

the mightier, and thus the early whispers of rivalry by jealous voices were soon later by the trumpets of war.

TRICKSTERS IN THE MABINOGION

Mabinogion of Wales abounds with trickster figures, mortal magician and otherworld fairy alike. Arawn King of Annwn, the lord of the otherworld, betrays Pwyll Prince of Dyfed in a dishonorable act, and the cost to Pwyll is to buy Arawn's friendship and reclaim his own honor is to switch guises with the fairy for a whole year. They live each other's lives and sleep with each other's wives during this period, and none is the wiser of the switch; Pwyll spends his year in exile by slaying Hafgan, Arawn's rival and enemy. This encounter smacks of the formulaic ritual acts that exemplify the trickster in *The Mabinogion*: Arawn has warned Pwyll to strike his foe just once, and no more; Pwyll does, and is victorious. One more blow, however, would have undone Pwyll's magic, and Pwyll would have lost. Such is the stuff of Welsh tricksters. Rhiannon, that most famous of Welsh fairy figures, appears to Pwyll as he sits on a fairy mound, and magically eludes pursuers until he thinks to ask her to stop teasingly to halt.

The use and understanding of the proper forms of language prove vital throughout this branch of *The Mabinogion*, as Pwyll first loses Rhiannon through careless words and then regains her through the employment of a magic that depends on the victim's thinking that he must say the proper magic words. This trigger phrase springs the trap on the vile Gwawl, who had deceived Rhiannon for his own. Gwawl's shame is avenged, however, by the power of Llwyd, a classic shape-shifter. Llwyd created all manner of mischief in Dyfed, all earmarked by forms of magic indicative of the trickster: a portentous thunderclap, a bewitched mist, and a blinding flash were followed by the mysterious disappearance of the population of Dyfed. Later Llwyd threw in a generous enchanted castle for good measure. As a final insult, Llwyd transformed himself and his wife and followers into mice and ravaged the harvest. The spell is finally undone by a vow properly formulated, however; upon being released from the land of Dyfed by Manawydan, Rhiannon's second husband, Llwyd acknowledged that had Manawydan not spoken wisely, vengeance would have rained down upon him like that horde of rodents.

MEDIEVAL FAIRIES AS TRICKSTERS

In the medieval tradition the Tuatha De Danann—or *sidhe*—become transformed into what we know as fairies. Indeed, the mighty Celtic god Lugh himself metamorphosed in Christian traditions into Lugh-chromain, "Little Lugh," or the leprechaun of Irish folklore, an acquisitive little trickster if ever there was one. While fairies sometimes appear in folklore and literature as positive, guardian spirits, more often than not they are hazardous capricious creatures with whom to have dealings. Through fairy rings, fairy mounds, charmed objects, food, potions, and the like, fairies often come

into contact with mortals at the peril of the poor unsuspecting humans. Generally speaking, fairies are neither evil nor good, except when they have been deemed so through Christian interpretation. It is more fair to note that they do not subscribe to any human code of conduct, and they answer to their own moral code; thus in their dealings with humans they often seem amoral—or morally ambiguous—at best, and downright evil at worst. To the fairy king who captures Lady Heurodis in *Sir Orfeo*—as to the various Puck figures, wild huntsmen, and fairy dancers who inhabit medieval British literature—the feelings and well-being of their human neighbors simply don't count for much. They are, moreover, ideal trickster figures, in that they are often shape-shifters, often display voracious appetites for blood or sex or riches, and are creative in their employment of tricks and traps and carefully worded oaths and vows.

Lesser Gods or Spirits

World mythology contains a variety of deity and spirit motifs in addition to those primary types already discussed. There are figures associated particularly with fate. There are races of ancient giants against whom the ultimately victorious gods must fight. Cyclops and other monsters, centaurs, dwarfs, fairies, and angels all have roles in the world of myth. The mythologies of the British Isles are particularly rich in such figures.

Germanic Demigods and Spirits

In Germanic mythology, two groups of minor figures—the Norns and the Valkyries—are among the most visible female members of the pantheon. Except for occasional bursts of independence by the fertility figure Freya, goddesses act less than they are acted upon in Germanic myth, quite likely as a result of the ascendancy of the warrior cults over those of fertility. Indeed, the connection between the powers of life and death and the Norns, the Valkyries, and Freya might suggest that all of these figures are descendants of the great goddess, who was traditionally associated with these fundamental matters. Hel and giantesses such as Skadi are powerful female figures, but they represent the powers of chaos feared by the gods. The Norns and the Valkyries—although hardly well developed in terms of individual personality—do provide a glimpse of female power and autonomy in the ranks of the Germanic gods themselves, and echoes of these powerful forces can be heard in their distant Anglo-Saxon Christian counterparts.

THE NORNS

The Norns are the Norse goddesses of fate: the three sisters are named Urd, "Fate"; Skuld, "Being"; and Frigg, "Future"; or perhaps "Debt"; and Verdandi, "Present." They guard the well of Urd and decide the destinies of the gods, men, the gi-

ants, and all other creatures. It is interesting to note that a being named Skuld is also counted in some lists of the Valkyries. The Norns have an ancient relationship to childbirth—which certainly makes sense, as they determine the fate of every child—and they may in fact have evolved from an early goddess of maternity. Thus the tripartite goddess of the Celts may be thought to have some ancient relationship to the Norns. The myth of the origin of the Norns is obscured by the later records, however, and they are said in *Volsunga Saga* to be related to the races of elves and of dwarfs, as well as to the gods. Some sources suggest that there are different races or sets of Norns, some benevolent, some malevolent. It seems likely that one set of Norns may have multiplied over time. Snorri tells us that the well of Urd lies beneath the second root of Yggdrasill, the world tree, and that each day Urd and her sisters water the lowest branches thereof; that well is also where the gods hold daily assemblies. In the mythic cycle of the gods the Norns appear mainly as types, occasionally making a pronouncement of doom. In some of the sagas, however, they take a more active role resembling that of the Valkyries.

Although the Norns are described as weaving and snipping the destinies of men and of gods—very like the classical Fates—they are also associated with the scoring or carving of wood, as in the cutting of runes or the planks upon which days were counted on Scandinavian farms. Weaving, and the prophetic powers granted to women as a result of this labor, is an association mentioned in the saga of the earls of Orkney; the mother of Jarl Sigurd is said to have woven for him a banner that signified victory to the lord it preceded, but death to the man who carried it. It also has been argued that some scraps of cloth found in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries might be similar talismans of victory. The Norns were known in Britain by the name of Urd, the Old English form of which is *Wyrd*. *Wyrd* is a concept of inexorable fate that was extremely common in Old English literature, and notably in *Beowulf*. Although the metaphorical notion of *wyrd* was quite common, the Norns as a distinct set of beings do not appear in early English literature; the tradition may have lived on in Scots and English folktales, however, a possibility to which the “weird sisters” of *Macbeth* and elsewhere attest.

THE VALKYRIES

In Norse sources the female goddesses and divine spirits were known in general as *disir*, and the Valkyries constitute one branch of this sisterhood, which most likely originated in an Indo-European group of death-goddesses. Warrior-goddess figures such as the Valkyries abound in Indo-European mythology: from India to the lands of the Teutons to the battlegrounds of the ancient Irish, female spirits flitted above and about many an ancient conflict. In Germanic myth, such beings with dominion over the battlefield seem to have been considered demonic in nature; it has been suggested that these figures developed from stories about actual cults of Germanic warrior women. Eventually, in the Norse tradition, the association of these spirits with Odin as his shield-maidens seems to have tempered this conception, and they be-

came known as “Odin’s girls,” or “wish girls,” meaning those who did Odin’s bidding. His bidding was to select and to harvest the greatest human warriors for his army of the dead in Valhalla, and this the Norse name *valkyrjar*—roughly “choosers of the dead”—makes clear. The Old English term for these spirits was *waelcyrge*, and those few references to slaughter-choosers that survive in English records seem to indicate that these were perceived to be malevolent, demonic spirits.

The Valkyries served Odin without question, and were zealous in their search for additions to the *einherjar*, the chosen slain. Freya shared some Valkyrie-like attributes—although it sometimes escapes notice, she took her half-share of the battlefield dead, after all, and her feather coat reminds us of the “swan maiden” Valkyries of the saga of Weland, and of German folklore—but she differed from them in at least one fundamental respect: unlike the most of the other goddesses of Asgard, the Valkyries were, by and large, virgins one and all, preferring the “great death” of the battlefield to the *petit mort* of the bed chamber. Each night in Valhalla these shield-maidens turned into barmaids, and the same hands that had singled each man out for slaughter now brought mead to the dead heroes returning from their sport on the battle plain.

At Odin’s command, the Valkyries sometimes grant victory to a warrior, and sometimes death; but the first is just a precursor to the second: it is only through glory and victory in battle that a hero might rise to the stature Odin demands in his chosen ones. Thus warriors chosen to fall sometimes rebuke the Valkyries for their faithlessness, but the battle-maidens answer that it was only through their auspices that the warriors succeeded in the first place. The Valkyries are sometimes numbered at nine, sometimes at twelve, and sometimes there seem to be many, many more. It has been suggested that a small number of warrior-goddesses were later supplemented by half-mortal Valkyries who entered Valhalla after lives as mortal shield-maidens. The Valkyries are given suitably gruesome and warlike names in the Norse sources, but these are likely more literary than mythic in origin.

The Valkyries undoubtedly were supernatural spirits, creatures of the otherworld that fit most neatly in a Christian Anglo-Saxon context as demons, handmaids to the Devil himself; indeed, even in material that was not overtly Christian, the Anglo-Saxons seem to have seen only the worst side of these battle-goddesses. In *The Wonders of the East*, for example, they are said to be related to the Gorgons of classical myth, and their gaze is described as steely and deadly. Furthermore, the violent female figures of *Beowulf*—Grendel’s mother first and foremost, of course, but let us not forget the evil gaze of Modthrytho, a Gorgon type if ever there was one—are evil monsters who slaughter and invite slaughter.

In a number of narratives of the lives of holy women, however, the old Germanic model of the virgin warrior-goddess is recreated in a new form. As we shall see in our discussions of the hero and of the sagas, the saint’s life was a genre through which Anglo-Saxon authors often recast heroic and mythic material. Just as Christ is reinvented into a young Germanic hero in *The*

Dream of the Rood, the Old English poetic versions of the lives of Judith, Juliana, and Elene show us these heroines in the light of the Valkyrie tradition. These holy virgins are steely-eyed themselves, potent battle leaders who single-handedly defeat the agents of Satan in spiritual (and sometimes physical) battle, and who inspire both their followers and the readers of their sagas to carry on the good fight.

THE GIANTS

In Indo-European mythology generally—and in Germanic myth specifically—giants represent the forces arrayed against the powers of the gods; at the same time, however, these rival forces often are much like and indeed often are related to the gods themselves. In this aspect the Germanic giants play a role akin to that of the Irish Fomoir, the Indic Demons, the Iranian Turanians, and the classical Titans. The Old Norse term *jotunn* is cognate with the Old English *eoten*, and both may have come from an Indo-European root term having to do with eating; thus it has been postulated that early forebears of the Germanic peoples may have come into contact with rival tribes to which they attributed cannibalistic behavior. This sense of giants as man-eaters has worked its way into the fabric of Germanic folklore, and indeed, “Jack and the Beanstalk”—perhaps the most notable English tale of giant-slaying to survive into the modern period—is premised upon this aspect of giant behavior.

Giant, rather like *troll*, derives from a catch-all term for monsters and for the rivals of the gods, a word that only later takes on the more specific meaning with which we are familiar; thus in the Norse records we meet a number of different forms of giants and giantesses: some are monstrous and ugly, with numerous heads or limbs; others—while perhaps coarse in manner and mien—are more or less simply huge versions of men; still others—notably among the giantesses—are as beautiful and desirable as the deities themselves. Indeed, some giant-folk (notably Gerd and Skadi) live among the gods as friends and lovers, while some gods (notably Odin) are descended from giants themselves. The Norse giants inhabited Jotunheim, bordering Midgard, the land of humans, on the middle level of the cosmos.

In general, it appears that the giants are described as enemies of the gods in two ways: some, like Thrym and Utgar-Loki, appear to be members of a rival tribe who live in halls like men and gods and array themselves against the gods as a rival army. Others are embodiments of forces of nature, as their categories (frost-, fire-, and rock-giants) make clear. These giants represent the chaos that always lurks at the door of man and that undermines the social structure of the gods by its constant encroachment on men, livestock, and crops. They are ice storms and volcanic eruptions, early frosts and earthquakes: the forces of the natural world that bring blight, death, and destruction to men as readily as the gods bring light, life, and fertility. Perhaps the best examples of giant-kin in early English literature are Grendel and his

Dam, the demons who terrorize the hall of King Hroddgar in *Beowulf*. These two figures—although described in quasi-Christian terms that suggest that they dwell in the darkness of sin outside the light of God—clearly also represent the monstrous forces lurking on the margins of civilization, hating the joy of men, and anxious to extinguish it.

THE DWARFS AND THE ELVES

Little distinction is made in the Norse sources between dark elves and dwarfs, and the names are used almost interchangeably; we are told, however, that the latter inhabited Nidavellir while the former lived in Svartalfheim. In both cases, caves, pits, and mountain hollows are likely places in which to find these creatures. In the Norse sources and throughout the Germanic world these beings are most often considered evil, or at best self-concerned and little interested with the well-being of humans. Dwarfs seem to have evolved in great part from folklore and had little ritual or religious significance. Unlike their Celtic counterparts, the *genii cucullati*—which were associated with fertility, plenty, and the mother goddess—the mythic provenance of these figures seems to have been darker: the Indo-European root of *dwarf* seems to have been something meaning “destruction,” “disease,” “deception,” or “demonic.” The dwarfs are master smiths and adept at magic while they are at it, and when forced to labor or to surrender treasure against their will, they are well able to bestow a potent curse for good measure. All the greatest treasures and weapons of the gods, it is only fair to note, were the products of dwarf hands, but always the dwarfs served themselves first: lust, greed, power, and fear—these were the motivations of the dwarfs.

It is clear from the later Norse texts that light elves were friends to god and man, that they inhabited Alfheim—on the upper plane of the cosmos, along with Asgard and Vanaheim—and that they were good, and often mixed with the gods in their halls; but little else about their particulars is known. Unlike those concerning the dwarfs, beliefs about the light elves may have evolved from ritual roots and may have originated in minor figures of veneration, most likely nature spirits. The Anglo-Saxon tradition concerning elves is somewhat different from the Norse and the German, and is noteworthy in that it is one of the few instances in which we see an early English tradition transported into much later German folklore. It is clear that the Anglo-Saxons perceived that elves could be dangerous, as the names of a number of diseases take the term *aelf-* or *ylf-* as part of their name in Old English. Perhaps owing to the Celtic influence in Britain, this dark underside was hidden beneath a beautiful visage, however, as the Anglo-Saxons thought elves to be beautiful, shining creatures, often quite small, and sometimes very well disposed toward humans. A number of Anglo-Saxon names include the word *aelf* as an element, and a common descriptor might be translated “pretty as an elf.” This combination of good and evil, beauty and danger, reminds us of later medieval traditions of the fairies, traditions which are clearly Celtic in origin.

THE DIVINE SPIRITS

Vettir is a broad term that encompasses all of the supernatural creatures known to the Norse; these include the gods, elves, dwarfs, giants, and spirits of any kind. The Germanic peoples were somewhat like the Celts in their belief that the landscape was numinous—that is, that it was alive with spirits—and the belief in land and water sprites of various forms and dispositions was widespread. Belief in personal guardian spirits was likewise endemic to the Germanic world. *Hamingjar* were a kind of personal guardian spirit, and clearly evolved from an understanding of personal fortune and destiny; indeed, the word itself comes from a root meaning “luck.” *Fylgjur* were likewise personal guardians of sorts, and the term derives directly from a verb meaning “to follow, to guide, to accompany.” *Fylgjur* were usually described as spirit beings with the ability to take on multiple forms, but they sometimes were thought to be one’s own spirit, which passes on from the body after death. While one’s *hamingja* could be transferred to anyone else after death, one’s *fylgja* was bound within the family circle and might only pass onto a close relative. Both of these concepts of protective spirits seem to be similar to the Christian concept of the guardian angel or the Roman belief in the personal *genii*, and both seem to have developed from an earlier belief that the spirit could take on its own form outside of the body.

THE BEAR’S SON

The folkloric motif of the super-human warrior descended from the union of a great bear and a human woman survives in oral cultures around the globe. Most usually the narrative includes a number of common elements: the bear’s son undertakes some quest with a number of companions and spends the night in an abandoned dwelling; during the course of the night one of the companions is wounded or killed by an invading monster—perhaps the owner of the dwelling, perhaps not—and the bear’s son stalks this marauder into an underground lair, where he avenges the attack upon his companion. The bear’s son himself usually is said to be able to take on the form of his father, and often is impervious to weapons in battle, fighting with the ferocity of a wild beast.

A tale of this type has passed from folkloric to mythic and even epic status in almost every part of the world in which humans come into contact with bears. This is true for a number of reasons. Bears exhibit a number of human-like traits, especially at times a shambling, upright walk. A bear walking upright or standing up to reach might—from a distance in dim light—easily be confused for a man, and large, hairy, gruff men might well remind one of bears. Further, bears manifest a combination of characteristics, including ferocity when cornered and gentleness with their young, which may call to mind the worst and best of humankind.

Bear-hunting families in many regions often traditionally claim descent from the bear; this totemic relationship is thought to have originated in an-

cient bear cults, which made sacrifice unto their quarry before the hunt in order to appease it, and thought to take on characteristics of the animal through partaking of its flesh or heart. Such rituals evolved from the belief that the bear was a super-human creature with power and prowess only to be overcome if the creature itself willed it; bears often were credited with second-sight, and thus thought to be able to foretell their own doom. Therefore the tremendous courage, terrible ferocity, massive strength, and supernatural intelligence associated with the bear were thought to pass down to those who hunted and were descended from them.

Nowhere is this folkloric cult of the bear more well established than in northwest Europe, where well into the modern period Norwegian and Lapish folktales suggested that young women were stalked and kidnapped by supernatural bears; these bears then mated with their captives, and thereby took their places as patriarchs of leading families of the region. In Old English literature *Beowulf* certainly manifests some of the elements of the bear’s son’s folktale, notably in his battle with Grendel and Grendel’s mother; further, the Icelandic hero Bodvar Bjarki—who figures prominently in the saga of King Hrolf Kraki—is one of the closest analogues to the character *Beowulf*, and shares several of his attributes and adventures. Bodvar Bjarki, whose very name means something like “Battle Bear,” is explicitly the son of bears and is able to take on the form of the bear in battle, where he is a ferocious and nearly unassailable opponent. Norse Berserks, who developed as a warrior cult devoted to Odin, clearly drew upon the potency of the bear’s son tradition.

THE DRAUGAR AND HARMFUL SPIRITS

The draugar were the undead of Germanic myth, revenants, or zombies who—unlike mere ghosts—inhabited their bodies after death and in this way walked the earth. The term seems to come from an Indo-European root meaning “harmful spirit,” and it has been argued that fire rituals associated with the exorcism of draugar suggest a very ancient origin for this belief. These beings could cause great havoc among the living, and often terrified and even slaughtered both livestock and humans. Draugar might come back to life to avenge some particular wrong, but more often than not the impetus simply seems to have been an evil disposition; those who are unpleasant in life often are more so in death. The bodies of draugar—when exposed in the grave—were usually uncorrupted, although they often blackened and swelled over time. Moving these bodies to a place of disposal often proved difficult because they would become very, very heavy; further, they might well disappear if sought by a party containing a Christian priest. Draugar were exorcised most effectively by decapitating the corpse and placing the head between the buttocks; some sources suggest cremating the remains and scattering the ashes in a safe area—that is, in a place where they will not come into contact with living beings.

The most famous example of a battle with such a revenant is probably

Grettir's fight with Glamr in *Grettissaga*; this story is of particular interest to us because of its connection to Beowulf's battle with Grendel. We will turn to retellings of both episodes in the section on heroic battles with monsters. *Eyrbyggjasaga* contains an episode in which the ashes of a draugar are consumed by a cow, and one of her offspring becomes possessed by the spirit of the undead Thorolf Twist-Foot as a result; this story has obvious resonance with that of the genesis of the two bulls of *The Tain*. The same saga contains a highly engaging account of the exorcism of a number of ghosts through the rather ordinary Norse legal proceeding known as a door-court: each wraith was called to the threshold of the house and charged with trespass and mayhem; testimony was taken and evidence was presented in the normal way, and then sentence was passed. Each spirit in turn was sentenced to banishment, and each in turn stood and left as the order was made. Each parted with a comment that implied that the ghost stayed only as long as it was allowed; cautionary words indeed.

Celtic Demigods and Spirits

THE THREE MOTHERS

In Britain, the mother-goddess is usually rendered in triplicate, as Celtic numerology associated the number three with good luck. Figures of the mother-goddess usually take one of two forms: *Deae Matres*, three goddesses who are often depicted seated and holding or receiving fruits of the field; and *Dea Nutrix*, a seated goddess nursing infants. The first are found in various contexts and were associated with some springs as well as with harvests. The second seem to have been personal protective talismans, perhaps for pregnant women and young mothers; they are most often found in homes or in graves.

GENII CUCULLATI

These hooded dwarfs take their name from the Roman term for a beneficent spirit (*genii*) and the name of the type of Gaulish cape (*cucullus*) they are often depicted as wearing; further, some stone depictions of these dwarfs bear the designation *genii cucullati*. They usually appear in a set of three, and sometimes accompany a mother-goddess figure. The practice of triplicating these figures—and those of the three mothers—is significant, as the number three was considered magical by the Celts and was thought to ward off evil. These dwarfs are common in the north and west of Britain, and they often are grouped around sites that also contain idols of the three mothers. Associated with health and fertility, they sometimes are depicted carrying eggs or offering a gift to the mother-goddess.

SUCELLUS

Like the three mothers, Sucellus was not minor in divine stature, but rather in mythic importance, as not much is known about him; he seems to have

been worshiped primarily in Gaul. Sucellus was known in Britain, however, and a ring dedicated to this god was found at York. Sometimes Sucellus is thought to be a manifestation of Dis Pater, and certainly he fulfilled some funereal functions; he also was associated with Silvanus in southern Gaul, however, and hence he also may have been a protector of herds and harvests. He usually is depicted carrying a hammer or mallet, and thus is to be equated with the tradition of the hammer-god. Sucellus is called the "Good Striker"; in this Celtic deity we detect aspects of the ancient hammer-god of Northern Europe that we know most intimately through the form of the Norse Thor.

The Celtic hammerer often appears with a barrel or a drinking horn, perhaps in allusion to his role as a god of wine; moreover, at times he is accompanied by a dog, sometimes three-headed, reminding us of Cerebus, the hound who guards the gates of the classical underworld. Tripling in the Celtic world had an apotropaic function, however, meaning that both the three-headed hound and the hammer of Sucellus might have served to ward off evil. Celtic gods often appeared in pairs, and the consort of Sucellus was Nantosuelta, whose name means "Winding Stream." They were worshiped together in wine-growing regions, where the water-goddess brought moisture and the hammer-god hallowed and fertilized the soil. Sucellus himself had associations with water and was the patron at a number of Gaulish healing springs; his connection with dogs and serpents might suggest powers over both healing and death. Healing, hunting, and death are all associated in Celtic belief, and so it is that the wild hunt can be a bridge to the otherworld in Celtic myth.

SPIRITS IN THE LANDSCAPE

The early Celts held the world to be full of spirits, and every tree, stream, and spring had its particular animus. Therefore, groves and water sources were often believed to be sacred; trees, and especially very old trees, were objects of particular veneration. Through their branches and their roots—systems which mirror each other in aspect—trees both reach up into the heavens and down into the underworld; they therefore provide ideal bridges between the worlds of the gods, the living, and the dead. Water could both bring and destroy life, and so sources of water were held to be holy. Sacrifices were often made into rivers and springs, and often valuable objects were destroyed and cast into their watery embrace; such rituals were common in Britain. Marshes were by their very nature mystical and hazardous, and so might serve as a likely conduit to the otherworld. Bog sacrifices might be particularly opulent, and it is certain that humans were among the offerings to the spirits of some marshes: Lindow Man stands in mute testimony to such practices in Britain. Healing springs especially were venerated, as were the deities associated with them; Sulis, the god of the hot springs at Bath, is probably the most noteworthy of these figures in Britain.

brought to the lair by the sea-witch or her son; he grasped it firmly and brought it against the neck of the ogre-woman. Her neck was cloven—flesh and bones—and life fled from her body. Beowulf then sought the corpse of her son, and he took his head as a battle trophy. Meanwhile, the blood of the hag bubbled up to the surface, and all thought Beowulf lost; the Danes returned home mournfully, while the Geats remained and grieved for their lost leader. Soon their sorrow turned to joy, however, as Beowulf emerged from the loathsome waters with his trophy, the head of his foe Grendel. The Geats returned then to Heorot, and the leader of the Geats proudly displayed the head of the enemy of the Danish folk.

Bran's Voyage to the Land of the Immortals

Bran the son of Febal was visited in his dreams by a vision of a beautiful woman; her visage haunted him day and night, and finally he determined to seek her. He and his foster brothers and their crew therefore set out to find the island from whence she came. They had many adventures on their voyage—including meeting the sea-god Manannan—and they visited a number of magical islands. Finally they came on the Island of the Women, and here they stayed for a long, long time. Eventually Bran's crew grew restless, however, and they determined to depart. Now they were warned that for any man among them to set foot on the shore of Ireland ever again was for that man to sign his own death warrant. They had, in fact, sojourned in this land of immortals for many centuries, and although time had stood still while they remained, to journey home would be to bring age and death crashing down upon them. The men determined to sail for home anyway. In the sight of Ireland one of the crew leapt overboard and swam ashore, and his shipmates watched in horror as he crumbled to dust. Bran himself committed his story to strips of wood carved in Ogam script; these he cast overboard before leading his men on their journey into oblivion.

Pwyll's Journey to the Otherworld

Pwyll's pact with Arawn, the king of Annwn, and his journey to the underworld ruled by his acquaintance are discussed in our treatment of *The Mabinogion*. Suffice it at this point to note that Pwyll gains power and prestige through his relationship with Arawn, a relationship that is cemented by Pwyll's acts of heroism and faithfulness while in the otherworld, and that is denoted by Pwyll's designation as "Head of Annwn."

Sir Orfeo Seeks his Wife in the Land of Fairy

Sir Orfeo is the subject of a good deal of comment in the conclusion to this book. The Orpheus myth generally, however, is a classic example of the hero's descent into the underworld. Orpheus, of course, undertakes this journey to regain his love lost to death, and ultimately bespeaks the human desire to combat and to overcome death. This tradition is traceable in the Western tradition all the way back to Gilgamesh and perhaps beyond; human desire for immortality, however, is always ultimately frustrated. Orpheus and many others fail at the last in their attempts to conquer death. Sir Orfeo himself, how-

ever, reaches the land of Fairy and escapes unscathed with his beloved Queen Heurodis. Through this success Orfeo seems to win a respite from the inevitable, and in that aspect differs from the ultimate source of this particular myth.

Christ's Journey to the Underworld: The Harrowing of Hell

After Christ's death on the Cross, he descended to Hell, where he spent the three days prior to his Resurrection. Christ's death was the key to his rebirth, and thus to his immortality. Having conquered death he became once more fully divine, and through his victory offered the hope of similar everlasting life through him to all of his followers. Christ did not return from his sojourn in Hell alone, however; with him were freed Adam and Eve, the Prophets, and all the righteous who had died before Christ came to redeem their sins. Christ ripped open the gates of Hell in order to leave with these good souls, and hence this act is called "The Harrowing of Hell," meaning the opening of Hell; a harrow is a blade used by farmers to rip open the soil. This conception of Christ's violent overthrow of Satan's dominion of the dead was very popular in the Middle Ages, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Anglo-Saxon England, where the Germanic recasting of Christ as a warrior-hero imbued it with the tint of martial victory, and that liberally combined elements of Christ Triumphant with those of Christ Militant.

Heroic Battles with Monsters

A traditional test of the hero on his quest is the battle with seemingly overpowering monsters such as dragons and cyclops. The Northern European invaders brought a great variety of hero-monster stories to the British Isles; traditional Northern European monsters such as trolls and dragons were particularly well represented in early British literary material. Further, under Christian influence the monster in various guises became an image of Satan and the victim of heroes such as the English patron Saint George. Accounts of the lives, miracles, and martyrdoms of saints became a popular narrative form in the Middle Ages, and—not surprisingly—usually manifested important elements of the monomyth of the hero. Moreover, all saints' lives ultimately were modeled on the life of Christ, and thus the heroic battle with monsters took on added levels of symbolic significance as the battle between good and evil, God and Satan, virtue and sin, and Church and anti-Christ.

Grettir's Fight with Glamr

The Norse Grettir displays some of Beowulf's heroic and personal characteristics, but these similarities served each of these heroes differently. Both die at the end of their sagas, but while Beowulf's death may be attributable in some part to his heroic overconfidence and honor, pride is not considered a mortal

sin in this poem, and Beowulf is considered a great hero and a good king throughout his tale. Grettir's fortunes change after his battle with Glamr, however, and he suffers outlawry and solitude as a result of his uncompromising pride and actions. Perhaps newly Christian Iceland in the early tenth century could not abide the same fierce and independent heroic spirit in a live troublemaker like Grettir that a more solidly Christian Anglo-Saxon England could celebrate in a safely dead and legendary heroic pagan forebear of the sixth century or so.

A farmer named Thorhall had a hard time keeping shepherds, for his farm in Shadow Valley was haunted by some troll or spirit or another. Finally he managed to contract a man named Glamr to work for him. Glamr was a huge and imposing chap, with the hair and eyes of a wolf, and the disposition to match: he was thoroughly unpleasant and made no attempt to get along with others. He was not a practicing Christian, and he both mocked and lamented the traditions of the Church that caused him the slightest inconvenience. For all that Glamr was a good shepherd, and Thorhall lost no sheep during the period of his employment. For this reason the farmer was willing to put up with his hired hand's eccentricities, and ordered that he be left to his own devices.

One Christmas eve morning Glamr was up early and demanding his breakfast, heedless of the fact that the good Christians of the household were used to fasting on that day. Thorhall's wife fed Glamr as he requested, but she warned him that nothing good would come of it; his response was a derisive laugh. No one ever saw Glamr alive again. That evening he didn't come home at his usual time, nor did he arrive at Church before Mass was over. No one was willing to search for the unpleasant fellow until daylight, so it was nearly noon the next day before they found him; Glamr was dead, his skin had taken on a blue-black hue, and he had swollen up to the size of an ox. Several attempts to bring the corpse back to the church proved unsuccessful, as his body had become so unaccountably heavy, and when they brought along a priest to hallow a burial in the wilds, they couldn't find the body. The next time they searched—without the priest—they found him again, and unable to haul the corpse an inch further they gave up and raised a cairn of stones over it; then they returned home.

It soon became apparent that this grave could not contain Glamr; animals and shepherds were killed or were frightened off, and soon Thorhall's farm was on the brink of ruin. His servants were gone, his stock scattered or slaughtered, and—to add insult to injury—Glamr made a practice of returning to the farmhouse each night, mounting the gables and riding the house like a fierce gale. A light now burned all night in that hall, and the rafters and beams seemed ready to tumble down. Thorhall was at his wits end; he stayed with friends for a while, but when he returned Glamr's hauntings were worse than before, and Thorhall's poor daughter took ill and died from the strain. Thorhall thought he might have to abandon his farm forever.

At this time Grettir heard about the goings on at Thorhall's farm from his uncle Jokul, for indeed, people in those parts were talking of little else. Grettir was much thought of for his exploits, and it seemed to him that a trip to Thorhall's would be just the kind of adventure he relished; his uncle thought it would be the worse for him, but Grettir would heed no warning, and soon made his way to the farmer's house. Here he found that the story had not been exaggerated, and that all

was in a shambles; the house seemed about to fall in upon itself, and it certainly was not the most hospitable of dwellings. The farmer was fair in his warnings to Grettir, and tried to convince him to leave; he was especially concerned for Grettir's horse, as Glamr seldom allowed one to escape alive. His words were for naught, however, for Grettir was determined to stay; and the truth be told, the farmer was happy to have such a bold man sleeping under his roof.

The first night passed, and the dawn came with no visit from the monster; the farmer was optimistic. Another night followed like the first, and still the revenant had not mounted the farmhouse roof; Thorhall was overjoyed. When they went out to feed Grettir's horse, however, they found it had been slaughtered. The farmer warned Grettir to leave immediately, if he valued his life, but the hero responded that he felt the life of his horse had at the least paid for a glimpse of the zombie; they both were convinced that he would have his chance that very night. So it came to pass: Thorhall closed himself up in his separate room, and Grettir made himself as comfortable as he might upon the benches in the hall.

At about the third hour of the night Grettir heard a huge racket outside; he heard the crash and rattle of a large creature climbing upon the roof, and soon the rafters and gable shook and swayed so violently that it seemed the whole roof must soon collapse. This went on for a long time, and then the creature seemed to shamble back down off of the roof. Footsteps sounded as the zombie shuffled around to the makeshift door crudely fixed upon its post; the undead night-walker thrust this out of his way, and ducked low to enter the hall. When he stood to his full height inside, his monstrous head grazed the gables. Seeing a figure wrapped in furs upon a bench, Glamr lunged forward; not a word was spoken, but a mortal battle soon commenced. The enemies grappled, crashing around the hall, upending and destroying what little remained whole within the house. Soon the monster began to move toward the door, dragging his foe behind him; Grettir thought himself over-matched as it was, and did not desire to battle Glamr in the wide open field. Glamr was the stronger, however, and toward the threshold they inched; a large rock stood somewhat submerged just in the entryway, and as Grettir felt he could not hold on for much longer, he braced his feet against this stone and thrust himself with all his might against his opponent. The monster was utterly unprepared for this, and the two grapplers crashed through the doorway, the man landing on top of the monster. Glamr's shoulders were so broad that as he fell backward he pulled the door-frame and a part of the roof down with him.

Now Grettir saw the only sight that would ever terrify him: in the cloud-broken moonlight he saw Glamr's demon eyes glowing and glowering; for the rest of his life he saw those eyes staring at him in the dark, and for that reason he was afraid to go abroad alone at night ever after. Now his strength failed him, and the monster pronounced a curse upon him; his luck would turn from that fateful day, his powers would stagnate, and he would be hounded by Glamr's gaze unto death. As the demon finished, Grettir felt his strength surge back; he drew his short sword and hacked the head from the night-walker. This head he placed between the monster's buttocks. Then he and Thorhall burned the body, and buried the ashes far from the habitations of animals and men. Thus Grettir vanquished Glamr the revenant.

Beowulf's Fight with Grendel

Lo! In days of old, Hrodgar, king of the Danes, caused a great mead-hall to be built; it was broad and high, and this greatest of halls he named Heorot. In Heorot,

Hrodgar kept a large and loyal retinue, feasting them on beer and meat and distributing to each man his share of treasure. All were happy there, and the hall was the heart of the community of warriors of the Danes, whose joyful strains wafted away each night from Heorot clear down to the marshy fens and watery borderlands, where a dark creature walked alone. This solitary figure was named Grendel, and he was a demon of the race of Cain. He wandered each night alone and miserable, and the sounds of joy from Heorot filled him with loathing and rage. One night he came to the hall while all within were sleeping, and the fury of his attack was such that there was much weeping the morning after his coming; thus did the joyful song of Heorot turn into a mournful dirge. Nor did Grendel stay away long; he returned the very next night, and soon this nightly slaughter brought an end to the community that had flourished in the mead-hall; all joy was fled, and many was the man who now made his bed elsewhere. For twelve long winters events continued in this wise, until Hrodgar despaired of ever regaining the Heorot and warrior brotherhood of old.

Across the sea in the land of the Geats, Beowulf the young hero heard of Hrodgar's plight, and determined to leave the court of his king and uncle Hygelac in order to cleanse the great hall of the Danish king of this monster; he hoped to win fame and renown in the attempt. In a party of fifteen Beowulf crossed the salt byway to the land of the Danes, and soon was well received in Hrodgar's hall. The Danish king knew his visitor of old, and knew his lineage; his heart was glad to have such a hero as his champion. After feasting Hrodgar and his retinue went to their beds, a safe distance from Heorot; Beowulf and his host, however, took their rest among the benches, and soon all but the leader were fast asleep. Removing his weapons and armor, the hero vowed to destroy his foe with his bare hands.

The watchful one had not long to wait. The hateful visitor soon arrived, and entered the hall as he had so many times before. He reached out for the warrior slumbering on the bench nearest to him, and soon had rent the flesh and bones, slurped the blood and bile, and eaten his victim whole, hands and feet. He turned next to the hero who awaited him, and the demon gripped this man as he had his first. But this man gripped him back, and it was clear to the monster as soon as they were grappled that he had never before encountered such strength; then the evil one wished he were far away in his foul and lonely home in the fens. There followed a terrific tumult and violent struggle; the opponents crashed about the hall, one desperate to depart, the other grim in his grip, both anxious to snuff the life from the other. Finally the troll escaped from the clutches of his nemesis, but at what cost? For he left his arm and shoulder behind him, still firm in the grasp of his foe. Then he who had so joyfully slaughtered many knew the despair of the victim of violence, as he made his way back to the depths of his dank home, mortally wounded. Beowulf exulted in his victory, and next day mounted his trophy over the door of Heorot in token of his glory. Soon enough he would take the head of his fallen enemy, as well.

Sigurd the Dragon Slayer

After Odin, Loki, and Hoenir had paid Otter's ransom to Hreidmar and his sons with Andvari's tainted gold, the kin of Otter fell out over the division of this wergild. Regin and Fafnir—Hreidmar's two remaining sons—wished to have their shares immediately. Their father refused them, however, and as a result Fafnir killed his father in his sleep and made off into the barren wilds with his ill-gotten

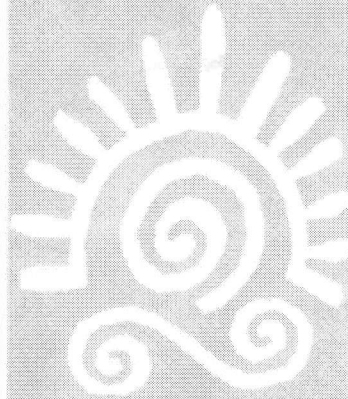
gains; there he transformed himself into a great venomous serpent, and he spent his life brooding over his cursed treasure and laying waste to the countryside all around. Regin, meanwhile, left penniless, went to the court of King Hjalprek, where he served as smith. After the birth of Sigurd, Regin served as his foster father, raising the boy in his household and teaching him the pastimes of nobility and the mystery of runes. As Sigurd began to grow to manhood, his foster-father attempted to incite in him the pride and heroic spirit necessary to confront Fafnir; eventually Sigurd agreed to do so, on the condition that Regin forge for him a magnificent sword. Regin created two lesser blades that Sigurd shattered upon the anvil, but the third time Sigurd bade him use the two pieces of Sigmund's broken blade, which Sigurd had obtained from his mother as his inheritance. This blade was named Gram, and when Regin had refashioned it, it cut easily through the anvil. Sigurd now agreed to face Fafnir, once he had avenged his own father's death.

Once Sigurd had accomplished this vengeance he returned to Regin and prepared to make good on his oath. They traveled together to the heath upon which Fafnir lived, and searched until they found the track leading from the lair of the worm to his watering hole; Regin advised Sigurd to dig a trench across this track, to lie in wait within the trench until Fafnir crossed over it, and then to thrust his sword into the serpent's heart. Sigurd asked what would happen to him if he were submerged in the dragon's blood, but Regin merely derided him for his cowardice and made off in haste. Sigurd dug a trench as he had been told, but before he had finished an old gray-beard appeared before him and noted that he should dig a series of drainage trenches so that he would not come to harm from the worm's blood. This old wanderer then vanished; it was not the first time the young hero had been helped by the all-seeing one.

Having completed his task, Sigurd hid himself at the bottom of the central trench; he had not long to wait. Soon the earth trembled with the approach of the dragon, and poison spewed all around; but Sigurd was safe in his hiding place. Just as the belly of the beast passed over him, Sigurd thrust the sword with all his might through the heart of the evil one, and thus the serpent received its death blow. Fafnir asked who had slain him and why, but at first Sigurd refused to reveal his identity; finally, however, stung by the taunts of the dying beast, Sigurd foolishly revealed his name, and so the dragon was able to pass the curse of the gold along to his killer. Sigurd did not fear death, however, and so determined to take the gold anyway, and be rich until the day marked out for his fall. After Sigurd had interrogated Fafnir concerning his wisdom about the gods, the dragon died.

With his vile kin safely put to rest, Regin soon appeared on the scene and demanded his share of the wergild of his brother Otter, denied to him for so long: Sigurd might keep all the hoard, but Regin asked of the warrior the trifle of Fafnir's roasted heart. This request Sigurd granted, and then Regin drank of the serpent's blood and fell into a deep sleep. While Regin slumbered, Sigurd roasted the dragon's heart for him. Burning his finger by accident, however, Sigurd thrust his digit into his mouth. Upon tasting the blood of the worm, Sigurd suddenly found himself able to understand the speech of birds and learned from those around him of Regin's plotted treachery against him. Determining now to send one brother upon the heels of the other, Sigurd drew Gram once more and took his false-hearted foster-father's head. Then he ate some of the heart of Fafnir and packed the rest away. Finally Sigurd made his way to the lair of the dragon, packed up all of the treasure he found there, and left to seek the shield-maiden Brynhild.

THE SAGAS



Generally speaking, the Old Norse term *saga* refers to Icelandic prose literary works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the Old Norse plural form is *sogur*. Many such sagas give us information about the Norse gods, but most of those with which we immediately are interested may be grouped either as “historical sagas” or as “heroic sagas.” The former category includes, among others, the *Heimskringla*—a titanic account of the kings of Norway from mythical times until 1177—and the famous *Islendinga sogur*—the “sagas of the Icelanders.” The latter includes the *fornaldar sogur*—the “legendary heroic sagas”—as well as heroic narratives from the Icelandic sagas and others. Historical sagas thus deal with accounts of the kings of Norway, the earls of Orkney, and the like, as well as with the early history of the settlement of Iceland and points west by the Norse; these sagas are most notable for their concise and matter-of-fact style, for their attention to realistic detail, and for their appearance of historical veracity. Heroic sagas sometimes include complex

genealogies, as well as mythical and folkloric elements and material from ancient heroic traditions.

It is dangerous, however, to accept any saga as an unimpeachable historical source without corroborating evidence, and likewise, the mythic and legendary material of the sagas is sometimes more fourteenth-century Icelandic than pre-Christian Germanic. It would be naïve, therefore, to assume that these medieval Christian literary traditions represent an unassailable link in an unbroken chain stretching from pre-historical oral traditions to the threshold of the modern literary period. It also would be overcautious, however, to reject out of hand the relationship between the earlier oral traditions and the later written sagas; there is doubtless some relationship between the oral and written traditions, and furthermore, often the trappings of saga may shroud some useful kernel of mythic or historical origin.

While sagas may be unreliable historical witnesses, therefore, examining comparatively some narrative elements of the saga genre may be helpful in determining the mythic function of a number of British heroic tales and pseudo-historical records. Here we are using the term *saga* to refer to medieval literary works that represent some sort of link to an earlier oral culture and are similar to the Icelandic sagas in some significant ways. Most, for example, include some aspects of saga style, many use legendary historic or mythical material as a saga might, and several contain sagalike elements of realistic description. Most crucially, each episode recounted here illustrates narrative material or archetypal elements of mythic provenance, often associated with aspects of the hero. Thus, although not all of these works are sagas in the technical sense, all are reminiscent of sagas in some respects, and so we use the term for the sake of convenience. We begin this section with Norse accounts of historical personages and events in Britain; we then move on to Norse heroic narratives that echo heroic elements in English myth and literary history. Next we examine Anglo-Saxon versions of history that draw upon heroic traditions, and Old English heroic tales that illustrate Germanic historical sensibilities. We conclude our discussion of the sagas of Britain by describing the Irish and Welsh mythic, historical, and heroic cycles that embody narrative elements of the saga.

Sagas of Norse Britain

The Norse were an important force and presence in Britain from the eighth through the eleventh centuries, and these islands were important stepping stones in the Viking expansion to the west; thus it is not at all surprising that several Norse sagas touch upon British topics. *Orkneyingasaga*, the saga of the earls of Orkney, is the only example that focuses primarily on the Isles of Britain, but there are notable mentions made in a number of other sagas. We have chosen to recount three episodes with British settings from three different historical sagas, as well as three heroic passages that illustrate the close kinship between Norse and English mythic and literary traditions. In 1066,

Harald Hardradi quite possibly could have become the king of England instead of William of Normandy, and so it seems fitting to begin with the episode from his saga that details the fall of Hardradi's army at the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Harald lost his life in that battle, and thus he gained his famous "seven feet of English ground" in place of the whole realm he had coveted. In Egil Skallgrimson we find one of the most famous and irascible of saga heroes, and we include his famous sojourn in York to illustrate the importance of the north of England in the Scandinavian world of the time. In the saga of Saint Magnus from *Orkneyingasaga* we find a saga hero cast in the mold of hagiography, and this combination reminds us of Anglo-Saxon conceptions of warrior-saints. In the sagas of Bodvar Bjarki and Grettir the Strong there are clear echoes of mythic and narrative traditions manifested in the Old English *Beowulf*, while in the saga of Volundr we find a Norse reflection of an ancient Germanic god the Anglo-Saxons knew as Weland. Finally, it is worth mentioning that while we do not mean to give short shrift to the Norse mythological sagas, we will not discuss these in this section, as we already have dealt at length with the cycle of the Norse gods.

Norse Sagas of the History of Britain

KING HARALD HARDRADI WINS SEVEN FEET OF ENGLISH GROUND

Harold Godwinsson ascended to the throne of England in early 1066, succeeding the reign of Edward the Confessor. Harold's claim to the throne was contested both by William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, and by Harald Sigurdsson—called *Hardradi*, meaning "hard counsel" or "fierce governing," sometimes rendered "ruthless"—king of Norway. Harold of England had also alienated his own brother, Tostig, a marauder of the first degree; their sibling rivalry comes into the story at Stamford Bridge. On 20 September 1066, Harald of Norway landed in the north of England with close to 10,000 men and routed an English army on his way to York. Harold of England surprised his rival at Stamford Bridge just five days later, however, and the Norwegian king was killed and his army destroyed in detail. William of Normandy landed in the south of England just three days later, and Harold Godwinsson had to march down to meet him; the English army was massively defeated at the Battle of Hastings on 14 October, Harold was killed, and William became king of England. It has long been noted that the double forced march of the English army—200 miles north from London to Stamford, then all the way down to Hastings—played a key role in the Norman victory at Hastings. It is entirely possible, then, that—had William landed the sooner—Harald Hardradi might have been king of England. The passage below begins with the incognito approach of the Norwegian lines by King Harold Godwinsson; Snorri's account ignores the facts that the Norwegians were surprised and that one-third of their forces were miles away guarding their 300 ships.

when he arrived with eight ships, but still Magnus was unafraid; he went to church to hear mass, and it was at prayers the next morning that Hakon and his henchmen found the blessed earl.

When Hakon came upon his cousin, Magnus offered him three ways to avoid tainting his soul with the mortal sin of breaking his peace-vow, not to mention staining his hands with the blood of his kinsman. The first offer was that Magnus would leave Orkney for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; the second offer was that Magnus be handed over in bondage to mutual friends in Scotland; the third offer was that Magnus be mutilated, or else blinded and cast into the dungeon. Magnus made it clear that he wanted to save his cousin's soul if he could. The first two offers did not please Hakon, but he considered the third; at this point his men rose in protest against him, however, and said that they wanted no more division of power in Orkney, and thus that one earl or the other must die. Hakon responded that he himself was not willing to make that ultimate sacrifice, and so it would suit him better if his men killed Magnus instead of him. He looked among his minor retainers for one to sully his hands with this foul deed, and when his standard-bearer refused he appointed his cook to the task; the poor man didn't want this honor, but all involved forced him, and Magnus promised him that he would pray to God for the forgiveness of his executioner. After having said his prayers, Magnus directed his killer to strike him full on in the front of the head, as it would not befit a chieftain to be beheaded like a common thief. So Magnus died.

The rocky, mossy site where Magnus died soon became a grassy field, and this miracle is the first attributed to him. Hakon would not allow his men to carry Magnus to church, and so they departed. This situation was mended by Thora, the mother of Magnus, who approached Hakon with such heartfelt sorrow and gentle humility that he was moved to allow her to bury her son in the church. The site of this grave soon was said to emit light and fragrant odors, and miraculous cures were visited upon the infirm who stood vigil there; but this was kept secret during the years of Hakon's rule. Earl Hakon proved himself an able ruler, however, and was well respected for that; he also undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in later years to pay for his sins. But many of those most closely involved in the treacherous death of Magnus were said to have died horrible deaths. Hakon himself died peacefully in his bed, but strife ensued when his earldom was again divided, this time between his sons Harald and Paul; as unlikely as it seems, Paul gained the whole of the earldom when his mother and her sister wove a poisoned tunic for him. Harald donned the tunic unawares, and so he died instead of Paul.

Meanwhile many miracles were performed at the grave of Magnus: blindness, wounds and infirmities, and leprosy all were healed. Still the bishop did not declare the sainthood of Magnus, nor translate his bones to a reliquary; he feared the enmity of Earl Paul. Finally the bishop made a vow to do so if a voyage home from Shetland went well, but he reneged on this vow and was struck blind for his falsehood. Crawling to the grave of Magnus, the Bishop wept tears of true contrition, and was healed when he renewed his vow. This time he was as good as his word and soon had disinterred the bones of the saint, which he washed and found to be bright as snow. He tested a finger bone in a sanctified flame, and it took on the hue of burnished gold. These signs were taken as tokens of the holiness of Saint Magnus. Some time later a man dreamt that Saint Magnus appeared unto him and asked to be moved to the church at Kirkwall; at first the man was afraid of the wrath of Earl Paul, but eventually he approached the bishop and the transfer was made. Many, many miracles of healing were performed there, demonic possessions

were exorcised, and many who desecrated the shrine or the day of Saint Magnus rued their mistakes. Here ends the account of the miracles of Saint Magnus of Orkney.

Norse Echoes of English Heroic Sagas

BODVAR BJARKI AT THE COURT OF KING HROLF

Bodvar Bjarki is a major character in the saga of King Hrolf Kraki, one of the *fornaldar sagur* of medieval Iceland. In the tale of Bodvar Bjarki we are presented with a classic Norse account of the hero's birth and journey of transformation; this journey is played out in duplicate, moreover, in that Bodvar—having gained heroic stature and courage himself—leads another ordinary man through the same metamorphosis. The episode that we have excerpted here recounts that second transformation, the rebirth into herohood of a worthless, cringing scapegoat in the court of King Hrolf; Bodvar acts as the midwife at the rebirth of the timid wretch Hottr into the brave hero Hjalti. This theme of the voyage from boyhood to manhood under the auspices of a mentor figure is a common archetype, and Bodvar Bjarki plays both roles in Hrolf Kraki's saga. The Hottr episode also contains a classic example of the hero's battle with a monster, a battle with obvious resonance with Beowulf's battle with Grendel; in both cases a hero from outside the royal court has to come to the rescue of the hapless Danes, who are beset by a magical troll that may not be scathed with ordinary weapons.

The saga of Hrolf Kraki as a whole has many obvious parallels with that of *Beowulf*, and it has been suggested that Bodvar and Beowulf may be analogous characters drawn from the same ultimate source. The Hrolf of the Icelandic saga is equivalent to the Hrothulf of *Beowulf*, and both sources agree that this figure is the nephew of Hroar, who is better known to us as the familiar Hrodgar of the Anglo-Saxon epic. It is in any case clear that both tales take as the central driving force of their narratives stories of strife and struggle within the early Danish monarchy, and the central events of both sagas take place in sixth-century Denmark. Both sagas draw on the same oral traditions, both are classically Germanic in that they plant their roots in the misty, mythic-historic past, and both concern themselves with the origin and rise to prominence of the family of Skjold, called Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf*. This mythical character is said by both accounts to be the patriarch of the Danish Royal House, called the Skjoldungs in Old Norse and the Scyldinga in Old English; both words come from the root for "shield," and refer to the king's role as a guardian of his people. The Anglo-Saxon version is the older of the two by at least a few hundred years, and includes an account of the discovery of the foundling Scyld that is remarkably like the story of Moses; the epithet *Scefing* was added to his name because a sheaf of wheat was found with him. Thus in the Old English tradition the mythical father of the Danish kings was linked folklorically with both protection and sustenance. By the period of the great Icelandic sagas in the fourteenth century, the Old Norse tradition had

associated the family of the Skjoldungs with a great many important mythical figures from Adam to Odin; the development of such lineages was a trait common to many medieval historians of Germanic dynasties.

Although written well after the conversion to Christianity, the saga of King Hrolf contains several overt references to the pagan past. Most notable among these are the references to Odin and the Berserks, those warriors of insane battle-frenzy who may be linked to shape-changing and to Odinic cults. In this saga Odin is cloaked in the meagrest of Christian trappings, and aspects of his divinity shine through. Bodvar and his two brothers are themselves the sons of Bjorn the Bear-Man, and thus the origin of this hero draws upon the Bear's Son folktale. Bodvar's brother Elk-Frodi was an elk from the waist down, and his brother Thorir had a dog's feet. Bodvar himself had the power to take the form of a bear, as his father had before him. Bodvar reached his full maturity and strength by drinking some blood that Elk-Frodi had drawn from his own veins; the concept of capturing some of the strength or characteristics of a beast by drinking its blood or eating its heart also has ancient folkloric origins, in the Germanic world and beyond. In his role as the mentor of Hottr Bodvar reprises this practice, as we shall see in the following selection.

Bodvar Bjarki rode to the hall of King Hrolf and stabled his horse next to the finest of the king; he asked no man's leave. Entering the hall, he found a small group of men, and he seated himself far out on the benches. After he had been there a bit, he noticed a shuffling sound off in a corner, where a man's hand—black and greasy—reached out from within a heap of foul old bones. Curious, Bodvar ambled over to the great pile of bones and called to him who was within. The answer was timid, and the man identified himself as Hottr. Bodvar asked Hottr why he was within the pile of bones and what he might be doing there. Hottr answered that he had made himself a shield-wall with the bones; it seems that some among the retainers of Hrolf took pleasure in pelting the poor man with their gnawed bones, and it is well known that such sport often proves fatal to the unfortunate target. Now Bodvar reached into the grisly wall of rotting gristle and bone and pulled Hottr out. The poor man was upset that his handiwork had been destroyed, and terrified that Bodvar meant to kill him. Bodvar assured him that this was not the case, and commanded the wretch to keep silent; then the hero took the filthy dog by the scruff of the neck and carried him to a nearby stream, where he scrubbed him clean of grime and grease.

Bodvar then returned to his place on the benches, and he seated Hottr beside him; the poor man—although he sensed that Bodvar meant to help him—was terrified, and he shook like a sapling in a high wind, leg and limb. Soon enough the hall began to fill with the champions of Hrolf, and when they noticed Hottr at his new seat on the benches they thought him over-bold for his station; he, meanwhile, would have returned to his stinking fortress had not Bodvar kept a firm grip on him. Now the retainers of Hrolf began their old game again, starting with small bones pelted playfully in the direction of Bodvar and Hottr. Bodvar pretended not to notice the missiles, but Hottr was terrified and could not eat or drink because he was convinced that he would be hit at any moment. Suddenly Hottr warned Bodvar that a large bone was about to hit him; Bodvar bade Hottr to be silent, and caught

the knucklebone as it came to him. It was a great hunk of bone, the knuckle and leg all together. Turning toward his assailant, Bodvar sent the missile back the way it had come, and struck dead the man who had thrown it; all of Hrolf's men now became silent with dread.

Word quickly came to Hrolf Kraki that one of his men had been slain by a most imposing stranger; those who bore the tidings wished permission to slay Bodvar in return, but upon hearing the whole tale King Hrolf would have none of it. Long had he spoken against this sport of his champions, as it brought disgrace upon them all. He commanded instead that Bodvar be brought before him. The king asked Bodvar his name, to which the hero responded that the warriors of Hrolf called him "Hottr's Guardian," though his name was Bodvar. The king asked then what Bodvar offered to pay in compensation for the slain man; Bodvar refused any wergild, claiming that the man had brought his injury upon himself. Then the king asked if Bodvar would like to be his champion, and to take the seat of the slain warrior, but Bodvar answered that he and Hottr came as a set, and that they would need to be seated higher on the bench than had sat the ruffian he had killed. The king declined not the offer, although he saw little merit in Hottr. Bodvar then marched well down the benches, choosing a place of honor much higher than he had been offered; jerking three warriors from their seats, Bodvar seated himself and little Hottr. The men of Hrolf's court took great umbrage at this insult, but none dared to avenge it.

Now Yuletide came, and Hrolf's men became gloomy. Bodvar asked Hottr why this might be, and he was answered that for the past two winters a great winged monster had come to call upon Hrolf's hall, that this greatest of trolls had wrought great mischief, and that weapons bit it not. Furthermore, those who had stalked it had never returned. Bodvar retorted that Hrolf's court held fewer men of mettle than he had been led to believe. On Yule eve the king—wishing to protect his men—bade them all to remain safely inside, and to leave the cattle to fend for themselves. All promised to do as he asked, but Bodvar meanwhile stole away into the night, carrying the protesting Hottr over his shoulder. Soon they saw the horrible monster, and Hottr cried out that it would swallow him whole. Bodvar told him to be quiet, casting the sniveler onto the ground, where he remained motionless. Now Bodvar advanced, but by some magic he was unable to draw his sword from its sheath. Using all of his great strength he was able to shift it a bit, and then he grasped the scabbard and pulled it away from the blade. In the nick of time he cast away the scabbard and thrust the sword under the shoulder of the monster so that he pierced its heart. The beast fell down dead. Now Bodvar went over to Hottr and picked him up and carried him over to the slain monster. Forcing Hottr's mouth open, Bodvar caused him to drink two gulps of the troll's blood and to eat a bit of its heart.

The change in Hottr's character was immediate and incredible; he wrestled with Bodvar for a long time, and then he boldly said that he would never fear any man again. These words pleased Bodvar greatly, and together these two propped up the beast so that it appeared to be alive and about to attack. They went back to the hall then, and no one was the wiser concerning their adventure. In the morning the king asked if the beast had ravaged the livestock, and was answered that all were alive and safe in their pens. Curious, Hrolf sent out scouts to search for any sign of the monster; these came back quickly, reporting that it was nearby, enraged and ready to attack. Hrolf told each warrior to look to his courage before, so that they might overcome the dreadful menace. When they gathered before it, however, the king noticed that it seemed to be standing stock-still; he asked if any among them would dare to approach the creature alone and unaided.

Bodvar answered that here was a task to sate the curiosity of the bravest of men, and he suggested that his benchmate Hottr clear himself of the slander of cowardice by undertaking it, especially since no one else seemed too eager to do so. Hottr quickly assented, and the king noticed at once the change in the man's demeanor. Then Hottr demanded the king's sword, Golden-Hilt, and declared that he would carry the blade to victory or to death. Hrolf replied that Golden-Hilt could only be carried by a warrior both skilled and brave; Hottr rejoined that the king would soon see both qualities in him. Hrolf assented, remarking that a change so complete in other facets might well bode that Hottr was now a mighty warrior. Taking the sword, Hottr charged the beast and struck it down with one blow. King Hrolf was not fooled, however; he guessed aloud that Bodvar had killed the beast, and the hero acknowledged that possibility. Hrolf was well pleased then with both champions, declaring that of all of Bodvar's fine qualities, this one was supreme: that he had transformed a cowardly weakling into a fearless and mighty warrior. He renamed Hottr Hjalti, after Golden-Hilt.

GRETTIR THE STRONG IS OUTLAWED

As in the case of Egil Skallagrimsson, in Grettir Asmundarson we find aspects of the archetypal hero, but like the rest of his character these aspects seem to have developed without any sense of proportion or moderation. Grettir is another rugged individualist—to give this aspect of the hero a modern American face—and like many such before him, he made many enemies as a result of his inability to seek middle ground. Like Egil, Grettir killed a man at a tender age, and spent the rest of his life facing larger and more potent foes. Unlike Egil, however—and indeed, rather like the poet, saga writer, and chief-tain Snorri Sturluson himself—this intractability came back to haunt Grettir, and he was eventually killed by his enemies. *Grettissaga* shares a number of characteristics with *Beowulf*, as do Grettir and Beowulf themselves; indeed, these two sagas contain several analogous episodes. Moreover, each of these tales delves into folklore and mines nuggets of historical records with which to forge an allusive and wide-ranging saga. Each hero is stoical and uncompromising in the face adversity, and each seeks risks and dangers that allow him to express his heroic nature and to gain thereby glory, the traditional Germanic equivalent of immortality.

Unfortunately for Grettir, he was born into a Christian era that was rapidly divesting itself of its heroic trappings, and so—unlike Beowulf—Grettir progressively alienates himself through his acts. Further, the *Beowulf* poet recorded his version of that saga several hundred years before *Grettissaga* was penned, and the former is much more straightforward and unassuming in its style than the latter; the story of Grettir, on the other hand, written at the end of the period of the great epic sagas, uses its strong, detailed characterization of its hero—in classic saga style—as an exemplum, in this case as an exemplum of the conflict between encroaching centralized authority and classic Germanic heroic individualism. The first chapters of this saga deal with the centralization of Norway that drove many Vikings—including Grettir's forebears, with whom he shares many characteristics—to Iceland. Even Iceland

lost its autonomy eventually, however, and all those independent individualists eventually fell under the power—however watchful—of a king. Grettir, then, in this context, is a throwback to earlier times and values. He fights and wins battle after battle, and with each victory he reasserts his heroic nature; eventually he falls, however, and his fall echoes the fall of that earlier cultural system. Christ and the king of Norway prove too strong.

In the episode at hand, Grettir has gone to Norway to seek a position in the service of the new king, to whom he is distantly related. An arrogant act of courage, however, ends in the unintentional death of a number of important brothers, and Grettir's subsequent inability to suffer any affront to his honor ends in his expulsion from Norway. His arrival at home brings no joy, however, when he learns he has been outlawed—for life—there as well, for the same killing; this episode, then, spells the beginning of the end for Grettir. In the splash of Grettir's plunge into the icy waters of the channel south of Stad we hear an echo of Beowulf's swimming contest with Breca, fueled by a similar sense of boastful heroism. In this instance, however, Grettir's heroic sensibilities backfire.

When King Olaf took complete control of Norway, many were those who thought to turn old debts of friendship to their advantage; one such was a man named Thorir, who thought to send his sons to Olaf to enter his service. Another such was Grettir Asmundarson. The Thorirssons had reached the harbor below Stad a few days before Grettir, and had taken up residence in a house built for sailors using the channel; there they spent their time in drinking and feasting. One night the merchant ship upon which Grettir had booked passage found itself facing a severe storm just south of Stad, and found safe anchorage across the channel from the Thorirssons. Still, the merchants had no fire, and they loudly complained that they might well freeze to death unless fire were procured. Suddenly, one of them noticed fire across the channel, and they bemoaned the fact that they couldn't sail over there because of the storm. Grettir endured their pathetic whining as long as he could, and finally he announced that such a feat was no challenge to a real man; the merchants then asked him whether he thought he was up to the task himself. He answered that he was, but he thought that little good would come of it, and they would hardly thank him as they should.

Stripping down to woolen tunic and drawers, then, Grettir dove into the channel and crossed with the aid of a large barrel. Reaching the other side he found himself nearly frozen stiff, and so he burst into the house of the Thorirssons huge and blue, with clothes and hair stiff with ice and salt. The Thorirssons and their friends thought him a troll, and attacked him as soon as he entered; many began to hit at him with flaming brands, and in their drunkenness they soon spread the fire throughout the house. Grettir, for his part, paid them no heed, and ran out as soon as he had grabbed the fire he sought. As Grettir reboarded the merchant ship with his hard-won fire, his hosts greeted him most warmly; soon enough they changed their tune. In the morning they sailed across the channel to thank their benefactors, but all they found was ash and bones; calling Grettir a murderer they cast him out, and he had a devil of a time finding his way to Trondheim to see the king. By the time that he did, the story had proceeded him, and at his audience with Olaf Grettir had to defend himself against charges of arson and willful murder. Finally the king