

Chapter 2

THE ELF WOMAN'S CONVERSION: MEMORIES OF GENDER AND GENDER SPHERES*

“Álfkonan hjá Ullarvötnum” (The Elf Woman at Ullarvötn)¹

Near the Lakes of Wool in the east of Iceland, a sheep farmer named Andrés lost his entire flock. As this was a grievous loss to the farmer, he sent out servants to find the sheep, but neither sheep nor men returned. Despite his parents' fears for his safety, the farmer's son, Sigurður, determined to go look for the men and the sheep. Sigurður found no sign of them until he came upon a series of lakes where someone had spread wool out to dry, and just then he noticed a flock of sheep grazing on lush, green grass. He approached, feeling sure they were the missing flock, but a beautiful woman met him before he could get very close to the sheep. She greeted him by name (though he was sure he had never seen her before), said that she had taken the sheep and killed all the servants, and that she would surely kill him too unless he agreed to become her lover. The woman—who said she could be called Vandráð or Valbjörg, whichever Sigurður prefers—said she was of elf-kind and that she had lost her parents two years before. No longer did she live with her own kind because her father had prophesied that she would bear the children of a human man. Sigurður, moved by her beauty, grace, and not unimpressed by her elfish powers, agreed to stay with her on the conditions that the flock be sent back to his father and that his father be told that he was alive and well. She agreed, and all was well with the couple for three years.

Sigurður's father, Andrés, was glad to see his flock returned, and while saddened not to have his son come home, he felt a consolation that he was safe and sound, until one night, Sigurður came to his father in a dream and beseeched his father to come to him on the night of Christmas Eve. “When you come,” said Sigurður, “bring the Reverend Eiríkur with you, have him stand at the door as you enter, and be sure that he catches and holds fast to the woman who tries to rush out of the house when you enter. Be sure of this, father, for if he lets her go, you will surely never see me again.” After explaining where to find him, Sigurður disappeared. Andrés did just as his son had asked, and on Christmas Eve, he followed the directions given to him and came upon their home. He entered the rooms to find his son carding wool while a beautiful woman sat holding a baby. When Andrés entered the room he proclaimed, as was the custom in Iceland at the time, “God be here!” At the proclamation of the name of God, the elf woman went into a frenzy, threw the baby on the bed, and ran from the house, but the Reverend Eiríkur was at the door and ready for her. He clasped his arms around her and didn't let go. For a week thereafter, Eiríkur

* A version of this chapter appeared in *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011): 165–90.

¹ Adapted from JÁ 1:97–99, from the manuscripts of Ólafur Sveinsson of Purkey (1762–1845).

confined the elf woman, though she wailed and begged him to free her. Eiríkur was firm but gentle with her, working to quell her anger and violent temperament. After that time, she was somewhat recovered and went home with Sigurður, where they stayed over the winter. The woman improved greatly over that time (though it is unclear whether she took the Sacraments during mass) and had been completely freed from her elfish nature by the spring, when Reverend Eiríkur came to visit them. He joined the couple in marriage, and from then on, they were happy and productive. In fact, it is said that many people admired the woman because she was very charitable, had great virtue as a housewife, and she hated any kind of disagreeability.

The couple is said to have had four children together, some of whom went on to become well known in the country.

This story must be one of the most peculiar in all of Icelandic folklore. It preserves the powerful otherworldliness often associated with the elfish or fairy dwellings in international tales, yet the elf's power and beauty also fit well into Icelandic traditions. Valbjörg's wooing of a human man and aversion to Christianity are likewise not unexpected in Icelandic stories of elves, though elfish women who take human lovers tend to hope their children will be baptized into the Christian church. All this so far fits well into both Icelandic and international motifs associated with stories of the elves,² but the story takes an odd, even unprecedented turn in the second half, when the elf woman is mysteriously freed from her elfish nature and becomes, by all accounts, human. The referend, Eiríkur, seems to exorcise her in some fashion, as the text reads, "vakir prestur yfir henni; er hún stundum í ómegin, en þess á milli er hún að gráta og biðja prest að sleppa sér; en það gjörir hann ekki" (the priest watched over her through the night; she would faint now and then, and would at times weep and beg the priest to free her, but he did not do it),³ and her condition after having been cured is almost picturesque: "Hún var góðgjörandi kona so hún var elskuð af fólki; líka var hún siðferðisgóð á heimili og hataði ósamþykki" (She was such a charitable woman that she was much loved by people; she was likewise of great virtue as a housewife and hated any kind of disagreeability).⁴ Her liberation (as it is depicted) from her elf nature intertwines with gender and religion as well. In fact, the story seems to pit two spheres of gender against one another: in the one sphere, Sigurður, Andrés, and Eiríkur (Sigurður's mother is hardly mentioned) represent masculinity, Christianity, and the normative world, and in the other, Valbjörg represents the feminine, (anti-Christian) elf-hood, and an elfish otherworld. The female sphere—it must be evident—is almost wholly redefined by the male sphere.

As [chapter 1](#) made evident, the *kvöldvaka* (lit. "night-waking") was a key factor in the cultivation of cultural memory in Iceland because it afforded a context in which stories from an older time could be intermingled with existing religious doctrine. Kirsten

² I discuss these connections in some detail below (61).

³ JÁ 1:99.

⁴ JÁ 1:99.

Hastrup suggests that *sagnaskemmtun*, or the part of the *kvöldvaka* when old sagas were read aloud, resulted in the “steady reproduction of ancient images of Icelandic history.”⁵ As is observable in the stories discussed in this and the [previous chapter](#), these “ancient images” serve a deeper purpose in cultural memory than just to recall events or even merely to entertain. While they rarely supported Christian doctrine in the strictest sense,⁶ they regularly worked to reconcile those “ancient images” with contemporary Christian life. Furthermore, woven into the images of the past were newly fashioned (but often equally heterodox) images of the supernatural world that required reconciliation as well. The result was a tension between a stricter view of church doctrine, which did not look kindly upon ancient folk motifs, and a view that was not so strict, which welcomed intermingling between folk and Christian belief.⁷ The divide quickly spread throughout cultural memory by way of orally transmitted folk materials, songs, and poetry.⁸ Throughout all of these changes and the blending of interpretation, gender spheres—such as those on display in the story of the elf woman’s conversion—were also woven into the mixture. Answering the question of how these gender spheres interact with religious belief will be the work of this chapter.⁹

Gender Spheres in Old Norse Sources

Scholars have often noted that in Old Norse sources, female historical and literary figures tend to exhibit strong opposition to the conversion to Christianity. Often cited as

5 Kirsten Hastrup, “Iceland: Sorcerers and Paganism,” in *Early Modern European Witchcraft*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 190.

6 The obvious exceptions to this statement are those stories propagated by the religious leaders themselves. *Vísnaþók Guðbrands* (1612) by Guðbrandur Þorláksson, for instance, stands as an especially important exception. See the introduction above for my discussion of Guðbrandur and his efforts.

7 Hastrup argues for less of a divide between the elite and popular cultures though she acknowledges a small educated class. In my opinion, post-Reformation Icelandic literature supports a more divided culture than in medieval times. See Kirsten Hastrup, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400–1800: An Anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 190–91. See also my discussion of religious development in the Introduction.

8 See Matthew Driscoll’s chapter on “Popular Romances in Post-Reformation Iceland” in his *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 1997), 1–33.

9 This chapter attends primarily to the female gender sphere largely because valuable scholarly work has recently been directed toward understanding the relationship of women to Old Norse conversion, Christianization, and religious institutions. This scholarly discussion offers a useful and important point of contact with the later folk tradition, which in my opinion must be taken into account in order for the discussion to be considered complete. As may be evident here, the argument could certainly be made that, given the predominance of men in Christian institutions, no aspect of the normative culture therefore remains unaffected by the attributes of the masculine gender. If such is the case, it is all the more reason to examine the role and impact of the non-normative gender.

support for this opposition are the confrontations between Þorvaldur and Friðgerður in *Þorvalds þáttur ens víðförla* (The Tale of Þorvaldur the Far-Travelled) and *Kristni saga* as well as Þangbrandur's conflict with Steinunn in *Njáls saga*. Sources such as these have contributed to the perception of a Christian-male/pagan-female opposition structure that has helped forge our understanding of gender roles in Norse conversion and Christianization.¹⁰ Some scholars see this opposition structure as evidence of a historical phenomenon involving pagan women during the process of Norse conversion and Christianization,¹¹ while others have argued that it functions as a literary construction ultimately reflective of negative ecclesiastical views of women.¹² Recently, Siân Grønlie has challenged these interpretations, arguing that they tend to overlook narrative accounts that paint women in a supportive, Christian light, adding further, "even when the Christian-male/pagan-female opposition is clearly drawn, it does not always follow that the narrative sympathy, insofar as we can discern it, lies with the Christian-male."¹³ Rather than a gendered religious opposition, Grønlie observes a topos in Icelandic literature that instead presents a social opposition that bears a gendered imprint.¹⁴ On one side of the opposition persists a "female sphere," which is private, intimate, based in the home, and opposed to conversion, while on the other stands the "male sphere," which is public, political, legal, and in support of conversion.

One interesting literary example from the thirteenth-century *Sturlunga saga* warrants further comment. In a brief scene, the famous pagan heroine from *Völsunga saga* and the *Poetic Edda*, Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, appears as a dream-woman to the young

10 For overviews of this discussion see Gro Steinsland, "Husfruer, gydjer og volver," in *Kvinnenes kulturhistorie: Fra antikken til år 1800*, ed. Kari Vogt, Sissel Lie, Karin Gundersen, and Jorunn Bjørgum, 2 vols. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1985–88), 1:126–30; Ruth Manzo Karras, "God and Man in Medieval Scandinavia: Writing—and Gendering—the Conversion," in *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 100–114; and, more recently, Siân Grønlie, "'Neither Male Nor Female'? Redeeming Women in the Icelandic Conversion Narratives," *Medium Ævum* 75 (2006): 293–318; and *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie. Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series 18 (London: Viking Society, 2006), n. 18.

11 See, for example, Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 79–80; Gro Steinsland, "The Change of Religion in the Nordic Countries: A Confrontation between Two Living Religions," *Collegium Medievale* 3 (1990–92): 123–35.

12 See, for example, Birgit Sawyer, *Kvinnor och Familj i det forn- och medeltida Skandinavien*, Occasional Papers on Medieval Topics 6 (Skara: Victoria bokförlag, 1992), and Birgit Sawyer, "Women and the Conversion of Scandinavia," in *Frauen in Spätantike und frühmittenalter: Lebensbedingungen, Lebensnormen, Lebensformen*, ed. Werner Affeldt and Ursula Vorwerk (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1990), 263–81; Helga Kress, "Grey þykir mér Freyja": Um konur, kristni og karlveldi í íslenskum fornþóknemntum," in *Konur og kristsmenn: þættir úr kristnisögu Íslands*, ed. Inga Huld Hákonardóttir (Reykjavík; Háskólaútgáfan, 1996), 15–63 (reprinted in Helga Kress, *Fyrir dyrum föstru. Konur og kynferði í íslenskum fornþóknemntum* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofa í kvennafræðum, 1996), 167–219).

13 Grønlie, "Neither Male nor Female," 295.

14 Grønlie, "Neither Male nor Female," 310.

woman Jóreiður. The passage proceeds as might be expected in a sequence of visits from a dream-woman,¹⁵ and contains a mixture of prose and poetry in which Guðrún reports on certain events. In literary terms, Guðrún's usefulness to the story appears have more to do with allusions to her own story¹⁶ than with the fact that she is a pagan hero. Be that as it may, the saga writer seems to anticipate an objection on the part of the audience to a pagan speaking into a Christian world and thus gives an answer to the objection.

Judy Quinn has noted that the narrative works hard to contribute a Christian context to the passage,¹⁷ which opens by giving the dreams at least the veil of a Christian context, saying, "Þetta dreymdi hana Jóreiði sextán vetra gamla þar í Miðjumdal um messu, Maríumessu Magðalenu, í kirkju" (The sixteen-year-old Jóreiður dreamed this in the church at Miðjumdalur during the Mass of Mary Magdalene).¹⁸ Later Jóreiður sees her dream-woman (who at this point remains anonymous) dressed in a black cloak riding a grey horse. Jóreiður asks who she is, and when Guðrún tells her, she responds, "Hví fara heiðnir men hér?" (What are pagans doing here?). Guðrún replies, "Öngu skal þið það skipta ... hvort eg em Kristin eða heiðin en vinur em eg vinar míns" (That should not concern you at all ... whether I am Christian or pagan, but I am a friend to my friends).¹⁹ The questioning then moves on to the more relevant issues concerning the well-being of Jóreiður's family members. Later, Guðrún again references Christianity, when she says, "Nú hefir þetta þrisvar borið fyrir þig enda verður þrisvar allt forðum. Það er og eigi síður að góð er guðs þrenning" (Now this has happened to you three times, since all good things come in threes. It is no less true that God's Trinity is good).²⁰ The narrative could easily go without the references to Christianity, and for that reason the appearance of the Christian context indicates something about the expectations of the audience in the mid-thirteenth century. Judging from Jóreiður's reaction when she learns the name of her dream-woman, the question seems to be whether a pagan dream-guide, male or female, can be trusted.²¹ That the events take place specifically on the mass of Mary

15 See my discussion of dream-women below, 133 and 136.

16 Julia McGrew's makes note of this point in her translation of *Sturlunga Saga*, 2 vols. (New York: Twayne, 1970), 1:476. See also Sandra Balif Straubhaar's brief introduction to the scene in *Old Norse Women's Poetry: The Voices of Female Skalds* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2011), 44. Straubhaar's is furthermore a useful collection and discussion of female *skalds* from Old Norse poetry.

17 Judy Quinn, "The Use of Eddic Poetry in Contemporary Sagas," *Frá Suðlægri Strönd/From a Southern Shore* 3 (1987): 54–72.

18 *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 2010), 674.

19 *Sturlunga saga*, 675.

20 *Sturlunga saga*, 675.

21 Quinn notes that in other places in *Íslendinga saga*, Valkyries often appear in men's dreams and prophecy about death in battle and therefore do not contradict expectations, but in contrast, in a Christian setting, a (male) bishop tends to appear to a male dreamer to advise him: Quinn, "Eddic Poetry," 59–60.

Magdalene, rather than just any mass, further feminizes the encounter and further breaks the expectations of the female sphere.

This late medieval representation of the pagan heroine Guðrún Gjúkadóttir serves as a contrast with expectations of male and female spheres: though she is not Christian, she speaks from a Christian perspective into a Christian narrative context. The extra efforts to present her in a Christian context may also point to the expectation of gender spheres, since the narrative works to push Guðrún beyond the expected pagan-female sphere, which she might otherwise appear to confirm.²² While there may have once been the expectation that the female sphere would oppose Christianity, in the Christian period even pagan women of the past can be claimed by Christendom. If this reading has any merit, the narrative may point to a shift in gender spheres toward the end of the Christianization period.

Gender Spheres in Post-Medieval Folk Narratives

At this point, it is worth asking whether and how these spheres might have survived in the later Icelandic cultural memory. The remainder of this chapter seeks to observe these two spheres across a longer view of religious development in Iceland, paying specific attention to the body of Icelandic folklore material collected from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.²³ Rather than turning to historical, literary, or archaeological sources, it is worth looking here to the folk record, which also preserves a cultural memory of both cultural and religious developments.²⁴ I begin by revisiting the tale entitled “Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi” (Gullbrá and Skeggi in Hvammur)²⁵ to explore the first part of the story, in which familiar persons and events from pre-conversion

22 It is impossible to make any definitive assertion on this question, since we are without a matching context in which a male pagan hero appears for a similar purpose.

23 The analysis of later material requires a slight revision of Grønlie's male and female spheres. Rather than speaking of the support or opposition to *conversion*, as such, in post-Christianization Iceland, the opposition is between Christian orthodoxy and beliefs more on the periphery of Christian doctrine.

24 I have discussed some of the historical discussion that surrounds issues of post-Reformation Iceland above (11–17), but for further context see Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, as well as Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years* for a general overview. For a discussion of Icelandic Reformation, see Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir, *Siðbreytingin á Íslandi 1537–1565: Byltingin að ofan* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1997). For an examination of women's social and legal rights in the nineteenth century, see Þórunn Sigurðardóttir, “Saga World and Nineteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Women Farmers,” in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 281–93. For a study of educational developments in Iceland after the Reformation, see Sigurður Pétursson, “Latin Teaching in Iceland after the Reformation,” in *Reformation and Latin Literature in Northern Europe*, ed. Inger Ekrem, Minna Skafté Jensen, and Egil Kraggerud (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 106–22.

25 An English version of this tale appears in the first volume of Jón Árnason, George E. J. Powell, and Eiríkur Magnússon's *Icelandic Legends* (London: Bentley, 1864), 113–20, but note that significant portions of the original tale were not included in this translation.

Iceland appear once again. I then turn to a series of tales about Icelandic magic users²⁶ which betray much about the spheres of gender and Christian beliefs, though perhaps more for their lack of a female sphere than for its prevalence. Thus equipped, a deeper exploration of the morphological potency and uniquely Icelandic character of the story about the elf woman's conversion—"Álfkonan hjá Ullarvötnum"²⁷ ("The Elf Woman at Wool Lakes")—opens the door to a vision of the reconciliation between male and female spheres. Analysis of these tales suggests that the gendered spheres observed by Grønlie have not been lost in the later Icelandic folktales. Rather, the tales seem to manipulate the topos to reconcile lingering social challenges of both gender and religion.

The Cultural Memory of Auður *hin djúpuðga*

As may be evident from the discussion of early Iceland in the Introduction, the cultural memory of Auður *hin djúpuðga* (the deep-minded) played an important role in the cultural memory of early Icelandic Christianity and beyond.²⁸ Imbedded within this cultural memory, the story of "Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi"²⁹ again places Auður at her farmstead in the Hvammur region, where much Icelandic history begins. No doubt appended by the collector, the tale reminds us that Sturla Þórðarson, "Hvamm-Sturla," and his famous children get their start here, and states that Auður settles in this area upon her arrival to pre-conversion Iceland.³⁰ In the early Icelandic accounts, Auður unmistakably challenges the expectation that women oppose Christian conversion.³¹ Not only is she a strong, authoritative woman, but she is also a devout Christian (one of only a few in Iceland at the time), owns land, gives advice, and serves in political roles. Thus, Auður functions perhaps more as a female in the male sphere. Nevertheless, she stands as an early example of the complicated relationship between the two spheres of gender and Christianity.

²⁶ Many of these tales are not yet translated into English, but see Jacqueline Simpson's translation of *Legends of Icelandic Magicians* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1975) for an representative selection.

²⁷ An English version of this tale appears in the first volume of Árnason, Powell, and Eiríkur Magnússon, *Icelandic Legends*, 72–80.

²⁸ In fact Auður remained fixed in the Icelandic memory well into the twentieth century. See Vanherpen's very good article "Remembering Auður/Unnr *djúp(a)uðga* Ketilsdóttir." Especially noteworthy is Vanherpen's examination of Magnús Friðriksson's 1940 version of the tale, entitled "Hvammur í Dalasýslu," published in *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* (1940): 88–111.

²⁹ JÁ 1:140–44. The Jón Árnason version of this tale is taken from the manuscripts of Rev. Jón Þorleifsson (1825–1860), but the tale is first mentioned in 1690, in a letter from Árni Magnússon, who lived at Hvammur. See McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 132; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 119.

³⁰ Hvammur is also the site of one of the more famous male Christian/female pagan oppositions, that between the Christian (male) Þorvaldur and the pagan (female) Friðgerður. See *Kristni saga*, chap. 2 and *Þorvalds þáttur ens víðförla*.

³¹ The most predominant accounts of Auður *hin djúpuðga* appear in *Landnámabók* and in *Laxdælasaga*, chaps. 5–7.

“Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi” further muddles the topos, but it does so by manipulating the male and female spheres rather than by dispensing with them all together. Of the tale’s two distinct parts, one deals directly with Auður while the other addresses events after her death (which I have discussed in the [previous chapter](#)). In the first part, Auður has set aside a certain portion of her farmland as sacred, upon which no crops should grow and no livestock should graze.³² The tale acknowledges that Auður, though Christian herself, lives in a pre-Christian Iceland. By reserving this sacred area, Auður seems to anticipate the conversion of the entire country, and the ensuing conflict bears out her foresight. When Auður has grown old, a young and beautiful woman named Gullbrá arrives at Hvammur wanting to purchase the sacred land because, she says, she fears that eventually another Christian church (one already stands on Auður’s land) will one day be built on the sacred land. Since Auður is at the time bedridden with an illness, Gullbrá is able to trick the superintendent (a man) into selling her the land for a bag of gold. Typical of Scandinavian folk tradition, the beautiful Gullbrá then reveals her true nature as an evil and ugly troll, and she builds her own temple on her newly acquired sacred land, specifically (even geographically) in opposition to the Christian church already standing on Auður’s land.

Thus begins a battle between the two women. The prefigured battle over conversion allows us to examine how a gendered opposition might have progressed alongside Iceland’s various religious developments. In simple terms, the cultural memory of Auður *hin djúpúgða* preserves in a post-medieval Iceland both her status as a strong, exceptional female leader and her role as a representative of Christianity during the settlement period, but several emendations to the original memory cannot be ignored. For one, the later tale revises the expected opposition to Christianity of the female sphere, not just because Auður is a female Christian (as she is in Old Norse sources) but also, in the folktales, because the tale creates a new enemy of Christianity: a troll. Perhaps it is not entirely surprising, given the close association between the post-medieval folk story and the conversion narratives of earlier Icelandic texts, that we again do not find the prevalent conversion opposition of a Christian male figure struggling against a pagan female figure. Here, even more pointedly than in the earlier narratives, we observe a female Christian pitted against the evil, notably female, Gullbrá who has come to thwart conversion. The difference bears special significance due to the association of evil not with just any female, but with a *female troll*—a mythological figure who, particularly in female form, is well-known in Icelandic oral tradition for being especially sinister.³³

Closely related to this adoption of a female–female confrontation is the tale’s blurring of religious boundaries. At first glance it appears evident that the evil troll Gullbrá represents paganism and that Auður represents Christian condemnation of the ancient

³² The land is placed under an *álag*, a “compulsion,” or in the more common plural form, *álög*, the meaning of which is closer to “a spell” or a “curse.” An *álagablettir* is a piece of land own by the *huldufólk* and is off limits. See Árni Óla’s *Álög og bannhelgi* (Reykjavík: Setberg, 1968).

³³ See for instance *Stjúpúsögur*, JÁ 2:299–381, in which female trolls play an especially sinister role.

religion. Gullbrá uses strong magic, makes sacrifices of some sort, and her malice is unmistakable. By taking possession of the sacred land, she does indeed forestall the building of another Christian church—hindering the spread of the Christian religion, as it were. Religious affiliations in the tale are complex, however, as Gullbrá offers a more vaguely defined opposition to Christianity, appearing more troll-like than pagan. She is never referred to in terms of ancient religion, and none of her rituals suggest the connection. Even Auður somewhat blurs the line between religions. In one instance, she seems to rely on more than just Christian divine strength, for she states that no harm will come to Hvammur because the land is protected by a good spirit, a *fylgja*, to use her exact word, a term that, as the following chapter of this book will attest, conjures memories of pagan attendant spirits by the same name. In the post-medieval folklore, it seems, *evil* does not always directly correspond to ancient paganism, nor does *good* rely exclusively upon the Christian god.

The point is driven home in the second half of the tale, where gendered opposition becomes further inverted. [Chapter 1](#) offers a thorough examination of the second part of the tale (39–43), but it is worth remembering that a pagan male, Skeggi—according to the tale, this appears to be Skeggi, son of Friðgerður, a famous female opponent to Christianity featured in *Kristni saga*—takes up the battle against the evil troll-woman. While Skeggi initially turns to several typically pagan elements of heroism and strength,³⁴ he finally defeats the troll by seeking help from the Christian god, vowing to build a Christian church at Hvammur in return. Divine assistance immediately comes, and in the end Skeggi keeps his promise to build the church (thus confirming Gullbrá's original fear). Interestingly, however, Skeggi refuses to convert to Christianity before his death.

In its entirety, the tale revises gender spheres to produce a male pagan, Skeggi, who refuses to convert despite his collaboration with the Christian god, and a female Christian, Auður, who at times calls on old beliefs. The revision of the gender structure in early motifs is associated with, and in some ways allows for, a softening of Christian hostility against paganism and vice versa, while setting another category—trollishness—as the sphere of evil. This assessment of a “troll sphere” coheres with recent work done by Ármann Jakobsson on the subject of trolls. Ármann concludes that trolls are not a mythological category so much as a designation of otherness and danger. As he puts it,

The troll is danger; what is not dangerous and feared cannot be a troll ... Danger turns the world on its head. Like death it intrudes into the established order, snatches all imagined control from the humans who have set themselves up to be the protagonists of their own lives. Danger becomes an abyss, into which one can feel oneself helplessly falling. As an image of danger, the troll cannot be but terrible.³⁵

34 In fact the tale reflects the well-known Bear's Son type. John McKinnell outlines this connection, though he is more interested in the second half of the tale: *Meeting the Other*, 134–35). See my discussion of this point in [chapter 1](#) (39–41).

35 Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (Earth, Milky Way: punctum, 2017), 19.

Such is the portrayal of the troll sphere in “Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi.” In contrast, the tale depicts a paganism that is not so much “evil” as “ancestral,” and though not an acceptable part of Christendom, Christianity still allies itself with paganism to defeat the troll. Ultimately, the tale preserves a complicated nostalgia for the Norse ancestral religion, while reducing the associations of paganism with evil by deflecting evil onto another, independent mythological race. Contemporary historical and literary evidence of the time corroborates this assessment. We may remember that the sixteenth-century bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541–1627) famously voices his frustration in *Ein ný sálmabók* (A New Hymnal, 1589) over rural Icelanders who enjoy the songs and stories of trolls and pagandom,³⁶ and Arngrímur Jónsson’s *Crymogæa* (1609) codifies the view of the Old Norse world as a golden age.³⁷ “Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi” contributes to this larger context of cultural memory by reconstituting the male Christian-female pagan opposition. In doing so, the cultural memory reflected by the tale paints a favourable picture of both strong women characters and paganism, while likewise maintaining the integrity of early Christianity in Iceland.

Cases of Witchcraft, Male or Female?

Female magic users were not limited to mythological figures like the trollish Gullbrá in Icelandic folktales. Sorcerers (male *galdrmenn* and female *galdrakerlingar* or *galdranornir*) constitute a vibrant part of the folk record. Even more so than in the story of Gullbrá and Auður, tales of Icelandic magic users often share a connection to historical figures and events. At times these tales make obvious use of typical folk motifs, but sometimes one gets the sense that stories simply report local suspicions of a certain person’s magical ability. The role of these tales in Iceland’s cultural memory is particularly illuminating on the question of gender and Christianity, but not in ways that might be expected. While Iceland did indeed suffer from the same wave of witchcraft persecutions as other areas of Scandinavia and Europe in the seventeenth century, cases of witchcraft were comparatively few.³⁸ Only 120 cases were brought, all of them in the seventeenth century, resulting in only twenty-two defendants being burned for the crime,³⁹ while others received less severe punishments or were

³⁶ Margrét Eggertsdóttir, “From Reformation to Enlightenment,” 190; Driscoll, *Unwashed Children*, 14, for discussions of this sentiment.

³⁷ See also Jakob Benediktsson for a deeper discussion of Arngrímur’s motivations for writing his polemics in *Arngrímur Jónsson and His Works* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1957), 32–39.

³⁸ Ólafur Davíðsson, *Galdur og Galdramál á Íslandi*, ed. Einar Arnórsson, Sögur 20 (Reykjavík: Sögufélagið, 1940–43), and Ólína Þorvarðardóttir, *Brennuöldin: galdur og galdratrú í málskjöllum og munnmælum* (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 2000), present the most comprehensive accounts of the witch trials in Iceland. The clearest discussion in English is Hastrup, “Iceland,” 383–401. For a recent and comprehensive study of witchcraft in medieval Nordic world, see Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

³⁹ Hastrup, “Iceland,” 386

acquitted.⁴⁰ Also unlike Europe, Icelandic prosecution of witches focused primarily on men. Of the 120 recorded cases of witchcraft in Iceland, only ten were brought against women, and of the twenty-two defendants burned, only one was a woman (a second was smothered).⁴¹ These numbers starkly contrast with the results of the witch-hunt craze in Europe, where the total number of cases, and specifically cases against women, was considerably higher. Modest assessments count roughly 50,000 victims, and in most European countries, women were considerably more likely (4 to 1) to be accused and executed for witchcraft.⁴² Cases in Europe tended to reflect the sentiments of the late fifteenth-century production *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), in which women were viewed as the morally weaker of the two sexes and therefore more susceptible to temptation by the Devil. Certain regions, however, defied the typical expectation of predominantly women victims of execution. Burgundy (52% male), Estonia (60% male), Normandy (73% male), and Iceland (92% male) all prosecuted more male than female witches.⁴³ Lara Apps and Andrew Gow argue, in fact, that cases of male witches in early modern Europe have been largely ignored.⁴⁴ The overwhelming number of male defendants in Iceland, however, suggests an intrinsic expectation that men, rather than women, practised witchcraft.

It remains to be seen why places such as Normandy, Estonia and Iceland so drastically contradict typical tendencies to accuse women of witchcraft. The anomaly is especially perplexing in Iceland, since, as Helga Kress has recently argued, it is primarily women who practise sorcery in medieval Icelandic sources. Those few men who engaged in witchcraft, says Kress, maintained a close proximity with the female gender: either they owed their magical ability to a more experienced female magic user (typically a family member) or they themselves suffered a kind of feminization by using magic.⁴⁵ In his recent study of magic in the Nordic Middle Ages, Stephen Mitchell

40 Michael Fell, *And Though this World with Devils Filled: A Story of Suffering*, American University Studies, Series 7: Theology and Religion 236 (New York: Lang, 2007), 15. See also the introduction to Jón Magnússon, *Píslarsaga séra Jóns Magnússonar*, ed. Matthías Viðar Sæmundsson (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 2001).

41 Hastrup, "Iceland," 386.

42 Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, "Introduction: The Problem of European Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft in Europe 400–1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 1–40 at 17. This ratio has raised much scholarly debate. See Elspeth Whitney, "The Witch 'She' / The Historian 'He': Gender and the Historiography of the European Witch-Hunts," *Journal of Women's History* 7 (1995): 77–101; Lara Apps and Andrew Gow, *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

43 Apps and Gow, *Male Witches*, 45.

44 Apps and Gow, *Male Witches*, 2–3.

45 Helga Kressm "Óþarfar unnustur áttu, Um samband fjölkynngi, kvennafars og karlmennsku í Íslendingasögum," in *Galdramenn: Galdrar og samfélag á miðöldum*, ed. Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2008), 21–49, especially 22. Compare François-Xavier Dillmann's argument that magic users in Old Norse narratives are evenly numbered between male and female: *Les Magiciens dans l'Islande ancienne* (Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien

corroborates the notion of the Nordic medieval feminization of magic: "one also senses an important and meaningful opposition between that which is 'manly' or virtuous ..., on the one hand, and magic, on the other."⁴⁶ In contrast, Gunnar Karlsson and several others suggest that the surprising dearth of female witches in the country results first from the sociological status of women in seventeenth-century Iceland and second from the uniquely Icelandic perspective on what constituted magic use.⁴⁷ In comparison with the European descriptions of witchcraft, Icelandic law defined witchcraft as having a much stronger element of literacy. Sorcerers were said to study magic books and to carve runes. Since women were largely illiterate, the argument goes, it was impossible for them to qualify as magic users. Fell adds that since women were typically more closely bound to the home, they would rarely have had the opportunity to go into the wilderness or live on the outskirts of society for the purposes of conducting witchcraft.⁴⁸

This sociological assessment goes a long way to explaining why Icelandic accusations of witchcraft largely ignored women, but the scarcity of female witches in the historical record may also be reflected by the folk tradition, where primarily male sorcerers seem to have prevailed as well. While, as Kress observes, Iceland certainly enjoyed a legacy of strong supernatural female beings in the figures of the *norn*, the Valkyrie, and the *vølv*a from pagan times, the idea of female magic users seems not to have survived the Christianization and Reformation processes. It is true, as Ellison points out, that several women magic users appear in the later folk record,⁴⁹ but these female figures invert the medieval trend and often display some key proximity to other, male, magic users. As indicated by the discussion below, this proximity occurs in many cases by way of some family connection: a husband or father has taught magic to his wife or daughter. At other times, the proximity is more simply a morphological one. The first post-Christianization sorcerers were men, beginning in the twelfth-century tales of Sæmundur *fróði*.⁵⁰ From then on, folk tradition closely follows the Sæmundur tales

för Svensk Folkkultur, 2006), 157. Note Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's comments in "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*," *Scandinavian Studies* 81 (2009), n. 1, and *Images of Women*, 123, which make it clear that the strength and numbers of women magic users were greater than men.

46 Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, 190.

47 See Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 146; Hastrup, "Iceland," 227–28; Fell's "Introduction" in *And Though this World*, n. 36; Ruth C. Ellison, "The Kirkjuból Affair: A Seventeenth-Century Icelandic Witchcraft Case Analyzed," *Seventeenth Century* 8 (1993): 220; Shaun F. D. Hughes, "The Re-emergence of Women's Voices in Icelandic Literature, 1500–1800," in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 91–128.

48 Fell, "Introduction," *And Though this World*, n. 36.

49 Ellison, "The Kirkjuból Affair," 219.

50 Terry Gunnell has done a thorough review of the folk tradition of Sæmundur *fróði*: see "The Return of Sæmundur: Origins and Analogues," in *Þjóðlif og Þjóðtrú: Ritgerðir Helgaðar Jóni Hnefli Aðalsteinssyni*, ed. Jón Jónsson, Terry Gunnell, Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, and Ögmundur Helgason (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1998), 87–111. See also Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Sæmundr *fróði*:"

either by leaving out female magic users altogether or by associating them in some way with that tradition. Additionally, magic users in the *Sæmundur* tradition tend, somewhat strangely, to use their abilities for the good of Christian people; most of them were in fact said to be reverends in the Church. The result is that we do not observe the typical European-style female witch in Icelandic folktales. In terms of tradition, it may not have been folkloristically feasible for women to be witches in the European sense. The witch-hunt craze in the seventeenth century simply had no folk identity upon which to graft itself. The post-medieval folk tradition of Icelandic magicians was male and pro-Christian, though indeed on the fringe, while the European tradition perceived witches as female and anti-Christian. The two traditions were in competition with one another, and the older, native tradition won out. There was no folkloristic room for the European-style witch to flourish.

This suggestion finds some confirmation in the tale conspicuously titled “*Nornin á Saxlandi*,”⁵¹ or “The Witch of Germany,” one of the few references to a European-style female witch in Icelandic folklore. In the tale, *Sæmundur*, the prototypical Icelandic sorcerer, has apparently agreed to marry the eponymous German witch, but only so that he can play her for a fool. When the witch realizes that she has been insulted, she sends *Sæmundur* a cursed cask⁵² of ominously red-coloured gold. The tale at this point becomes an opportunity to show that *Sæmundur* outwits his opponents, and he takes the cask of red gold and throws it into Hekla, a volcano in the south of Iceland. The tale is very clear that *Sæmundur* would never marry the German witch and that he is the more powerful magic user.

Jón Árnason acquired this tale from the manuscripts of Árni Magnússon, who lists as his informants Björn Þorleifsson (1663–1710), who was bishop of Hólar, Captain Magnús Arason (ca. 1684–1728), and Halldór Þorbergsson (ca. 1623–1711), all of whom died in the early eighteenth century. This tale very likely then represents a late addition to the *Sæmundur* tradition, one that developed only after the explosion of witch-hunts in Europe. On the level of folk memory, the tale indicates a distancing of Icelandic belief in magic from European varieties. The German witch represents the malevolent, typically female strain of European magical prowess, stories of which had by that time made their way to Iceland as indicated by the historical records mentioned here. This tale makes an enemy of that type of witchcraft, saying, quite literally, that Icelandic magic, like *Sæmundur*, will never “marry” it. The prototypical Icelandic magician then engages in and wins contests against the foreign type of witchcraft, and divorces himself from it forever.

A Medieval Master of Magic,” *Arv* 50 (1994): 117–32; and chapter 5 (124–38) for more on the legacy of *Sæmundur fróði*.

51 JÁ 1:471.

52 The tale refers to a *sending*, which can aptly be translated as a “gift,” but presumably one that is intended to harm rather than acknowledge friendship. In this case it can be considered a subset of the more typical ghost-like *sending* common in Icelandic lore from the late medieval period, in which a sorcerer sends a spirit to harass the object of his displeasure.

More will be said of Sæmundur and other magic users in [chapter 5](#), below, but this brief foray into magicians in Iceland should be enough to indicate that, at least generally speaking, the prevalence of male magicians in Iceland appears to preserve at least the male/Christian half of the gendered spheres discussed at the beginning of this study, but the few tales of female magic users in the later sources articulate a meaningful female sphere as well. Three female magicians are of special interest. Straumfjarðar-Halla (Halla of Straumfjörður), is said to be one of two sisters of Sæmundur *fróði*, the most famous of all Icelandic sorcerers, though, according to Jón Árnason, she lived several hundred years after Sæmundur.⁵³ Halla's magical prowess certainly echoes that of Sæmundur, and she appears, like him, to use magic with benevolent intent. Further, many motifs corresponding to those of other magician tales appear: haymaking, anxiety over the state of the soul at her death, and assisting those in need while attacking the greedy.⁵⁴ These motifs suggest no specific gender, but the tale entitled "Ljósmóðurstörf Höllu" (Halla as Midwife)⁵⁵ bears particular poignancy for the role of magical women in post-Reformation Iceland. The tale states that Halla, a skilled midwife, was called upon to assist a woman in labour. When the labour pains get too great and the woman begins to scream out in pain, her husband chastises her, remarking that it cannot be as bad as she is making out. Hearing the husband's ignorant remarks, Halla tells him to try it himself and see how he likes it. At once, the husband begins wailing with pain and the wife's pains cease, and so it continues until the baby is nearly born, when the pain returns to the wife for the final moments of birth. The tale concludes with Halla remarking that she was able to have the husband bear the pain of labour but not the baby itself.

Halla's actions bring her closer to what Simpson refers to as a "white witch," or someone who uses charms to effect good, often times as a healer or midwife.⁵⁶ In its patently Icelandic social and folkloristic context, however, the tale also presents Halla as one who has the ability to usurp authority from the patriarchal figure (in his own house, no less!) and hand it over to the matriarch. In this way the tale confirms the female sphere as private, intimate, based in the home, and of course childbirth is entirely in the female sphere. The husband's remarks infringe upon the female sphere in a decidedly

53 JÁ 1:494, n. 1. Halla lived in the fifteenth century, in Straumfjörður in the west of the country. Also of historical interest, as Simpson has stated, are the famous gifts that Halla purportedly gave to Alftanes church: fishing rights for a particular area and a magic cooking pot (Simpson, *Legends*, 96).

54 For more on the connections between Halla and Sæmundur, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "Six Icelandic Magicians after the Time of Sæmundur Fróði," trans. by Terry Gunnell, *Arv* 52 (1996): 49–50.

55 JÁ 3:539. It is worth noting that Jón Árnason rejected this tale from his original collection. It was not included until the 1954–1961 edition, along with other rejected tales. One can only speculate as to why it was initially rejected. It was collected by Brynjólfur Jónsson (1838–1914) of Minna-Núpi, who regularly contributed to Jón Árnason's first edition but also had several tales rejected. See also Brynjólfur Jónsson frá Minni-Núpi, *Tillag til alþýðlegra fornfræði*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Menningar- og fræðslusamband alþýðu, 1953).

56 Jacqueline Simpson, "Witches and Witchbusters," *Folklore* 107 (1996): 9.

male manner, reflecting what amounts to a public display of strength and authority. When Halla forces him to suffer the pains of labour, she not only preserves the female sphere, she also threatens to undermine the husband's authority in the public sphere. Should anyone in the male sphere see him, he would lose face. Finally, the last moments of the tale confirm the ultimate primacy of the female sphere, for only women can know the experience of childbirth. Only in the female sphere does such intimacy between mother and child exist.

Other tales of female magic users are much more mixed in their sympathy. Margrét Þórðardóttir (d. 1726), known as *Galdra-Manga* (Sorceress-Margrét), is thought to be the daughter of Þórður Guðbrandsson, who was burned to death for sorcery at Trékyllisvík in 1654.⁵⁷ She lived during the height of the witch-hunt period and is probably the most famous female witch in Iceland. Accounts of her in Jón Árnason's collection,⁵⁸ much more so that those of Halla, convey what appear to be local suspicions of Margrét's magical prowess and vindictiveness, rather than morphologically significant motifs. Like Halla, *Galdra-Manga* is associated with a male magic user, though one less prevalent than Sæmundur. *Galdra-Manga* apparently acquired her magical ability from her father, Þórður. As such, she again inverts the medieval phenomenon of male magic users acquiring their ability from a female family member.⁵⁹ She was twice convicted and tried for witchcraft, once in 1656, again in 1660, and was acquitted both times.

Interestingly, according to tradition, *Galdra-Manga* is said to have used her magical prowess seemingly to advance gendered ends. According to the tales, she used magic to seduce married men, specifically priests, and then killed their wives.⁶⁰ In the 1660 suit against her, however, her husband, Reverend Tómas Þórðarson of Staður on Snæfellsnes, served rather effectively as her advocate, though of course the cynic would say that he was under her "spell" and bound to do so. After the last trial, sources are divided on what happened. Some say she lived happily with Tómas for some years, while others say that the disgrace of the trial divided the couple and that Tómas suffered financially and personally at the end of his life. By conveying the notion that *Galdra-Manga* uses magic to seduce her lovers, tales of her exploits distort the female social sphere. While she seeks a private, intimate life based in the home, she also disrupts the already-established (male and female) spheres of her lovers and their wives. She strangely favours the Church, but once again in the distorted manner of seducing its reverends. Tales of her exploits convey, then, a poor example of the female sphere, but an example nonetheless.

57 JÁ 1:517.

58 JÁ 1:517–20. Jón Árnason took these accounts from the manuscripts of Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877) and Rev. Benedikt Þórðarson (1800–1882).

59 As noted by Helga Kress, in "Óþarfar unnustur áttu," 22; see my comments above.

60 She also seems to help other adulterous women escape discovery by their husbands, as in the tale "Hrakningar Möngu" (JÁ 1:517–18).

Finally, like the tales of *Galdra-Manga*, those about Stokkseyrar-Dísa, that is Þórdís Markúsdóttir from Stokkseyri,⁶¹ report more anecdotal information than discernable folk motifs. Dísa's infamy often seems to derive from her general bad nature and mischievousness, which is only sometimes associated with magic. She more effectively distinguishes herself as a drunkard and a thief, as her evil intentions, mischievousness, and poor social conduct prompt her ejection from society more than her use of magic. In some ways, it must be admitted, Dísa reflects a more typical European witch. She seems to have some skill with magic, she lives on the outskirts of society, and she does harm to others for her own gain. Yet in one way she fails in the end to meet European expectations. Female witches in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Europe tend to be older, beyond childbearing age, and in fact sometimes associated with physical symptoms of menopausal woman. For this reason, scholars have often discussed whether and how European and American witches play havoc with gender roles, as they no longer are able to act as sexual partner or mother.⁶² Not only does Dísa contradict this European trend, she does so while on her way to distorting the female sphere. In one instance she is said to have borne two children, twins, but to have starved them to death, possibly so she could raise them again as zombie-like *sendingar* (discussed below). Like *Galdra-Manga*, Dísa offers a grotesque image of the female sphere, particularly in regards to her family.

Gender Spheres and the Elf Woman's Conversion

Whereas magician tales and witchcraft leave little room for fringe or opposing female voices in Christendom, other tale types freely allow them. It was observed earlier how Gullbrá the troll-woman represents a significant female voice opposing Christianity though not one directly associated with paganism. Icelandic elf tales also regularly present female voices that begin on the fringe of Christendom, but, unlike female trolls, elfish voices⁶³ tend to seek reconciliation of some kind with the male, Christian sphere. The story of the elf woman's conversion has its peculiarities but, for better or worse, it fits somewhere into this trend. The tale bears the marks of several familiar motifs and generally falls into a fairly significant group of tales about elves seeking companionship with humans, which Jón Árnason entitled "Huldufólk leitar lags við

⁶¹ JÁ 1:566–68.

⁶² See, for example, Simpson, "Witches," 7–9; Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987), 111–19; Francisco Bethencourt, "Portugal: A Scrupulous Inquisition," in *Early Modern European Witchcraft: Centres and Peripheries*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 415; Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981); Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

⁶³ I do not mean to imply anything necessarily about elves as a mythological species but rather about a certain voice that assumes the identity of elfishness in this and other tales. See Terry Gunnell's study on the dangers of mis-categorizing elves in the Germanic and Scandinavian traditions: "How Elvish Were the *Álfar*?", in *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myths: Essays in Honour of T. A. Shippey*, ed. Andrew Wawn (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 111–30.

mennskar manneskjur" (The hidden people seek companionship with human people).⁶⁴ Many elements of these narratives cohere with an Irish and Welsh tradition, but the Icelandic versions nearly always qualify as having experienced a significant oikotypal shift. Even those stories, such as the famous "Kötludraumur," which enjoyed popularity in the *rímur* or ballad genres, display indications of an oikotype. In the Icelandic tales, events take place in specific Icelandic towns to specific (often historical) individuals, and the logic of the respective tales tends to be consistent. All these factors localize such tales within an Icelandic context and thus make them useful to our study of cultural memory.

As a folk figure, Valbjörg fits the typical paradigm that one might expect from narratives associated with fairies and a fairy world: An elf or fairy woman lures a man from the human world into marriage and life in the fairy world (F302 and F302.1),⁶⁵ while a taboo prevents the man from rejoining the "outside world" where his family resides. Valbjörg's love affair with Sigurður also confirms Richard Firth Green's observation that a "characteristic of female, as opposed to male, fairy lovers ... is that they must be sought at the untamed edges of the human lifeworld."⁶⁶ The conversion motif likewise matches V331.8 (Fairy Converts to Christianity), and several instances exist in Irish and Scandinavian lore in which a fairy, a giant, or a troll seeks either baptism or burial in a Christian churchyard.⁶⁷ The Valbjörg narrative, however, adds something to these motifs and other stories, specifically with respect to the notion that Valbjörg's elf-hood can be "cured." The Irish tales in particular tend to emphasize religious conversion through reasoning rather than exorcism. The Irish motif F382 (Exorcizing Fairies) describes fairies that disappear when a Christian ritual takes place,⁶⁸ but this generally results in the fairy's demise, or at least its profound discomfort, much as Valbjörg's initial response when she hears the name of God. In these motifs, elf-hood remains a part of the figure's genetic makeup, as it were, regardless of whether a conversion or exorcism takes place. In the Icelandic variety, the actions of the priest Eiríkur change Valbjörg's nature—literally, the tale says, her "konukindina" (womanhood).⁶⁹

64 JÁ 1:58–100.

65 These designations accord with Stith Thompson's *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, rev. ed., 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–58).

66 Green, *Elf Queens*, 100.

67 See, e.g., Tom Peete Cross, *Motif-Index of Irish Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1952): F251.8 (Fairy Professes Faith in Christianity); F389.6 (Abduction of Christianized Fairy Woman by Fairies Prevented by Saint); F394.1 (Mortal Advises Fairy); F531.5.8 (Giants and Christians); F531.5.8.3 (Giant Christianized); and F.268.1 (Burial Service for Fairy Queen Is Held at Night in Christian Church).

68 Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, 4 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970–71), 1B:191.

69 JÁ 1:99.

Despite these morphological indications, we do not have a thick enough corpus of folkloristic evidence to speculate much on the psychological implications of the tale,⁷⁰ but it may be possible nevertheless to hazard an assessment of Valbjörg's function as a convert to Christianity in light of adjacent narrative traditions, either those about fairies or those about conversion.⁷¹ Green has observed that a few authors of medieval romances depict fairies living as integrated members of Christendom,⁷² some even swearing oaths by the Virgin Mary and participating in mass.⁷³ Green contextualizes these instances of fairies in Christendom within a larger tension between clerical and popular beliefs about fairies. According to Green, these "Christian" fairies represent an example of "cultural compromise formation,"⁷⁴ by which "vernacular culture ... might make remarkable efforts to adjust its beliefs to the orthodoxies of the church."⁷⁵ A similar type of compromise seems quite in line with the present discussion of the Valbjörg narrative, so that we may add to the narrative mechanisms observed in [chapter 1](#), of pejoration and adjacency pairs. In the Valbjörg narratives, the mechanism of cultural compromise formation works to draw the heterodox beliefs in elves and elfish power, beauty, and grandeur in line with orthodox views of Icelandic Christianity, such that it is not only Valbjörg who converts to Christianity but also—and perhaps even more importantly—narratives *about* elves that have also converted to Christianity.

Valbjörg, like Gullbrá, reflects a powerful female figure in opposition to Christianity, while Sigurður represents the brave, civilized Christian male. Before her conversion, at least, their relationship appears to corroborate a version of the Christian male-pagan female opposition. She effectively attempts to create the ideal female sphere: their pre-conversion life is domestic, certainly private, and opposed to Christian conversion, but it has been relegated to the periphery, out of sight of civilization. The relegation confirms Grønlie's suspicion that, "as Christianity strengthens its hold on society, what remains of age-old pagan practices is banished to the periphery—they become the domain of old women, widows, foster-mothers, and others on the outskirts of the male community."⁷⁶

70 Other Icelandic tales of elves, though not a part of the same corpus, hit near to the gender trends observed in the Valbjörg narrative. For instance, the Icelandic folk record supports the common international tale that claims the "hidden people" originate from Eve's attempt to hide from God her unwashed children, which leans toward a matriarchal view of elfish legacy ("Huldumannagenesis," JÁ 1:7). This is a common tale in Borgarfjörður, but the tale is also prevalent in Rogaland, Norway. See Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*, The Nordic Series 15 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 205–6.

71 Female elves regularly make appeals to the Christian church for assistance or salvation (especially ML 5050: Fairies' Hope for Christian Salvation), appeals which tend to be associated specifically with their social or biological roles as women.

72 Green, *Elf Queens*, 62.

73 Green, *Elf Queens*, 69.

74 Green, *Elf Queens*, 69. This idea derives from Ginzburg's *Ecstasies*, 11.

75 Green, *Elf Queens*, 2.

76 Grønlie, "Neither Male nor Female," 303.

When Valbjörg turns the corner and recovers to become, to all appearances, an “elf-free” Christian woman, the tale breaks the opposition of male Christian and female pagan and reconciles the two spheres. Thus joined, Valbjörg and Sigurður then have the opportunity to contribute to the newly reconciled spheres by way of their children. In plain terms, “converting” Valbjörg moves subsequent generations away from her peripheral spiritual position and toward the established Christian belief system. In fact, we are told that Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm (ca. 1749–1821), a prominent priest near Helgafell, was descended from Valbjörg, though he would not often speak of his elfish heritage.

Finally, Valbjörg's proximity to the Old Norse pagan religion remains quite ambiguous. Her name offers the only clues to the puzzle: The reader may recall that Valbjörg says of herself that she is sometimes called “Vandråd,” a name of unclear origin but one that might reasonably be translated as “difficult choice.”⁷⁷ Within the folktale itself, this appellation may be a reference to Sigurður's difficult decision to become Valbjörg's (Vandråd's) lover or to die like the other men captured by her, yet it might also be a reference to Valbjörg's own difficult choice to remain an elf or to convert to Christianity—if, that is, Valbjörg had any choice at all in the matter. More intriguing, Vandråd is also the root of the somewhat uncommon Old Norse male version of the name, Vandráður, which appears in the Icelandic conversion narrative, *Kristni Saga*. According to *Kristni Saga*, Vandráður (along with his brothers) prosecuted the missionary Stefnir—who was a relative of theirs—for being Christian, since a recently passed law had dictated that taking the Christian religion was a shame upon one's family and thus it was the responsibility of the family to prosecute the case against any Christian.⁷⁸ Stefnir is summarily convicted and shipped off to Norway. In the story of Valbjörg (Vandråd) the elf, the tables have turned in more ways than one: the opponent of Christianity has gone from male to female (Vandráður to Vandråd); the woman is converted to Christianity rather than prosecuting someone else for being Christian; and she is brought *into* a family rather than being prosecuted and cast out *by* her family. The gender spheres in the two stories are almost completely reversed.

Nevertheless, the Valbjörg narrative never overtly states her “religion,” unless elfhood could be called a religion. In the same way that “Gullbrá and Skeggi in Hvammur” creates a new sphere—the troll sphere, which has not only an anti-Christian identity but also an evil, dangerous one—the story of Valbjörg seems to create another sphere, set apart from the expectations of the traditional male and female spheres of Old Norse texts. Unlike Skeggi, the elf Valbjörg does not reflect an overtly Norse pagan figure, but nor does the tale wholly demonize her, as was the case with Gullbrá, despite the fact that Valbjörg has been doing rather a lot of killing. Valbjörg stands rather as a representative of peripheral culture and beliefs that fall outside of normal Christian doctrine, having only a vague connection to ancient religion, but one that enables reconciliation

⁷⁷ Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1874), s.v. *vand-*.

⁷⁸ *Kristni saga*, in *Biskupa Sögur I*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, Íslensk Fornrit 15 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2003), 17.

nonetheless. This new sphere, which we may call simply the “elf sphere” in opposition to the “troll sphere,” again represents a slice of cultural memory that stands outside Christianity, but the elf sphere creates a venue for reconciliation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy instead of the hostility observed in Gullbrá’s troll sphere. Rather than reconciliation of Christianity and ancestral paganism, which we saw in the tale about Gullbrá and Skeggi, Valbjörg’s conversion marks the redemptive possibilities between peripheral beliefs and the “male” Christian belief system of the priest Eiríkur and Sigurður’s family. To include marriage and childbearing as aspects of that redemption serves not to highlight the confrontation between Christianity and a peripheral mythological figure but rather to draw her out into the accepted, albeit unorthodox Christian culture. The tale is perhaps no less misogynistic for all this—the female sphere is certainly redefined by the male—yet the cultural memory embedded within the story runs deeper: the gender spheres transcend gender, only to take on the dynamic of religious belief within a complex cultural memory struggling to reconcile heterodoxy with orthodoxy. In a sense, then, all heterodoxy becomes female in contradistinction to the orthodox male, and the normative male seeks to reconcile the female to himself.

Final Thoughts: The Elf Woman’s Conversion

Margaret Cormack has shown that post-Reformation folktales about Catholic saints conflict with pre-Reformation sources. Concerning “associations between places and objects with supernatural power,” she argues that “accounts for place-names, power, or other associations have been subject to more or less drastic revision or reinvention.”⁷⁹ Cormack’s evidence is compelling, and my aim in this chapter is not to contradict her broader conclusions concerning the historical value of post-Reformation folktales. Even those that may not accurately corroborate historical evidence still have the capacity to unlock meaningful evidence of the culture from which they come. One must nevertheless proceed with care. Approaching folktales in search of cultural memory helps illuminate important issues in a culture, but to achieve a reliable correspondence between a particular tale (or group of tales) and a culture’s memory, we must have confidence in the tale’s connection to a particular cultural context.⁸⁰ It is for this reason that the Icelandic folktales of Jón Árnason’s collection hold particular value for the study of

⁷⁹ Margaret Cormack, “Catholic Saints in Lutheran Legend: Post-Reformation Ecclesiastical Folklore in Iceland,” *Scripta Islandica* 59 (2008): 47–71 at 67.

⁸⁰ Lauri Honko, for instance, sought a “thick corpus” and organic variation, meaning that enough variants of the same tale would indicate a living oral tradition. See his “Thick Corpus and Organic Variation.” This type of variation is difficult to reproduce in tales recorded in written archives (such as the Jón Árnason collection), but Jyrki Pöysä offers some help in this regard, suggesting that variation “in archived anecdotes can be divided into at least the following sub-categories: agent changes, changes in the level of abstraction (of agents and milieu), changes in the narrative’s social outlook, and changes in the degree of personal experience.” See Jyrki Pöysä, “Variation in Archived Anecdotes,” 580.

cultural memory. Because of the diligence of their editors and collectors, we now benefit from quite specific knowledge about the origins of these tales, including where, when, and from whom they were collected. This wealth of information, taken alongside the large body of manuscript traditions in Iceland, helps to solidify our understanding of the social context for these Icelandic folktales. Of course, we must not confuse how our conclusions might be applied. The tales studied here reveal something about the cultural memory of a post-Reformation Iceland, and we must be careful not to step too far outside that purview. Nevertheless, while it may be too hasty to suggest that these tales reflect an ancestral pagan religion, it would not be too hasty, I think, to suggest that *within the cultural memory* of these tales, they do. The Auður and Skeggi of the Gullbrá tale are not the same Auður and Skeggi of ninth-century Iceland, but they do contribute to a post-Reformation cultural memory (accurate or not) of those figures. Likewise, the magic users of post-Reformation tales differ significantly from stories found in early medieval sources, but those differences reflect valuable information about the development of belief systems in Iceland from earlier to later sources. Finally, elfish figures such as Valbjörg must obviously not be confused with pre-Christian notions of, for instance, *landvættir* (land spirits), but she does represent a lingering sympathy for supernatural beings who fall outside Christian acceptance. In all these tales, it is clear that changes in the cultural memory have occurred since the medieval period. The question now must become *what do these changes indicate about Icelandic cultural memory?* In this chapter I have tried to answer that question specifically regarding the roles and functions of female characters, but as this examination proceeds, the same question will be asked of other key elements of belief as well.

The tales discussed here serve the purpose of reconciling, and perhaps rationalizing, peripheral belief systems with the more orthodox Christian beliefs of their day. All of these tales nonetheless also suggest an unwillingness to dispense with these peripheral and “ancient” features within Iceland’s cultural memory, even if, in some cases, attempts are made to incorporate those peripheries into the centre, as in the story of the elf woman’s conversion, through what must be considered a typical masculine appropriation of the female sphere. The addition of the “troll sphere,” as in the narrative about Gullbrá, allows both the female authority figure of Auður and the pagan authority figure of Skeggi to retain their nobility. These tales employ an earlier literary topos to achieve their goal, which is perhaps not surprising given Iceland’s high esteem for its “ancient images,” as Hastrup puts it,⁸¹ but the usage of these topoi represents an appeal to internal context. The external context, of Reformation theology and the post-medieval worldview, influences how that internal context must be understood. The later folktales manipulate those spheres to achieve their reconciliation between fringe beliefs and more orthodox views. In terms of Iceland’s religious and literary history, this assessment suggests that it was not only prominent church figures like Guðbrandur Þorláksson who sought reconciliation between popular oral tradition and

81 Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, 190.

the Church: the "centre" was reaching outward to the periphery, as it were. From the opposite direction, the "peripheral," orally transmitted folklore also reached inward toward the centre, attempting to connect with orthodox beliefs.

Concerning the role and function of the female folk figure in post-Reformation folktales, we find that she is a vibrant, vitally functional, and dynamic figure, every bit as intriguing as her medieval predecessor. The presence of strong female characters suggests that, at least in the folk literature, the long development of Christianity in Iceland has not resulted in the diminution of female figures within Iceland's cultural memory. Though sometimes mixed in their opposition or support for Christianity, the female folk figures in these tales were integral in shaping the cultural memory of Icelandic Christianity. In other words, as Christianity developed throughout the country's history, the female folk figure was not merely passively influenced by the "radical remapping of gender," to borrow a phrase from Carol Clover;⁸² the female folk figure was also herself a vehicle for the convergence of ancestral images and the Christianity that so affected her.

82 Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 385.