

Article

Watch Out for the Skin Deep: Medieval Icelandic Transformations

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Abstract: Icelandic prose narratives from the 13th and 14th centuries are replete with instances of metamorphosis, humans transforming into animals, or changing shape in an indeterminate way. Sources indicate that the transformation is not merely corporeal but is also spiritual. In this paper, the Old Norse lexicon of transformation, such as the words *hamrammr*, *hamslauss*, and *hamstoli*, will be closely examined.

Keywords: shapeshifting; magic; self; mind; body

1. Metamorphosis in Medieval Iceland

The post-modern phenomenon of the self-help book (see [Dolby 2005](#)) attests to the allure of the idea of transformation to the modern human, living in a period of affluence and opportunity. In spite of being a settler state, medieval Iceland was a very different kind of society with each and every individual more or less stuck in their assigned role from birth. Nevertheless, the idea of transformation was also a compelling one in this new society, characterized not least by its massive production of narratives that are still preserved in manuscripts from 1200 to the 20th century.

Medieval Icelandic prose narratives contain various types of transformation, some of which involve a human metamorphosing into a beast whilst others seem to involve other kinds of the transgression of the normal. They reveal that the medieval Icelandic conception of transfiguration, and consequently of the mind, body, and self, is subtle and complex (see e.g., [Strömbäck 1935](#); Aðalheiður [Guðmundsdótti 2001, 2007](#); [Páez 2020](#)). It must also be remarked that magic and shapeshifting are twin concepts in medieval Icelandic texts, and are hard to separate. Though often left unmentioned, magic is ever-present in medieval shape-shifting narratives, and indeed shapeshifting lies at the heart of medieval magic. In this study, I ask whether we can identify the self in the body or the mind in medieval Icelandic sources, or is there perhaps no clear separation between the two?

2. Splitting the Self

In the *Ynglinga saga of Heimskringla*, attributed to the poet, scholar, and magnate Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), the pagan deity Óðinn is presented as an Asian sorcerer king who migrated to Northern Europe and was reinterpreted as a god, in a 13th-century case of euhemerization (cf. [Carrier 2014](#); [Piet 2023](#)). He is a voyager king and a great soldier but venerated by his men mostly due to his magic skills:

Hann var svá fagr ok gøfugligr álitum, þá er hann sat með sínum vinum, at öllum hló hugar við. En þá er hann var í her, þá sýndisk hann grimligr sínum óvinum. En þat bar til þess, at hann kunni þær íþróttir, at hann skipti litum ok líkjum á hverja lund, er hann vildi. Önnur var sú, at hann talaði svá snjallt ok slétt, at öllum, er á heyrðu, þótti þat eina satt. Mælti hann allt hendingum, svá sem nú er þat kveðit, er skáldskapr heitir. Hann ok hofgoðar hans heita ljóðasmiðir, því at sú íþrótt hófsk af þeim í Norðrlöndum. Óðinn kunni svá gera, at í orrustu urðu óvinir



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hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir, en vápn þeirra bitu eigi heldr en vendir, en hans menn fóru brynjulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skjöldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar. Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvártki eldur né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, p. 17)

Not only can his men go berserk due to his magic, but Óðinn is himself a shapeshifter who can be in two places at once:

Óðinn skipti hómum. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lönð at sínum ørendum eða annarra manna. Þat kunni hann enn at gera með orðum einum at slökkva eld ok kyrra sjá ok snúa vindum hverja leið, er hann vildi (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, p. 18).

Furthermore, Óðinn has mastered the art of sorcery:

Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttir fylgði, ok framði sjálf, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mǫnnum vit eða afl ok gefa oðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt. Óðinn vissi um allt jarðfé, hvar fólgt var, ok hann kunni þau ljóð, er upp lausk fyrir honum jorðin ok björg ok steinar ok haugarnir, ok batt hann með orðum einum þá, er fyrir bjoggu, ok gekk inn ok tók þar slíkt, er hann vildi. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, p. 19)

It is thus clearly stated that his paranormal powers lie at the root of his subsequent veneration as a deity. As well, in these short descriptions, the author of the *Ynglinga saga* illustrates the main powers of magic and transmutation.

To begin with, the author mentions countenances and colors that Óðinn could change but does not specify how this was performed, since the emphasis is on the impact of his transformation on his opponents. It is no less important that Óðinn seems to be responsible for his men going berserk, which means turning bestial, either into a dog or a wolf, with coming to possess the strength of an ox or a bear. These transformed humans are immune from fire and iron, do not wear a byrnie, and bite their shields. In fact, all the tropes of going berserk are present without clarification as to how complete the transformation is. Then Óðinn's own metamorphosis is described. He can be in two places at once, his body lies as if dead or asleep but he himself—or perhaps his mind—is an animal, fowl, fish, or reptile, and can go in a flash to distant lands. The movement across space seems to be the main purpose, whereas the bestial transformation is a means to an end. What is happening is unclear, but the next depiction seems to import that Óðinn's split self is a consequence of his magic. Óðinn's magic is called *seiðr* and scholars have debated whether this is a particular ritual or a word that means magic in its entirety (see e.g., Dillmann 2006; Tolley 2009; Raudvere 2003; Mayburd 2014). Regardless, this magic allows him both to see into the future and harm others. The magic ritual (*fjölkyngi*) connected with it is so full of *ergi* (on these two terms see Ármann Jakobsson 2008; Ármann Jakobsson 2013) that only women can normally perform it, although Óðinn himself seems to rise above gender categories (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2011b). The text also states that much of his power resides in words and magic verses that he can speak in order to do more or less what he wants.

The magic described in the three passages above is wide-ranging and its possession makes the Asian sorcerer so powerful that it seems no wonder he has been reinterpreted as a god. The splitting of the self is possibly the most important attribute, apart from his knowledge of magic spells and sorcerous rituals, that he can use to achieve control over others. There is power in transmutation, and maybe the purpose of such power comes to the fore in the final sentence: He took what he wanted. The marauder mentality of this rapacious Eastern king seems to be intertwined with his magic might. Óðinn also has the

power to harm others, and he does not shy away from using it since, as a sorcerous deity, he is above the rules guiding human behavior sometimes referred to as morality.

The extensiveness of Óðinn's magic and shapeshifting leaves the interpreter in a quandary. Transformation into a beast, the separation of mind and body, going berserk, transgressing boundaries, these all seem to be within the reach of this single sorcerer. Furthermore, even if we are told that he knows the *seiðr* ritual and certain magic words to further his will, we are not told what such a ritual entails, only that it seems to transgress gender boundaries. Óðinn's ability to transcend the limitations that fetter the rest of us leaves him strangely immune to definition. He may have been a human once, but his powers are no longer within the realm of human ability.

3. No Fixed Abode of Apparitions

The Óðinn narrative offers an explanation of the nature of shapeshifting, although the explanation is both banal in its simplicity and also more of a label than an explanation: It is all a kind of magic. In this case, Óðinn is himself the originator of this magic, whereas, in many shapeshifting narratives, it is presented as a spell or a curse. This is so in the case of Böðvarr bjarki, one of the protagonists of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, who is depicted sitting motionless in the rooms of the king while a bear is fighting fiercely in the desperate last battle of King Hrólfr kraki against the superior numbers and evil magic of the half-elvish Queen Skuld (Jónsson and Vilhjálmsson 1944, pp. 87–89). His companion, the heroic Hjalti arrives and urges Böðvarr to join the battle, which he of course does, as the bravest of all warriors. Unfortunately, however, that means that the bear has now vanished from the battle and no longer fights for King Hrólfr, who goes on to lose his life and his kingdom. The bear is thus obviously an extension of Böðvarr, possibly his mind fighting in the shape of a bear while the body is inert, which recalls Óðinn's shapeshifting method.

We are not told if the same is true of the unseen nightriding hag, whatever shape that creature takes, who attacks and eventually kills the young Gunnlaugr Þorbjarnarson in *Eyrbyggja saga* (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1935, pp. 28–29). This mysterious figure is believed to be either an extension of the elderly witch Geirríðr or her counterpart Katla, since both witches have been competing for the favors of young Gunnlaugr, a coveted student of the art of magic. The appearance of the nightrider is never mentioned, in fact, its existence is presented as a mere supposition, but it has the ability to maim Gunnlaugr in an unspecified manner when he is on his way between farmsteads on his own late at night. He has been attacked, hence there is an attacker, and later Katla admits to the attack, although she does not specify what form she took during it.

As a saga of regional conflict, the *Eyrbyggja saga* highlights the judicial proceedings following the attack and the impact they have on power in the region, casting aside the exact nature of the paranormal in this scene (cf. Kanerva 2011). Naming is sometimes regarded as an explanation of unknown phenomena, both in the Middle Ages and the 21st century. The taxonomy of the paranormal tends to be vague and not something modern scholars can rely on. Medieval authors did not think like modern lexicographers and were not always interested in using one term, and always in the same sense. One such term is *fylgja*, a being that sometimes takes a human form, other times an animal shape (see e.g., Stankovitsová 2020). Could the “kveldriða” or “marlíðandi” mentioned in this *Eyrbyggja saga* episode be a being that other medieval historians would refer to with the term *fylgja*? It certainly seems to come from a split-self such as the one mentioned in the Óðinn narrative of the *Ynglinga saga* and the one implicated in the *Hrólfs saga kraka*. It is not mentioned whether this extension of the individual is in animal form or not.

The *fylgjur* may also appear to innocent sleepers, such as Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*, and invade their dreams, like the well-known old hag of Newfoundland, a sleep paralysis demon or nightmare, later did (see e.g., Hufford 1982). In *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr dreams of animals that represent the attackers who are coming after him in the immediate future, which may possibly be “fylgjur” (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1954, pp. 155, 170; cf. Crocker 2015). Sometimes men and women may also come to people in their dreams to

warn them, curse them, or prophesy about their futures (see e.g., Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934, pp. 84, 223). These soporous visitors tend not to be described in detail, mostly they are referred to as “maðr” or “kona” (cf. Crocker 2019). Some are big, but some seem to be average in size. It is never explained where they come from, but in light of *Heimskringla*’s depiction of Óðinn’s powers, one might suspect sorcery. Possibly these paranormal dream folk have their own magic powers that enable them to penetrate the sleep of others, but it is equally possible that they are messengers from powerful sorcerers who do possess such powers. Ordinary humans who find their dreams invaded by hostile forces cannot understand the origins of the visitation.

One may also speculate about the physicality of such apparitions. They appear to the dreamer in physical form, but dreams are essentially hazy and nebulous; possibly the dream invaders are nothing but a mental manifestation of a mighty sorcerer who uses their skill to enter the minds of various victims. This leads to another question, that of the corporality of the self, or *hamr* (cf. Eriksen et al. 2020). How real are the apparitions of the troubled mind?

4. Where Is My Mind?

The usage of the term *hamr* in the description of Óðinn’s split selfhood makes the word of particular interest. It is often glossed as ‘the skin’, but the magical transformation of the deity seems to reach beyond the skin. The same would seem to be true of its many compounds found in medieval Icelandic texts: *hamrammur*, *hamremi*, *hamskipta*, *hamslauss*, *hamstola*, *hamstoli*, and *hamstolinn* (on these words, see, e.g., Strömbäck 1935; Novotná, forthcoming). They would seem to indicate that the “hamr” is a volatile entity that can be lost or stolen or transformed. This is well illustrated in a short anecdote in the kings’ saga *Morkinskinna* (Ch. 24) where the son of a noblewoman has a strange mental affliction: “hann missti minnis sem hann væri hamstoli” (Jakobsson and Guðjónsson 2011, p. 147). The mother seeks the advice of both kings of Norway at the time (c. 1046), the benevolent King Magnús and the wise King Haraldr. In the end, it is King Haraldr who comes up with the following diagnosis of the boy’s ailment:

Hann er draumstoli, en þat hlýðir öngum manni, ok er ekki øðli til þess at menn dreymi ekki ok at þat megi hlýða. Gakk nú þar til er Magnús konungr hefir tekít laugar ok lát sveininn súpa af handlauginni. Síðan láttu hann syngja, ok þó at hofga slái á hann eða geispa þá láttu hann eigi ná at sofna; en eptir þat far þú með hann þangat er konungr hefir hvílt ok lát sveininn þar sofna, ok meiri ván at honum birtisk draumr.

The diagnosis is that the boy’s memory loss is secondary, and the real issue is that he is unable to dream. The miraculous cure is to drink water that has been blessed by the presence of King Magnús and then to sleep where the king has slept, possibly so that some of the king’s good fortune may rub off on the second sleeper. The cure works and the boy now dreams that both kings come to him and urge him to be good (King Magnús) and clever (King Haraldr). Thus, the boy’s ability to dream is restored by the royal duo.

The boy wakes up laughing and remembers his dream, which indicates that he is cured. But what exactly is it to be “draumstoli” or “hamstoli”? Who has stolen his dreams, and what is the “hamr” that has been stolen? It certainly does not seem to indicate only skin in this episode. Highlighting the importance of dreams in the Middle Ages, their loss seems to result in a loss of the “hamr” and this term seems to convey some essence closer to what we traditionally call mind rather than skin, that is, human cognition. The loss of memory turns out to be a part of a loss of self that results from the absence of dreams, and it is countered by the two kings working together and reinstating the ability to dream. Is this a kind of magic? Who else but a magician can steal people’s dreams and consequently their memories or their “hamr”, a part of humans that make them an individual?

The narrative is not concerned enough with the victim of the dream-stealing sorcerer to mention his name, or explain why he in particular became its victim. The threat of dream-stealing is left unexplained. Instead, the episode is mainly concerned with the

fruitful collaboration of two kings who each exemplifies a pivotal attribute of a monarch, goodness, and wisdom. It is a part of a larger narrative within *Morkinskinna* of the dual kingship of 1046–1047 that seems on the whole to argue that it leads to trouble when there are two kings in one country, even though both are highly competent in their own way (see, e.g., Jakobsson 2014). On the other hand, the narrative demonstrates that the existence of two kings may not always be disruptive. Cooperation between them is also possible and may be productive when it comes to issues that might otherwise be beyond them, such as countering the spells of powerful sorcerers.

The ailment of the youth is not explained any further. Occurrences of illness are rarely explained in the modern sense in medieval texts. Possibly the affliction is common enough not to merit much of an explanation. People do fall ill, they acquire mysterious interior diseases, and some lose their minds. In this short anecdote, the cure is more important than the disease, the doctors, the two collaborating kings who help the boy regain his mind, more important still (see Crocker and Jakobsson 2021). For our purposes, what is most significant is that the “hamr” is far from being only the skin of the human. On the contrary, it seems in this story to denote the cerebral part of the human or even the divine self at a person’s core.

5. Lupine Magnates

The mental affliction caused by a stolen “hamr” indicates that when warriors are said to be “hamrammr” or “hamslaus” or when they “hamast” in a battle, the shape-shifting that occurs is not only skin deep. Berserk is another term used to refer to some of the people who can shapeshift (Loth 1962, p. 132). It is stated in one saga that it is troll-like to “hamast” (Halldórsson 1959, p. 371), the transformation often linked to the excessive anger that results in people losing their minds. This is the case in the 16th-century version of *Osvalds saga* in the compendium *Reykjahólabók* where king Gaudon is close to losing his mind: “bathnade honvm ecki at helldr fyrer brioste. nema nv læ honvm vid nalega at hamzatt og ganga af vithinv” (Loth 1969, p. 85). In the same way as the previous example, this indicates that it is the loss of the human sense that brings about the real metamorphosis.

Two of the most well-known cases of shapeshifting during a battle are from the *Egils saga*. The former is when Kveld-Úlfr and his followers metamorphose in a sea battle with royal retainers along the Norwegian coast: “svá er sagt, at þá hamaðisk hann, ok fleiri váru þeir forunautar hans, er þá hōmuðusk” (Sigurður Nordal 1933, p. 69). What happens to Kveld-Úlfr and his entourage is uncertain. We are told that they shapeshift but not how, and it evidently results in them growing stronger in battle and killing everything in their way. Later in the saga, Kveld-Úlfr’s son Skalla-Grímr seems to lose his senses in wrath when his teenage son Egill and his friend Þórðr appear to be getting the better of him during a somewhat undefined violent game, and he is accused by his servant Brák of having “hamask” at his own son (Sigurður Nordal 1933, p. 101). Brák is said to have magic powers herself and, after the recent killing of Þórðr, she is, in essence, Egill’s only remaining friend. Her consideration of his lonely son does not stop Skalla-Grímr from chasing after her and killing her with a gigantic boulder before presumably becoming normal again.

The superhuman nature of father and son’s behavior is evident, but what does it actually consist of? Is the lupine Kveld-Úlfr still in human form when he “hamask” or has he actually taken the shape of the wolf? What happened to him at night when he, according to the beginning of the story, becomes so “stygggr” that he cannot be addressed and is thus believed to be “mjok hamrammr”? (Sigurður Nordal 1933, p. 4). The narrative of *Egils saga* is delightfully ambiguous on the subject, possibly catering to various audiences with differing beliefs in the nature of the paranormal (Ármann Jakobsson 2011a). The same is seen in Skalla-Grímr’s later transmogrification, also in the dusk at nightfall. What has metamorphosed in that scene? It is the magnate’s body, mind, or behavior? Are these even separable?

Egils saga provides no clear answers to these questions, cheerfully positing its family at the boundary between human and beast and then remaining silent about what that

actually means. Furthermore, the sagas in general cunningly seem to avoid the temptation of explaining the occult. It remains in the eye of the beholder. Similar to the unseen alien in the film *Alien*, the dread it evokes is possibly more powerful than a paranormal entity can manage when it eventually arrives. It is possible that nothing a modern mind conjures up can ever be equal to the monsters designed by the minds of centuries of saga audiences listening to the sagas during the dark Nordic winters.

6. Incomplete Transformation

Even though the contemporary Icelandic word *hamur* would seem to signify the body and its skin rather than the mind and its thoughts (see, e.g., [Ásgeir Bl. Magnússon 1989](#)), the medieval Icelandic usage of the word *hamr* often indicates that it signifies the mind no less than the skin, or perhaps that these are not easily distinguished.

This is potentially unwelcome news for modern scholars asking the question of whether medieval Icelanders believed a human could fully transform into a beast or not. But what does it mean to fully transform? Would it suffice that the body has become bestial, or must it also include cognitive functions? Perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether a metamorphosed creature can be anything but a hybrid of its original shape and its transmogrified state.

Even when there is no transfixed sorcerer who, having conjured the beast, controls it from far away, the metamorphosed animal seems to retain some of its human qualities. We do not know what happened to Gull-Pórir Oddsson, the protagonist of the *Gull-Póris saga*, who vanishes after his son's untimely death and is believed to have turned into a dragon to protect his gold ([Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson 1991](#), p. 226). This dragon is often seen flying in the vicinity, but it presumably shied away from humans since there are no further stories about it. Thus, we are never told if this creature thinks or acts like a human or whether it is fully bestial.

The dragon Fáfnir that plays a central role in the legend of the Rhine gold that is related e.g., in Old Norse eddic poetry and later in the 13th-century *Völsunga saga*, on the other hand, clearly retains some of its human faculties. This is evident by their lengthy conversation with Sigurðr after receiving a terminal wound from him (see e.g., [Jónsson and Vilhjálmsson 1943](#), pp. 38, 39). Fáfnir first appears in the legend as a human or a humanoid figure. It is hard to define all the mythological figures, including Óðinn, Loki, and their kin, in the eddic myths as human but, on the other hand, it is also hard to define them as inhuman. He is the brother of the shapeshifter Otr but was transformed into a dragon after killing his father and appropriating all the gold the family had been given in order to lie on it and guard it. His other brother Reginn refers to him as evil, and it is possibly Fáfnir's turpitude, along with the avarice that makes him murder his father for sole possession of the treasure, that is responsible for a civilized being's transformation into a wild dragon (see e.g., [Jónsson and Vilhjálmsson 1943](#), pp. 30–32, see also [Barreiro 2019](#)).

However, after this monstrous worm is wounded and vanquished, and has wrecked all his surroundings in his terrible death throes, Fáfnir begins to converse calmly with Sigurðr. He first asks him his name and that of his father and his entire kin. Sigurðr refuses to reveal his name and calls himself a noble beast, possibly meant to be a riddle. Fáfnir responds somewhat impatiently—understandably, since he is dying—that the young hero must be lying. The worm goes on to warn his interlocutor of the curse of the gold and of himself, to ruminate on his own existence and the dread he caused in life, and to give his slayer occult information about the norms and the gods. The “helmet of dread” Fáfnir mentions in the conversation indicates that his place in society is important to him, and, as [Páez \(2020\)](#) has remarked, the Old Norse self is sometimes inseparable from its place in society.

Fáfnir also reveals that he knows that Reginn is the plotter behind his death and in general converses like the respectable humanoid he used to be. The draconian part of him is hardly revealed in his fairly polite if sometimes blunt speech, but this does not necessarily mean that Fáfnir is to be regarded a human inside the body of a beast. His cruel and

oppressive rule over humans has indeed been draconian, and though Fáfnir is intelligent enough to reflect on the fear he induced in mere humans, he expresses no remorse before his death.

7. Conclusions: Self and Society

A beast who can converse intelligently with humans has clearly retained some of its human side and any talking beast's transformation can be considered incomplete given how defining speech is for mankind. As William Faulkner once wrote (Faulkner 1951), the past is never dead, and possibly a complete transformation is an illusion. Though Fáfnir is bestial, his cognitive powers remain those of a human. But how much humanity remains within the beast? It seems unlikely that even in the case of the draconian other, the transformation is only one of shape. Fáfnir's words indicate that he also embodies the dragon spirit, indeed, his evil nature may be what originally caused his metamorphosis into a poison-spewing beast.

Where, then, does the self reside? In the brain, in the skin, or in the heart? Even though there was some discussion of the anatomy of selfhood in medieval Europe (see, e.g., Lönnroth 1963–1964; Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir 2018; Eriksen et al. 2020), Icelandic historians of the age tend to remain sensibly silent on the subject. In spite of a clear fascination with shapeshifting, the mysteries of the “hamr” are never fully revealed. The shape remains undefined and so does its shifting.

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