

Chapter I

THE DEAD BRIDEGROOM CARRIES OFF HIS BRIDE: PEJORATION AND ADJACENCY PAIRS IN ATU 365*

“Djárninn á Myrká” (The Deacon of Myrká)¹

In the north of Iceland, there once lived a church deacon at a farm called Myrká [Dark Water]. His name is not recorded, but he was in love with a beautiful young woman named Guðrún, who lived at the nearby farm at Bægisá on the opposite side of the river Hörgá from Myrká. The deacon would often ride his trusted horse, Faxi, to visit Guðrún. A little before Christmas one year he rode there to ask whether she would like to go with him to the Christmas Eve party at Myrká. She happily agreed, and the deacon returned to Myrká, promising to come back on Christmas Eve to escort Guðrún to the party. About that time there had been an unusual thaw along the river Hörgá, so when he tried to cross on his way back to Myrká that night, the ice broke up to make his usual fording impossible. The deacon rode down the river and tried to cross closer to Saurbæ, the farm below Myrká, but his horse stumbled on the ice and threw its rider. The deacon fell and suffered a gruesome, fatal wound on the back of his head. The next morning a neighbouring farmer woke to find Faxi, the deacon's horse, saddled and grazing in his field, but the deacon was nowhere to be found. The farmer went out to search for him, fearing the worst, and he found the deacon's body near the river. Shortly thereafter the deacon was buried in the Myrká churchyard, but because of the changing weather conditions, word of the tragedy did not reach Guðrún across the river, which is why on Christmas Eve, she was not surprised to see the deacon arrive at Bægisá as planned to escort her to the party. The deacon was a little quiet, a little pale, and strangely cold, but she mounted the horse behind him and they began the trip to Myrká. As they crossed the Hörgá, the deacon's hat slipped forward just enough to reveal the nasty, clearly fatal wound on the back of his head. The deacon then recited an ancient poem:

* An early version of this chapter was published as “The Moon Glides, Death Rides: Pejoration and Aborted Otherworldly Journeys in ‘The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off His Bride’ (ATU 365),” *Intégrité* 16 (2017): 13–30.

¹ Adapted from “Djárninn á Myrká” (JÁ 1:270–72). It could be objected that the informant for “Djárninn á Myrká,” a housewife named Ingibjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (1807–1873), lived, as far as we know, in Belgsholt in Borgarfjörður (in the west of Iceland) and had no real connections with the Myrká farm or Hörgardalur (JÁ 1:678, note for “270. Djárninn á Myrká”). However, a variant of the tale recorded by Páll Jónsson (1812–1889), of Valla, who worked at Myrká in Hörgardalur, corroborates the story, saying that he had seen the stone under which the deacon was said to have been buried and that a woman there had told him the story (JÁ 1:272).

Máninn líður,
 dauðinn ríður;
 sérðu ekki hvítan blett
 í hnakka mínum,
 Garún, Garún?

The moon glides,
 death rides;
 don't you see the white gash
 in my neck,
 Garún, Garún?

Guðrún was terrified but brave. She stayed on the horse behind the deacon until they arrived at Myrká, when she realized that the deacon was taking her to the churchyard where his open grave awaited them both. At this, Guðrún's fear seized her and she fought to get away. Looking desperately for any way to free herself, Guðrún scrambled and grabbed at whatever was close at hand, and as they crossed the threshold of the graveyard, she managed to get hold of the bell cord at the gate leading into the churchyard and rang the bell for her very life. The sound of the bell was enough to send the deacon into a frenzy. Guðrún escaped, but in his frenzy the deacon was able to clutch her riding cloak, and with it still in his hand he went down into his grave as the dirt poured in over him.

Thus begins² the story of “The Deacon of Myrká,” one of the great specimens of nineteenth-century Icelandic folktales collected by Jón Árnason. Hidden beneath the haunting visual images of the deacon riding his horse, Faxi, in the moonlight as Guðrún sits terrified behind him is a history of the love between the couple and the tragedy of Guðrún's loss. The tale is also deeply connected to the geography of Iceland. The river Hörgá runs in the north, not far from the now-popular tourist town of Akureyri, where the farms of Myrká, Bægisá, and Saurbæ are situated just as they ought to be according to the tale. Myrká is a small farm now, about ten kilometers from Bægisá. Just on the Bægisá side of the river, a great slope rises to divide the two, so that Myrká sits in a kind of valley through which the Hörgá flows. The interested tourist (or folklorist) can easily follow the deacon's tracks from Myrká to Bægisá and back, noting on the way different places where he might have forded the Hörgá, and where he might have died. It is obvious to anyone who walks those paths why the deacon elects to go downriver to Saurbæ—instead of upriver toward Myrká—to find a better place to ford: the river's banks become far too craggy to cross closer to Myrká.

The story also has deep roots in the Scandinavian beginnings of Iceland, reaching, as we shall soon see, far back into Old Norse and even Proto-Indo-European origins. For all of the intrigue of the story—its geographic connections, its ancient origins, and its lasting value as a classic horror story—one subtle but vital question lingers just below the surface: as tragic as the story is, it offers no explanation for why the deacon, who by all accounts was a good man in life (a deacon in the local church, seemingly well respected in the region, and well-liked by Guðrún), transforms into such an evil creature after his

² The story goes on to tell of the deacon's continued haunting of Guðrún, until a powerful *galdramaður* (sorcerer) came to Myrká and put his ghost to rest by placing a boulder over his grave. This ending will be considered in more detail below (30–31).

death that he would want to haunt and murder the one person he seems to love most. Discovering an answer to this question requires an exploration of the cultural memory embedded in the narrative, which leads to a study of how the story was constructed over a long period of time, reaching as far back as the mythology and religion of the medieval North, and the cultural and religious influences upon the Icelandic society that produced the “The Deacon of Myrká.”

ATU 365 and Connections to Old Norse Literature

Indications of the earliest manifestations of this story may be found by recognizing “The Deacon of Myrká” as a classic example of the international tale type known as “The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off His Bride” (ATU 365),³ which has at its core the story of a recently deceased bridegroom who returns from the dead to take his unwitting bride into the grave with him. This tale type has enjoyed a remarkably broad appeal among storytellers throughout Europe. Hans-Jörg Uther identifies examples of it in no less than forty-five distinct cultures, all but one of which (Japanese) have their origins in either the European (in forty instances) or the Finno-Ugarit world (in four instances).⁴ Francis Child was the first to recognize a connection between ATU 365 and Old Norse narrative. In his late nineteenth-century collection, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Child says of the eighteenth-century ballad “Sweet William’s Ghost,” that it “agrees in many particulars with the conclusion of the second lay of Helgi Hundingsbani in the Elder Edda.”⁵ Since Child’s remarks, numerous passing references to a connection between Old Norse sources and ATU 365 may be found throughout scholarly discussions, yet there has been no in-depth examination of those possible connections. To do so would require a more involved study than is possible here, but I hope at least to set the foundations for future work.

Three important medieval connections to ATU 365 bear relevance to the “Deacon of Myrká.” First, the Eddic poem “*Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur*” (The Second Lay of Helgi Hunding’s Bane) presents the *final chapter* of two heroic lovers—the great king Helgi and his Valkyrie wife, Sigrún—whose love had endured great adversity only for Helgi to be killed at the hands of Sigrún’s brother, Dagr. A burial mound is raised for

³ Though there are at least five recorded variants of ATU 365 in Iceland, I will focus on “The Deacon of Myrká” because it is the most complete and most elegant. As Jacqueline Simpson notes (*Icelandic Folktales & Legends* (Stroud: Tempus, 2004), 150), these variants may be found in JÁ 1:272–3 and 273–74. See also Konrad Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1860), 73; and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Verzeichnis Isländischer Märchen-varianten*, FFC 83 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1929), 33; but see my comments below (43–44) on these variants.

⁴ Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols. (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), 1:229–30. Hereafter these tale type designations will be referred to by their abbreviated name and ATU number, in this case: “The Dead Bridegroom,” ATU 365.

⁵ Francis Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, ed. Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge, 5 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1882–98), ballad no. 77 (3:226–34).

Helgi, and he is said to go on to Óðinn's hall to join the *einherjar*, that prestigious group of warriors who will fight for Óðinn at the end of the world. Sigrún's grief and tears are so great, however, that she calls him back to the living for one last night with his bride. The relevant passages read as follows:

Heim gekk ambótt ok sagði Sigrúnu:

42. "Út gakk þú, Sigrún
frá Sevafjöllum,
ef þik fólks jaðar
finna lystir.
Upp er haugr lokinn,
kominn er Helgi;
dólgsþor dreyma,
döglíngur bað þik
at þú sárdropa
svefja skyldir."

...

44. "Fyrir vil ek kyssa
konung ólífðan
en þú blóðugri
brynju kastir.
Hár er þitt, Helgi,
hélu þrungit,
allr er vísi
valdögg sleginn,
hendur úrsvalar
Högnar mági.
Hvé skal ek þér, buðlungur,
þess bót of vinna?"

...

[Sigrún bjó sæng í hauginum.]

47. "Hér hefi ek þér, Helgi,
hvílu gorrva,
angrlausar mjök,
Ylfinga niðr;
vil ek þér í faðmi,
fylkir, sofna,

The handmaid went home and said to Sigrún:

42. "Go out, Sigrún
from Sevafjall,
if you want to
find the leader of the troop.
The barrow has opened,
Helgi has come;
gaping wounds bleed,
the king requested
that you soothe
his bloody injuries."

...

44. "First I will kiss
the lifeless king
before you cast off
your bloody mail.
Your hair, Helgi,
is covered with hoar-frost,
The prince is all
wet with the dew of the corpse,
the hands of
Högni's son-in-law are cold and wet.
How shall I, lord,
bring about a cure for this?"

...

[Sigrún made a bed in the barrow.]

47. "Here, Helgi, I have
made a resting place,
free from heavy cares,
descendant of Ylfings;
in your embrace I will
sleep, Lord,

sem ek lofðungi
lifnum myndak.”⁶

as I would with
the prince when he was alive.”

Like “The Deacon of Myrká,” this narrative poem tells of a woman who survives the man she loves. The relevant elements are that (1) a well-respected man, Helgi, has died and he bids his beloved, Sigrún, to enter his burial mound with him to tend his bloody wounds; (2) Sigrún, grieving, willingly and eagerly does so and ornately prepares a bed for them both to lie upon; and, most importantly, (3) in the morning, Helgi returns to Valhalla and does not come back. Sigrún dies of grief not long after.

Closely related to the death scene in “Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur” is another Eddic poem, “Sigurðarkviða in Skamma” (The Short Lay of Sigurður), which is a version of possibly the most famous story in all of Germanic and Old Norse literature—that of Sigurður Fáfnisbani and the Valkyrie, Brynhildur:

65. “Biðja mun ek þik
bœnar einnar,
sú mun í heimi
hinzt bœn vera:
Láttu svá breiða
borg á velli
at undir oss öllum
jafnrúmt sé,
þeim er sultu
með Sigurði.

65. “I must make
one request of you,
it will be my last
request in this world:
Let a pyre be prepared
In the meadow
with enough space
for all of us—
those who die
with Sigurður.

66. “Tjaldi þar um þá borg
tjöldum ok skjöldum,
valarift vel fáð
ok Vala mengi;
brenni mér inn húnka
á hlið aðra.

66. “Cover the pyre with
tapestries and shields,
foreign cloths, well-made
and a host of foreign slaves;
the southerner should burn
beside me.

67. “Brenni inum húnka
á hlið aðra
mína þjóna
menjum gofga”⁷ ...

67. “On the other side
of the southerner should burn
my serving women,
wearing splendid jewels” ...

⁶ *Eddukvæði*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Íslenzk Fornrit, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014), 2:280–81.

⁷ *Eddukvæði* 2:347–48.

This poem describes Brynhildur's lamentations after the great hero, Sigurður, meets his unfortunate demise (even though Brynhildur is the one who arranges his murder). This burial scene again features (1) the death of a well-respected man, (2) the grieving bride who goes to her lover and prepares a marriage bed/pyre upon which the lovers lie, (3) which will facilitate the journey into the afterlife. To point (3), Brynhildur proclaims, "Shut not yet on Sigurður's heels / the gleaming, ring-locked gates of Hel" (st. 69), implying that Sigurður cannot, or must not, make the otherworldly journey into the afterlife without his bride.

A third medieval reference is more controversial. It has become unpopular to associate these two death and burial scenes from the *Poetic Edda* with the well-known tenth-century account of a (possibly Scandinavian) ship burial on the Volga River described by the Muslim traveller Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, mainly, I suppose, because it remains uncertain that ibn Faḍlān was indeed describing a tribe of Scandinavian voyagers who had come so far into Russia.⁸ If the rituals described are not Scandinavian, then it is difficult to see how they would be connected to burials described in Scandinavian Eddic poetry.⁹ Regardless of these reservations, the similarities between the Eddic death scenes and the burial ritual described by ibn Faḍlān are, frankly, quite strong. According to his account,

They produced a couch and placed it on the boat, covering it with quilts and cushions made of Byzantine silk brocade. An aged woman whom they called the Angel of Death turned up. She spread the coverings on the couch. It is her responsibility to sew the chieftain's garments and have him prepared properly, and it is she who kills the female slaves.¹⁰

And later:

Six men entered the yurt. They all had intercourse with the female slave and then laid her beside her master. Two held her feet, two her hands. The crone called the Angel of Death placed a rope around her neck with the ends crossing one another and handed it to two of the men to pull on. She advanced with a broad-bladed dagger and began to thrust it in and out between her ribs, now here, now there, while the two men strangled her with the rope until she died.¹¹

Here we may observe that, despite the brutality, several essential aspects of the ritual remain: (1) a well-respected man, probably a high-ranking chieftain, has died; (2) a

⁸ James E. Montgomery, "Ibn Faḍlān and the Rūsiyyah," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), 1–25 at 1–5, but see now Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, *The Rus in Arabic Sources: Cultural Contacts and Identity* (Bergen: Centre for Medieval Studies, 2013), 92–128, who offers an extensive discussion of Ibn Faḍlān's life and travels.

⁹ See also Neil Price, "Passing into Poetry: Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology," *Medieval Archaeology* 54 (2010): 123–56.

¹⁰ Abū Zayd al-Sirāfi and Ahmad Ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books: Accounts of China and India and Mission to the Volga*, ed. and trans. Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James E. Montgomery, Library of Arabic Literature 17 (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 246–47.

¹¹ al-Sirāfi and Ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books*, 250–51.

marriage bed/pyre is ornately prepared for the deceased and a lover; and (3) for the express purpose of facilitating the chieftain's passage into the afterlife, the death ritual hinges upon a sexual union—however gruesome—enacted by the chieftain's men on his behalf.

Setting these medieval sources alongside “The Deacon of Myrká” allows for a comparison of common elements. In both medieval and post-medieval sources, (1) a man of good reputation—a deacon, chieftain, or hero—has died; (2) he is unable to complete his otherworldly journey to the afterlife; consequently, (3) certain burial proceedings are enacted that include the participation of a beloved or bride. In the medieval sources, these include the preparation of a marriage bed/pyre and the accompaniment of a wife, lover, or slave; and in the post-medieval accounts, they include the abduction of the grieving bride. The essential difference between the medieval and post-medieval narratives is that in almost all cases, post-medieval tales like “The Deacon of Myrká,” the bride is either terrified of the recently deceased bridegroom and tries to get away or she wants to go with him but is forbidden. In most cases, she survives the encounter. This fundamental difference is telling.

The Pejoration of ATU 365

One of the important nuances of ATU 365 is that it has never been only about the loss of a lover. These stories are about the loss of a lover *and* the otherworldly journey the deceased lover takes into the afterlife. If, however, there is any value in the connections between medieval sources and post-medieval tales, then the differences between the early and late traditions indicate a kind of pejoration process in the development of ATU 365. The emphasis and cultural investment in the two components of ATU 365—the loss of a lover and the journey to the afterlife—changed as time passed, so that a developmental trajectory may be observed. In the sources discussed here, ibn Faḍlān's account offers some indication of what the early, pre-Christian stages of this development might have looked like in the developmental trajectory of these narratives.¹² That account describes a ritual that is almost wholly concerned with the journey to the afterlife, as indicated by one conversation recounted in ibn Faḍlān's narrative. When the Muslim traveller asks one of the Rūsiyyah why they burn their dead, the latter replies, “We ... cremate them there and then, so that they enter the Garden on the spot,” because “My lord feels such great love for him that he has sent the wind to take him away within an hour.”¹³ Of course, the Rūs does not mention here that the dead chieftain is not burned alone but with the female slave who is meant to be

¹² It is worth pointing out that it is not necessary that the ritual described by ibn Faḍlān be of Scandinavian origin for the connection between it and ATU 365 to hold. It only needs to be an observation of one of the cultures that supports ATU 365. This connection cannot be proven either, but given the broad distribution of the tale type throughout the Indo-European world, it seems reasonable to deduce that there may well be a connection based on comparative analysis.

¹³ al-Sirafi and ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books*, 252–53.

his lover. But while there is an element of an intimate connection between the female slave to be sacrificed and the chieftain to whom she is bound in death, that element has more to do with the ritual journey the deceased must take than with any sense of romantic commitment on the part of the chieftain or the unfortunate girl. It is clear that the slave is meant to see her sacrifice as a great honour—she volunteers—but it is not because of any apparent love she feels for the deceased. She and the rest of the female slaves have been convinced that to die with the chieftain is a high honour. On this point, a particularly chilling moment in ibn Faḍlān's account occurs when the men outside the ritual ship are instructed to bang their shields and make other noise to cover the screams of the slave girl as she is being murdered, lest the other young women in attendance become reluctant to participate in future rituals.¹⁴

The Eddic poems “Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur” and “Sigurðarkviða in Skamma” represent a midway point along the narrative's trajectory, where the grossly sexualized ritual of ibn Faḍlān's account is transformed into a desperate, romantic commitment on the part of both the bride and the bridegroom. The romantic element thus rationalizes the sacrifice of the slave girl. It is possible that earlier, oral versions of these narratives were coeval with rituals such as that observed by ibn Faḍlān and were used as a kind of script for the ritual. While we have no direct evidence of such a thing, Terry Gunnell's work on the origins of drama in Scandinavia may lend some credence to the speculation. Gunnell is able to argue that poems in the *Poetic Edda* were once used to support dramatic, possibly ritual enactments of the narratives.¹⁵ If so, then an oral tradition would, even in the earliest stages, be responsible for romanticizing the ritual sacrifice.¹⁶ Regardless, at least by the time of the *Poetic Edda*, the functionality of these death and burial motifs has shifted: whereas the ritual practices in Ibn Faḍlān's account were invested in the well-being of the deceased and in his journey to the afterlife, the heroic narratives in the *Poetic Edda* invest themselves not only in that journey but also in the grieving beloved who is left behind.

By the time of the post-medieval narrative, the developmental trajectory has severed all ties with any sympathy we may have for the deceased's otherworldly journey. As Ronald M. James observes in reference to Cornish variants of the tale type, “for pre-Christian society, crossing the line into the supernatural—or at least in this case into the realm of the dead—for romance was heroic. Nineteenth-century expressions of the story generally assert that no living person would want to enter the grave, even when it is the last resting place of a lover.”¹⁷ The same may be said of nineteenth-century versions of the tale in Iceland and, generally, in other cultures. Even in those variants in which

¹⁴ al-Sirafi and ibn Faḍlān, *Two Arabic Travel Books*, 250–51.

¹⁵ For an involved discussion of this hypothesis, see Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995).

¹⁶ See also Price, “Passing into Poetry,” 123–56.

¹⁷ Ronald M. James, “‘The Spectral Bridegroom’: A Study in Cornish Folklore,” *Cornish Studies* 20 (2013): 131–47 at 143.

sympathy with the deceased might remain, the thought of going with the deceased has come to be pejorated.¹⁸ Acknowledging this pejoration process, however, points to a problem with the development of ATU 365. As the function of the bride's joining her fallen bridegroom in the grave becomes pejorated, the bridegroom's safe conduct during his otherworldly journey to the afterlife is hindered. To put it another way, if the bride does not go with her bridegroom into the grave, then he cannot rest peacefully after death. "The Deacon of Myrká" illustrates the problem quite well, for after Guðrún is saved from her fate that night, the deacon goes on to terrorize her and the farm at Myrká for two weeks. Only when the townspeople enlist the help of a *galdramaður*, a magician, is the deacon finally laid to rest, and then only after a great struggle in which a large boulder is set upon his grave.¹⁹

A Theological and Historical Context

A brief examination of the religious and theological developments in Iceland might offer some explanation of this quandary. It may appear logical that after the conversion and Christianization that took place in Iceland during the medieval period, the new Christian worldview would quickly facilitate a pejoration of such sacrifices, but poems such as "Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnur" and "Sigurðarkviða in Skamma" attest to at least a lingering appreciation of the romantic aspects of the ritual, as James's observations attest. I suggest that it is Lutheran, rather than Catholic, doctrine and culture that brings about the most significant pejoration of ATU 365 in Iceland, and particular it is a preoccupation with Hell that does so. B. S. Benedikz has argued that post-Reformation Iceland experienced such a preoccupation with Hell due to what amounts to faulty Lutheran theology. According to Benedikz, post-Reformation Icelanders' "minds were fed by ill-trained priests, most of whom were no better off than themselves physically or spiritually, with an ill-digested adulterated Lutheranism which passed for theology in which Hell became of greater importance than Heaven."²⁰ During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Iceland struggled to overcome poor food supply and Danish oppression, which drove Icelanders into what Benedikz calls the "slough of mental and physical degradation."²¹ With Reformation came a redoubled effort to stamp out any suspect moral turpitude in the country, and the effort prompted a more aggressive and, importantly, a much more corporeal approach to governing morality. The Alþing, the Icelandic parliament, passed the *Stóridómur* (The Great Verdict) in 1564, a law put forward in an effort to secularize punishment of immorality, which invoked an immediate

¹⁸ See Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, no. 77 A–C (3:226–34) for variations on this theme, in which, when the bride desires to go with the deceased bridegroom, it is typically the bridegroom who charges her not to come.

¹⁹ JÁ 1:272.

²⁰ B. S. Benedikz, "Introduction," in *Legends of Icelandic Magicians*, ed. Jacqueline Simpson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1975), 2.

²¹ Benedikz, "Introduction," 2.

and tangible punishment that had not been immediately present in the Catholicism of Iceland.

Regarding the theology of post-Reformation Iceland, Jack P. Cunningham looks at the broader landscape, both politically and theologically, of Icelandic Reformed religion to argue that the Reformation succeeded in Iceland due in part to the significant developments in Denmark and in part to the fairly minimal theological changes brought about by Icelandic Reformers. Cunningham argues that these minimal theological changes reflect “a deliberate ploy of the Reformers,” who wanted to make it easy for Icelanders to accept the new theology.²² Whether Cunningham is right about the motivations behind the theologically soft Reformation in Iceland, it does seem to be the case that, at least initially, little changed on the ground level of theology, but there were also no remaining Catholic bishops or priests to preserve the old theology. Consequently, and in much the same way that an official-sounding date for conversion does not necessarily signal a society fully Christianized, we must consider whether a process of “Lutheranization” following Reformation might have stretched over a considerably long time after Lutheranism won control of Iceland in 1550.²³

The first real, ground-level theological changes in Iceland were not enacted for another twenty years. It was the prolific bishop of Hólar, Guðbrandur Þorláksson (bishop from 1571 till his death on July 20, 1627), who made the first fruitful efforts to re-educate Icelandic lay population. Guðbrandur was greatly helped by the introduction of the printing press to Iceland,²⁴ which allowed him to write a series of texts that were relatively easy to reproduce. Not least, he oversaw a translation of the Bible into Icelandic, known as *Guðbrandsbiblíá*, which was completed in 1584 and was in use for some considerable time to follow.²⁵ With the publication of his *Vísnaþók Guðbrands* in 1612, Guðbrandur also offered a Christian response to what he saw as the rising problem of secular poetry on all manner of unsavoury topics, including *rímur* (long, complicated narrative poems) that were often retellings of medieval romances and heroic sagas.²⁶ If we view Guðbrandur’s efforts as the establishment of Lutheranization in Iceland, then the process took at least one generation. As important a figure as Guðbrandur was, however, there is reason to say that the Lutheranization process in Iceland was not fully complete, at least on the ground level, until the life and works of another Icelandic Lutheran bishop, Jón Þorkelsson Vídalín (1666–1720,

²² Cunningham, “Changing Fashions,” 67.

²³ For information on the Icelandic Reformation, see Vilborg Auður Ísleifsdóttir, *Siðbreyting á Íslandi 1537–1565* and Guttormsson’s comprehensive study of the history of Christianity in Iceland, *Frá siðaskiptum til Upplýsingar*. In English, see Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 128–48 and 169–72, and Cunningham, “Jón Arason,” 245–73 and “Changing Fashions,” 65–92.

²⁴ The printing press was first introduced by Jón Arason, who seems to have made good use of it. See Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 136.

²⁵ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 136.

²⁶ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 137.

bishop of Skálholt from 1697 till his death). Jón Vídalín's contribution was important to the Lutheranization process not because his theology was materially different from that of his predecessors but rather because his message much more effectively made it into the hands of Icelanders. Jón Vídalín's *Vídalínspostilla*—a set of sermons, one for every day of the year and various major church festivals (published in 1718 and 1720)²⁷—were much more likely to become a part of the average Icelandic's daily life than the Bible, which during this time was not present in every Icelandic household because it was too expensive.²⁸ It was difficult, especially in the winter, for many Icelanders to travel to church for Sunday services on a regular basis. Even in the summer months, the long distances between farms made it difficult. In lieu of regular church attendance, weekly—and, in the winter, nightly—worship was held in the home, and *Vídalínspostilla* became arguably the primary text for such “services” from the time of its publication till well into the nineteenth century.²⁹

As was discussed in the Introduction, these nightly services were in reality just one part of a much more important Icelandic tradition.³⁰ The *kvöldvaka*, or the “night wake,” was an occasion when families gathered together during the evening on farmsteads across Iceland to tell stories, read from the classic medieval sagas, sing songs, recite *rímur*, and read from religious texts such as *Vídalínspostilla*. The *kvöldvaka* was both a form of entertainment and a means of worship; it was a key factor in intermingling classic medieval saga materials with life and culture long after the end of that era. As Emily Lethbridge stated recently, “the *kvöldvaka* ... meant that orality, or ‘re-oralization,’ was still central to the transmission of written texts even up until the nineteenth century in some parts of Iceland.”³¹ As an anthropological phenomenon, the *kvöldvaka* indicates that there were regular, widespread familial and social gatherings in which narrative genres, literary works, and theological perspectives intermingled. As a literary and folkloristic phenomenon, the *kvöldvaka* thus justifies serious consideration of whether and how religious and secular narratives might display a significant exchange

²⁷ For a thorough discussion of Jón Vídalín and *Vídalínspostilla*, see Gunnar Kristjánsson “Inngangur,” in *Vídalínspostilla: Hússpostilla eður Einfaldar predikanir yfir öll Hátíða og Sunnudagaguðspjöll árið um Kring*, ed. Gunnar Kristjánsson and Mörður Árnason (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1995), xv–civ.

²⁸ Sigurdur Arni Thordarson, *Limits and Life: Meaning and Metaphors in the Religious Language of Iceland* (New York: Lang, 2012), 59.

²⁹ There were other *postilla*, but none of them had the widespread influence that *Vídalínspostilla* could boast. See Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, 171, and Thordarsson *Limits and Life*, 59.

³⁰ For more on this tradition, see Magnús Gíslason, *Kvällsvaka: En isländsk kulturtradition belyst genom studier i bondebefolkningens vardagsliv och miljö under senare hälften av 1800-talet och början av 1900-talet*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia Ethnologica Upsaliensia 2 (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977).

³¹ Emily Lethbridge, “*Gísla saga Súrssonar*: Textual Variation, Editorial Constructions and Critical Interpretations,” in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, ed. Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010), 123–52 at 125–26.

of ideas between one another. Jón's *Vídalínspostilla* was a central, vital contributor to the *kvöldvaka* in both anthropological and literary terms.³²

There was doubtless a wealth of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Icelandic oral folk narratives and legends that rankled leaders of the Lutheran church. We may remember that Guðbrandur Þorláksson was quite concerned that these heterodox tales, poems, and songs might obscure the minds and hearts Icelanders.³³ Considering the importance of the *kvöldvaka*, he was probably right to be concerned. These "unprofitable songs" were in many cases later, post-medieval manifestations of medieval narratives from the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), *Íslendingasögur* (Icelandic family sagas), and Eddic poetry, which themselves purported (whether accurately or not) to be holdovers from a pre-conversion and Christianization age in Iceland and the medieval North.³⁴

We thus have three cultural-religious phenomena taking place at once: (1) a growing preoccupation with Hell, death, and the afterlife; (2) a changing religious landscape that has not been adequately established to address the fears and needs of a population preoccupied with Hell; and (3) the cultural venue of the *kvöldvaka*, in which theology, folk narratives, and ancient sagas are intermingled. This latter cultural phenomenon, the *kvöldvaka*, afforded Icelanders a weekly (or nightly) opportunity to talk, read aloud, and tell stories about those matters of belief that concern them most. Those stories and discussions would have invariably been informed by Lutheran doctrine, but they could just as easily have been merged with the lingering folk belief of the day. This was the cultural-religious environment in which "The Deacon of Myrká" was told, a story that had its roots in an ancient and widespread Proto-Indo-European tale type that was sufficiently influenced by a muddled Lutheran message to pejorate the one part of the story that was truly reprehensible in Christian eyes: the willingness of the bride to be gruesomely murdered for the purpose of securing the bridegroom's peaceful transition into the afterlife. The most felicitous way around this problem in the post-medieval tales was to transform the recently deceased—who was a "good man" in the ancient pagan ritual and the romantic, heroic narratives of the medieval sources—into an evil, disgruntled creature after his death, who must be defeated rather than comforted in his death. Doing so comes with its own problems, however, as it seems to have left a gap—an unmet need,

32 For my reading of *Vídalínspostilla*, Thordarson's *Limits and Life* has been an invaluable resource. Interested readers may also consider Arne Möller's *Vídalínspostilla* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel Nordisk Forlag, 1922), and the Introduction ("Inngangur") to the recent edition of *Vídalínspostilla* cited above. For an English translation of selected sermons, see Jón Vídalín, *Whom Wind and Waves Obey: Selected Sermons of Bishop Jón Vídalín*, trans. Michael Fell (New York: Lang, 1998).

33 See above, 15–17.

34 For a discussion of this topic, see Driscoll, *Unwashed Children*; Eric Shane Bryan, "Icelandic *Fylgjur* Tales and a Possible Old Norse Context: A Translation and Discussion of several Icelandic Folktales," *Heroic Age* 13 (2010), www.heroicage.org/issues/13/bryan.php; Eric Shane Bryan, "Conversion and Convergence: The Role and Function of Women in Post-Medieval Icelandic Folktales," *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011): 165–90; Bryan, "Prospective Memory of Death and the Afterlife."

so to speak—in the folk tradition for stories about people who die and do not become evil creatures after death. Surely *some* (or most?) people die peacefully and go to Heaven when they die. What of them? Is Church doctrine enough to accommodate the cultural memory of the afterlife, or do stories arise of these more fortunate folk as well?

Discursive Tales as Adjacency Pairs

The field of linguistics may be of help here. The concept of *adjacency pairs* has its origins in linguistics, where it may be described as a pair of utterances in which the cultural context, customs of communication, and speech situation of an utterance determine that the first part of a verbal exchange be followed by a second part that fits well with it. For instance, the phrase *Hello, how are you?* might be followed by the adjacent phrase *Just fine, thanks ... and you?* The context of the discourse and the first part of the exchange work together to create an environment in which the second part of the exchange is appropriate and even expected.³⁵ In a similar way, while the connections between “The Deacon of Myrká” and the Dead Bridegroom tale type reveal much about the cultural memory imbedded in the tale, a study of cultural memory also benefits from a proper understanding of how the tale might be in “dialogue” with other tales. Inasmuch as a particular tale draws from its past, it may also respond to other stories from the same cultural context. In this sense, one tale might have developed and thriven in a culture not just because it was believed to be true but because it was a necessary—as the cultural context demanded—reaction to an existing story, and, given that context, created a folkloristic version of an adjacency pair.

Adjacency Pairs for “Djárninn á Myrká”

An adjacency pair in which one tale, tale type, or motif is discernably responding to another due to its specific external context may be evident in the tradition of “The Deacon of Myrká.” Within this notion of adjacency pairs, in fact, we may find ways in which other tales answer that lingering question about the story of the deacon—why the deceased would be transformed into something evil in death.

There are five other Icelandic variants of the deacon story that fit into the category of ATU 365 and address these questions in some way.³⁶ All of them retain the detail that the deceased suitor uses Guðrún’s nickname, Garún, because they cannot say the name of God, *Guð*, embedded within her full name.³⁷ They also respond to the lingering question of the lover’s posthumous evil by intimating or stating overtly that the motivation for the haunting is that the woman has scorned his love in some way. While this answer resolves the question of the lover’s evil, it represents quite a departure from

³⁵ See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 302–304.

³⁶ These may be found in JÁ 1:272–3, 1:273–74, and 3:352–53; Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen*, 73; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Verzeichnis Isländischer Märchen-varianten*, 33.

³⁷ As Jacqueline Simpson also notes, *Icelandic Folktales & Legends*, 150.

the usual international trend, which tends to depict the two principal figures in the story as being genuinely in love. In some cases, the lover cares deeply about the well-being of his beloved, despite the fact that he has come back from the dead. In others (Child 77A and B, see below, 44), it is the beloved's idea to follow the lover in death (not unlike Brynhildur's desire to follow Sigurður into the afterlife), but he even attempts to stop her.

Another group of Icelandic folktales depicts visitations from the recently deceased in more of a sentimental than a sinister light. In several instances a recently deceased person appears in a dream or as a ghost in order to tell a loved one something about their death. These rather formulaic stories typically comprise a brief prose contextualization of events leading to a tragic death, followed by a four- to six-line poem that describes the circumstances of the death and the deceased's prospects for the afterlife. The tale "Dapur er dauðinn kaldi" (Dreary Is Cold Death)³⁸ serves as a particularly nice example. At around seventy-five words, the story offers a brief description of a man's death by drowning having gone out fishing with several others. That night his mistress (unaware of his death) dreams that he comes to her and speaks the following verse:

Mjög var órótt þá að dró nótt.	All was quite restless as the night dragged on.
Dapur er dauðinn kaldi.	Dreary is cold death.
Mig þar að bar sem margur var	I was taken there where many are,
Á lifandi manna landi. ³⁹	To the land of the living.

The poem displays a certain morbidity in the first two lines, but in the end it offers consolation and hope to the grieving bride: *lifandi manna landi* (to the land of the living) must allude to a peaceful afterlife if it is not a specific naming of the Christian Heaven. The mourner can rest assured that her beloved is in good hands and can hold onto the prospect that she will see him again. Most importantly, the bridegroom neither tries to deceive the bride nor use force to take her with him, nor even to convince her in any way to come with him. He simply leaves. He needs no assistance or sacrifice to bring about his otherworldly journey into the afterlife. His sole purpose in appearing to the bereaved is to ease their pain. In all other respects, these tales mirror the formula of ATU 365: A well-respected man has died tragically away from home; the beloved (or a loved one) is unaware of his death until he arrives in a dream or as a ghost. Yet, after all is said, he leaves to go on his otherworldly journey on his own.

A particularly interesting poem in this group refers to a historical personage, a Reverend Þorlákur Þórarinnsson who lived in Iceland from 1711 to 1773.⁴⁰ The tale only

³⁸ JÁ 1:224.

³⁹ JÁ 1:224.

⁴⁰ For more on Reverend Þorlákur, see Oscar Clausen, "Prestasögur: Dulspakur klerkur og forvitri," *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* 41 (January 16, 1966), 4 and 12, <https://timarit.is/page/3289742#page/n3/mode/2up>.

offers a single sentence as introduction, saying that the night after the death of Reverend Þorlákur, he visits a girl close to him (though not a lover) and speaks the following verse:

Dauðinn fór djarft að mér,	Death handled me roughly,
dauðanum enginn ver;	against death there is no defence;
dauðinn er súr og sætur,	death is sour and sweet,
samt er hann víst ágætur	yet it is surely fine for
þeim sem í drottni deyja	those who die in the Lord
og dóminum eftir þreyja. ⁴¹	and subsequently wait for judgment.

For eighteenth-century Icelanders, a theological connection to the story of Þorlákur's death would have been reinforced by the songs of the famous Icelandic hymnist, Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614–1674). One of his most popular hymns, for instance, follows the trajectory of Jón Vídalín's theology:

Með sínum dauða hann deyddi	With his death he put death
Dauðann og sigur vann,	to death and won the victory.
Makt hans og afli eyddi.	Its strength and power destroyed,
Ekkert mig skaða kann.	Nevermore can it hurt me.
Þó leggist lík í jörðu	Though my body be laid in the earth
Lífir mín sála frí.	My soul lives on free.
Hún mætir aldrei hörðu	It will never meet with harshness,
Himneskri sælu í. ⁴²	In blissful eternity.

Based on this comparison, the tale of Þorlákur's death suggests no conflict between accepted Church doctrine and the fact that Reverend Þorlákur appears in a dream. After all, there is nothing heterodox about supernatural events. In fact, the validity of Christian doctrine hinges upon the one all-important supernatural events of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection, and further encompasses a plethora of supernatural events. Thus, the convergence we see here of ATU 365 and Christian doctrine would not be alarming to the Christian lay person in eighteenth-century Iceland, provided that the supernatural events recorded in the tale did not diverge into pagan or otherwise heterodox belief systems.

The aforementioned tale of Reverend Þorlákur's death and posthumous visitation in a dream would not seem to qualify as one of the unprofitable songs to which Guðbrandur refers, but other stories about him certainly would. Þorlákur lived in Hörgárdalur, Iceland, from 1711 to 1773. Though perhaps not properly a *galdramaður*, a magician, Þorlákur Þórarinnsson was known to have the gift of second sight (*ófreskisgáfur*) and

41 JÁ 1:223.

42 Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Hallgrímskver: Sálmar ok Kvæði* (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1944), 230.

was said to see *huldufólk*, or hidden people (whom we might call elves), in Eyjafjörður and other places.⁴³ Perhaps not insignificantly, he was believed to have some talent for quieting troublesome ghosts,⁴⁴ and known for unusual methods of healing.⁴⁵

He is said, also, to have known the details of his own death, which is quite a remarkable story in itself. Premonitions about one's own death or the deaths of others are a commonly used literary topos or folkloristic motif in Iceland,⁴⁶ both before and after the Reformation, but this example offers particular insight. Þorlákur knew he would drown while crossing the river Hörgá at a certain ford. As the story goes,⁴⁷ one day as he was leaving the church after a gathering, he came across a beautiful red foal tied to a post. Bystanders noticed that he was uncharacteristically interested in the foal, and after examining it carefully, Þorlákur sought out the owner and begged him to sell him the horse. From then on, this red foal became Þorlákur's saddle horse, and it was on this horse that he drowned in the Hörgá. On the day of his death, he rode out with a companion, came to the ford and asked his companion to wait a moment. Þorlákur got off his horse, prostrated himself on the bank and prayed; after a time, he rose, mounted the red foal, and told his companion to proceed ahead of him. As his companion reached the opposite riverbank he looked back to find the foal in the middle of the river, riderless. The important implication here is that Þorlákur knew, because of his second sight, the appearance and features of the horse upon which he was to die and, rather than trying to escape his fate, he made efforts to secure it by obtaining the horse.

It must be stressed that Reverend Þorlákur was, as I have said, a historical person, and he lived in Hörgárdalur, in the north of Iceland. In fact, it is not at all insignificant that Reverend Þorlákur lived and died on the very same river, not fifteen kilometers from the site where the deacon of Myrká is said to have died. This means that in the same region, on the same river, just a short horse ride away, we have one active narrative that represents the pejorated version of ATU 365 ("The Deacon of Myrká") and another narrative (about Þorlákur) that not only fills the functional void left by the pejorated ATU 365 but does so by joining aspects of ATU 365, with its roots in paganism, with the dominant religious infrastructure of the day. In the one tale, we have a pejorated, aborted otherworldly journey into the afterlife; in the other, we have the fulfilment of that otherworldly journey, free of the pejoration present in ATU 365.

Adjacency Pairs in the Bear's Son Tales

Adjacency pairs of this kind are neither new nor uncommon in the development of beliefs in the North. One of the most important adjacency pairs occurs in the stories

⁴³ JÁ 3:20 and 434, 3:588–89, 4:243, 5:463–64.

⁴⁴ JÁ 3:588 and 3:589.

⁴⁵ JÁ 3:589.

⁴⁶ Margaret J. Cormack, "Saints and Sinners: Reflections on Death in Some Icelandic Sagas," *Gripla* 8 (1993), 187–218 at 189.

⁴⁷ JÁ 3:434.

that make up the tale type known as Bear's Son tales, which is so prevalent throughout the northern world. An intriguing Icelandic folktale entitled "Gullbrá og Skeggi í Hvammi" (Goldbrow and Skeggi in Hvammur)⁴⁸ represents a nineteenth-century manifestation of this adjacency pair at work in this group of tales, but the origins of the story reach back to the earliest of Norse stories and pass along the way through stories about conversion from paganism to Christianity. The function of certain motifs in the narrative also illuminates an important discursive mechanism in the development of the folktale. The tale is divided into two distinct parts,⁴⁹ of which the first (addressed more fully in the [next chapter](#)) tells the story of a conflict between Auður *djúpuðga* Ketilsdóttir and the evil troll-woman Gullbrá, who takes over a portion of Auður's land at Hvammur. Auður was a prominent early Icelandic settler in the Hvammur region of Iceland, well known not only for being a strong female leader during the Icelandic settlement period but also for being a Christian in an otherwise pagan country. Another series of conflicts with Gullbrá occur in the second distinct part of the tale, this time between Gullbrá and an expressly pagan figure named Skeggi, who, according to the tale, is the son of Friðgerður, a famous practitioner of Norse paganism and vocal opponent of Christianity featured in *Kristni saga* (generally known as The Story of Conversion).⁵⁰

By the end of the first half of the story, Auður has trapped Gullbrá within a series of crosses set up around Gullbrá's land (the final barrier is to be Auður's own body, which is buried in such a way as to block Gullbrá's only remaining exit from the space). Gullbrá tries to escape by having her servants bind her eyes and lead her on a horse out of the land, up toward the slopes leading to the nearby heath. She brings with her a precious chest of gold, but as she passes by one of the crosses, the chest tumbles from her lap.

48 JÁ 1:140–44. Collected from Jón Þorleifsson (1825–1860).

49 In fact, the manuscript sent to Jón Árnason presents them as two related but distinct tales, even though Jón combined them to create a single narrative. Jón's change makes logical sense to a degree due to the closeness of the two tales. See below, 51–54 for more on this story.

50 The tale seems to contain an error here. It describes in some detail the scene in *Kristni saga*, chap. 2, in which the missionaries Þorvaldur and Bishop Friðrekur are mocked by a boy named Skeggi, son of the pagan woman Friðgerður, who was conducting a *blót* (sacrifice) at the time of the missionaries' arrival in Hvammur. However, the tale mistakenly refers to Þangbrandur instead of Þorvaldur. Þorvaldur's missionary efforts spanned from 981–985, while the later missionary Þangbrandur was not active until 998/999. The later folktale reads: "Þess er getið í Kristnisögu og víðar að þá er *Þangbrandur* prestur fór um Vestfirði þá kom hann að Hvammi; var máli hans þar illa tekið; húsfreyja kom eigi út og var inni að blóti; en Skeggi son hennar gjörði gabb að þeim Þangbrandi á meðan" (It is told in *Kristni saga* and many other places that when the missionary *Þangbrandur* went around the Westfjords, he came to Hvammur; he was not received well; the housewife at the farm [that is, Friðgerður] did not come out and was inside at a sacrifice, but Skeggi, her son, mocked Þangbrandur and company in the mean time"; my italics). The error is also present in the manuscript *Handrit af Jón Þorleifsson*, Lbs. 531 4to. It is perhaps most prudent not to try to make more of the error than we ought. One can imagine how easy it might have been to confuse the two names.

Desperate to save it, she tears the blindfold from her face, cursing the ring on which the gold chest hung,⁵¹ but when she sees the cross barrier, her eyes are gruesomely burned. She finally reaches her new abode (in a dreadful valley) but suffers constant pain from the ordeal until she finally dies from her wounds. On her deathbed she asks her servants to bury her in a deep hole under a violent waterfall, which flows in a dark valley. There, neither light nor church bells can trouble her.

As John McKinnell has noted, the second part of the Gullbrá narrative fits well the well-known Bear's Son tale type, so prevalent in medieval Scandinavian sources,⁵² which R. W. Chambers and others reference in the early studies of *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*.⁵³ The shift from Gullbrá's original abode to her final "resting" place results in a narrative landscape perfectly situated to follow the Bear's Son story. Chambers enumerates the steps in this tale type as:

1. A hero sets out on an adventure with companions;
2. the hero resists a supernatural being in a house;
3. guided by the creature in some manner (often a trail of blood);
4. the hero is lowered by a rope;
5. overcomes a different underworld foe, victory often attained by the use of a magic sword found below, and finally;
6. the hero is left by those who were supposed to lift him up again.

51 This is quite an interesting detail in itself. According to the tale, Gullbrá curses the ring, saying that it will now be put to some use that she did not intend. The narrator breaks in to say that the ring then became the door handle for a church in Hvammur. A long description is given of the ring, which is very old, worn down copper plated with a picture embossed on it of two figures wearing armour and one with a pointed weapon (a *lagvopni*) thrust through his chest so that it comes out of his back. The narrator then links the tale to *Kristni saga*, saying that the woman who harangued Þorvaldur was in fact the mother of Skeggi, who laughed at Þorvaldur and his companion (*Kristni saga*, 9, and see footnote 50 above). It is impossible to say definitively what the association between the two stories might be. The geography as described in both tales corresponds well enough to suggest some connection, which at least contributes verisimilitude and the possibility of oral transmission, but the tale is in no way dependent upon the association, so much so that Powell and Magnússon do not even include the excerpt in their translation of the tale. Nevertheless, it bears testament to the importance of the association between the struggles of pre-conversion Iceland and those of the later belief structure. They are all of a piece.

52 John McKinnell's *Meeting the Other in Norse Myth and Legend* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 134–35.

53 See R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 62. See McKinnell, *Meeting the Other*, 132–35. For further connections, see Magnús Fjalldal, "Beowulf and the Old Norse Two-Troll Analogues," *Neophilologus* 97 (2012): 547–48, doi:10.1007/s11061-012-9328-y; and Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998). For a more comprehensive list and assessment of Bear's Son examples in literature and folklore, see J. Michael Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic, Saga and Fairytale in Northern Germanic Tradition* (New York: Garland, 1992).

The Gullbrá narrative differs in one important way from traditional Bear's Son tales, particularly in step five. After her defeat at the hands of Auður, Gullbrá retreats to her hidden abode, dies, and becomes an *afturganga*, a ghost who roams the region killing livestock and the occasional farmhand. As the battle begins, the audience realizes that, unlike Auður and Gullbrá, Skeggi and Gullbrá have much in common: they are both pagan (of a sort), both practise witchcraft (though Gullbrá seems more proficient than Skeggi), and both seem to love gold. Skeggi, however, has no malice in him, and his desire for Gullbrá's gold does not seem to carry with it the greed that Gullbrá harbours. Wanting to put a stop to Gullbrá's hauntings, Skeggi waits for favourable enough weather to travel to the gully where she is buried. Here the indications of a connection with the Bear's Son tale begin to show. Skeggi travels with two companions to Gullbrá's lair, representing the first, albeit very general, step that the hero travels with companions. The story then hints at step 2, the hero initially resists the supernatural foe, when he is lowered by his two companions and fights with Gullbrá in her lair. As the struggle takes place, Skeggi's companions are so frightened by the horrible noises below that they nearly abandon Skeggi. Just as they are about to flee, however, Skeggi gives the signal to pull up the rope (which is attached to the chest of gold), but just before they get it to the top, they see an awful spectral fire that rises above the heights of the mountains. Unable to stand any more, his companions flee, finally abandoning Skeggi (step 6) and the gold. Skeggi escapes but cannot subdue the *afturganga*, taking the story back to steps 2 and 5. He must again fight Gullbrá, who, according to the tale, seems to have doubled in strength.

Step 5—that the hero achieves victory in the second battle by means of a magic sword, which he finds in the cave below—warrants careful consideration, because here the notion of an adjacency pair begins to come into focus. Step 5 in fact seems at first to have little bearing on the tale about Skeggi, as he does not find any weapon in Gullbrá's cave. Put in the proper context, however, step 5 becomes one of the more significant moments in the tale. Skeggi recovers and makes another attempt to overcome Gullbrá. Three days later, Skeggi returns, near-dead but with the chest of gold, and says that he has killed the troll and is himself dying. On his deathbed he explains that a portion of the gold should be used to build a church at Hvammur because the Christian god helped him when his pagan gods would not. He explains that when he struggled with Gullbrá the first time, he called upon Pórr for help but the pagan god did nothing for him. He then says that the second time they fought, he promised the Christian god that he would build a church at Hvammur if he succeeded. Immediately after calling to the Christian god, a bright light turned the troll to stone. In *Beowulf*, as in many other Bear's Son tales, the hero finds himself in a similar situation to Skeggi here. Beowulf has been given the sword *Hrunting* by Unferð (ll. 1455–64), but it fails Beowulf in his fight with Grendel's mother (ll. 1522–28). Instead of a sword, it is a god that fails Skeggi, and the magic weapon he discovers is not another sword but another god, the Christian god.

Some profound change has taken place in the legacy of the Gullbrá story, in which a Christian evangelical message replaces the finding of a magical sword. While it is a fascinating development in the Bear's Son tale type, this substitution of an appeal to the Christian god has a long history in Norse sources. The fourteenth-century *Bárðar saga*

Snæfellsáss (The Saga of Bárður, the God of Snæfell), for instance, offers a specimen of the Bear's Son tale type similar to the Gullbrá narrative.⁵⁴ In *Bárðar saga*, Gestur, the leader of a band of warriors sent to fight the evil king Raknar, enters Raknar's burial mound but soon finds himself in dire straits. Gestur first calls on his pagan troll father, Bárður "Snæfellsás" (the god of Snæfell), who appears but who can do nothing to help. Gestur then vows to take the Christian faith if he leaves the mound alive. King Ólafur Haraldsson, who sent Gestur and the party on their quest, magically appears in the mound carrying a great light that stuns Raknar and gives Gestur the victory. True to his word, Gestur is baptized shortly thereafter, much to the dissatisfaction of his father, Bárður, who appears to Gestur in a dream the night after his baptism. After telling his son that he lacks character for abandoning his forefathers' faith, Bárður puts his hands over his son's eyes and seems to curse them to burn out of their sockets. Gestur dies of the wounds, still in his baptismal clothes. Though Skeggi decides not to convert whereas Gestur does, both suffer in their own way. More importantly, the currency of exchange between the "helping" force has become conversion in both narratives: Gestur converts himself, and Skeggi converts the landscape. The prevalence of the Bear's Son tale type in Icelandic sources suggests that this type of narrative was well-known in literate and oral cultures alike,⁵⁵ so the narrative type was sufficiently well known that the key shift in the Bear's Son narrative—going from a pagan magical helper to an explicitly Christian one—was likely recognized throughout the folk culture, literate or not, and was maintained centuries after the earliest evidence of it. The detail about a great light saving the hero is consistent between the earlier and later sources, as well.

It may be that the presence of the light is the factor that connects the pagan and Christian traditions of the story. For example, in *Harðar saga og Hólmverja* (The Saga of Hörður and the People of Hólm), another fourteenth-century Icelandic family saga represents another variant of the Bear's Son tale type.⁵⁶ While *Harðar saga* maintains several similarities to *Bárðar saga*, in this version the Christian elements do not play an immediate role. Hörður's crew still suffer the problem of digging into the mound, but Hörður has received a special sword from a mysterious man named Björn (bear) that prevents the earth from filling back in. Inside the mound Hörður faces the sinister troll Sóti and overcomes him by asking his companion, Geir, to light a wax candle. The light weakens Sóti sufficiently for Hörður to overcome him. The idea of a saving light, it seems, was either originally a part of some pagan versions of the narrative and later co-opted by the Christian-empowered revisions, or late medieval versions have reverse engineered the motif to fit supposedly pagan versions.

The post-medieval tale about Gullbrá, like the medieval versions that contain the same motif, thus achieves a graceful unity in the end, as Gullbrá's gold pays for the

⁵⁴ See Stitt, *Bear's Son*, 116–20 and 146–50; Magnús Fjalldal, "Two-Troll Analogues," 547–48.

⁵⁵ See Magnús Fjalldal, *Long Arm of Coincidence*, 79–116, for an overview of theories concerning relationships between respective Bear's Son texts.

⁵⁶ For comparisons between the two sagas, see Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear's Son*, 150.

building a church on the land she stole from Auður in the first half of the story. The remembrance of Gullbrá's role as a representative of evil in the Christian sense burns again in high relief when the redemption of the land suggests a promise of the greater redemption to come, compelling the audience to admit the value of conversion. Only Skeggi resists conversion, buried on unconsecrated ground, with the remainder of Gullbrá's gold under his head. His figure leaves the audience anxious about the state of those who hold on to pagan ideas after realizing the power of the Christian god, for they cannot help but wonder whether Skeggi will turn out any better than did Gullbrá. Because of the changeover from sword to god, the structure of the Bear's Son tale here takes upon itself the cultural memory of conversion.

As an adjacency pair, the Bear's Son and Gullbrá narratives establish a discernable dialogue between the earlier examples of the Bear's Son tales and the later. The later versions, making up the group that substitutes the Christian god as the weapon that saves the hero, seem to have developed in response to the earlier versions as a way to emphasize the power and authority of the Christian god. In the Gullbrá narrative, the identification of the pagan hero as Skeggi—a famous pre-Christian figure whose identity is kept alive in the Icelandic cultural memory—enables the adjacency pair to generate a localized cultural memory within the specific history of the region and country.

Final Thoughts: The Deacon of Myrká and the Legacy of Storytelling

Although the Icelandic folk narrative "Djákninn á Myrká" represents a cultural memory of the time during which it was produced, the narrative does not stand isolated in literary and folkloric history. Both its internal and external contexts point to deep roots in the past. As an example of the folktale type ATU 365, "Djákninn á Myrká" is part of a legacy of belief and storytelling that reaches back to a pre-Christian time. This legacy implies nothing about actual pagan practices or beliefs as they occurred in the pre-Christian North, but it does suggest that they, whatever they were, were diachronically connected to the post-medieval narratives through this legacy. The pejoration process and adjacency pairs represent two ways that narratives concerning death and the afterlife have been transformed by—and have in turn transformed—cultural memories of death in the medieval and post-medieval North. The development of the narrative from the earliest times to the post-medieval period has undergone a process of pejoration which has brought about what amounts to the demonization of the dead bridegroom in the story. I have furthermore suggested that this fundamental change has left this tale type wanting something and, consequently, a closely correspondent group of tales has arisen, making up a folkloristic "adjacency pair," to fill the void left by the pejoration of ATU 365.

Considerably more work is required to determine whether such adjacency pairs have developed around other examples of ATU 365 throughout the Indo-European world, but a cursory glance at some other traditions suggests that different traditions address the problem differently. Each seems to be compelled to deal with the pejoration of ATU 365 in one way or another. In some, the hostile bridegroom is said to be a rejected

lover seeking revenge;⁵⁷ in others, the romance of self-sacrifice seen in the Norse poetry remains to some extent, though it is not consummated;⁵⁸ while in still others, a moral lesson of some kind is proposed.⁵⁹ This variation is to be expected in such a widespread tale type, the many variants having been uniquely influenced by their respective cultural context, but there is another, perhaps more important lesson to be taken from the observations made here: folk narratives develop according to the cultural influences upon them. The “Deacon of Myrká” and its adjacent narratives develop in such a way as to create a narrative mechanism by which beliefs about death, Hell, and the afterlife might be accepted, revised, or rejected. It is hard to call these stories “orthodox” according to the post-Reformation doctrine, but that is quite different from saying that they are “pagan” or simply “heterodox.” They are a complicated blend of heterodoxy and orthodoxy. These stories indicate a desire to make sense of the religious context in which they were fostered. When a part of the narrative legacy becomes offensive to that context, the narrative suffers a pejoration. When the narrative seems lacking or irrational within that religious context, adjacent narratives or variants crop up to address the pressure of the irrationality or need.

The subsequent chapters of this book will illustrate further examples of this type of blending, pejoration, adjacency pairs, and other ways that the legacies of some of the great Icelandic folktales of the post-medieval period illustrate a developing cultural memory of belief, and, hopefully, some indications of *why* and *how* such blending occurred. It is not difficult, however, to imagine how it might have happened. During a long winter night in the north of Iceland, the *kvöldvaka*—that time of storytelling, hymn singing, and perhaps reading from *Vídalínspostilla*—is particularly lively at a certain farm near the river Hörgá. Perhaps some guests have come from the neighbouring farm to join the night’s festivities, and someone tells the story of the of the deacon who raged so violently after his unfortunate death. No one knows why he turned into such a devil when he died, and it is hard to imagine that he made it to Heaven in the end. Then, thinking about that hymn of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s they had sung just a few minutes earlier, someone remarks: *Have you heard the story of poor Reverend Þorlákur? He died just like the deacon, even on the same river, though he wasn’t quite so nasty as the deacon after he died. My grandmother was there and she told me all about it. Here’s what happened ...*

57 See JÁ 1:272–74; Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen*, 73; and Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 77C.

58 Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, 77A and B.

59 Gottfried August Bürger, *Lenore*, trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1900).