

Shapeshifting and Berserkergang

Shapeshifting, in its various forms, is one of the more common minor literary motifs in Old Icelandic literature. The identification of a human with an animal provided a rich symbological vocabulary for the poets and saga-writers: knowledge out of the ordinary, most usually prophetic knowledge, could be quickly and artistically expressed by, for instance, the representation of hostile persons as wolves, bears, or eagles. This identification, however, was clearly, in its origins, more than a literary device. The common Germanic usage of animal-elements in personal names¹ indicates that the association between a human and a specific animal was deeply grounded in the Norse culture, a grounding which is reflected both in heroic-mythological tales of shapeshifting and in the more prosaic context of the family sagas in which elements of this association may survive. Likewise, iconographic evidence such as that provided by the Torslunda helm-plate matrices and certain of the figures on the Oseburg burial tapestries, among other examples, gives clear evidence of the deliberate identification between the human warrior and the animal whose characteristics he was thought to embody, expressed by masking and the wearing of the appropriate animal's skin. This identification is made clearest in the problematical figure of the *berserkr*, who at times, particularly in the earlier sources, was said to use the physical animal-hide in order to induce his fits, but could also "change his hide" (*hamask*) in fury, or even involuntarily, without the use of a physical skin, leading to the fascinating question of the relationship between the different forms of shapeshifting known to the saga-authors, the psychological transformation of the berserk, and the specific importance of an animal's skin in the process of shape-changing.

The shapeshifting of Norse literature takes two chief forms: the changing of the body and the changing of the disembodied spirit (or spiritual manifestation of the human in the form of an animal). Of the two, the latter is by far the most common within a human context: physical metamorphosis in the world of human beings occurs only rarely and in the more fantastic materials such as Völsunga saga and Hrólfs saga kraka, which will be discussed in more detail

later. While the practical Icelandic mind in general rejected the concept of actual physical metamorphosis in favour of the more nebulous, but also more believable, shapeshifting of the temporarily disembodied soul, the differentiation between the physical transformation practiced by gods and *jötnar* and the spiritual transformation of the Icелander who is *hamrammr*, can be made only in regards to their normal realm of operation: gods and *jötnar* naturally belong to that sphere of existence which is entered by the human when he (or she) leaves the physical body behind. Hence, we may expect to find a direct relationship between the shape-shifting mechanisms of deities and their associates, and those used by humans in their extracorporeal activities: it can be demonstrated that the same fundamental principles underly the process by which gods and *jötnar* transform themselves in the otherworldly realms, legendary heroes transform themselves (or are transformed) physically in the human realms, and saga-characters transform their spirits and carry out activities separately from their actual bodies.

The chief consistent element in accounts of otherworldly shapeshifting is the shapeshifter's use of a skin in order to transform - a necessity suffered even by the gods. Þjóðólfr's Haustlöng describes Loki as making his flight "hauks flugbjalfa aukinn", (increased by a hawk's flying-pelt)² regarding which Snorri clarifies that Loki must ask "ef Freyja vill líá honvm valshams, er hon a" (if Freyja will lend him (the) hawk's hide which she owns)³ in order to fly to and from Jötunheimr - a description perhaps influenced by Þórr's request to Freyja in Þrymsqviða 3, "Muntu mér, Freyja, fiaðrhams líá, / ef ec minn hamar mættac hitta?" (Will you, Freyja, lend me your feather-hide, if I am to be able to get my hammer?)⁴ - a loan necessary so that Loki can fly to Jötunheimr and make enquiries. Similarly, when Þjazi comes after Loki, according to Snorri, "teckr hann arnar haminn" (he takes the eagle's hide).⁵ Even in as late a work as Sörla þátr, it is described how "Loke verdr þa at einne flo...Þa dregr Loki af ser floar haminn" (Loki then becomes a fly...then Loki takes off his fly's hide).⁶ The source of all winds is described in Vafþrúðnismál 37 as "iötunn, í arnar ham" (a giant in eagle's hide). That the belief in the gods' need for the use of a hide for shapeshifting was

firmly rooted in the native religion of the Viking Age is borne out by the Larbrö St. Hammars III picture stone (Gotland, ca. 700-800) which shows a peculiar figure, half-human, half-bird, with the eagle's beak arching over the man's head. He is receiving drink from a woman, behind whom stands a threatening male figure with a sword. This scene is usually interpreted as showing Óðinn's reception of the mead of poetry from Gunnlöð, the eagle-shape referring to his subsequent escape in that form.⁷ Even in the realm of myth, instances where a skin is not specified are rare, and usually imposed from without. In his description of the return of Iðunn, Snorri says only that "bra Loki henni ihnotar liki" (Loki drew her into a nut's likeness).⁸ No details of this transformation are provided in the Haustlög text from which Snorri was apparently working, but it seems reasonable to accept Richard North's explanation that "the two elaborate wing-kennings in 12/4 and /6, which imply painted images of birds flying, may show that Þjóðólfr is here inferring Þjazi's pursuit of Loki from a picture of two birds above a fire", with Iðunn concealed in some manner consonant with Snorri's description,⁹ though the suggestion that the term *ása leika* for Iðunn may be understood as "plaything/doll of the Æsir" may refer to her transformation into an easily portable shape¹⁰ is perhaps a stretch of interpretation. In Hyndluljóð, Freyja transforms her lover Óttarr into a boar, and again, no hide is explicitly mentioned. It is worth considering, however, that in the case of Iðunn, the concealment of the goddess is achieved under the physical cover of a shell; while Freyja's statement in stanza 7, "þar er göltr glóar, gullinbursti / Hildisvíni, er mér hagir gørðo, / dvergar tveir, Dáinn oc Nabbi" (this is the glowing boar, golden-bristled Hildisvíni, which the skillful dwarves Dáinn and Nabbi made for me), suggests that Óttarr has, in some manner, been given not an entirely new boar-shape, but one already existing - that he may be hidden beneath the dwarf-made hide of Hildisvíni.

The same motif of using a skin to completely change one's shape appears within the human context in the more fantastical materials, most notably Völundarkviða and Völsunga saga. In these texts, we see people who are nominally in the human world transformed by the use of an enchanted hide, without which they do not have the ability to shapeshift. The swan-

maidens of Völundarkviða are easily typed according to the Animal Bride folkloric motif:¹¹ they lay their swanskins aside, are captured and wedded by Völundr and his brothers, but fly away after nine years of marriage. Völsunga saga presents a more complete picture of the shapeshifting process. In chapter 7, Sigmundr and Sinfjötli find two men sleeping in the woods, regarding whom it is said that “Þeir hófdu ordit fyrir uskopum, þviat ulfahamir hengu í husinu yfir þeim. It tiunda hvert deyr mattu þeir komast or haumunum...Þeir Sigmundr foru í haminaa ok mattu eigi or komazi, ok fylgdi su nattura, sem adr var, letu ok vargsrodda” (A spell had been cast upon them, for which reason wolves’ hides hung in the house over them. Every tenth day they were able to come out of the hides...Sigmundr (and Sinfjötli) put on the hides and were not able to come out of them, and the same power followed as before, and they also howled like wolves). The wolfskin’s nature leads them first to fall upon bands of travellers in the woods, then causes Sigmundr to mortally wound his son. When Sinfjötli is healed via magical intervention, “fara þeir til iardhuss ok eru þar til þess, er þeir skylldu fara ur ulfhaumunum. Þa taka þeir ok brenna í elldi ok badu engum at meini verda” (they went to the cave and were there until they were able to come out of the wolf-hides. Then they took and burned them in the fire and said that no further harm should come [of them]).¹² H.R. Ellis-Davidson observes that “This tale contains some of the elements of folktales, but in the agreement about taking on enemies and the reference to warlike achievements in the wolfskins, there seems to be a hint of a different tradition, one associated with young heroes living like wolves in the forest and learning how to support themselves by robbery and killing.”¹³ The similarity between this apparently initiatory shapeshifting and the iconographically documented use of wolfskins, in particular, as a part of warrior-ritual is too close to be ignored.¹⁴ Within the fictional context of the legend, the symbolic transformation of the heroes is expressed as an actual physical change, taking place by means of the animal skin; however, the degree to which earlier Norse culture would have distinguished between the symbolic-ritual and the physical shapeshifting is impossible to determine.

The further transformations taking place in Völsunga saga are of particular interest in regards to the distinctions they offer between forms of shapeshifting. The transformation of Ottarr is a complete physical transformation, achieved, as Reginn describes, by the fact that he “hafde adra idn ok naturu” (had a second occupation and nature);¹⁵ his death is immediately recognised when his characteristic otter-skin, the embodiment of his second nature, is shown to Hreiðmarr. Similarly, Fáfñir’s transformation to a dragon is a physical change; though the means by which it takes place are not described. However, when Sigurðr and Gunnarr exchange forms in order that Sigurðr may cross the fire to woo Brynhildr in Gunnarr’s place, the phrase used is “Skipta nu litum” (they now changed appearances)¹⁶ - they merely carry out an illusionary change of appearance, which does not affect their abilities or natures in the same manner as a change of *hamr*: Grani is willing to carry the disguised Sigurðr, where he had refused to bear Gunnarr, and Sigurðr can thus carry out his task in the other man’s shape. Such illusionary shapeshifting, or *sjónhverfing*, appears occasionally in the family sagas;¹⁷ however, it is purely a matter of deluding the eye, unrelated to the other types of transformation practised in Norse literature.

The fullest range of human shapeshifting, however, is demonstrated in Hrólfs saga kraka. In the account of Björn the father of Böðvar-Bjarki, a full physical metamorphosis takes place, and here again the change is demonstrated to be effected by means of a skin. Although when Hvít curses Björn, she strikes him with a glove of wolfskin,¹⁸ when he performs his metamorphosis as he is cursed to do every morning, he “steypiz síðan bjarnarhamrinn yfir hann, ok gengr björninn svá ut” (afterwards pulled the bear-hide over him, and the bear thus went out),¹⁹ while his paramour Bera finds the ring he has asked her to take from his body only after “Konungsmenn höfðu þá flegit björninn mjök” (the king’s men had then largely flayed the bear);²⁰ that is to say, the item of human identification lies under the transforming skin. Björn’s first two sons bear marks of their father’s curse in varying degrees - Elgfróði is an elk from the waist down, and Þórir has dog’s feet²¹ - but it is only Böðvarr, the chief object

of this account, who is a shapeshifter. Unlike his father, however, his transformation follows the usual Icelandic pattern: in Hrólfr's final battle,

Þat sjá þeir Hjörvarðr ok menn hans, at björn einn mikill ferr fyrir Hrólfs konungs mönnum ok jafnan þar næst, sem konungrinn var; hann drepr fleiri menn með sinum hrammi en fimm aðrir kappar konungs; hrjóta af honum högg ok skotvápn, en hann brýtr undir sik bæði menn ok hesti af liði Hjörvarðr konungs ok alt þat, sem nánd er, mylr hann með sínum tönnum, svá at illr kurr kemr í lið Hjörvarðr konungs.

(Hjörvarðr and his men saw that a great bear went before the men of King Hrólfr, nearest to where the king was; he slew more men with his paws than five other warriors of the king; hewing- and shot-weapons bounced off him, and he broke under him both men and horses of the host of King Hjörvarðr and all which neared him he crushed with his teeth, so that ill murmuring came into the host of King Hjörvarðr).²² Böðvarr, meanwhile, is sitting motionless, only stirring when Hjalti comes from the field to rouse him, and when he goes out, “er þá björninn horfinn burt úr liðinu, ok tekr ná bardaginn at þyngjaz fyrir” (then the bear vanished away from the host, and the battle grew very heavy).²³ Although more physical in effect than most Icelandic shapeshifters, Böðvarr's technique of immobilizing the body while the soul goes out is typical of the general method as described by Snorri in chapter 7 of Ynglinga saga:

Óðinn skipti hömm. Lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þá fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lond at sinum ørendum eða annarra manna

(Óðinn changed hides. His body lay then as if sleeping or dead, but he was then a bird or animal, fish or snake, and traveled in a moment to faraway lands on his errands or those of other men).²⁴ Snorri's attribution of this skill to Óðinn is understandable only in its context: that is, as a euhemeristic account of the god-as-sorcerer. Nevertheless, his description of this, and the various other magics he attributes to Óðinn, must be understood as based on genuine beliefs about magical practice. Although the word *hamr* is never used in regards to Böðvarr's

shapechanging in Hrólfs saga, it is not unreasonable to expect that the Icelandic mind would have made an immediate connection between the physical *bjarnarhamr* used by his father Björn and the spiritual form which Böðvarr is able to take at need: Böðvarr may, in fact, be seen as having inherited the paternal *hamr*, albeit in a non-physical form.

For confirmation of this interpretation, it is necessary to examine the phenomenon of shapeshifting as it appears in the family and kings' sagas. In contrast to the tales of gods and legendary heroes, the relatively realistic style of these works largely precludes accounts of actual physical transformation: shapeshifting must take place either as a simple illusion or by the shifting of the metamorphosis to a different plane of existence. While well-documented, the nature of the evidence in regards to the Icelandic view of shapeshifting is in some ways confusing, inasmuch as it is tangled closely with the concept of the *fylgja*, itself difficult to pin down to a single specific definition. Nevertheless, as with the physical transformations of legend and myth, the theme of making use of an existing shape or *hamr*, albeit a non-physical one, is not only present in the shapeshifting known to the Icelanders, but may indeed be demonstrated to be a fundamental element of metamorphosis, whether it is explicitly described or merely understood.

The classic example of an Icelandic shapeshifter is Egill Skalla-Grímsson's grandfather Kveld-Úlfr, of whom it is observed in the first chapter of Egils saga that,

var þat siðr hans at rísa upp árdegis ok ganga þá um sýslur manna eða þar er smiðir váru...En dag hvern, er at kveldi leiða, þá gerðisk 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 Kveld-Úlfr

(it was his custom to get up early and go about men's business or where there was smith-work...But every day when evening came, then he became peevish, so that few men could speak with him; he was prone to sleep in the evenings. That was said among folk, that he was greatly *hamrammr*; he was called Evening Wolf).²⁵ The strong implication is that Kveld-Úlfr is believed, when he lies down in his deep evening sleep, to be prowling about at the same

time in the form suggested by his name. A similar example appears in Landnámabók, chapter S 350/H 309:

Dufþakr í Dufþaksholti...var hamrammr mjök, ok svá var Stórólfr Høengsson...Þá skildi á um beitingar. Þat sá ófreskr maðr um kveld nær dagsetri, at björn mikill gekk frá Hváli, en griðungr frá Dufþaksholti, ok fundusk á Stórólfsvelli ok gengusk at reiðir, ok mátti björninn meira. Um morguninn var þat sét, at dalr var þar eptir, er þeir höfðu fundizk, sem um væri snúit jörðinni, ok heitir þar nú Idugróf. Báðir váru þeir meiddir

(Dufþakr of Dufþaksholt...was greatly *hamrammr*, and so was Stórólfr Høengsson...They quarreled over grazing rights. A man with second sight saw in the evening near sunset, that a great bear went from Hváll, but a boar from Dufþaksholt, and they met on Stórólfsvöllr and began to struggle, and the bear got the better of it. In the morning it was seen that the dale in which they had met was as if the earth had been turned up, and that place is now called Idugróf. Both were then injured).²⁶ The theme of battling shapeshifters is also found in chapter 19 of Svarfdæla saga, in which a fight between men is accompanied by a boar and a white bear, who take part in the fight; when Karl, one of the principals, comes home, he is greeted by his father Þorsteinn svörfuðr, who says,

‘Sezt niðr, frændi, ok seg frá tíðendum, ok þykkjumst ek eigi vita, hví erfiði þetta hefir á mik fengit sem ek hafa verit með yðr í bardaganum, ok eigi má ek heðan ganga.’ Karl mælti, ‘Vissa ek, faðir, at þú vart í bardaganum ok veittir oss lið’

(“Sit down, kinsman, and tell me the news, for it seems to me that I do not know what hardship has gripped on me since I have been with you in the battle, and I am not able to go hence.” Karl said, “I know, father, that you were in the battle and helped our host”).²⁷ Þorsteinn svörfuðr dies very shortly afterwards, possibly as a result of his exertions, just as the old Kveld-Úlfr is overcome by the aftereffects of a berserk-fit.²⁸

These instances do not mention the use of an animal-skin, spiritual or physical, although the latter is strongly implied by the adjective *hamrammr* (hide-strong); they do beg the question of whether a person who was *hamrammr* was able to take on more than one shape,

or whether they were normally restricted to a specific *hamr*, as in the mythological instances where a single *hamr*, though it can be loaned for special purposes, is decidedly the characteristic property of a single person. Instances do appear where the choice of shape is either stated or implied, but these are generally qualified by the identification of the person as being skilled in magic: Óðinn as sorcerer in Ynglinga saga, chapter 7, and the account in Sturlaugs saga Starfsama chapter 12 of a young wizard engaging in a magical battle with a Finn in the forms of dogs, then eagles,²⁹ are the two most notable examples of explicit multiple shapeshifting.

The magical transformations in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, chapter 7, and Egils saga, chapter 59, while appearing as singular instances of the sorcerer's capabilities, also seem, by their peculiar appropriateness to the given task, to suggest that the shapes may be chosen by the shapeshifter rather than being as, for instance, Böðvarr's bear-form is, sole options. In the former case, "Haraldr konungr bauð kunngum manni at fara í hamförum til Íslands ok freista, hvat hann kynni segja honum. Sá fór í hvalslíki." (King Haraldr bade a wise man to go in hide-faring to Iceland and find out what he could say to him. He went in whale-shape).³⁰ In Egils saga, a swallow sits outside the house where Egill is trying to compose the poem that will save his life, and when his friend Arinbjörn goes out to look, "hann sá, hvar hamhleypa nökkur fór annan veg af húsinu" (he saw, where some hide-leaper went in another direction off the house).³¹ Although the saga does not explicitly state it, the implication is that the swallow is Queen Gunnhildr, who was reputed to have learned magic from the "Finns".³² The term *hamhleypa*, "hide-leaper", is much rarer than the relatively common *hamrammr*, and specifically suggests a shapeshifting witch. It is worth noting that in two of these four accounts, there is a direct connection with the foreign magics of the "Finns", or Saami,³³ while in Óðinn's case, the multiple shapeshifting is part of a general catalogue of extraordinary magical skills.

While the question of whether Icelandic shapeshifting and related practices might be classified as forming part of a Nordic shamanic complex³⁴ is outside the scope of this article,

there seems to be a clear difference between being *hamrammr* and being a magician. In general, the animal form taken by the Icelandic shapeshifter seems to be one expressive of the nature of the human, if not indeed actually linked directly with his name, as in the cases of Kveld-Úlfr and Böðvarr bjarki, and implied by the pedigree from Harðar saga chapter 17, in which a hostile man introduces himself as “Björn blásiða...son Úlfheðins Úlfhamssonar, Úlfssonar, Úlfhams sonar ins hamrama”³⁵ - a most threatening list of names, clearly intended to intimidate the heroes with the suggestion that they are about to face someone who is in some way *hamrammr*, whether he is a berserk or a shapeshifter; while the ability to shift into the animal form and/or go berserk also seems to be largely an inherited, rather than a learned, characteristic in the minds of the Icelandic saga-writers,³⁶ and hence in general to be distinguished from the practice of magic, although some magicians obviously include shapeshifting among their skills.

The identification of a human with a single animal-shape expressive of that person’s nature leads inevitably to the consideration of the Icelandic belief in the *fylgja*, and the question of whether a direct relationship exists between *fylgja* and *hamr*. H.R. Ellis sums up the difference between the two neatly:

The distinction between the animal *fylgja* and the animal form assumed by the spirit of the shape-changer lies of course in the fact that in the second case the animal form is only active while the body of the owner lies in a state of unconsciousness; it is informed, apparently, by the whole conscious mind of the human owner. The *fylgja* however is the active, invisible companion which attends the owner in his waking state; it would usually appear, in spite of its name, to precede him.³⁷

It can further be observed that, although being *hamrammr* is an unusual characteristic, implying the special power of the shapechanger, the possession of a *fylgja* appears to be a commonplace of human nature. While the *fylgja* can be seen only in dreams,³⁸ by someone with powers of supernatural perception,³⁹ or under unusual circumstances such as the owner’s impending death,⁴⁰ it is, nevertheless, invisibly present for everyone, serving, for those who can see it, as a sort of psychic indicator of personal character and status. This is demonstrated most explicitly in Þórsteins þátr uxafóts, in which the young Þórsteinn’s polar-bear fetch

reveals that, as the perceptive Gæitir tells the boy, Þórsteinn is not the son of the couple who raised him, but rather of a great family.⁴¹

Defining the character of the *fylgja* in Icelandic literature is sometimes difficult, being affected both by the demands of literary convention and by the apparent conflation of two different sorts of accompanying spirits, the animal and the (human) female. Regarding the problem, Else Mundal concludes that the two should be distinguished, and that it is likeliest that the original term *fylgja* was transferred from the animal-*fylgja* to the woman-*fylgja* through their chief point of similarity, the motif of the accompanying spirit,⁴² evaluating them separately in her examination of the *fylgja* phenomenon. Literary convention offers a different type of problem, particularly when the *fylgja* is seen in the context of a significant dream, at which point it may pass entirely from the realm of folk-tradition (albeit folk-tradition used for literary purposes) to a simple symbolic effect. The most marked examples of this divergence occur particularly in the Eddic poems Guðrúnarqviða önnor 41-42 and Atlamálin grœnlensco 17-19, wherein Atli appears in dreams as both bear and eagle and his sons as hawks and whelps, and the instances in the sagas when a group of men are perceived collectively as a gathering of animals, usually wolves about to make an attack.⁴³ In the former case, Kelchner observes that the variant fetches all have in common a similar relationship to both the person they portray and the dreamer: they serve as a direct form of symbolic expression.⁴⁴ Likewise, the “group-fetches” are representative of attitude and position, rather than being meant to be taken literally as the actual *fylgjur* of the men involved (and, indeed, the word *hugr* is often used instead of *fylgja*, suggesting that what the dreamer is seeing is the personified intention of his enemies, rather than their actual animal-spirits); only the leaders of such groups have different animal-forms which makes it possible to recognise them. It is safe, therefore, to accept Mundal’s firm conclusion that the animal-*fylgja* is a completely stable attribute, so that the same animal-shape will follow its person unchanging from cradle to grave.⁴⁵

The similarity between the character of the *fylgja* and that of the *hamr* leads to the question of a relationship between the two. They overlap in both form and function, as expressions of

the extra-physical force of the person to whom they are attached; one may compare, for instance, the description of the battle between Dufþakr and Stórólfr cited above with the dream described in Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkongum í Dana ok Svía veldi:

þar sá ek einn hjört standa á vellinum; þá rann or skóginum einn hlébarðr, ok þótti mér fax hans sem gull, ok hjörtrinn stakk hornunum undir bóg dýrinu, en þat féll dauðt niðr; þar næst sá ek, kvar flaug flugdreki mikill, ok kom þar, sem hjörtrinn var, ok greip þegar í klór sér, ok sleit allan í sundr; þá sá ek bjarndýr eitt, ok fylgdi húnn úngr, ok vildi drekinn taka hann, en beran varði, ok vaknaða ek þá. Hún mælti: þetta er mikill draumr...þar hefir þú sét konúnga fylgjur, ok munu þeir eigast við orrostur

(“There I saw a hart standing on the field; then a leopard ran out of the wood, and its mane seemed golden to me, and the hart stuck its horns under the shoulder of the animal, and it fell down dead; there next I saw where a great flying dragon flew and came where the hart was, and gripped it in its claws, and tore all apart; then I saw a bear, and her cub followed, and the dragon would take him, but the bear defended, and then I awoke.” She said, “That is a great dream...there you have seen the *fylgjur* of kings, and they shall deal with each other in battle”).⁴⁶ Although the latter instance is a prophetic dream, while the former is an account of a contemporary battle of shapeshifters, it may be argued that the struggle of *fylgjur* in the dream could, in and of itself, be seen as an actual battle, with a comparison being made to Finni’s analysis of the cause of Eyjólfur’s misfortune in chapter 20 of Ljósvetninga saga:

‘Þat mynda ek ætla, at þar myndir þú eigi hafa getat staðizk fylgjur þeira Þorvarðs ok frænda hans, er fjándskap leggja á þik.’ Eyjólfur mælti: ‘Ætlar þú, at þeira fylgjur sé meiri fyrir sér en mínar ok minna frænda?’ Finni mælti: ‘Ekki kveð ek at því; þó þat er reynt, ef vér spyrjum um för Þorvarðs’

(“I would expect that there you were not able to stand against the *fylgjur* of Þorvarðr and his kinsmen, who are your foes.” Eyjólfur said, “Do you think that their *fylgjur* are greater than mine and my kinsmen’s?” Finni said, “I did not say that; but that is proven, if we ask about Þorvarðr’s journey”).⁴⁷ The belief expressed here is clearly that the conflict of *fylgjur* is the decisive element in the struggle, a belief also expressed by Þorsteinn frá Hofi in chapter 30 of Vatnsdæla saga, when he cautiously advises that the hostile brothers Jökull and Þórir be

greeted well because, “hafa þeir bræðr rammar fylgjur” (the brothers have powerful *fylgjur*):⁴⁸ he is not concerned with their physical prowess, but with the question of their superior force on the spiritual plane, which is embodied in their *fylgjur*.

An etymological analysis of *fylgja* and *hamr* also suggests the possibility of an original association. The noun *fylgja* may be connected with the verb *fylgja*, “to accompany”, which accords with and may have had some influence upon the Icelandic image of the *fylgja* as an animal-spirit attached to a human being. There also, however, exists the noun *fylgja* meaning “afterbirth” or “caul”, regarding which Turville-Petre observes “This noun could also be derived from the verb, but is more likely to be related to Icelandic *fulga* (thin covering of hay) and Norwegian dialect *folga* (skin, covering) and with the verb *fela* (to hide)”, commenting that *fylgja* (accompanying spirit) cannot be divorced completely from its homonym.⁴⁹ Mundal also accepts a connection between *fylgja* and afterbirth, though observing that the connection between an animal-shape and the afterbirth is not clear.⁵⁰ Further, the verb *fela* is also indicated as a possible origin for *fylgja* (spirit).⁵¹

The comparison of these interpretations with the etymology of *hamr* seems to suggest further the possibility of a close association of the two concepts. The word *hamr* indicates a covering or skin;⁵² de Vries cites a Middle Low German *ham* for covering or afterbirth, suggesting a relationship with *hams* (fruit-rind, snakeskin),⁵³ a concept upon which he elaborates in his Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte,

Die moderne Sprache kennt noch als Bedeutung für *hamr*, ‘Nachgebur’, ursprünglich wohl ‘die Haut, in welche die Frucht eingeschlossen ist’...Diese Eihaut des Embryo wurde in einer besonderen Beziehung zum Kinde gedacht; sie enhielt seine Seele, oder ein seelenartiges Wesen, das ihn als Schutzgeist begleitete.⁵⁴

Both *fylgja* and *hamr*, then, seem to derive from the concept of the afterbirth as embodying a form of spiritual protection, expressed in the former case as a universally present semi-independent being in the shape of an animal, in the latter as a means of disembodied activity in animal-shape of which only specially talented persons can avail

themselves, changing spiritually in the same manner in which gods and legendary heroes physically transform themselves. The connection between the use of the afterbirth and shape-shifting appears constant throughout later Scandinavian folklore: in Denmark, it was believed that if a woman crawled naked through the caul of a foal, she could give birth painlessly, but her firstborn would be a *mare* or werewolf;⁵⁵ while Norwegian belief included the afterbirth, rather than the pelt, of a wolf pulled over the head of the would-be shapeshifter.⁵⁶ Like the *fylgja*, the *hamr* appears in most cases, as mentioned above, to be a specific and single animal-form. Although the sole case in which *fylgja* and *hamr* are specifically shown together is a *fornaldarsaga*, and hence particularly likely to demonstrate literary-fantastic usage rather than folk belief, it is worth mentioning: in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, the wizard Ógautan takes the shape of a vixen in order to spy upon the heroes, and he also appears as a vixen in *fylgja*-form.⁵⁷ The implication here is that when Ógautan takes on his animal-shape, he is actually taking possession of his *fylgja*: he is able to use it as a *hamr*, in the same way in which the various otherworldly beings cited above use their respective animal-*hamir*. The assembled evidence suggests, indeed, that this assumption of an invisible, but nevertheless omnipresent, animal-hide may have been the normal process by which the Icelandic shapeshifter operated; that to be *hamrammr* was to have the ability to depart the body and cloak oneself in the skin of one's *fylgja*, as, for instance, when Kveld-Úlfr wandered about at night in the form of a wolf, or Böðvarr bjarki took on the shape of a bear in order to fight for his king.

The use of the metaphysical *hamr* or *fylgja* was paralleled in the Viking Age by the practice of animal-masking for the purpose of transforming a human's nature, most frequently seen in the induction of berserkerang, regarding which the physical animal skin and the spiritual power of *hamr*-use appear to have been not only fundamental, but even perhaps interchangeable. Berserkerang and *hamr*-use are paralleled in *Egils saga*, chapter 27:

Svá er sagt, at þeim mönnum væri farit, er hamrammir eru, eða þeim, er berserksgangr var á, at meðan þat var framit, þá váru þeir svá sterkir, at ekki helzk við þeim, en fyrst, er af var gengit, þá váru þeir ómáttkari en at vanda

(It is said thus, that for those men who were *hamrammir*, or those, whom berserker-gang was on, while it was upon them, then they were so strong that no one could stand against them, but at first, when it had gone off, then they were very weak and in difficulty).⁵⁸ A very similar description is given in Eyrbyggja saga, chapter 28, which emphasizes the identification between berserker-gang and *hamr*-shifting:

Berserkirnir gengu heim um kveldit ok váru móðir mjök, sem hátr er þeira manna, sem eigi eru einhama, at þeir verða máttlausir mjök, er af þeim gengr berserksgangrinn.

(The berserks went home in the evening and were greatly exhausted, as was the case with those men, who were not of one *hamr*, that they became very weak when the berserker-gang went off them).⁵⁹ There is also an apparent connection, although not a necessary one, between berserker-gang and the possession of a powerful *fylgja*: in Vatnsdæla saga, chapter 30, Þórsteinn frá Hofi's description of the brothers Jökull and Þórir as possessing "rammar fylgur" follows almost immediately upon the characterization, "Á Þóri kom stundum berserksgangr" (Berserker-gang came on Þórir at times).⁶⁰

In this regards, however, a notable peculiarity of berserker-gang which appears to distinguish it in character, as well as effect, from the shape-shifting described above, is that, while an individual's *hamr* or *fylgja* might be of various sorts, only the bear and the wolf are directly associated with berserker-gang, as in the cases of Kveld-Úlfr and the pedigree of Björn blásíða. In relationship to this animal-association, H.R. Ellis-Davidson also cites a description of a group of dedicated warriors, similar to the accounts of berserk-bands, who were "said to be brothers...on an island in Denmark...in Book VI of Saxo's Danish History...it may be noted that members of the group have names formed from *björn* (bear)."⁶¹ Significantly, although there are a considerable number of references not only associating warriors with boars in general (such as the *heiti* "jöfurr", boar, for a ruler) but identifying individual men with boars,⁶² and, as mentioned in the examples above from Landnámabók and Svarfdæla saga, showing the boar as a powerful form assumed by shapeshifters, as well

the direct transformation of the human Óttarr into a boar by the goddess Freyja in Hyndluljóð, there survive no references to a boar-equivalent of the wolf- or bear-berserk. Näsström argues that “(the enemy warrior’s) hostile character was symbolized by the word ‘bear’ - a notion which probably embodies the solution to the problem of berserks, ulfhednar, and werewolves. In the same way, the warrior would employ a ‘boar’ for instance, as a symbol of himself”⁶³ and suggests that the boar in Hyndluljóð is merely Óttarr’s totem or representative. However, Freyja’s words in stanza 45,

‘Ber þú minnisöl mínom galti,
svát hann öll muni orð at tína,
þessar ræðo á þriðia morni,
þá er þeir Angantýr ættir rekia’

(Bear thou remembrance-ale to my boar so that he remembers all words to say, these speeches, on the third morning, when he reckons clans with Angantýr) make it clear that Freyja’s steed is, despite her initial denial, Óttarr himself, albeit concealed in the form of Freyja’s boar Hildisvíni: the case is one of transformation, rather than symbolic totemism. Boar-masking and even ritual possession by means of a boar-mask may have taken place - H.R. Ellis-Davidson suggests that, in the context of the cult of Freyr, “the king put on (a boar-mask helmet) in order to be possessed by the god”⁶⁴ - but such a possession, if it took place, would, in purpose and nature if not in method, have been a phenomenon significantly different from that of the berserk-fit. There seems no practical reason why the ferocious boar should not be associated with berserker-gang in the same way as the bear and the wolf; the only obvious suggestion is that the boar, when identified as a cultic animal, is firmly within the Vanic cult, whereas the wolf is certainly, and the bear probably, connected with Óðinn. The appearance of the boar-mask on some of the female figures in the Oseberg tapestry, who are easily interpreted as worshippers of Freyja,⁶⁵ as well as a woman wearing a bird-of-prey costume, who may well represent a priestess of the goddess or Freyja herself,⁶⁶ while no corresponding wolf- or bear-women are known, indicate the likelihood of berserker-gang as an

original Óðinnic specialization, just as Snorri describes in Ynglinga saga, chapter 6 (quoted below), with its actual occurrence and the memory of the associated animal-forms outliving the cult: the berserk, as suggested in the examples given above, was a man who had a bear or wolf *hamr* to take on. As an originally cultic specialization, berserkergang may provide a somewhat slanted perspective on the more general subject of ritual/psychological transformation in Norse culture. However, whatever other forms of ritual masking-transformation may have existed in Norse spiritual activity, the nature of our surviving references which concentrate to a large degree on battle, and the peculiar character of berserkergang as the sole practice related to masking/shapeshifting which continued to occur spontaneously after the ritual use of animal skins had been largely discarded, has determined that berserkergang is the only one which is extensively and explicitly documented, with a vocabulary of terms which describes its relationship to the types of transformation discussed above and offers the opportunity of clarifying the fundamental character of Norse shapeshifting-beliefs.

The two words used to describe those susceptible to berserk-fits, *berserkr* and *úlfheðinn*, directly indicate the use of an animal-skin in the induction of berserkergang. The latter term is a transparent formation, ‘wolf-coat’; the former has been the subject of some debate as to whether it indicates ‘bear-shirt’ or ‘bare-shirt’, referring to the berserk’s ability to go without armour, as described in Ynglinga saga, chapter 6: “(Óðins) menn fóru brynjlausir...Þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvárki eldr né járn orti á þá. Þat er kallaðr berserksgangr” (Óðinn’s men went without armour...they slew men, but neither fire nor iron could touch them. That is called berserkergang).⁶⁷ Although not universally recognised,⁶⁸ the interpretation of “bear-shirt”, complementary to “wolf-coat”, is, however, the more generally accepted; Ásgeirr Magnússon dismisses the alternate interpretation as rather unlikely.⁶⁹ The terms *úlfheðinn* and *berserkr* are identified from an early literary period, in Þórbjörn hornklofi’s Haraldskvæði 8: “grenjuðu berserkir...emjuðu ulfheðnar”(berserks roared...úlfheðnar howled).⁷⁰ The characteristic use of the wolf-pelt in fighting is also mentioned by Eyvindr skáldaspillir in

Háleygjatal 8: “Ok sá halr / at Hárs veðri / hösvan serk / hrísgrísnis bar” (and the man bore the gray sark of the wolf in battle).

The donning of animal-skins to bring on a berserk-fit is explicitly attested in the saga-literature regarding berserks, demonstrating that the saga-writers were aware of the practice. Chapter 9 of Vatnsdæla saga describes “þeir berserkir, er Úlfheðnar vǫru kallaðir; þeir höfðu vargstakka fyrir brynjur ok vörðu framstafn á konungs skipinu” (the berserks, who were called *úlfheðnar*; they had wolf-cloaks for byrnies and were at the front of the king’s ship).⁷¹ The similarity of this account of Haraldr hárfagri’s elite troops to the description in Haraldskvæði is suspicious; nevertheless, the added description of the wolfskin coats indicates a direct consciousness of the relationship between putting on the hide and entering the berserk state.⁷²

The ritual use of animal hides, in particular that of a wolf, is most significantly attested in the iconographic evidence of the Vendel and Viking Ages. The helm-plate press from Torslunda is the best-known of these, and the one which has received the most comment in its suggestive juxtaposition of the wolf-skinned warrior with the apparently one-eyed dancer in the bird-horned helm, which is generally interpreted as showing a scene indicative of the relationship between berserker-gang, masking-ritual, and the god Óðinn.⁷³ Similar wolf-man figures appear in the south-west Germanic area: the sword-decoration from Gutenstein and the bronze piece from Obrigheim, both 7th century, provide iconographic evidence of the ritual practice behind the *Úlfheðinn*/Wolfhetan-related names, regarding which Müller observes, “Der dem Kampfgott geweihte Tier-Krieger wurde für den Mann zu einem Leitbild, das auf die Namengebung einwirkte.”⁷⁴ The image appears to have survived into the Viking Age, as shown by a small figure from a cremation-grave in Kungsängen, Uppland (ca. 800 C.E.), which shows a man in a wolf-coat apparently biting the head of a large serpent.⁷⁵ One of the Oseberg tapestry fragments has been interpreted as showing the battle of Brávellir, with the armed female figures representing valkyries and the man in a wolf- or bear-skin as a berserk.⁷⁶

This being so, it is interesting to note that there is a relative paucity of saga-period references to the use of hides in inducing berserkerang, in contrast to those presenting berserkerang as a spontaneous shift of consciousness. The berserk state is identified as a heathen practice in the “Kristinna laga þátr” of the law-book Grágás, in which it is proscribed in the same chapter as offering to heathen wights, practicing magic, and similar activities, with the same penalty (lesser outlawry) applying. However, there is no description of the means involved in going berserk - there is, for instance, no clause forbidding the possession or wearing of an animal skin - and the proscription includes the peculiar addition that those men who are present when another goes berserk are responsible for restraining him or suffering the same penalty.⁷⁷ This latter clause suggests, as Jesse Byock interprets it, a simple social responsibility of private individuals to restrain violent individuals, rather than an explicit indictment of heathen ritual.⁷⁸

The saga-characters who are prone to berserkerang, whether they are presented as primary characters or simply as stock literary villains, appear to need no particular preparation to undergo a fit. This could possibly be explained by the connection of the masked animal-warriors with the native religion,⁷⁹ of which the saga-writers may have been chary; however, the saga descriptions of berserks give less indication of deliberate avoidance than of a simple lack of any sense of the animal-hide being necessary. Berserkerang, in fact, appears as an involuntary or only semi-voluntary response to stress, occasionally happening at undesired and inappropriate times. The classic example of the latter occurs in Egils saga, chapter 40, where Skalla-Grímr, becoming unduly excited in the course of a ball-game that has lasted past sundown, kills one young man and then turns to attack his son, whereupon Egill's nursemaid Þorgerðr brák, who is described as “fjölunnig mjök” (greatly skilled in magic), exclaims, “Hamask þú nú, Skalla-Grímr, at syni þínum?” (Are you now changing *hamr*, Skalla-Grímr, against your son?),⁸⁰ whereupon he turns on her instead, chasing and eventually killing her. The undesirability of berserk-fits is also played up in Vatnsdœla saga, chapter 37, in which, when the sons of Ingimundr are comparing their respective worth,

“Þórir kvazk minnsthátt af þeim, - ‘fyrir þat, at á mik kemr berserksgangr jafnan, þá er ek vilda sízt, ok vilda ek, bróðir, at þú gerða at’” (Þórir said himself to be the worst of them - “because the berserker gang comes on me at times when I would least wish it, and I wish, brother, that you could do something about it”).⁸¹ The immediate sequel to this self-revelation, in which Þórir is cured of berserker gang by adopting and bringing up the exposed infant Þorkell krafla, is a decidedly christian message; nevertheless, the whole would be impossible in a context in which the use of a physical animal-hide was a prerequisite to the achievement of the berserk-state. Further, at least in the Iceland of the sagas, putting on a bearskin alone was not sufficient to make one a berserk: Gunnell cites the scene from Kórmaks saga in which Steinarr nundarson appears at the spring Þórsnessþing masked and wearing a bear-skin cloak,⁸² observing that “the purpose of the disguise is totally unclear, since...there is nothing in either Kórmaks saga or Egils saga to suggest that he was ever regarded as a *berserkr* or needed to hide his identity.”⁸³ Steinarr’s intention is to challenge Hólmganga-Bersi to a duel, which does suggest a connection between the bear-disguise and ritualized combat, but a direct identification with berserker gang is entirely absent.

This leaves the question of how the transition from the original *úlfheðinn* or *berserkr* (if the “bear-hide” etymology is accepted) to the saga-character who, sometimes unwillingly, undergoes berserk rages was conceptualized. A possible answer is provided by the vocabulary used: the descriptions “sem eigi eru einhama” (who were not of one *hamr*),⁸⁴ “þá hamaðisk (Kveld-Úlfr)” (then Kveld-Úlfr changed *hamr*),⁸⁵ and “Hamask þú nú...at syni þinum” (are you now changing *hamr*...against your son)⁸⁶ attest to a direct connection between *hamr* and berserker gang. Given the previously discussed function of the *hamr* in regards to extra-physical shapeshifting, it is not unreasonable to postulate that, in the Icelandic mind, the spiritual *hamr* had largely or entirely replaced the actual animal hide previously used by the berserk warrior: that is to say, instead of using the *hamr*, or skin of the *fylgja*, to go out of the body in an animal’s shape, the Icelandic berserk was able to draw it into himself (or susceptible to being overcome by it) so as to enter the spiritually transformed state of

berserkergang. The reasons for this shift must remain a matter of speculation, though it may perhaps be postulated that, given the probable Óðinnic cultic/initiatory character of the original bear- or wolf-masking, both the transition to Iceland, where the cult of Óðinn was apparently considerably less practised than in the Continental homelands,⁸⁷ and then the conversion to christianity would have had a significant effect in regards to redefining the phenomenon. However, if the underlying complex of beliefs regarding the nature of the animal-*fylgja* and its relationship to the human, including the possibility of two-way possession, had not already been firmly in place, the shift from the use of a physical animal-pelt to the metaphysical skin of the *fylgja* in inducing either extra-corporeal or psycho-spiritual transformation would not have been initially possible.

It can, hence, be concluded that, when the secondary magic of illusion is left out, the various instances of transformation in Icelandic literature, rather than forming distinct typological groupings, can be seen as a general spectrum governed by the same overall rules, altered only by the nature and circumstances of the shapeshifter. The assumed form exists, in some manner, separately from the being who is donning it: it embodies the foreign capabilities and nature which the shapeshifter wishes to assume. In the transition between worlds and literary genres, the complete metamorphosis of a deity or legendary character upon putting on an animal's hide becomes the spiritual metamorphosis of the Icelander with access to his personal animal-*hamr* or the magician who, like Óðinn, can “shift *hamr*” in order to transform into a number of different shapes outside of his physical body. Finally, these transformations find their reflection in the physical world in the frenzy of the psychologically transformed *berserkr*, brought on either voluntarily by use of an animal hide (physical or metaphysical), or involuntarily when he is overcome by his bear- or wolf-*hamr*. The fundamental technique in all cases is the same: only the manifestations differ.

Notes

- ¹ cf. Gunter Müller, “Germanische Tiersymbolik und Namengebung.” Frühmittelalterliche Studien 2 (1968) 202-217.
- ² Richard North, ed. and trans., The *Haustlǫng* of Þjóðólfr of Hvinir (Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1997) 6, stanza 12.
- ³ Snorri Sturluson, Edda Snorra Sturlusonar, ed. Finnur Jónsson (København: Nordisk Forlag, 1931) 80.
- ⁴ Gustav Neckel, ed., Edda: Die Lieder der Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern, rev. Hans Kuhn, 3rd ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1962). All further Eddic quotations are from this edition.
- ⁵ Snorri Sturluson, Edda, 80.
- ⁶ Flateyjarbók, 3 vols. (Christiana: P.T. Malling, 1860-68) 1: 276.
- ⁷ Sune Lindqvist, Gotlands Bildsteine, 2 vols. (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1941-42) 1: fig. 85, p. 95; Erik Nylén and Jan-Peder Lamm, Bildstenar (Stockholm: Gidlund, 1987) 50-52.
- ⁸ Snorri Sturluson, Edda 80.
- ⁹ North 51.
- ¹⁰ North 52.
- ¹¹ cf. the common North Atlantic story of the seal-woman whose sealskin is captured and who is forced to wed her captor, bearing him children, but eventually regains her skin and escapes. Jacqueline Simpson, ed. and trans., Scandinavian Folktales (London: Penguin, 1988) 205-06.
- ¹² Magnus Olsen, ed., Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar (København: Møller, 1906-08) 15-17.
- ¹³ H.R. Ellis-Davidson, “Shape-Changing in the Old Norse Sagas,” Animals in Folklore, ed. J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russel (London: D.S. Brewer, Ltd., and Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield for the Folklore

Society, 1978). Rpt. in A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture, ed. Charlotte F. Otten (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986) 142.

¹⁴ cf. the discussion of the ritual use of animal skins in Terry Gunnell, The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995) 64-76.

¹⁵ Olsen 34.

¹⁶ Olsen 67.

¹⁷ cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., Eyrbyggja saga, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935) 51-53, in which Katla casts the illusionary disguises of distaff, goat, and pig on her son Oddr; and Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, eds., Þorskfirðinga saga, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1991) 200-01, in which Askmaðr and his wife attempt to escape from a burning house disguised as a boar and a sow, but when the boar is killed, it is seen to be Askmaðr himself.

¹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, ed., Hrólf's saga kraka ok Bjarkarímur (København: Møller, 1904) 50.

¹⁹ Finnur Jónsson, Hrólf's saga kraka 52.

²⁰ Finnur Jónsson, Hrólf's saga kraka 53.

²¹ Finnur Jónsson, Hrólf's saga kraka 54.

²² Finnur Jónsson, Hrólf's saga kraka 100.

²³ Finnur Jónsson, Hrólf's saga kraka 102.

²⁴ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., Heimskringla I, Íslenzk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 18.

²⁵ Sigurður Nordal, ed., Egils saga, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941) 4.

²⁶ Jakob Benediktsson, ed., Landnámabók, Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936) 355-56.

²⁷ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., Svarfdœla saga, Íslenzk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956) 181-82.

²⁸ Sigurður Nordal 70-71.

²⁹ Valdimar Ásmundarsson, ed., Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda, 3 vols. (vols. 1-2 Reykjavík: Sigm. Guðmundsson 1885-86; vol. 3 Reykjavík: Sigf. Eymundsson, 1889) 3: 476-77.

³⁰ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla I 271.

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- ³¹ Sigurður Nordal 182-83.
- ³² cf. chapter 32 of Haralds saga ins hárfagra, in Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, Heimskringla I 135-36.
- ³³ see R.I. Page, “Lapland Sorcerers,” Saga-Book of the Viking Society 16.2-3 (1963-64): 215-32.
- ³⁴ as suggested, for instance, by Peter Buchholz, “Schamanistische Züge in der altisländische Überlieferung,” diss., U of Münster, 1968, 56 ff.
- ³⁵ Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Harðar saga, Íslenzk fornrit 13 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1991) 46.
- ³⁶ For instance, Kveld-Úlfr is the son of a man named Bjálfi (“pelt”) and the nephew of one Hallbjörn Half-troll (Egils saga, 3), while Kveld-Úlfr’s own son, Skalla-Grímr, is a berserk; cf. also the previous observations about Böðvarr bjarki’s inheritance of the bear-shape.
- ³⁷ H.R. Ellis, Road to Hel (Cambridge: University Press, 1943) 129.
- ³⁸ Georgia Dunham Kelchner, Dreams in Old Norse Literature and their Affinities in Folklore (Cambridge: University Press, 1935) 17-30.
- ³⁹ Þorsteins þátrr uxafóts, Flateyjarbók 1: 252-53.
- ⁴⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., Brennu-Njáls saga, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954) 106.
- ⁴¹ Flateyjarbók I: 253.
- ⁴² Else Mundal, Fylgjemotive i norrøn Literatur (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974) 73.
- ⁴³ A hostile flock of cattle led by a large red ox appears in chapter 16 of Ljósvetninga saga, ed. Björn Sigfússon, Íslenzk fornrit 10 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950) 65; Þorbjörg dreams of a pack of wolves led by a white bear in chapter 31 of Harðar saga, 77; a similar pack of wolves led by a vixen appears in chapter 20 of Hávarðar saga ísfirðings, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943) 349.
- ⁴⁴ Kelchner 18.
- ⁴⁵ Mundal 38.
- ⁴⁶ C.C. Rafn, ed., Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda, 3 vols. (København: 1829-30) 1: 367.
- ⁴⁷ Björn Sigfússon, Ljósvetninga saga 100-01.
- ⁴⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Vatnsdæla saga, Íslenzk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1939) 83.

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- ⁴⁹ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion of the North (1964; Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975) 228.
- ⁵⁰ Mundal 44-45.
- ⁵¹ Ásgeirr Blöndal Magnússon, Íslensk Orðsifjabók (Reykjavík: Orðabók Háskolans, 1989) 218-19; Jan de Vries, Altnordisches etymologische Wörterbuch, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1962) 147-48.
- ⁵² Ásgeirr Blöndal Magnússon, Orðsifjabók 304.
- ⁵³ de Vries, Wörterbuch 208.
- ⁵⁴ Jan de Vries, Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1956) 1: 224.
- ⁵⁵ E.T. Kristensen, ed., Danske Sagn som de har lydt i folkemunde, 7 vols. (Århus: 1892-1901) 2: 231.
- ⁵⁶ Knut Strompdal, “Gamalt frå Helgeland” 3, Norsk folkeminnelags skrifter 44 (1939) 63.
- ⁵⁷ Valdimar Ásmundarson, Fornaldar sögur 2: 80.
- ⁵⁸ Sigurður Nordal 70.
- ⁵⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthias Þórðarson, Eyrbyggja saga 74.
- ⁶⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Vatnsdœla saga 83.
- ⁶¹ H.R. Ellis-Davidson, Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) 80.
- ⁶² Britt-Marie Näsström, Freyja - The Great Goddess of the North, Lund Studies in History of Religions 5 (Lund: Department of History of Religions, University of Lund) 169-73.
- ⁶³ Näsström 172.
- ⁶⁴ H.R. Ellis-Davidson, The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe (London: Routledge, 1993) 106.
- ⁶⁵ Gunnell 62-63.
- ⁶⁶ Anne Stine Ingstad, “Oseberg-dronningen - hvem var hun?” Oseberg-dronningens grav: Vår arkeologiske nasjonalskatt i nytt lys, Arne Emil Christensen, Anne Stine Ingstad, and Bjørn Myhre (Oslo: Schibsted, 1992) 246-48.
- ⁶⁷ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Heimskringla I 17.
- ⁶⁸ see Hans Kuhn’s discussion of the word in “Kämpen und Berserker,” Frühmittelalterliche Studien 2 (1968) 222.
- ⁶⁹ Ásgeirr Magnússon 52.

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- ⁷⁰ Finnur Jónsson, ed., Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning, 4 vols. (Leutershausen: Strauss & Cramer, 1912-15) B1 23. All further skaldic quotations are from this edition and volume.
- ⁷¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Vatnsdœla saga 24-25.
- ⁷² Haraldr hárfagri's use of an elite berserk-troop is also mentioned in Egils saga, chapter 9; however, there it is only observed that "engi var ósárr á konungsskipinu fyrir framan siglu, nema þeir, er eigi bitu járn, en þat váru berserkir" (no one was unwounded on the king's ship before the first sail, except for those on whom iron did not bite, and that was the berserks). Sigurður Norðal 23.
- ⁷³ Heinrich Beck, "Die Stanzen von Torslunda und die literarische Überlieferung," Frühmittelalterliche Studien 2 (1968) 247-50; also Per-Olaf Ringquist, "Två vikingatida uppländska människofigurer i brons," Fornvännen (1969) 291-94.
- ⁷⁴ "Zum Namen *Wolfhetan* und seinen Verwandten," Frühmittelalterliche Studien 1 (1967) 212.
- ⁷⁵ Ringquist 287-89, figs. 2a-2b.
- ⁷⁶ Ingstad, "Oseberg-dronningen" 245.
- ⁷⁷ Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed. and trans., Grágás: Islændernes Lovbok i Fristaten Tid, 4 vols. In 2 (Kjøbenhavn: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852-70) 1: 22-23.
- ⁷⁸ Jesse L. Byock, Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 26.
- ⁷⁹ The issue has been extensively discussed; see for instance "Berserker," Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, Heinrich Beck and others, eds. (Berlin: de Gruyter 1973-) 2: 298-304; Otto Höfler, Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen (Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1934); de Vries, Religionsgeschichte 1: 492-99.
- ⁸⁰ Sigurður Nordal 101-02.
- ⁸¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Vatnsdœla saga 97.
- ⁸² Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Kórmaks saga. Íslenzk fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939) 247.
- ⁸³ Gunnell 81.
- ⁸⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Eyrbyggja saga 74.
- ⁸⁵ Sigurður Nordal 69.
- ⁸⁶ Sigurður Nordal, Egils saga 101.

⁸⁷ Turville-Petre, Myth and Religion 66-67; Turville-Petre, "The Cult of Óðinn in Iceland," Nine Norse Studies, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series 5 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972) 1-19.