',[1] the second being *metamorphosis*, i.e. the 'change of one body into another or change of species'.[2] Metempsychosis happens when the soul, or an equivalent interpretation of the soul, leaves the body and inhabits another body or vessel. The soul assumes the physical exterior of the vessel, while keeping the mental interior of the original vessel. Metamorphosis is defined as the whole physical body changing into another, or changing species. In some cases, the mental interior will change too, as with the change of species, where some of the animal characteristics not previously inherent in the shapeshifter are assumed. In others, they remain the same and only the exterior changes. The capacity of human language is often lost when a change of species occurs, taking the shapeshifter to a bestial level. The examples used in this study show cases of metamorphosis only.

Involuntary metamorphosis is, primarily, a physical change of a human body due to external forces, applied to a human not of their own volition, for example as the result of a curse. These changes, intended as punishment, are therefore literal rather than metaphorical. This type of metamorphosis is probably the best-known category that we find in folklore across the world, in religious texts, and in philosophical material of the Middle Ages. Moreover, because of its reintroduction in modern literature, with publications such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897, werewolves and vampires have become part of pop culture in books, television, and movies; but the representations we are familiar with today differ slightly from the earlier ones. The texts examined in this study all depict examples of cursing a character into another form or species.

One of the earliest known literary representations of one of the most well-known 'involuntary' metamorphoses, the werewolf, was by the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) in his work *Metamorphoses*, dated to the year 8 AD. In one of the poems, the god Jupiter turned Lycaon, a man known for his cruelty, into a wolf after Lycaon had cooked and served a hostage.[3] After this transformation his eyes remained the same as before, as did his ferocity and lust for slaughter.[4] The earliest werewolves were portrayed as ferocious beasts, similar to the modern-day understanding of them, but

1 Bynum, 'Metamorphosis', p. 987.
2 *ibid.*, p. 991.
3 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, fable VII [I. 216–243].
4 *ibid.*

around the twelfth century werewolves could be portrayed as sympathetic, rational, and victimised.[5] They could speak and knew the word of God. These types of werewolves are what we find in Giraldus Cambrensis's *Topographia Hiberniae*. Giraldus was a Welshman, writing on behalf of the colonising forces of the Anglo-Normans, with an agenda to defame the Irish, compared to the civilised Anglo-Normans. It also shows that Giraldus was aware of the literary tropes of lycanthropy in the twelfth century, and the text can be used to highlight these literary tropes. A common idea of the time was that the human soul remained in the wolf body, with the eyes remaining human, as Ovid also argued.[6] Interestingly, the Old Norse material does not mention original werewolves explicitly, and neither does early Irish saga narrative material, although werewolves are mentioned in a variety of other Irish and British sources, such as the writings of Bishop Patrick and the aforementioned Giraldus Cambrensis. The lack of werewolves in Irish narrative sources is surprising, given the frequency of the metaphorical imagery of wolves in relation to the *fían*.[7] The Old Norse material may show traits of a vampiric element, but this will be discussed below.

Firstly, this study will present evidence from two Irish narratives from the early medieval period: the story of Bran and Sceolang and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. Then, it will present the evidence from the Old Norse narrative tradition using Fáfnir the dragon and *Hrólfs saga kraka* as examples of 'involuntary' shapeshifting. The undead of the Old Norse tradition will be examined to show that there are types of 'involuntary' transformations, but that there is also an element of the 'voluntary'. Although 'involuntary' shapeshifting is often found in saints' lives, these will not be considered in the present study; only secular texts are considered here.

In two versions of the same tale we hear of Finn mac Cumaill's two hunting dogs, Bran and Sceolang. The shorter version is found in the poem *Lugh's Kinship with Certain Members of the Fían*, dated to *c.* 1300,[8] found in *Duanaire Finn* ('The Poem-Book of Find'). Here, we hear of how one of Lugh's two sisters, Tuirnn, is given to a king of Ulster,[9] who was already married to the daughter of Bodb, who changed Tuirnn into a hound when she found out Tuirnn was pregnant. The cursed Tuirnn was brought to another house, where she gave birth, still in hound form, to Bran and Sceolang.[10] Tuirnn's

5 Bynum, 'Metamorphosis', pp. 1000–1001.
6 *ibid.*, p. 1002.
7 McCone, 'Werewolves'.
8 Murphy, *Duanaire Finn III*, p. cxvii.
9 Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II*, p. 114.
10 *ibid.*, p. 116.

sister, Muirnn, was the mother of Finn mac Cumaill, and the two pups were his cousins by blood. The longer version is found in the fifteenth-century *Feis Tighe Chonáin* ('The Feast in the House of Conán'). Here, Finn was at a feast at Conán's place, and retold the story of how Bran and Sceolang were born. He stated that his mother was Muirnn, who had a sister named Tuirnn.[11] Finn gave Tuirnn to Oilioll mac Eachtach, but he was also attended by Uchtdealbh, a spirit. Tuirnn became pregnant, and Uchtdealbh came to her, to talk:

> 'Do chuaidh an rīogan amach," ar Fionn, "ꝛgairrit do chuaidh in tan tuc [an] uhain-eachlach slat draīachta amach ōna coim ꝛ do bhuail buille ar in rīogan dí, co ndearna sadh bhreach-dearg di dob āille do connuibh in domhain ar in lāthair sin'.[12]
>
> [The young woman accompanied her out,' said Fionn, 'and when they were some distance from the house, she took her dark druidical wand from under her garment, and having struck the young woman with it, metamorphosed her into a greyhound, the handsomest that human eyes ever beheld.]

The hound was taken to a man named Fergus, and while in his care, she gave birth to a male and female pup.[13] Uchtdealbh eventually turned Tuirnn back to her human shape, telling Finn of the two pups. Finn decided that the two pups should remain in hound shape.[14] Both stories agree on the familial relationship between Finn and the two dogs, explaining how he came about owning the dogs, and explaining the particular form and look of the dogs. As Bran and Sceolang age they are much taller than any other dogs, with an array of colours in their fur, on their paws, and their claws.[15] Due to Finn's status as a hero, and the liminal characteristics of both himself and the members of the *fíanna*, it is perhaps fitting that his hunting dogs also would be liminal and supernatural. The dogs were human foetuses when their mother was cursed, and their change then came when they were in a liminal location: not born, not dead. John Carey has argued that the stories of Bran and Sceolang originated as stories of 'hapless women

11 Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain*, p. 21.
12 *ibid.*, p. 22. Translation from Reinhard and Hull, 'Bran and Sceolang', p. 46.
13 Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain*, p. 23.
14 *ibid.*, pp. 33–34.
15 Reinhard and Hull, 'Bran and Sceolang', p. 44.

transformed by jealous rivals',[16] and that the shorter version of the tale from *Duanaire Finn* reflects this tradition, where the longer version in *Feis Tighe Chonáin* has been greatly expanded with an addition of the tradition of 'The Werewolf's Tale', unlikely in existence prior to *Feis Tighe Chonáin*.[17] The parts that Bran and Sceolang play in both the versions of the tale are as minor characters, not having a major impact on the actual story itself. They are part of an explanatory segment, conveying and underlining the supernatural elements of the *fíanna*. By making Muirnn and Tuirnn sisters of Lugh in one tale, it makes a direct link between the hero and the god. By adding the cursing to the tale and making the dogs supernatural, Finn's already exalted status as a hero is enhanced. Using the definitions set out by Bynum, this transformation is a literal metamorphosis; a complete change of the body into another species.

The tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (TE, 'The Wooing of Étaín') is essentially three connected tales, which can be found in fragmentary form in *Lebor na hUidre* (*c.* 1100), and in complete form in the *Yellow Book of Lecan* (YBL), late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, with fragments of the stories also found in Egerton 1782 and TCD H 3. 18.[18] Here only the complete version from YBL is considered. It is a *remscéla* ('pre-tale') to the historic king cycle of tales, concerning Conaire Mór and *Togail Bruidne da Derga*.[19] Only two of the three stories contain elements of shapeshifting, namely the first and the third, and these are the two which will be considered here. In the first story, which is found in YBL col. 985, Étaín Echraide was the daughter of Ailill, king of Ulster.[20] Midir married Étaín, but he was already married to a woman named Fuamnach, who had been reared by the wizard Bresal, and was skilled in the magic of the Túatha De Danann.[21] Fuamnach was Midir's wife, his *cétmuinter*, and Étaín became his *adaltrach*, his concubine.[22] The *cétmuinter* was legally allowed to inflict injury upon the *adaltrach*,[23] however, the legal aspects of marriage are not the major theme in TE. The fact that Fuamnach was Midir's wife is slightly underplayed, and appears to be a literary tool, or catalyst, to create a situation where Étaín can be

16 Carey, 'Werewolves', p. 43.

17 *ibid.*, pp. 43–44.

18 Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 137.

19 *ibid.*, p. 139; see also O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*.

20 Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 148.

21 *ibid.*, p. 152.

22 Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 70–71; Liam Breathnach, 'On Old Irish Collective and Abstract Nouns'.

23 Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 79.

cursed, which is the same theme we see in the story of Bran and Sceolang. Fuamnach struck Étaín with a rod of scarlet quicken tree, turned her into a pool of water, and then left.[24] The heat from the fire, the air, and the seething ground turned the water, i.e. Étaín, into a worm, and then a purple fly the size of a man's head. This fly was still the most beautiful fly in the land, and in this shape Étaín stayed with Midir, and he knew that it was her.[25] Fuamnach then created a strong wind that blew Étaín away from Midir, and made it impossible for her to settle anywhere in Ireland for seven years, until one day she was able to land on In Mac Óc's breast.[26] Then Fuamnach created another wind that blew Étaín all the way to Ulster, where she fell into a beaker of the wife of Étar, who swallowed her, and then conceived and gave birth to a girl, who was also named Étaín.[27]

The transformation of Étaín from water, a non-living form, into a worm, has been explained by Tómas Ó Cathasaigh as resulting from cosmic force, which 'as traditionally envisaged by the Irish, is tripartite, its three components being *nem*, *talam*, *muir,* "heaven, ground, and sea", or more precisely the heavens, the surface of the earth, and the underneath'.[28] While Ó Cathasaigh argued that Étaín's transformation from water to worm was a reflection of the three components of the heavens, earth and water, in fact the text states it was the heat from the fire, the air and the seething ground which transformed her. None of the three 'cosmic forces' can be readily linked with the heat from the fire. The air may be linked to the heavens, although the heavens, as a term, connotes a more divine nature, rather than simply air, and the seething ground can be linked to the earth, but this is where the links end.

It could be argued that heat is the significant element here, and the main trigger for transformation: the fire from the heat is obvious in this context. The seething ground gives an image of a ground being so warm it is almost boiling, and the air could possibly be considered as warm due to the strong links with heat already mentioned. Fire and heat often change things: they turn hard metal into a liquid mass; turn cold water into steam; break down wood; and burn the flesh off the bones of a body, human and animal. Another layer of meaning can be found when looking at religious texts. The

24 Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 152.
25 *ibid.*, p. 152.
26 *ibid.*, p. 154.
27 *ibid.*, p. 156.
28 Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois*, p. 182.

text *In Tenga Bithnua* ('The Ever-new Tongue'), dated to the late ninth or early tenth century,[29] considering a man's position in the universe, states

> Ata ann chetamus adbhar de gæith ⁊ aer; is de forcoemnacair tinfisiu anala i corpaib doine. Ata dano adbar tesa ⁊ chombruithe ann di then; iss ed do-gni dergthes fola in sin i corpaib. […] Ata ann dano adbar di clochaib ⁊ do criaidh thalman; conid edh do-gni comusc feola ⁊ chnama ⁊ ball isna doinib.[30]
>
> [There is in it [i.e. the body of every human], first of all, material from wind and air; from it proceeds the respiration of breath in people's bodies. And there is in it material of heat and seething from fire; that is what makes the red heat of blood in bodies. […] And there is in it material from the stones and clay of the earth; so that that is what makes the mingling of flesh and bones and limbs in people.]

The air is the breath of a human, fire the blood, and the clay of the earth the bones and flesh of the body. John Carey, in his study on *In Tenga Bithnua* and Eriugena's ninth century *Periphyseon*, discussed what Eriugena called *miraculum miraculorum* (i.e. the resurrection of Christ) and argued that both texts saw resurrection from death as not being 'imposed by arbitrary fiat, but found within the inmost fabric of creation'.[31] If we assume that Étaín is technically dead when she becomes a puddle of water, which has no 'humanity' to it, her resurrection is then a result of her creation, which entailed air, fire and earth already, which now had to be found in her surroundings and 'absorbed' by her again, to regain 'life'. Although she does not become human, she is recognisable in her fly-shape because of her eyes, reinforcing the idea of the twelfth century writers of the human soul remaining in the animal shape, as discussed in the introduction.

In the third tale, found in YBL col. 992, Étaín was married to Eochaid, King of Tara. After having beaten Eochaid in a game of chess, Midir requested Étaín, but was denied. After a month of waiting, Eochaid allowed Midir to put his arms around Étaín in the middle of the house, in front of everyone, but Midir disappeared through an opening in the roof, transforming himself and Étaín into swans.[32] When Eochaid came to claim back his wife, Midir

29 Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, p. 75.
30 Text and translation from Carey, *In Tenga Bithnua*, pp. 115–117.
31 Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, p. 88.
32 Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 184.

placed fifty women in front of Eochaid, who all looked like Étaín. Eochaid claimed he would be able to recognise Étaín by how she served drink. He picked one woman, but it turned out it was in fact his own daughter he had picked, not Étaín, who had been pregnant when Midir took her away. The first story, discussed above, focused on Étaín's different transformations in order to eventually become reborn, whereas the third focuses on the relationship between Midir and Eochaid, and the incestuous relationship between Étaín's daughter and Eochaid that conceives Conaire Mór's mother. The literary use of shapeshifting in the third version is a minor theme, which allows Midir to take Étaín with him, but also sets the stage for Eochaid's relationship with his own daughter and the birth of Conaire Mór, forming part of the hero's backstory. Étaín's character has been argued to be of an ambiguous nature, since originally she appears to be human, but changes into something inhuman, as well as seemingly possessing qualities attributed to the sovereignty goddess.[33] The texts states that there was 1,012 years between the two incarnations of Étaín, and Thomas Charles-Edwards pointed out that that would place Étaín's original begetting to the time of David, in a mythical prehistoric time when the gods ruled Ireland, and given that Étaín was the daughter of a king, she may also have been 'more goddess than human'.[34] Both of the versions of TE depict a literal metamorphosis, where, in both instances, Étáin's body is changed into different species, both living and dead.

The involuntary shapeshifting in the Irish narrative tradition can often be related to Christian imagery, using underlying symbols and patterns also found in contemporary Christian writings, although most of the transformations take place in the supernatural, or liminal, world. Although depicting a pre-Christian magical world, the worldview underlying the composition of these tales is consonant with their Christian authorship. In the Scandinavian narrative tradition we also find similarity with contemporary Christian writings. As the following examples will show, some tales conform to the literary norms of medieval Irish and Christian tradition.

In the *Vǫlsunga saga*, composed around the thirteenth century,[35] we find the story of the transformation of Fáfnir from man to dragon. Fáfnir was characterised as greedy, and when his father was given compensation from Óðinn, Loki and Hœnir for the death of Otr, Fáfnir's brother who could turn himself into an otter, it was the cursed treasure of the dwarf Andvari he

33 Charles-Edwards, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 172.
34 *ibid.*, pp. 173–174.
35 Teichert, 'Þeir Sigmundr fóru í hamina', p. 282.

was given. Fáfnir killed his father and took the gold for himself. The death of his father by Fáfnir's hand is a direct result of the curse by the dwarf who said that whoever owned the treasure taken from him by Loki, would die from owning it. Fáfnir became so consumed by the treasure and its curse that he left his home to guard it, and became even more ill-natured.[36] His transformation was a permanent one,[37] and only through his death at the hands of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, was he released from the curse. Matthias Teichert has argued that because Fáfnir's brother, Otr, was able to transform into an otter, perhaps shapeshifting was a genetically inherent feature of the two.[38] However, the saga provides no clear indication of this, and their father is never mentioned as possessing such abilities, so this must therefore remain conjecture.

Fáfnir's transformation works on three levels: firstly, it is arguably a warning against greed, with the dragon as a metaphor for a person's behaviour; secondly, it serves as a catalyst for the events leading up to the heroic event of Sigurðr killing the dragon; and thirdly, it links the world of the gods with the world of man and the (supernatural) dwarves. That it is Óðinn and Loki who are responsible for the death of the shapeshifting Otr is significant, since these two gods are the ones most famous for their shapeshifting abilities. It is also Loki who catches the dwarf Andvari and takes his gold, prompting the curse by the dwarf.

Hrólfs saga kraka is dated to *c.* 1400, but Saxo Grammaticus used a narrative about Hrólfr and a poem about Bǫdvarr, the son of Bjǫrn, around *c.* 1200, indicating that the tradition was already established.[39] The date of *c.* 1400 is for the saga in its current form, and it may have been substantially influenced by the now lost *Skjǫldunga saga*, *c.* 1200.[40] Although there are several instances of shapeshifting in the saga, it is the story of Bjǫrn and Bera that will be discussed here. Bera is the female version of the personal name Bjǫrn, both meaning 'bear', alluding to events in the story. Bjǫrn is the son of King Hringi, who married Hvít, who took a liking to Bjǫrn.[41] When refused by Bjǫrn, Hvít struck him with a wolf-skin glove, cursing him to be a cave bear, never to be released from the curse.[42] Most evil stepmothers in medieval Icelandic tradition belonged to the race of trolls, who have long

36 *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 14. See also Santiago Barreiro's contribution in this book.
37 Teichert, 'Þeir Sigmundr fóru í hamina', p. 283.
38 *ibid*, p. 283.
39 Jones, *Kings*, p. 129.
40 *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.
41 *Hrólf saga kraka*, ch. 18.
42 *ibid.*, ch. 19.

been connected to sorcery in folk belief.[43] After his transformation, Bera still recognised Bjǫrn by his eyes. The concept of a person under metamorphosis being recognised by their eyes is also found in the Early Irish tradition, as seen in the case of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, and this also ties the Old Norse literature into wider European norms, as noted above. The curse only made him a bear during the day, but a human during the night, and Bera would stay with him during the night.[44] Hvít directly cursed Bjǫrn by using a wolf-skin glove, drawing upon supernatural powers associated with the wolf. The wolf-skin glove motif is also found in *Jóns saga leikara* ('The Saga of Jón the Player'), *c.* 1400, but in that saga Jón turns into a wolf.[45] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has argued that the motif could be traced back to the motif of shapeshifting through wearing animal skin, but that at times the touch of the pelt or skin, and the magic possessed by the one cursing, is enough to cause shapeshifting.[46] Bjǫrn is transformed into a bear, rather than a wolf, which might be expected, but that may be due to the type of animal that is already inherent in his name. The saga focuses on the bear imagery, and one of the sons of Bjǫrn, Bǫdvarr Bjarki, becomes a great hero who has the ability to project a form of spirit animal in the shape of a bear. The use of a curse directly aimed at a person is an obvious sign of involuntary shapeshifting, and to apply Bynum's definitions to the text, Bjǫrn's transformation is a literal metamorphosis, as his entire body changes.

This study will now examine the literary evidence of the undead in the Old Norse tradition. The undead, in their different forms, are a literary trope that is often used as a catalyst for future events, or as a 'monster' the hero has to vanquish. The undead are examined here because their metamorphosis is often an 'involuntary' one, and because it highlights that the literary trope of shapeshifting also applied to the most liminal of characters. The undead of the Icelandic sagas can be put into three seemingly different categories: *draugr*, mound-dweller, and *aftrgangr*, but sometimes *draugr* and *aftrgangr* are used interchangeably.[47]Although they share commonalities between them, there are subtle differences that set them apart. As the examples below will show, the *draugr* is the most destructive one, causing both physical harm and mental distress, simply because of their evil nature. The mound-dweller and *aftrgangr* only seem to do physical harm when confronted directly, but

43 Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 299.
44 *Hrólf saga kraka*, ch. 20.
45 Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 298.
46 *ibid.*, pp. 298–299.
47 Teichert, 'Nosferatus', pp. 4–5.

cause mental distress among people in their immediate area. They do not venture far from their respective area of burial, but stay close to home. The archaeological evidence from Neolithic and Bronze Age graves in Western and Northern Europe could show traces of a belief in a return from the dead, and how to prevent it.[48] Some of these measures were also found in medieval European graves and seventeenth-century plague graves in Germany.[49]

Ármann Jakobsson has noted that *draugar* have primarily been glossed as 'ghosts' in English,[50] but this is an insufficient translation of the Old Norse term, and since there is no adequate English term to encompass all that a *draugr* entails, the Old Norse term will be used forthwith. The etymology of *draugr* is argued by Ármann to relate to various forms of the term for the dead in the Germanic languages.[51] He has noted that in poetic language the term originally meant a wooden log, which served as a metaphor for a human, and that 'if the words prove to be related, one might suggest that ghosts and revenants get their name from the metaphoric use of the word for wooden log: the dead person is lifeless and wooden'.[52] He also noted that it is quite likely that this connection was made by medieval Icelanders, considering the relationship between man and tree and the world in other written materials.[53] Ármann argued that although the term is found in medieval Icelandic, it is a rare term, and often famous *draugr*, such as Glámr and Víga-Hrappr, are not actually labelled as such, but the term troll is used instead.[54] Nora K. Chadwick argued that the *draugr* possibly originated in Sweden.[55] According to Chadwick, the ghosts are 'animated corpses, solid bodies, generally mischievous, and greatly to be feared';[56] they are generally male ghosts, though female ones do appear. Both the Icelandic *draugar* and continental revenants were seen to be 'ill-intentioned from their own desire or instinct, not as animated by the Devil for the downfall of the human race',[57] but displaying antisocial behaviour and isolating themselves while alive.[58] Essentially, these undead had an unpleasant nature, which ended up carrying over into their death. The transformation into a *draugr* can be

48 *ibid.*, p. 2.
49 *ibid.*, pp. 2–3.
50 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', p. 281.
51 *ibid.*, p. 284.
52 *ibid.*,pp. 284–285.
53 *ibid.*, p. 285.
54 *ibid.*, pp. 284–285.
55 Chadwick, 'Norse Ghosts II', pp. 124–127.
56 Chadwick, 'Norse Ghosts', p. 50.
57 Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 19.
58 Teichert, 'Nosferatus', p. 5.

seen as a type of shapeshifting, but an involuntary one, since it happens after the death of a person, while the *aftrgangr* and the mound-dweller veer more towards a voluntary nature. These undead tend to appear primarily in conjunction with important stages in the protagonist's storyline,[59] but generally do not have a larger part to play.

The best-known example of a *draugr* is found in the fourteenth-century Icelandic *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*,[60] where Grettir fights the *draugr* Glámr. Glámr was killed under mysterious circumstances, believed to be caused by a monster, possibly another *draugr*. When they found him, he was black as Hel, and had swollen to the size of a bull.[61] The reference to Hel in *Grettis saga* can refer both to the realm of the dead who did not die a heroic death, and to the guardian of the realm, the goddess Hel.[62] Her father was Loki, a known shapeshifter in the mythological sagas. The reference 'black as Hel' can therefore be seen as a reference to the darkness in the realm Hel, but also the darkness of the character of Hel, the goddess of death, at least according to *Snorra Edda*. It appears Glámr was able to also wound the monster enough to kill it. As a *draugr* Glámr had a habit of breaking bones in the body to kill men.[63] Grettir came to the farm Glámr was haunting, and experienced for himself a *draugr* riding a house. During the fight between Grettir and Glámr the moon shone onto Glámr's eyes as the hero looked at them, and he became so scared that his strength left him, and he almost died. Glámr did not kill Grettir; instead, he cursed him, saying he would become an outlaw and would always see his eyes, and he would be afraid to be alone, eventually leading to his death. Grettir then regained his strength and cut off the head of his enemy, placing it at his buttocks.[64] Glámr was deliberately killing men and livestock who came his way, physically breaking their bodies. But he was not connected to the land he was haunting in the same way a mound-dweller is: he is simply there because this is where he died and was buried. In his 1897 publication *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts*, Andrew Lang referred to Glámr as a vampire, and such a term was very popular at the time of publication.[65] Ármann argues

59 *ibid.*,pp. 4–6.

60 *Grettir's Saga*, p. xi.

61 *Grettis saga*, ch. 32.

62 Abram, 'Myths', p. 85.

63 *Grettis saga,* ch. 33.

64 All these episodes are from *Grettis saga,* ch. 35.

65 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampire Killers', p. 307. The term 'vampire' is etymologically neither of Hungarian or Romanian origin, as has been the traditional belief (Wilson, "Vampire", p. 577). Instead, the term has been argued to stem from the Turkish word *uber*, meaning 'witch'; the

that *draugar* and vampires share similar functions: 'like the Dementors from the Harry Potter novels (or their somewhat obvious inspiration, Tolkien's *Nazgûl*), they prey on their victims and leave them drained of blood, energy, mental facilities or their spirit',[66] referring specifically to the *draugar* in *Grettis saga*. I would argue that although *draugar* and vampires do share similar functions, *draugar* should not be thought of as Count Dracula-like vampires. Modern fiction has altered the original view of vampires. The first recorded use of the word 'vampire' in Western Europe did not occur until the seventeenth century, and always primarily referred to incidents in Eastern Europe.[67] Instead, *draugar* should be viewed in terms of being *vampiric*. With respect to Glámr, the *vampiric* element is found first in his death, and then in his transformation. The monster he was hunting killed him, seemingly transferring the *draugr* curse onto Glámr. Another element is Glámr draining Grettir's energy during the fight. The draining of life force, or energy, is also found in the Romanian *strigoi*, which has been argued to have inspired the bloodsucking element of the Dracula legend. Kathryn Hume has argued that the *draugar* of the Old Norse tradition have a human counterpart in the *berserkir*, and both 'are avaricious, bloodthirsty, and totally self-centred'.[68] The *berserkr*, like the *draugr*, knows no limitations or territorial borders; he simply fights in his frenzy, killing whatever moves in front of him.[69]

Chadwick explored the evidence in the literature of the Old Norse tradition, and how men are seen to go willingly into their own burial mound.[70] There seems to be no explicit reason for this behaviour, but in the cases involving intoxicating drinks, it is perhaps a self-sacrifice to the god Óðinn.[71] Despite the fact that these men essentially caused their own death, they have no way of knowing if they become a *draugr*, but there seems to be at least an intent to return as an undead. One example that could be argued to be of a 'voluntary' nature is the case of Hrappr Sumarliðason, known as Víga-Hrappr ('Hrappr the killer'), from *Laxdœla saga*. He was known as an

Greek verb 'to drink'; serbian *bamiiup* (*ibid.*, pp 577–578). Without a clear consensus of etymology it is difficult to find a definite explanation of the word. However, the Greek *vrykólakas*, the Romanian *strigoi*, the Polish, Ukranian, and West Russian *upir*, all show commonalities with the Serbian-Bulgarian *vampir* (Teichert, 'Nosferatus', p. 26).

66 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampire Killers', pp. 309–310.

67 Wilson, '"Vampire"', p. 579.

68 Hume, 'From Saga to Romance', p. 13.

69 On *berserkir*, see Rebecca Merkelbach's chapter in this volume.

70 Chadwick, 'Norse Ghosts', pp. 51–54.

71 *ibid.*, p. 52.

aggressive man who saw himself as superior.[72] After he became mortally ill he told his wife that he wanted to be buried underneath the living room door in an upright position under the threshold, so that he could keep an eye on things.[73] Teichert has argued that this shows a definite intent on return in some form.[74] This was done, but in his death he haunted his farm and murdered his servants.[75] Because of this the farm was deserted. Later his body was dug up and re-buried in a remote place,[76] and later still Óláfr Hǫskuldsson, who took over Hrappr's farm after he died, dug up Hrappr's body and burned it,[77] for Hrappr still haunted the place where he had been re-buried.

This example is peculiar because it seems to concern a *draugr*, but the term used in the text is *aftrgǫngunni*, found under *aptr-ganga* in Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon's *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, in which it is glossed as '*a ghost*, *apparition*, the French *revenant*'.[78] The first part, *aftr* (also spelled *aptr*) with verbs related to motion, such as the verbs *to go* or *move*, it 'almost answers to Lat. *re-* […] "aptr" implies a notion *a loco* or *in locum*',[79] meaning a walker *from* or *into* a place. Hrappr deliberately asked to be buried underneath his own house, in a liminal place, i.e. the threshold, and in an upright position. Hrappr appears to have had some idea as to what may happen to him after he died, and adding his known temper to this, it does seem as if he wanted to become a revenant. Because he is never referred to as a *draugr*, but specifically as *aftrgangr*, it implies that a distinction may have been made between the two types of undead.

In *Grettis saga* we find another *aftrgangr*, who is also a mound-dweller, the first of the undead that Grettir encounters. While Grettir was on the island of Háramarsey, on the west coast of Norway, he lived with a farmer named Þorfinn. One day, while he was out with another farmer, Auðunn, they saw a fire burning north of Auðunn's farm.[80] Grettir asked what it was, and Auðunn answered that the fire came from a mound where Kárr the Old, Þorfinn's father, was buried. Kárr 'aftrgengit', and drove away the other farmers who owned land on the island, so that Þorfinn owned all the

72 *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 10.
73 *ibid.*, ch. 17.
74 Teichert, 'Nosferatus', p. 8.
75 *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17.
76 *ibid.*, ch. 17.
77 *ibid.*, ch. 24.
78 *The Cleasby & Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary*, aptr-ganga, p. 23.
79 *ibid.*, aptr-, p. 23.
80 This and the next episode are from *Grettis saga*, ch. 18.

land himself. After a long fight Grettir defeated Kárr by beheading him and placing the head at the backside of the now decapitated Kárr. This can be seen as both a great insult to any dead body, but it also seems to be a form of surety that the undead does not come back again, because Grettir does the same after he has beheaded Glámr.

Ármann notes that 'the rear end is often considered to be the demonic "other face" of humanoids',[81] and the situation is also found in *Bárðar saga*, where the *draugr* Raknar was defeated by Gestr and a spectral vision of King Óláfr Tryggvason.[82] Kárr is a mound-dweller, and Ármann has argued that this type of *draugr* is connected to the concept of the cursed treasure, and that it is exceedingly greedy.[83] He is also seemingly an *aftrgangr* (at least this is the term connected to him) when explained how he moves around, showing that he is able to leave his mound under certain circumstances, in this case chasing people from the land, so that his son would own it all. When Grettir encounters Kárr, he is seated in a chair: often evil men would die sitting down, indicating an intent to return, which is why they had to be killed in a horizontal position, such as on their back, and also why, if a person died in a seated position, their body would be broken to put them in a horizontal position.[84] The mound-dweller is driven into his undead state to protect a treasure he is guarding, creating a link with the dragon motif applied to Fáfnir, but it could be argued that the *aftrgangr* is also guarding a treasure, i.e. the land.

Nancy Caciola writes: 'Medieval conceptions of death were fluid [...] one could die a "good" or a "bad" death; one could undergo a temporary or more permanent death; and one could die a partial death — that is, a death of the personality without the death of the body, or vice versa'.[85] There was therefore no straightforward form of death, or afterlife. At the same time, 'intimacy between the living and the dead was possible because death was not envisaged as a full extinguishing of either body or spirit'.[86] This would also be where we can locate the undead of the Scandinavian tradition. These were physical beings, with human bodies, and not what the modern understanding of a 'ghost' entails.[87]

81 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', p. 292.
82 *ibid.*, p. 292.
83 *ibid.*, p. 290.
84 *ibid.*, p. 296.
85 Caciola, 'Wraiths', p. 7.
86 *ibid.*, p. 7.
87 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', p. 284.

Stories of interaction in different forms are frequent in medieval narrative literature, as will be argued in the following. Some continental clerics saw the dead body as available for demonic possession, in the sense that the dead body was an instrument, or even a suit for the demon to wear.[88] This would mean that a transgression occurs between the body and the demonic spirit, and not the living and the dead.[89] This was not the case with the undead of the Icelandic tradition. The belief in corpses that come back to life is, however, well-attested in Iceland, as well as England, the Low Countries, northern France, and Germany, with the saga literature of Iceland presenting this belief extensively.[90] There were continental counterparts to the undead: 'numerous "horror" stories of the undead may be found in chronicles and exempla collections from northern Europe from the late twelfth century on'.[91] Ármann has argued that the *draugar* are closer to the vampires of the Eastern European traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[92]

In the medieval Irish narrative the undead are primarily ghostlike, setting them apart from the Old Norse undead. In *Do Ḟallsigud Tána Bó Cúalnge* ('How the Táin bó Cúailnge was found'), dated to around the ninth century,[93] the ghost of Fergus mac Róich returned and relayed the story of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* to Murgen mac Sencháin. A fog fell about the place, and Murgen was hidden for three days and nights, thus creating a liminal setting. When Fergus came to Murgen he was dressed well, and then related the story:[94] Fergus, as a ghost, had one role, and that was to relay what happened during the *Táin*. He is benevolent and helpful, and the last witness to this event. There is no description of him other than being well-dressed, and we get very little insight into the overall situation. One story where we are given a good amount of information about a ghost's appearance is in *Scel Coirpre Chruim ⁊ Moel Sechnaill meic Moel Ruanaid*, a Middle Irish text about Cairpre Cromm, bishop of Clonmacnoise between 890 and 904 AD, and Mael Ṡechnaill mac Mael Ruanaid, King of Ireland 846–862 AD.[95] In this story, a soul in distorted form, jet black, and dreadful,[96] appeared before Cairpre while he was praying. The blackness of the soul was a result

88 Caciola, 'Wraiths', pp. 11–15.
89 *ibid.*,p. 13.
90 *ibid.*, p. 15.
91 *ibid.*, p. 17.
92 Ármann Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen', p. 284.
93 Murray, 'Finding of the *Táin*', p. 17.
94 *ibid.*, pp. 22–25.
95 Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', p. 465.
96 *ibid.*,§ 1, p. 468.

of sin, and the soul named itself as Mael Sechnaill, King of Ireland. Mael Sechnaill's confessor was in hell and could not help him, but he had heard Cairpre's voice as he was praying, and his voice had terrified the demons that were tormenting him.[97] Mael Sechnaill eventually left, saying he should have done more good in his life. Cairpre prayed for Mael Sechnaill's soul, while the priests at Clonmacnoise prayed for the priest in hell. Half a year later Mael Sechnaill returned speckled, and then another half year later he returned as a *deilb suachnid solustai*,[98] ('splendid shining shape').[99] In this story the ghost, or soul, seeks out a holy man to ask for help. Although the soul is black and ugly when he first comes to Cairpre, he does not appear malevolent. Here it seems as if the sins do not affect the behaviour of the soul, but only the appearance, while the undead of the Old Norse tradition are ugly and behave in a malevolent way. Ghosts in Medieval Irish sources are arguably closer to our modern understanding of 'ghosts', i.e. the soul that has left the body of a dead person. In both instances the soul comes into the human world to converse with a human, and the human is in one case a scholar and in another a bishop.

A return from the dead can be argued to be a form of metamorphosis; the returned is no longer human, and the form is often distorted. Both the 'involuntary' and 'voluntary' cases of transformation depict a literal metamorphosis, one that is permanent and irreversible. Only through a second death can the undead be released, or through prayer as was the case of Mael Sechnaill. Our modern view of the undead is that they are primarily of an 'involuntary' nature: zombie virus, vampire bite, or curses in general but, as the Old Norse narrative tradition shows, the medieval concept of the undead also entailed 'voluntary' elements.

In conclusion, in the literary concept of shapeshifting in the early medieval Irish and Old Norse narrative traditions we find more similarities than may have been expected at the outset. Both narrative traditions adhere to specific tropes also found in Christian literature, such as the recognition of the eyes, and both traditions use literary devices found in the worldview of the early medieval period. When considering only 'involuntary' shapeshifting it could be argued that the literary concepts were well known amongst authors at their time of writing, and that the philosophical ideas about metamorphosis are evident in both literary traditions. The concept of 'involuntary' shapeshifting, as a result of a specific curse and laid upon a

97 *ibid.*, § 6–8, p. 470.
98 *ibid.*, § 13, p. 472.
99 *ibid.*, § 13, p. 473.

specific character has been examined in this study, and the evidence from both narrative traditions show a belief in cursing people into other shapes and forms. The curses may typically be carried out by women scorned, as was the case with Bran and Sceolang, Étáin, and Bjǫrn, whereas Fáfnir's metamorphosis was caused by a dwarf's curse on a treasure. Cursed treasure also recurs in the case of the mound-dweller, and arguably also in the case of the *aftrgangr*, where the treasure is the land itself.

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About the Author

Camilla With Pedersen Graduated from Maynooth University in 2013 with a Master of Literature in Medieval Irish Studies. The focus of her research is the correlations between Old Norse literature and Early Medieval Irish narrative literature, specifically the supernatural elements. Her thesis focused on the literary trope of shapeshifting, and how the two literary cultures utilised this trope. She has continued to develop her research as an independent researcher. She is currently employed by the Office of Public Works, Dublin Castle, Ireland, where she is part of the guiding team, and contributes to the educational programme for children and adults, organising workshops and specialised tours.

6. *Unde sunt aues istae?*

Notes on Bird-Shapeshifting, Bird Messengers, and Early Medieval Hagiography

Santiago Disalvo

Abstract
The birds in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, as they tell Saint Brendan, are supernatural beings that have undergone metamorphosis, and in that new shape they have a message to deliver to the pilgrim monks. Along with its Celtic background of well-known animal shapeshifting —the story of Tuan Mac Cairill, the Children of Lir, the *Buile Shuibhne* ('The madness or frenzy of Suibhne', in which the mad king becomes one with the birds) — we may find the presence of other supernatural birds in Irish vernacular *immrama* (otherworld journey tales). But bird imagery in hagiography, and, especially the function of birds as heavenly messengers, merge with the Celtic literary legacy in order to sing praise of God in this early medieval narration.

Keywords: Birds, Irish, Hagiography, Supernatural

Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate,
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deception of the thrush? Into our first world.[1]

1 T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton", *Four Quartets.*

Barreiro, S. and L. Cordo Russo (eds), *Shapeshifters in Medieval North Atlantic Literature*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019
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More than a hundred manuscripts copied throughout Europe contain the text of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, most probably written for the first time by a *scottus peregrinus* or a monk from an Irish foundation in Lotharingia, around the second half of the 10th century.[2] This renowned work condenses a number of features cherished by the clerical authors of the time: a voyage narrative retelling a pilgrimage to the Promised Land adorned with the natural wonders of Creation; the presence of supernatural and thaumaturgical forces; the use of biblical and allegorical elements; and a hagiographic development in a monastic context, with a corresponding liturgical timing.

The presence of animals, strange beasts, and birds is fundamental for the voyage narrative itself: we find common island fauna and the seabirds, but also Jasconius the whale, the monstrous fish, the threatening gryphon, the friendly otter, the flock of underwater creatures, and the great, wonderful and helping bird which brought food to the monks and defended them against the gryphon. There seem to be at least four important and interrelated dimensions in the representation of birds in the *Navigatio*, which may also be found in other medieval texts, namely: 1) the birds as messengers and helpers, or conversely, as bad omens and destroyers, 2) the birds as rational beings, as a result of shapeshifting that preserves human abilities, 3) the birds marking *liminality* as an opening to the Otherworld,[3] and 4) the importance of the birds' voices and their singing. This last dimension has a peculiar function in the *Navigatio*: it enhances the religious nature of this hagiographic voyage-narrative.

This study will treat these four aspects of the shapeshifting birds of the *Navigatio* from a comparative perspective. This is why it seems fitting, in this case, to make use of material from beyond the early medieval era. The relevance of such texts is justified by the literary phenomenon of the *Navigatio* itself: a prominent work that has a recognisable insular content,

2 Manuscript Add. 36736 (late 10th century) from the Abbey of saint Maximin, Trier (now at the British Museum).

3 Since its coinage and development in the field of anthropology (Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, and, later, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*), the concept of *liminality* has always implied a 'middle stage' in a process, an event or a ritual, including phenomena such as the 'rites of passage', the ambiguity of the 'state-in-between' for certain individuals within a community, a concern with borders (*limites*) and thresholds (*limina*), and several other sociological, cultural, and even psychological aspects. In the field of medieval literature and folklore studies, it refers often to the space between different realms (waking reality and dreams; civilised society and wild nature; life and death). Religious and spiritual implications are frequently found in many medieval Celtic literary studies, especially if the subject is the Otherworld and its inhabitants, as it is the matter in this article.

with Celtic and monastic roots, but also a rich continental manuscript tradition, which has influenced many medieval and early modern narratives. Nevertheless, the focus of this study will be on insular texts, revisiting ultimately some vernacular poems that may shed light on the importance of the birds with 'human voices' and their singing.

Supernatural and magical birds can be either helpers or destroyers in medieval Irish texts. For example, in the *Acallam na Senórach*,[4] a 'dialogue' between ancient pagan lore and the new Christian missionaries, the destruction caused by a fiery bird is described:

> ...*7* ticedh én co ngob iarnaide *7* co n-err teinedh ar fuindeog ordhaidi isin tsídh, *7* do chrothadh é gacha nóna ann, cu nach fácbadh claidem ar cennadairt, ná scíath ar dealgain, ná sleg ar aidhlinn, gan leacadh a ceann lochta in tsídha. Ocus do bítis lucht an tsídha ica dibhracad, *7* [cech urchar do berdis cuici — *Fr.* 27ª] is ed do thecmad ar cenn meic nó mhná nó dhalta do lucht in tsída. Ocus ro hecradh a tech n-ola in adhaigh sin aca, *7* do-riachd in t-én cédna chuca *7* doróine in t-aidmilledh cédna. Ocus do bhádar luchd in tsídha 'ga dibhrucad *7* nir' chuimngetar a bec dhó.[5]
>
> [A bird with a beak of iron and a tail of fire had perched on a golden window in the *síd*, and every evening was shaking there until not a sword was left on its stand, nor a shield on its peg, nor spear in its rack, but all would rain down on the heads of the people of the *síd*. They kept casting missiles at it but every missile thrown at it would fall on the heads of one of their boys or women or foster-children. Their drinking-hall was arranged that evening, and the same bird came to them and caused the same destruction. The people of the *síd* hurled missiles at it, but without result.]

4 The *Acallam na Senórach* (often translated as *The Colloquy of the Ancients*) recounts the trips and dialogues of the old heroes Oísin and Caílte Mac Rónáin, son and nephew of Finn mac Cumaill, with Saint Patrick, shortly after his arrival in Ireland. The stories tell the great deeds of the legendary Finn mac Cumaill and his warriors (the *Fianna*), as well as the relationship between the *Fianna* and the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the otherworldly inhabitants of the *síde* (earthly abodes of this supernatural beings, the *aes sídhe*). The text was composed probably at the beginning of the 13th century or even before, as Ann Dooley has considered ('The date and purpose').

5 Quotations are from Whitley Stokes' edition, *Acallamh na senórach*, lines 1630–1639. The translations are taken from Ann Dooley and Harry Roe's *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, p. 51.

The birds are depicted as an evil presence that attacks human prosperity:

> *7* ind uair as áes *7* as uair duind ar trebaire do buain tecait tri helta don muir aniar chuccaind *7* guib chnama léo, [fo. 140ª 1] *7* anala tened assa mbraigdib, *7* is comfuar re gaith n-erraig in gaeth tic assa n-eitib.[6]
>
> [and whenever it is the proper time for us to reap what we have sewn, three flocks of birds come from the sea to the west of us with gnawing beaks. Breath of fire comes from their throats and the wind that comes from their wings is cold as the wind of spring.]

This episode may be compared to the attack of the gryphon and its destruction in Chapter 19 of the *Navigatio*,[7] especially when the birds in the *Acallam* finally destroy one another over the sea, by means of a charm:

> Is annsin ro eirgedar inn enlaith risin forchanad sin tuc Cailte doib, *7* tangadar rompo amach ar in muir, *7* ro marbsatar cach díb a chéile da ńgobaib cnama *7* da n-análaib teintidi. Corub Carrac na hénlaithe ainm na cairrge os ur tSléibe Mis ar in muir amaig, *7* conid Sén na n-én dona gortaib ainm in tséin sin ó sin anall.[8]
>
> [Then the flock of birds rose up in response to the warning that Caílte gave to them. They went away off over the sea and each of them killed the other with their gnawing beaks and breaths of fire. Thus the rock by the sea beyond Slieve Mish is called the Rock of the Flock of Birds, and the charm is called ever since Charming the Birds from the Fields.]

However, birds are usually important helpers in the *Navigatio*. This can be seen quite clearly in the 'Paradise of the Birds', in Chapter 11. Upon arriving at an island described as a *locus amoenus*, some sort of paradisiacal sanctuary with a plentiful fountain and an enormous tree, Saint Brendan and his monks came upon a great flock of white birds:

> Erat autem super illum fontem arbor mire latitudinis in girum, non minus altitudinis, cooperta auibus candidissimis. In tantum cooperuerunt illam

6 *Acallamh na senórach*, lines 6274–6278; *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, p. 176.

7 For the Latin text, I am using Carl Selmer's edition, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*. For the translation, O' Donoghue, 'Brendaniana'.

8 *Acallamh na senórach*, lines 6345–6353; *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, p. 178.

ut folia et rami eius uix uiderentur. Cum hec uidisset uir Dei, cepit intra se cogitare et tractare quidnam esset aut que causa fuisset quod tanta multitudo auium potuisset esse in una collectione. Ac de hoc tantum sibi erat tedium ut effunderet lacrimas preuolutis genibus ac deprecaretur Deum, dicens: 'Deus cognitor incognitorum et reuelator absconditorum omnium, tu scis angustiam cordis mei. Deprecor tuam majestatem ut mihi peccatori digneris per tuam magnam misericordiam reuelare tuum secretum, quod modo pre oculis meis uideo. Non de meritis meis aut dignitate sed de immensa clemencia tua presumo.'
[…]
Cum autem uespertina hora appropinquasset, ceperunt omnes aues qui in arbore erant quasi una uoce cantare, percucientes latera sua atque dicentes: 'Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Syon, et tibi reddetur uotum in Jerusalem.' Et semper reciprocabant predictum uersiculum quasi per spacium unius hore, et uidebatur uiro Dei et illis qui cum eo erant illa modulacio et sonus alarum quasi carmen planctus pro suauitate.[9]

[Over the fountain hung a large tree of marvellous width, and no less height, covered over with snow-white birds, so that they hid its boughs and leaves entirely. When the man of God saw this, he was considering with himself why this immense number of birds were thus brought together in one assemblage; and the question grew so irksome to him that he with tears besought the Lord, on his bended knees, thus: 'O God, who knowest what is unknown, and revealest what is hidden, Thou seest the anxious distress of my heart; therefore I beseech Thee that Thou wouldst vouchsafe, in Thy great mercy, to reveal Thy secret in what I see here before me; not for any desert of my own worthiness, but solely in regard to Thy clemency, do I presume to ask this favour.'
[…]
On the approach of the hour of vespers, all the birds, in unison, clapping their wings, began to sing a hymn, 'O Lord, becometh Thee in Sion, and a vow shall be paid to Thee in Jerusalem' (Ps. LXIV.); and they alternately chanted the same psalm for an hour; and the melody of their warbling and the accompanying clapping of their wings, sounded like unto a delightful harmony of great sweetness.]

According to Carl Selmer, these passages of the *Navigatio* have several corresponding episodes in other *immrama*: the *Voyage of Maelduin*, the

9 *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, pp. 22–25.

Voyage of the Húi Corra, and the *Voyage of Snedgus and MacRíagla*.[10] In the *Voyage of Maelduin*, the sailors approach an island full of singing birds with black, brown and speckled feathers, while in *Húi Corra* a red woman-bird comes into sight. But the white, rational and talking birds in the *Navigatio* (doves? seagulls? petrels?),[11] although similar, are unique in nature: not only do they sing with heavenly voices but reveal the past (their own origins) and the future to Saint Brendan. Moreover, their shapeshifting nature is explained as a consequence of their liminal position between the spiritual and the physical world:

> Cum hec dixisset intra se atque resedisset, ecce una de illis auibus uolabat de arbore, et sonabant ale eius quasi tintinnabula, contra nauim ubi uir Dei sedebat. Que sedit in summitate prore et cepit extendere alas quasi signum leticie et placido uultu aspicere sanctum patrem. Statimque agnouit uir Dei quia Deus recordatus esset deprecationem eius, et ait ad auem: 'Si nuncius Dei es, narra mihi unde sint aues iste aut pro qua re illarum collectio hic [sit]?'
> Que statim ait: 'Nos sumus de illa magna ruina antiqui hostis, sed non peccando in eorum consensu fuimus. Sed ubi fuimus creati, per lapsum illius cum suis satellitibus contigit et nostra ruina. Deus autem noster iustus est et uerax. Per suum magnum iudicium misit nos in istum locum. Penas non sustinemus. Hic presenciam Dei possumus uidere, sed tantum alienauit nos a consorcio aliorum qui steterunt. Vagamur per diuersas partes aeris et firmamenti et terrarum, sicut alii spiritus qui mittuntur. Sed in sanctis diebus atque dominicis accipimus corpora talia qualia tu nunc uides et commoramur hic laudamusque nostrum creatorem. Tu autem cum tuis fratribus habes unum annum in tuo itinere. Adhuc restant sex. Vbi hodie celebrasti Pascha, ibi omni anno celebrabis, et postea inuenies que posuisti in corde tuo, id est terra repromissionis sanctorum.'
> Cum hec dixisset, leuauit se de prora illa auis et cepit uolare ad alias.[12]
>
> [Thereupon one of the birds flew off the tree, and in his flight his wings had a tinkling sound like little bells, over to the boat where the man of God was seated; and, perching on the prow, it spread out its wings in token

10 *ibid.*, p. 86.

11 Chapter 11 of the *Navigatio* 'brings to mind the many inaccessible islands along the Irish Coast, inhabited exclusively by birds (stormy petrels) whose continuous chirping resembles the sound of the human voice' (*ibid.*, p. 86).

12 *ibid.*, p. 23.

> of gladness, and looked complacently towards St Brendan. Then the man of God, understanding from this that his prayer was granted, addressed the bird: 'If you are a messenger from God, tell me whence have those birds come, and why this concourse of them here?' The bird at once made answer: 'We are partakers in the great ruin of the ancient enemy, having fallen, not by sin of our will or consent, but soon after our creation our ruin resulted from the fall of Lucifer and his followers. The Almighty God, however, who is righteous and true, has doomed us to this place, where we suffer no pain, and where we can see the Divine presence, but must remain apart from the spirits who stood faithful. We wander about the world, in the air, and earth, and sky, like the other spirits on their missions; but on festival days and Sundays we take the shapes you see, abide here, and sing the praises of our Creator. You and your brethren have been now one year on your voyage, and six more years' journeying awaits you; where you celebrated your Easter this year, there will you celebrate it every year, until you find what you have set your hearts upon, the Land of Promise of the Saints'. When it had spoken thus, the bird arose from the prow of the vessel, and flew back to the other birds.]

Many authors have studied the phenomena of bird-messengers and shapeshifting in many cultures, ranging from James George Frazer's famous essay on magic and old religions, *The Golden Bough*, to more recent studies in northern anthropology,[13] pagan culture and beliefs, often with a focus on the function of birds as psychopomps.[14] Frazer's observations on the *external* soul and the *return of the soul* include the presence of beasts and birds, for example, that many peoples conceive the human soul as a bird ready to fly. This concept has left its mark on most languages as a metaphor or a poetic figure. In the vision of many cultures, the souls of the departed take the form of birds in order to get through the passageway from one world into another, a phenomenon related to liminal states between the realms of life and afterlife.

When the birds on the Island give details to Brendan about their origin, they reveal their wonderful shapeshifting from angelic to bird-form (*accipimus corpora talia qualia tu nunc uides*) that occurs on festival days and Sundays (*in sanctis diebus atque dominicis*). Séamus Mac Mathúna explains how the birds appear to be presenting themselves as neutral angels:

13 Mannermaa, 'Birds and Burials'.

14 Moreman, 'On the Relationship between Birds and Spirits of the Dead'; Taylor, 'Birds, Liminality, and Human Transformation'.

> The tradition of the neutral angels is well-documented in both medieval literature and the folk tradition and has been studied by various scholars who have sought to establish the sources of the fiction. Marcel Dando provides numerous examples from medieval works, beginning with the *Navigatio* […] He concludes from the evidence that its appearance in medieval literature ultimately finds its origin in the *Navigatio*, that it originated among Irish monastic circles and was developed from early patristic exegesis.[15]

Bird shapeshifting has had its heyday in ancient classical literature and mythology as well as in later recorded European folk-narratives, all of which have had a heavy influence on medieval European literature. In the milieu of medieval clerical literature, the celebrated forerunner and almost omnipresent influence in this matter is Ovid's *magnum opus*, the *Metamorphoses*. Interestingly, his work had been influenced by Hellenistic 'ornithological' poetry, especially by Boios' *Ornithogonia*, an Alexandrian poem now fragmentary, committed to bird-figures. Ovid can be considered as one of the most important predecessors in the recounting of cases of shapeshifting or metamorphosis from humans into birds throughout the *Metamorphoses*: Coronis (Book II); Procne, Philomela, and Tereus (Book VI); Ceyx and Alcyone (Book XI); Aesacus (Book XI); Cycnus (Book XII); Picus (Book XIV). Other myths and legends that mention this kind of transformation may be found elsewhere: such as, in Norse literature, the Swan-maidens in the *Vǫlundarkviða* from the *Poetic Edda*. Moreover, Marie de France's *Lais* contain a number of tales about shapeshifting (presumably of Celtic origin) including, in the lay of *Yonec,* a case in which the transformation of a man into a bird is closely linked to thresholds between worlds and otherworldly messages.[16] This metamorphosis is not a sign of punishment or curse, but of nobility and appealing *gentilesse*:

> The specific animal shape taken by Muldumarec is also significant: he reassures his beloved of his credentials by stressing that his animal form is that of a 'Gentil oisel' [noble bird] (122). His claim implies a hierarchy of

15 Mac Mathúna, 'Judas in Medieval Irish literature', pp. 120–121.

16 In *Balor With the Evil Eye*, Alexander Hagerty Krappe infers that *Yonec* is a version of an ancient myth, probably going back to fertility and agricultural rites: 'The lay of Yonec is but a Christian and courtly version of the Irish myth of Balor in the form in which it was still current in Ireland at the time of the Norman conquest. But it was adapted to the civilisation of Mediaeval France and England and at the same time contaminated with the *Märchen* of the Jealous Stepmother,' p. 5.

> nobility among animals, that other animal forms would have been less noble. […] The tales of Yonec and the swan-knight ancestors of Godefroy both situate a shape-shifting bird-man as the origin of a cultured, powerful knight.[17]

It is therefore clear that the subject was fascinating for ancient and medieval poets in different cultural contexts, and the *Navigatio* is at a very central point in this literary stream, with its unique spiritual features.

Now, let us consider a number of extant examples of shapeshifting in medieval Irish literature, which may be read as an interesting folkloric background to the angel-birds in the *Navigatio*. 'Mythological' accounts such as that of Tuan Mac Cairill, the only survivor of one of the earliest settlements in Ireland who lived for centuries under different shapes, (a stag, a wild boar, a hawk, a salmon, before being reborn as a human), have even led some authors to ponder the concept of metempsychosis in Celtic culture.[18] One of the most dramatic cases of shapeshifting in Irish literature, with profound roots in folklore, is the *Oidheadh chloinne Lir* (usually known in its translated version as *The Fate of the Children of Lir*), in which the cruel Aoife transforms her husband's children into swans that, nevertheless, are able to feel, speak, and retell their misfortune to their father, the King Lir:

> Agus ó nár faomhadar sin do dhéanamh, tug féin cloidhiomh amach do mharbhadh agus do mhilleadh chloinne Lir; agus do bhac a banndacht agus a bith-mheatacht, agus anbhfainne a h-aigionta dhi, sin do dhéanamh; agus tángadar as siar go tráigh Locha Dairbhreach, agus do sguireadh a n-eachra ann sin, agus do iarr sisi ar chloinn Lir a bh-fothraghadh do dhéanamh, agus dul do snamh ar an Loch: agus do rinneadar amhail a ndúbhairt Aoife leó. Agus mar fuair Aoife ar an Loch iad, buailios do fhleisg doilbhthe droighiochta iad, agus do chuir a reachtaibh cheithre n-éaladh, n-áalainn, n-aoinghil iad; agus do rinne an laoidh ann:
>
> *Aoife*
> Amach daoibh a chlann an righ,
> Do sgaras bhúr síol ré séan;
> Do bhúr g-cáirdibh is sgéal truagh,
> Biaidh bhúr n-uall ré h-ealtaibh éan.

17 Griffin, *Transforming Tales*, p. 6.
18 d'Arbois de Jubainville, *The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology*.

Fionnghuala
A bhaidhbh! ro fheadamair t-ainm,
Do thraothais gan eathair inn,
Sinn gé chuirthaoi tuinn ar tuinn,
Biaidhmíd seal ó rinn go rinn.

Ro ghéabham cabhair gan chleith,
Do ghéabham rogha agus rath,
Acht gé luidhfiom ar an loch,
Ar meanmna do budh moch amach.

A h-aithle na laoidhe sin tugadar clanna Lir ioná g-ceathrar a n-aighthe a n-éinfheacht ar an inghin, agus do labhair Fionnghuala lé, agus is éadh ro ráidh: 'Is olc an gníomh do rinnis, a Aoife, agus fós is olc an comhall caradraidh dhuit ar milleadh gan ádhbhar, agus díoghaltar ort go follas é, agus tuiirr ann, óir ní feárr do chomhachta-so ar ar milleadhne, 'ná droidhiocht ar g-caradne ar a dhioghalt ort; agus tabhair tréimse agus ceann dhuinn ar an milleadh tugais orrainn."[19]

[And when they did not consent to do this, she herself drew forth a sword to kill and destroy the children of Lir; but her womanhood, and her natural cowardice, and the weakness of her mind prevented her. And so they went westward to the shore of Loch Dairbhreach; and their horses were halted there. And she [Aoifé] desired the children of Lir to bathe, and go out to swim upon the lake; and they did as Aoifé told them. And as soon Aoifé found them upon the lake, she struck them with a metamorphosing druidical wand, and so put them into the forms of four beautiful perfectly white swans; and she made this lay there:

Aoifé
Out with you [on the water] O children of the king!
I have deprived your descendants of [all] good luck;
To your friends your story will be a sad one;
Your shouts shall be with flocks of birds.

19 *Oidhe Chloinne Lir*, pp. 6–7; pp. 45–47 (translation).

Fionnghuala
Thou witch! we know thy name.
Thou hast struck us down without a vessel; [but]
Though thou mayest us send from wave to wave,
We shall be sometimes from cape to cape [*i.e.* on the dry land].

We shall receive relief, — without concealment;
We shall receive warning and grace;
Even though we light upon the lake;
Our minds [at least] shall be early [*i.e.* range] abroad.

After that lay, the four children of Lir turned their faces together towards the woman [Aoifé]; and Fionnghuala spoke to her, and this was what she said: 'Evil is the deed which thou hast done, O Aoifé, and moreover an ill act of friendship it is for thee to ruin us without cause; and it shall be manifestly avenged upon thee; and thou shalt fall in revenge for it; for thy power for our destruction is not greater than the druidism [*druidic power*] of our friends to avenge it upon thee; therefore, assign us some period and termination to the ruin which thou hast brought upon us.]

This passage shows several features that are also significant in the *Navigatio*. Shapeshifting is a result of 'punishment' (though unjust, in case of the *Oidheadh chloinne Lir*), and the birds are bound to their water environment. The maintenance of human conscience, thought, voice, and ability to communicate are central to the narrative. The importance of birds' voices is to be found in several other texts as well, such as the *Buile Shuibhne*, the Irish story of the mad king. This narrative, although it is a very different kind of text, recounts some sort of transformation that takes place as a result of a curse intended to punish a religious trespassing.[20]

20 'Táinic roimhe fón toichim sin co ttarla Rónán dó & ochtar psalmchetlaidh dá muintir ina fharradh & íad ag crothadh uisge coisreagtha dar na slúaghuibh & roscroithset ar Suibhne hi ccuma cháich. Agus andar leis-siomh bá dá fhochuidmedh rocroithedh an t-uisge fair, & dorad a mhér a suainemh na sleighe seimnidhe robhúi ina láimh & rosdiubhraic do pshalmcheadlaidh do muintir Rónáin go romarbh don oenorchar sin é. Dorad andara hurchar don fhogha faobrach uillenngér dochum an chlérigh budhdhén go rosben isin chlog robháoi for a ucht, go rosging a crann as a n-airde isin aer, co n-ébairt an cléireach: 'Guidhim-si an Coimde cumachtach', ar sé, 'an ccomhairde dochúaidh crann an fhogha isin aer & a néllaibh nimhe co ndeachair-si amail gach n-ethaid & an bás roimris-si for mo dhalta-sa, gurab eadh notbéra .i. bás do rinn, & mo mhallacht-sa fort & mo bhennacht for Eorainn, Uradhrán & Telli uaim i n-aghaidh do shíl & chloinne Colmáin Chuair, & itbert:

Selmer referred back to the studies of Kölbing (1897–1898), who identified narrative motifs in the *Navigatio* that appeared later in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain, ou Le chevalier au lion*, one of them being the great tree by the fountain crowded with birds: 'In contrast to the belief of Irish folklore that these birds are the souls of the departed (also in the *Voyage of Maelduin* and the *Voyage of the Húi Corra*), the birds of the Brendan story are instead identified as the Fallen Angels of the Revolt of Lucifer. The same story appears in the (later) *Iwein* epic of the Arthurian cycle'.[21] The birds in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, as they tell Saint Brendan, are supernatural beings that have undergone metamorphosis, and, in that new shape, have a message to deliver to the pilgrim monks.

Rónán
Mo mallacht for Shuibhne,
rium is mór a chionaidh,
a fhogha bláith builidh
dosháith trém chlog creadhail.
An clog sin roghonais
notchurfi-si ar cráobhaibh
gurbat aon ré hénaibh,
an clog náomh ré náomhaibh.'
[He marched on thus until he encountered Ronan with eight psalmists of his community sprinkling holy water on the hosts, and they sprinkled it on Suibhne as they did on the others. Thinking it was to mock him that the water was sprinkled on him, he placed his finger on the string of the riveted spear that was in his hand, and hurling it at one of Ronan's psalmists slew him with that single cast. He made another cast with the edged, sharp-angled dart at the cleric himself, so that it pierced the bell which was on his breast and the shaft sprang off it up in the air, whereupon the cleric said: 'I pray the mighty Lord that high as went the spear-shaft into the air and among the clouds of Heaven may you go likewise even as any bird, and may the death which you have inflicted on my foster-child be that which will carry you off, to wit, death from a spear-point; and my curse on you, and my blessing on Eorann; (I invoke) Uradhran and Telle on my behalf against your seed and the descendants of Colman Cuar,' and he said:

Ronan
My curse on Suibhne!
Great is his guilt against me,
his smooth, vigorous
dart he thrust through my holy belly.
That bell which thou hast wounded
will send thee among branches,
so that thou shalt be one with the birds—
the bell of saints before saints] (text from O'Keeffe's edition, *Buile Shuibhne,* lines 140–167; translation from O'Keefe's *Buile Shuibhne* [*The Frenzy of Suibhne*], pp. 11–13).

21 *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*, p. 86.

Some of the most renowned birds in hagiography are Saint Columba's cranes,[22] Saint Kevin's blackbird, and Saint Benedict's crow,[23] among several others, such as the listening birds of Saint Francis of Assisi. As Jacques Voisenet states, the Lives of many Irish monks often included an account about their true attachment and even love towards certain animals.[24] But with Saint Brendan's voyage we enter the realm of Otherworld birds. We may find the presence of other supernatural birds in Irish vernacular *immrama*, but bird imagery in hagiography and, especially, the function of birds as liminal messengers, merge with the Celtic literary legacy in order to sing praise of God in this early medieval narration.

The birds in the 'Paradise Island' of the *Navigatio*, as they themselves make clear, are angels. To the medieval Christian mind it would have been perfectly possible that an angel could appear in animal form, since God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, did so when he descended as a dove in Jesus Christ's baptism.[25] Resuming Marcel Dando's statement about the monastic origins of the legend of the neutral angels, Jude Mackley affirms:

> The legend of the neutral angels was relatively unknown when the *Navigatio* was composed; however, the inclusion of the legend in the later works, such as Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Wolfram von

22 'This transcendent dimension of the birds' journey makes Columba's dialogues with them all the more significant. As creatures freed of the restrictions of time, they are potential preservers of past lore or preservers of present lore into the future, as they are in the legend of the herons of Druim Cet. And while we do not find traditional stories explicitly passed on in any other Columbian *corr* ['heron, crane'] legends, the bird performs precisely this function in an episode of the early modern Irish recension of the *Acallam na Senórach* (*Dialogue of the ancients*), which primarily features a lengthy exchange between Patrick and ancient survivors from the heroic past. The time traveler Oisín – the hero who is brimming with lore himself – encounters a lone heron, whom he asks to tell her story. The bird identifies herself, claiming to be more than two centuries old, and proceeds to tell the tragic tale of how she was changed into a heron as a result of her animosity towards a sexual rival. The bird, in exchange for the tale she has told, requests a story from Oisín and he happily obliges her. Thus the encounter between the heron and the old hero turns into a genuine dialogue that enriches the narrative tradition' (Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients*, pp. 188–189).

23 Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*, pp. 16, 17–18, 44–45. In the earliest Romance poetry, some cases of bird-shapeshifting affecting the saints themselves are worth noting, for instance, *Saint Eulalia*, the young martyr in the *Cantilène de Sainte* Eulalie, whose soul flies to heaven in the figure of a dove: "*in figure de colomb uolat a ciel*" (v. 25). For a description and date of this poem, see Hilty, 'La Séquence de Sainte Eulalie'.

24 Voisenet, *Bestiaire chrétien*, p. 151. On this subject, see MacNickle, *Beasts and Birds*, Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, and especially Alexander, *Saints and Animals in the Middle Ages*. For a comparison between the life of Saint Francis and birds in medieval Celtic visions and hagiographies, see Armstrong, *Saint Francis*, pp. 63–67.

25 cf. Mt 3:16, Mk 1:10, Lk 3:22, Jn 1:32.

> Eschenbach's *Parzival*, attests to its later popularity. Similarly, the concept of human souls or archangels represented as birds appears in the *immrama*. Although the *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* does not include an encounter with the soulbirds, the travellers hear the distant singing of psalms and see an island full of birds. The scene in *Máele Dúin* could be a condensed version of the comparative encounter in the *Navigatio*, or perhaps in Máele Dúin the angels are so occult that they remain hidden from the text.[26]

The angels pass through a liminal state in order to reach the human world and deliver a message.[27] Birds also seem to do so, whether they present themselves clearly as angels or not. For instance, a passage from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* introduces a metaphor or a simile in which the flight of a bird is fundamental. Bede narrates the events immediately before the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria to the Christian faith in the seventh century. The voice of a king's counsellor states the following explanation regarding the new religion:

> Cujus suasioni verbisque prudentibus alius optimatum regis tribuens assensum, continuo subdidit: 'Talis, inquiens, mihi videtur, rex, vita hominum praesens in terris, ad comparationem ejus quod nobis incertum est temporis, quale cum te residente ad coenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio et calido effecto coenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemalium pluviarum vel nivium, adveniensque unus passerum domum citissime pervolaverit, qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit. Ipso quidem tempore quo intus est, hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen parvissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabitur. Ita haec vita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidve praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec nova doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda videtur.' His similia et caeteri majores natu ac regis consiliarii divinitus admoniti prosequebantur.[28]

26 Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan*, p. 119.

27 See Newman, 'The Good, the Bad and the Unholy', p. 108: 'The neutral angels of the *Voyage of Saint Brendan* inhabited a spiritual and geographic liminal space. The world of demons and angels seemed clearly circumscribed by medieval theologians, but these neutral angels complicate this binary system. Significantly, the neutral angels seemed to occupy the same liminal regions as pagan fairies and other preternatural beings.'

28 *Baedae Opera Historica*, Lib.II, cap.XIII. Translation from Sellar, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, pp. 116–117.

> [Another of the king's chief men, approving of his wise words and exhortations, added thereafter: 'The present life of man upon earth, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thegns, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all. If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.' The other elders and king's counsellors, by divine prompting, spoke to the same effect.]

This text, which can be considered in some way foundational for Anglo-Saxon literature, invites us to recognise a set of features relevant to religious literature and birds, such as the spiritual journey, and the transition between the human and the non-human in the broad sense: the wild and at the same time the sacred, or at least, the supernatural.

Let us consider now one of the important elements of bird behaviour, namely their singing. In the *Second Branch of the Mabinogi*, the birds of Rhiannon (*adar Rhiannon*) are three magic birds whose song can raise people from the dead and bring about the sleep in the living. They can also distort the perception of space as they can be remote but seem very near:

> Ac y [gyt ac y] dechreuyssant wynteu uwyta ac yuet, dyuot tri ederyn, a dechreu canu udunt ryw gerd, ac oc a glywssynt o gerd, diuwyn oed pob un iwrthi hi. A fell dremynt oed udunt y guelet uch benn y weilgi allan. A chyn amlyket oed udunt wy a chyn bydynt gyt ac wy. Ac ar hynny o ginyaw y buant seith mlyned.[29]

29 *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 46; for the translation, *The Mabinogion*, p. 32. At the end of this branch, the birds are mentioned again, as the narration goes over the principal episodes, this particular one being named the 'Ganyat Adar Riannon' (*Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, p. 48; 'the Singing of the Birds of Rhiannon', *The Mabinogion*, p. 34). In the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen* (*Culhwch and Olwen*), in order to win Olwen's hand, Culhwch must accomplish a series of tasks imposed by Ysbaddaden who desires to have Rhiannon's birds: 'Adar Rianhon y rei a duhun y marw ac a huna y byw a vynhaf y'm didanu y nos honno' (*Culhwch ac Olwen*, lines 632–633; 'I want the birds of Rhiannon, they that wake the dead and lull the living to sleep, to entertain me that night', *The Mabinogion*, p. 195).

> [As soon as they began to eat and drink, three birds came and sang them a song, and all the songs they had heard before were harsh compared to that one. They had to gaze far out over the sea to catch sight of the birds, yet their song was as clear as if the birds were there with them. And they feasted for seven years.]

Voisenet also reminds us of the importance of these singing birds in hagiography, as they congregate around holy men in prayer, such as Saint Kevin, abbot of Glendalough, while singing praise to God with sweet melodies.[30]

This aspect is very important, as it is one of the most original features of the angel-birds in the *Navigatio*: their chanting. We have briefly mentioned shapeshifting and bird behaviour in rational beings, and bird messengers and helpers in their significant link to the Otherworld. But the *Navigatio* also shows heavy reliance on the liturgical nature of the voyage and the importance of chanting, psalms, and all the natural elements singing praise of God along the pilgrims' journey. One might say that the voyage is guided by God himself throughout the liturgical tides and the somewhat cyclical prayers of monastic life. The encounter with heavenly prayers through the words of heavenly messengers is a feature that will repeat itself in later hagiographic texts, both in insular and continental European literature throughout the Middle Ages.[31]

30 Voisenet, *Bestiaire chrétien*, p. 236.

31 For an example of insular hagiography in the High Middle Ages that includes this subject, a particular miracle tale should be considered. It has a 10th century saint as central character, Dunstan, abbot of Glastonbury (940–957) and archbishop of Canterbury (957–988). It is clearly found in the first testimonies on St Dunstan's life which are the *Vita Dunstani* (*ca*. 997–1004) by an anonymous author known only by the letter *B.* (Byrhtferth of Ramsey? *c*. 970–1020) and the *Lectiones in depositione S. Dunstani* by Adelard of Ghent (addressed to archbishop Ælfheah, *c*. 1006–1012). Following these, we find the *Lives* written by Osbern (*c*. 1050–1090) and Eadmer of Canterbury in the 11th and early 12th centuries (*c*. 1060–1126). Some parts of these texts were later introduced as separate narrations in Marian miracle collections in Latin, such as William of Malmesbury's (*c*. 1096–1143), and subsequently put in verse by Nigel of Canterbury in Latin, and by Adgar (*Le Gracial*, ca. 1190) in Anglo-Norman romance. Finally, St Dunstan's miracle is to be found in collections outside England, especially in the *Pez* Collection, the *Speculum historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais (*c*. 1190 – 1264), and in several Hispanic *marialia*: the *Alcobacense* Ms. ("Lisbon Mariale"), *Liber Mariae* by Juan Gil de Zamora, and the *Cantigas de Santa María* by Alfonso X (both from the second half of the 13th century). Two of these *cantigas* are clearly derived from accounts of Saint Dunstan's life, namely *cantiga* 288 and 296. These two poems are apparently two parts of the same original story, according to most of the sources (and the oldest ones): the narration began to split in two different miracle tales, as we may see in surviving collections, in the 12th century, as *Pez* and *Alcobacense* MSS show.

The pleasure of music as an otherworld or after-world experience,[32] at least in Western Europe, has a very long literary tradition (Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and its vision of musical spheres is one of the most famous), which can be traced back not only to the Latin Classics but also to Celtic and Germanic texts. We have a whole world of 'literary visions', thoroughly described by Howard Rollin Patch:[33] the *Visions of Drythelm, of Adamnán, of Tundale, of the Monk of Eynsham*, including heavenly visions of Paradise, some of them with a very significant musical component, such as in the Irish *Voyage of Bran*. Patch has also explained in detail the importance of birds in this matter:

> In the *Voyage of Bran* there is an ancient tree in blossom on which the birds sing the canonical hours; in the *Voyage of Snedgus* (17–18) is a tree with beautiful birds – on top is a great bird that tells of creation and Christ and the last judgment, and the birds sing psalms and canticles in praise of the Lord; the *Voyage of the Húi Corra* gives us a 'bird-flock of angels' making music to the Lord, Michael in the form of a bird, the jester who dies and reappears as a bird, the song bird who is Michael (44), which is a woman's soul (55–56). The *Adventure of Cian's son Teigue* tells of the birds that lay eggs of blue and crimson which have had effects on those men that eat them; also of birds that feed on berries and sing songs that put sufferers to sleep. The *Voyage of Saint Brendan* (xxi) tells of the island which is a Paradise of birds, where the birds discourse joyously from the tops of trees. The bird carrying a branch from the Otherworld fruit tree is found here too (xlii). In the *Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn* the birds sing 'a sweetly drawn-out song' in the treetops. In the *Adventures of Cormac* the house of white silver and the house of bronze are thatched with the wings of white birds. No doubt the idea behind all this is what is indicated in

32 As every text on the life of Saint Dunstan's confirms, music was an important element in the saint's spiritual life and after-world experience: 'When he arrived there with a psalm on his lips, he heard to his surprise in the darkness unfamiliar voices, singing in the church with complex harmony. He hastened to look in through an opening, to find the church all bathed in brilliant light; bands of virgins were wheeling around in a dance, singing as they moved the hymn of Sedulius that begins: "Let us sing, friends, to the Lord," and what follows. He also noticed that after each verse they alternately repeated, as mortal girls might have done, and as though in harmony with their circling dance, the first couplet of the hymn: "Let us sing, friends, to the Lord His honour; let the sweet love of Christ resound from devout mouths", and the rest' (Winterbottom and Lapidge, *The Early Lives of St Dunstan*, p. 101). This section of the text (chapter 36 of the earliest *Vita Dunstani*), which describes the experience of pleasure through the senses (light, sound, movement), stands at the beginning of a rich textual tradition.

33 Patch, *The Other World*, p. 132.

> the *Voyage of the Húi Corra* (55–56) where the soul of the woman says: 'The birds that ye see are the souls that come on Sunday out of hell'– in all cases the birds are souls, that is why they sing the hours.[34]

Anthropomorphic features in the depiction of birds, which include voice or speech, have been studied in Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially in *The Seafarer*, while *The Phoenix* is an excellent example of allegorical use of a bird figure (and predecessors of symbolic birds are present, of course, in late antiquity and early medieval literature). What these birds in the Anglo-Saxon poems of the *Exeter Book* (*Codex Exoniensis*, 10th century) have in common is the function of their singing.

Many of these features have been newly revisited by authors such as Michael Warren, whose recent publications explore the image of the pelagic bird-soul in *The Seafarer*, and highlight the poet's keen knowledge of the specific seabirds by their names, appearance, and sound. Finding their home on the seas, while flying away to seek refuge, these birds are 'native foreigners', a paradoxical term coined by Warren in order to explain the poem's conflicting feelings as a journey of the soul.[35] Whether *The Seafarer* describes some sort of ascetic-spiritual trip, or merely a mournful exile journey –or both –, it is difficult to determine. What is certain is that some elements are common to a wide tradition of insular ascetic literature, that is, a stream of devotional and poetic religious writing with Celtic (especially Gaelic) and Anglo-Saxon branches, both vernacular and Latin. As Lydia Eby, among others, has explained,[36] birds in mythology often perform a connecting function between the realm of the gods and the realm of men. In this way, they are shown as mediators, both marking and dissolving limits. This seems to be particularly evident in accounts of Celtic origin, especially in the sacred function of these animals, but it is also a feature found in the Germanic world. A passage from the *Vǫlsunga saga* tells how Sigurðr begins to understand the speech of birds by touching his tongue with a little of the blood of Fáfnir's heart.[37] He then listens to climbing birds (nuthatches) chirping in a nearby bush. After this, six birds speak, and their sayings are decisive for the plot, because they incite Sigurðr to kill Reginn.[38]

34 *ibid.*, p. 55.

35 See Michael Warren's 'Native Foreigners'.

36 'Between the Earth and Sky'. See also Devoto, 'El tiempo en las *Cantigas*'; Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*; and Slavin, 'Liminality in early Irish literature'.

37 *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 19, p. 33.

38 *Vǫlsunga saga*, ch. 20, p. 34.

Colin Ireland and, in particular, Nicolas Jacobs, among other authors, have studied some of these elements in *The Seafarer*, specifically with regard to the possible parallels on the topic of birds.[39] Particularly noteworthy are some similarities with the already-mentioned *Buile Shuibhne*, in which King Suibhne goes mad and behaves like a bird, in the midst of a nature described as exuberant and joyful.[40] It is a *locus communis* to compare the rich liveliness of nature with the social comfort and joys, often used to eulogise a life of simplicity led in the wilderness. Jacob sees the origin of this motif in early Irish nature poems rather than in Anglo Saxon poetry:

> As it is impossible to deduce what form the motif might have taken at an early date, it is risky to speculate on the transformations it may have undergone in the English poem, though any ironization of the motif which may have taken place in Irish is unlikely to have crossed the language-boundary, and if we are to read the *Seafarer* passage in that way we presumably have to do with an independent English development. The presence of sea-birds rather than the more varied flora and fauna of the *Suibhne* stanzas may at first sight appear to be an adaptation to the marine setting of the English poem and the need to evoke a generally inhospitable environment; but the presence of these birds in a twelfth-century poem put in the mouth of Colum Cille demonstrates that they constituted, at least at a later date, an acceptable detail in Irish as well, and in that poem they plainly represent one of the pleasures of the monastic life.[41]

Among other characteristics, Jacobs identifies some stanzas in the poems of *Buile Shuibhne* that describe and compare the singing of wild birds in a maritime context in a positive way, as a pleasure comparable to the joys of the mead-hall in *The Seafarer*:

Hwilum ylfete song	
dyde ic me to gomene,	ganotes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg	fore hleahtor wera,
mæw singende	fore medodrince.
Stormas þær stanclifu beotan,	þær him stearn oncwæð,
isigfeþera;	ful oft þæt earn bigeal,

39 Ireland, 'Some Analogues of the Old English *Seafarer*'; Jacobs, 'The Seafarer and the Birds'.
40 On liminality in *Buile Shuibhne* see Slavin, 'Liminality in early Irish literature'.
41 Jacobs, *ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

urigfeþra; nænig hleomæga
feasceaftig ferð frefran meahte.[42]

[Sometimes I would take the song of the swan as my entertainment, the cry of the gannet and the call of the curlew in place of human laughter, the sea-mew's singing in place of the mead-drinking. There storms would pound the rocky cliffs whilst the tern, icy-winged, answered them; very often the sea-eagle would screech, wings dappled with spray. No protective kinsman could comfort the inadequate soul.]

The birds mentioned here are the curlew, the gannet, the gull, the tern, all of them coastal birds, inhabitants of the area between the land and the ocean; the cuckoo and the eagle appear in other verses. What is remarkable is that another poem that is also part of the *Exeter Book* contains descriptions very similar to those in *The Seafarer*, this time clearly allegorical and with identifiable Latin background (especially, Lactantius, Ambrose, as well as passages from the Old Testament), something that has not been sufficiently highlighted by critics. *The Phoenix*, unlike *The Seafarer*, is typically considered part of an allegorical-doctrinal poetic bestiary that also includes the poems of *The Panther*, *The Whale*, and *The Partridge*.[43] What is worth stressing here is the similarity of vocabulary and imagery when describing the song of birds as an experience of great joy and bliss:

Sona swa seo sunne sealte streamas
hea oferhlifað, swa se haswa fugel
beorht of þæs bearwes beame gewiteð,
fareð feþrum snell flyhte on lyfte,
swinsað ond singeð swegle togeanes.
ðonne bið swa fæger fugles gebæru,
onbryrded breostsefa, blissum hremig;
wrixleð woðcræfte wundorlicor
beorhtan reorde, þonne æfre byre monnes
hyrde under heofonum, siþþan heahcyning,
wuldres wyrhta, woruld staþelode,
heofon ond eorþan. Biþ þæs hleoðres sweg

42 Original text in *The English Old English Reader*, ed. Marsden, vv. 19–26; translation from Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.

43 See Michael Drout, 'The Partridge'. The author presents interesting evidence about the 'The Partridge' in the *Exeter Book* as describing not that bird but the phoenix instead.

eallum songcræftum
ond wynsumra
Ne magon þam breahtme
ne hearpan hlyn,
ænges on eorþan,
sweghleoþres geswin,
ne ænig þara dreama
gumum to gliwe
Singeð swa ond swinsað
oþþæt seo sunne
sæged weorþeð.
ond hlyst gefeð,
þrist, þonces gleaw,
feþre flyhthwate;
swetra ond wlitigra
wrenca gehwylcum.
byman ne hornas,
ne hæleþa stefn
ne organan,
ne swanes feðre,
þe dryhten gescop
in þas geomran woruld.
sælum geblissad,
on suðrodor
þonne swiað he
heafde onbrygdeð,
ond þriwa ascæceð
fugol bið geswiged.[44]

[As soon as the sun high overtops the salt streams then this shining grey bird goes from the tree, out of the grove, and swift on his wings he takes flight upon the air and makes melody and sings towards the firmament. Then so lovely is the bird's articulation, so inspired his heart, ecstatically jubilant, he modulates his singing more wondrously, with clear voice, than ever a son of man heard below the heavens since the exalted King, Creator of glory, founded the world, the heaven and the earth. The harmony of the song is sweeter and more beautiful than all musical instruments and more delightsome than every melody. Not trumpets, nor horns, nor the sound of the harp, nor the voice of any man on earth, nor the strain of the organ's melody, nor the wings of the swan, nor any of the joys which the Lord created for men's mirth in this mournful world may match that effusion. So he sings and makes melody, joyously enraptured, until the sun has sunk in the southern sky; then he falls silent and takes to listening. Intrepid, discerning in his contemplation, he upturns his head, and three times beats his swift-flighted wings; then the bird is silenced. Always, twelve times by day and by night, he marks the hours.]

This last example should make even clearer why it is fitting to compare this feature in the Hiberno-Latin and the Anglo-Saxon texts: the function of transition between one universe and the other, or between a mundane mode of existence and an ascetic one, whether eremitical, or as pilgrim-missionary,

44 Original text from Cook, *The Old English Elene, Phoenix, and Physiologus*, vv. 120–147; translation from Bradley's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.

is linked to the birds, their singing, and their communication. It must be noticed that, both in the *Navigatio* and *The Phoenix* (and, to some minor extent, in *The Seafarer*), human and divine times are marked throughout the day and the years by the birds. They impose almost a seasonal-liturgical rhythm. As Mackley indicates: 'The heavy liturgical emphasis of the scene with the neutral angels in the *Navigatio* serves to direct the divine focus of the narrative; at the same time, attention to the canonical hours and the repetitious lists of psalms have a possible meditative function. The scene is presented as plausible and needs no further validation beyond that the birds are messengers from God.'[45]

It is not unlikely that monastic authors of both the vernacular poems and the *Navigatio* had taken doctrines and spiritual images from the same patristic sources. In this sense, Jacobsen explains the possible relationship between the Island of the Birds in the *Navigatio* and Origen's doctrine exposed in *De principiis*. Origen considered humans as the third *ordo* of the reasonable creatures 'and about those spirits that God had judged able to complete the human race, which are the souls of mankind, Origen reported that some of them, in making advances (*per profectum*), ascended to higher degrees and were admitted even to the *ordo* of the angels'.[46] Brendan and his monks are on this pilgrimage in search for that perfect status, and they make great progress (even arriving at the Promised Island):

> Looking at the tree with all its birds, Brendan turned to the Lord with an ardent prayer, asking him to reveal the secret of the assembly; he was aware of meeting something important to his *profectus* on the way to the Promised Land. [...] Brendan's monks sail between these two poles [the fallen angels transformed in birds and the fallen Judas]; they too are exiles, but have a destination. On their journey they meet examples of different levels (*gradus*) of punishment and sanctification.[47]

Although it cannot be proved that all these texts are genetically related to the *Navigatio*, it is certainly important that a series of common elements can be detected: bird behaviour and shapeshifting as a result of religious punishment, the ability to communicate by words or voices, the singing and chanting that measure a sacred time, the introduction to a spiritual realm or into Paradise.

45 Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan*, pp. 120–121.
46 Jacobsen, 'The Island of the Birds', p. 114.
47 *ibid*., pp. 115–116.

Finally, we must observe that other medieval texts outside the Isles also narrate visions of the after-world related to a musical experience. A wider comparative study, which may include other medieval continental texts such as Latin and even Romance miraculous accounts and hagiography, would certainly enrich the scope of our understanding of birds and their human and supernatural shifts in medieval texts. Scenes of contemplative practice with birds as messengers or guides ('psychopomps') are represented within the context of monastic life where the supernatural usually takes place through a beatific vision, from Jacques de Vitry's sermons[48] to Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa María*,[49] which, for instance, contain the tale of the monk that falls in ecstatic contemplation through the song of a bird in an orchard.[50] A cautious but fruitful comparison would thus be possible between Latin and Romance texts, hagiographic poems, allegorical prologues, and even some Marian miracles. All these texts, as well as many of their modern siblings,[51] are inhabited by birds. 'Other echoes / Inhabit the garden', with songs on the thresholds, marking transitions between times and universes.

48 See Carolyn Muessig's studies on Jacques de Vitry (*c.*1160–1240) and his *Sermones communes*, ('Heaven, earth and the angels', 59).

49 A well-studied case is that of cantiga 103, in which a monk is granted a foretaste of the joy of Paradise by listening to the ravishing melody sung by a small bird in the monastery's garden ('Como Santa Maria feze estar o monge trezentos anos ao canto da passarŷa porque lle pedia que lle mostrasse qual era o ben que avian os que eran en Paraiso'). See Filgueira Valverde, *Tiempo y gozo eterno en la narrativa medieval*; Devoto, 'El tiempo en las *Cantigas*'; Poole, 'In Search of Paradise'. Kevin R. Poole notes: 'As anticipation, the monastic life is one trapped within the confines of earthly time, though it strives to imitate in its imperfect way the perfections of Heaven. The monk of cantiga 103, inheritor of the monastic tradition who must prepare himself through prayer, song, and meditation for the glories to come, nonetheless wishes to know how the life that he presently leads compares to that of the Celestial Jerusalem. He embodies this 'desire for God' and longs for a small peek at the paradise that awaits him' (Poole, 'In Search of Paradise', p. 120).

50 This is a motif in European folklore narrative: ATU 471 or SLP I/ 1970 (Tomšič, 'Večnost', pp. 8–9), ATU 471, 'The Bridge to Another World', and 471A, 'The Monk and the Bird' ('Years seem moments while man listens to song of bird'). See *Multilingual Folklore Database* (ATU classification). In the Iberian Peninsula it is related with the legend of San Virila of Leyre.

51 This very subtle link between birds resulting from shapeshifting in pagan and magic-folklore texts and birds as messengers in medieval hagiography, as a complementary relationship, seems to be relevant in modern fantasy narrative written by authors well-aware of the ancient and medieval literary traditions such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. LeGuin. Just to mention a few examples, in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, Elwing joined her husband Eärendil in the form of a bird, and was also able to communicate with birds and transform herself into a swan in order to meet her husband in his voyages across the sky. On the other hand, the great Eagle Thorondor in *Silmarillion*, and his descendant Gwaihir in *The Hobbit*, as well as Roäc, son of Carc, the raven, and the anonymous thrush in the dusk, are positive helpers and messengers. By contrast, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the infamous *crebain* act as bird-spies of Saruman. Ursula LeGuin's main character in *A Wizard of Earthsea* is Ged, the magician, who can shift into the shape of a sparrow-hawk.

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About the Author

Santiago Disalvo holds a Ph.D. in Medieval Poetry at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP), Argentina, and is an Associate Professor in Medieval and Renaissance Spanish Literature at the Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences in that same university. As a researcher at the Institute for the Research of Humanities and Social Sciences (IdIHCS-CONICET), he co-directs the research project *Romance Medieval and Renaissance Lyric in its European Context: Traditions, Rewriting, Translation, from its Origins until its Contemporary Development*. He has published two books on medieval monastic and clerical poetry, one as author and another as editor, as well as many articles on liturgical hymnody, Marian miracles, and Medieval Latin, Romance, and Old English religious poetry.

7. Sin, Punishment, and Magic

Changing Form in Medieval Welsh Literature

Luciana Cordo Russo

Abstract
Although shapeshifting is a recurring phenomenon in medieval Welsh literature, it has not been systematically addressed. This paper thus surveys metamorphoses in secular and religious prose tales written in Wales, both in Middle Welsh and Latin: on the one hand, it examines and classifies instances of shapeshifting in the collection of tales known as *Mabinogion* and, on the other hand, it looks at a few cases in the hagiographical discourse (Latin lives and vernacular poetry) that narrate metamorphoses as miracles. By analysing the vocabulary, the narrative function and meaning of transformations, the association of metamorphoses with magic, the marvelous and the miraculous emerges, as well as ways of thinking about change and identity, and the boundaries between human and animal realms, and between the natural and the supernatural.

Keywords: Shapeshifting, Punitive Transformations, Wales, *Mabinogion*, Transformation Miracles

In her introduction to the most recent translation of the eleven Middle Welsh prose tales, known as *Mabinogion*, Sioned Davies summarises their main themes by pointing out that '[t]hey tell of love and betrayal, shape-shifting and enchantment, conflict and retribution.'[1] Indeed, shapeshifting is a

1 Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. ix. In the same line, Mac Cana affirms that '[i]t is true that in Irish and Welsh literature shapeshifting is commonplace' (*Celtic Mythology*, p. 122). For a brief consideration of shapeshifting in Celtic sources see Carey's entry 'Reincarnation and Shapeshifting' in the Celtic Encyclopaedia, where he focuses on sequences of metamorphoses linked to the narrative motif of memory of former existences that legitimise the past or the retelling of past events; this is the case of the poet Taliesin in a series of poems, notably 'Kat

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recurring phenomenon in these stories: in six of the eleven tales we find a total of 23 transformations of different types. These metamorphoses tell us, as Caroline Walker Bynum, Marina Warner, and Laurence Harf-Lancer have taught,[2] about ways of thinking about change and identity, and the boundaries between human and animal realms, and between the natural and the supernatural.[3] However, they have not yet been systematically addressed. The following pages will survey metamorphoses in secular and religious prose tales written in Wales, both in Middle Welsh and Latin, paying particular attention to vocabulary, with the aim of discussing their narrative function and meanings. In section one I will examine instances of shapeshifting found in a group of Middle Welsh tales, which are associated with magic and the marvellous. In addition, a few cases of transformations are narrated in hagiographical texts as supernatural miracles performed by or for saints; they will be discussed in section two. This comparison is especially elicited due to the interplay of Latin and vernacular writing,[4] as well as of religious and secular texts,[5] and the particular character of the lives of Welsh saints.

Metamorphosis in Middle Welsh Tales

The corpus for analysis in this first section comprises six tales from a group of Middle Welsh narratives found in two fourteenth-century manuscripts (Llyfr Gwyn Rhydderch and Llyfr Coch Hergest):[6] specifically, the *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (*Four Branches of the Mabinogi*), whose fourth branch

Godeu' ('The Battle/Army of the Trees'), where '[b]eing rather than knowing gives him his authority' (*Legendary Poems*, p. 167). The poem begins with the line 'Bvm yn lliaws rith' ('I was in a multitude of forms'); the vocabulary is similar to the one found in the prose tales that will be examined here (*ibid.*, p. 187, n. 1). Poetry, however, lies outside the scope of this study. Note, as a coda, that in the post-medieval *Hanes Taliesin* ('Story of Taliesin') we see a sequence of transformations while one character chases after another, which ends in the chased being swallowed and reborn (Carey, 'Reincarnation and Shapeshifting', p. 1485). For *Hanes Taliesin* see Ford, *The Mabinogion*, pp. 159–181. Jackson, in his study of traditional motifs in Middle Welsh literature, poses that this story is composed of the motif of the 'magic transformation flight' plus 'the magic transformation contest between two wizards' (*The International Popular Tale*, p. 116).

2 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*; Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses*; Harf-Lancner, 'Introduction' and 'La métamorphose'. See also the introduction to this book.

3 Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*; Le Goff, 'Lo maravilloso'.

4 Russell, '"Go and Look in the Latin Books"'.

5 Of which manuscripts are a straightforward example (McKenna, 'Reading with Rhydderch').

6 That is, National Library of Wales, Peniarth MS 4 (c.1350), and Oxford, Jesus College 111 (c.1382–1425).

concentrates the majority of the transformations and has received most of the scholarly attention; *Culhwch ac Olwen* (*Culhwch and Olwen*); and *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* (*The Tale of Lludd and Llefelys*).[7] A good number of the transformations fall into what Harf-Lancner calls 'métamorphose cyclique' ('cyclical metamorphosis'),[8] that is, shapeshifts that are reversible:

7 The collection is a nineteenth-century construct that draws together tales written in Middle Welsh that have varied textual traditions and pertain to different times and places, except for the *Four Branches*. These are, strictly speaking, the tales of the *mabinogi* after which the collection was named by the first English translator, Lady Guest; use has established the name as a convenient way to refer to the collection (see Luft, 'The meaning of mabinogi', for a summary of arguments regarding the meaning of the term). Some of the tales also appear (most of them in fragmentary form) in thirteenth-century manuscripts. For a discussion of dates, manuscripts, and authorship see Huws, *Medieval Welsh Manuscripts*; Rodway, 'The Where', and references there. The *Four Branches* narrate the story of several prominent literary families of the kingdoms of Dyfed and Gwynedd: alliances, friendships, marriages, offspring, conflicts, vengeance, and resolutions. In the *First Branch*, Pwyll, lord of Dyfed, forges a long-lasting friendship with Arawn, king of the Otherworld, with whom he exchanges presents; he then marries Rhiannon, has a son who mysteriously disappears (and whom his wife is falsely accused of having killed), is reunited with him, dies, and Pryderi (his son) succeeds him and marries Cigfa. The *Second Branch* moves to Gwynedd, where Bendigeidfran, crown king of the Island of Britain, grants his sister Branwen to Matholwch, king of Ireland. One of his brothers, feeling unconsulted in the decision, insults Matholwch by maiming his horses. Bendigeidfran manages to compensate the Irish, who leave with Branwen, but eventually they cannot forget the insult and the lady is mistreated and insulted every day. She sends a message to his brother and, in the end, the battle between both people causes the desolation of Ireland, Branwen and Bendigeidfran's deaths, and the survival of only 7 of all the Welsh who crossed the sea. By the king's order they keep his head and bury it somewhere in London after 87 years of feasting and supernatural bliss. With the *Third Branch* we return to the south of Wales and follow the adventures of Pryderi, his wife Cigfa, Rhiannon, and her husband Manawydan (another of Bendigeidfran's brothers) after an enchantment has fallen on Dyfed and everything and everyone has disappeared. Rhiannon and Pryderi disappear later inside a magical castle, and Manawydan finally solves the mystery and makes the wizard responsible for the enchantment (motivated by vengeance on something that occurs in the *First Branch*) lift the spell. The action of the *Fourth Branch* happens mostly in the north, where Math, lord of Gwynedd, cannot leave the side of his virgin foot holder except to go to war. One of his nephews, Gilfaethwy, desires the maiden, so his brother Gwydion contrives a plan: they steal Pryderi's otherworldly pigs (a gift from Arawn) and the battle between Dyfed and Gwynedd ensues. Pryderi dies in personal combat against Gwydion, and Gilfaethwy rapes the maiden. Math punishes the brothers by transforming them into animals of different gender, which produce offspring. When looking for a new foot holder, Math summons Aranrhod, his niece (Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's sister), who, being tested by her uncle, gives birth to two boys. Gwydion nurtures and raises one of them, who is cursed by his mother because he embodies the shameful lost of her virginity. Gwydion tricks her into giving a name and arms to the boy, and with Math they create a wife for him out of flowers. Lleu's wife finally betrays him with her lover, but Gwydion succeeds in retrieving his nephew (who escaped in the form of an eagle) and they get revenge. The tale ends with Lleu as the new lord of Gwynedd.

8 'Introduction', p. 9.

humans who turn into animals and then back again. These include a change of physical appearance that may entail a slight adjustment of the cycle: from man 'a' to man 'b' and then back to man 'a'. Furthermore, in these texts three more changes occur from animal to human. There is, finally, a completely different case: a transformation from vegetal to human and then to animal permanently.

Certain regularities can be drawn from the 23 instances of transformations and can be used as criteria for classifying the examples and understanding their function and meaning. The transformations can be divided into two broad categories according to whether they possess a voluntary or imposed character, which Helen Fulton terms 'agentless' or 'agentive' magic.[9] For Fulton, early Middle Welsh prose tales 'exemplify a particular narrative strategy that might be called "magic naturalism"': the agentless occurrence of marvels where characters have gifts or supernatural qualities, or extraordinary physical abilities that do not depend on charms or magical tokens.[10] Fulton includes shapeshifting as a physical accomplishment and/or supernatural talent in the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, which she uses as one of her case-studies (the other being *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, 'Rhonabwy's Dream'). This agentless marvel is unmotivated and left unexplained, and 'resides naturally in individuals or the natural world';[11] enchanted creatures possess characteristics that go beyond their natural limits, such as talking animals, giants, and so on. The world of *Culhwch ac Olwen* (and that of almost all of these tales) is a world of *mirabilia*: marvels within the category of nature, the unusual and the inexplicable within nature.[12]

Miranda Green, in her study of animals in the earliest literary material, notes that metamorphosis can occur in one of three ways: voluntarily, that is, 'a god or superhuman individual changes from human to animal form or vice versa from choice'; imposed as a punishment or revenge; or 'a creature may be transformed for a particular purpose'.[13] She further indicates that the 'metamorphosed creature retains all its human faculties,'[14] a concept that is, as we shall see, of primary importance here. The ideas presented by Fulton and Green are fundamental for the analysis of the following examples.

9 See also Pedersen's contribution in this book.

10 'Magic and the Supernatural', p. 1.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

12 Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, p. 19. It should be noted that the vocabulary and definitions related to the natural and the supernatural are rather fluid and not all authors clearly separates *mirabilia* from the supernatural *miracula*.

13 *Animals*, p. 192.

14 *Id.*

The first type of transformation, that is, voluntary or agentless metamorphosis, is rather limited in the corpus, with only five instances in total.

(1): In the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*, it is insinuated that Aranrhod's firstborn Dylan shapeshifts into an aquatic creature: after being named, he made for the sea and 'y gyt ac y doeth y'r mor, *annyan* y mor a gauas, a chystal y nouyei a'r pysc goreu yn y mor, ac o achaws hynny y gelwit Dylan Eil Ton' (77, 'as soon as he came to the sea, he received the disposition of the sea, and he would swim as well as the best fish in the sea, and because of that he was called Dylan Eil Ton').[15] Note that the word *anian* ('nature or quality', 'essence', 'disposition')[16] reappears in this same tale when Math condemns his nephews to their new animal forms. In addition, Dylan's name is heavily imbued with his maritime nature, meaning 'sea, ocean, the deep, wave' and it is expanded accordingly with his epithet 'son of wave' after his metamorphosis.[17] His death at the hand of his uncle is mentioned, but then Dylan disappears from the tale altogether.

(2) In this same text, Lleu escapes from the man who tried to kill him, and actually wounded him severely (his wife's lover), 'yn rith eryr' (88, 'in the shape of an eagle'). We will come back to Lleu in eagle form in the discussion of example 9 below.

(3) In *Culhwch and Olwen*, Menw son of Teirgwaedd is portrayed as having magical abilities. Besides casting spells, 'ymrithaw a oruc Menw yn rith ederyn' (ll. 1030–1031, 'Menw transformed himself into the shape of a bird') in order to confirm the location of the wild boar Twrch Trwyth and its piglets, which Arthur needs to hunt for Culhwch so that he can win Olwen, the

15 I follow Ifor Williams's edition of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (*Pedeir Keinc*); references are to page numbers. I have also consulted more recent separate editions, in this case, that of Hughes, *Math uab Mathonwy*. Editions of the other tales will be provided after the first quotation, citing by line or page number depending on the case. I have rendered all the Middle Welsh originals as literal as possible with the aim of fully appreciating the vocabulary of shapeshifting.

16 *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (GPC).

17 *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 213, n. 44.26. See further discussion in Keefer, 'The lost tale of Dylan', for whom Dylan turns into a seal, arguing for the existence of a cognate tale in a Scottish popular ballad recorded in the nineteenth century. Welsh, for his part, contrasts Dylan as creature of the sea to his brother Lleu as creature of the air (given that he transforms into an eagle, see following example) and considers them as doubles, twin sons of Aranrhod ('Doubling', p. 350). For a fuller discussion of the rather scarce poetic traditions related to Dylan see Haycock (*Legendary Poems*, pp. 478–487); unfortunately, none of these mentions help us unravel the exact 'disposition' to which Dylan shapeshifted.

giant's daughter, for Culhwch. Menw is one of Arthur's men and functions as magical helper to Culhwch.[18]

(4) Another character from this same tale displays superhuman abilities: Gwrhyr Gwalstawd Ieithoedd (Gwrhyr 'the Interpreter of Languages') is able to understand all languages, even those of animals, and because of that Arthur sends him to parley with the wild boars. In order to accomplish this task Gwrhyr flies away 'yn rith ederyn' (ll. 1078–1079, 'in the shape of a bird') and holds a conversation with one of the piglets, Grugyn Gwrych Eraint, who refuses to talk to Arthur and regrets 'digawn o drwc a wnaethoed Duw ynni, an gwneuthur ar y delw hon' (ll. 1087–1088, 'enough harm has God done to us, for making us in this image').[19]

(5) Lastly, in the tale of the brothers Lludd and Llefelys, the second *gormes* ('oppression', 'plague') that falls upon the island of Britain is, according to Llefelys, the result of two dragons fighting: each time the foreign dragon is hit, he gives a terrible cry. In order to defeat it, Lludd must dig a pit in the centre of the island and place there a vat full of mead covered with a sheet. Then – continues the tale – the dragons will begin to fight each other 'yn rith aruthter aniueileit' (l. 101, 'in the shape of monstrous animals') but eventually will rise in 'yn rith dreigeu' (l. 102, 'in the shape of dragons') and, finally, exhausted by the fierce and terrible combat, they will descend 'yn rith deu barchell' (l. 104, 'in the shape of two piglets') to the sheet, sinking it with their weight and dragging it to the bottom of the tub, where they will drink all the mead and fall asleep. This series of metamorphoses enhances the symbolic meaning of the tale of the fight of the two serpents-dragons, which is a also well-known story in the pseudo-historical tradition, first attested in the *Historia Brittonum* where one dragon is said to represent the Britons while the other the Saxons;[20] the battle is understood as an embodiment of the conflict between both peoples during the Early Middle Ages. Geoffrey of Monmouth also re-elaborates the story in the *Historia Regum Britanniae*, in the episode of Merlin and Vortigern.[21] In fact, it is in

18 Jackson, *The International Popular Tale*, pp. 67–99; Bromwich and Evans, *Culhwch*, xxxiii-xxxix.

19 This other shapeshifting will be treated below in example 14. Gwrhyr's transformation is striking in that it suggests that the conversation can only happen animal to animal, and he possibly chooses a bird to gain fast and easy access to the boars.

20 *Historia Brittonum*, § 42.

21 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, VI, 106–108.

the Welsh translation of Geoffrey's text preserved in Llanstephan Ms. I that *The Tale of Lludd and Llefelys* first appears.[22]

Yet most of the metamorphoses in the corpus happen as a result of agentive magic and the control of objects, charms or spells. For Fulton, the deliberate performance of magic upon another is not common:[23] magic, whether natural or demonic (in our corpus there is no evidence that magic is considered evil or demonic), is not dominant in the texts that Fulton analyses but it is here.[24] Thus the second type of transformations includes those that are imposed, which – as was stated before – can be motivated either by a desire to punish or by revenge, or by any other particular purpose. We will start with this last group of metamorphoses, those motivated by another particular purpose.

(6) In the *First Branch of the Mabinogi*, Pwyll and Arawn (a king of the Otherworld or Annwfn) exchange appearances at the behest of the latter. Arawn then says to Pwyll: 'mi a'th rodaf di y'm lle i' ('I will put you in my place'), with 'pryt innheu a'm ansawd arnat ti' ('my own image and appearance on you'), so that when Pwyll faces Arawn's enemy, 'byd di i'm rith yno' (3, 'you [Pwyll] will be in my shape'). During Pwyll's time in the shape of Arawn, the narrator refers to him by way of personal pronouns and twice as 'y gwr a oed yn lle Arawn' (5, 6, 'the man who was in Arawn's place') but never using his name. At the end of this episode, after the agreed year had elapsed, 'y rodes Arawn y furuf, a'y drych e hun y Pwyll, Pendeuic Dyuet, ac y kymerth ynteu y furuf e hun a'y drych' (6, 'Arawn gave Pwyll his own form and image to Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, and he himself took his own form and image').

By changing places with Arawn, Pwyll is able to defeat Arawn's rival king Hafgan, who could only be defeated by a human,[25] and thus compensate the insult and dishonour committed towards him when he violated one of the rules of hunting: at the beginning of the tale, Pwyll had allowed his own dogs to feed from the stag killed by Arawn's hounds. In this case, the transformation is part of the motif of mortal beings helping otherworldly kings or individuals and contributes to the configuration of Pwyll's character and behaviour,

22 For a fuller discussion of the tale see Robert's introduction to his edition (*Cyfranc*, xi-xl; for the episode of the two dragons see especially pp. xxxiii-xxxix).

23 'Magic and the Supernatural', pp. 10–11.

24 A wider study of magic in medieval Welsh literature needs yet to be undertaken. On natural magic (which, needless to say, is not supernatural or preternatural and should not be confused with *mirabilia* and *miracula*) see Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, pp. 20–23.

25 This is a common Celtic motif, as Mac Cana states: '[the] otherworld rulers sometimes invoke the intervention of mortals in their mutual conflicts' (*Celtic Mythology*, p. 80).

setting the foundation of the long-lasting friendship between both characters, which will have further impact in the story of the *Fourth Branch*.[26] As a result of this experience and his time as ruler of Annwfn, Pwyll receives the nickname 'Pen Annwfn', 'Head of Annwfn', for the enduring alliance forged with Arawn. The experience of shifting appearances thus provokes in Pwyll a development of his inner self that is reflected in the expansion of his name.[27]

(7) Another example of agentive transformation comes from the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi* and involves Gwydion, a multifaceted character portrayed as magician, trickster, master of disguises, poet, and storyteller.[28] Gwydion takes charge of his sister Aranrhod's son because she rejects him: he is the result of an illicit sexual relationship that brings her humiliation and shame. He tries to make her recognise the boy (and thus gain all the attributes to obtain a social position) but she only curses him, swearing the fate that he will never get a name, weapons, or a wife from this world. Gwydion then tricks her with magic and enchantments into giving a name and arming the boy. In the first scene, he conjures up ('hudaw', 79) a ship from seaweeds and a great amount of cordwain from other algae and, together with the boy, they pose as shoemakers near Aranrhod's fortress. Once they were seen from there, Gwydion 'dwyn eu heilyw e hun a oruc, a dodi eilyw arall arnunt' (79, 'removed their own appearances and put another on them') so that they were not recognized, eventually succeeding in getting a name for the boy (Lleu Llaw Gyffes). As soon as that was accomplished, 'yd ellyngwys ef y uab yn y bryt e hun, ac y kymerth y furyf e hun' (81, 'he gave back his own appearance to the boy and he took his own form'). In the second scene, 'amgenu eu pryt a wnaethant, a chyrchu y porth yn rith deu was ieueinc' (81, 'they changed their appearance and made for the gate in the shape of two young lads'), saying to Aranrhod's gatekeeper that they were poets. Magic, then, appears in Gwydion's hands, in this episode as

26 For the development of Pwyll's character see Byfield, 'Character and Conflict'. See also Welsh, who sees Pwyll and Arawn as doubles that allow Pwyll to become a better version of himself: 'Pwyll becomes his external double, a stronger and wiser figure who remains part of his name and identity even after his own external form is returned to him.' ('Doubling', p. 353).

27 The method for changing appearances in this case, as well as in the following, contrasts with the one employed by Merlin in the Cambro-Latin *Historia Regum Britanniae* (VIII, 137) to give Uther Gorlois' aspect so that he can sleep with Igerna (the duke's wife). Here, Merlin provides herbs that conceal Uther, Merlin and a companion's true identity.

28 Gwydion appears as a magician (with an ability to transform people with his magic wand) in a number of poems and in a triad, for which see Bromwich, *Trioedd*, pp. 392–394, and *Math uab Mathonwy*, lvi-lxvii. Lambert analyses his role as poet, storyteller, magician, Math's counsellor, and Lleu's tutor in 'Magie et Pouvoir'.

well as at Pryderi's court, at the service of deceit;[29] however, the purposes are entirely different: one is aimed at reversing a curse, while the other at stealing in the pursuit of selfish interests.[30]

(8) Another example is the creation of a wife for Lleu. Because of the fate imposed by Aranrhod, Lleu will never find a wife born to men of this world. Math then proposes to Gwydion to 'hudaw gwreic idaw ynteu o'r blodeu' ('conjure a wife for him from the flowers') with 'an hut a'n lledrith' ('our magic and enchantment') and so they 'asswynaw yr un uorwyn deccaf a thelediwaf a welas dyn eiroet' (83, 'conjure up the fairest and most beautiful damsel anyone had ever seen'). They gave her the name Blodeuedd, which has been interpreted as the collective plural of *blawt*, 'flowers'.[31] It is readily noted that her name is completely motivated by the origin of her creation.

(9) After the transformation in (2), Lleu spends some time as an eagle until Gwydion finds him at the top of a tree and makes him come down by singing *englynion* calling for him,[32] which Lleu the Eagle seems to understand. When he was close, 'y trewis Gwydion a'r hutlath ynteu, yny uyd yn y rith e hunan' (90, 'Gwydion struck him with his magic wand so that he was in his own shape'), but because of the wound (referred to in [2] above) and all that he had suffered he looked miserable: he was all flesh and bone. Evidently, then, that which afflicted Lleu in eagle form remained in his human physical form: pain and corporal harm can be transferred from shape to shape.

(10) In this same tale, the brothers Gwydion and Gilfaethwy are forced to mate while in animal form (see example 16), producing offspring every year. When

29 In a previous episode, Gwydion conjures up horses and hounds, together with their apparels, with the aim of exchanging them for the otherworldly pigs that belong to Pryderi. After the exchange (but not when Gwydion is making the enchantment), the narrator further adds shields to the gifts presented by him, commenting (as a sort of almost-forgotten side note) that '[y] rei hynny a rithassei ef o'r madalch' (70, 'those he had shaped out of toadstools'). Gwydion knows that this illusion will only last for a short period of time. Whether or not Gwydion created the horses and dogs ex nihilo, both examples are very similar to other magic spells cast by this character, such as the making of the ship and leather.

30 In a previous episode, when Gwydion and Gilfaethwy seek to gain access to Pryderi's court, they achieve it 'yn rith beird' (69), 'in guise of bards'. This case, nonetheless, seems to be a disguise devoid of magic. Note, lastly, that although Gwydion performs magic guided by selfish goals, sometimes even with catastrophic results, magic is still not presented as evil or demonic.

31 *Math uab Mathonwy*, p. lxxxvi; *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 283.

32 Each *englyn* (pl. *englynion*) is of the four-line type, and the three that Gwydion sings form the poem.

they come back to Math's court, he transforms the babies using his magic wand into boys, which are later given names. The three boys born from the act of procreation of the two brothers, Hyddwn, Bleiddwn, and Hychddwn, are always portrayed positively and retain in their names their zoomorphic association.[33]

This type of transformation also includes one that is imposed as vengeance:

(11) In retaliation for the deception of Gwawl son of Clud in the *First Branch*, in the *Third Branch* one of his friends, Llwyd son of Cil Coed, casts a spell over the land of Dyfed making every living being disappear except for Pryderi, Cigfa, Rhiannon and Manawydan. After Pryderi and Rhiannon vanish inside an enchanted fortress, Cigfa and Manawydan eventually settle down and Manawydan sows the field, but when the grain is ripe and ready for harvest, the fields are devastated during the night. It is Llwyd who later explains that his retinue had asked him to 'eu rithyaw yn llygot' (64, 'transform them into mice') with the aim of destroying the grain; his own wife and the ladies of the court also join the party, asking him to 'eu rithaw' ('transform them'), so – says Llwyd – 'y ritheis inheu' (64, 'I transformed [them]'). But his wife was pregnant and she remained in that state while being a mouse, and Manawydan was able to catch her, using her to force Llwyd into removing the spell over the land and releasing Pryderi and Rhiannon. Once this is done, Manawydan released the female mouse and 'y trewis ynteu hi a hutlath, ac y datrithwys hi yn wreigyang deccaf a welsei neb' (65, 'he [Llwyd] struck her with the magic wand and restored her to her shape of young lady, the fairest anyone had seen'). Again, as in example (9), a disposition or situation is transferred from one shape to the new one.

In addition, shapeshifting can occur as punishment,[34] which can be divine, as in the following cases:

(12) In the tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, the giant Ysbaddaden asks Culhwch to obtain a long list of *anoethau*, 'marvels' or 'difficult tasks', in order to marry his daughter. Among the animals he needs are Nyniaw (Nynnio) and Peibiaw (Peibio), who 'rithwys Duw yn ychen am eu pechawd' (ll. 599–600, 'God

33 The names of the boys preserve their early animal character: 'hydd' ('stag'), 'bleidd' ('wolf'), 'hych' (plural of 'hwch', 'pig'), irrespectively of the meaning of the second element of the name (for which see *Pedeir Keinc*, pp. 268–269, n. 23, and Millersdaughter, 'The Geopolitics', p. 301, n. 82).

34 Transformation as punishment is also a traditional motif (D661) present in many other literatures; the motif-index, however, does not list the examples discussed here (Thompson, *Motif-Index*). See also Welsh, 'The Traditional Narrative Motifs'.

transformed into oxen because of their sin'). Both characters are historical figures, sons of Erb, a king of Erging (Archenfield) in the sixth century.[35]

(13) Another task that Arthur and his men must accomplish to obtain the hand of Olwen for Culhwch involves Rhymhi the beach and her puppies, Gwyddrud and Gwydden Astrus. When they depart in their search, Arthur enquires into which shape ('rith') she is in, and finds out that she is a she-wolf, and has been roaming around killing cattle and hiding in a cave. At the end of this episode, 'eu datrithaw o Duw y Arthur yn eu rith e hunein' (l. 940, 'God restored their own shape for Arthur'). Arthur's question seems to suggest that they were condemned to wander in different shapes.

(14) During the hunt of the Twrch Trwyth in this same tale, Arthur tells his men that this boar '[b]renhin uu, ac am y bechawt y rithwys Duw ef yn hwch' (ll. 1075–1076, 'was a king, and because of his sin God transformed him into a boar'). The piglets share the same fate, as it can be seen in the conversation between Grugyn and Gwrhyr in example (4) quoted above. It is interesting to note with regard to this transformation, that Michel Pastoureau posits that one of the causes that contributed to the devaluation of the boar in favour of the stag was the infernal symbology associated with the former in the writings of numerous Christian authors in which the boar is depicted as an impure beast of diabolical ferocity, an enemy of all that is good, the image of the sinner, and of man rebelled against God.[36] Indeed, the Twrch Trwyth has clear negative connotations as 'the boar of destruction' (given the desolation of the island after his rampage) and Arthur's confrontation with him can be seen to embody the fight between good and evil. Lastly, it should be noted that the name of this character is also related to his zoomorphic appearance: 'twrch' means 'boar', while 'trwyth', 'trwyd' is cognate with the Irish 'tríath', which is glossed as 'king', 'sea' and 'boar' in an Irish glossary.[37] These meanings, which may have inspired the story in *Culhwch*,[38] stress the connection between the name and the shapeshifting narrative: a king transformed into a boar that was last seen heading to the sea.

Punitive transformations can also be caused by humans; instances of this type of shapeshifting are found in the *Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*.

35 For a complete discussion of Nynnio and Peibio see Bromwich and Evans, *Culhwch*, p. 130, n. 599; Bartrum, *A Welsh Classical Dictionary*, p. 583 and pp. 611–612 respectively.

36 'Chasser le sanglier', pp. 81–82.

37 Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, p. 43; see also Bromwich and Evans, *Culhwch*, pp. xiii-lxxii.

38 Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence*, p. 43, citing Russell.

(15) Blodeuedd's treason, adultery and attempted murder of Lleu trigger Gwydion's punishment, who spares her life by condemning her to a worse fate. According to him: he transforms her 'yn rith ederyn' (91, 'into the shape of a bird'), and because of the humiliation she caused Lleu, Gwydion tells her that she will be hated and abused by other birds, hiding in the night and she will have to endure the disposition of the owl. He wants her to suffer as Lleu suffered while in animal form. But – Gwydion ends – 'na chollych dy enw, namyn dy alw uyth yn Blodeuwed' (91, 'you will not lose your name but will always be called Blodeuwedd'),[39] that is, literally, 'flower-appearance.' Yet the narrator closes the episode by providing a different interpretation: 'Sef yw Blodeuwed, tylluan o'r ieith yr awr honn. Ac o achaws hynny y mae digassawc yr adar y'r tylluan: ac ef a elwir etwa y dylluan yn Blodeuwedd' (91, 'Blodeuwedd is owl in today's language. And because of that the owl is hated by birds. And until today the owl is called Blodeuwedd'). Translators have noted the change in her name at this point,[40] and critics[41] have placed this element into the wider context of loss of name and identity during transformation (which will be discussed below), but it should be stressed, as Hughes alerts, that the employment of *Blodeuedd* before the transformation and *Blodeuwedd* after it is not consistent in the manuscripts.[42] Moreover, Gwydion himself sentences her to keep her name, most likely as a reminder of her offences. By adding a letter, the changed name of Blodeu(w)edd links her past and present and underlines the development of the self and changes in appearance caused by the imposed shapeshifting.[43]

Blodeu(w)edd's punitive transformation by Gwydion is certainly fit: 'it is part of the poetic justice of her punishment that he also "undoes" her and changes her into another form',[44] this time permanently. Stories that seek to explain the origin, name, behaviour or particular attitudes of animals or individuals are very common, and this narrative represents an actualization of that story. In addition, as Pfannenschmidt affirms, '[t]hese connections between the name for the treacherous wife and the owl are another example

39 Keefer calls attention to '[t]he authority of verbalization over enactment, the word over the ritual (…) as an alternative means of power' since Gwydion uses only his words (and not a magic wand) to effect Blodeuedd's transformation ('The lost tale of Dylan', p. 82).

40 *Math uab Mathonwy*, p. lxxxvii, n. 87.

41 See Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects'.

42 *Math uab Mathonwy*, p. lxxxvii.

43 Cf. Sheehan, for whom 'this adulteress's transformation is rendered permanent through alteration of her name' ('Matrilineal Subjects', p. 334). Although Sheehan recognises Gwydion's sentence, she nevertheless considers that it serves to reinforce the loss of name as a specific trait of the metamorphoses narrated in this tale, instead of a challenge to that idea, as I argue here.

44 Pfannenschmidt, '"From the shame you have done"', p. 260.

of the tendency to associate the natural characteristics of an animal with punishment for human behavior'.[45] All in all, Blodeu(w)edd's punitive transformation into an owl is the closest analogue to Ovid's aetiological stories.[46]

(16) Lastly, another episode in this tale involves a series of very particular punitive transformations. Math, king of Gwynedd, can only live in times of peace if his feet are placed on the lap of a virgin. One of his nephews, Gilfaethwy, desires the maiden, so his brother Gwydion contrives a war with Pryderi of Dyfed, which forces Math to depart and allows Gilfaethwy to rape the maiden. As punishment for their treason, Math transforms them with his magic wand into pairs of animals of opposite sex (stag/doe, wild boar/sow, wolf/she-wolf) and makes them stay in that shape for a year, repeating the process three times. The first shapeshifting is narrated as follows 'Ac yna y kymerth e hutlath, ac y trewis Giluathwy yny uyd daran ewic; ac achub y llall a wnaeth yn gyflym, kyt mynhei dianc nys gallei, a'y taraw a'r un hutlath yny uyd yn garw' (75, 'Then he took his magic wand and transformed Gilfaethwy so that he became a fair-sized doe, and set upon the other quickly [although he tried to escape, he could not] and struck him with the same magic wand so that he became a stag').

Math then adds: 'Canys ywch yn rwymedigaeth, mi a wnaf ywch gerdet y gyt, a'ch bot yn gymaredic, ac yn un anyan a'r gwyduilot yd ywch yn eu rith, ac yn yr amser y bo etiued udunt wy, y uot ywchwitheu' (75, 'Since you are allied, I will make you live together and be coupled, and take the same natural disposition as the wild animals in whose shape you are, and when they have offspring, so will you').[47] After each year, both animals return with their offspring, which are transformed into boys by Math (see example 10). Finally, Math forgives his nephews, having been punished enough, and after a prefatory *englyn* (that functions as magic words accompanying the gesture) 'yn y taraw wynteu yll deu a'r hutlath yny uydant yn eu cnawt eu hun' (76, 'strikes them both with his magic wand so that they returned to their own flesh').[48]

Two more elements stand out from this episode. Firstly, the pronouns that are employed by Math during the verbal enchantment, the 'wy' ('they') of the wild animals is opposed to the 'ywch' ('you') of the two brothers, seemingly

45 *ibid.*, pp. 261–262.

46 Andrea Schutz draws a parallel with Nyctimene, a woman transformed into an owl as punishment for incest in Book 2 (cited by Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects', p. 335).

47 The process is repeated in identical terms each time (75, 76).

48 The *englyn* (in this case, a three-verse composition) emphasises Gilfaethwy's treason (calling him 'enwir', 'wicked', 76, 'false') by contrasting him to the boys' honesty ('kywir', 76) (Sheehan, 'Matrilineal Subjects', p. 332).

serve to separate responsibilities and control over bodies: that which the animals do, you will suffer. Secondly, when Math changes them back into their original form, they return to 'eu cnawt eu hun' ('their own flesh'), suggesting that they (or perhaps a part of their selves?) had been inside a corporeal form that is *other*, not theirs.[49] This seems to reinforce the idea that something of the order of the self is preserved during transformation.[50]

This last example, which represents the longest cycle of transformations in the corpus, is the more complex and has attracted the attention of critics mainly because the metamorphoses are part of a wider network of transgressions of gender roles, moral codes, familial ties, and obligations.[51] Despite its peculiarities, this example expresses concerns and themes that allow us to gain insight into all of the examples discussed above. Roberta Valente has argued that both Gwydion and his sister Aranrhod 'evade the gender roles which convention demands of them' and 'attempt to cross borders of behavior to which they should have no access'.[52] Therefore, Math's punishment shows the negative results of favouring individual desire over proper conventional behaviour and compensation. For her part, Sheehan has stressed that 'names function to secure both body and identity' and that 'metamorphosis in the *Mabinogi* is distinct from metamorphosis in learned, mainstream medieval culture: it involves losing one's name and identity when one finds oneself in a different *rith* (shape), a different *cnawt* (flesh), a body not one's own'.[53] While

49 Likewise Sheehan, for whom the tale 'keeps distinct original and transformed bodies and identities' ('Matrilineal Subjects', p. 332).

50 It also recalls Gerald of Wales's history of werewolves in *Topographia Hibernica*, v, 106. Here, Gerald recounts the story of a couple from Ossory who was cursed by a saint to live in the shape of wolves for seven years, during which time their human form remained under the wolf's skin. See discussion in Carey ('Werewolves', pp. 48–50) and Bynum (*Metamorphosis*, pp. 77–111). Carey also noted the relation between the brother's punishment and this story told by Gerald in two ways: 'the idea of animal transformation (including transformation into wolves), as a punishment, and the imposition of that punishment on a couple who unite with one another while in wolf form' (p. 62). It could be added that the time constraint of one year for each transformation is another connective element, probably related to the process of mating and delivering of offspring, as well as the (apparent) unthreatening nature of the creatures.

51 Carey makes a particular claim regarding this: 'we have the remnant, much changed but in many respects remarkably intact, of a myth describing the end of a paradisal state of being, and the emergence of the conditions of morality' ('A British Myth', p. 35). Thus the series of transformations and births that accompany it mediate between the opening, which recounts the fall of man via Goewin's rape, and the rest of the tale, the maturity of the hero (Lleu) that will guide humanity. Carey also offers Irish parallels of the metamorphoses, which are usually linked to floods (pp. 33–35).

52 'Gwydion', p. 331. See also Winward ('Some aspects of the women of *The four branches*') for a characterisation of Aranrhod and a discussion of her 'male' qualities and attitudes (pp. 88–89), and her refusal to accept maternal responsibilities (p. 100).

53 'Matrilineal Subjects', p. 333, p. 335.

it is remarkable, as Sheehan argues, that in the *Fourth Branch*, as well as in the *First*, the text refuses to call a man by his name when he is in a different shape or in another body or appearance (the case of Pwyll, the brothers, and Lleu), and that it is only after regaining their initial form that the narrator employs again their proper name (in the case of Lleu, it is his name, besides Gwydion's magic, which enables him to recover his human form), the cases of Blodeu(w)edd and Dylan pose a challenge to this interpretation since both retain their names with a slight but telling variation or expansion. On top of this, we found great variability in this respect throughout the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (and, we might add, in the rest of the corpus).

On the contrary, I am much more inclined here to see an inherent ambiguity in the status of the brothers, as Sheehan argues in another part of her study:

> As animals, the brothers experience desire unmediated by human subjectivity; otherwise they would recoil from the incestuous act and Math's sentence would not be fulfilled. At the same time, however, they must necessarily have the ability to understand and obey Math's command to return to his court at Caer Dathyl when a year has elapsed.[54]

At this point and during the three consecutive years, the brothers experience the 'coexistence of a human reason and an animal body',[55] a double nature that separates inner self from appearance.

Thus the transformations so prominently featured in these Welsh tales mostly entail instances that support the idea that characteristics of the first condition are preserved, be they animal (the persistence of the zoomorphic association through the name of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's sons), vegetal (the name of Blodeu[w]edd), or human.[56] Characters retain their human faculties or, at least, traces of humanity in their new animal shape. As Bynum argues, medieval authors insist on the importance of identities and assert, even when destabilizing them, a certain degree of survival of self and identity.[57]

Gwrhyr's behaviour, when he shapeshifts into a bird to talk to the wild boars ravaging Britain and converses with them in presumably the language of animals, is not motivated by the natural disposition of his new form but by very human concerns. In the case of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy, there is

54 *ibid.*, p. 330.

55 Harf-Lancner, 'La métamorphose', p. 220 (my translation).

56 The cases that do not allow for this interpretation do not offer counterarguments either; they simply do not allow us to reach any conclusion on the matter. Nyniaw, Peibiaw, Rhymhi and her pups are cases in point.

57 *Metamorphosis*, p. 32.

no total annihilation of self even when gender identity is changed. Their punishment for rape is, as Valente indicates, castration; it is rather symbolic than realistic in its representation of the laws, although it should be noted that in one of the law codes castration is prescribed for a man charged with rape if he is unable to compensate accordingly and the woman lacks family protection.[58] The punishment fits their crime: 'As the brothers raped Goewin, so Math rapes them, forcing them to perform sexual intercourse with one another';[59] similarly, Blodeu(w)edd's punishment is in accordance with her crime, which, although it does not involve sexual transgression, is caused by it. In fact, Gwydion later performs the same role as Math in his punishment of Blodeu(w)edd.[60] Further, the punishment stresses the severity with which serious alterations of the social order should be addressed, such as disloyalty, insult, and transgression of family ties and obligations. For Davies, Math's punishment 'inflicts liminality' upon the brothers: 'They are thus not only humiliated (...) but are also marginalized as they live out this liminal existence as *men yet not men, animals yet not animals*'.[61]

These tales thus highlight the fluidity and instability of the boundaries between the animal and the human worlds and the 'apparent ease of interchange between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic perceptions: there was no rigid barrier in the Celtic mind between the human and the animal form'.[62] In addition, metamorphoses occur within a concept of the marvellous that is unmotivated and unexplained, Fulton's 'magical naturalism', with its double character in Celtic literatures: at the same time friendly and threatening, good and evil.[63] Punitive metamorphoses destabilize (but do not destroy) not only individual identity but also, and more importantly, integration into a family and thus the network of dependency ties and familial responsibilities and obligations (the social being). In this way the

58 'Gwydion', p. 337.

59 Millersdaughter, 'The Geopolitics', p. 296.

60 What Millersdaughter calls repetition in difference (*ibid.*, p. 311).

61 'Venerable Relics?', p. 173, my emphasis. Millersdaughter sees the phase of punishment (shapeshiftings) as a *rite de passage* that allows Gwydion to re-enter the community as a political subject and take up his social role as Math's heir ('The Geopolitics', pp. 298–302). For the author, 'incest-sodomy-bestiality is a threefold, corrective penalty that *re-establishes* geopolitical order' (*ibid.*, 292, emphasis in original). The author draws on queer theory, post-colonialism and feminist approach to sustain her reading. Valente, for her part, stresses Gwydion's atypical socialisation in his usurpation of the female fertility when he creates new life during his time in animal form and in the conjuration (with Math) of Blodeu(w)edd ('Gwydion').

62 Green, *Animals*, p. 195.

63 Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, pp. 126–127.

tales portray and problematise all the codes that should be obeyed to keep social order, and the ways to repay violation of social norms.[64]

Lastly, all of these transformations have important narrative functions as motivation of the action, making the narrative move forward, marking a step in the development of a character, or contributing to the larger arch of the story. Surprise or wonder at the transformation is completely absent from these narratives (both from narrators and characters), which fully and seamlessly integrate episodes of shapeshifting into the action.

Punitive transformations also appear in the medieval Welsh hagiographic discourse. Although the examples are rather scarce, as we shall see, they are nonetheless particularly striking and similar to those discussed above, and seem to be circumscribed to Irish and Welsh lives of saints. We turn now to these examples, hoping to cast light on the cases of metamorphoses presented here.

Mutation and transformation in Welsh hagiographic discourse

The corpus to be analysed in this section is composed of the lives of Welsh saints written in Latin during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries;[65] the exploration will be expanded to another rich source about traditions of saints: fourteenth-century vernacular poems, known as *cywyddau*. In the five instances found, transformations are divine punishments imposed through the mediation of the saint. They are not cyclical as the previous cases: they are never reversed. Transformations go from human to animal or inanimate object, or from animal to inanimate object. There is a special case in which a saint reverses a metamorphosis, returning a man to his original human form; it is connected to example 13, and will be treated last.

64 As Davies points out, the tales discuss 'the nature of insult and compensation, friendship, dishonour and vengeance. Throughout we are aware of the author's emphasis on a moral code of conduct – underneath the magic and enchantment there is a message of lasting significance' (*The Four Branches*, p. 65).

65 For discussions of the Latin lives of Welsh saints see Henken (*Traditions*, *The Welsh Saints*), Evans ('Y Bucheddau', esp. 259 and ff.). With regard to the Welsh church, see Davies, *The Age of Conquest*, pp. 172–210. The examples from this section are drawn from Henken's Index of Saints' Traditions (*Traditions*, pp. 321–368). All quotations from the Latin lives are taken from Wade-Evans (*Vitae sanctorum*), and references are to sections and page numbers. I have not included examples from beyond the fourteenth century (such as St David's transformation of men into wolves attested in Ieuan ap Rhydderch's *cywydd* see Henken, *Traditions*, p. 340) mainly because of space constraints. For the motif index of weapons and punishments see Henken (*The Welsh Saints*, pp. 144–146 and pp. 38–44).

(17) *Life of St. Illtud* § 23 (226): 'De duobus latronibus in duos lapides transformatis' ('Of two robbers transformed into two stones'). Two thieves try to steal a herd of swine that belongs to St. Illtud during two consecutive nights, but they get lost both times. The narrator thus says that God, in his punishment:

> *mutauit* eorum corpora in duos lapides, spiritus autem ueluti meruerant permisit adire penas infernales. Hoc memorabile *miraculum* credibile est a posteris, hactenus enim apparet locus hare, que uocatur sub Iltuti nomine. Nunc usque etiam uidentur lapides immibiles sub duorum latronum appellatione uocati. In duros lapides *mutari* crede latrones, nequitie testes meruerunt sic remanentes. Pro grege porcorum *sunt* corpora *uersa* duorum. Sub niue sub pluuia sub grandine sunt sine uita
>
> [*changed* their bodies into two stones, and let their spirits, as they had deserved, go to infernal torments. This memorable *miracle* is credited by posterity, for even till now there is seen the place of the sty, which is called by the name 'Two Robbers'. Believe thou the robbers were *changed* into hard stones, deservedly remaining so, a witness to their iniquity. On account of the herd of swine the bodies of the two *were changed*; lifeless they continue beneath snow, beneath rain, beneath hail (emphasis added)]

Apart from vocabulary, which will be discussed below, there are a few things that should be noted. Firstly, divine intervention happens without the presence of the saint: Illtud does not perform any kind of verbal curse or act (he is actually not even present in the scene). Secondly, the miracle of transformation functions as *exemplum*: it is a testimony of bad behaviour with a clear moral message. Thirdly, both body and soul are punished, with the former seemingly continuing to be tormented in its new stone-form, as the last sentence strongly suggests: under the snow, under the rain, under the hail they (the robbers) are (still) without life. This detachment of body and spirit while something of the order of the self is retained is reminiscent of Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's case analysed above. Lastly, the episode runs as an onomastic tale, linking the past to the present and asserting the extant vigour of God's example (and of the punishment of the robbers, who are still being tormented).

(18) *Life of St. Cadog* § 30 (92): 'De lupis in lapidibus transformatis' ('Of wolves transformed into stones'). In this episode, the 'non minus mirandum miraculum pro fidelis clientis sui Cadoci meritis diuina miseratio patrare dignatur' ('miracle no less wonderful [that] divine compassion deigns to perform on

account of the merits of his faithful servant, Cadog') involves the threat to the saint's sheep in present-day Flat Holm (Bristol Channel) by wolves coming from England. They kill several sheep and try to reach Wales. But when they were halfway there 'diuino iuditio in lapides *transformati sunt*, qui Brittannico sermone Cunbleid uocantur, is est, lupina saxa, eo quod Dei famulum irritassent eiusque oues laniassent' ('by divine judgement they *were transformed* into stones, which are called in the British speech Cunbleid, that is, wolf-like stones, because the wolves had provoked the servant of God and torn his sheep').

We find here again an onomastic tale that signifies at different levels: on the one hand, a symbolic meaning related to the wolves from England as English warriors on their way to Wales; on the other hand, an exemplary meaning of divine punishment. As before, the saint is not present during the episode, but God protects his sheep because of his proven merits; divine judgment is thus independent. Finally, it is also worth noting God's vindictive character, which reappears in other examples.

(19) *Life of St. Cadog* § 22 (68–72): 'De altercatione inter sanctum Cadocum et regem Arthurum pro cuiusdam reconciliatone' ('Of the dispute between saint Cadog and king Arthur respecting the reinstatement of a certain person'). Cadog provides asylum to a king who had killed three of Arthur's warriors. When the latter finds out about this, he heads towards there but he does not dare to face the saint directly. Cadog then proposes to leave judgement in the hands of judges and nobles of the country. They, in turn, decide that Arthur should be compensated with a hundred cows. The king accepts but provocatively asks for multi-coloured cows, red in the fore and white in the hind part. Cadog prays and, by divine power, the cows are changed ('mutata') according to Arthur's wishes. Everyone rejoices at this miracle ('hoc miraculo'). Arthur, Cai, and Bedwyr gather the cattle but as soon as they are about to take them, the cows, in presence of all the men, 'diuino nutu in filicis fascibus transfigurate sunt' ('[were] transfigured by the divine will into bundles of fern'). Seeing this 'prodigium' ('prodigy', translated by Wade-Evans as 'wonder'), Arthur asks for forgiveness, which is granted to him by Cadog.

In this example, the saint is present and God's miracles are triggered by his prayers. God is, again, quite vindictive in his final rebuke of Arthur. This episode is part of a larger picture of saintly struggles against secular rulers, and Cadog is able to forgive and show mercy to a repentant (Arthur).

(20) *Cywydd* to St. Brigid by Iorwerth Fynglwyd: Transformation of the mayor of London into a horse. In this composition, the poet invoked St. Brigid by recalling that 'a'th ŵyl osodes Iesu, / noswyl Fair, uwch no Sul fu.

/ Gwnaethost uddunt yn Llundain / y maer yn farch, morwyn fain.' ('And your feast Jesus set, / eve of Mary's feast, higher than Sunday. / You made for them in London / the mayor into a horse, slender maiden').[66] This is a rather enigmatic reference given that there are no other sources related to this episode in St. Brigid's life. Apart from the undoubted symbolic value of the punishment, it represents a clear display of the saint's power extending beyond Wales.[67]

(21) *Cywydd* to Dewi (St. David). In this poem, a story about how David reversed a transformation inflicted by God is recounted as follows:

> Ef a *rithawdd*, dygngawd ddig, / Ddeuflaidd anian ddieflig / Deuwr hen oedd o dir hud, / Gwydre astrus ac Odrud, / Am wneuthur drud antur hynt, / Ryw bechod a rybuchynt; / A'y mam, baham y bai hi, / Yn fleddaist, oerfel iddi; / A dewi goeth a'u dug wynt / O'u hir boen ac o'u herwbwynt[68]
>
> [[God] transformed, wrathful severe anger, [into] two wolves of evil nature two old men who were from a magic land, Gwydre the skilful and Odrud, for doing an unwise adventure, some sin they desired, and their mother (why would she?) into a she-wolf, a curse upon her. And pure David brought them out of their long suffering and proscription]

Firstly, wolves associated with proscription point to the symbolic value of warriors as wolves and social sanctions on youthful excesses, as McCone has studied with respect to Irish werewolves.[69] More importantly, a similar version of this story is found in the tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, example 13. There, Gwyddrud and Gwydden Astrus are Rhymhi's pups, and they have all been turned into wolves. It is Arthur who mediates between them and God, achieving their reversal into human form. In comparison, this poem recovers a tradition that attributes this reversion to David, who is shown to be magnanimous (as many other saints that reverse God's punishment).

66 Mehan, *The Search*, pp. 35–36.

67 *ibid.*, p. 36.

68 Quoted in Henken, *Traditions*, p. 64. My translation varies slightly, although it is radically different in that for Henken it is David who turns the two old men into wolves, not God. The story of Gwyddrud and Gwydden Astrus and the marked contrast between the angry punisher and the magnanimous David (named in the poem at the point of the reversal of wolves into men) suggest this reading.

69 'Werewolves'.

Henken points out that, although this is the only reference to this story, it was probably sufficiently familiar to the audience.[70]

The vocabulary linked to the metamorphoses employed in all these examples is quite consistent.[71] The word 'miraculum', 'miracle', appears in all the Latin lives, complemented by 'memorabile' ('memorable', 17), 'mirandum' ('that which is to be wondered or marvelled at', 18); 19 adds 'prodigium' ('prodigy'). The *miraculum* signifies the presence of God through the mediation of the saints, at which witnesses are surprised and wondered.[72] It is truly 'supernatural', contrary to the *mirabilia* and natural magic encountered in vernacular prose texts.

The inclusion of miraculous metamorphoses as punitive transformations attributed to the Welsh saints may be related to the particular character of Welsh hagiographic discourse. The prose lives are heavily indebted to Latin hagiographic tradition, but they also follow vernacular narrative models, whose themes and motives reveal, as Henken has shown, a biographic pattern similar to that of secular heroes. For this author, 'the Welsh saints have less in common with the martyred saints of Europe than with mythological and secular heroes of their own land',[73] and 'the saints took on all the attributes of kingship and were perceived as guardians of the land'.[74] They are notable for their curses and the violence in their lives; the miracles they perform manifest their access to God and are displays of power rather than of kindness or magnanimity. At the same time, they share with other hagiographic traditions the characteristic that punishment results from aggression towards property or people under the protection of the saint (cattle theft or usurpation of land); punishment by a display of saintly power thus dissuades eventual future aggressors.[75]

Nonetheless, punitive transformations through mediation of a saint seem to be unique to Irish and Welsh hagiographic discourse. Edina Bozoky, in

70 *Traditions*, p. 64.

71 The verb 'transformo, transformare', 'to change in shape, transform', appears in 17 and 18; 'muto, mutare', 'to change, alter', in 18; 'transfiguro, transfigurare', 'to change in shape, to transform, transfigure, metamorphose', in 19; 'rhithaf, rhitho', 'to shape, transform', in 21. Example 17 includes also the passive voice with the perfect passive participle of the verb 'uerto', 'uersus, -a, -um', 'to turn'. The poem to St. Brigid has the less specific form 'gwneuthur', 'to make' (into a horse). All definitions of the Latin forms are taken from the Perseus Digital Library.

72 Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders*, pp. 8–28.

73 Henken, *The Welsh Saints*, p. 12.

74 Henken, 'Welsh hagiography', p. 27. Also Davies: '[t]his assimilation of lay and ecclesiastical values and mores is a striking feature of the native church in Wales (…) [s]aints were similarly depicted as sacred heroes performing wondrous acts of spiritual valour' (*The Age of Conquest*, p. 175).

75 Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle*, pp. 276–277. I wish to thank Ariel Guiance for discussing with me several general aspects of hagiography.

her book on miracles and marvellous tales of martyrs and saints, dedicates a few pages to metamorphoses and refers to cases that pertain only to those literatures: Saint Berach (who changes the appearance of a king), Saint Patrick (who transforms a tyrant into a little fox), Saint Kevin (who transforms a man into a stag so that he can escape his enemies), and Saint Mochelloc (who changes a woman into a goat).[76] Furthermore, Wendy Davies states that '[s]aints that curse and cause destruction are characteristic of Celtic material of the early Middle Ages',[77] and she draws attention to the vindictive character of saints. Máire Johnson suggests that it is possible to see behind these episodes of punitive transformation the influence of New Testament apocrypha like the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.[78]

In Wales, the *Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelium* about the birth and childhood of Mary and the infancy of Christ was very popular, as the three independent early translations attest.[79] The Welsh text, following its source, recounts a series of curses inflicted by the infant Jesus on other boys, resulting in death, which is then reversed miraculously by him.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the influence of apocryphal texts (as well as Old Testament examples) and the fluidity between secular and religious narrative models could be the first steps to understanding the introduction of such punitive transformations and vengeance in the lives of Welsh saints. Furthermore, the motifs are deeply rooted in folklore and onomastic lore. Davies cogently argues that cursing was a response to insult and dishonour, thus a means to keep social order.[80] As it has been indicated by scholars from the field of hagiography, these texts carry out the role of classic biography as educational tool to inspire exemplary behaviour by showing models worthy of emulation and negative models of undesirable attitudes.[81]

Conclusions

The study of metamorphosis presented here confirms the centrality of shapeshifting in the literature of medieval Wales, so much so that even God, through the mediation of the saint or on behalf of him, inflicts punitive

76 *Miracle!*, p. 45.
77 'Anger and the Celtic Saint', p. 193. See also Johnson, 'Vengeance is mine'.
78 'Apocryphal sanctity', pp. 103–107.
79 Williams, 'Rhyddiaith Grefyddol', p. 364. For the text, see also Williams, 'Llyma Vabinogi'.
80 'Anger and the Celtic Saint', pp. 198–202.
81 Goodich, *Miracles and wonders*, p. 5.

transformations. My survey brought forward a total of 28 instances of metamorphosis (see appendix for chart): 5 voluntary or agentless metamorphoses (examples 1 to 5) and 23 imposed transformations, of which 7 are motivated by a particular purpose (examples 6 to 10), 1 is driven by vengeance (example 11), and 15 are punishments, 8 divine (examples 12 to 14 and 17 to 21) and 7 human (examples 16–17).

Miraculous punitive transformations present in hagiographical compositions share a number of similarities with imposed transformations embedded in the secular narratives of the *Mabinogion*. Metamorphoses are performed as punishment for insult or shame, and are aimed at compensating honour and status. Endangering the saint's cattle (cases 17 and 18) or challenging his power, and subsequently that of God, (as in 19 and perhaps 20) are equally disruptive for the community that follows them as Blodeu(w)edd's treason to her husband and Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's insult to Math and the attempt on his body by removing the virgin who serves as foot holder, without whom he apparently cannot live. They are displays of anti-social behaviour from which a moral lesson on how to respect social codes of peaceful coexistence and development can be extracted. Saints wield the same knowledge and can channel similar power to that exercised by the few characters who can perform magic in the tales: Math, Gwydion, and Llwyd. A serious transgression against sacred property, family or social order can lead to the fate of transformation into animal form. Shapeshifting is then a threat to those who have wronged, not to society at large, which punishes those responsible by enacting the transformation. Vocabulary is also consistent throughout, but an important difference is that while shapeshifting in the *Mabinogion* 'is about process, mutation, story,'[82] in hagiography it completes the story, ending the episode and leading to another, sometimes weakly related, phase in the life of the saint. By contrast, in the Middle Welsh prose tales, shapeshifted characters enter a liminal state in which they are at times forced to make decisions that can be contrasted with their consequences, allowing the audience to draw a moral learning in this way: 'disruption can be innovative and lead to regenerative possibilities'.[83]

Agentless and magical transformations in the tales of the *Mabinogion* lack a specific term such as *miraculum* (which appears in the Latin lives) but they are firmly integrated to the world of natural *mirabilia*.[84] However, shapeshifting

82 Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 30.

83 Davies, 'Venerable Relics?', p. 168.

84 See also Valade, Cordo Russo, and Raye, 'Uses of the Supernatural', who arrive to this conclusion for the Middle Welsh *Chwedyl Iarlles y Ffynnawn*.

is not a quality that anyone seems to possess. Rather, only a few characters with extraordinary abilities (Gwrhyr, Lleu, Dylan), magical skills (Menw, Gwydion, Math, Llwyd), or from the Otherworld (Arawn) can perform this type of deed and assume or inflict a change of *rhith*, 'shape'. In most of the transformations, the self is transformed but not lost. Even the thieves in the Life of St Illtud retain something, despite their stone shapes, that makes them suffer torment. None of the characters loses entirely the traits that belong to, or define, their previous disposition; they can even be reversed to their original shape. Shapeshifting may also reveal something that was already part of the self and which is linked to the name (Dylan, Blodeuedd, the Twrch Trwyth) or will expand it (Pwyll, Blodeu[w]edd). What one endures or the condition one possesses in one state is transferred to the other: as Llwyd's wife was pregnant as a woman and then as a mouse, or as Lleu became weak and his health deteriorated as an eagle and remained so when he was reversed. Interestingly, it is in the case of exchange of appearances that we find great variety and abundance of terms to refer to the external aspect that has been changed: *pryd*, *ansawdd*, *ffurf*, *rhith*, *eilyw*, all refer, with nuances, to the changeable exterior.[85] This reinforces the idea that one central issue is not the opposition between the animal and human worlds but the link between inner self and 'false' appearance, or the disclosure of true nature via a change of appearance. The fascination with shapeshifting finally expresses that the world of the *Mabinogion* is one of flux and movement.

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85 See the appended chart for the particular nuance of each term.

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About the Author

Luciana Cordo Russo completed her PhD in Literature at the University of Buenos Aires. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the IMHICIHU-CONICET in Buenos Aires. She also teaches Literary Theory and Criticism and Medieval Literature at the University of San Martín. Her current research focuses on the dissemination and translation of the legend of Charlemagne in Wales. An important contribution on this topic will appear in *Charlemagne in the Norse and Celtic Worlds*, edited by Sif Rikhardsdottir and Helen Fulton. She translated for the first time into Spanish the eleven Middle Welsh prose tales commonly known as *Mabinogion*, for which she won the Wales Literature Exchange Translation Award. She has published several articles and book chapters, as well as co-edited two books on medieval literature.

Appendix: Chart with an outline of the basic details related to each example analysed in this study

Example	Text	Character/s metamorphosed	Vocabulary	Animal/object	Type
1	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Dylan	'gauas annyan y mor', 'received the nature of the sea'	Aquatic creature	Voluntary or agentless metamorphosis
2	*First Branch of the Mabinogi*	Lleu	Rhith, 'shape'	Eagle	Voluntary or agentless metamorphosis
3	*Culhwch and Olwen*	Menw	Ymrhithaf, 'to shape himself, to transform' yn rith, 'in the shape'	Bird	Voluntary or agentless metamorphosis
4	*Culhwch and Olwen*	Gwrhyr	Rhith, 'shape'	Bird	Voluntary or agentless metamorphosis
5	*Lludd and Llefelys*	gormes	Rhith, 'shape'	Monstrous animals, dragons, piglets	Voluntary or agentless metamorphosis
6	*First Branch of the Mabinogi*	Arawn and Pwyll	Pryd, 'image'; ansawdd, 'appearance'; ffurf, 'form'; rhith, 'shape'	Exchange of appearances	Imposed transformation motivated by a particular purpose
7	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Gwydion and Lleu	Eilyw, 'appearance'; pryd, 'image'; ffurf, 'form'; rhith, 'shape'		
8	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Blodeuwedd	Hudaf, asswynaf, 'to conjure' from flowers	Human	
9	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Lleu	Rhith	Human	
10 (3 in total)	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Gwydion and Gilfaethwy's offspring	Rhith, 'shape'	Human	

Example	Text	Character/s metamorphosed	Vocabulary	Animal/object	Type
11	*Third Branch of the Mabinogi*	Llwyd's household and wife	Rhitaf, 'to shape'; datrithaf, 'to return'	Mouse / human	Imposed shape-shifting motivated by vengeance
12	*Culhwch and Olwen*	Nyniaw and Peibiaw	Rhitaf, 'to shape'	Oxen	Punitive transformation caused by God
13	*Culhwch and Olwen*	Rhymni, Gwyddrud and Gwydden Astrus	Rhith, 'shape'; datrithaf, 'to return'	Wolves	
14	*Culhwch and Olwen*	Twrch Trwyth and progeny	Rhithaf, 'to shape'	Boars	
15	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Blodeuwedd	Rhith, 'shape'	Owl	Punitive transformation caused by man
16 (6 in total)	*Fourth Branch of the Mabinogi*	Gwydion and Gilfaethwy	Rhith, 'shape'	Stag/doe; boar/sow; wolf/she-wolf	
17	*Life of St Illtud*	Thieves	Transformo, 'to change shape, transform'; muto, 'to change, alter', uersa sunt, 'were changed'	Stone	Miraculous punitive transformation caused by God through the mediation of the saint
18	*Life of St Cadog*	Wolves	Transformo, 'to change shape, transform'	Stone	
19	*Life of St Cadog*	Cows	Transfiguro, 'to change in shape, to transform, transfigure, metamorphose'	Bundle of fern	
20	*Cywydd to St Brigid*	Mayor of London	gwneuthur yn farch, 'to make into a horse'	Horse	
21	*Cywydd to St David*	Wolves	Rhithaf, 'to shape'	Human	

Index