

Metamorphoses: a Comparative Study of Representations of Shape-
Shifting in Old Norse and Medieval Irish Narrative Literature

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Introduction

Definitions of Metamorphosis and Metempsychosis

This study will consider literal and metaphorical metamorphosis representations of metamorphosis. The *literal* representations are situations where a character is described as changing shape, not just assuming some animalistic traits. *Metaphorical* is here defined as situations in which the author of a text has used animal imagery to explain human behaviour. These two representations will be considered in the light of the two types of shape-shifting, set out originally by Caroline Walker Bynum, 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 is here seen as the soul, or an interpretation of the soul, leaving the body, or vessel, and inhabiting another body or vessel. The soul goes into another vessel, and assumes the physical exterior of the vessel, while keeping the mental interior of the original vessel. Metamorphosis is here seen as the whole physical vessel or body changing into another, or changing its 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 shape-shifter, 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 occur, taking the shape-shifter to a bestial level. Marina Warner and others have discussed the Ovidian form of metamorphosis, based on the writings of Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC to 18 AD). According to Warner,

‘Ovidian shape-shifting belongs on the one hand to the broad rubric of metempsychosis, the Pythagorean doctrine, which holds that the soul, or essence of something or some person, migrates from one body to another. Forms do not only take on different forms; the whole of nature evolves through the creative power of shape-shifting and this transmigration of souls’.³

¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf’, in *Speculum*, 73: 4 (1998), p. 987

² Bynum, ‘Metamorphosis’, p. 991

³ Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* (New York, 2002), p. 3

She goes on to state that these writings containing shape-shifting ‘appear in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilisations’.⁴ This aspect will be an underlying focus of this study, since in order to understand the representation of shape-shifting in the two literary cultures, it is important to understand the society and time they were written in. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir has argued that in the northern regions of Europe, there was primarily two shape-shifting forms; a bear or a wolf, ‘although the latter seems to have been more popular’.⁵ Guðmundsdóttir has argued that the *berserkr* frenzy is closely related to the practice of shape-shifting because ‘in both cases men acquire the attributes of animals’,⁶ as will be discussed in the following. The main difference, she argues, lies in that it is assumed that either the soul travels to another body, i.e. metempsychosis, and people are then described as *eigi einhamr*, meaning ‘not one-formed’, or the body undergoes metamorphosis.⁷ Both Walker Bynum and Guðmundsdóttir put forward good, concise definitions of what shape-shifting is considered to be, but Guðmundsdóttir’s definition is focused more on the Nordic view of shape-shifting and *berserkir*. Miranda Green has noted that the early Irish and Welsh traditions contain many tales dealing with superhuman wisdom, enchanted beasts and animals, and people being able to communicate with animals and gods, along with the concept of metamorphosis.⁸ Green also makes the argument that there are two basic principles regarding animals, in general, in the literary traditions, which need to be considered to support the analysis of the roles of animals in the literature: first, the enchanted creature, which has human abilities, such as human speech; and second, is metamorphosis, either from one animal to another, or from human to animal.⁹

The aspect of *theriomorphism*, meaning to have an animal form or shape, in the case of Medieval Irish narrative and the Old Norse material is often, but not exclusively, confined to wolves or bears.¹⁰ This concept is used on occasion in this study, and here only in context with wolf shapes.

⁴ Warner, *Metamorphoses*, p. 18

⁵ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature’, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106: 3 (2007), p. 277

⁶ Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Werewolf’, p. 281

⁷ Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Werewolf’, pp 281-282

⁸ Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (London, 1992), p. 163

⁹ Green, *Animals*, p. 190

¹⁰ P.L. Henry, ‘Furor Heroicus’, in *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 39 (1982), p. 240

Philosophical Considerations about Metamorphosis

Philosophical ideas about the concept of metamorphosis in relation to God's power emerged in the early years of Christianity. The pre-Christian concept was scrutinised by early Christians, as they tried to explain how this was possible, or impossible, with God's power at the centre of their debate. Early medieval Christians, such as St Boniface, Pope Gregory VII and Burchard of Worms, considered the belief in werewolves sinful, because, as Burchard argued, only God could turn one thing into another.¹¹ Throughout the middle ages, the concept of metamorphosis was discussed as a philosophical term, in relation to God's power, and the influence of demons.¹² Marina Warner argues that in some medieval texts metamorphosis was performed by devils and witches, being monstrous hybrids already.¹³ Phillip A. Bernhardt-House has argued that it was common in medieval Christianity to depict the devil with lupine imagery and characteristics, or to demonise the wolf through diabolic actions.¹⁴ However, most of the debates developed around the idea of werewolves, more so than any type of metamorphosis. Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that, in the twelfth century,

‘thinking about entities was dominated by the classical trope “like from like”, understood to mean that like is generated from like, like returns to like, like know like via likeness [...] the idea of likeness even, natural events such as spontaneous generation, or miracles such as Christ's healing of the blind man, as the unfolding of an essence or the preservation of species or type’.¹⁵

“Conversion” at that time meant development, not a radical change, as it implies today.¹⁶ However, by the end of the twelfth century the radical change of one entity for a completely different one became increasingly fascinating to intellectuals.¹⁷ Alchemy became popular, the theologians of the Eucharist argued that the bread became annihilated and that the body of Christ then replaced it.¹⁸ This led to a revival in stories containing metamorphosis, and

¹¹ Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 173

¹² Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, *Werewolves, Magical Hounds, and Dog-Headed Men in Celtic Literature* (New York, 2010), pp 157-163

¹³ Warner, *Metamorphoses*, pp 35-36

¹⁴ Bernhardt-House, *Werewolves*, p. 92

¹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York, 2001), p. 24

¹⁶ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, pp 24-25

¹⁷ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 25

¹⁸ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 25

vampires and werewolves.¹⁹ These stories were based on the *Physiologus* which was circulating already in antiquity, with the beast epic developing in the twelfth century, along with bestiaries and later fables.²⁰ Fables portrayed single fictitious events, with at least one character being an animal; bestiaries dealt with interpretation of the behaviour of real animals; and beast poems were fictitious narratives with talking animals.²¹ In the thirteenth-century *exempla*, which were based on fables, bestiaries and beast epics, were used in sermons, and by the fourteenth century they were used across Europe.²²

In relation to Ireland, when examining the writings of Augustinus Hibernicus, it is clear that the issue of shape-shifting was not only found in narrative literature, but also in philosophical writing of the middle ages, where scholars seemed to have wrestled with the idea. When the Irish Augustine, a seventh-century writer and philosopher, discussed the biblical incident where Moses threw down his staff and it turned into a serpent, and then back to wood, he contemplated how this change was possible:

‘Unless it be that each, the staff and the serpent, appears to be made from earth; for being made from the same material, they could by the power of God the Governor be changed into each other by turn. But if it be conceded that all things made from earth can be changed into one another by turns – as for instance animal to tree, bread to stone, man to bird – then none of these could remain firmly within the bounds of its own nature. We would seem, indeed, to give our assent to the laughable tales told by the druids, who say that their forbearers flew through the ages in the form of birds; and in such cases we would speak of God not as the Governor, but as the Changer (*Mutator*) of natures. Far be it from us to do so, lest we believe that after the first establishment of the natures of all things he made anything new, or not contained by its nature.’²³

It is evident from the Irish Augustine that ideas about metamorphosis, and its philosophical implications, derived from late Antique sources, were present in Ireland already in the seventh century, and these ideas would have influenced the writings of the Early Irish period.

¹⁹ Bynum, *Metamorphosis*, p. 25

²⁰ Pluskowski, *Wolves*, p. 118

²¹ Pluskowski, *Wolves*, p. 118

²² Pluskowski, *Wolves*, p. 126

²³ John Carey, *Kings of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin, 1998) p. 58

Education of the Early Irish and Medieval Scandinavian periods

The traditions of metamorphosis and metempsychosis in Ireland possibly originated from Latin and Greek traditions, coming to Ireland through England or Spain, and were well-established, and well-known, by the time Scandinavians began to write. We know that there was scholarly contact between the English and the Irish in the seventh century AD, evidenced by a letter written by the English scholar Aldhelm, as well as the writings of Bede.²⁴ English students could be found in Ireland, and Irish students went to England, where texts such as Virgil's three poems, and Publius Ovidius Naso's *Metamorphoses* would have been available to them.²⁵ Some of the Irish material does show clear connections with the classical epics, such as *Togail Troí*, where others, such as *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, have been convincingly argued to contain elements of the classical epic.²⁶ The Latin tradition was available in Ireland, and we can assume that some Irish texts were inspired by the Latin works. Ireland was also familiar with the learning of Greek, which is evident in the total 246 entries of Greek etymologies of Irish headwords from *Sanas Cormaic* (77 entries); the mid-eighth-century text *De Origine Scotiae Linguae* (also known as O'Mulconry's Glossary) (209 entries); *Dúil Dromma Cetta* (22 entries); and *Irsan* glossary (72 entries), with many entries occurring in more than one glossary.²⁷ Primarily the Greek is first translated into Latin, then into Irish.²⁸ Many of the words have been corrupted, indicating the Irish were not always able to translate the Greek words properly.²⁹ It has been suggested that a form of oral instruction in Greek, by native speakers, was in existence, and this has been corroborated by biblical commentaries 'which can be traced back to the school of Theodore and Hadrian in Canterbury'.³⁰ Although there appears to have been some knowledge about Greek from a linguistic angle, Greek texts, such as the *Iliad*, were not available to the Irish at the time.³¹

Compared to Ireland, Iceland was only settled by Norse settlers between c. 870 and 930 AD, but according to the *Landnámabók* the earliest settlers were of Celtic, or mixed Celtic and

²⁴ Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 17

²⁵ Miles, *Heroic Saga*, pp 17-18

²⁶ See Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011) for an extensive discussion on the influence of classical literature on the Irish narrative material.

²⁷ Pádraic Moran, "'A Living Speech'? The Pronunciation of Greek in Early Medieval Ireland', in *Ériu* 61 (2011), pp 30-31

²⁸ Moran, "'Living Speech'?", p. 31

²⁹ Miles, *Heroic Saga*, p. 34

³⁰ Miles, *Heroic Saga*, p. 35

³¹ Miles, *Heroic Saga*, p. 35

Scandinavian ancestry.³² And unlike the early arrival of Christianity in Ireland, Iceland converted in 999 or 1000, based on a decision made at *Alþingi*, and was a top-down approach, according to *Íslendingabók*.³³ In 1056 the first Icelandic-born bishop was consecrated, and in 1133 the first Icelandic monastery was settled.³⁴ However, as with Ireland, Christianity opened the door to new intellectual influences, which were combined with the traditional, and primarily orally transmitted, culture.³⁵ This also meant the use of the Roman alphabet for writing the sagas, rather than the limited runic alphabet, which had been in use prior, but was only used for brief inscriptions. We know that Norse traders were in contact with Christians, and were familiar with Christian practices and objects, and supposedly, the Norse traders had to undergo the *prima signatio*, i.e. a form of preliminary baptism, in order to trade with Christians.³⁶ Medieval Iceland writing only started in the twelfth century, placing it into a Western European development of vernacular genres and Latin, and prose work, such as romances and chronicles, in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.³⁷ Icelandic sagas are distinctly different from romances, but the rise of historical writing in the rest of Europe influenced historical writing in Iceland. The sagas were originally written in the vernacular language, not Latin, although some direct translations are from Latin, and other languages. Ross has argued that it is likely that a large number of Latin works by Norwegians and Icelanders were destroyed during the Reformation.³⁸ Writing in the vernacular rather than Latin may have made sense in the late eleventh and early twelfth century, because most Icelanders were unfamiliar with Latin, but from the twelfth century onwards we find educated lay people and religious communities, composing saints' lives as well as sagas, all in the vernacular.³⁹ However, inventories of religious houses in the later medieval period show familiarity with the Latin, English and German languages, and first and second hand acquaintance with a wide variety of Latin sources.⁴⁰

³² Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), pp 6-8

³³ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 10

³⁴ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 8

³⁵ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 10

³⁶ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 10

³⁷ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 47

³⁸ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 46

³⁹ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 46

⁴⁰ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 46

Early Irish Sources

In a 1961 article D. A. Binchy argued that literature in Ogam form may have existed, but to a very limited extent.⁴¹ However, it is probably more likely that some aspects of the literature, as we know it today, stem from an oral tradition, and, as Binchy also argued, was a ‘fusion between the native tradition, as represented by these schools of oral learning, and the new learning’.⁴² The written language of the early Irish literature shows no dialect, and there seems to have been a standardised written language, a language which Binchy argued was possibly not spoken by many people.⁴³ This view, however, belongs to the ‘nativist’ camp of a long running debate. Kim McCone has argued that we only have evidence for a literate tradition in early Christian Ireland, not the preceding possible oral tradition, and the sources we do have are written in a monastic environment.⁴⁴ According to McCone pagan practices were condemned by the Christian literati,⁴⁵ whose worship and study revolved around Scripture.⁴⁶ He argues that the concept of decapitation, and head-hunting, which is described in the Ulster Cycle, was practised still in early Christian Ireland, and the written accounts were not a pagan Celtic tradition, but reflections of contemporary events.⁴⁷ Early Irish Christian scribes were familiar with gruesome and bloody events from biblical material, such as David severing the head of Goliath in display of victory, making the act of decapitation not intrinsically pagan.⁴⁸ Patrick Sims-Williams argued in relation to the example of the Champion’s Portion that it is also found in other classical material such as the Bible, works of Homer, and Tacitus’ account of the Germans, as well as modern society,⁴⁹ although it has been sanitised to concern etiquette. The debate between nativists, anti-nativists and now celtosceptics enables students to consider the background of different themes found in medieval Irish literature. As for the concept of shape-shifting the above discussion on education and philosophy has shown that this particular concept was not necessarily intrinsic to either the Irish or Scandinavian tradition, and it is not treated as such in this study.

⁴¹ D. A. Binchy, ‘The Background to Early Irish Literature’, in *Studia Hibernica* 1 (1961), p. 9

⁴² Binchy, ‘Background’, p. 10

⁴³ Binchy, ‘Background’, p. 11

⁴⁴ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present* (An Sagart, 1991), p. 5

⁴⁵ McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 7

⁴⁶ McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 29

⁴⁷ McCone, *Pagan Past*, p. 30

⁴⁸ McCone, *Pagan Past*, pp 29-30

⁴⁹ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtic Civilization: Continuity or Coincidence?’, in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 64 (2012), pp 37- 39

The early Medieval Irish tales have been divided into categories, or *cycles*, in modern times, based on the main characters and locations portrayed in them: Mythological, Heroic, Fenian, and Kings Cycle. The Mythological Cycle consists of stories about the gods and goddesses, specifically the Túatha De Danann, taking place in a distant, unspecified time of the gods. The stories tell of battles and supernatural events, such as *Cath Maige Tuired*, *Aislinge Óengusa*, and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. The Heroic, or Ulster Cycle, is set in Ulster, with the main text being *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the main hero being Cú Chulainn. The Fenian Cycle consists of stories about Finn and his *fián*, and often tells of supernatural events and hunting trips. The Kings Cycle contains stories about prehistoric and historic kings of Ireland, and unlike the other Cycles, the stories here are of a more varied sort. Unlike the Old Norse saga categorisation, the Irish Cycles are straightforward in what they entail.

Some texts considered here fall outside of this categorisation of stories, namely law texts. Some of the stories used in this study are found as anecdotes in law texts, or as in the case of *Bretha Crólige*, are law texts mentioning a type of metamorphoses. Early Irish law texts consisted of *cánai* and law books. *Cánai* were ‘formally promulgated laws or edicts’,⁵⁰ while law books were seen as manuals rather than primary law,⁵¹ although they were treated as authoritative sources, as is evident in citations from law books in later legal texts.⁵² One such law book is the late seventh- or early eighth-century *Senchas Már*, where we also find the tract *Bretha Crólige*. Law texts and narrative literature are two different types of written work, and should therefore also be read differently, i.e. according to the context in which it was written and the intended audience. However, we find narrative elements in law texts, and legal material in the narrative literature of early Ireland. The early Irish scholarly texts were often introduced by an account of the where, when, who, and why of the composition of the text, and we find narrative anecdotes in the law texts, such as ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’ (see “Involuntary” chapter) and ‘The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti’ in the glossary of the *Senchas Már*.⁵³ This led Liam Breatnach to argue that perhaps some stories were composed specifically for the legal tract they accompanied, but that the use of biblical examples as well indicates that the authors also used already existing stories.⁵⁴ The link between law texts and literature, and how the knowledge of legal texts influenced the writers of the narratives, is

⁵⁰ Liam Breatnach, ‘Law and Literature in Early Medieval Ireland’, in *L’Irlanda e gli Irlandesi Nell’Alto Medioevo* (2009), p. 216

⁵¹ Breatnach, ‘Law’, p. 216

⁵² Breatnach, ‘Law’, p. 218

⁵³ Breatnach, ‘Law’, pp 219-224

⁵⁴ Breatnach, ‘Law’, p. 225

evident in some stories which portray e.g. court cases; legal implications of actions; legal principles; or contain extracts directly from law texts.⁵⁵ The story of how Sétantae killed the hound of Culann, and the events following, reflects the legal procedure of compensation for the killing of animals.⁵⁶ With this in mind, some of the texts discussed in this study contain obvious legal elements, such as *Tochmarc Étaíne*, but we must still read the text as a narrative, because the legal element is not the focus of the text. It is important to note, however, the interlinked relationship between the literature and the law, and that one of the narrative examples examined in this study is found as an anecdote in a law text, namely ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’.

Old Norse Sources

For the Scandinavian sources of the sagas Christopher Abram supports an oral-tradition prior to the arrival of Christianity and writing,⁵⁷ a theory supported by Guðrún Nordal,⁵⁸ and Margaret Clunies Ross.⁵⁹ Lars Lönnroth has argued that the oral tradition is evident in the sagas due to their often colloquial language with a large amount of stereotypical narrative patterns, such as the model of introducing new characters, and referencing people and what they have said.⁶⁰ Prior to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there is very little written material, and it is not until the second half of the thirteenth century that works produced, and the variety of the written works, as survives today, increased significantly.⁶¹ The term *saga* (plural *sögur*), is related to the verb *segja* ‘to say, tell’, giving *saga* a broad spectre of interpretation, but all are related to a form of telling or relating something.⁶² In the modern English language, *Icelandic saga* has come to denote ‘a specific type of long epic prose narrative written in Old Norse in medieval Iceland at some time after 1150, at least partly based on indigenous oral tradition and primarily dealing with the legendary past of the Scandinavian people’.⁶³ A *saga* was, to contemporaries, an individual interpretation of facts,

⁵⁵ Breatnach, ‘Law’, pp 233-234

⁵⁶ Breatnach, ‘Law’, pp 234-235

⁵⁷ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North – The Gods of the Norsemen* (London, 2011), pp 10-11

⁵⁸ Guðrún Nordal, ‘The Sagas of the Icelanders’, in Stefan Brink & Neil Price (eds.) *The Viking World* (London, 2012), p. 316

⁵⁹ Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 15

⁶⁰ Lars Lönnroth, ‘The Icelandic Sagas’, in Stefan Brink & Neil Price (eds.) *The Viking World* (London, 2012), p. 308

⁶¹ Birgit and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia – From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500* (Minnesota, 1993), p. 1

⁶² Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 15

⁶³ Lönnroth, ‘Icelandic Sagas’, p. 304

which was subject to the authors' and scribes' manipulation, in terms of length, content and outcome.⁶⁴

The *Íslendingasögur*, or sagas of the Icelanders, essentially give a hypothetical picture of events and people, including kings, living in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries in a Viking diaspora, and by including the kings of Norway and genealogies of the main characters, they root themselves in a specific place in time, namely c. 870-1070.⁶⁵ However, it cannot be ignored that these sagas were written in the later Christian period of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. This period is often termed the Sturlung Age, from the Sturlung family, who had a dominant role both in politics and saga-writing, led by chieftains such as Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Thorðarson.⁶⁶ Most of the sagas place the events in Iceland, but also include Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Greenland, the British Isles, Constantinople and Vinland.⁶⁷ Nordal notes that, unlike other fictions of the Middle Ages, these sagas 'do not contain literary prologues that place the narrative in a context with other medieval genre at the very outset, nor is there any discussion of the writers' attitudes to the factual or fictive quality of the narrative'.⁶⁸ At a recent research seminar presentation by Ralph O'Connor,⁶⁹ he discussed how fiction could turn into history, and vice versa, as people, or the audience, interpreted what was presented to them. This may be why there was no clear indication of either, meaning the audience could perceive the sagas in a variety of ways. O'Connor also argued that the *Íslendingasögur* were written as intended *historia*, composed as a collective memory of oral history, which became a narrative culture. He furthermore argued that by adding in genealogies in the sagas, and the fact that the events in the sagas took place closer to the written period than in the Irish narrative tradition of the same time, the *Íslendingasögur* inadvertently included real people as "witnesses" to the events. They do provide some detail about the pagan religion of the settlers, but although gods are named, how they were perceived is not clear.⁷⁰ Gwyn Jones argued that the *Íslendingasögur*, rather than being historical or biographical in the modern sense, instead were a 'historical or biographical tradition ranging from the near factual to the wholly fictitious [...] affected by the creative imagination of story-tellers, authors, and scribes, by the changes to which oral tradition is

⁶⁴ Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London, 1972), p. 125

⁶⁵ Nordal, 'Sagas of the Icelanders', p. 315

⁶⁶ Lönnroth, 'Icelandic Sagas', p. 304

⁶⁷ Nordal, 'Sagas of the Icelanders', p. 316

⁶⁸ Nordal, 'Sagas of the Icelanders', p. 316

⁶⁹ October 9th 2014, Maynooth University

⁷⁰ Abram, *Myths*, p. 21

subjected over a period of two or three hundred years'.⁷¹ This argument is further elaborated on by Ármann Jakobsson, who adds that the *sögur* 'may contain realistic elements in its depiction of the human world yet present a hero who sometimes appears more beast than man'.⁷² The main concern of the *Íslendingasögur* appears to be feuding and violence, not relaying much about peacetime.⁷³ The *konungasögur*, or King's sagas, are based partly on skaldic poetry honouring the king, and prose tales which may have been present at the court of the king.⁷⁴ They 'provide us with evidence about the nature of pagan culture in mainland Scandinavian, but they do not, strictly speaking, preserve myths themselves'.⁷⁵ Events in the sagas are governed by fate and/or luck, giving the world picture a "pagan" atmosphere, but with a lack of pagan gods mentioned.⁷⁶ Another type of saga is the *fornaldarsögur norðulanda*, or Nordic sagas of antiquity, consisting of about thirty texts in late medieval Icelandic.⁷⁷ These are characterised by 'the valorisation of Nordic heroes, wide-ranging exploits across the map of Europe, frequent pagan theophanies, and a remarkable array of supernatural creatures and villains',⁷⁸ as well as no clear definition of time. They generally take place before the settlement of Iceland, in the unidentified Germanic heroic literature landscape, or in exotic areas also found in adventure tales.⁷⁹ The *fornaldarsögur* are concerned with the pre-Christian world, but they are influenced by European romance and hero-tales, and are therefore not very reliable regarding a Scandinavian pre-Christian period, since they portray a much more fantastical era.⁸⁰ These *sögur* were written more as entertainment than historical accounts.⁸¹ Clunies Ross has used *þorgils saga Haflíða*, written before 1250, as an example to show that the *fornaldarsögur* existed in an oral form already in the twelfth and thirteenth century, because they are mentioned as part of the court entertainment in *þorgils saga Haflíða*.⁸² The stories were assembled from popular wonder tales; myths and legends concerning the pagan pantheon of gods and half-human and non-

⁷¹ Jones, *Kings*, p. 124

⁷² Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils saga', in *Scandinavian Studies* 83:1 (2011), p. 30

⁷³ Jones, *Kings*, p. 124

⁷⁴ Lönnroth, 'Icelandic Sagas', p. 306

⁷⁵ Abram, *Myths*, p. 22

⁷⁶ Lönnroth, 'Icelandic Sagas', p. 309

⁷⁷ Stephen Mitchell, 'The Heroic and Legendary Sagas', in Stefan Brink & Neil Price (eds.) *The Viking World* (London, 2012), p. 319

⁷⁸ Mitchell, 'Heroic and Legendary Sagas', p. 319

⁷⁹ Mitchell, 'Heroic and Legendary Sagas', p. 320

⁸⁰ Abram, *Myths*, pp 23-24

⁸¹ Jones, *Kings*, p. 125

⁸² Ross, *Cambridge Introduction*, pp 18-19

human creatures associated with the gods; poems about early heroes of Scandinavia and the Baltic coastal area; as well as quasi-historical accounts of folk-memory.⁸³ Because Scandinavia was the last of the Germanic areas in Europe to be Christianised, it was believed to have preserved primitive features once common across the Germanic areas.⁸⁴ This can be argued to be the case in terms of the *fornaldarsögur*. The *fornaldarsögur* ‘udtrykker often en kristen ideology og en antipati mod det hedenske, og visse på overfladen hedenske elementer og topoi har kristne tekstlige forlæg, selvom man ikke kan spore en eksplicit kristen diskurs i narrativen’,⁸⁵ (‘often express a Christian ideology and an antipathy against the heathen, and some, on the surface, heathen elements and topoi have Christian textual sources, even though one cannot trace an explicit Christian discourse in the narrative’).⁸⁶ Lönnroth has argued that there might have been some admiration by the Christian writers for the “pagan” past of their ancestors.⁸⁷ These texts were not distinguished by the writers to be seen as historiography or fiction, but it was accepted that a story did not need to portray only the truth for it to be of entertainment value to its audience.⁸⁸ These texts should not be read as purely fiction nor purely as truth, because they consist of both, while also containing elements of both oral and literary traditions.⁸⁹

It should be noted that ‘tradition’ is an ambiguous term, but this study will use Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s definition, which defines ‘tradition’ as a set of choices from several different historical parts and symbols, chosen by a community, and the methods of how this choice is carried out, to establish an identity, and thereby a ‘tradition’.⁹⁰ This of course makes ‘tradition’ a very fluid concept, which changes continuously, and aspects considered an important part of a community’s tradition today, may not be as important a century from now. As mentioned above, O’Connor has discussed how fiction could become history, and vice versa.

⁸³ Jones, *Kings*, p. 126

⁸⁴ Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia*, p. xi

⁸⁵ Agneta Ney, *et al.*, ‘Indledning’, in Agneta Ney, Ármann Jakobsson & Anette Lassen (eds.) *Fornaldarsagaerne – Myter og Virkelighed* (Denmark, 2008), p. 13

⁸⁶ Translation is my own.

⁸⁷ Lönnroth, ‘Icelandic Sagas’, p. 309

⁸⁸ Lönnroth, ‘Icelandic Sagas’, p. 305

⁸⁹ Lönnroth, ‘Icelandic Sagas’, p. 306

⁹⁰ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘Legend as Critic’, in Tom Dunne (ed.) *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence* (Cork, 1987), p. 25

Scope of the Study

The scope of the present study needed to be limited in order to provide a manageable corpus of texts. For this reason, it excludes the study of fully divine figures, i.e. those characterised as ‘gods’ in the respective traditions.⁹¹ A major forthcoming study by Dr Mark Williams: *Ireland’s Immortals: A History of the Gods of the Irish Myth* (Princeton University Press), will examine the Early Irish pantheon of gods, and Christopher Abram’s *Myths of the Pagan North – The Gods of the Norsemen* (Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2011) examines the Norse pantheon of gods. For the same reason, hagiographies have been excluded, as well as archaeological evidence, such as iconography. Thus, this study considers shape-shifting by human and semi-human characters in early Irish and Scandinavian literature.

⁹¹ The text *Aislinge Óenguso* is examined in this study on the basis that Caer Ibormeith also shape-shifts, and Óengus is only part of the story.

I “Voluntary” Shape-Shifting

This chapter will examine the literary evidence that exists in the written Irish narrative tradition of the medieval period and the Old Norse written material, of “voluntary” shape-shifting. When discussing “voluntary” shape-shifting, it is important to note, again, that these changes can represent both a *metaphorical* metamorphosis of a person’s character and *literal* metamorphosis, from one form to another. The metaphorical changes focus on the behaviour of a character, and how the literature uses specific animalistic imagery to explain behaviours that are seen as not entirely human or normal. The literal changes are often found in mythological texts, where gods, due to their powers, change into different shapes, depending on the purpose, however, the scope of this study will not include mythological or divine characters, as mentioned in the main introduction to this study. They also appear in texts set in liminal places, such as in the Fenian Cycle.

The two main groups of characters studied here, in terms of metaphorical metamorphosis, are the *fianna* of Ireland and the *berserker* of Scandinavia. Both of these groups are directly connected to the concept of animal warriors. Michael Speidel has argued that scene 36 onwards on Trajan’s Column, portraying the conquest of Dacia, in modern day Romanian Transylvania, in 101-106 AD, depicts a concept of the animal warriors.⁹² However, the gap in time between this column and the literary representation of the *fianna* and *berserker* is too great for this column to be considered as definitive evidence for a long running historical institution of the animal warrior. It is significant, though, that people had thought of people possibly assuming an animalistic identity, e.g. through the wearing of animal skins, or behavioural changes.

Kim McCone has argued that the *berserker* and the *vikingar* are closely related.⁹³ McCone argues that the name Woden in Germanic and Óðinn in ON, meant ‘fury’, a statement mirrored by Rudolph Simek in his *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, where he says the element *ódr* means ‘fury’, and that Óðinn, or Woden, was the god of cult ecstasy, among other things.⁹⁴ On the seventh-century bronze die from Torslunda, Öland, Sweden, Óðinn is

⁹² Michael P. Speidel, *Ancient Germanic Warriors – Warrior Styles from Trajan’s Column to Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2004), pp 3-4

⁹³ Kim McCone, ‘Werewolves, Cyclops, *Díberga*, and *Fíanna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland’, in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 12 (1986), p. 20

⁹⁴ Rudolph Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 35

portrayed as dancing a war dance to rouse a warrior next to him to battle, who appears to have a canine head.⁹⁵ This artistic representation is notably dated to four or five centuries before the writing of the Old Norse literature considered in this study. We cannot know for sure what this representation meant, and whether it is the same as the literary representation we find centuries later. The literary representation may be a romanticised idea about concepts that were once familiar to the Scandinavians, but had slowly dwindled, and were re-imagined in a later period. The literary representation of the Scandinavian medieval culture, does not always seem to make a clear connection between *berserkir* and *vikingar*. Most males of the communities could be *vikingar*, but not every male could be a *berserkr*.

After this short introduction to the general aspects of the warrior types of the *fianna* and the *berserkir*, the study will now examine, and discuss, the two groups, using literary examples. It will also examine other literary examples from the two traditions that are not of *fianna* or *berserkir* characters.

IRISH EVIDENCE

The Fenian Cycle

‘The Fenian cycle dwells on the theme of transformation or transition – that is, on the nature of passage between opposed states or categories’.⁹⁶ It is therefore only fitting to consider the cycle and its main hero, Finn mac Cumail, in a study concerning different aspects of shape-shifting. The stories are ‘played out in zones beyond the civilized pale, or between the human and the supernatural pales’.⁹⁷ Proinsias Mac Cana dated the earliest Fenian tradition to the later seventh century,⁹⁸ but Eoin Mac Neill argued that the greater part of the Fenian cycle was composed from the ninth century onwards, primarily in the eleventh century onwards.⁹⁹ The words *fíán* and *fénnidi* ‘derive from the Indo-European root that also gives us Latin *vēnāri* “to hunt” and English “win”. In many cultures, hunting and warring in the wilderness constitute the designated vocation of the young male on the verge of manhood’.¹⁰⁰ So it is

⁹⁵ Speidel, *Germanic Warriors*, pp 31-32

⁹⁶ Joseph Falaky Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes and Their Rites of Passage’, in *Béaloides*, 54/55 (1986/1987), p. 162

⁹⁷ Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 162

⁹⁸ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 2

⁹⁹ Eoin Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn I: The Book of the Lays of Fionn* (London, 1908), p. xxvi

¹⁰⁰ Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 163

with the Fenian *Männerbund*. The evidence, according to McCone, suggests ‘a marked clerical aversion to the *fíán* in the early period because it embodied values that were perceived as a threat to the hierarchical, settled society of the *túath* in which the Church had a vested interest’.¹⁰¹ In the earlier texts the *fíán* is presented more harshly, than in the later, more romanticised tradition. McCone argues that the *Córus Béscnai*, which is part of the seventh- or eighth-century *Senchas Már*, a legal tract describing three different forms of feasts, mentioning the *fled demunda*, i.e. ‘devilish feast’, is a reference to the *díbergaig* and *féindidi*, because it states that this feast is ‘given to sons of death and bad people’ such as bandits and pagans.¹⁰² According to McCone the term *díberg* ‘belongs to a group of institutional terms including *flaith* “lordship, lord” that denote both an activity, in this case the vagrant robbery, plunder, and murder arising from a peculiar vow and hair-style, and its practitioners, whether collectively or individually’,¹⁰³ however, the term is also used by Giolla Mo Dutu Ó Casaide in ‘Éri óg, inis na náem’ §52, dated to 1143, to refer to *Danmharig Átha Cliath na cland, díbergaigh laec[h] ráidh Lochland* (‘The Danmharig of Dublin of the lineages, The reavers of the warriors of Lochlainn’),¹⁰⁴ meaning a group of Vikings, apparently of the Danish Dublin lineage. This use of the word *díbergaig* in relation to Vikings can be explained through McCone’s definition mentioned above, i.e. the term being both an activity of plunder, and the plunderers themselves. It is important to note here, though, the significant gap between the two notions of *díberg*, since its original meaning, as found in the *Córus Béscnai*, would have changed in the period between the seventh or eighth century and the twelfth century. It would appear that the term *díberg* denotes an ‘inherently violent and antisocial institution dangerous to the settled community, both lay and ecclesiastical, and typically professed by members of a *fíán*’,¹⁰⁵ so not directly *fíán*-activity, but members of the group would partake in such *díberg* activities. *Díberg*, then ‘had a more specialised reference to a particularly nasty aspect of it [plundering activities, ed.] that early churchmen were prone to emphasise in order to discredit the institution as a whole’.¹⁰⁶ The evidence used by McCone to explain his argument about *díberg* is mostly based on literary representations, and the actuality of the concept in its institution historically is arguably still

¹⁰¹ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 2

¹⁰² McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 5

¹⁰³ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 6

¹⁰⁴ Giolla Mo Dutu Ó Casaide, ‘Éri óg, inis na náem’ (s. xii, AD 1143), B. Mac Carthy (ed. & tr.), *The Codex Palatino-Vaticano No. 830*, TLS 3 (Dublin 1892), 403-37: 424 §52 (Handout from Ó Corrain)

¹⁰⁵ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 6

¹⁰⁶ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 6

unknown. Edel Bhreathnach has argued that it was not until the late seventh century, and beyond, that *díberga* was dislodged from the *fían*, and the group became the ‘more beneficial, Christian and often functional Männerbund of Finn mac Cumail’.¹⁰⁷ While the *fían* was dependent on the *túath*, the *túath* also saw a use for the *féindidi* in ‘enforcing internal and external claims, the *nemed*-status of *fían*-members apparently being vested in *athgabáil* “recovery of dues”’.¹⁰⁸ McCone has also argued that at the age of fourteen, which was the age of termination of fosterage for boys, the boys spent time with a *fían*, ‘an independent organisation of predominantly landless, unmarried, unsettled, and young men given to hunting, warfare, and sexual licence in the wilds outside the *túath*’.¹⁰⁹ When these boys came in possession of property, usually through inheritance, they would be able to leave the *fían*, and regained membership of the settled society.¹¹⁰ The men were going from one form of society to another, upgrading, in a sense, to become fully-grown, responsible adults, as opposed to the irresponsible teenage-behaviour they have been argued to have acted out in the *fíanna*. According to *Tecosca Cormaic* every man is a *fénnidi* until he gets a household.¹¹¹ A literary example here is Cathbad, the druid father of king Conchobor, who is a *fénnidi* until he is recognised by the father of Ness, whom he has had extramarital activities with, and is granted land.¹¹² As can be seen from the literary evidence, however, ‘most Fenian heroes stay within the *fían* instead of completing their life-transition, or they die while in the *fían*, thus achieving a kind of immortality through Fenian commemoration’.¹¹³ The literary representation then, primarily, provide a picture of the men staying with the *fíanna* their entire lives, while the apparent historical evidence, portrays the *fíanna* as a temporary phase of young men’s road to adulthood.

An important rite of passage in a person’s life is being given a name, whether it is a naming ceremony outside of a religious structure, or through baptism in a religious context. Through the public naming of a child, the public recognises the child’s status, kin and gender.¹¹⁴ Where women retain the name given to them in infancy, men in the Irish literary tradition of the medieval period were often named on several occasions throughout their life, indicating

¹⁰⁷ Edel Bhreathnach, *Ireland in the Medieval World, AD400-1000 – Landscape, kingship and religion* (Dublin, 2014), p. 143

¹⁰⁸ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 8

¹⁰⁹ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 13

¹¹⁰ McCone, ‘Werewolves’, p. 13

¹¹¹ Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 164

¹¹² Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 164

¹¹³ Nagy, ‘Fenian Heroes’, p. 168

¹¹⁴ Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 137

different transitions they went through.¹¹⁵ When Finn mac Cumhaill is born he is first called Demne,¹¹⁶ and later he is given the name Finn, meaning ‘fair’.¹¹⁷ A simple thing such as changing a name can have great effects on a character’s life; ‘to change one’s name is to change one’s role and even one’s very being’.¹¹⁸ Thus, when a hero in the Early Irish narrative is re-named, he, as a person, changes, along with his role. Finn is given the name based on his looks, while Cú Chulainn of the Ulster Cycle tales, is given the name based on the role he assumes after having slain the hound of Culann in his boyhood deeds. Both heroes essentially experience a form of shape-shifting, where their previous roles are altered. Cú Chulainn becomes the protector of Ulster, while Finn’s physical form is enhanced through his new name. Another *fian* hero who is given a new name is Caílte. He is originally called Daolghus. In the story labelled by Gerard Murphy as *The Lay of the Smithy*, c. 1400,¹¹⁹ we learn that the smith Lon mac Liomtha challenges Finn and his men to a race. They eventually arrive at the Cave of Corann, where Lon has his smithy, and Daolghus begins to work away at the craft. Lon and another smith notice his skills and refer to him as *in fear caílte gan time shíneas in tinne crúadha*,¹²⁰ (‘the slender warm man without weakness who is stretching the bar of steel’).¹²¹ Finn then gives Daolghus the name Caílte, which is then his name ever since. Like Cú Chulainn, Caílte’s naming is related to a set of skills; here it is the craft of the smith, a craft which is generally seen as a supernatural, magical craft.

Áirem Muintiri Finn

When considering metaphorical metamorphosis and the *fian*-tradition, the first time these young males are exposed to a type of metamorphosis in their life with the *fian*, is during the initiation ceremony, as described in the twelfth-century text *Áirem Muintiri Finn*. Initiation ceremonies are depicted both in ancient art, possibly on the Gundestrup Cauldron, and in literature from early times, and were, and still are, a rite of passage for young men and women into adulthood, becoming a permanent member of a society. Initiation ceremonies are still in existence in modern day’s practices within religious communities, and in secular

¹¹⁵ Bhreathnach, *Ireland*, p. 137

¹¹⁶ Kuno Meyer, ‘The Boyish Exploits of Finn’, in *Ériu*, 1 (1904), p. 181

¹¹⁷ Meyer, ‘Boyish Exploits’, p. 183

¹¹⁸ Proinsias Mac Cana, ‘Fianaigeacht in the Pre-Norman Period’, in *Béaloideas*, 54/55 (1986/1987), p. 76

¹¹⁹ Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn III: Introduction, Notes, Appendices, Indexes and Glossary* (Dublin, 1953), p. 85

¹²⁰ Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II – The Book of the Lays of Fionn* (London, 1933), p. 12

¹²¹ Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II*, p. 13

communities. The literary representation of the initiation ceremony of the *fían* must be very different in nature to any historical institution. We must assume so because of the supernatural elements that appear in the ritual as described below. The new recruits were metaphorically transformed into animals, or more specifically, game, in a “mock” hunt, and if they failed the test they were not admitted into the *fían*:

‘Ní gabthái fer díb so co mbo rífilí dá leabar déc na filidhechta. ní gabtha fer díb fós co nderntái latharlog mór co roiched fillidh a uathróigi. Ocus no chuirthe (*sic*) ann é ocus a sciath les ocus fad láime do chronn chuill. [ocus nó]nbar [lae]ch iar sin chuigi co náí sleguib leo ocus deich [n]imuirí atturru co ndibruigidís I nóinfecht é. ocus dá ngontai thairis sin é ní gabtai a bfianoigecht.

Ní gabtái fós fer díb so co nderntai fuiltfighi fair ocus go cuirthe trí feduib Erenn ina rith é co tigdísim uili ina diaid ar eiccill a gona. Ocus ní bídh aturro acht in craeb do ega. dá rugta fair do gontai é ocus ní gabthai iar sin. da crithnaidhidís a airm ina láimh ní gabtai. dá tucad craeb isin choill ní dá fholt as a fhighé ní mó no ghabtai. dá minagedh crand crín fá a chois ní gabtái. mina lingedh tar crann bud comard r[e] a édan ocus mina cromad fó cradd bu[d coma]r[d] rena glún ní gabtai é. ocus mina tucad in dealg as a chois dá ingin gan toirm[esc] a retha uime ní gabtai a bfianaigecht é. ocus dá ndernadh sin uili fa do muir Finn é’,¹²²

‘Of all these again not a man was taken until he were a prime poet versed in the twelve books of poesy. No man was taken till in the ground a large hole had been made (such as to reach the fold of his belt) and he used to be put into it with his shield and a forearm’s length of a hazel stick. Then must nine warriors, having nine spears, with a ten furrow’s width betwixt them and him, assail him and in concert let fly at him. If past that guard of his he were hurt then, he was not received into Fianship.

Not a man of them was taken till his hair had been interwoven into braids on him and he started at a run through Ireland’s woods; while they, seeking to wound him, followed in his wake, there having been between him and them but one forest bough by way of interval at first. Should he be overtaken, he was wounded and not received into Fianna after. If his weapons has quivered in his hand, he was not taken. Should a branch in the wood have disturbed anything of his hair out of its braiding,

¹²² *Silva Gadelica (I.-XXXI.): a Collection of Tales in Irish*, ed. S. H. O’Grady (London, 1892) Vol. I, pp 92-3

neither was he taken. If he had cracked a dry stick under his foot [as he ran] he was not accepted. Unless that [at his full speed] he had both jumped a stick level with his brow, and stooped to pass under one even with his knee, he was not taken. Also, unless without slackening his pace he could with his nail extract a thorn from his foot, he was not taken into Fianship: but if he performed all this he was of Finn's people'.¹²³

Wounded game is easier to catch and therefore essentially dead; quivering weapons means that the recruit has shown fear; and cracking sticks are a sign for the predator that prey is near. Another aspect of this initiation ceremony, is that the would-be-member had proved himself to not be prey. Not making sounds, being able to navigate possibly unfamiliar territory, and having a steady hand, are very important features in the predator. In a sense it could be argued that these young men are proving two things simultaneously: first, that they are not prey, and second that they are predator. Since the prerequisite to join the *fían* seems to be to undergo this test, the young males voluntarily submit to it. They do not become game in their physical form, but their status is essentially revoked, and it is fair game to wound or even kill the new recruits. All their humanity is taken away, simply stripped down to animalistic survival skills. If they passed the test, they were welcomed into the *fían*, and would now take on the guise of the hunter, instead of the prey. When examining the vocabulary used by the author of this passage to convey the implication of the stripping of humanity from the young men, it is noticeable that there are no words for animals specifically. It is still clear that the author wanted to present a notion of losing humanity, and replacing it by animal characteristics, but unlike the other examples used here, there are no words directly indicating the author's idea, and yet, it is still very clear to an audience what is happening. In *Tecosca Cormaic*, when asked how Cormac mac Airt was as a *gilla*, he answers, *ba-sa coistechtach caille*,¹²⁴ ('I listened carefully in the forest');¹²⁵ and *ba tó fásaig*,¹²⁶ ('I was quiet in the wilderness').¹²⁷ *Tecosca Cormaic* also talks of being skilled in hunting and fighting, all of which mirrors the initiation ceremony as described above. According to Joseph Nagy, 'the seemingly canine nature of fénnidi, especially Fenian ones, is

¹²³ *Silva Gadelica*, Vol. II, p. 100.

¹²⁴ Joseph Falaky Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw – The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 126

¹²⁵ Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 127

¹²⁶ Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 126

¹²⁷ Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 127

an expression of their martial identity'.¹²⁸ In *Duanaire Finn* in the story of *The Bathing of Oisín's Head*, Oisín speaks of his teeth in a matter much akin to wolves and hounds: 'they could gnaw a stag's haunch, hard and hungry and houndlike: they would not leave joint or jot of it but they would make mince-meat of'.¹²⁹ This description brings to mind images of wolves after having taken down a stag, their teeth gnawing at the tough skin and flesh. In many stories the portrayal of the *fíán*'s social structure much resembles that of packs of wolves, with an alpha male, here the leader of the *fíán*, and a complex hierarchy of warriors and women alike. They hunt together, though the males are primary actors here, and they live together and travel together. On their hunting trips and in battle, the *fíán* members, such as Caílte, have been known to make a cry, or shout, also known as *dord fíansa*, before they do battle.¹³⁰ According to the Dictionary of the Irish Language, *dord* means 'buzzing, humming, droning, intoning',¹³¹ saying specifically about *dord fíansa* that it is 'a kind of chant or refrain practised by the Fiana (accompanied sometimes by sounds produced by striking together the shafts of their spears)'.¹³² The explanation does not really give much information regarding the actual chant or humming of the *fíanna*, but by examining the other examples given under *dord* it becomes clear that *dord* denotes a non-verbal, and perhaps non-human, form of sound: it is found in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as the sound the Duind Cualngne makes; as the 'belling of a stag'; and as *dord na murduchann* meaning 'mermaids' chanting'.¹³³ The sound may not be as explicit as literary indications suggest the war cry of the *berserker* would have been, but the collective humming could in itself be seen as a "pack" ritual. By adding the striking together of spears to the *dord*, it becomes more of a means to create sounds in general, perhaps as a tool to appear as a larger group than the number who are actually on a battlefield. To some extent parallels can be drawn to the howling or growling of wolves in packs, as a form of communication, as well as the group mentality of expressing such sounds to establish a form of identity marker.

¹²⁸ Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 44

¹²⁹ Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn I*, p. 112

¹³⁰ Maire West, 'Aspects of *díberg* in the tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 49/50 (1997), p. 957

¹³¹ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (online), letter Degrá-dúus, column 357.

¹³² *DIL*, letter Degrá-dúus, column 357.

¹³³ *DIL*, letter Degrá-dúus, column 357.

The Naming of Dún Gaire

In the story *The Naming of Dún Gaire*, dated to c. 1150 by Gerard Murphy,¹³⁴ the *fían* is up against a group of seemingly canine warriors, known as the Dogheads, whose leader is Clíabhach ri coinneann coir ‘Clíabhach, righteous king of the Dogheads’.¹³⁵ It ends with victory for the *fían*: *ro mharbh lucht na ccenn gcon*,¹³⁶ (‘the folk with dogs’ heads were killed’).¹³⁷ The *cenn con* would imply either some form of a mask being worn by the men, or human men with dog heads, i.e. *cynocephali*. We are told that *fearrdorn a ffiacoil gach con / lán glaice laich na timcioll*,¹³⁸ (‘each dog’s tooth was equal to a man’s fist, its circuit as much as a warrior could grasp’),¹³⁹ indicating that their teeth were different to what may be considered as “normal” teeth, but also that these warriors were larger than those in the *fían*. A description like this lends credibility to the cynocephalic concept. Up until the mentioning of the size of the teeth, one could still be led to believe that these were simply men, wearing masks or some other form of disguise to make themselves look more menacing, or even behaving in a canine manner, but the comparison of the teeth, changes the perspective. The idea of cynocephali originated in the Greek and Roman traditions, where it was believed that ‘beyond the boundaries of the familiar world there lived types of humans very different from us’.¹⁴⁰ This is most likely how the dog-headed invaders are supposed to be seen: as an alien race encroaching on the lands of the *fían*, and not as shape-shifters. It does pose the question of why this particular type of alien race had been chosen as an opponent to Finn and his *fían*, over other types of aliens believed to exist. In *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* §§ 167 and 187, it is stated that Banba was the first to take Ireland, and that later Partholon was driven out by *Concind*,¹⁴¹ or *Concheind*,¹⁴² which is translated as *cynocephali*. Bernhardt-House has argued that the passages may indicate ‘an extremely early Irish familiarity with the works of Isidore and other such likely conduits of the tradition of the cynocephalic race’.¹⁴³ The earliest European literary examples of cynocephali come from Herodotus, writing in the fifth

¹³⁴ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn III*, p. cxvi

¹³⁵ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn II*, p. 23

¹³⁶ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn II*, p. 26

¹³⁷ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn II*, p. 27

¹³⁸ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn II*, p. 26

¹³⁹ Murphy, *Duanairé Finn II*, p. 27

¹⁴⁰ Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (New York, 2008), p. 94.

¹⁴¹ R.A.S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Dublin, 1939), p. 178

¹⁴² Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, p. 196

¹⁴³ Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, *Werewolves, Magical Hounds, and Dog-Headed Men in Celtic Literature* (New York, 2010), p. 301

century BC, and Ktesias of Cnidian, writing in the fourth century BC.¹⁴⁴ These dog-headed hybrids bridged the boundary between human and animal, being completely neither of the two.¹⁴⁵ Among scholars this raised a debate about humanity, and whether hybrids could be seen as human, or as alien beings.¹⁴⁶ These hybrids were seen by westerners as coming from the East, which had barely been explored yet, despite the Crusades from 1095 onwards.¹⁴⁷ The cynocephalic race, as seen here, was a reaction to European interest in a philosophical interpretation of souls and metamorphoses from human to animal.

Eachtach, Daughter of Diarmaid and Grainne

The metaphorical metamorphosis in the Fenian tradition is not only set towards animals: in some cases people are described as adopting characteristics specific to another gender, primarily female to male, in their general behaviour. This often occurs in relation to some form of tragedy upon the woman. An example from *Duanaire Finn* is the story of Eachtach, the daughter of Diarmaid and Gráinne, dated to between 1250 and 1400,¹⁴⁸ who adopted male warrior characteristics upon hearing of the death of her father.¹⁴⁹ Her change consisted of her shedding the norms attached to a woman, and taking on the warrior role of a man, by attacking Finn and his *fian* with her *fian*-brothers.¹⁵⁰ She took on single combat with Finn, and wounded him to the point where he needed to be helped.¹⁵¹ Her behaviour is also quite similar to the *berserkrsgangr* as described in the Old Norse tradition. It is perhaps much more overt when a female character, through a voluntary decision (despite it being caused by grief), takes on characteristics not inherent in her gender. Also, the single combat is reminiscent of *holmgangr*, a feature which will be dealt with later. Eachtach's gender-contradictory behaviour leads the discussion to the role of the women in the *fian*. The role of the warrior maiden, as Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha has observed, would not have been a common role since, 'in reality women did not appear to have had the capacity to sustain

¹⁴⁴ Bernhardt-House, *Werewolves*, p. 260

¹⁴⁵ Bartlett, *The Natural*, p. 95

¹⁴⁶ Bartlett, *The Natural*, p. 95

¹⁴⁷ Bartlett, *The Natural*, p. 101

¹⁴⁸ Murphy, *Duanaire Finn III*, p. 40

¹⁴⁹ Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn I*, pp 149-150

¹⁵⁰ For studies of gender expectations in medieval Ireland see the essays in Sarah Sheehan & Ann Dooley (eds.) *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland* (New York, 2013)

¹⁵¹ Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn I*, p. 151

careers as warriors, marauders, or battle-leaders',¹⁵² though there are a few examples of literary female warriors, such as Eachtach. One such example is Scáthach from *Tochmarc Emire*, who is a female warrior, whom Cú Chulainn sought out in order to learn the last feats of the warrior.¹⁵³ *Tochmarc Emire* is found in two versions, the earliest dated to the eighth century, and found in Rawlinson B 512, and the later version found in six manuscripts, the earliest of these being *Lebor na hUidre*, dated to the late eleventh or early twelfth century.¹⁵⁴ The encounter between Cú Chulainn and Derb Forgaill (considered below), is only found in one text, which source is *Aided Lugdach agus Derbforgaill*, dated to the tenth century.¹⁵⁵ In *Tochmarc Emire*, Scáthach was at war with another female warrior, Aífe, who, in the battle, fought Cú Chulainn and almost defeated him, but he tricked her by making her believe her chariot had fallen into the glen, and then overpowering her.¹⁵⁶ Although Scáthach and Aífe are not part of a *fíán* (it is at least not mentioned), they exhibit the traits of the male warrior in literature, and are a rare occurrence. It could be argued that since these women are foreign, in the sense that they are not living in Ireland, they are more “exotic”, and are able to show characteristics outside of the norm. As with Eachtach and Finn, Cú Chulainn needed a diversion in order to survive the fight with the women. It is interesting to note that it is a woman, and not a man, who challenges the leader, an aspect which goes against the norm in the established society. Eachtach is attacking Finn based on her grief, adding a sense of humanity to the poem. She does not want to take over Finn’s position, she simply wants some form of recompense, and in her mourning the only option, in her mind, is a violent one. This situation stands alone as an example of outside forces, working independently of the norm, influencing the *fíán*. The result is however not a lessening of Finn’s position; in fact there seem to be few changes to his position as alpha. Although belonging to the “involuntary” chapter of this study,¹⁵⁷ it is worth mentioning in this context of metaphorical gender metamorphosis, the story of ‘The Abbot of Drimnagh who was Changed into a Woman’,

¹⁵² Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and Settled Folk: Women, Honor, and Shame in Medieval Ireland’, in Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (eds.) *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland* (New York, 2013), p. 20

¹⁵³ Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, in T.P. Cross & C.H. Slover (eds.) *Ancient Irish Tales* (London, 1936), p. 163

¹⁵⁴ Ruairí Ó hUiginn, *Marriage, Law and Tochmarc Emire* (E.C. Quiggin Memorial Lecture Series, 15) (Cambridge, 2013), pp 6-7

¹⁵⁵ Ó hUiginn, *Marriage*, p. 37

¹⁵⁶ Cross and Slover, ‘Wooing of Emer’, p. 167

¹⁵⁷ See chapter II.

originally found in Additional 30, 512, fo. 10b (A), and *The Book of Fermoy*, p. 113a (F).¹⁵⁸ In this story, the abbot is cursed by an unknown power, morphing into a woman, in every physical sense.

The Law Texts

The fictional literature about the *fianna* gives a certain image of how they were perceived by the writers of the poems, but the law texts also provide a sense of how the canine imagery was used in terms of legal issues. The law texts are earlier in date than the literature, and therefore lend credence to the theory that the concept of canine imagery being used to describe certain types of human behaviour was established early on. The Old Irish law texts mentions specifically ‘violent women who go “into wolf-shape” (*i conrecht*) and who spend their time “wolfing” (*oc fáelad*) on the margins of society’.¹⁵⁹ The *Bretha Crólige*, dated to the late seventh century,¹⁶⁰ lists, among other women, *confæl conrechta, mer, dasachtag*,¹⁶¹ (‘a werwolf in wolf’s shape, an idiot, a lunatic’),¹⁶² as women ‘not to be taken to the house of a third party for sick-maintenance’.¹⁶³ Women and wolves are linked metaphorically, and it may be that the wolf was used as a metaphor for a “warrior woman”, meaning someone travelling with e.g. the *fianna*, or someone not living fully within the norms of society. Ní Dhonnchadha has argued that women who were not confined to a social location in society could be seen as a threat to the established order, although through immorality rather than violence.¹⁶⁴ This is not to say that these women were seen as particularly violent, but given that the wolf often moves on the borders of settled and civilised society, it may have been this aspect that was specific to these women: they were on the boundary of the settled society, but not a part of it as such. Often sexual connotations were associated with the wandering woman,¹⁶⁵ suggesting a form of prostitution. Just as the rest of the *fían* these women would have been outsiders in society. The role of women in the *Duanaire Finn* and *Acallam na Senórach* is generally quite modest, but the poem called *The Women Folk of the Fían*, dated

¹⁵⁸ Kuno Meyer, ‘Story of the Abbot of Druimnaig, who was Changed into a Woman’, in O.J. Bergin *et al* (eds.) *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts Vol. I* (Dublin, 1907), p. 76

¹⁵⁹ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and Settled Folk’, p. 21

¹⁶⁰ D. A. Binchy, ‘Bretha Crólige’, *Ériu* 12 (1938), p. 1.

¹⁶¹ Binchy, ‘Bretha Crólige’, p. 26.

¹⁶² Binchy, ‘Bretha Crólige’, p. 27.

¹⁶³ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and Settled Folk’, p. 32

¹⁶⁴ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and Settled Folk’, p. 22

¹⁶⁵ Ní Dhonnchadha, ‘Travelers and Settled Folk’, p. 22

to c. 1200,¹⁶⁶ in the *Duanaire Finn*,¹⁶⁷ lists mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives connected to the *fian*, and their relationships, and the sons they bore. Though it is an instrument to show the greatness of the sons born to these women, it is still of great significance that these women are mentioned: it shows the *fianna* as not simply a *Männerbund*, but as a social entity or society, comparable with a pack of wolves.

It can be partially concluded from the Irish material that the animal imagery used by the authors of the Fenian cycle was a method to describe, metaphorically, the ways in which the *fianna* were seen to live. They were not seen to actually metamorphose into animals, instead, characteristics specific to certain wild animals, both prey and predator, were used to describe these men and women, who were seen to live somewhat like wild animals. Interestingly, an area where animal imagery was not used was when women were taking on male characteristics, as seen with Eachtach, Scáthach, and Aífe. These women did not become men, but instead, either temporarily or permanently, took the position of a warrior, a predominantly male role, and acted according to their new status.

The study now turns to the Old Norse saga material, to examine any differences from or similarities to the Irish material just examined. The examples will also be metaphorical metamorphoses, rather than actual metamorphoses, which will be dealt with later.

SCANDINAVIAN EVIDENCE

Definition of Berserkr/Berserkir

The cause of the *berserkr* and his, supposedly, uncontrollable rage, has been studied in relation to neurochemical aspects, such as the study by Howard D. Fabing, ‘On Going Berserk: a Neurochemical Inquiry’, in *The Scientific Monthly*, 83: 5 (1956). However, despite the modern day research done on possible physical causes of the *berserkrsgangr*, there is no literary evidence to suggest an intake of mushrooms, or the like. On the contrary it seems to be more of an internally induced process, which can appear almost immediately, seemingly out of nowhere, if the person so wishes it to come upon him. The cases of *berserkrsgangr*, as will be discussed below, are always related to some form of martial act. The archaeological evidence cannot give any proper detailed description of *berserkir* warriors, but what has been

¹⁶⁶ Murphy, *Duanaire Finn III*, pp cxvi-cxvii

¹⁶⁷ Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II*, pp 100-13

found does link with the literary representation, to some extent, of bears and wolves.¹⁶⁸ It appears that the wolf was adopted into Scandinavian martial culture as emblematic animal around year 500, as is evident from the archaeological evidence.¹⁶⁹ Aleksander Pluskowski argues that in pre-Christian Scandinavia the image of the wolf, and associating oneself with it, was usually positive, and ‘this positive use of animalistic identity encompassed those individuals who were perceived as sharing a closer metaphysical relationship with the wolf’.¹⁷⁰ By identifying with animals, such as the wolf, the warrior made himself the predator, and his enemies the prey.¹⁷¹ The terms *berserkr* (singular) and *berserkir* (plural) will be used here, as this is their original Old Norse forms, and the English berserk and berserks, will only be used in quotations. Mary Danielli has argued that the *ber-* part of *berserkir* has often been taken to mean ‘bear’, while the latter part means a shirt, and that the leader of a group of *berserkir* is often named Björn, also meaning ‘bear’.¹⁷² Rudolph Simek agrees with the etymology of *ber-* as ‘bear’, suggesting that the warriors, like the quite similar *ulfheðnar*, wore animal skins, a portrayal of which is found on Vendel-Age Swedish helmets of the sixth- and seventh-centuries.¹⁷³ Danielli also notes that an alternative origin could be ‘bareshirt’, based on a passage in *Ynglinga saga*, found in the thirteenth-century *Heimskringla*, chapter 6, where the men led by Óðinn is said to be *brynjulausir*,¹⁷⁴ meaning ‘without armour’. These men were also said to *voru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bítu í skjöldu sína, voru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar*,¹⁷⁵ (‘were mad as dogs or wolves, bit in their shields, were strong as bears or bulls’).¹⁷⁶ However, Simek argues that *ber-* was misunderstood by Snorri Sturluson, and also by scholars up to the nineteenth century, who mistook it for *berr*, which means ‘naked’, an interpretation which gained support based on the depiction of the Germanic warriors of Tacitus who fought naked.¹⁷⁷ The *Cleasby and*

¹⁶⁸ H.R. Ellis Davidson, ‘Shape-changing in the Old Norse Sagas’, in Charlotte F. Otten (ed.), *A Lycanthropy Reader – Werewolves in Western Culture* (Syracuse, New York, 1986), p. 149

¹⁶⁹ Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 137

¹⁷⁰ Pluskowski, *Wolves*, p. 134

¹⁷¹ Pluskowski, *Wolves*, p. 141

¹⁷² M. Danielli, ‘Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature’, *Folklore* 56:2 (1945), pp 229-245, at p. 233.

¹⁷³ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 35

¹⁷⁴ *Ynglinga saga* in Samuel Laing, *The Heimskringla or the Sagas of the Norse Kings Vol. I*, 2nd Edition (London, 1889), ch. 6, p. 276

¹⁷⁵ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6, p. 276

¹⁷⁶ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6 p. 276

¹⁷⁷ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 35

Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary, also supports the notion of *ber* meaning ‘bear’.¹⁷⁸ The wolf and the bear were most likely deliberately chosen as metaphors for the *berserkir*, because both animals had fighting techniques that were familiar to the creators of the sagas, and which seemed to mirror the fighting styles of the *berserkir* and other warriors: ‘the bear is a lone fighter, an independent champion of tremendous power, with a certain nobility in his behaviour, although when carried away by rage he will strike down anyone in his way’.¹⁷⁹ The bear could be a representation of the *holmgangr*, where the wolf could be a representation of the twelve-man *berserkir* bands that raided both in Scandinavia and abroad.¹⁸⁰ In the Scandinavian saga tradition the *berserkr* is the wild warrior, often the opponent of the hero of the sagas, whose stereotypical characterisations were the ‘übernatürlichen Kräfte, der berserkgangr, das Heulen, das Beißen in Schildränder’.¹⁸¹ The *berserksgangr* has been compared to Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*. Ralph O’Connor has argued that, by using Marie-Louise Sjoestedt’s terms of the hero “inside” and “outside the tribe”, the *berserkr* is at the same time both inside and outside the tribe, since he is also found in kings’ retinues, or as O’Connor says: ‘the crack troops of a legendary king’,¹⁸² but at the same time they are portrayed as outlaws. ‘There are scattered references to *berserker* in early poetry, datable to between the tenth and twelfth centuries; but detailed descriptions do not appear until the Icelandic family sagas and legendary-heroic sagas (*Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*) composed from the thirteenth century onwards’.¹⁸³ According to Rudolph Simek, the earliest reference to *berserkr*, or *berserkir*, is in *Haraldskvæði*,¹⁸⁴ which can be found in the *Heimskringla*, c. 1225, other than that they are only alluded to seven times in poetry, primarily the Eddic lays and skaldic stanzas, of the twelfth- to fourteenth-centuries.¹⁸⁵ A similar character to the *berserkir* is the *ulfheðnar*, ON ‘wolf-skins’, who are mentioned in connection with the *berserkir*, and is a ‘type of warrior in animal guise who had their origin in the cult bands of warriors dedicated to Odin’.¹⁸⁶ There are generally two

¹⁷⁸ Volundr Lars Agnarsson, *The Cleasby and Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary*, p. 61

¹⁷⁹ Davidson, ‘Shape-changing’, p. 150

¹⁸⁰ Davidson, ‘Shape-changing’, p. 150

¹⁸¹ Gerd Sieg, ‘Die Zweikämpfe der Isländersagas’, in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 95:1 (1966), p. 6

¹⁸² Ralph O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk? Warriors at the Edge of Humanity in Irish and Icelandic Sagas’, in Jan Erik Rekdal & Charles Doherty (eds.) *King and Warrior in Early North-West Europe* (Dublin, **forthcoming**)

*I am very grateful to Ralph O’Connor for allowing me to use his work prior to publication.

¹⁸³ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

¹⁸⁴ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 35

¹⁸⁵ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 35

¹⁸⁶ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 338

stereotypes of *berserkir*: as an élite troop of mostly twelve men, who serve famous kings; and as the wandering trouble-maker, who travels both alone and in groups, challenging farmers, demanding women, and who can only be beaten by the hero.¹⁸⁷ O’Connor notes that it is ‘possible that some notion of warrior-rage lies at the basis of these links, since warriors in Indo-European cultures are presented as the “anger professionals”; but it is equally possible that the close association between shapeshifting and warlike *furor* in Norse was secondary to a more general concept of transfiguring rage associated mythologically with primordial monsters’.¹⁸⁸ This study will now examine the literary evidence for the metaphorical metamorphosis of *berserksgangr*, using both the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.

Egils saga Skallagrímsonar

There is one case where it is difficult to determine exactly whether it deals with *berserksgangr* or something else, which is still similar. In *Egils saga Skallagrímsonar*, composed in the early or mid-thirteenth century, but set in the ninth- and tenth-centuries,¹⁸⁹ we are told how Kveld-Úlfr, grandfather to the hero Egill Skallagrímsonar, got his name. According to the story he is bad-tempered around people:

‘Enn dag hvern, er at kveldi leið, þá gerðist hann styggr, svá at fáir menn máttu orðum við hann koma. Var hann kveldsvæfr. Þat var mál manna, at hann væri mjök hamrammr. Hann var kallaðr Kveldúlfr’,¹⁹⁰

‘Every day towards evening he would grow so bad-tempered that few people dared even address him. He always went to sleep early in the evening and woke up early in the morning. People claimed he was a shape-shifter and they called him Kveldulf’.¹⁹¹

Kveld- means ‘evening’ or ‘night’, and Úlfr means ‘wolf’, he therefore becomes *Night-Wolf*. In the same saga, Kveldúlfr and Skallagrímur, father of Egill, take on *berserksgangr* as they attack a ship, and over fifty men on board the ship: *og svo er sagt, að þá hamaðist hann, og fleiri voru þeir förunautar hans, er þá hömuðust*,¹⁹² (‘he is said to have become frenzied like

¹⁸⁷ Simek, *Dictionary*, p. 35

¹⁸⁸ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

¹⁸⁹ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

¹⁹⁰ Valdimar Ásmundarson, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (Reykjavik, 1892), ch. 1, p. 92

¹⁹¹ Bernard Scudder, *Egil’s Saga* (London, 2004), ch.1, p. 3

¹⁹² Ásmundarson, *Egils saga*, ch. 27, p. 68

a wild animal. Some other men of his went into a frenzy too').¹⁹³ Not at any point in the saga are Kveldúlfr or Skallagrímr identified as *berserkir*, instead the compounds related to *hamr*, i.e. 'skin', are used for both of them. Even in the following example there is no mention of *berserksgangr*:

‘Svá er sagt, at þeim mönnum væri farit, er **hamrammir** eru, eða þeim, er berserksgangr var á, at meðan þat var framit, þá vóru þeir svá sterkir, at ekki helzt við þeim, enn fyrst, er af var gengit, þá vóru þeir ómáttkari en at vanda. Kveldúlfr var ok svá, at þá er af honum gekk **hamremmin**, þá kendi hann mædi af sókn þeiri, er hann hafði veitt, ok var hann þá af öllu saman ómáttugr, svá at hann lagðist í rekkju’,¹⁹⁴

‘It is said that people who could take on **the character of animals**, or went berserk, became so strong in this state that no one was a match for them, but also that just after it wore off they were left weaker than usual. Kveldulf was the same, so that when his **frenzy** wore off he felt exhausted by the effort he had made, and was rendered completely powerless and had to lie down and rest’.¹⁹⁵

This complete exhaustion after a fight could be argued to be a response to the extent of inhumanity Kveldúlfr has experienced during *berserksgangr*, but the saga does not specifically say they partake in *berserksgangr*. Rather the mention of *berserksgangr* in the example above seems to be more an afterthought, trying to compare the two different, yet similar, states of battle frenzy. However, there is definitely some form of de-humanisation of the men under *hamrammir*, i.e. ‘able to change one’s shape’,¹⁹⁶ and the exhaustion of Kveldúlfr in particular, leading to his death later in the saga, could be a result of him not being able to fully return to his human state. O’Connor has argued that Kveldúlfr definitely is a shape-shifter, ‘but not in the zoomorphic sense, and not a werewolf’.¹⁹⁷ Kveldúlfr seems to be, by the author, both associated and disassociated with werewolves and *berserkir*: ‘he [Kveldúlfr] has married a *berserkr*’s daughter, goes into a frenzy which is identical to *berserksgangr* and suffers the same ill effects afterwards, but great care is taken to keep him in the category of shapeshifter (*ham*-compounds) and not *berserkr*’.¹⁹⁸ The example here

¹⁹³ Scudder, *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 27, p. 47

¹⁹⁴ Ásmundarson, *Egils saga*, ch. 27, pp 69-70

¹⁹⁵ Scudder, *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 27, p. 48

¹⁹⁶ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 237

¹⁹⁷ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

¹⁹⁸ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

could be argued to be ambiguous, since there does seem to be an allusion to *berserksgangr*, but with the use of *hamr*- compounds.

Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar

Grettis saga, dated to the beginning of the fourteenth century, depicting the Viking Age, and drawing on earlier sources,¹⁹⁹ sees Grettir fight with many *berserkir*, and defeat them quite easily, such as the time he fought the two brothers, Þórir þömb and Ögmundur illi. He cunningly lured them in with friendship, food and drink; took away their weapons; and locked them in a shed.²⁰⁰ Not only were the brothers named as *berserkir*, but when they were locked in the shed, they: *kemr á þá berserksgangur ok grenja sem hundar*,²⁰¹ ('then the berserker fury came upon them, and they started howling like dogs').²⁰² Grettir killed both of the brothers with just one thrust of his spear. The *berserkir* at this stage did not have any weapons, but the danger was still very real, since their frenzy and their power was very real. It must then be assumed that these *berserkir* were then potentially able to kill, or at least wound, an opponent using only their body strength, although there are no examples of this that this study is aware of. On another occasion, Grettir killed the *berserkr* Snækollur, after he demanded the daughter of the farmer Grettir was staying with.²⁰³ In this instance, it is one of the features of spurring on the *berserkrsgangr* that ends up being the cause of death for Snækollur, namely, the biting of the shield rim:

‘Tók hann þá at grenja hátt ok beit í skjaldarröndina og setti skjöldinn upp í munn sér ok gein yfir hornit skjaldarins ok lét allólmliga. Grettir varpaði sér um völlinn, ok er hann kemr jafnfram hesti berserksins, slær hann fæti sínum neðan undir skjaldarsporðinn svá hart, at skjöldrinn gekk upp í munninn, svá at rifnaði kjaþrinn, en kjálkarnir hlupu ofan á bringuna’,²⁰⁴

‘He began to bellow loudly and to bite the edge of his shield, putting the shield in his mouth and grinning over the rim and getting enraged. Grettir dashed out into the field, and when he came right up to the berserker’s horse he kicked the bottom of the shield

¹⁹⁹ Jesse L. Byock, *Grettir’s Saga* (Oxford, 2009), p. vii

²⁰⁰ Richard C. Boer, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Germany, 1900), ch. 19, pp 71-73

²⁰¹ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 19, p. 76

²⁰² Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, ch. 19, p. 60

²⁰³ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 40, pp 151-153

²⁰⁴ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 40, pp 152-153

so hard to the shield went right up into the man's mouth so that the jaw fell down on his chest'.²⁰⁵

Grettir is the hero and he, of course, can kill a *berserkr* because of his strength, which is almost super-human, without him having any supernatural talents, nor going into *berserksgangr*. The hero of the saga will often come upon a *berserkr* in his youth, when he still has to prove himself to his family, and he will defeat the *berserkr*, because he is the hero. Glúmr, from *Víga-Glúms saga*, went to Norway to see his grandfather, but his grandfather did not immediately accept him. While he was there the *berserkr* Björn járnhaus came to the feast of Glúmr's grandfather, Vigfúss, and challenged every man to *hólmanga*, but everyone had an excuse not to accept.²⁰⁶ Glúmr, however, fought the *berserkr* in his grandfather's hall, but spared his life by not killing him, but felling him to the ground outside of the hall, removing him from the space he had tried to disturb.²⁰⁷ After this, Glúmr was recognised by his grandfather.

Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks

In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, of which the most significant manuscript is a later text of the fourteenth or early-fifteenth century, found in the Royal Library of Copenhagen as Gl.kgl.sml.2845 4to,²⁰⁸ the *berserkr* Angantýr is the oldest of twelve brothers, all sons of Arngrímr and Eyfura,²⁰⁹ the same number as a whole group of *berserkir*:

‘Allir váru þeir berserkir, svá sterkir ok miklir kappar, at aldri vildu þeir fleiri fara í hernað en tólf, ok kómu þeir aldri svá til orrostu, at eigi hefði þeir sigr; af þessu urðu þeir ágætir um öll lönd, ok engi konungr var sá, er eigi gæfi þeim þat, er þeir vildu hafa’,²¹⁰

‘They were all berserks, champions so great and strong that on their forays they were never more than twelve, and they never went into battle without gaining the victory;

²⁰⁵ Byock, *Grettir's Saga*, ch. 40, p. 114

²⁰⁶ Guðmundur Pjertursson, *Víga-Glúms Saga, sive Vita Víga-Glúmi* (Havniæ, 1786), ch. 6, p. 32

²⁰⁷ Pjertursson, *Víga-Glúms Saga*, ch. 6, p. 34

²⁰⁸ Christopher Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra – The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (London, 1960), p. xxiv

²⁰⁹ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 2, p. 3

²¹⁰ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 2, p. 3

for this they were famed in every land, and there was no king who would not grant them what they demanded'.²¹¹

When they go into *berserksgangr* they *synir sverðun ok bitu skjaldarrendr, ok kom á þá berserksgangr*,²¹² ('drew their swords and bit the rims of their shields, and the *berserksgangr* came upon them').²¹³ Here they act first by biting their shields before the *berserksgangr* comes upon them. It is a form of ritual to bring on the frenzy, and is a voluntary act. They are also said to be howling, but not until they have killed all the men on two ships: *gengu þeir á land upp grenjandi*,²¹⁴ ('they went up on land uttering a fearsome sound').²¹⁵ *Grenjandi* was translated by Christopher Tolkien as "howling", and *Cleasby and Vigfusson* has the same translation.²¹⁶ In *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* the term *grenja* also appears and it is a hideous, fearsome, fear inducing sound, which could be howling, or a form of bellowing. The aspect of the "impotent" *berserkir* after the *berserksgangr* is also found in *Saga Heiðreks*, where Angantýr and his brothers are described as weaker than usual after the attack is over and they have won.²¹⁷ Angantýr fathers a daughter, who will be considered later, who also acts a *berserkir*.

Berserkir in King's Retinue

It was mentioned above that O'Connor argued that the *berserkir* functioned both inside and outside a tribe, both as an outlaw and as a member of a king's retinue. This dual role was also held by the *fianna*. This will now be discussed further, examining the evidence for *berserkir* in a king's retinue, and their role as such. A group of usually twelve *berserkir* were often employed in a king's retinue, and would be part of his personal guard. Despite being in a king's retinue, they are portrayed as being challenged in that position by the hero, and in some cases they are portrayed badly, even though they have a high position. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* King Adils of Uppsala in Sweden had twelve *berserkir* who defended his lands. The *berserkir* were led astray by their king, when he ordered them to ambush King Helgi, who was the father and former husband of King Adils' wife, which ultimately led to the death of King Helgi.²¹⁸ Here the *berserkir* are loyal to a fault, and had no scruples doing the king's

²¹¹ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 2, p. 3

²¹² Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 5

²¹³ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 5

²¹⁴ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 5

²¹⁵ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 5

²¹⁶ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 214

²¹⁷ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3

²¹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur* (Copenhagen, 1904), ch. 12, pp 33-34

bidding. In the same saga a farmer's son named Svipdag came to the court of King Adils, and as was custom for the returning *berserkir*, they went around the hall challenging every man to claim that he was equal to them.²¹⁹ Svipdag took up the challenge, and the following morning *hólmganga* was fought between Svipdag and the *berserkir*, however, later that same night that the *berserkir* attacked him, and he killed four of them. The *berserkir*'s role at King Adils' court appears to be one of representing the strength of the king and his kingdom. The challenges posed by these men are a way to assert the power of the king's men, and therefore the king himself. In such cases the king is challenged as well, as will be seen later, but he too refuses to fight them. This, however, does not in any way diminish his claim to the throne. After their failure to kill but one man, King Adils outlawed the *berserkir*, which led them to raid their former king's lands, and Svipdag was sent to do battle with them. In the battle he lost his eye, and King Adils never came to his aid as promised, and Svipdag left the king's service.²²⁰ The *berserkir* are part of King Adils' retinue and therefore abide by his orders, although their discharge and subsequent outlawing is an example of how *berserkir* were also viewed: as property with a lesser value. Essentially these men have the strength to overthrow the king, or at least raid his lands. The king however does not give them much thought or value once a new warrior shows his prowess. Svipdag is asked to take over for the *berserkir*, and he does, but King Adils does not seem to care much about who protects him, as long as it is the strongest person. The loyalty, essentially, is a one-way street. The same custom of challenging men when *berserkir* return from fighting is also found at the court of King Hrólfr later on in the same saga. The men in the hall, including the king, all give a very courteous refusal to take up the challenge, but again Svipdag claimed that he is an equal.²²¹ The king stopped the fight before it broke out, and the two reconciled and became friends.²²² This custom is once again shown when Bǫðvarr joined the court of King Hrólfr, and he throws the *berserkr* down on the ground, only wounding him.²²³ In all of the cases portrayed in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, the *berserkir* assert a physical strength probably a representation of the strength of the kingdom. While in the service of their respective kings there are no real challenges to the king's authority; it is not until a king has acted dishonourably towards his *berserkir* that there is a risk of retaliation. The ritual of challenging each man in the hall appears to be just that: a ritual, which may be a literary representation of the historical institution of warriors in

²¹⁹ Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, ch. 14, p. 37

²²⁰ Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, ch. 14, pp 37-42

²²¹ Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, ch. 15, pp 44-45

²²² Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, ch. 15, p. 45

²²³ Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, ch. 24, p. 73

the king's retinue, challenging each other to prove who is the strongest. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, dated to around the mid-thirteenth century, the concept of *berserkir* as property is portrayed very clearly: Earl Hákon in Norway has two Swedish *berserkir*, Halli and Leiknir, who were given to him by the Swedish king.²²⁴ Such is the description of their *berserksgangr*:

‘Peir géngu berserksgang, ok vóru þá eigi í mannligu eðli er þeir vóru reiðir, ok fóru galnir sem hundar ok óttuðust hvárki eld né járn’,²²⁵

‘They used to go berserk, and once they had worked themselves up into a frenzy, they were wholly unlike human beings, storming about like mad dogs and afraid of neither fire nor weapons’.²²⁶

The Earl gives the two *berserkir* to a man named Vermundr, who takes them back to Iceland with him, where he then gives them to his brother, Styr.²²⁷ The saga depicts how these two men are moved around like cattle, and could indicate a view of *berserkir* in the service of kings and chiefs as simply a form of weapon, which can be used or discarded at the owner's leisure. They are seen more as property and status symbols of the owner than men in their own right. *Berserkir* were part of a king or chief's retinue, as seen in the above example. However, this was not a guarantee that they would solely use their strength against the king or chief's enemies, and both Halli and Leiknir cause trouble in Iceland.

Hólmganga

The characteristics of the *berserkir* and the pattern of events around the *hólmganga* are seen by Gerd Sieg as ‘Teile einer primär dichterischen Schöpfung’,²²⁸ a concept which was already established at the time of compiling the sagas.²²⁹ The tradition of *hólmganga*, as described in the *Íslendingasögur*, was outlawed between c. 1006 and 1014.²³⁰ Despite outlawing *hólmganga*, the practice appears in both *Grettis saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga*.²³¹ The tradition of *hólmganga*, ‘was a compromise between the antagonistic conceptions of private and communal law’.²³² It was single combat ‘fought out with naked weapons until one

²²⁴ Guðrandur Vigfusson, *Eyrbyggja saga* (Leipzig, 1864), ch. 25, pp 38-39

²²⁵ Vigfusson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25, p. 38

²²⁶ H. Pálsson & P. Edwards *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London, 1989), ch. 25, pp 68-69

²²⁷ Vigfusson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25, p. 39

²²⁸ Sieg, ‘Die Zweikämpfe der Isländersagas’, p. 6 ‘parts of a primarily poetic work’

²²⁹ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 6

²³⁰ Gwyn Jones, ‘The Religious Elements of the Icelandic “Hólmganga”’, in *The Modern Language Review*, 27:3 (1932), p. 307

²³¹ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 4

²³² Jones, ‘Religious Elements’, p. 307

combatant gains the victory’,²³³ and which was ‘regulated by the injunctions of a social etiquette of the duel, the *hólmgöngulög*, or Law of the Wager-of-Battle’.²³⁴ However, these rules were not written down until the later Christian period.²³⁵ The sagas show no evidence of men, who were about to partake in *hólmganga*, relying on any form of divine power,²³⁶ but there are examples of men using *seiðr*, or witchcraft, in order to protect themselves. In *Egils saga*, a man named Ljót inn bleika is described thus as he enters the field where he is about to fight: *Ok er hann gekk fram á völlinn at hólmstaðnum, þá kom á hann berserksgangr. Tók hann þá at grenja illiliga ok beit í skjöld sinn*,²³⁷ (‘And when he entered the arena, a berserk fury came over him and he started howling menacingly and biting at his shield’).²³⁸ It can also be argued that the *hólmganga* between Egill and Atli, in the same saga, shows a form of *berserkersgangr* by Egill, when he bit the throat of Atli, since this is the only way to beat him, because Atli had used *seiðr* to protect him from Egill’s sword.²³⁹

One third of all *hólmganga* in sagas is the hero versus *berserkir* or *vikingr*, and sometimes these two are interchangeable.²⁴⁰ The usual pattern of a *hólmganga* in the literature seems to be that a *berserkr* and his men take a woman away from her father or husband, challenging the man of the house to a duel if he does not give up the woman.²⁴¹ Due to the *berserkr*’s knowledge of his own strength during *berserksgangr* he feels invincible, but in most cases the *berserkr* loses to his opponent, if his opponent is the hero.²⁴² When the hero is the one in *berserksgangr* then he will, of course, win, otherwise he would not be the hero. There are cases of the *berserkr* not being slain, but merely wounded. The *berserkr* would then have to pay a form of ransom in order to buy himself free.²⁴³ Most of the examples in the literature portray *hólmganga* as taking place outside of Iceland, because single combats were a part of the overseas adventures of the hero.²⁴⁴ Sieg has argued that due to the compilers issues with

²³³ Jones, ‘Religious Elements’, p. 307

²³⁴ Jones, ‘Religious Elements’, p. 307

²³⁵ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 2

²³⁶ Jones, ‘Religious Elements’, p. 308

²³⁷ Ásmundarson, *Egils saga*, ch. 64, p. 198

²³⁸ Scudder, *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 65, p. 139

²³⁹ Ásmundarson, *Egils saga*, ch. 65, p. 205

²⁴⁰ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 2

²⁴¹ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 3

²⁴² Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 3

²⁴³ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 3

²⁴⁴ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, pp 3-6

the untrustworthiness of some episodes in the saga material, they deliberately located these abroad.²⁴⁵

Female Berserker

The story of Eachtach, as discussed above, has similarities in the Old Norse tradition, which also has females who take on a role primarily attributed to males, namely that of the “shield-maiden”. The term “shield maiden” is arguably an outdated term, and very much a product of the later romanticised idea of the Viking Age. Instead of this outdated term, this study will use simply ‘female warriors’. Most of the examples for the female warrior are found in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, or in the *fornaldarsögur*, which are unreliable at best as historical sources, but they do give an insight into what Natalie Zemon Davies and Carol J. Clover have termed, ‘an underlying concern with the basic issue of where one sex stops and the other begins – not only psychosexually, but also socially’.²⁴⁶ One of these women is Hervor from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Hervor is the only daughter of Angantýr and *hon fæddisk upp með jarli ok var sterk sem karlar, ok þegar hon mátti sér nokkut, tamðisk hon meir við skot ok skjold ok sverð en við sauma eða borða*,²⁴⁷ (‘she was brought up in the house of the jarl, and she was as strong as a man; as soon as she could do anything for herself she trained herself more with bow and shield and sword than with needlework and embroidery’).²⁴⁸ While still quite young she ran away and essentially became a highway robber, killing and robbing men for own gain. The jarl eventually brought her back home, but she continued to treat others badly.²⁴⁹ Because of her mistreatment of a slave, the slave told her a serf fathered her, and the jarl was then forced to tell her that her father was Angantýr. When she heard this she decided to go and claim her inheritance as sole heir. After being dressed and outfitted as a man on her own demands, she joined a group of Vikings and took the name Hervarðr, the male equivalent of her own name, Hervor. She became the leader of the small Viking band. Even though it is not stated why, it must be assumed it was due to her skills as a leader and as a warrior. The Vikings and Hervor arrived at the island of Sámseyjar, where Angantýr was buried. Hervor went through flames and into the barrow, where she proclaimed her inherited right and called upon her father: *Vaki þú, Angantýr / Vekr þik*

²⁴⁵ Sieg, ‘Zweikämpfe’, p. 7

²⁴⁶ Carol J. Clover, ‘Maiden Warriors and Other Sons’, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 85:1 (1986), p. 36

²⁴⁷ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 10

²⁴⁸ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 10

²⁴⁹ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks*, ch. 3, p. 10

Hervor / *eingadóttir*,²⁵⁰ (‘wake (you), Angantýr / *Hervor* wakes you / your only daughter’).²⁵¹ Then she laid claim to the sword *Tyrfingr*, an heirloom of her family, which was buried with her father. Angantýr awoke, refused to give her the sword because she was only a woman, and prophesised about her future son, *Heiðrek*. Eventually he gave up the sword to her after warning her of its powers, and she left. *Hervor* stayed a while with King *Guðmundar* of *Glasisvöllum*, who suspected she was a woman dressed as a man, but never told her of his suspicion.²⁵² After leaving the king’s court, she had another stint with a group of Vikings, before, suddenly becoming weary of the whole thing, and for no apparent reason *fór hon til Bjarmar jarls ok settisk til hannyrðanáms*,²⁵³ (‘she went to Bjarmar the jarl, and settled down to fine work with her hands’).²⁵⁴ She married the son of King *Guðmundar* and they had a son, *Heiðrek*, who became the protagonist of the rest of the saga. *Hervor* is unique in that she seems to have a period of *fíanna* related “coming-of-age”, or “coming-of-womanhood”, where she is a highway robber and a Viking, a *díberg* of sorts. She is the only child of Angantýr and takes on the role traditionally held by the son as the claimant of inheritance. It seems to have been a common thing in the Old Norse society that the son would spend some time abroad, preferably at the court of a king, and *Hervor* does so here. Before she sets out on her *fíanna*-like period of adventure, she is already skilled in wielding weapons, a feat she herself is responsible for learning. This pull towards weapons rather than embroidery could be argued to be a “genetic” aspect of her father’s *berserkir* status and nature. However, *Hervor* is never described as partaking in acts that have so far been related directly to *berserksgangr*. Only once do we hear about her fighting, other than that it is only implied. For some reason unbeknownst to the audience, other than she is becoming weary, she settles down, completely abandoning her former warrior ways, and goes from a female warrior, to settling down. In *Atlakviða*, preserved in the *Codex Regius*, c. 1270,²⁵⁵ *Guðrún* is the sister of *Hogni* and *Gunnarr*, who went to King *Atli*, *Guðrún*’s husband, and were killed by the king’s men. In revenge for the unlawful slaying of her brothers, *Guðrún* brandished her armour, burned down the hall with the murderers in it, and killed *Atli* in his own bed.²⁵⁶ As with *Eachtach*, the *berserkrangr* of *Guðrún*, although never explicitly stated as such, is spurred

²⁵⁰ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðdreks*, ch. 3, p. 14

²⁵¹ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðdreks*, ch. 3, p. 14

²⁵² Tolkien, *Saga Heiðdreks*, ch. 4, p. 20

²⁵³ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðdreks*, ch. 4, p. 20

²⁵⁴ Tolkien, *Saga Heiðdreks*, ch. 4, p. 20

²⁵⁵ Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda Vol. I – Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969), p. xi

²⁵⁶ Dronke, *Poetic Edda Vol. I*, stanza 41-44, pp 11-12

on by an act of murder, followed by sorrow and grief by the woman left behind. The same episode takes place, but in more detail in *Atlamál in Grænlensko*, stanzas 47 and 48.²⁵⁷ The metaphorical metamorphosis of adopting gender specific traits, not associated with the characters own gender, shows the fluidity of the concept of metamorphosis in the medieval period, and of the boundaries between not just man and animal, but also between genders.

Transformation through Terror

ON *Verða at gjalti*, from *göltr* ‘bog’, literally meaning ‘to be turned into a bog’, i.e. ‘to turn mad with terror’,²⁵⁸ derived from the Irish *geilt*, meaning a wild man living in the woods.²⁵⁹ In early Irish narrative two things often happen to a king once the end of his reign is upon him: he either dies a threefold death (i.e. falling or hanging; wounding or burning; and drowning or interment), or he is stricken with panic and ‘flees the battlefield and assumes a savage existence’.²⁶⁰ William Sayers has argued that the Old Norse *verða at gjalti* stems from a period close to the settlement of Iceland,²⁶¹ based on its form when it appears in the sagas. *Geilt* or *verða at gjalti* is the opposite of what a *berserkir* was supposed to be. The men who *verða at gjalti* were so afraid that the only thing they could do was to hide in the woods, sometimes for years. However, where *berserkir* seemed to be able to control their transformation, men who *verða at gjalti* could be exposed to external sources, forcing them, through *seiðr*, into this fear-stricken state.²⁶² When the theme is used in the Icelandic sagas it ‘occurs in an episode where it stands in sharp contrast to normative Icelandic values of self-reliance, initiative, control, and courage’.²⁶³ By running you were labelled as *geilt* in Irish, or *niðingr* in Old Norse. *Niðingr*, a word which still exists in some parts of Scandinavia today, is synonymous with a person with no honour, a coward, and someone who is afraid. By having characters act with panic in battle, or upon killing another man, the Icelandic sagas and the early Irish narrative set the stage for men who do the opposite; the *berserkir* and the *fianna*. Despite the *berserkir* being portrayed as mean, evil and conniving men, they never flee from a fight. Panic is not in their vocabulary.

²⁵⁷ Dronke, *Poetic Edda Vol. I*, p. 86

²⁵⁸ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 223

²⁵⁹ William Sayers, ‘Deployment of an Irish Loan: ON “verða at gjalti” “to Go Mad with Terror”’, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 93:2 (1994), p. 157

²⁶⁰ Sayers, ‘Deployment’, p. 159

²⁶¹ Sayers, ‘Deployment’, p. 165

²⁶² Sayers, ‘Deployment’, p. 167

²⁶³ Sayers, ‘Deployment’, p. 174

Ralph O'Connor puts forward the argument that the portrayal of the *berserksgangr* in the Icelandic sagas give an impression that it is not a voluntary action, but an involuntary one.²⁶⁴ He uses the example of Halli and Leiknir in *Eyrbyggja saga*, saying that the slightest offence would set them off. However, having a temper appears to be a necessary evil if one was a *berserkr*. In order to be the best warrior they had to be in touch with what gave them the strength to fight and win, which was here their rage. In their battle-frenzy, which could be argued to lay dormant, they would act out and fight in a way best described by the authors by using animalistic imagery and metaphors. O'Connor also uses an example from *Vatnsæla saga*, where 'Þórir Ingimundarson plaintively tells his brother Þorsteinn that he feels himself to be less of a man than his brother because of his condition',²⁶⁵ saying that the *á mi kemr berserksgangr jafnan Þá er ek vilda sízt, ok vilda ek, bróðir, at Þú gerðir at* ('berserksgangr always comes over me when I want it least, and I wish you would do something about it, brother').²⁶⁶ Þórir's brother then heals him by praying, and Þórir never undergoes *berserksgangr* again. It is important to note here the very Christian element of praying for a person to avoid going into *berserksgangr*. This would not have been a common interpretation, since the only way of never again going into *berserksgangr* again usually seems to be through death. The Christian element is obvious in this text, and therefore it cannot be considered as a valuable argument to support that *berserksgangr* was generally an involuntary act. The church would of course have had some issues with this type of behaviour and the practice was outlawed between 1006 and 1014,²⁶⁷ which would probably cause the church to condemn this sort of behaviour, and what better way to do this than to cure it with prayers.

Before turning to the metamorphosis of the human body, as found in the literature, it can be concluded that the examples shown above give an overall picture of a tradition of metaphorical animalistic characteristics used by the authors to explain the almost inhuman rage, actions and behaviour of the characters as we find them in the Medieval Irish and Old Norse narrative material. The *fianna* and the *berserkir* were not necessarily seen as actually metamorphosing into an animal shape, but by applying certain physical and mental characteristic, primarily attributed to animals, the authors were able to place these characters outside of the norm, while still maintaining a close connection to the norm. The characters

²⁶⁴ O'Connor, 'Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?'

²⁶⁵ O'Connor, 'Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?'

²⁶⁶ O'Connor, 'Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?'

²⁶⁷ Jones, 'Religious Elements', p. 307

were created to be both supernatural, i.e. their way of life, strength, howling, and also natural, i.e. their everyday life, their behaviour apart from their battle frenzy.

LITERAL METAMORPHOSIS

The study will now consider the literary representations of voluntary literal metamorphosis. These examples are different from the examples above, because here the characters are described as transforming, and not just taking on animalistic characteristics. Not all of these examples will have connections to warrior frenzy, as we have seen with the examples above.

The term on *hamr*, OHG *hemdi*, Danish *ham* ‘a skin’, primarily refer to the skin or fur of an animal, but also ‘shape’ with the phrase *skipta hömum*, ‘to change shape’,²⁶⁸ was used in the medieval Scandinavian sources for a pelt, a skin, and a shape which both gods and men put on to change their shape.²⁶⁹ A *hamr* could be made of feathers, such as the one the goddess Freyja used. A *varghamr* was the wolf-skin which men would put on to change into a *vargr*, i.e. a wolf.²⁷⁰ Another word also existed for wolf, *úlfr*, which seems to refer more to the actual animal. ‘Other related terms connected to werewolves or shape-shifting beings are *vargstakkr* (wolf coat), *úlframr* (wolf skin), *úlfheðinn* (wolf skin / pelt) and *berserkr* (bear coat)’.²⁷¹

Völsunga saga

In *Völsunga saga*, composed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century,²⁷² a *fornaldarsögur*, we meet King Völsung, who is slain in battle against King Siggeir, his son-in-law, and King Völsung’s sons are laid in stocks in the middle of the forest:

‘En at miðri nótt þá kom þar ylgr ein ór skógi gömul, at þeim, er þeir sátu í stokkinum. Hún var bæði mikil og illilig. Henni varð þat fyrir, at hún bítr einn þeira til bana. Síðan át hún þann upp allan. Eptir þat fór hún í brott’,²⁷³

²⁶⁸ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 236

²⁶⁹ Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, ‘The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature’, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106: 3 (2007), p. 279

²⁷⁰ Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Werewolf’, p. 280

²⁷¹ Guðmundsdóttir, ‘Werewolf’, p. 280

²⁷² O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

²⁷³ Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, in G. Jónsson & B. Viljhálmsson (eds.) *Fornaldarsög Norðurlanda Vol. I*, via heimskringla.no, ch. 5

‘At midnight an old she-wolf came to them out of the woods as they sat in the stocks. She was both large and grim-looking. She bit one of the brothers to death and then ate him all up. After that she went away’.²⁷⁴

The she-wolf came for nine nights, and killed and ate all but Sigmundar. Signy, his sister, sent a man to put honey on Sigmundar’s face. When the she-wolf came back, instead of eating him, she smelled the honey and licked his face. The she-wolf put her tongue in his mouth, and he bit down on it, and she jerked back so hard that her tongue came off and she died from her wounds. *En þat er sögn sumra manna, at sú in sama ylgr væri móðir Siggeirs konungs ok hafí hún brugðit á sik þessu líki fyrir tröllskapar sakir og fjölkynngi,*²⁷⁵ (‘and some men say that the she-wolf was Siggeir’s mother, who had assumed this shape through witchcraft and sorcery’).²⁷⁶ Her shape-shifting is deliberate, with an intent to kill her son’s enemies, who are also his family. Later in the same saga we find an intriguing tale of the *vargrhamr* and its use. Sigmundar and Sinfjötli, his son and nephew (Sigmundar and Signy slept together, and she conceived a son), are living in the forest and they come across a cabin in the woods:

Nú er þat eitthvert sinn, at þeir fara enn á skóginn at afla sér fjár, en þeir finna eitt hús ok tvá menn sofandi í húsinu með digrum gullhringum. Þeir höfðu orðit fyrir ósköpum, því at úlfahamir hengu í húsinu yfir þeim. It tíunda hvert dægr máttu þeir komast ór hömunum. Þeir váru konungasynir. Þeir Sigmundr fóru í hamina ok máttu eigi ór komast, ok fylgdi sú náttúra, sem áðr var, létu ok vargsröddu. Þeir skildu báðir röddina.

Nú leggjast þeir ok á merkr, ok ferr sína leið hvárr þeira. Þeir gera þann mála með sér, at þeir skuli til hætta, þótt sjau menn sé, en eigi framar, en sá láta úlfsrödd, er fyrir ófriði yrði.

"Bregðum nú eigi af þessu," segir Sigmundr, "því at þú ert ungr ok áráðisfullr. Munu menn gott hyggja til at veiða þik,"²⁷⁷

‘One time, they went again to the forest to get themselves some tiches, and they found a house. Inside it were two sleeping men, with thick gold rings. A spell had been cast

²⁷⁴ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: the Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (London, 2004), ch. 5, p. 41

²⁷⁵ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, ch. 5

²⁷⁶ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, ch. 5, p. 42

²⁷⁷ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, ch. 8

upon them: wolfskins hung over them in the house and only every tenth day could they shed the skins. They were the sons of kings. Sigmund and Sinfjotli put the skins on and could not get them off. And the weird power was there as before: they howled like wolves, both understanding the sounds. Now they set out into the forest, each going his own way. They agreed then that they would risk a fight with as many as seven men, but not with more, and that the one being attacked by more would howl with his wolf's voice. "Do not break this agreement," said Sigmund, "because you are young and daring, and men will want to hunt you."²⁷⁸

Once they are able to remove the *úlframir*, they burn them in a fire at their forest house, which seems to be the only way to break the curse. Matthias Teichert has recently published an article discussing this particular incident of Sigmundr and Sinfjötli. He states that this is the only metamorphosis in the Nordic Nibelungen sagas 'die nicht mit Absicht und auf Wunsch einer sich verwandelnden beteiligten Person geschieht, sondern sich gerne den Willen der Betroffenen vollzieht'.²⁷⁹ He bases this on the wolf pelts having magical power, making them victims of a spell.²⁸⁰ Teichert argues that the term *úskap* being used to relate to the metamorphosis, which he translates into German 'Unglück' or 'Verhängnis', i.e. 'bad luck, disaster', or 'doom, fate', denotes an involuntary act caused by a spell. However, the term can also mean "unshape", shapelessness, deformity',²⁸¹ and 'evil spells, imprecations' in its plural form.²⁸² In terms of categorising this event as "voluntary", the study takes into account that they donned the skins of their own free will. The text hints at no external force, and the spell is focused on the two sleeping men, not Sigmundr and Sinfjötli. Whether Sigmundr and Sinfjötli were aware of the curse or not is ambiguous, because it is unsure whether they were aware of the same information the audience is given about the curse. However, the act of walking into a house, donning wolf-skins not belonging to them, suggests a voluntary action, although they were not fully aware of all the consequences of wearing the wolf-skin.

In the same saga, the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbana is told. The interesting aspect of shape-shifting is however not linked directly to Sigurð, but to the dragon he slayed. Reginn,

²⁷⁸ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, ch. 8, p. 44

²⁷⁹ Matthias Teichert, 'þeir Sigmundr fóru íhamina. Die Werwolf-Erzählung in Kap. 8 der 'Völsunga Saga'', in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 138:3 (2009), p. 284

²⁸⁰ Teichert, 'þeir Sigmundr fóru íhamina', p. 284

²⁸¹ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 669

²⁸² Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 669

Sigurð's foster father has two brothers, named Fáfñir and Otur, the latter being so named because he had the likeness of an otter during the day and behaved like one.²⁸³ Otur is labelled as a voluntary shape-shifter, and is discussed below, while Fáfñir is an involuntary shape-shifter, and will be discussed in Chapter II. One day Otur was lying on the banks of a river eating a fish in the likeness of an otter, when Oðinn, Loki and Hænir see him lying there and threw a stone at him, seemingly killing him. The gods then proceeded to skin the otter,²⁸⁴ which indicates that Otur was wearing a skin, a *hamr* of some sorts. The gods were forced by Otur's father to pay a ransom for the death of Otur, and Loki left to try and catch something with a net of the goddess of the sea, Rán. He caught the dwarf Andvari, who was in possession of a great treasure. Loki took the treasure back Otur's father, but the dwarf cursed the treasure, stating that it would be the death of whomever possessed it.²⁸⁵ This is the treasure Fáfñir would eventually take, after killing his father. Otur's shape-shifting is of a voluntary nature, due to him seemingly wearing a *hamr*, and there is no mention of any form of genetic mutation. His brother Fáfñir's transformation is due to the curse by Andvari, i.e. the two metamorphoses are not related. His behaviour, which is not affected by the *hamr*, is another indicator. He acts as if he is an otter, which means his change is a physical, as well as, a mental one.

The *Völsunga saga* also deals with the transformation of a human into another human. In this scenario a witch comes to Signý, the twin sister of Sigmundar, the only surviving children of King Völsungur, and the two women trade places, each taking the shape of the other woman.²⁸⁶ The witch takes the shape of Signý, and takes her place next to her husband, while Signý takes the shape of the witch and goes into the forest to Sigmundar. Sigmundar and Signý sleep together, without Sigmundar knowing it is his twin sister. After three nights, the women meet again, and return to their own shape. Signý then bears a child, a boy named Sinfjötli. In the Irish narrative material from the seventh to the thirteenth century there are some variants to the werewolf motif of the Icelandic material: the connection between wolves, hounds and warriors; the soul taking on the shape of a wolf, while the body is still asleep; a saint's curse on people; and the aggressive female werewolves.²⁸⁷ Unlike the

²⁸³ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, 'Völsunga saga', ch. 14

²⁸⁴ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, 'Völsunga saga', ch. 14

²⁸⁵ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, 'Völsunga saga', ch. 14

²⁸⁶ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, 'Völsunga saga', ch. 7

²⁸⁷ Guðmundsdóttir, 'Werewolf', p. 292

Scandinavian material, the Irish narratives often have several “voluntary” acts of shape-shifting by the same character.

Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill

Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill, is found in five manuscripts: Laud Misc. 610; TCD H. 3. 18; *Book of Fermoy*; Rawlinson B 512; and *Lebor na hUidre*.²⁸⁸ Tuán is also mentioned in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* of the eighth century, where his feast day is set as the first of April.²⁸⁹ John Carey dated the *Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill* to the seventh century, but also noted that Tuán may have been completely fictitious.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, Carey argued that the legend of transformation was a later addition to the text,²⁹¹ but does not give a date. In the story, Tuán, a cleric, told his own story of Ireland, to Finnia, while in a hermitage. Tuán was originally part of a group who came to Ireland from Greece, himself the sole survivor of a plague among the new settlers. He lived as a wild man, alone, for a number of years, stating that he was ‘shaggy, clawed, wrinkled, naked, wretched, sorrowful’.²⁹² One night while asleep, Tuán saw himself go into the shape of a stag, and he was then young again. While he was in the shape of a stag Nemed came to Ireland and re-settled the island, but after a while, they all perished. As Tuán became an old stag he went to live alone again, but remembering how to shape-shift he went into the shape of a boar, and once again became young. Then Sémión mac Starai came and re-settled Ireland, but as with the Nemed, he also perished, and Tuán became old again. Then he went into the shape of a hawk, Beotchecht mac Iordanen re-settled Ireland, Tuán became old, lived alone, and then transformed into a freshwater salmon. This salmon is the last animal shape he took, because while in this shape he was caught by Cairell, was cooked and then served to Cairell’s wife, and she became pregnant, and gave birth to him.²⁹³ The many invasions of Ireland in Tuán’s story are parallel to those depicted in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, and this story may have served as an influence of *Lebor Gabála Érenn*. The theme of rejuvenation, rather than rebirth, is very predominant, because each time Tuán shape-shifts he became young again, then grew old in his new shape, then shape-shifts and became young again. Each time he took a new shape, a new settler arrived in Ireland, relaying the story of how Ireland came to be. The final form he took was a salmon, and then

²⁸⁸ John Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, in *Ériu* 35 (1984), p. 93

²⁸⁹ Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, p. 97

²⁹⁰ Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, p. 98

²⁹¹ Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, p. 98

²⁹² Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, p. 105

²⁹³ Carey, ‘Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill’, p. 106

he was caught, eaten, and reborn as a human. This particular concept is also found in *Tochmarc Étaíne*,²⁹⁴ and in the story of the two swineherds, considered below. However, in those stories it is small insects that are swallowed by a woman in a drink. Here we have a combination of the insect theme, linked with the notion of salmons being supernatural animals in their own right, and possibly a link with the salmon of knowledge concept, which is found in the Fenian Cycle. John Carey has argued that this type of story is called *immacallam*, ‘dialogue’, and that the oldest version of this story is called *Imacallam Tuain fri Finnia*.²⁹⁵ Usually these types of *immacallam* stories are ‘structured around a conversation between two learned persons, which provides a context for the disclosure of esoteric lore’.²⁹⁶

De Chophur in da Muccida

In the *remscéla* stories that are connected with the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* we find the story of how the two bulls, Dond Cualngi and Finnbenach, who are essential to the epic, were begotten. The story, *De Chophur in da Muccida* survives in the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*, and in a longer version in the fifteenth-century manuscript Egerton 1782,²⁹⁷ and have been edited by Ulrike Roider.²⁹⁸ The longer version has more detail concerning what the two swineherds did while in their different forms; it states that it was one of the two swineherds in the shape of a maggot who told Medb to marry Ailill; and another prophesied that they would become bulls.²⁹⁹ The shorter version, as found in the *Book of Leinster*, has them transforming into dragons and stags, a feature not found in the longer version. Alfred Nutt argued that the original text could possibly be dated to the early eighth century.³⁰⁰ Two pig-keepers, Friuch and Rucht, are employed by two different kings of *síds* in Munster and Connacht.³⁰¹ Both their names are related to physical aspects of pigs, i.e. *Friuch* meaning ‘boar’s bristles’³⁰², and *Rucht* meaning animal ‘grunting’, or ‘a pig’³⁰³. The two pig-keepers *suithe ngentlehta la cehtarde, ocus nos-delbtais in cech richt, amal no-bíth Mongán mac*

²⁹⁴ See Chapter II.

²⁹⁵ John Carey, ‘Suibne Geilt and Tuán Mac Cairill’, in *Éigse* 20 (1984), p. 99

²⁹⁶ Carey, ‘Suibne Geilt and Tuán Mac Cairill’, p. 99

²⁹⁷ Alfred Nutt, ‘The Begetting of the Two Swineherds’, in A. Nutt & K. Meyer (eds.) *The Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth Vol. II* (London, 1897), p. 57

²⁹⁸ Ulrike Roider, *De Chophur in da Muccida. Wie die beiden Schweinehirten den Kreislauf der Existenzen durchwanderten* (Innsbruck, 1979)

²⁹⁹ Nutt, ‘Two Swineherds’, pp 60-65

³⁰⁰ Nutt, ‘Two Swineherds’, p. 70

³⁰¹ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 24

³⁰² *DIL*, letter F, column 446-447

³⁰³ *DIL*, letter R, column 112

Fiachna,³⁰⁴ ('both possessed the lore of paganism, and used to shape themselves into any shape, as did Mongan, son of Fiachna').³⁰⁵ Mongán mac Fiachna is also known as the reincarnation of Finn mac Cumail.³⁰⁶ With these powers, and their employment by kings of the *síd*, the two pig-keepers have been set up as, if not completely, then bordering on, supernatural characters. The two were pitted against each other to prove who possessed the greater power, and after challenging each other *dí bliadain lána dóib iarsin i ndelbaid senén*,³⁰⁷ ('they were two full years in the shapes of ravens').³⁰⁸ While in their other shapes the two took on names, which are directly linked to their shape, just as their human names are linked with them being pig-keepers. These names are outlined in the manuscript after the description of their different forms: 247 a, lines 3-7. As birds they changed their names to *Ingen* and *Eitte*, which means 'talon',³⁰⁹ and 'wing'.³¹⁰ The two of them quarrelled all those two years, and then returned to their human shape.³¹¹ After this initial shape-shifting, the two of them then proceeded to shape-shift six times. First they changed into *míl uisci*,³¹² or creatures of the sea, taking the names *Bled* and *Blod*, either meaning 'whale' or 'seamonster'.³¹³ In this form they continued to quarrel with each other. Then they changed into two deer,³¹⁴ which are unnamed, before they turned into two *fennid*,³¹⁵ which means a warrior, but also someone who is a member of a *fían*. In this state they took the names *Rind* and *Faebur*, meaning 'point (of a weapon)',³¹⁶ and 'axe-edge' or 'sharp-bladed weapon'.³¹⁷ Their fourth shape was that of *siabuir*,³¹⁸ taking the names *Scáth* and *Sciáth*, meaning 'shadow',³¹⁹ and 'wing', or 'shield'.³²⁰ The fifth shape they took was as *da draic*,³²¹ also unnamed. Whether this is to be understood as actual dragons, the way we imagine them today, or whether it simply means a flying monster, is unclear. In their sixth and final form

³⁰⁴ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 26, lines 9-11

³⁰⁵ Nutt, 'Two Swineherds', p. 58

³⁰⁶ See Nora White *Compert Mongáin and Three Other Early Mongán Tales* (Maynooth, 2006)

³⁰⁷ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 32, line 43

³⁰⁸ Nutt, 'Two Swineherds', p. 59

³⁰⁹ *DIL*, letter I, column 259

³¹⁰ *DIL*, letter E, column 254

³¹¹ Roider, *De Chophur*, p 32-34

³¹² Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 36, lines 67-68

³¹³ *DIL*, letter B, column 117

³¹⁴ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, line 73

³¹⁵ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, line 75

³¹⁶ *DIL*, letter R, column 71

³¹⁷ *DIL*, letter F, column 10

³¹⁸ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, line 76

³¹⁹ *DIL*, letter S, column 76

³²⁰ *DIL*, letter S, columns 90-91

³²¹ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, line 77

they became *di dorbbi*,³²² ‘two worms’, and fell into two different rivers, and were swallowed up by two different cows, who then gave birth to the two bulls.³²³

Friuch and Rucht perform the act of shape-shifting through their supernatural powers, which they seem to possess due to both learning and them possibly being from a *síd*. At first the two are encouraged by others to challenge the other to see who is the most powerful, and the escalation into a twelve-year quarrel that is never solved, not until the end of the *Táin*, is a reaction to their need to be better than the other. The reason for their many shapes seems to be that each of them need to prove themselves in different elements: birds and dragons for air, whales or sea-monsters for water, and warriors and stags for earth. The phantoms are to prove themselves in the liminal place between the living and the dead. The idea that they can actually shape-shift into the state that is neither dead nor alive, and then back to life, is a rare occurrence. The maggots would probably represent the element of earth as well, but it seems they shape-shift in mid-air, and then fall into the wrong element, namely water. We find the concept of an insect being consumed in drink in other stories, such as *Tochmairc Étaíne*, a story which will be discussed in the “involuntary” chapter.

Tochmarc Emire

Tochmarc Emire is found in two versions specifically with the title, the first is an eighth-century text found in the fifteenth-century manuscript Rawlinson B 512; the second, and later and longer, modernised version, is found in *Lebor na hUidre* from the late eleventh to the early twelfth century. In the text Cú Chulainn met a woman, Derb Forgaill, while returning from his quest to gather knowledge of all the martial arts with Scáthach. Derb Forgaill had been given to the Fomorians as a tribute, but Cú Chulainn killed the Fomorians when they came to get her.³²⁴ After this he was offered Derb Forgaill as wife, but he refused, saying that she was to come to him a year from then. A year later he saw two birds on the sea, and shot them down with a stone.³²⁵ The birds turned out to be women, one of them Derb Forgaill, and Cú Chulainn sucked the stone out of her, drinking some of her blood in the process.³²⁶ Because of this transfer of blood, and their new status as being blood relatives, it was

³²² Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, line 79

³²³ Roider, *De Chophur*, p. 38, lines 79-84

³²⁴ Cross & Slover, ‘Wooing of Emer’, p. 169

³²⁵ Cross & Slover, ‘Wooing of Emer’, p. 169

³²⁶ Cross & Slover, ‘Wooing of Emer’, p. 170

impossible for him to marry her.³²⁷ It is never indicated or hinted at the first time we meet Derb Forgaill that she has the ability to shape-shift. It is only in that moment when she, and her hand maiden, turn back into human form that we realise she had the ability. As mentioned above, the encounter with Derb Forgaill is originally found in *Aided Lugdach ocus Derbforgaill*, dated to the tenth century.³²⁸ This would explain the lack of information about her in *Tochmarc Emire*.

Aislinge Óenguso

In *Aislinge Óenguso*, dated to the eighth century, but found only in one sixteenth-century manuscript,³²⁹ the two characters, Caer Iborneith and Óengus, each shape-shift, although Caer's is involuntary, and as examined in the chapter concerning "involuntary" shape-shifting. Óengus is the son of the Dagda and Boann, and is therefore a member of the pantheon of gods. Because of his divine heritage, he is able to change his shape as he pleases. After Caer had appeared to him several times, Óengus was finally able to meet her after his parents helped find her. When they met

‘Con-tuillet i ndeilb dá géise co timchellsat a lloch fo thrí conná bed ní bad meth n-enech dó-som. To-comlat ass i ndeilb dá én fínd co mbáatar ocin Bruig Maicc in Oicc, ocus [ch]echnatar cocetal cíul co corastar inna dóini i súan trí láa ocus teora n-aidche’,³³⁰

‘They slept in the shape of two swans until they surrounded the bath-place three times. There was not and there will not be a loss of honour to him. They went from there in the shape of two white birds until they were at the Brug of the mic ind Oicc and they made a concert so that the people fell asleep for three days and three nights’.³³¹

It is not said how he changes his shapes, we only know that he does, because the author felt it was necessary to make the distinction that, when he comes to her at the end of the poem, he is in his human shape, *doínachta*, when he calls her to him. Shaw also mentions this odd reference, and argues it was due to the prominence of metamorphosis as a theme, and the

³²⁷ Cross & Slover, ‘Wooing of Emer’, p. 170

³²⁸ Ó hUiginn, *Marriage*, p. 37

³²⁹ Francis Shaw, *The Dream of Óengus – Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin, 1934), p. 29

³³⁰ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p. 63

³³¹ Edward Müller, ‘Two Irish Tales’, in *Revue Celtique*, III (1876-1878), p. 350

constantly changing shapes of the characters.³³² Óengus ability to shape-shift is a feature of his divine character, and we must assume that because Caer was only a swan every second year, and since there is no evidence for the curse actually being lifted, that the two of them continued changing shape for years to come.

The voluntary literal metamorphosis of both the Irish and Scandinavian tradition shows a wide variety of metamorphosis. The sagas tend to focus on one transformation for one character, but as was seen with the Irish narratives, one character can often metamorphose several times, and this was meant as a re-birth of the character. In the Scandinavian sagas there is no re-birth of the character when they metamorphose, and often they utilise a *hamr* of sorts to change their shape. By utilising literal metamorphosis the text and the character are elevated into a realm of the supernatural. The character who performs to shape-shifting is de-humanised, but not in a negative way, instead the metamorphosis is portrayed as a tool to accomplish other things: for Tuán mac Cairill it was a means of re-birth; for the swineherds it was a show of power; for Óengus it was a means of being with Caer; and for Otur it was a way of being left alone.

³³² Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p p. 18

II “Involuntary” Shape-shifting

This chapter will examine “involuntary” shape-shifting in the Old Norse and Medieval Irish narrative literature. The definition for “involuntary” is a physical change, either *metempsychosis* or *metamorphosis*, which happens due to external forces, applied to a character not of their own volition. This happens primarily through a curse. As will become clear through the examples used here, very few of the transformations are metaphorical. In the “voluntary” shape-shifting chapter we found a number of transformations which might be understood as metaphorical, due to their explanation of the behaviour of warriors, such as the *berserker*. A curse upon a person rarely results in a metaphorical change, but is instead a complete literary transformation, i.e. the “victim” metamorphoses completely. However, one case in this chapter does pose some debate as to the extent of the metamorphosis, namely the case of *Finn and the Man in the Tree*. As the discussion will show, he appears to have undergone a physical change, but the language of the metamorphosis can also lend itself to metaphorical analysis. In modern times the most familiar examples of “involuntary” shape-shifting are those of the vampire and the werewolf, which were re-introduced in recent times with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), and the many representations of werewolves in books, movies and television, often alongside and opposite vampiric creatures. One of the first literary representations of the werewolf was by the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso, or 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.³³³ After he had been turned his eyes remained the same as before, as did his ferocity and lust for slaughter.³³⁴ The earliest werewolves were portrayed as ferocious beasts, similar to the modern day understanding of them, but around the twelfth century, werewolves were primarily portrayed as sympathetic, rational, and victimised.³³⁵ They could speak and knew the word of God. These types of werewolves is what we find in e.g. Giraldus Cambrensis’ *Topographia Hiberniae*. The idea of the time was that the human soul remained in the wolf body, with the eyes remaining the same, as Ovid also argued.³³⁶ Three medical conditions have been argued to be related to the development of the werewolf legend:

³³³ Publius Ovidius Naso, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid – Vol. I Books I-VII* Henry Thomas Riley (translator) (Gutenberg Project, 2007), fable VII. [I. 216-243]

³³⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, fable VII. [I. 216-243]

³³⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Metamorphosis, or Gerald and the Werewolf’, in *Speculum*, 73:4 (1998), pp 1000-1001

³³⁶ Bynum, ‘Metamorphosis’, p. 1002

Clinical Lycanthropy, a psychiatric condition where an individual believes himself to have transformed into a canine;³³⁷ Lupus Erythmatusus, making an individual very sensitive to light, and may in some cases shun daylight completely;³³⁸ and Hyper-Trichosis, a physical condition, which has the individual experiencing extreme hair growth.³³⁹

Interestingly the Old Norse material does not mention werewolves, nor does early Irish saga narrative material, although werewolves are mentioned in a variety of other Irish and related sources, such as the writings of Bishop Patrick and Giraldus Cambrensis. The Old Norse material may show traits of the vampiric element, but this will be discussed below. There are examples of Irish saints cursing people and transforming them, such as the abbot Natalis in Giraldus Cambrensis' *Topographia Hiberniae*, but there are no such examples from the Old Norse saints. Saints will not be considered in this study because hagiography is outside the scope of the present study, which focuses on narrative and saga literature.

IRISH EVIDENCE

Bran and Sceolang

Finn mac Cumaille had two hunting dogs with him, who deserve mentioning here, since they were not originally dogs, but humans. In the poem, *Lugh's Kinship with Certain Members of the Fíán*, dated to c. 1300,³⁴⁰ found in *Duanaire Finn*, we hear of Lugh's two sisters, Tuirn and Muirn, and how Tuirn was given to a king of Ulster.³⁴¹ The king was already married to the daughter of Bodb, who changed Tuirn into a hound, when she found out she was pregnant. The cursed Tuirn was brought to another house, where she gave birth, still in hound shape, to Bran and Sceolang.³⁴² Muirn was the mother of Finn mac Cumaille, making Bran and Sceolang cousins of Finn. This is a short version of the events related in the fifteenth-century *Feis Tighe Chonain*. Here, Finn was at a feast at Conan's place, and retold the story of how Bran and Sceolang were born. He stated that his mother was Muirnn, who had a sister

³³⁷ Kieran Hickey, *Wolves in Ireland – a natural and cultural history* (Dublin, 2011), p. 56

³³⁸ Hickey, *Wolves*, p. 56

³³⁹ Hickey, *Wolves*, pp 55-56

³⁴⁰ Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn III – The Book of the Lays of Fionn* (Dublin, 1953), p. cxvii

³⁴¹ Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II – The Book of the Lays of Fionn* (London, 1933), p. 114

³⁴² Murphy, *Duanaire Finn II*, p. 116

named Tuirnn.³⁴³ 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, “7 gairrit do chuaidh in tan tuc [an] uhain-eachlach slat draīachta amach ōna coim 7 do bhuail buille ar in rīogan dí, co ndearna sadh bhreach-dearg di dob āille do connuibh in domhain ar in lāthair sin’³⁴⁴

‘The young woman accompanied her out, 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’.³⁴⁵

The hound was taken to a man named Fergus, and while in his care, she gave birth to a male and female pup.³⁴⁶ 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.³⁴⁷ Although this story could be categorised as “genetic” shape-shifting, it is not the case, because Tuirnn was already pregnant when she was cursed, making the embryos human first. When she became cursed, it affected them as well, creating a double curse of both mother and offspring. 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.³⁴⁸ Finn and his *fīan* are often described as hunting across Ireland, and a hero such as Finn cannot have just any hunting dogs with him. The fact that the dogs are his cousins by blood enhances their position among the other hunting dogs. That the choice was with Finn whether the dogs should remain in animal shape or return to human shape may be an acknowledgement of the legal right he had as the leading male of his kin. It may also be a representation of Finn’s status as a *fīan* leader. John Carey has argued that the stories of Bran and Sceolang originated as stories of ‘hapless women transformed by jealous rivals’³⁴⁹ and that the shorter version, i.e. from *Duanaire Finn*, reflects this tradition, where the longer version in *Feis Tighe Chonáin* has been greatly

³⁴³ Maud Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain* (Dublin, 1936), p. 21

³⁴⁴ Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain*, p. 22

³⁴⁵ John R. Reinhard and Vernam E. Hull, ‘Bran and Sceolang’, in *Speculum*, 11:1 (1936), p. 46

³⁴⁶ Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain*, p. 23

³⁴⁷ Joynt, *Feis Tighe Chonain*, pp 33-34

³⁴⁸ Reinhard and Hull, ‘Bran and Sceolang’, p. 44

³⁴⁹ John Carey, ‘Werewolves in Medieval Ireland’, in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 44 (2002), p. 43

expanded with an addition of the tradition of ‘The Werewolf’s Tale’, unlikely in existence prior to *Feis Tighe Chonáin*.³⁵⁰

Finn and the Man in the Tree

The story known as *Finn and the Man in the Tree* is only found in MS 1337 H. 3. 18, as a commentary to the late seventh- or early eighth-century *Senchas Már*, glossing the term *imbas forosnai*.³⁵¹ In the story we meet a servant of the *fíán* of Finn mac Cumail, named Derg Corra son of Ua Daigre, who became the object of affection of a woman Finn desired.³⁵² This story is much earlier than the large body of work of *Dunanaire Finn*. Finn sent Derg Corra into exile, and while in exile he *arfoét caill 7 imtighed for luirgnib oss n-allta (si uerum est) ar a étrumai*,³⁵³ (‘took up his abode in a wood and used to go about on shanks of deer (si uerum est) for his lightness’).³⁵⁴ The description of Derg Corra as going about on shanks of deer is arguably an ambiguous one, i.e. is he actually metamorphosing into a deer, but so far only his shanks have changed, or is it a metaphor for his swiftness and ability to move around the forest quietly? The story has many other themes, as will be discussed below, and it is therefore difficult to determine what type of metamorphosis we are dealing with, metaphorical or literal. However, it is definitely a form of non-human imagery. Derg Corra needed to adapt to his environment, and therefore he needed to change the way he moved in the forest, compared to his overzealous jumping around, which he was known for while with the *fíán*. Instead, he needed to move quietly, but still with the ability to run if he needed to. After being gone for three days and nights, Finn went looking for Derg Corra and he saw,

‘In fer i n-úachtar in craind 7 lon for a gúalainn ndeis 7 find-lestar n-uma for láimh clí, osé co n-usce 7 hé brecc bedcach and 1 dam allaith fo bun in craind 7 bah é abras ind fir teinm cnó 7 dobered leth n-airne na cnó don lun nobíth for a gúalaind ndeis, noithed feisin al-leth n-aill 7 doicsed a uball asin lestar n-uma búi for a láimh clí 7 noranda[d] i ndé 7 docuireth a leth don dam allaid búi fo bun in craind. No-ithad som

³⁵⁰ Carey, ‘Werewolves’, pp 43-44

³⁵¹ Kaarina Hollo, ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’ as Verbal Icon’, in S.J. Arbuthnot & G. Parsons (eds.) *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (Dublin, 2012), p. 50

³⁵² Kuno Meyer, ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, in *Revue Celtique*, XXV (1904), p. 347

³⁵³ Meyer, ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, p. 346

³⁵⁴ Meyer, ‘Finn and the Man in the Tree’, p. 347

iarom in *leth* n-aill 7 no-ibed loim fair den uisce asin *lestur* búi for a láim co mbo comól dó frisin n-iich 7 a n-oss 7 in lon’,³⁵⁵

‘A man in the top of a tree, a blackbird on his right shoulder and in his left hand a white vessel of bronze, filled with water, in which was a skittish trout, and a stag at the foot of the tree. And this was the practice of the man, cracking nuts; and he would give half the kernel of a nut to the blackbird that was on his right shoulder while he would himself eat the other half; and he would take an apple out of the bronze vessel that was in his left hand, divide in two, throw one half to the stag that was at the foot of the tree, and then eat the other half himself. And on it he would drink a sip of the water in the bronze vessel that was in his hand, so that he and the trout and the stag and the blackbird drank together’.³⁵⁶

This text is categorised as “involuntary” based on the nature of the shape-shifting, which is brought on by involuntary exile, and seemingly necessary survival in the forest. Derg Corra does not want to change; there is no indication of “voluntary” act. Kaarina Hollo has argued that when Finn finds Derg Corra in the forest, the verbal forms of the narrative change from the regular preterite to the imperfect, indicating habitual actions, and bringing these actions ‘into a realm of the ritual and the scene into the realm of the atemporal’.³⁵⁷ It is an interesting development in the story, considering Derg Corra has only been gone for three days and nights, and it is quite a short time to develop any “habitual” actions. The use of the imperfect verbal forms are in order to have the scene stand out from the regular preterite, creating a focus on the scene, which the audience may not be fully aware of. The focus of the description is on the objects and the relationship between them, i.e. the tree, the man, the vessel, the animals, the nuts, and the apple.³⁵⁸ The apple and nuts are divided by Derg Corra and shared with the animals.³⁵⁹ This, Hollo argues, suggests that ‘the encounter of Finn and Derg Corra was designed by its author, no doubt incorporating pre-existing material from his native Irish tradition, to be read as a mediation upon the crucifixion and the Eucharist’.³⁶⁰ Although her argument is valid, there may be another layer to the scene. The word *gilla*, a term used to describe Derg Corra at the beginning of the text, is translated as ‘servant’ by

³⁵⁵ Meyer, ‘Finn and the Men in the Tree’, pp 346, 348

³⁵⁶ Meyer, ‘Finn and the Men in the Tree’, pp 347, 349

³⁵⁷ Hollo, ‘“Man in the Tree” as Verbal Icon’, p. 54

³⁵⁸ Hollo, ‘“Man in the Tree” as Verbal Icon’, p. 54

³⁵⁹ Hollo, ‘“Man in the Tree” as Verbal Icon’, p. 55

³⁶⁰ Hollo, ‘“Man in the Tree” as Verbal Icon’, p. 54

Kuno Meyer, but Joseph Nagy has argued that *gilla* ‘functions as a designation for young males on the verge of entering into adult status’,³⁶¹ and that it refers to someone at a stage closer to manhood than the term *mac* does.³⁶² He argues that the *gilla* in medieval Irish literature functions as a liminal character, who is still in the process of initiation into adulthood.³⁶³ This may indicate that Derg Corra has yet to undergo the initiation ceremony, as it is described above in Chapter I. The text dealing with the initiation ritual is much later in date to the very early *Finn and the Man in the Tree*, but due to the fragmentary nature of the early material of the Fenian cycle, it could be argued that it is copied from an earlier, lost text.³⁶⁴ Whether the author of *Finn and the Man in the Tree* was aware of this text, or whether it existed at the time, is unsure, but he may have been aware of some form of “ritual” of initiation among certain warrior groups. In this ritual the young men were metaphorically transformed into prey, being hunted by members of the *fían*, and having to show survival skills which seemed to have a supernatural element. It may be that Derg Corra, who, although being a *gilla* of the *fían*, but still a member in a sense, was reduced back to this stage of initiation ritual, once again becoming the prey. However, as argued above, the initiation ritual text is much later than Derg Corra’s transformation, and the two must therefore be compared with that in mind. Nagy argues that the feat of jumping over the cooking fire, performed by Derg Corra prior to his exile,³⁶⁵ is the feat of swiftness, advocated by the *fían*, and that the act itself functions as a transition for Derg Corra into adulthood.³⁶⁶ However, this feat is only a minor part of what the *fían* seems to require of their members, when the initiation ceremony is considered as well. Therefore, the feat of jumping over the cooking fire may be no more than what occurs in many texts of the medieval Irish narrative corpus, namely a show of feats by members of a specific group prior to, and during, eating and feasting.³⁶⁷ The description of the Derg Corra walking around on shanks of deer, could be a direct reference to this. While in exile he is accompanied by a stag, a bird, and a fish, which are all animals that appear in

³⁶¹ Joseph F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw – The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 125

³⁶² Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 125

³⁶³ Nagy, *Wisdom*, p. 126

³⁶⁴ Kevin Murray, ‘Interpreting the Evidence: Problems with Dating the Early *fíanaigecht* Corpus’, in *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (Dublin, 2012), p. 34

³⁶⁵ Meyer, ‘Finn and the Men in the Tree’, p. 346

³⁶⁶ Nagy, *Wisdom*, pp 132-133

³⁶⁷ See for example William Sayers ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 9:1 (1983), pp 45-80

some form in the early Irish narrative material.³⁶⁸ These three animals have been argued to be a representation of the *tria genera animantium*, a Christian triad of animals linked to Christ and the crucifixion.³⁶⁹ The three animals with him are representations of different natural elements in themselves: the bird is the air, the fish is the water and the stag is the earth. The stag is also closely linked to the *fíán*, both as a target during hunts, and in terms of women connected with the *fíán*, who are able to turn into deer, such as Oisín's mother Bláí Derg. In *Áth Liac Find*, 'Ford of the Stone of Finn', a dindshenchas from the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*, it is told that Bláí Derg came to the *fíán* in shape of a deer, spent the night with Finn, and begot a fawn, which was Oisín, 'little deer'.³⁷⁰ If we assume that Derg Corra did not partake in the initiation ritual of the *fíán*, but still got reduced to a state of the prey, which does counter the distinction of the *fíán* as predators and hunters, he is reduced to what could be labelled a "double-liminal existence". By being a member, or associated with the *fíán*, he lived a life in a liminal place: not part of settled society, but still dependent on it. By being exiled from the *fíán*, and taking up an existence similar to the outlaws of early literary tradition, he exists almost in a "double-liminal" space. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, it is debatable whether this transformation is literal or metaphorical. The reference to him walking around on shanks of deer may also be a metaphorical reference to his movement in the woods, i.e. that he can walk around quietly. In the twelfth-century text *Buile Suibhne* the main character Suibhne was cursed by St Rónán, when Suibhne cast the saint's psalter in the water.³⁷¹ The curse entailed Suibhne always being naked, and to wander the world in that state, as well as dying from a spear point, but later he cursed him again, specifically to be a bird and go mad.³⁷² During the battle of Mag Rath *robhúirset an damhradh dermháir adú 7 anall amail dámha damghoire co ttuargaibhset tri tromghaire ós aird*,³⁷³ ('the vast army on both sides roared in the manner of a herd of stags so that they raised on high three mighty shouts'),³⁷⁴ which made Suibhne go mad and flee like a bird. His feet barely touched the ground because of his swiftness, and he was so nimble that when he did touch the ground he

³⁶⁸ See *Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill* and *De Chophur in da Muccida*, where the characters metamorphose multiple times, including into stags, birds, and fish, or sea-creatures. It is clear that these animals had a significance which has yet to be clarified.

³⁶⁹ Hollo, 'Man in the Tree' as Verbal Icon', p. 56

³⁷⁰ Rolf Baumgarten, 'Placenames, Etymology, and the Structure of Fianaigeacht', in *Béaloideas* 54/55 (1986/1987), pp 4-5

³⁷¹ J. G. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne* (Dublin, 1975), §§ 3-5, pp 1-3

³⁷² O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne*, §§ 5-10, pp 3-7

³⁷³ O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne*, § 11, p. 7, ll. 189-191

³⁷⁴ J. G. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne – The Frenzy of Suibhne* (London, 1913), § 11, p. 15

left no trace.³⁷⁵ This story is “involuntary” due to the curse put upon Suibne by St Rónán, but Suibne also serves as a parallel to Derg Corra. Both have become wild men, the term used throughout *Buile Suibhne* is *geilt* or *geltacht*, which is a liminal phase, often in a process of initiation into a group or status, or regaining status, although the process is not always completed.³⁷⁶ The theme of *geilt* has been argued to reflect British literary influences of the ninth and tenth centuries.³⁷⁷ The same concept was discussed in the Chapter I, as a loan word into Old Norse. It was argued that a king, at the end of his reign, either dies, or his stricken with panic, fleeing a battlefield, and going mad.³⁷⁸ Although Derg Corra was not a king, in their forest dwelling state there are similarities between the two men. Derg Corra is said to walk on deer’s haunches, and Suibne is swift in his fleeing. Suibne grew feathers³⁷⁹, and while this seems to be a literal transformation, Derg Corra’s deer haunches may also be literal. Suibne consistently lived in the tops of trees, which is where Finn found Derg Corra. The term *geilt* is never used about Derg Corra, but there are similarities with the wild man of the Irish narrative tradition. However, it is important to note that the Derg Corra story is an anecdote, where *Buile Suibhne* is a long text of 87 paragraphs, with clear hagiographical themes, although not being a hagiographical text. *Buile Suibhne* entails long poems, describing nature, and Suibne interacts on several occasions with other people, both sane and insane people, and is in his state of *geilt* for much longer, and eventually is released through death. We do not know what happened to Derg Corra, because the story was an anecdote to show how Finn uses his thumb to gain *imbas forosnai*.

Tochmarc Étaíne

The tale *Tochmarc Étaíne* (TE) is essentially three 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. 18.³⁸⁰ Here only the complete version from YBL is considered. It is a *remscéla* to the historic king cycle of tales, concerning Conaire Mór and *Togail Bruidne da Derga*.³⁸¹ Only two of the three stories contain elements of shape-shifting, namely the first

³⁷⁵ O’Keefe, *Buile Suibhne*, § 12, p. 8

³⁷⁶ Joseph F. Nagy, ‘The Wisdom of the Geilt’, in *Éigse* 19 (1982), p. 44

³⁷⁷ John Carey, ‘Suibne Geilt and Tuán Mac Cairill’, in *Éigse* 20 (1984), pp 94-96

³⁷⁸ William Sayers, ‘Deployment of an Irish Loan: ON “verða at gjalti” “to Go Mad with Terror”’, in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 93:2 (1994), p. 159

³⁷⁹ O’Keefe, *Buile Suibhne*, § 40, p. 40, l. 1123, § 60, p. 63, l. 1778, § 61, p. 68, l. 1792

³⁸⁰ Osborn Bergin and R.I. Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, in *Ériu* 12 (1938), p. 137

³⁸¹ Bergin and Best, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, p. 139

and the third, and these are the two which will be considered here. In both instances the shape-shifting revolves around Étaín, but in the third, Midir also shape-shifts. In the first story, which is found in YBL col. 985, Étaín Echraide was the daughter of Ailill, king of Ulster.³⁸² 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.³⁸³ Fuamnach was Midir's first wife, his *cétmuintir*, and Étaín became his *adaltrach*, his second wife, or concubine.³⁸⁴ The *cétmuintir* was legally allowed to inflict injury upon the *adaltrach*.³⁸⁵ However, the legal aspects of marriage is not the major theme in TE. The fact that Fuamnach was Midir's first wife is slightly underplayed, and is not a feature in TE III. It appears to be a literary tool, or catalyst, to create a situation where Étaín can be cursed. Fuamnach struck Étaín with a rod of scarlet quicken tree, and turned her into a pool of water, and then left.³⁸⁶ 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, somehow, the most beautiful fly in the land, and in the shape of a fly, Étaín stayed with Midir, and he knew that it was her.³⁸⁷ When Fuamnach returned she 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.³⁸⁸ Fuamnach then had Midir summon In Mac Óc, and went herself to find Étaín, and once again created a wind that blew her 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.³⁸⁹ Étaín is involuntarily transformed into water, which, while still biological, is not human in any way. It is however possible, through the aid of fire, air and earth, to transform her into a worm. It is not specifically stated *how* the elements are able to help transform water into a worm, and then into an insect. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has explained this as a result of cosmic forces, 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

³⁸² Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 148

³⁸³ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 152

³⁸⁴ Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 2009), pp 70-71

³⁸⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 79

³⁸⁶ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 152

³⁸⁷ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 152

³⁸⁸ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 154

³⁸⁹ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 156

earth, and the underneath'.³⁹⁰ The use of the term 'cosmic forces', connotes an intervention by divine-like beings, but the three elements are simply the elements most important to humans: the earth is where our nourishment comes from in many cases; water is another nourishment, and also makes things grow from the earth; and the heavens, or the skies, "holds" the sun, which gives us heat, and help everything grow. Ó Cathasaigh argued that Étaín's transformation from water to worm was a reflection of the three components of the heavens, earth and water, but the texts states it was the heat from the fire, the air and the seething ground which transformed her. None of the three "cosmic forces" can properly be 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, and not air; the seething ground can be linked to the earth, or the underneath of the ground, but this is where the links end. However, there may be more layers to this scene than cosmic forces. It could be argued that heat is the significant element here, and the main trigger for the 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, which is the original meaning of the seething; and the air could possibly also be considered as warm due to the strong links with heat already mentioned. Fire and heat often changes things: it turns hard metal into a liquid mass; turns cold water into steam; breaks down wood; and burns the flesh off the bones of a body, human and animal. Another layer can be found when looking at religious texts. The text *In Tenga Bithnua*, dated to the late ninth or early tenth century,³⁹¹ when dealing with man's position in the universe, states

‘Ata ann chetamus adbhar de gæith 7 aer; is de forcoemnacair tinfisiu anala i corpaib doine. Ata dano adbar tesa 7 chombruithe ann di then; iss ed do-gni dergthes fola in sin i corpaib. [...] Ata ann dano adbar di clochaib 7 do criaidh thalman; conid edh do-gni comusc feola 7 chnama 7 ball isna doinib’,³⁹²

‘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

³⁹⁰ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, *Coire Sois – The Cauldron of Knowledge – A Companion to Early Irish Sagas* (Indiana, 2014), p. 182

³⁹¹ John Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun – Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Wales, 1999), p. 75

³⁹² John Carey, *Apocrypha Hiberniae II, Apocalyptic 1: In Tenga Bithnua – The Evernew Tongue* (Brepols, 2009), pp 115-117

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.³⁹³

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 John Eriugena's ninth-century *Periphyseon*, discussed what Eriugena called *miraculum miraculorum*, i.e. the resurrection, and argued that both texts saw resurrection from death as not being 'imposed by arbitrary fiat, but found within the inmost fabric of creation'.³⁹⁴ 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, but 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 remains 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.³⁹⁵ When Eochaid came to claim back his wife, Midir 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. In this third story, Étaín is again involuntarily transformed. Whether she wanted to come with Midir or not, he is the one who transforms her in order to take her away. The story does not relate how she reacted to the transformation, or whether she wanted to come with him, but the transformation is the significant part, and it is "involuntary". The concept of the two swans is also found in the eighth-century *Aislinge Óenguso*. The first story focused on Étaín's different transformations in order to eventually become re-born, where the third focuses on the relationship between Midir and Eochaid, and the incestuous relationship that conceives Conaire Mór's mother. After Étaín flew away with Midir she is not featured in the story. The shape-shifting here is then only a small part of the

³⁹³ Carey, *In Tenga Bithnua*, pp 115-117

³⁹⁴ Carey, *A Single Ray of the Sun*, p. 88

³⁹⁵ Bergin and Best, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', p. 184

story, and a feature for Midir to retrieve her from Eochaid, setting the stage for Eochaid's relationship with his own daughter. Étaín's character has been argued to be of an ambiguous nature, since originally she appears to be human, or maybe Fomorian, but changes into something inhuman, as well as seemingly possessing qualities attributed to the sovereignty goddess.³⁹⁶ 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 pre-historic time when the gods ruled Ireland, and seeing as Étaín was the daughter of a king, she may also have been 'more goddess than human'.³⁹⁷

Aislinge Óenguso

The text, *Aislinge Óenguso*, dated to the first half of the eighth century,³⁹⁸ is found in only one manuscript, namely *Egerton 1782 fol. 70 b.*, a manuscript dated to the sixteenth century.³⁹⁹ It is found as the *remcéla* of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in LL 245b as *De aislinge in M(a)icc Oic*; in R.I.A. MS D. 4. 2 fol. 49 v.b. as both *Do aislingthi Aengh(us)a mh(ei)c in Dagh(dh)a* and *Don tseirc rochar Mac in Oicc Chaire Heabarbaithi*; in R.I.A. MS. 23 N 10, Rawl. B 512 and Harl. 5280 and *Airec Neman Uraird Maic Coisse* as *Aislingi in Maic Oic*⁴⁰⁰; and in *Egerton 1782* as *Aislingi Oengusai innso*.⁴⁰¹ All of these have been placed in the list of *remscéla*, but, as Francis Shaw has noted, the story has no clear connection to events in the *Táin*,⁴⁰² apart from the appearance of Ailill and Medb as rulers of Connacht, the place where the beautiful and mysterious Caer Ibormeith lives, and he therefore concludes that the link with the *Táin* is an artificial one, the evidence for this lying in the last paragraph of the text:

‘Is de sin ro boí cairdes in Maicc Óic agus Ailella agus Medbae. Is de sin do-cuaid Óengus, tricha cét, do Ailill agus Meidb do tháin inna mbó a Cúailnge’

Conid ‘*De Aislingiu Óenguso Maicc in Dagdai*’ ainm in scéuil sin isin *Táin bó Cúailnge*’,⁴⁰³

³⁹⁶ Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne: A Literal Interpretation’, in *Ogma – Essays in Celtic Studies in Honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin* (Dublin, 2002), p. 172

³⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, ‘Tochmarc Étaíne’, pp 173-174

³⁹⁸ Francis Shaw, *The Dream of Óengus – Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin, 1934), p. 37

³⁹⁹ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p. 29

⁴⁰⁰ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, pp 23-25

⁴⁰¹ Hugh Fogarty, ‘*Aislinge Óenguso: A Remscél Reconsidered*’, in *Narrative in Celtic Tradition – Essays in Honour of Edgar M. Slotkin – CSANA Yearbook 8-9* (New York, 2011), p. 57

⁴⁰² Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p. 25

⁴⁰³ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p. 64

‘Therefrom there was friendship between the micc Oig and Ailell and Medb and in consequence Oengus went with three hundred to Ailell and Medb for the Tain bo Cuailnge. This story is called the vision of Oengus son of the Dagda and the Tain bo Cuailnge’.⁴⁰⁴

This paragraph, according to Shaw, is to be read as the compiler adding in the full title of the poem, having a list of the *remscéla* in front of him, and is therefore artificially added to the list, and he bases this on the preposition *di* appearing after *conid*.⁴⁰⁵ Hugh Fogarty argues that Óengus does not appear as a member of the host from Connacht, despite what is stated at the end of the text.⁴⁰⁶ Instead, he argues, the reason for linking this text with the *Táin* is because it ‘enjoyed a certain popularity as a mythological tale and was thus drawn, like many other stories, under the dominant influence of the *Táin*’⁴⁰⁷. Despite that neither Óengus or Caer appear in the *Táin*, the two stories do seem to share a commonality, namely that *Aislinge Óenguso* anticipates correct operation of kingship as a central theme.⁴⁰⁸ The text contains both an “involuntary”, and a “voluntary” shape-shifting, of Caer and Óengus, respectively. In this chapter, Caer will be examined, and Óengus in the “voluntary” chapter. The maiden Caer Iborneith was under a spell by an unnamed power, which caused her to be in the shape of a swan one year, and in human shape the next year: *bíid i ndeilb éuin cach la blíadnai, in mblíadnai n-aili i ndeilb duini*⁴⁰⁹. During her transformations she appeared to Óengus, seemingly as a form of apparition, while he was sleeping. Although Caer plays a very small role, when looking at her accumulated presence in the text, she is an important character, because she is essentially the catalyst of the shape-shifting of Óengus. Caer is obviously cursed, but she is cursed to take the shape of a swan only every second year. This idea of only a partial, or temporary, change is also found in the Old Norse *Hrólfs saga kraka*, discussed below. Here the change is between night and day, and not year to year. The author specifically chose to turn her into a swan, a good choice considering the femininity associated with the swan, as well as the concept of divine birds, linked by silver chains, even in human form:

⁴⁰⁴ Edward Müller, ‘Two Irish Tales’, in *Revue Celtique*, III (1876-1878), p. 350

⁴⁰⁵ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, pp 26-27

⁴⁰⁶ Fogarty, ‘*Remscél* Reconsidered’, p. 58

⁴⁰⁷ Fogarty, ‘*Remscél* Reconsidered’, p. 58

⁴⁰⁸ Fogarty, ‘*Remscél* Reconsidered’, p. 58

⁴⁰⁹ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, p. 59

‘Co n-accatar in n-ingin n-etarru. Ní tacmuictis inna hingena dí acht coticcí a gualainn. Slabrad airgdide eter cach dí ingin. Muince airgdide imam brágait fadisin ocus slabrad di ór forloiscthiu’,⁴¹⁰

‘When they saw 150 young maidens and they saw the maiden among them. The maidens did not reach her to the shoulder. A silvery chain between every two maidens. A silvery necklace about their neck itself and a chain of burnished gold’.⁴¹¹

The silver chain reveals one of many supernatural elements in the text. Birds and silver chains are often linked to the supernatural and are found in many stories, such as *Compert Con Culainn*. In this text, however, the character Óengus is himself a divine figure, as are his parents, and Caer is linked to a *síd*.

The Story of the Abbot of Druimenaig, who was changed into a woman

In the peculiar, and amusing, story *The Story of the Abbot of Druimenaig, who was changed into a woman*, an early Middle Irish text, the Abbot of Drimnagh climbed a hill during an Easter feast.⁴¹² The Abbot is described in slightly feminine terms; *leine dont sróll ríghdha*,⁴¹³ ‘tunic of royal silk’,⁴¹⁴ and *gheilcnis*,⁴¹⁵ ‘white skin’.⁴¹⁶ He did carry a sword, which is described as a ceremonial sword.⁴¹⁷ He fell asleep on the hill, and when he woke up, he had a distaff, a woman’s weapon, originally used for spinning wool, instead of the sword. When he reached for his face, hair, and between his legs, he found female signs, not male. A large, ugly woman found him, and asked what he was doing alone, thinking he was a girl. The Abbot openly acknowledged his new physical features by calling himself a girl. He thought it was God who had changed him. The Abbot went to Crumlin, and met a young soldierly man, slept with him, and found out afterwards that he was the Abbot of Crumlin. The Abbot stayed in Crumlin for seven years, and had seven children.⁴¹⁸ The story ends with the Abbot of Crumlin, and the transformed Abbot of Drimnagh, being invited to Easter celebrations in

⁴¹⁰ Shaw, *Aislinge Óenguso*, pp 53-54

⁴¹¹ Müller, ‘Two Irish Tales’, p. 348

⁴¹² Kuno Meyer, ‘Story of the Abbot of Druimenaig, who was changed into a Woman’, in O.J. Bergin *et al* (eds. and trans.) *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts Vol. I* (Dublin, 1907), p. 76

⁴¹³ Meyer, ‘Abbot of Druimenaig’, p. 76

⁴¹⁴ Barbara Hillers, ‘The Abbot of Druimenaig: Genderbending in Gaelic Tradition’, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 15 (1995), p. 176

⁴¹⁵ Meyer, ‘Abbot of Druimenaig’, p. 76

⁴¹⁶ Hillers, ‘Genderbending’, p. 176

⁴¹⁷ Meyer, ‘Abbot of Druimenaig’, p. 76

⁴¹⁸ Meyer, ‘Abbot of Druimenaig’, p. 78

Drimnagh, arrived at the hill, where the Abbot had first been transformed, and he laid down to rest, and woke up in his original male shape, the sword back at his side.⁴¹⁹ When he returned to Drimnagh, he was told he had not been gone more than an hour. Strangely, though, it is mentioned that the Abbot of Crumlin did have seven children, who were divided between the two abbots (a form of shared custody), once everyone believed the story. The transformation of the Abbot of Drimnagh is very much involuntary, but he accepts his fate rather quietly. Instead of protesting, he acknowledges that he is a woman. He believed it was God who changed him, which may explain his acceptance, thinking this was God's will, but in reality, there is no knowing who changed him, or why, if we take the story literally. It should perhaps, instead be seen metaphorically, as a satirical way of showing how the Abbacy of Drimnagh subjugated itself willingly to the Abbacy of Crumlin. The author used feminine imagery to illustrate the subjugation of Drimnagh to the manly Crumlin, although the transformation of the Abbot is a complete transformation. When we first meet the Abbot of Crumlin he is described as young and soldierly,⁴²⁰ perhaps indicating martial supremacy of Crumlin over Drimnagh. The seven children could be smaller churches, resulting from this "union" between the two abbacies. This is a good example of how even literal transformations can, or should, be understood metaphorically as well. Once the Abbot of Drimnagh has changed shape, he is only referred to in the third singular feminine form, or as *ingin*, 'girl'. Even after the Abbot wakes up in his male shape again, he is still referred to as *ingin*.⁴²¹ It is not until he has lamented that he is once again referred to in the masculine form.⁴²² He became a passive character, with actions exerted upon him, taking on the role of the subjugated woman.

The involuntary shape-shifting 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. In the Scandinavian evidence, which will be discussed next, there appears to be no overt connection with Christian writings.

⁴¹⁹ Meyer, 'Abbot of Druimenaig', p. 79

⁴²⁰ Meyer, 'Abbot of Druimenaig', p. 78

⁴²¹ Meyer, 'Abbot of Druimenaig', p. 79

⁴²² Meyer, 'Abbot of Druimenaig', p. 79

SCANDINAVIAN EVIDENCE

Völsunga saga

In the *Völsunga saga*, composed in the thirteenth or fourteenth century,⁴²³ we find the stories about the brothers Otr and Fáfnir, both of them shape-shifters, but in different ways. Otr is a voluntary shape-shifter, and his story is found in the “voluntary” chapter, while Fáfnir’s is an “involuntary” act. According to Reginn, Sigurðr Fáfnisbana’s foster father, and Fáfnir’s brother, Fáfnir was always the greedy one.⁴²⁴ When his father was given compensation for his son, Otr’s, death by Óðinn, Loki and Hænir, he was given the treasure of the dwarf Andvari, which had been cursed by the dwarf. 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 *hverjum skyldi at bana verða, er þann gullhring ætti ok svá allt gullit*,⁴²⁵ (‘the gold ring would be the death of whoever owned it, and the same applied to all the gold’).⁴²⁶ Fáfnir became so consumed by the treasure and by guarding it that, *Hann gerðist svá illr, at hann lagðist út ok unni engum at njóta fjárins nema sér ok varð síðan at inum versta ormi ok liggr nú á því fé*⁴²⁷ (‘Fafnir became so ill-natured that he set out for the wilds and allowed no one to enjoy the treasure but himself’).⁴²⁸ Fáfnir was attracted to the treasure, due to his own greed, but he did not slay his father and take the treasure in order to become a dragon; that fact was unknown to him at the time. His is therefore an involuntary act of shape-shifting, and also a permanent one.⁴²⁹ Matthias Teichert has argued that because Fáfnir’s brother, Otr, was able to transform into an otter, perhaps shape-shifting was a genetically inherent feature of the two.⁴³⁰ However, the saga provides no clear indication of this, and their father is never mentioned as possessing such abilities, and it must therefore remain a theory. Fáfnir’s transformation works on three levels: first, it is arguably a warning of being greedy, where the dragon is used as a metaphor for a person’s behaviour; second, it becomes a catalyst for

⁴²³ Ralph O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk? Warriors at the Edge of Humanity in Irish and Icelandic Sagas’, in Jan Erik Rekdal & Charles Doherty (eds.) *King and Warrior in Early North-West Europe* (Dublin, **forthcoming**)

⁴²⁴ Guðni Jónsson & Bjarni Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, in G. Jónsson & B. Viljhálmsson (eds.) *Fornaldarsag Norðulanda Vol. I*, via heimskringla.no, Ch. 14

⁴²⁵ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, ch. 14

⁴²⁶ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs: the Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer* (London, 2004), p. 58

⁴²⁷ Jónsson & Viljhálmsson, ‘Völsunga saga’, ch. 14

⁴²⁸ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, p. 59

⁴²⁹ Matthias Teichert, ‘Þeir Sigmundur fóru í hamina. Die Werwolf-Erzählung in Kap. 8 der ‘Völsunga Saga’’, in *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 138:3 (2009), p. 283

⁴³⁰ Teichert, ‘Þeir Sigmundur fóru í hamina’, p. 283

the events leading up to the heroic event of Sigurðr killing the dragon; and third, 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 shape-shifting Otr is significant, since these two gods are the ones most famous for their shape-shifting abilities. It is also Loki who catches the dwarf Andvari and takes his gold, prompting the curse by the dwarf. The transformation of Fáfnir is then caused by one, if not two, of the gods known for their shape-shifting abilities.

Laxdæla saga

In the *Laxdæla saga*, a thirteenth-century text, the ox, called Harri, is briefly mentioned. He had four horns, two were large and curvy, the third pointed upwards, and the fourth one went out from the bull's forehead and curved down in front.⁴³¹ When the ox turned eighteen years old, the fourth horn fell off, and its owner, Olaf Hoskuldsson, butchered the bull, but that same night Olaf had a dream about an old woman who said to him:

“þér er svefns en þó mun fyrir hitt ganga Son minn hefir þú drepa látit ok koma ógervilegan mér til handa, ok fyrir þá sök skaltu eiga at sjá þinn son alblóðgan af mínu tilstilli; skal ek ok þann til velja, er ek veit at þér er ófalast”⁴³²

“You are asleep, but that makes no differences”, said the woman. “You have had my son killed and returned him to me mutilated; and for that you shall live to see your own son drenched in blood by my doing, and I shall choose the one whom I know you would least want to lose”⁴³³.

The ox, Harri, is a peculiar case, because we hear nothing about his lineage. We must assume that his mother is a supernatural being, because she is able to show herself to Olaf in a dream, but was she herself an animal, who could take human guise? Or is Harri a result of magic? If so, who made him into a bull? There are many questions, but few clear answers. This study assumes that the transformation was “involuntary”, because if it was an inherent or voluntary ability in Harri to transform himself, then surely, he would have transformed himself when he realised he was going to be slaughtered. Since the woman emphasised that he had come home

⁴³¹ Benedikt Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga* (Reykjavik, 1920), ch. 31 p. 85

⁴³² Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 31, p. 85

⁴³³ Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga* (Suffolk, 1969), ch. 31, p. 117

to her mutilated, there may have been a spell put on him, and if he was able to live to a certain age, he would return to his human form.

Hrólfs saga kraka

We find several themes of shape-shifting in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. The saga is dated to c. 1400, but Saxo Grammaticus used a saga about Hrólfr and a poem about Bødvarr, the son of Bjørn, around c. 1200, indicating that the tradition was already established.⁴³⁴ The date of c. 1400 is for the saga in its current form, and it may have been substantially influenced by the now lost *Skjöldunga saga*, c. 1200.⁴³⁵ The main example for “involuntary” shape-shifting is the story of Bjørn and Bera. Bera is the female version of the personal name Bjørn, both meaning ‘bear’. Bjørn is the son of King Hringi, who married Hvít, who took a liking to Bjørn.⁴³⁶ Bjørn hit her for her insolence, and Hvít struck him with a wolf-skin glove, cursing him to be a cave-bear, with all that entailed, never to be released from the curse.⁴³⁷ Bjørn then turned into a great grey bear, but Bera recognised his eyes and followed him to a cave, where, because he was a man at night, he turned back into his human shape, and they sleep together.⁴³⁸ The concept of a person under metamorphosis being recognised by their eyes is a very common one. It is also found in *Tochmarc Étaíne*, where Étaín is still recognisable in her fly shape, as well as in Ovid’s story about Lycaon. Bera became pregnant, and Bjørn uttered a prophecy. Their three children will be discussed in the chapter on “genetic” shape-shifting. The example here is clear: Hvít directly cursed Bjørn, by the use of a wolf-skin glove, enhancing the supernatural powers which are connected to the wolf. Perhaps it would be expected that she had used a bear-skin glove, since she was cursing him into a bear-shape. However, it would seem that in order to curse someone into a wild animal, one needs an object related to a wild animal, in this case the glove. The story of Bjørn’s curse sets up the narrative of the rest of the saga, in which his son Bødvarr Bjarki, becomes a great hero, and has the ability to project a form of spirit animal in the shape of a bear. The curse by queen Hvít is specifically targeted at Bjørn after he rejects her advances. The choice to make him a bear is a deliberate one on the part of the queen. She knows that bears close to human settlements would be hunted and killed, which is what happens to Bjørn. It is a form of

⁴³⁴ Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London, 1972), p. 129

⁴³⁵ Jones, *Kings*, pp 129-130

⁴³⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur* (Copenhagen, 1904), ch. 18, pp 48-49

⁴³⁷ Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 19, pp 49-50

⁴³⁸ Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 20, pp 50-51

double punishment: not only is Björn forced away from his home and Bera, but he is also destined to day quite violently, at the hands of his own people.

Draugr

Ármann Jakobsson has argued that *draugr* have primarily been glossed as “ghosts” in English,⁴³⁹ this is however an insufficient translation of the Old Norse term, but seeing as there is no proper English translation to encompass all that a *draugr* entails, and the ON term will be used forthwith. ‘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’.⁴⁴⁰ There was therefore no straightforward form of death, or the 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’.⁴⁴¹ This would also be where we find the *draugr* of the Scandinavian tradition. These were physical beings, with human bodies, and not what the modern understanding of a “ghost” entails.⁴⁴² Stories of interaction in different forms are frequent in the Middle Ages, 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 a suit even, for the demon to wear.⁴⁴³ This would mean that a transgression occurs between the body and the demonic spirit, and not the living and the dead.⁴⁴⁴ This was not the case with *draugr* 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.⁴⁴⁵ There were Continental counterparts to the *draugr*: ‘numerous “horror” stories of the undead may be found in chronicles and exempla collections from northern Europe from the late twelfth century on’.⁴⁴⁶ Jakobsson has argued that these *draugr* are closer to the vampires of the Eastern European traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth

⁴³⁹ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Medieval Icelandic Undead’, in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 110:3 (2011), p. 281

⁴⁴⁰ Nancy Caciola, ‘Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture’, in *Past & Present*, 152 (1996), p. 7

⁴⁴¹ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 7

⁴⁴² Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, p. 284

⁴⁴³ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, pp 11-15

⁴⁴⁴ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 13

⁴⁴⁵ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 15

⁴⁴⁶ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 17

centuries.⁴⁴⁷ In his 1897 publication *The Book of Dreams and Ghosts*, Andrew Lang referred to Glámr of *Grettis saga* as a vampire, since this was published at time when the term was very popular.⁴⁴⁸ The term “vampire” is etymologically neither of Hungarian or Rumanian origin, as was the traditional belief.⁴⁴⁹ The term has been argued to stem from the Turkish word *uber*, meaning ‘witch’; the Greek verb ‘to drink’; and Serbian *bamiiup*.⁴⁵⁰ Without a clear consensus of etymology it is difficult to find a definite explanation of the word.

Jakobsson argues that *draugr* 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’⁴⁵¹, referring specifically to the *draugr* in *Grettis saga*. This study would argue that although the *draugr* and vampires do share similar functions, *draugr* 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.⁴⁵² Instead *draugr* should be viewed, in terms of being *vampiric*, as creatures who reside in their graves, or caves; who have died, but are brought back in a reanimated, slightly distorted, form. These creatures cause havoc, eat livestock, and kill people. This is seen in the etymology of the term *draugr*, which is argued by Jakobsson to relate to various forms of the term for the dead in the Germanic languages.⁴⁵³ Jakobsson has noted that in the poetic language the term original 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’.⁴⁵⁴ He also notes 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.⁴⁵⁵ N.K. Chadwick argued that the *draugr* possibly originated in Sweden.⁴⁵⁶ According to Chadwick, the ghosts

⁴⁴⁷ Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, p. 284

⁴⁴⁸ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic *Draugr* and Demonic Contamination in *Grettis Saga*’, in *Folklore*, 120 (2009), p 307

⁴⁴⁹ Katharina M. Wilson, ‘The History of the Word “Vampire”’, in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46:4 (1985), p. 577

⁴⁵⁰ Wilson, “‘Vampire’”, pp 577-578

⁴⁵¹ Jakobsson, ‘Vampire Killers’, pp 309-310

⁴⁵² Wilson, “‘Vampire’”, p. 579

⁴⁵³ Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, p. 284

⁴⁵⁴ Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, pp 284-285

⁴⁵⁵ Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, p. 285

⁴⁵⁶ N.K. Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts II (Continued)’, in *Folklore*, 57:3 (1946), pp 124-127

are ‘animated corpses, solid bodies, generally mischievous, and greatly to be feared’,⁴⁵⁷ and are generally male ghost, though female ones do appear. Both the Icelandic *draugr* and the 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’.⁴⁵⁸ The demonic possession view of the undead was less common than the *draugr*-form.⁴⁵⁹ Essentially these undead had an unpleasant nature, which ended up carrying over into their death. The *draugr* can be seen as a form of shape-shifting, but an involuntary one, since it happens after the death of a person, and there seems to be no way of controlling the change after death. Chadwick explored the evidence in the literature of the Old Norse tradition, and how men willingly go into their own burial mound.⁴⁶⁰ There seems to be no explicit reason for this behaviour, but in the cases involving intoxicating drinks, it appears to be a self-sacrifice to the god Óðinn.⁴⁶¹ Despite the fact that these men essentially caused their own death, they have no way of knowing if they become a *draugr* after or not. The ritual in itself does not seem to denote a guarantee. It is possible that ‘the same cult of the *draugr*, and the ritual interment of a living companion with him [i.e. the dead], may lie behind the series of death-stories of the pairs of princes, simultaneously dead and buried, in the early chapters of the *Ynglinga Saga*’.⁴⁶² Kathryn Hume has argued that the *draugr* of the Old Norse tradition have a human counterpart in the *berserkr*, and both ‘are avaricious, bloodthirsty, and totally self-centered’.⁴⁶³ The *berserkr*, like the *draugr*, knows no limitations or territorial borders, he simply fights in his frenzy, killing whatever moves in front of him. *Berserkr* are primarily males, and are also to be feared. The most well-known *draugr*-fighter in the Icelandic family sagas, is Grettir, whom we have already come across. The first time he met a *draugr* was when he lived with a farmer named Þorfinn. One day, while he was out with another farmer, Auðun, they saw a fire burning north of Auðun’s farm.⁴⁶⁴ Grettir asked what it was, and Auðun answered:

⁴⁵⁷ N.K. Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts (A Study in the Draugr and the Haugbúi)’, in *Folklore*, 57:2 (1946), p. 50

⁴⁵⁸ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 19

⁴⁵⁹ Caciola, ‘Wraiths’, p. 19

⁴⁶⁰ Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts’, pp 51-54

⁴⁶¹ Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts’, p. 52

⁴⁶² Chadwick, ‘Norse Ghosts II’, p. 124

⁴⁶³ Kathryn Hume, ‘From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature’, in *Studies in Philology*, 77:1 (1980), p. 13

⁴⁶⁴ Richard C. Boer, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Germany, 1900), ch. 18, p. 63

“Þar á nesinn stenðr haugr,” segir Auðunn, “en þar var í lagðr Káre enn gamli, faðir Þorfinns; áttu þeir feðgar fyrst eitt bóndaból í eyjunni, en síðan Kárr dó, hefir hann svá aptr gengit, at hann hefir eytt á brott ǫllum bóndum þeim, er hér áttu jarðir, svá at nú á Þorfinnr einn alla eyna. Ok engum verðr þeim mein a þessu, er Þorfinnr heldr hendi yfir”⁴⁶⁵

““Out on that headland stands a grave-mound,” said Audun. “In it was laid Kar the Old, Thorfinn’s father. At first, father and son owned a single farm on the island, but after Kar died he returned from the dead and started walking, so much so that in the end he drove away all those farmers who owned land here. Now Thorfinn alone owns the whole island, and no harm from these happenings comes to those under Thorfinn’s protection.”⁴⁶⁶

Grettir decided he wanted to possess the treasures buried in the mound, and so he dug into the mound, and inside he found the skeleton of a horse, and a man sitting in a chair.⁴⁶⁷ However, Kar the Old, the *draugr*, attacked him while he was in the mound, and they fought in the darkness, and only by using his utmost strength did Grettir manage to defeat the *draugr*: he beheaded the *draugr* and placed the head at the backside of the now dead *draugr*.⁴⁶⁸ 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 *draugr* does not come back again, because Grettir does the same after he has beheaded Glámr. Kar is what is labelled a mound-dweller, and Jakobsson has argued that these types of *draugr* are also connected to the concept of the cursed treasure, and that they are exceedingly greedy.⁴⁶⁹ Glámr is a much bigger *draugr* than the mound-dweller seemed to be. He is himself killed under mysterious circumstances believed to be caused by the monster he set out to kill: *hann var dauðr ok blár sem Hel en digr sem naut*,⁴⁷⁰ (‘he was black as Hel and swollen as fat as a bull’).⁴⁷¹ It appears Glámr was able to also wound the monster enough to kill it. As a *draugr* Glámr causes people to lose their minds, and he rides the houses (as you would ride a horse).⁴⁷² He had a habit of breaking the bones in the body to kill men.⁴⁷³ Grettir

⁴⁶⁵ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 18, p. 63

⁴⁶⁶ Jesse L. Byock, *Grettir’s Saga* (Oxford, 2009), ch. 18, p. 51

⁴⁶⁷ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 18, pp 64-65

⁴⁶⁸ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 18, p. 65

⁴⁶⁹ Jakobsson, ‘Vampires and Watchmen’, p. 290

⁴⁷⁰ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 32, p. 125

⁴⁷¹ Byock, *Grettir’s Saga*, ch. 32, p. 94

⁴⁷² Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 32, pp 126-127

⁴⁷³ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 33, pp 127-130

came to the farm where Glámr is haunting, experiencing for himself a *draugr* riding a house. One night Glámr came to the farm and Grettir fought him. While Grettir and Glámr were fighting, the moon shone onto Glámr's eyes as Grettir looked them, and he became so scared that his strength left him, and he almost died.⁴⁷⁴ Glámr did not kill Grettir, instead he cursed him, saying he would become an outlaw, and *þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þessi augu sé þér jafnan fyrir sjónum, sem ek ber eptir; ok mun þér erfitt þykkja, einum at vera, ok þat mun þer til dauða draga*,⁴⁷⁵ ('I lay this curse upon you: these eyes will always be within your sight, and you will find it difficult to be alone. This will drag you to your death').⁴⁷⁶ Grettir then regained his strength, and cut off the head of Glámr, placing it at his buttocks.⁴⁷⁷ The case of Grettir is very interesting as a stand-alone study, but due to the nature of this study, all of the elements concerning Glámr as a *draugr* cannot be considered here.

In the Old Norse tradition there appears to be a definite concept of "ghosts" and "revenants", but in the medieval Irish narrative ghosts are portrayed in different ways. In *Do Fálsgud Tána Bó Cúalnge*, dated to around the ninth century,⁴⁷⁸ the ghost of Fergus mac Róich was summoned by Murgan mac Sencháin, in order to retrieve the lost *Táin*. A fog fell about the place, and Murgan was hidden for three days and nights. When Fergus came to Murgan he was dressed well, and then related the story to Murgan.⁴⁷⁹ Fergus, as a ghost, has one role, and that is to relay what happened during the *Táin*. He is benevolent in that he is helpful despite being summoned from the dead. There is no description of him other than that he is well-dressed, and we get very little insight into the whole situation. One story where we are given a good amount of information about the ghost is in *Scél Coirpre Chruim l Moel Sechnaill meic Moel Ruanaid*, a Middle Irish text about Cairpre Cromm the bishop of Clonmacnoise between 890 and 904 AD, and Mael Sechnaill mac Mael Ruanaid, King of Ireland 846-862 AD.⁴⁸⁰ In this story a soul; *in deilb n-aduathmair n-agairb, is i choirtchiti cirbud*,⁴⁸¹ ('a very dreadful, very harsh shape, tanned and jet-black'),⁴⁸² appeared before

⁴⁷⁴ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 35, p. 136

⁴⁷⁵ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 35, p. 137

⁴⁷⁶ Byock, *Grettir's Saga*, ch. 35, p. 102

⁴⁷⁷ Boer, *Grettis saga*, ch. 35, p. 137

⁴⁷⁸ Kevin Murray, 'The Finding of the *Táin*', in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 41 (2001), p. 17

⁴⁷⁹ Murray, 'Finding of the *Táin*', pp 22-25

⁴⁸⁰ John Carey, 'The Story of Cairpre Cromm and Mael Sechnaill son of Mael Ruanaid', in John Carey et al (eds.) *The End and Beyond – Medieval Irish Eschatology Vol. I* (Aberystwyth, 2014), p. 465

⁴⁸¹ Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', §1, p. 468

⁴⁸² Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', §1, p. 469

Cairpre while he was praying. The blackness of the soul was a result 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 Mael Sechnaill has heard Cairpre's voice as he was praying, and his voice had terrified the demons that were tormenting Mael Sechnaill.⁴⁸³ 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*,⁴⁸⁴ ('splendid shining shape').⁴⁸⁵ 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, where *draugr* are ugly and behave malevolent. Irish ghost 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 case, which can be argued to be of a "voluntary" nature, though still pertaining to *draugr*, is the case of Hrappr Sumarliðason, or Víga-Hrappr (Killer-Hrapp), from the *Laxdæla saga*. He was of Scottish descent on his father's side, and his mother's family was from the Hebrides, where he was also born.⁴⁸⁶

‘Hrappr var felstum mönnum ekki skapfeldr, var hann ágangssamr við nábúa sína; veik hann á þat stundum fyrir þeim, at þeim mundi þungbýlt verða i nánd honum, ef þeir heldi nökkum annan fyrir betra mann en hann’,⁴⁸⁷

‘Hrapp did not endear himself to most people. He was aggressive towards his neighbours, and let them know he would make life very difficult for them if they regarded anyone as being superior to him’.⁴⁸⁸

As Hrappr got older he became more brutal, but his strength began to fail. He became deadly ill, and 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.⁴⁸⁹ This was done,

⁴⁸³ Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', §§6-8, p. 470

⁴⁸⁴ Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', §13, p. 472

⁴⁸⁵ Carey, 'Cairpre Cromm', §13, p. 473

⁴⁸⁶ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 10, p. 16

⁴⁸⁷ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 10, p. 17

⁴⁸⁸ Magnusson & Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, ch. 10, p. 62

⁴⁸⁹ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17, p. 37

but Hrappr does not rest: *svá segka men, at hann deyddi flest hjón sín i aftrgöngunni. Hann gerði mikinn ómaka þeim flestum*,⁴⁹⁰ ‘people say he murdered most of his servants in his hauntings after death, and caused grievous harm to most of his neighbours’.⁴⁹¹ Because of his hauntings the farm became deserted. In chapter 17, we are told how Hrappr’s body was dug up and re-buried in a remote place,⁴⁹² and in chapter 24, we are told that Olaf Hoskuldsson, who took over Hrappr’s farm after he died, dug up Hrappr’s body and burned it,⁴⁹³ after Hrappr had haunted the place where he had been buried, and Olaf had built a house. Moving Hrappr’s body had ceased the hauntings in the original place, but the haunt had simply been moved to another place, not eliminated. Hrappr’s son was the first to live on the land after his father died, but shortly after he went mad and died,⁴⁹⁴ indicating that there may still have been some remnants of Hrappr’s hauntings. This example, is peculiar, because it does deal with a *draugr*, although the term used in the text is *aftrgöngunni*, found in the *Cleasby and Vigfusson* under *aptr-ganga*. It means ‘a ghost, apparition, the French revenant’.⁴⁹⁵ The first part, *aptr* with verbs related to motion means ‘re-’, and with the verb *ganga*, meaning ‘to go, walk’, the word, literally, means ‘re-walker’. Hrappr deliberately asked to be buried underneath his own house, in a liminal place, i.e. the threshold, and in an upright position. As we have seen with the other examples, the mound dweller Grettir first was in an upright sitting position, and Glámr was unceremoniously buried under rocks. 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. However, it is unlikely that he really wished for all of the horrible things to happen, including the death of his son.

What can be concluded from the evidence examined above concerning *draugr*, it is evident that, to some extent, the *draugr* is a shape-shifter, albeit involuntary. Rarely do we find examples of good natured people becoming *draugr*, instead it would appear to be primarily tough, greedy, evil men, who after death return in an enhanced form of what they were. The physical form has changed: they are larger, stronger, smell much worse (like a corpse), and their eyes change. The mental form has changed too, and it seems that every mental feature of the person prior to death has been enhanced: they become greedier, more evil, more menacing, all consideration of others, even the slightest form, is gone, and they become self-

⁴⁹⁰ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17, p. 37

⁴⁹¹ Magnusson & Pálsson, *Laxdæla Saga*, ch. 17, p. 78

⁴⁹² Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17, p. 38

⁴⁹³ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 24, p. 70

⁴⁹⁴ Sveinsson, *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17, p. 38

⁴⁹⁵ Volundr Lars Agnarsson, *The Cleasby and Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary*, p. 23

absorbed, intent only on their own survival and entertainment. The *draugr* is an example of the fluid and, at times, looser types of shape-shifting. The study has already discussed other fluid forms of metamorphosis, such as change of name and gender. In terms of the *draugr* the fluidity lies in the change from alive to undead, including physical and mental changes. There appears to be an underlying philosophical idea as well, as argued in the introduction, about the soul, although in the case of the *draugr* it is less about the soul and more about the physical aspect of the body being undead.

As a preliminary conclusion to this chapter, it can be partly concluded that out of all examples discussed here, of both the Scandinavian and Irish material, only one story appears to be debatable in terms of metaphorical or literal metamorphosis, i.e. *Finn and the Man in the Tree*. Here we are also not dealing with a curse, but banishment, and the metamorphosis had been argued to have several levels of interpretation, although none of these are conclusive. It depends on the interpretation of the audience, and whether they read the story as part of the *imbas forosnai*, or in another context. Generally, all the texts will portray a literal transformation, otherwise the curse would not be visible and fulfilled. The point of a curse is to make the victim suffer, as queen Hvít did with Björn, Uchtdelbadb to Tuirnn; whoever cursed Caer; Fuamnach to Étaín; and Andvari to the treasure. In the case of Andvari, the curse was projected upon an inanimate object, which affected anyone who owned it. The *draugr* cannot really be seen as victims of a punishment, because we do not really know how they are “created”. If the curses were only of a metaphorical nature, rather than the literary representations presented here, the punishment would have been lacking. It curses are placed upon someone by an external force, but are part of the plot of the story: the victim will have to survive or overcome the curse, i.e. Étaín, Caer, Björn and Tuirnn; or the victim will have to sacrifice their human life to obtain something, i.e. Fáfñir. In all cases discussed above, the involuntary shape-shifting is a catalyst for either greater events or characters, i.e. Björn, Tuirnn, Fáfñir/Andvari; or for overcoming obstacles, i.e. Caer and Étaín. For a literary curse to have the desired effect on the audience it would need to have been complete, and even exaggerated, as was the case with Étaíne and Fáfñir.

III “Genetic” shape-shifting

The cases of “genetic” shape-shifting examined in this chapter primarily have a genetic link specifically stated. Gods, and their offspring, are not considered in this chapter, because, as already mentioned in the introduction, this would encompass a far greater scope than what is currently possible for this study. In the Old Norse family sagas, the *Íslandingasögur*, we have the luxury of short genealogical descriptions at the beginning of most of the texts, or at times in other places in the texts. Because these sagas were used as a means of establishing a foothold, and lineage, of the families living in Iceland in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, genealogies were quite important. This tradition was carried on in later times, and can also be found in the *fornaldarsögur* of the later middle ages. These genealogies provide us with possibility of tracing an inherent shape-shifting gene. In the Irish narrative literature there are rarely a mention of lineage of a character, unless it is a significant factor in the story line. It appears that the audiences were expected to know other texts where these characters appear and, thereby, what their background story was. With this in mind, there seems, however, to be no clear examples of “genetic” shape-shifting in the early Irish narrative literature, and very few in the Old Norse saga tradition. The only good example from the Irish material is that of Cú Chulainn,⁴⁹⁶ where the audience is required to know the background story of his lineage in order to fully understand his *ríastrad*. Otherwise the only other example discussed in this chapter is a “wonder tale” probably collected in the eleventh century. The first example from the Old Norse tradition only has metaphorical metamorphoses, and the second one is possibly influenced by French court romance tales. The three texts will be discussed, starting with the two Old Norse examples.

De hominibus qui se uertunt in lupos

Although the Irish narrative tradition have little to no examples of “genetic” shape-shifting, a text, possibly written by Bishop Patrick of Dublin, shows that the concept may have existed outside of the narrative tradition. In *Versus sancti Patricii episcopi de mirabilibus Hibernie* we find a section named *De hominibus qui se uertunt in lupos*, (‘Of men who turn themselves into wolves’).⁴⁹⁷ The five extant poems are found in a Cistercian manuscript, British Museum Cotton MS. Titus D. xxiv, dated to the twelfth century,⁴⁹⁸ and Elizabeth Boyle argues that *de*

⁴⁹⁶ See chapter IV

⁴⁹⁷ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Writings of Bishop Patrick, 1074-1084* (Dublin, 1955), p. 63

⁴⁹⁸ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 8

mirabilibus Hibernie was probably written in the eleventh century, but possibly earlier.⁴⁹⁹ In the text *De hominibus* it is stated that men of *Scottorum gentis*⁵⁰⁰ were able to change their shape at their own will.⁵⁰¹ Although this would then mean we would categorise this text as “voluntary” shape-shifting, an important fact about these men is given: *miram naturam maiorum ab origine ductam*,⁵⁰² (‘who have this wondrous nature from ancestry and birth’).⁵⁰³ This information indicates that this is an inherent feature of these *Scottorum gentis*, and therefore “genetic”. Although it would have been possible to focus mostly on this case as “voluntary”, it is here labelled as “genetic”, because the literary examples examined here all have “voluntary” shape-shifting; Bǫðvarr voluntarily projects the bear, and Egill, although burdened by grief is not cursed to act as he does. The Irish text is very similar to other stories contained in Giraldus Cambrensis’ *Topographia Hiberniae*, the Norse *Konungs Skuggsjá*, and the *Book of Ballymote*,⁵⁰⁴ however, some details differ in some of these versions. There is a significant similarity between the *De hominibus* in *de mirabilibus Hibernie* and the vernacular text found in *The Book of Ballymote*, under the title *Do ingantaib Erenn andso da rer Lehair Glind-da-lacha*, (‘Of the Wonders of Eri here according to the Book of Glen-da-Locha’).⁵⁰⁵ Here the genetic, or inherited, ability to turn oneself into a wolf is also stressed: *Sil in faelcon i n-Osraige ata*,⁵⁰⁶ (‘The descendants of the wolf are in Ossory’).⁵⁰⁷ The noun *síl* is frequently found to mean ‘race, progeny, descendants’,⁵⁰⁸ and both versions emphasise that the ability to transform, voluntarily, into a wolf is rooted in an inherited feature, and the version in the *Book of Ballymote* specify that these men are found in Ossory. John Carey has argued that the tradition of a genetic link, rather than an involuntary cursing, as appears in *Topographia Hiberniae* and *Konungs Skuggsjá*, is the older of the beliefs.⁵⁰⁹ These texts are labelled as “wonder tales”, and are usually found in writing by non-Irish writers. Here,

⁴⁹⁹ Elizabeth Boyle, ‘On the Wonders and Ireland: Translation and Adaptation’, in E. Boyle & D. Hayden (eds.) *Authorities and Adaptations: The Reworking and Transmission of Textual Sources in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2014), p. 248

⁵⁰⁰ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 62

⁵⁰¹ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 62

⁵⁰² Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 62

⁵⁰³ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 63

⁵⁰⁴ Gwynn, *Writings*, pp 126-129

⁵⁰⁵ James H. Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach annso sis. The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius* (Dublin, 1848), pp 204-205

⁵⁰⁶ Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 204

⁵⁰⁷ Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 205

⁵⁰⁸ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (online), Letter S, Column 224

⁵⁰⁹ John Carey, ‘Werewolves in Medieval Ireland’, in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 44 (2002), p. 54

however, it is the Irish Bishop Patrick of Dublin, who wrote while the city was still Norse-Irish.⁵¹⁰ The men who could turn themselves into wolves, were said, in the *de hominibus*, to leave their bodies, *sua corpora uera relinquunt*.⁵¹¹ The same is the case for the men of Ossory in the *Book of Ballymote* version: *7 aitnit dia muinteraib nar sogluaister na cuirp, air dia n-gluaister ni thicfadsum cucu semper*⁵¹², (‘and they command their families not to remove their bodies, because if they were moved, they could never come into them again’).⁵¹³ The bodies could not be moved, because then they could not return to them. It is also noted that if, while in wolf’s shape, a man is wounded, the wound will still be visible when he returned to human shape.⁵¹⁴

According to the *Lebor Bretnach* (TCD MS H 3. 17), translated into Irish in the later eleventh century, there was a group of people in Ossory, who had the ability to shape-shift:

‘Delbait iat i conaib altaid, 7 tiagait iat i conrētaib, 7 dia marbtar iat 7 feoil ina m-belaib is amlaid bid na cuirp as a tiagat; 7 aitnit dia muinteraib nar sogluaister na cuirp, air dia n-gluaister ni thicfadsum cucu semper’,⁵¹⁵

‘They transform themselves into wolves, and go forth in the form of wolves, and if they happen to be killed with flesh in their mouths, it is in the same condition that the bodies out of which they have come will be found: and they command their families not to remove their bodies, because if they were moved, they could never come into them *again*’.⁵¹⁶

A similar story is told by Giraldus Cambrensis, but in his version the men have been cursed. Here there is no mention of a curse. What is presented here is a case of metempsychosis: the bodies of the humans are empty vessels, while the soul either takes over a wolf, or turns itself into a wolf. The latter appears to be the case most likely here. It is a similar plot as we saw with Böðvarr Bjarki, where the empty body must not be disturbed.

⁵¹⁰ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 1

⁵¹¹ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 62

⁵¹² Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 204

⁵¹³ Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 205

⁵¹⁴ Gwynn, *Writings*, p. 62

⁵¹⁵ Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 204

⁵¹⁶ Todd, *Leabhar Breathnach*, p. 205

Egils saga Skallagrímsonnar

One of the most quoted examples from the Old Norse literary tradition is found in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonnar*, which is set in the ninth- and tenth-centuries, but was not composed until the thirteenth century. The saga begins with a short genealogy of Kveldúlf, ⁵¹⁷ stating that his father was named Bjálfa, meaning ‘fur, skin’, ⁵¹⁸ and his mother was Hallbera, the second element –bera, meaning ‘she bear’. ⁵¹⁹ Unusually it is the maternal lineage which is important in the context of Kveldúlf: Hallbera, his mother, is the daughter of a man named Úlfr, and sister to a man named Hallbjarnar hálftrólls. The –bjarnar element here is also bear related, and his nickname literally means ‘half troll’. Kveldúlf married the daughter of a *berserkr*, their son, Skalla-Grímr, married Bera and had a son, Egill, who is the hero of the saga. Kveldúlf and his son, Skallagrímr ‘are referred to as shapeshifters using lexis centring on the verb *hamask* (to change shape) and the adjective *hamrammr* (shape-strong, given to shapeshifting)’, ⁵²⁰ and not terms related to *berserksgangr*, as would perhaps be expected. These terms are concerned with an inner ability of rage and unnatural strength, but at the same time they also refer to a bodily change into an animal, and at times they refer to both possibilities at once. ⁵²¹ Ralph O’Connor has noted that the three men in *Egils saga Skallagrímsonnar* have very distinct physical appearances: they are all dark-haired, ⁵²² and all of them have a bad temper, but are never actually called *berserkir*. Christopher Abram has stated that, ‘Kveld-Úlfr was a truculent and troublesome man who was reputed to turn into a wolf after dark; his son, Skallagrímr, was no easier to get on with. He was taciturn and surly, prone to violent mood-swings and fits of rage, especially in the evenings’. ⁵²³ Ármann Jakobsson argued for a ‘troll’ element being present in Kveldúlf’s bloodline, because his uncle on his mother’s side, Hallbjörn, was also known as ‘the half-troll’. ⁵²⁴ It could rather be argued that the ‘bear’ element is more predominant here, seeing as Kveldúlf’s mother’s

⁵¹⁷ Valdimar Ásmundarson, *Egils saga Skallagrímsonnar* (Reykjavik, 1892), ch. 1, p. 1. For a discussion on the meaning of the name Kveldúlf, see chapter I.

⁵¹⁸ Volundr Lars Agnarsson, *The Cleasby and Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary*, p. 65

⁵¹⁹ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 58

⁵²⁰ Ralph O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk? Warriors at the Edge of Humanity in Irish and Icelandic Sagas’, in Jan Erik Rekdal & Charles Doherty (eds.) *King and Warrior in Early North-West Europe* (Dublin, **forthcoming**)

⁵²¹ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

⁵²² O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

⁵²³ Christopher Abram, *Myths of the Pagan North – The Gods of the Norsemen* (London, 2011), p. 109

⁵²⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils saga’, in *Scandinavian Studies* 83:1 (2011), p. 35

name is Hallbera and his uncle's name is Hallbjarnar. Egill Skallagrímsonar looked like his father, but, as O'Connor has also argued, there are no definite signs of him having the ability to shape-shift, and 'his anger is never described in the shapeshifter-terminology of *ham-* compounds, but as ordinary anger, *reiði*'.⁵²⁵ *Reiði*, as a noun, is a weak feminine, meaning 'anger'.⁵²⁶ He is never described as entering the same state of mind as his father and grandfather during *hamask*. The only example that seems to connote some form of shape-shifting is found in chapter 55, when Egill was at the court of King Athelstan. On this occasion Egill was pulling his sword halfway out of its scabbard, and then thrust it back in, several times. His facial features are described in detail, leading up to the description of his eyebrows' "distortion":

‘Enn er hann sat, sem fyrr var ritat, þá hleypti hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, enn annarri upp upp í hárrætr. [...] Ekki vildi hann drekka, þó at honum væri borit, enn ýmsum hleypti hann brúnunum ofan eð upp’,⁵²⁷

‘When he was sitting in this particular scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair. [...] He refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn’.⁵²⁸

Although Egill changed his facial expressions, it cannot be definitely concluded that this is actually a resonance of the shape-shifting lineage associated with his family. It may simply be a severe frown, exaggerated by the author to create an image of just how angry Egill really was: 'his facial contortions is simply a vivid manifestation of (non-valorous) anger and grief'.⁵²⁹ It does, however, have some similarities to the facial distortion of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*. It would then appear that the further we go down the bloodline, the animalistic element, originally denoted in names relating to bears (and trolls), lessens with each new generation. Egill is also the first to not have a name that relates to bears or trolls, or warrior like behaviour. His father's name Skalla-Grímr, consists of two elements: *skalli* and *grímmr*. *Skalli* means 'bald head', 'top of head',⁵³⁰ and *grímmr* means 'wrath' or 'ferocity',⁵³¹ and

⁵²⁵ O'Connor, 'Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?'

⁵²⁶ Michael Barnes, *A new Introduction to Old Norse – Part 1 Grammar*, 3rd edition (London, 2009), p. 51

⁵²⁷ Ásmundarson, *Egils saga*, ch. 55, p. 145

⁵²⁸ Bernard Scudder, *Egil's Saga* (London, 2004), ch. 55, p. 100

⁵²⁹ O'Connor, 'Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?'

⁵³⁰ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 536

⁵³¹ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 215

literally translates as ‘Grim the Bald’.⁵³² The latter element here also denotes, though in a more human way, a link with wrath and fighting, but already by Egill’s generation, the names indicate a lessening in the bloodline of animalistic characteristics.

Hrólfs saga kraka

In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, dated to the sixteenth century, but based on an earlier, but lost saga,⁵³³ we find another example of a “genetic” transferral of shape-shifting abilities, through the line of the father, but here it is much more clearly related, and may be only good example of “genetic” shape-shifting. In the saga Björn, literally ‘bear’, son of King Hringi, was cursed by his step-mother, Queen Hvít, i.e. ‘white’,⁵³⁴ to become a bear, after he rejected her advances.⁵³⁵ Bera, slept with Björn while he was in human shape, which only happened at night. He then prophesised about his own death the following morning, and that his step-mother, Hvít, would try and make Bera eat some of the meat from Björn’s bear form.⁵³⁶ He warned her against eating any of the meat. He then prophesised about the three boys she would give birth to; the first should be named Elgfróði (*elg* means ‘elk’,⁵³⁷ *fróði* means ‘knowledge, knowing, learned’⁵³⁸), the second þórir (the uncompounded personal name related to the god þórr⁵³⁹), and the third Bøðvarr.⁵⁴⁰ Gwyn Jones has argued that the name Bøðvarr is a genitive singular of *bøð*, also found in OE *beadu* ‘battle’,⁵⁴¹ which is supported by *The Cleasby & Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary*. Björn was killed the next morning, and Queen Hvít tricked Bera into eating some of the bear meat, which, along with the curse upon Björn, caused Elgfróði to be born half man, and half elk; þórir to be born with dog’s feet from his insteps down; but Bøðvarr was born without any animal limbs.⁵⁴² Notably, two out of the three names given to the boys are related to their special feature, although Björn named them before he died and Bera ate the bear meat: Elgfróði is half man, half elk, and as the story tells later, he is wise at times; Bøðvarr, although it is not immediately recognisable, has the ability to project a form of spirit animal in the shape of a

⁵³² Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 536

⁵³³ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

⁵³⁴ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 302

⁵³⁵ See chapter II for discussion on Björn’s transformation.

⁵³⁶ Finnur Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur* (Copenhagen, 1904), ch. 20, pp. 51-52

⁵³⁷ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 126

⁵³⁸ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 175

⁵³⁹ Agnarsson, *Cleasby and Vigfusson*, p. 743

⁵⁴⁰ Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga*, ch. 20, p. 52

⁵⁴¹ Gwyn Jones, *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (London, 1972), p. 129n

⁵⁴² Jónsson, *Hrólfs saga*, ch. 20, p. 54

bear; but Þórir's name, although he has dog's paws on his hands and feet, is not related to these attributes, instead he is named after a god, whose father, Óðinn, was also a shape-shifter, and who was eaten by the Fenrir wolf at Ragnarok. Perhaps Björn's names for his sons were an indication of their inner animalistic nature, which then became of a physical nature when Bera ate the meat. When considering the animals the boys are connected to we have a bear, an elk, and a dog. Two are by definition wild animals, and the third can be both wild and domesticated. The bear is explained through the parents, i.e. their names and the curse, however the dog and elk are unusual, especially the elk. In general elks do not appear often in the Old Norse material, primarily because it is not native to Iceland, although reindeer is. Instead we would find elks in Norway and Sweden, but even the stories originating in Norway and Sweden rarely have elks in them. Elgfróði and Þórir are born with physical signs of their parents' curse, and it is implied that the physical manifestations are a result of Bera eating the bear meat, and that had she not, the boys would have had animalistic characteristics in their behaviour, rather than "mutations" on their bodies. The temperament of all three of the brothers is very similar to that of a wild, uncontrollable animal with Elgfróði ends up as a high-way robber,⁵⁴³ and Bøðvarr, showing his bear-like rage when his mother told him about Björn's curse, and in revenge tied a leather bag around Queen Hvít's head and beat her to death and dragged her through the streets.⁵⁴⁴ He was completely unable to control his anger, and almost went into *berserksgangr* in his treatment of Hvít. The fact that he beat her rather than killed her quickly with a weapon, emphasises his anger, and gives an impression more of a bear attack, rather than a human killing another human, making Bøðvarr appear inhuman. In addition to his already existing genetically inherent strength and abilities, he also received some of his brother's strength. Bøðvarr had gone to see Elgfróði, and before they parted from each other Elgfróði pushed Bøðvarr, who stumbled,⁵⁴⁵ so:

‘Fróði nam sér blóð í kalfanum ok bað hann drekka, ok svá gerir Bøðvarr; þá tók Fróði til hans í annat sinn, ok þá stóð Bøðvarr í sǫmu sporum’⁵⁴⁶.

⁵⁴³ Jónsson, *Hrólf saga*, ch. 20, p. 55

⁵⁴⁴ Jónsson, *Hrólf saga*, ch. 22, p. 59

⁵⁴⁵ Jónsson, *Hrólf saga*, ch. 23, p. 62

⁵⁴⁶ Jónsson, *Hrólf saga*, ch. 23, p. 62

‘Frodi drew blood from his own calf, telling Bodvar to drink of it, and Bodvar did so. Then Frodi shoved his brother for a second time, but Bodvar stood firm in his tracks’.⁵⁴⁷

The obvious transfer of the blood from one person to another, in order to strengthen one, is a common theme, but the transfer is usually between e.g. a dead dragon and a living human, but here we have an example of a transfer between brothers, both still alive. In the Irish material we find the same concept of a transfer of “family” upon someone when they drink a person’s blood. In the Irish narrative material the drinking of another person’s blood is seen as a way to establish a family connection, as in *Tochmarc Emire*, where Cú Chulainn drank Derbforgaill’s blood, and could not marry her, because now they were related. It could be argued that the genetic shape-shifting aspect of Bǫðvarr is strengthened due to the added effect of his physically animalistic brother, giving him the sturdiness and strength that the elk has. These are heavy and strong animals, built for the cold and hard environment of the forests of northern Euroasia. It comes as no surprise then, that by giving his brother some of his blood, Elgfróði passes on some of the sturdiness of the elk to his brother. The transfer of power is also seen in a scene where Bǫðvarr made his new friend, the weak Hott drink the blood and eat part of the heart of a monster Bǫðvarr had just slain.⁵⁴⁸ This ritual conferred the power of the monster onto Hott, who then became almost as strong as Bǫðvarr. The only reason Bǫðvarr is able to kill the monster is due to the strength and power he has inherited from his father, and gained through his brother’s blood.

When King Hrólfr of Lejre, and his men were attacked at Yule evening, by King Hrólfr’s own sister, Skulda, who had summoned an army of supernatural beings, King Hrólfr and his men went to battle, but Bǫðvarr the king’s champion, disappeared.⁵⁴⁹ The battle began and soon,

‘þat sjá þeir Hjǫrvarðar ok men hans, at bjǫrn einn mikill ferr fyrir Hrólfs konungs mǫnnum ok jafnan þar næst, sem konungrinn var; hann drepr fleiri men með sínum hrammi en fimm aðrir kappar konungs; hrjóta af honum hǫgg ok skotvápn, en hann brýtr undir sik bæði men ok hesta of liði Hjǫrvarðar konungs ok alt þat, sem í nánd er, mylr hann neð sínum tǫnnum, svá at ilir kurr kemr i lið Hjǫrvarðar konungs’,⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁷ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki (ca. 1230-ca. 1450)* (London, 2005), ch. 23, p. 46

⁵⁴⁸ Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 23, pp 68-69

⁵⁴⁹ Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 33, p. 99

⁵⁵⁰ Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 33, p. 100

‘Hjorvard and his men saw a great bear advancing in front of King Hrolf’s troops. The bear was always besides the king, and it killed more men with its paw than any five of the king’s champions did. Blows and missiles glanced off the animal, as it used its weight to crush King Hjorvard’s men and their horses. Between its teeth, it tore everything within reach, causing a palpable fear to spread through the ranks of King Hjorvard’s army’.⁵⁵¹

Hjalti, formerly Hott, who could not see Bøðvarr on the battlefield, went in search of him, and found him sitting in the king’s chambers in a trance. He woke him up, and Bøðvarr reproached Hjalti for doing so, because the victory was nearly theirs, and on the battlefield, the great bear had disappeared, which had also prevented Skuld from using sorcery.⁵⁵² The question here is whether the bear is an animal, which Bøðvarr’s soul takes possession of, i.e. metempsychosis, or whether it is a supernatural spirit animal he is able to project from within, using his animalistic nature. This study would argue that it seems to be a form of projection of his inner animal, rather than metempsychosis, and O’Connor agrees, arguing that it is the soul which is sent out.⁵⁵³ The bear is unusually large, and it just vanishes from the battlefield when Bøðvarr is woken from his trance. Had it been a case of metempsychosis, we would expect the bear to still be at the battlefield, and not just wander off. Bøðvarr had to be in a complete state of calm and concentration in order for him to project this animal from him, which is why he went to the king’s chambers, and not on the side of the battlefield. He knew that if he was disturbed the projection would disappear. Hjalti went in search of him, despite King Hrólfr telling him to focus on the battle. This subsequently led to the defeat and death of all the heroes of the saga. The concept of not disturbing the body is very common, and is still found in some Norwegian and German folk tales. Bøðvarr is not described as being a *berserkr*, and he seems to be deliberately set against *berserkir*, in order to portray him as the civilised counterpart, who also is the ‘bringer of civilised customs to the court of Hrólfr kraki, which before his [Bøðvarr’s] arrival was distinguished by its wealth but marred by violent and unmannerly behaviour (not just by *berserkir*)’.⁵⁵⁴

This chapter has the fewest examples of a categorised shape-shifting, and not without reason. Generally the Old Norse sagas have the most examples, or in this case two, of specifically

⁵⁵¹ Byock, *Hrolf Kraki*, ch. 33, p. 74

⁵⁵² Jónsson, *Hrólfr saga*, ch. 33, pp 101-102

⁵⁵³ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

⁵⁵⁴ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

identifiable “genetic” shape-shifting. Because they often begin with a genealogical outline information is at hand to establish the link throughout the lineage. The earliest example of Egill, i.e. ninth to tenth century, as already discussed, bases the genetic link in the maternal line. None of the transformations are actual literary transformations, instead we are dealing with a metaphorical transformation, where certain behavioural signifiers are inherited in the men of Egill’s family, leading back to the names of his ancestors. In the later sixteenth-century example of Hrólfr kraka, although based on an earlier lost saga, the transformation of Bǫðvarr is literal, but this text may have been influenced by romance tales from the French courts. We cannot therefore say that there was a narrative tradition of “genetic” shape-shifting in Scandinavia at the time, or it may have died out before the tenth century. It is however a feature in the mythological texts of the time, but these are not considered here. It may be that “genetic” shape-shifting was something which was seen as being part of the world of the gods, and not men. The only Irish example, apart from Cú Chulainn, is a wonder tale possibly written by Bishop Patrick of Dublin, and it is a story which is found in different versions. Two versions do stress the significance of the inheritance of the ability to change shape, but because other versions do not stress this, it is not clear if it is an added feature to the text, to make these men seem even more bestial, or whether it was commonly accepted.

IV Cú Chulainn's *Ríastrad*

The perhaps most well-known character of the early Irish literary tradition is Cú Chulainn, and due to his ability to perform *ríastrad*, i.e. distorting his own body, he is of significance when examining literary representations of shape-shifting. As stated in the introduction to this study, shape-shifting is here divided into three categories: “voluntary”, “involuntary”, and “genetic”, but Cú Chulainn fits no one category completely or wholly. Instead he seems to breach all three, being a transcendent and complex character, which is why he is considered independently. In the following chapter the different aspects of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad* will be examined in accordance with the tripartite distinction set out above, in order to show just how transcendent his shape-shifting is. The chapter will examine three sources and their description of the *cétríastrad*, i.e. his very first *ríastrad*: Recension I, *The Book of Leinster*, and the Stowe Manuscript, discussing the imagery surrounding the event. It will also discuss the other instances of the *ríastrad*, or where we may expect to see it, but it does not occur. The chapter will argue that there may be a preliminary state of rage prior to Cú Chulainn performing the *ríastrad*. Throughout, the chapter will argue how these literary representations of the *ríastrad* transcends the tripartite classification system.

The fullest description of the *cétríastrad* is found in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. There are three recensions of the epic: Recension I is found in four manuscripts; *Lebor na hUidre* (LU), dated to c. 1100 AD; *Yellow Book of Lecan* (YBL), dated to the late fourteenth century; Egerton 1782, dated to the early sixteenth century; and O'Curry MS 1, dated to late sixteenth century, but none of them contain a full text.⁵⁵⁵ Recension II is found in *The Book of Leinster* (LL), where the story has been modified to make for more of a complete work, according to Cecile O'Rahilly,⁵⁵⁶ although this is based on our modern understanding of a “complete” work of literature, i.e. beginning, middle, and conclusion. Recension III can be found in two later manuscripts, but only in fragmentary form.⁵⁵⁷ The three versions examined in this chapter are Recension I; Recension II; and R.I.A. MS. C VI 3, also known as the Stowe manuscript, which is the oldest representative of the seventeenth-century manuscripts, dating to 1633.⁵⁵⁸ O'Rahilly has argued that the Stowe manuscript is the earliest of the manuscripts, dating to 1633, with its composition being much earlier than this.⁵⁵⁹ The versions of

⁵⁵⁵ Cecile O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge – Recension I* (Dublin, 1976), p. vii

⁵⁵⁶ Cecile O'Rahilly (ed.), *The Stowe Version of Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Dublin, 1961), p. vii

⁵⁵⁷ O'Rahilly, *Stowe*, p. vii

⁵⁵⁸ O'Rahilly, *Stowe*, p. vii

⁵⁵⁹ O'Rahilly, *Stowe*, p. vii

Recension II, which are found in other manuscripts than LL are also known as IIB-version, a distinction assigned by R. Thurneysen, who assigned the Stowe manuscript version to the fifteenth century.⁵⁶⁰ The IIB-version is the version which was used by later scribes and can be found in manuscripts dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.⁵⁶¹ All of these three texts have been edited by Cecile O’Rahilly, and for Recension I and II, she has also provided a translation.

THE THREE DESCRIPTIONS OF CÚ CHULAINN’S *RÍASTRAD*

Recension I

‘Is and so cétríastartha im Choin Culaind co nderna úathbásach n-ílrechtach n-ingantach n-anaichind de. Crithnaigset a charíni imbi imar crand re sruth nó imar bocsimin fri sruth cach mball 7 cach n-alt 7 cach n-ind 7 cach n-áge de ó mulluch do talmain. Ro láe sáebglés díberge dá churp i mmedón a chrocind. Tánecatár a t[h]raigthe 7 a luirgne 7 a glúne co mbátár dá éis. Tánecatár a sála 7 a orcni 7 a escata co mbátár ríam remi. Tánecatár tulfhetti a orcan co mbátár for tul a lurgan combá métithir muldor[n]d míled cech mecon dermár díbide. Srengtha tollfétthe a mullaich co mbátár for cóich a muineóil combá métithir cend meic mís cach mulchnoc dímór dírím díreca dímesraighte díbide. And sin dorigni cúach cera dá gnúis 7 dá agid fair. Imslo[i]c indara súil dó ina chend; iss ed mod dánas tairsed fíadchorr [a] tagraim do lár a grúade a hia[r]thor a c[h]locaind. Sesseing a setig co mboí for a grúad sec[h]tair. Ríastartha a bél co útrachta. Srengais in n-ól don fídba chnána comate écnaig a ginchróes. Tánecatár a scoim 7 a t[h]romma co mbátár ar etelaig ine bél 7 ina brágit. Benais béim n-uglaib leóman don charput úachtarach fora fóreli comba métithir moltchracand cech slamsrúam thened doniged | ina bél asa brágit. Roclos blocbéimnech a chride ré chlíab imar glimnaig n-árcon hi fotha nó mar leómain ic technta fó mathgamnaib. Atchessa na coinnli bodba 7 na cithnélla neme 7 na haíble thened trichemrúaid i nnéllaib 7 i n-áraib úasa chind re fiuchud na ferge fírgarge hitrácht úaso. Ra chasing a fólt imam c[h]end imar craíbred ndergscíach i mbernaid at[h]álta. Ce ro crateá rígaball fó ríghthorad immi iss ed mod dá rísad ubull díb dochum

⁵⁶⁰ O’Rahilly, *Stowe*, pp vii-viii

⁵⁶¹ O’Rahilly, *Stowe*, p. viii

talman taris acht ro sesed ubull for each óenfinna and re frithchassad na ferge atracht dá fult úaso. Atracht in lúan láith asa étun comba sithethir remithir airmen n-óclaích corbo chomfota frisin sróin coro dechrastár oc imbirt na scíath, oc brogad and arad, oc taibleth na slog. Ardithir immorro remithir talcithir tresithir sithidir seólc[h]rand prímlui[n]gi móri in buinne díriuch dondfala atracht a fírchléthe a chendmullaig hi certairdi, ci nderna dubchfaich ndruídechta de amal cháig do rígbudin in tan tic rí día tincur hi fescur lathe gemreta'.⁵⁶²

‘Then a great distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognisable. All the flesh of his body quivered like a tree in a current or like a bulrush in a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves came on to the front of his shins, and each huge round knot of them was as big as a warrior’s fist. The sinews of his head were stretched to the nape of his neck and every huge immeasurable, vast, incalculable round ball of them became a red hollow (?). He sucked one of his eyes into his head so deep that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from the back of his skull on to his cheek. The other eye sprang out on to his cheek. His mouth was twisted back fearsomely. He drew back his cheek from his jawbone until his inward parts were visible. His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and his throat. His upper palate clashed against the lower in a mighty pincer-like movement (?) and ever stream of fiery flakes which came into his mouth from his throat was as wide as a ram’s skin. The loud beating of his heart against his ribs was heard like the baying of a bloodhound ... or like a lion attacking bears. The torches of the war-goddess, virulent rain-clouds and sparks of blazing fire, were seen in the air over his head with the seething fierce rage that rose in him. His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence a gap in a hedge. If a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it, but an apple would have stayed impaled on each separate hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above his head. The hero’s light rose from his forehead, as long and as thick as a hero’s fist and it was as long as his nose, and he was filled with rage as he wielded the shields and urged on the charioteer and cast sling-stones at the host. As high, as thick,

⁵⁶² O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 2245-2278

as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from every top of his head and dissolved into a dark magical mist like the smoke of a palace when a king comes to be waited on in the evening of a winter's day'.⁵⁶³

Recension II - The Book of Leinster

‘Is and sin cétríastarda im Choin Culaind co nderna úathbásach n-ilrechtach n-ingantach n-anachnid de. Crithnaigset a chairíni imbi immar chrand re sruth nó immar bocsimind ri sruth cach ball 7 cach n-alt 7 cach n-inn 7 cach n-áge de ó mulluch co talmain. Ro lá sáebchless díbirge dia churp i mmedón a chracaind. Tánccatar a thraighte 7 a luirgne 7 a glúne co mbáatar dá eis. Tánccatar a shála 7 a orccni 7 a escata co mbáatar riam remi. Tánccatar tullféthi a orcan co mbáatar for tul a lurggan comba méitithir muldom míled cech mecon dermár díbide. Srengtha tollféithe a mullaig co mbáatar for cóich a muneóil combá mé[t]ithir cend meic mis cach mulchnoc dímór dírim dírecra dímesraigthe díbide.

And sin doriñgni cúach cera dia gnúis 7 dá agaid fair. Imsloic indara súil dó ina chend; iss ed mod dánas tarsed fíadchorr tagraim do lár a grúade a iarthar a chlosaind. Seseing a séitig co mbó for a grúad sechtair. Ríastarda a bél co urthrachda. Sreñgais in n-ól don fidba chnáma comtar inénaig a inchróes. Tánccatar a scoim 7 a thromma co mbáatar ar eittelaig ina bél 7 ina brágit. Benais béim n-uglaib leómain din charput úachtarach for a fòrli comba méitithir moltracand teóra mblíadan cech slamsrúam teined doniged ina bél asa brágit. Roclos blocbéimnech a chride re chlíab immar glimnaig árchon i fotha nó mar leóman ic techta fo mathgannaib. | Athcessa na coinnle Bodba 7 na cidnélla nime 7 na haible teined trichemrúaid i nnéllaib 7 i n-áeraib úasa chind re fiuchud na fergge fírgairbe itrácht úaso. Ra chasing a fòlt imma chend imar craíabend nidercscíath i mbernaid athálta. Céro craiteá rígaball fo ríghthorud immi, is ed mod dá rísad ubull díb dochum talman taris acht ro sesed ubull for cach n-óenfinna and re frithchassad na ferge atracht da fòlt úaso. Atracht in lónd láith asa étun comba sithethir remithir áirnem n-ócláig. Airdithir remithir tailcithir tressithir sithithir seólchrand prímluñgi móre in bunne díriuch dondfóla atracht a fírchléithe a chendmullaig i certairddi co nderna dubchíach

⁵⁶³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 187

ndruídehta de amal cháich de rígbuidin in tan tic rí dia tenecur hi fescur lathi
gemreta',⁵⁶⁴

'Then his first distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognisable. His haunches shook about him like a tree in a current or a bulrush against a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front. The sinews of his calves came on the front of his shins and each huge, round knot of them was as big as a warrior's fist. The sinews of his head were stretched to the nape of his neck and every huge, immeasurable, vast, incalculable round ball of them was as big as the head of a month-old child.

Then his face became a red hollow (?). He sucked one of his eyes into his head so that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from the back of his skull on to the middle of his cheek. The other eyes sprang out onto his cheek. His mouth was twisted back fearsomely. He drew the cheek back from the jawbone until his inner gullet was seen. His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and his throat. He struck a lion's blow with the upper palate on its fellow so that every stream of fiery flakes which come into his mouth from his throat was as large as the skin of a three-year-old sheep. The loud beating of his heart against his ribs was heard the baying of a bloodhound ... or like a lion attacking bears. The torches of the war-goddess, the virulent rain-clouds, the sparks of blazing fire were seen in the clouds and in the air above his head with the seething of fierce rage that rose above him. His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence the gap in a hedge. Though a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, scarcely one apple would have reached the ground through it but an apple would have stayed impaled on each single hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above him. The hero's light rose from his forehead so that it was as long and as thick as a hero's whetstone. As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from the very top

⁵⁶⁴ Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge – From the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967), lines 2262-2294

of his head and became a dark magical mist like the smoke of a palace when a king comes to be attended to in the evening of a wintry day'.⁵⁶⁵

The Stowe Manuscript

‘Is ann sin ro cetríastradh im Coin Culainn co nderna uathbhásach iolrechtach iogantac[h] aindrenta anaithnidh dhe. Ro crit[h]naigsíod a cairine (uime) mar crann re sruth no mar boigsibhinn ar lar abann cach ball, cach n-alt 7 cach n-aigho dhe o mullach co talmain. Ro lá saobcleas díbirge da corp i medhon a croicinn. Tancatar a traighthe 7 a luirgne (7 a ghluine) co mbatar dia és. Tancatar a shála 7 a oircne 7 a iosgata go mbatar roimhe. Tangatar tulfheti a orcan go mbatar for tul a lorccan gurbhó commor fri moldoirn mhiledh cach meacan dermar dib-side. (Sreangtha tulfeth[e] a mullaigh co mbatar for coic a mhuinel guruo commor re ceann mismhic cech mulchnoc dimhor dimhearsraidhe dib-sen).

Is ann sin do-roighne cuach cera día ghnúis 7 dia aghaidh fair. Sluiccis an dara suil do ina chinn, is contapairt go dtairsedh fiadhcorr a toghraim do lár a gruaidi a hiarthur a cloigne. Ro sgince in tsuil oile go mb(oi) fora gruaid seactair. Ro ríastradh 7 ro saobadh a bel conicce a cluasa. Srengtar in aoil don fhidba cnama comba leir a inne 7 a inathar tara bhél. Tangatar a sgaimh 7 a troma co mbatar for etellaigh ina beolaibh 7 ina bragait. Benais bheim n-ulgaimh leomain don carpat uachtarach fora chele comba commór fri moltcroicend teora mbliadhan cach sliamsruaim thenedh ticedh ina bhél asa bragait. Ro-clos bloisgbeimnech a croide ina cliab mar glaim n-arcon i fothach no mar leoman ac tocht fo mathgamhnaibh. Do-chíthi na citnella nime 7 na haoible tenedh trichemruaidhe i nellaibh 7 i n-aeaibh ósa ccionn re fiuchadh na ferce fiorgairbe atract uasa. Ro caisnigh a fholt ima chend mar craoibredh ndergsieth i mbernaidh athfhalta. Gero craite rigaball cona toradh uime, is doic[h] nach roisfedh ubhall lár acht ro airisfedh ubhall for cec[h] n-aonfhionna ann re frithchasadh na fercci do erigh da folt uasa. Ro erigh a lon laoich asa edan comba sithremightir airtimh n-óglaiigh. † Airdithir remithir tailcithir tresithir sitithir seolcrann priomluinge móire in buinne direch donnfhola do érih a fíoruactar a cendmhullaigh i

⁵⁶⁵ O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, pp 201-202

*cethaird go ndernadh duibhcheo draoidechta dhe amail ciaigh do rigbruighin
romhoir in tan tic righ da hoindsaigi i feascar laithi geimhreta.*⁵⁶⁶

‘Then his first distortion came upon Cú Chulainn so that he became horrible, many-shaped, strange and unrecognisable. His haunches shook about him like a tree in a current or a bulrush against a stream, every limb and every joint, every end and every member of him from head to foot. He performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin. His feet and his shins and his knees came to the back; his heels and his calves and his hams came to the front. The sinews of his calves came on the front of his shins and each huge, round knot of them was as big as a warrior’s fist. The sinews of his head were stretched to the nape of his neck and every huge, immeasurable, vast, incalculable round ball of them was as big as the head of a month-old child.

Then his face became a red hollow (?). He sucked one of his eyes into his head so that a wild crane could hardly have reached it to pluck it out from the back of his skull on to the middle of his cheek. The other eyes sprang out onto his cheek. His mouth had twisted back and crooked as far as his ears. His cheek is drawn back from the jawbone so that his innards and his guts were visible through his mouth. His lungs and his liver fluttered in his mouth and his throat. He struck a lion’s blow with the upper palate on its fellow so that every stream of fiery flakes which come into his mouth from his throat was as large as the skin of a three-year-old sheep. The loud beating of his heart against his ribs was heard the baying of a bloodhound ... or like a lion attacking bears. The torches of the war-goddess, the virulent rain-clouds, the sparks of blazing fire were seen in the clouds and in the air above his head with the seething of fierce rage that rose above him. His hair curled about his head like branches of red hawthorn used to re-fence the gap in a hedge. Though a noble apple-tree weighed down with fruit had been shaken about his hair, it is likely that no apple would have reached the ground through it but an apple would have stayed impaled on each single hair because of the fierce bristling of his hair above him. The hero’s light rose from his forehead so that it was as long and as thick as a hero’s whetstone. As high, as thick, as strong, as powerful and as long as the mast of a great ship was the straight stream of dark blood which rose up from the very top of his head in all

⁵⁶⁶ O’Rahilly, *Stowe*, lines 2300-2333

directions and became a dark magical mist like the smoke of a very big palace when a king comes to visit it in the evening of a wintry day'.⁵⁶⁷

Discussion of Imagery

In each of the three versions Cú Chulainn is described as performing *sáebchless*, 'a wild feat'. The use of the word *cles*, or 'feat', here indicates that it is a voluntary act, because a feat is something which is performed, something a person is in control of, or something which has been taught, as with the other feats Cú Chulainn is able to perform. William Sayers has argued that *cles* is found in such compounds as *ubullchless*, or the 'apple feat', and *fáeborchless*, which means a 'sword edge feat'. The *Táin* alone lists a number of feats Cú Chulainn is able to perform, and he is in control of all of them. *Cles* is also associated with the word 'juggling' or 'a juggler', such as the 'hoary head-druid Tulchine, who juggles nine swords, nine shields and nine apples simultaneously in his private compartment in Da Derga's hostel'.⁵⁶⁸ Sayers argues that this means that '*cles* also had connotations of magic, shape-shifting, artifice, stratagems, deception and trickery',⁵⁶⁹ because it is linked with a druidic feat. Using the term *cles* denotes that this action has magical connotations, and is linked with the act of shape-shifting, which is what the *ríastrad* is. It would also appear that *cles*, as a feat, is taught primarily by foreign women, such as Scáthach and Aífe.⁵⁷⁰

It is significant to note here regarding the *cétríastrad* that it begins with his body shaking, and then his feet, shins and knees go to the back of his leg, while his heels, calves and hams go to the front. Apart from his facial contortions, and the visible lungs and liver, there are no mentioning of any other body parts. The arms are not mentioned at all, neither is his torso, apart from the distortions inside him. There is also much more focus on how his face distorts than his legs. The face is the one personally identifying feature, and once it distorts, Cú Chulainn is no longer recognisable as a person; instead he is a monster. The notion of being one-eyed has been discussed by several scholars, and in relation to other gods and heroes in earlier written traditions, such as Óðinn of the Norse tradition. Kim McCone has argued that the *ríastrad* could be seen as part of a Cyclops-theme, which, also relates to Óðinn. This theme is accompanied by a one-legged and one-armed theme, as can be found in the character

⁵⁶⁷ Translation based on the *Book of Leinster* version, with minor alterations. Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge – From the Book of Leinster* (Dublin, 1967), pp 201-202

⁵⁶⁸ William Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', in *The Canadian Journal for Irish Studies*, 9:1 (1983), p. 46

⁵⁶⁹ Sayers, 'Martial Feats', p. 46

⁵⁷⁰ Sayers, 'Martial Feats', p. 67

of Nuadu, but also in Lug, who is also Cú Chulainn's father in one of the three conceptions,⁵⁷¹ but also partly found in *Aided Con Culainn* and the three daughters of Calitín, discussed below. This loss-of-one-limb theme, McCone argues, appears to be part of Cú Chulainn's childhood, during his *ríastrad* as a boy; as an adult; and in his death, when Lugaid decapitates him, and his body then cuts off Lugaid's arm, who then cuts off Cú Chulainn's arm in revenge.⁵⁷² If we agree with this argument, then here is a genetic link between Cú Chulainn and his father Lug. The mouth opening up, and twisting back fiercely could be a reference to the baring of teeth or roaring by animals fighting. By opening his mouth we are also privy to a description of how fiery flakes appear in his mouth from his throat. His liver and lungs are seen fluttering in his throat, and he seems to be almost boiling over almost from the inside. The fluttering of his lungs may be an added reference to the roaring referred to above concerning his distorted mouth. The reference to the dark blood emanating from the top of his head, turning into a mist, at the end of the description, is another reference to the heat of rage and anger inside him. Physiologically his insides are being moved around, and his blood appears to be leaving his body, and evaporating, but his body still functions after the *ríastrad* has subsided. The strong imagery presented in the text is far beyond any other metamorphosis examined in this study, and it is clear that this hero is so monstrous in appearance that it has to spill over into his actions. The carnage that ensues after the *ríastrad* is evidence of the behaviour spilling over. He is not merely physically distorting, he is emotionally distorting, becoming consumed with anger and rage.

There are a number of references to nature in the descriptions, where certain elements are explained using flora and fauna. His shaking is linked to trees and bulrushes shaking in water currents; his hair is a bristle as red hawthorn, and could have apples stick on each hair. A crane would not be able to pick out his sunken eye; his heart beats like a baying bloodhound or a lion attacking bears; and he roars like a lion. Erik Larsen has argued convincingly that in order for the author to describe Cú Chulainn in this state of *ríastrad*, he had to use animal references, because 'he is not merely shape-shifting into a monster or animal the way gods did. He is not simply a very angry human. He is turning into a "monstrous... hideous and shapeless... unheard of... thing"'.⁵⁷³ He is beyond being categorised as either man or god, he

⁵⁷¹ Kim McCone, 'The Cyclops in Celtic, Germanic and Indo-European Myth', in *Studia Celtica*, XXX (1996), pp 95-99

⁵⁷² McCone, 'Cyclops', p. 99

⁵⁷³ Erik Larsen, 'Cú Chulainn: God, Man, or Animal?', in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 23 (2003), pp 179-180

is placed in an almost liminal category, which transcends all classifications. Phillip A. Bernhardt-House argues that the attributes, actions and motivations of Cú Chulainn are derived from a ‘wider dimension of canine symbolism’.⁵⁷⁴ Primarily the nature references are of flora and fauna, which would be found in Ireland, but then there is a reference to lions, which could not be found in Ireland. Lions have been linked to strength in other cultures, and being an exotic animal, the mentioning of the lion enhances Cú Chulainn’s state of rage. He is both strong and unusual.

THE *RÍASTRAD* AND TRANSCENDENCE

Ralph O’Connor has argued that the *ríastrad* and *furor* of Cú Chulainn are not static, but are part of the story of the hero.⁵⁷⁵ The *ríastrad*, as argued by Elizabeth Moore, ‘is a visual reflection of disorder, a display that indicates an imbalance within the *túath* itself – indeed, a deeper, darker, and much more menacing problem than that of a single hero who, being singularly ambiguous, occasionally “kicks over the traces”’,⁵⁷⁶ here referring to Jeremy Lowe’s article from 2000. Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*, is argued by Lowe to undermine his status as the hero of his tribe, since, when he is in the midst of the *ríastrad* he also poses a threat to his own people, making him a very unstable hero.⁵⁷⁷ To some extent this is true, but he also functions as the sole protector of the Ulstermen, when no one else is able to fight, creating an ambiguous role as both threat and protector at the same time. P.L. Henry has argued that the *ríastrad* is an obvious possession of martial fury,⁵⁷⁸ arguing for an involuntary act. The *macgnímrada*, or boyhood deeds, of Cú Chulainn portrays a young boy continuously overstepping the boundaries set by society, and continuously being re-integrated through the help of society; this in turn sets the scene ‘for his far more violent but fully socialized behaviour as a young adult in the *Táin*’.⁵⁷⁹ During his fights with the three sons of Nechta

⁵⁷⁴ Phillip A. Bernhardt-House, *Werewolves, Magical Hounds, and Dog-Headed Men in Celtic Literature* (New York, 2010), p. 2

⁵⁷⁵ Ralph O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk? Warriors at the Edge of Humanity in Irish and Icelandic Sagas’, in Jan Erik Rekdal & Charles Doherty (eds.) *King and Warrior in Early North-West Europe* (Dublin, forthcoming),

⁵⁷⁶ Elizabeth Moore, “‘In t-indellchró bodba fer talman’”: A Reading of Cú Chulainn’s First Recension “*ríastrad*”, in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 29 (2009), p. 158

⁵⁷⁷ Jeremy Lowe, ‘Kicking over the Traces: The Instability of Cú Chulainn’, in *Studia Celtica*, XXXIV (2000), p. 121

⁵⁷⁸ P.L. Henry, ‘Furor Heroicus’, in *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, 39 (1982), p. 235

⁵⁷⁹ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

Scéne there is no mention of *ríastrad* in Recension I,⁵⁸⁰ but the LL version and Stowe both mention that he does visibly get angry when Fóill mocks him: *doringni rothmol corcarda*,⁵⁸¹ *do-rinde rotnuall corcra*,⁵⁸² ('he blushed crimson').⁵⁸³ When he returned to Emain Macha, the watcher immediately assumed Cú Chulainn was going to kill them all if they did not stop him. Cú Chulainn turned his chariot sideways to Emain, which was *gess*,⁵⁸⁴ i.e. 'taboo'. The only way to calm him down was to stun him with naked women, which worked: *Foiligid in mac a gnúis forru 7 dobretha a dreich frisin carpat arná acced nochta nó náre na mban*,⁵⁸⁵ ('The boy hid his face from them and laid his countenance against the chariot that he might not see the women's nakedness').⁵⁸⁶ In this state, they were then able to dunk him into three vats of water to cool him down.⁵⁸⁷ The three vats of water re-appear in *Serglige Con Culainn*: after having killed many men, Cú Chulainn is asked to take a break from fighting. Láeg, his charioteer said they need to leave, because if Cú Chulainn was not satisfied with the amount of killing he would turn on them, and they prepared three vats of water to cool his rage.⁵⁸⁸ Although *ríastrad* is not specifically mentioned in this situation, it may be assumed that since the watcher knew Cú Chulainn was there to fight that he may have been distorted, since he said this before Cú Chulainn turned his chariot against Emain Macha. When Cú Chulainn killed the hound of Culann, *ríastrad* is again not mentioned in Recension I,⁵⁸⁹ and neither is any form of rage. The same episode in LL also does not mention either rage or *ríastrad*.⁵⁹⁰ If we take these outbursts, without specific reference to distortion, as a preliminary state of rage to the *ríastrad*, it could be argued that this is an indicator of the involuntary nature of the *ríastrad*. Arguably, there may be a stage of rage, of a possibly involuntary nature, which overcomes Cú Chulainn when he is in a threatened situation. In the examples shown discussed above, it could be argued that the preliminary state of rage is involuntary, due to him having to be forcefully calmed down by the use of water.

⁵⁸⁰ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 710-758

⁵⁸¹ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 1093-1094

⁵⁸² O'Rahilly, *Stowe*, line 1129

⁵⁸³ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, p. 168

⁵⁸⁴ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 806-807

⁵⁸⁵ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 1191-1192

⁵⁸⁶ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, p. 171

⁵⁸⁷ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, line 1193

⁵⁸⁸ Myles Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn* (Dublin, 1975), p. 21

⁵⁸⁹ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 575-587

⁵⁹⁰ O'Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 874-885

After the description of the *cétríastrad* there is no mentioning of how he returns to his human form, just that he does. William Sayers has noted that the verb *ríastraid* is derived from **reig-*, meaning ‘twist’, and that the verb is used with the preposition *imm*, ‘around’, and in the impersonal passive form, giving the meaning of the transformation being imposed upon Cú Chulainn, because it comes around him.⁵⁹¹ Sayers also proposes the argument that while Cú Chulainn is under *ríastrad* he is a danger to his own society.⁵⁹² Jeremy Lowe has argued that Cú Chulainn’s actions are irrational, and that the *ríastrad* is a result of excitement and turbulence, ‘as though he is a victim of forces beyond his control’.⁵⁹³ According to Lowe, Cú Chulainn has no control over his own body, and is unable to predict or control his actions in this state, which makes him a danger to his own people. During the events of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn does attack women and children in the enemy camp, and in cases where he does fight his own people, i.e. Fer Diad, his foster brother, they are already pinned against each other, driving a wedge between what could be understood as ‘own people’. Due to them being on different sides, they are no longer fighting for the same thing.

Despite arguments that Cú Chulainn cannot control himself during *ríastrad*, he still shows a great amount of control and awareness. As O’Connor has correctly states: ‘he channels the monstrous energy of his shapeshifting in a conscious, precise, and at one point even non-violent matter’.⁵⁹⁴ During every fight he is fully aware of his surroundings, and is able to utilise them to his advantage. He is well aware that he is a better warrior while in *ríastrad*, and consciously spurs it on, or even has his charioteer spur him on during fights. In Recension I, when he encounters the boy troop of Ulster he becomes distorted, the description being very similar to the *cétríastrad*, although much shorter, and attacks the boys.⁵⁹⁵ The verb used to describe what Cú Chulainn does to the boys is *do-scara*, ‘overthrows, knocks down, lays low, defeats, destroys’.⁵⁹⁶ Arguably he does not kill the boys, but just knocks them to the ground. This shows that he is either too young to fully use the *ríastrad*, or he still has a conscious mind, knowing not to kill the boys. In *Aided Óenfir Aife*, which is found in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*, Cú Chulainn fought his son Conlaí, but did not

⁵⁹¹ William Sayers, ‘*Airdrech, Sirite* and other Early Irish Battlefield Spirits’, in *Éigse*, 25 (1991), p. 53

⁵⁹² Sayers, ‘*Airdrech*’, p. 54

⁵⁹³ Lowe, ‘Kicking’, p. 122

⁵⁹⁴ O’Connor, ‘Why Does Cú Chulainn Go Berserk?’

⁵⁹⁵ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 428-436

⁵⁹⁶ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Online), letter Degra-dúus, Column 371

distort himself, instead he used the *gae bulga*, his magical spear, to kill the boy.⁵⁹⁷

Furthermore, the terminology; *ro lá sáeb**ch**less díbirge dia churp i mmedón a chracaind* (from LL), *ro lá saob**cle**as díbirge da corp i medhon a croicinn* (from Stowe), and *ro láe sáeb**gl**és díberge dá churp i mmedón a chrocind* (from Recension I), all contain the word *cles* (highlighted in bold), which has been discussed above. The sentence has been translated by Cecile O’Rahilly as: ‘he performed a wild feat of contortion with his body inside his skin’. This denotes, as argued above, a voluntary act, a feat, like many of the others Cú Chulainn can perform. He can engineer situations so that he can perform the feat, and thereby protect his people.

In *Compert Con Culainn*, an eighth-century text,⁵⁹⁸ he is said to be the son of two fathers, through three different conceptions, the divine Lug and the human Sualdaim. Although Sualdaim is the one who raises him after the final birth, it is Lug, and his ancestry, which could be argued to affect Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad*. In *Cath Maige Tuired*, originating in the ninth century, and redacted in the Middle Irish period,⁵⁹⁹ we are told how Lug’s father was a member of the Tuatha De Danann, and his mother was a Fomorian, the daughter of Balor of the Evil Eye, champion of the Fomorians. Balor is described as having only one eye which spews out poisonous fumes, immobilising the enemy. Generally we must assume that these Fomorians were primarily more monstrous in their form, than the Tuatha De Danann, although some are described as very beautiful. Lug’s mother carries her Fomorian bloodline through Lug, who then passes it on to Cú Chulainn. The fact that Cú Chulainn is conceived by Lug on two out of the three conceptions, could be argued to strengthen his paternal line. Cú Chulainn’s *ríastrad* visually resembles the shape of Balor of the Evil Eye, his paternal great-grandfather. The *ríastrad*, then becomes part genetic in nature, since Cú Chulainn, on his paternal bloodline, has a divine father, and a Fomorian great-grandfather, whose shape is very like our distorted hero. It is significant, though, that this genetic feature is not mentioned in the texts dealing with the *ríastrad*, but must be deduced by the audience when they know the story of Lug and Cú Chulainn individually.

A situation where we would expect Cú Chulainn to utilise the *ríastrad* is when he enters into single combat with his foster-brother, Fer Diad. This event is described in Recension I, *The*

⁵⁹⁷ Kuno Meyer, ‘The Death of Conla’, in *Ériu*, 1 (1904), pp 118-120

⁵⁹⁸ A.G. van Hamel, *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* (Dublin, 1933), p. 1

⁵⁹⁹ John Carey, ‘Myth and Mythography in *Cath Maige Tuired*’, in *Studia Celtica* XXIV/XXV (1989/1990), p. 53

Book of Leinster (LL), and *Stowe manuscript* versions of the *Táin*. However, there are significant differences in the portrayal of this event, compared to the description of the *cétríastrad*, which generally was similar among all three versions. Although both LL and *Stowe* have similarly long descriptions of the event, only LL have direct descriptions of Cú Chulainn distorting himself, some of which are also found in Recension I. The first from LL is comment in a stanza by Fer Diad, who said to Cú Chulainn: *rot gab baile is búadre, rot fá cach olc úanne, dáig is dait a chin*,⁶⁰⁰ ('frenzy and madness have seized you. All evil shall come to you from us for yours is the guilt').⁶⁰¹ The frenzy and madness having seized Cú Chulainn could be the *ríastrad*, or perhaps the beginning stages. As argued above there may be a pre-stage to Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*, which is curable with vats of water. This stanza is also found in Recension I, lines 3077-3080. Later in LL and in *Stowe* Cú Chulainn asked his charioteer Láeg, to incite him so that his anger would increase.⁶⁰² Whether this indicates control of the *ríastrad* or not depends on the interpretation. Cú Chulainn is obviously aware that, if incited and reviled, his anger will grow, possibly resulting in the *ríastrad*. He is not asking Láeg to urge him on to increase his spirit and courage; instead it is depicted in a more negative way, i.e. if he is negatively urged he will distort and kill Fer Diad. In Recension I, Cú Chulainn also asked Láeg to incite him, however here he only asks to do so if he is overcome, and to praise him if he is winning.⁶⁰³ There is no mention of doing this in order to increase his anger. The only text that mentions *ríastrad* in the Fer Diad incident is LL, which states,

‘Is and sin ra chétríastrad im Choin Culaind goros lín att 7 infithsi mar anáil i llés co nderna thúaig n-úathma[i]r n-acbéil n-ildathaig n-ingantaig de, gomba métithir ra fomóir ná ra fer mara in mílid mórchalma ós chind Fír Diad i certarddi’,⁶⁰⁴

‘Then occurred Cú Chulainn's first distortion. He swelled and grew big as a bladder does when inflated and became a fearsome, terrible, many-coloured, strange arch, and the valiant hero towered high above Fer Diad, as big as a *fomóir* or a pirate’.⁶⁰⁵

This event is not described in *Stowe*, but a similar event occurs in Recension I, although without mention of *ríastrad*: *ra lín at 7 infisi amail anáil i llés. Forbrid a méd co mba móam*

⁶⁰⁰ O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 3015-3017

⁶⁰¹ O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, p. 220

⁶⁰² O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 3271-3273; O’Rahilly, *Stowe*, lines 3090-3093

⁶⁰³ O’Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 3081-3082

⁶⁰⁴ O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, lines 3317-3320

⁶⁰⁵ O’Rahilly, *Book of Leinster*, p. 228

oltás Fer Diad,⁶⁰⁶ ('Cú Chulainn swelled and grew big as a bladder does when inflated. His size increased so that he was bigger than Fer Diad').⁶⁰⁷ The element of swelling up like a bladder and becoming taller than Fer Diad are the only two similarities between the two, but it is quite clear that Recension I is also referring to the *ríastrad*. It would appear that Cú Chulainn is aware that unless he distorts he would not be able to kill Fer Diad, and whether them being foster-brothers has caused him to hold back, is uncertain. These two descriptions are much shorter than the *cétríastrad* above, but the audience must at this time know the full distortion. Although Cú Chulainn appears to be in a state of distortion, at least in LL, he is only able to defeat Fer Diad by using the *gae bulga*. It is clear that after Fer Diad's death, the distortion must have subsided, because Cú Chulainn is able to lament Fer Diad through poetic utterances.

The last time Cú Chulainn uses the *ríastrad*, is in *Aided Con Culainn*. This text is found in two versions, A and B. A is fragmentary, with parts of it surviving in *Book of Leinster* fo. 119a – 123b, as well as short extracts from the original text in MS H. 3. 18, pp 601-603.⁶⁰⁸ The oldest nucleus of version A was dated by Pokorny to before the mid-eighth century.⁶⁰⁹ Version B is an Early Modern Irish, fifteenth-century text, which oldest manuscript is dated to the sixteenth century.⁶¹⁰ In *Aided Con Culainn* we are told how the death of Cú Chulainn came about, and it is probably not coincidence that the ones responsible for his death, through magic, were shape-shifters themselves. The Clan Calitín are referred to as *do delbatar* or *do dealbadar* several places in the text.⁶¹¹ However, this only occurs in the later version of the text. In the earlier version edited by Bettina Kimpton, the Clan Calitín are only mentioned to have studied druidry and witchcraft.⁶¹² In the later version we hear how Badb took the shape of a scaldcrow on two occasions, significantly as the crow that lets the men of Ireland know Cú Chulainn is truly dead when he was tied to the standing stone.⁶¹³ In the earliest version the scaldcrow is only mentioned once, when it sits on the pillar stone where Cú Chulainn died,

⁶⁰⁶ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, lines 3093-3094

⁶⁰⁷ O'Rahilly, *Recension I*, p. 207

⁶⁰⁸ A.G. van Hamel, 'Aided Con Culainn', in *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* (Dublin, 1933), p. 69

⁶⁰⁹ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 69

⁶¹⁰ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', pp 69-70

⁶¹¹ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 81, 89

⁶¹² Bettina Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn – A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni with Introduction, Translation, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary* (Maynooth, 2009), p. 11

⁶¹³ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 82, 113

and it is not said it is Badb.⁶¹⁴ She also took the shape of Cú Chulainn's mistress Níam, to convince him to go to battle.⁶¹⁵ Although it is not a feature in the earliest text, by setting more than one shape-shifter up against Cú Chulainn, and by adding magical poisonous spears, the scene is set for the death of the hero. They are juxtapositions to the hero: he is beautiful, but distorts into something terrifying, and they are ugly, terrifying hags who shape-shift into animals and beautiful women. Most significantly in the later version of this text is the last of Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*, which was incorporated from the *Táin*,⁶¹⁶ with some minor additions and rephrasing. Apart from that it is structurally similar to the *cétríastrad*, reiterating certain elements such as the physical change of his legs, the contortion of his face and the one eye being sucked into his head so that not even a crane can pick it out.⁶¹⁷ The analogy of apples getting caught on his hair as it stands up, and the blood rising from his head are also featured in this version.

As a preliminary conclusion it is important to state that this study did not attempt to label the *ríastrad* as either "voluntary", "involuntary" or "genetic", but as all three. Instead of viewing it as either or, it should instead be seen for what it is: a literary tool to highlight the importance of Cú Chulainn as a hero, and his *ríastrad* as a complex force, to elevate him to a level where all three categories are involved and utilised. Had only one of the three categories been used the *ríastrad* would not have been as complex a character feat as it is. By using verbs that denotes both an involuntary nature, i.e. *ríastraid* in the impersonal passive form, in conjunction with the preposition *imm*; and voluntary nature, i.e. *cles* to describe a feat, and its connotations of magic and shape-shifting, the complexity is apparent to the audience, who would also be familiar with stories of Cú Chulainn's genealogy.

⁶¹⁴ Kimpton, *Death of Cú Chulainn*, p. 24

⁶¹⁵ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 90.

⁶¹⁶ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 70

⁶¹⁷ Van Hamel 'Aided Con Culainn', p. 101

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the literary representation of literal and metaphorical metamorphosis and metempsychosis in the early Irish narrative and Old Norse saga traditions. It did so by distinguishing three categories of shape-shifting, namely “voluntary”, “involuntary”, and “genetic”. These three categories were chosen to better manage the material from both literary traditions, and to get a better understanding of shape-shifting in the context of cause and effect. Examining acts of shape-shifting without categories will not provide a broader understanding of the how and why of shape-shifting. Although two acts of literal shape-shifting may appear similar, due to the results of that shape-shifting, i.e. both may end up as the same animal, it is important to understand more than simply the result of metamorphosis: it is necessary to understand how and why. If we do not examine the events leading up to an event of metamorphosis, which may mean drawing on other material apart from the text where the metamorphosis occurs, we cannot fully understand the reason for the event in the first place. If all events of metamorphosis or metempsychosis are examined based on the outcome of the event, most will fall into the same categories, namely “animal” or “human”. If we utilise categories, such as those used in this study, which are based on previous studies of metamorphosis, we can better understand why the event occurs, and not simply that it does. Especially distinguishing between “voluntary” and “involuntary” is important, because the result of metamorphosis in these two categories, with the chosen two literary traditions, often happens to be the same, i.e. bear or wolf. Having this in mind, when examining “voluntary” shape-shifting it is also important to distinguish between literal and metaphorical, because the two are very different in their representations. As has been shown in this study, in Chapter I, the language used to describe metaphorical metamorphosis, e.g. the *berserker*, is different than that of actual metamorphosis.

By utilising categorisations, i.e. “voluntary”, “involuntary”, and “genetic”, as well as considering both literal and metaphorical transformation, this study has examined a number of texts from both literary traditions. The study did not limit itself to any specific early Irish literary Cycle, or Old Norse saga categorisation, but examined a broad spectrum of literature. The study examined texts from the Fenian Cycle, Ulster Cycle, and Mythological Cycle of the Irish tradition; and texts from the *Íslendingasögur*, *Fornaldarsögur* and the *Heimskringla*, which contained literal and metaphorical examples. This shows that the tradition of

metamorphosis was not confined to one set of texts, but was used as a literary tool in a range of sagas which had different forms and functions.

In terms of the metaphorical shape-shifting of a “voluntary” nature, two major literary groups of warriors were examined; the *berserkir* and the *fianna*. The *fián* of Finn mac Cumail are often described using animal imagery. In some cases they are also being juxtaposed with dog-like invaders, such as in the case of *The Naming of Dún Gaire* where they fought cynocephalic invaders of Ireland. In *Áirem Muintiri Finn* the new recruits are described as prey, rather than predator, which seems to be what they evolve into once they have passed an initiation test. Irish law texts deal specifically with the terms such as *confæl conrehta*, *i conrecht* and *oc fáelad*, primarily in connection with women and lunatics, and meaning ‘a werewolf in wolf’s shape’, ‘in wolf’s shape’, and ‘wolfing’, respectively. The animal imagery used in both the narrative and the legal texts is metaphorical, describing, in the case of the *fián*, a specific literary lifestyle, one that was outside of settled society, perhaps in a forest setting, where hunting played a large role; and in the case of legal texts, a type of female who seems to have functioned on the margin of society. The *berserkir* of the Old Norse saga tradition were warriors, often in a king’s retinue, but still functioning independently, usually while travelling in groups of twelve. Often the leader’s name was Björn or some other animal-derived name. Sagas such as *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Grettis saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Hrólfs saga kraka* provides us with descriptions of how the *berserkir* acted, and how they were seen by the society they lived in. Their howling and bellowing, and biting of shields is described either using animal imagery, or by underlining certain elements, which would have been viewed as animalistic by the audience. Their strength was almost super-human, and often it was only the true hero who was able to defeat a *berserkr*, and at times the hero would almost have to go into *berserksgangr* himself. Sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Hrólfs saga kraka* also show how *berserkir* were viewed as property and status symbols. Female *berserkir* existed within literature, although they are few and far between, and Hervor from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* is a great example of this. Although it has been argued that *berserksgangr* was not a voluntary act, this study argued that it was based on the control *berserkir* still possessed while in the frenzy. Again, as with the *fián*, no one truly metamorphosed into an animal, instead animal imagery is used figuratively to describe the warrior madness of the *berserkr*.

When it comes to literal “voluntary” metamorphosis we are dealing with a different type of writing. Animal imagery is no longer used to describe behaviour, instead we see descriptions of literal shape-shifting, which are generally less colourful, because there is no need to use different metaphors; when someone changes into something else; it is simply stated. The *Völsunga saga* contains a number of events of shape-shifting, the first being the King Siggeir’s mother, who turns into a wolf to kill off King Völsung’s sons, but Sigmundar kills her instead. Later Sigmundar and Sinfjötli (who is both his son and nephew), find two cursed wolf skins (*úlframi*), and put them on, immediately becoming wolves. Eventually they are able to take them off, and proceed to burn the *hamr*. Although this event has been argued to be of “involuntary” nature, the two men do voluntarily put on the skins. *Völsunga saga* also tells of Otur, a brother to the dragon-to-be, Fáfnir, who often changed into the shape of an otter by apparently donning a *hamr*. And lastly from the *Völsunga saga*, an example of human-to-human metamorphosis, when witch changes shape with Signý, twin sister of Sigmundar, causing Signý, in the shape of the witch, to sleep with her brother Sigmundar, and conceiving Sinfjötli, mentioned above. This is a rare case, and it would seem the literary reason for this was so that the strong blood-line of the Völsungs is carried on in Sinfjötli. The Old Norse examples stem primarily from the *fornaldarsögur Völsunga saga*, where the Irish examples have a wider range of literary examples.

Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill shows how Tuán continuously reinvents himself into another animal shape, until eventually being reborn as a human. This text is related to the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* texts, since it also centres on the different invading forces in Ireland. *De Chophur in da Muccida* is another story with numerous metamorphoses, with two swineherds changing shape to different animals, until they too, are both reborn; not as humans, but as bulls. In *Tochmarc Emire*, Derb Forgaill changes herself and a maid into the shape of birds to come and see Cú Chulainn after she has been promised in marriage to him. *Scél Tuáin Meic Chairill* and *De Chophur in da Muccida* are examples of supernatural characters who are able to change shape at their own volition. They do so on many occasions, and each of the stories have their own purpose for doing so: *Scél Tuáin* revolves around the many invasions of Ireland by invaders, and it is all observed by Tuáin, who, after being reborn, becomes a hermit, and no longer shape-shifts as he used to. It is a narrative device used as a way for him to never die: by shape-shifting he also became young again. *De Chophur* is a *remscéla* to the *Táin*, and is the story of how the two bulls that they are fighting over came to be. It also explains, inadvertently, why these two bulls are so special: it is because they were

supernatural people ones. With each new animal they also receive a new name, essentially renewing themselves, as Tuáin did. *Derb Forgaill* plays only a minor role in *Tochmarc Emire*, but she is a shape-shifter none the less. One text contained both a “voluntary” and “involuntary” event of metamorphosis; *Aislinge Óenguso*. Óengus is a god, and the only one to be examined in this study. He voluntarily shape-shifts into a swan, for an unknown period, in order to be with Caer Ibormeith, who showed herself to him in dreams, and who was cursed to be a swan every second year. She was examined in the “involuntary” chapter. Óengus, being a god, is supernatural, and it is therefore unsurprising that he possesses the ability to shape-shift as he pleases.

The “involuntary” shape-shifting chapter examined cases of characters being cursed into another shape, or involuntarily having to take on animal traits to survive. The story of Bran and Sceolang, *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *The Abbot of Druimenaig*, and *Aislinge Óenguso* all had characters that were cursed into another shape, or gender, by either a known or unknown force. Bran and Sceolang’s mother was pregnant when she was cursed by her husband’s first wife, and the children were cursed with her, and were born as dogs. The dogs ended up as Finn mac Cumail’s hunting dogs. Étaín was also cursed by the first wife, but her metamorphosis was one of several stages: first a puddle of water, which was re-shaped into a worm through outside forces. The outside forces were discussed as having several possible levels of interpretation, one being cosmic forces, another being the religious philosophical conception of earth, air and fire, as described in *In Tenga Bithnua*. In another version of *Tochmarc Étaíne* she is transformed into a swan by Midir, who flies away with her. In both cases the transformation was of “involuntary” nature, exacted upon her by someone else. *Aislinge Óenguso* contained two aspects of metamorphosis, the “voluntary” one of Óengus, and the “involuntary” one of Caer Ibormeith. Caer was cursed by an unknown character, and the curse was never actually lifted. Instead Óengus shape-shifted into a swan to be with her. In *The Abbot of Druimenaig* we hear of a male abbot who is transformed, by what appears to be divine force, into a woman, and marries a stronger, manlier abbot from a neighbouring abbacy. Although a transformation takes place, this text is an example of how a transformation can be both literal (the abbot wakes up with all female features), and metaphorical. The metaphorical aspect occurs when the audience realises this is a satire of how one abbacy subjugated to another, but eventually regained its own strength. The more controversial text, in terms of its interpretation, is *Finn and the Man in the Tree*, an anecdote found in the *Senchas Már*, glossing the term *imbas forosnai*. The exiled Derg Corra was said

to live in the wood and walk around on shanks of deer. This text was argued to be both of literal and metaphorical nature, depending on interpretation. Derg Corra's lifestyle was discussed to possibly be a reference to the initiation ceremony examined in Chapter I, but *Finn and the Man in the Tree* is of a much earlier date, and although the Finn material is fragmented, we cannot know whether a story about the initiation ceremony existed at the time. Derg Corra is surrounded by three animals, a bird, a fish, and a deer, which have been interpreted as the *tria genera animantium*, linked with Christ and depictions of him. The animals may also be literary representation emphasising the liminality of the situation Derg Corra is now in. Derg Corra has already been said to be a *gilla*, a liminal figure, living with a liminal group, i.e. the *fían*, and now, as an exile, he could be argued to live a double liminal existence, having to revert back to animal characteristics to survive. The three animals are also animals which figure in the Fenian Cycle of texts, and are not extraordinary in that sense. Derg Corra was compared to Suibhne, who went mad after being cursed and lived in the top of trees, as a wild man; *geilt*, until he was "saved" by a religious man, but eventually killed over a misunderstanding. The comparison was made to illustrate other events of exiled men living in the woods, taking on animalistic lifestyle, and perhaps even metamorphosed partially.

The Old Norse sagas which were examined in Chapter II were the story of Fáfñir the dragon, Harri the ox, Björn the bear, and the literary group known as *draugr*. Fáfñir of the *Völsunga saga* became a dragon when he stole a cursed treasure. His part is small compared to the length of the saga, but his transformation is arguably more of a catalyst to Sigurðr Fáfñisbana, one of the heroes of the saga, killing Fáfñir. We are not told the exact details of the metamorphosis, but this event is permanent and also the most magical in the sense that he becomes a dragon. Harri the ox from *Laxdæla saga*, is slaughtered by his owner, and it is not until his death when his mother appears in a dream, we realise he may have been a human possibly cursed into an ox shape. The event is very brief, and has no effect on the rest of the saga. Björn from *Hrólfs saga kraka* was cursed by queen Hvít to become a bear, and was killed in this shape, which was Hvít's plan. The curse, like that of Caer, is not completely permanent: where Caer is only a swan every second year, Björn is only a bear during the day. He sleeps with Bera while in human shape, and she conceives. Queen Hvít forces Bera to eat some of the meat from Björn, causing a furthering of the already "genetic" shape-shifting of Bǫdvarr and his brothers. A case which did not involve cursing as such, was the case of the *draugr*, revenants who are undead, and whose shape has changed to the grotesque, while still

being animated creatures. These often appear as opposition to the hero, such as Glámr in *Grettis saga*. They have been argued to be similar to vampires, although “vampiric” seems more appropriate here; they dwell in mounds or caves, at times seem to suck the energy out of humans, kill for fun rather than survival, and are known to cause havoc where they go. The only way to kill them seems to be beheading and then placing the head between the legs. These characters are obviously supernatural in nature, and are perhaps an extension of the *berserkir* as opposition to the hero. Conceptions of death in the Middle Ages were fluid, and these creatures only occur after death, although not everyone becomes one. It seems that it was possibly to spur on a transformation, and that some characters sought to become a *draugr* after death, to protect the treasure they were buried with, in the mound; these were usually called mound-dwellers, rarely coming out of the mound. Others, like Glámr, died a violent death by the hands of a *draugr*, but then became one themselves. This is possibly where the theory of vampires come in. The general similarity between all men who became a *draugr* after death, was that in life they were mean and evil, a feature which was carried through into their undead life. The Irish narrative tradition has nothing similar to *draugr*, but they do have ghosts (in the sense that we understand today). These however, primarily had a hortatory purpose for the story, since they sought redemption from religious men, thus providing a moral lesson for their living audience. The concept of the *draugr* is significantly Scandinavian in this regard.

A category which yielded little to be examined, especially since divine figures were outside of the scope of this study, was the “genetic” category. Only two texts from the Old Norse tradition and one from the Irish gave some form of clear distinction of genetic metamorphosis. *Hrolf saga kraka* yielded two examples of metamorphosis, one being “involuntary”, and the other “genetic”. This was also the best example of genetic metamorphosis that could be found in the literature. This was a clear case, with the children of a cursed man having physical mutations or the ability to project a spirit animal of sorts in the shape of a bear. However, since Bǫdvarr’s bear was a projection, and not an actual metamorphosis, even this text is lacking in unambiguous evidence of a tradition of “genetic” shape-shifting. *Egils saga* only shows some facial distortions which may be traced back to his metaphorically metamorphosing grand-father and father, who were both *berserkir*. The Irish example is a wonder tale, which is found in different versions, also by Giraldus Cambrensis, and although it is mentioned that a group of people from Ossory are able to change shape based on their heritage, it is a wonder tale rather than a saga narrative. Only Cú Chulainn

could be argued to be a definite case, but then the audience would have had to be familiar with the texts *Compert Con Culainn* and the mythological texts about the god Lug and his lineage. Was the concept of “genetic” shape-shifting confined to a specific type of stories? We know that it can be found in mythological texts in both traditions, but even then it is not completely followed through in either of the traditions. Was the concept then perhaps too inconceivable? More studies will have to be done on this specific topic, examining both narrative texts, laws, hagiography and religious material.

Cú Chulainn was such an example of metamorphosis he had to be considered independently, because he embodied all three categories of shape-shifting. The chapter began by listing three versions of the *cétríastrad*, the first distortion, of Cú Chulainn, i.e. Recension I, *Book of Leinster*, and *Stowe Manuscript*. The imagery used to describe the *ríastrad* focused on the physical changes, although without mentioning of what happened to his arms, with specific emphasis on the face, i.e. the identifying feature of a person. Physically he went from beautiful to grotesque and one-eyed, his legs backwards, lungs and liver in his throat, and fire and blood rising from him. Additionally to the physical changes, a number of references to flora and fauna were used to explain the *ríastrad*'s changes to his body. The *ríastrad* was argued to be of a voluntary nature, due to the control Cú Chulainn seems able to exercise over when the *ríastrad* is fully utilised. In texts such as *Aided Óenfir Aífe* and the *magnimrada* there are instances of Cú Chulainn not showing any anger or *ríastrad*, instead he remained calm and in control. The use of the term *cles*, ‘feat’, to refer to the contortion, indicating a taught feature, rather than an outside force, also supports the notion of a “voluntary” act. At the same time, *ríastrad* often occurs in the impersonal passive form, with the preposition *imm* ‘around’, indicating an involuntary nature. It was also argued in the chapter that there may be a preliminary state of rage, one that is curable with vats of water, which appears to have involuntary features. The genetic aspect of the *ríastrad* comes in the knowledge of other texts, specifically *Compert Con Culainn* and *Cath Maige Tuired*, the first saying that one of Cú Chulainn's fathers is the god Lug; and the second giving Lug's genealogy as part Fomorian. Taking all this information, both literary and linguistic, it is clear that Cú Chulainn transcends the tripartite categorisation set out in the introduction, and that this enhances his role as the main hero of the Ulster Cycle.

It is evident from the literature discussed in this study that there were different underlying reasons for choosing to portray a character as shape-shifter, be it literal or metaphorical. The literal metamorphosis was a narrative device, one to create characters that were significantly

different, be it good or evil. There is a long tradition of literal metamorphosis in literature, and, as explored in the introduction to this study, there were a number of philosophical concepts attached to the idea of metamorphosis. Metaphorical metamorphosis was more a comment on society, and what it meant to be human and/or civilised. As seen with the example of the *berserkir* and *fianna*, there is an obvious divide between a settled society and these two groups. The *fianna* were seen to live in liminal places, not fully human, nor civilised. The *berserkir* became uncivilised and inhuman once they entered into *berserksgangr*. Rarely are the *berserkir* the good guys, and for a long time the church appeared to have issues with the concept of the *fianna*. By using metaphorical metamorphosis as an analogy for loss of humanity, it also showed, to a 'civilised' audience, what happened when one transgressed the boundary of human civilisation.

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