

## Chapter 3

# THE FYLGJUR OF ICELAND: ATTENDANT SPIRITS AND A DISTORTED SENSE OF GUARDIANSHIP\*

### The Móri of Sel (or Þorgarður)<sup>1</sup>

*At a farm near the river Elliða [near Reykjavík] there lived a certain couple, and with them lived a workman named Þorgarður. The gossip was that the woman was having an affair with the man under her husband's nose. Also, it was considered a certain thing that the farmer had to bow deeper before the woman than the workman because the farmer went often to do trivial tasks, and was outside during bad weather when Þorgarður stayed home.*

*It was the farmer's habit to look after his livestock himself in the winter whenever the weather was bad. One winter night in a snowstorm the farmer didn't come home, neither that night nor the night after. He had gone to check on the sheep the previous morning and had intended to look after them during the day. The following morning people went looking for him, and he was found by the river Elliða with what appeared to be a fatal wound inflicted by human hand. Þorgarður was suspected because of the rumours about him and the farmer's wife, and the case was brought against him. It was in all likelihood Þorgarður who carried out the crime even though he vigorously denied it. Regardless, he was convicted of it, and it was decided that he would either be put to death (some say by hanging) or have to pay a substantial compensation, so he would only be able to save his life with a considerable fee. And so it turned out here as is to be expected, as most people choose to prolong their life, and for this reason Þorgarður wanted to save his skin for as long as possible.*

*At that time a famous diplomat named Jón lived at Sel in Seltjarnarnes. Þorgarður went to Jón and begged him to help save his life. Jón was at first reluctant to do so, but Þorgarður was so persistent that finally he acquiesced and decided to pay Þorgarður's compensation. Þorgarður had even promised to serve Jón and his descendants faithfully and virtuously, working with all his might and for as long as it took. Jón went to the table and began counting out the coins for the compensation, with Þorgarður right next to him the whole time. When Jón had been counting for a while, Guðrún, his wife, came into the living room and, seeing the money that Jón had set out on the table, asked what he wanted*

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\* An early version of this chapter originally appeared in my article "Icelandic *Fylgjur* Tales and a Possible Old Norse Context."

<sup>1</sup> Translated from *JÁ* 1:373–76. This narrative was compiled by Jón Árnason from stories circulated in Álftanes, Seltjarnarnes, and elsewhere in the region of Árnessýsla (in the southwest of Iceland). Valgerður Jónsdóttir (1771–1856) and Hólmfríður Þorvaldsdóttir (1812–1876) are also listed as sources. Special thanks to Shaun F. D. Hughes for his vital help with several difficult aspects of this translation.

with all the money. Jón told her what it was for, but she told him not to go through with such foolishness for a worthless man like Þorgarður, for whom the only thing he had going for him was that he should not be spared from hanging. At that moment the housewife took up the corner of her apron in one hand, walked to the table and swept all of the money into her apron with her other hand. Jón acquiesced both to her argument and to her sweeping away the money. She said she was taking the money with her, and then she looked at Þorgarðar and said, "Let everyone be responsible for their own actions." Þorgarður replied, "We are not done with each other here, because that is not more than for me to see to it that my fylgja will bid farewell to the two of you and your family in the ninth generation." Then Þorgarður was executed for his crimes. There are doubts as to whether it was done here or overseas,<sup>2</sup> but it is thought to be true that he was hanged in Kópavogur, and he immediately returned from the dead and attacked the couple at Sel, particularly Guðrún, Jón's wife, just as he had promised. Guðrún was beset with both unconsciousness and delirium.

Because this ghost stayed in Sel for a long time, he was called Sels-Móri, but he was also called "Þorgarður" now and then, and he kept that name as well, since the man had been so called. The couple at Sel had a daughter who was named Þorgerður. Halldór Bjarnason, the noteworthy farmer in Skildinganes, married her, and together they inherited both the wealth of Jón and Guðrun and the family ghost [ættarfylgja], called Þorgarður or Sels-Móri. A few short tales about him still circulated, both in Halldór's and Þorgerður's time and likewise while Bjarni, their son, was living in Sviðholt. This Bjarni was a very energetic man. He was probably one of the members of the legal court whom the law speaker Magnús Ólafsson appointed later to the Alþing of Öxará, 1798, and Bjarni lived then at Hlið at Álftanes. After that Bjarni became the school manager when the school was moved to Bessastaðir, but he still lived for a long time in Sviðholt, and was nominated district leader at Álftanes. Even though Móri did little for himself at that time, neither in Skildinganes with Halldór nor in Sviðholt while Bjarni lived there, he was likely still there for a long time and afterward while Bjarni's descendants lived there. He was thus regularly called Sviðholt's ghost, but very often he was still associated with the name Þorgarður.

Bjarni of Sviðholt had several promising children, who were well-known and thought rather bright, and there seems little sign that Móri harassed these children or their descendants who are living now. Another daughter of Bjarni, who was named Þuríður, married Benedikt Björnsson, a student from Hítardalur, who has long been the parson in Fagranes. She was an intelligent woman, but she suffered the misfortune that she was half-demented and sometimes completely crazy. Because of this she split from her husband, and Ragnheiður, her sister, took her in. She was the wife of Jón Jónsson, the school teacher at Bessastaðir, and later she was the first wife of Bjarni Gunnlaugsson, the headmaster at Reykjavík. It seems that Þuríður died while in her sister's care. Among the things Þuríður

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**2** During this time in Iceland, capital punishments were often carried out in Denmark. Special thanks to Shaun F. D. Hughes for directing me to this point.

is reported to have done during her delirious fits, is to have said, "Dear Sister, it is a viper that stings me," but others testify that she would say, "It is always Ingibjörg that stings me in the heart with a cobbler's needle." People suspected that she was referring to Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir of Álftanes, who lived with Benedikt and Þuríður before they separated, and who later became Benedikt's second wife, so that Þuríður had there, if you like, a reason for her deliriousness. Þuríður's family ghost [ættarfylgja] was held responsible for her madness although it has not manifested itself to any extent in the family since then; still some consider those people overbearing, and not at all in line with the ordinary temperament of people [alþýðuskapur]. I have not heard any stories in which Þorgarður harassed the housewife, Ragnheiður Bjarnadóttir, who was mentioned earlier, but there are rumours in Suðurland that he caused the destruction of a mail boat that was lost in 1817 because her first husband sailed with it. He was also the cause of the late Þórður Bjarnason's death, in Sviðholt; it is still said that he had haunted the children of Ragnheiður, especially Björn, the principal, and some have seemed to have been aware that this was the case.

It should be mentioned here that Bjarni Halldórsson in Sviðholt had a sister then who was named Jórunn. She was a very haughty and ornate woman. It is said that a certain man at Álftanes proposed to her, but she thought the situation beneath her and refused him. Then it is said that he had vowed, for his part, that despite this he would cling to her family line, even though he was prevented from attaching himself to her in the fashion he wanted. After that, Jórunn married Eyjólfur Jónsson, the student, who was then in Sviðholt but who later moved to Skógtjörn at Álftanes and was thought to be a distinguished man in the region. They had a baby girl. She was named Þorgerður after her grandmother. Eyjólfur and Jórunn had not been together very long when it became evident that Jórunn had some kind of mental illness which became more serious as time passed, and in the end she went completely insane. It was suspected that her suitor's curse had caused the sickness.

When Þorgerður Eyjólfsdóttir had grown to marriageable age, Eggert Bjarnason, who was at that time the priest at Snæfoksstaðir [Klausturhólum] in Grímsnes, proposed to her and married her. She thus went east with him and they had several children together. Time passed until Jórunn, Þorgerður's mother, died. She had never been mentally well since the time that misfortune came upon her after she was married. But there had been no signs of that sickness in Þorgerður while her mother lived, since she had never returned south after going east. Reverend Eggert had even been warned about letting her go south, and people said that if she never went out past the river Sog or Álftavatn, then she would not be affected. But when Jórunn at Skogtjör died, it is said that Þorgerður begged her husband to permit her to go south with him. He resisted at first but finally gave in when she pressed him further. Nothing is said of the couple's trip until they had come south over Hellisheiði, south into Fóelluvötn above Helliskot, where there it is said that she had a dizzy spell and that she was never the same again. Men suspect that her mother's ghost [fylgirdraugur], that is, Þorgarður, had met her there and followed her from then on as long as she lived, which was not for very long after that. The children of Eggert and Þorgerður have, some thought, prospered little, and two of their daughters went mad.

This account of Þorgarður, the *Móri* of Sel, refers to no fewer than eighteen individuals by name and stretches across six generations of a single family. Of those named individuals, fifteen can be verified as historical persons—only Þorgarður, Jón of Sel, and his wife Guðrún cannot be definitively identified.<sup>3</sup> This feature of the story indicates something about the cultural memory behind the so-called *fylgja* tales (stories of attendant spirits) from nineteenth-century Iceland: stories of this type present a certain closeness, familiarity, even an intimacy between the ghost (if we may call them such) and whomever they haunt. These creatures become attached to individuals, families, or farms, and address themselves to the business of destruction, nuisance, obstruction, and sometimes murder. At other times there seems to remain some uncertainty about whether such creatures do good or evil. In some stories, *fylgjur* even seem to do a distorted kind of service for the family or person to whom they attend.

A certain confusion also arises about how exactly to categorize the ghost in this story. The narrative at times refers to him by the name he carried in life, Þorgarður, at other times as a *móri* (a term I will discuss shortly), at still others he is called a *draugur* (ghost), *ættarfylgja* (family ghost), or *fylgidraugur* (attendant ghost). Are these terms interchangeable? The two words most commonly associated with Þorgarður—*fylgja* and *draugur*—hold deep connections in the Icelandic/Old Norse cultural memory. The word *draugur*, usually translated as “ghost,” can claim its origins in the Proto-Indo-European word *dhroughós* (Sanskrit *drógha-*), or “phantom,”<sup>4</sup> yet scholars and editors of medieval Icelandic texts often comment that the Icelandic “ghost” does not fit the normal European expectation of a non-physical apparition, having instead a physical form, perhaps more like zombies than phantoms.<sup>5</sup> A *fylgja* (pl. *fylgjur*) in pre-Christian times was a (female) guardian spirit, and the verb form, *að fylgja*, means to follow, to help, or to guide.<sup>6</sup> These considerations—the historical persons, the closeness of Þorgarður the attendant spirit, the ambiguity about his good or bad intent, and the long history of the words *draugur* and *fylgja*—highlight three straightforward though fundamental questions about the story of Þorgarður, the *Móri* of Sel: *What exactly is he? What are the origins of these stories? And what purpose do these stories serve in the Icelandic cultural memory?*

Answering these questions requires some care because the dead often evade categorization in Iceland. In an important study of stories adjacent to the *fylgja* tales

3 Information on these persons can be found in “Mannanöfn, Drauga og Vætta,” *JÁ* 6:67–182.

4 J. P. Mallory, *Oxford Introduction to Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-Indo-European World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 409.

5 Kent Michael Pettit has done a thorough analysis of this point in “Christmas Eve of The Living Dead: The Corporeal Undead vs. Icelandic Christianity” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2018), especially 49–78. See also Ármann Jakobsson, “Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Medieval Icelandic Undead,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110 (2011): 281–300, especially “The Old Norse Term *Draugr*” (283–85).

6 Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *fylgja*.

(such as the account of Þorgarður), Terry Gunnell looks closely at the origins and functions of *sendingar* narratives—stories about animation of the recently (or nearly) deceased for the purposes of “sending” them to do harm to another person.<sup>7</sup> Gunnell’s study examines the functionality of these tales, tracing *sendingar* narratives from their earliest possible sources in Sámi magic lore to the parts of Iceland where the stories enjoyed the most popularity, namely in the Westfjords and northern Iceland. Gunnell deduces along the way why and for what purpose the characters within these stories might have served to the communities that sustained them, arguing that these stories “pass on a great deal about cultural connections, inherited views, cultural concepts and the cultural vocabulary adopted to explain things that rural people in the past did not understand.”<sup>8</sup> Along similar functional lines drawn by Gunnell, Ármann Jakobsson has complicated our understanding of Icelandic ghosts by arguing that our modern perception of medieval Icelandic ghosts have been heavily influenced by the editorial and classification practices of Jón Árnason.<sup>9</sup> Ármann revises those classifications of medieval Icelandic ghosts by examining their “functions,” or the purpose they serve in the narrative, in respective medieval Icelandic texts. The *fylgja* group, I suggest, allows for a functionalist approach similar to that outlined by Terry Gunnell and Ármann Jakobsson: by observing the function of these creatures, we have the opportunity to understand something about the “cultural connections, inherited views, cultural concepts and the cultural vocabulary” embedded within these tales.

### Origins and the Muddling of the *Fylgja* Group

Post-medieval Icelandic folktales of the *fylgja* group have long been dissociated from the *fylgjur*, sometimes referred to as attendant spirits, of Old Norse literature and pagan belief. This is a view supported by the eminent Icelandic folklorist, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson.<sup>10</sup> One can easily see why. After the medieval period, virtually no textual evidence exists to indicate that the memory of the medieval iteration of the *fylgja* was sustained. Despite this dearth of textual evidence, recent surveys on beliefs in the psychic and supernatural in Iceland may suggest that belief in *fylgjur* remains alive in the minds of Icelanders. As Erlendur Haraldsson puts it, “there is more belief in the *fylgja* phenomenon than in any other Icelandic-specific psychic form, with 28% of

7 Terry Gunnell, “Waking the Dead: Folk Legends Concerning Magicians and Walking Corpses in Iceland,” in *News from the Other Worlds: Studies in Nordic Folklore, Mythology and Culture*, ed. Merrill Kaplan and Timothy R. Tangherlini (Berkeley: North Pinehurst Press, 2012), 235–66. I focus below on the *fylgja* group and refer readers interested in *sendingar* to Gunnell’s study.

8 Gunnell, “Waking the Dead,” 261.

9 Ármann Jakobsson, “Vampires and Watchmen,” 281–83. Ármann (rightly) points out that Jón Árnason was heavily influenced by German principles of classification due to the authority of German folklorist Konrad Maurer, who was intimately involved with the Icelandic collection of folktales in the nineteenth century (*Isländische Volkssagen*, 281).

10 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 187–88.

respondents considering it certain or likely, 42% possible, and only 22% rejecting it as impossible or unlikely.”<sup>11</sup> How far back this cultural memory of *fylgjur* goes is perhaps a matter of debate, but it should be clear that *fylgja* stories have had a strong impact upon Icelandic beliefs in the supernatural.<sup>12</sup> The earliest post-medieval written references to *fylgjur* as “attendant spirits” is from the seventeenth-century work on ghosts by Gísli Vigfússon (1637–1673), though the comments are preserved only the still-unpublished *Islandiæ Nova Descriptio* of Peder Hansen Resen, 1625–1688.<sup>13</sup> In the eighteenth century, Jón Steingrímsson described a *flugumýrarskotta*, which, in the fashion of the nineteenth-century *fylgjur* discussed below, appeared before a priest who was coming to visit Jón. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson argues that these later *fylgjur* have little to do with the pre-Christian supernatural figure of the *fylgja*. In Einar’s words, “The [earlier and later examples] of spirit have thus little more than the name *fylgja* in common.”<sup>14</sup> Einar would prefer to see these later *fylgjur* associated with the so-called *sendingar* (sg. *sending*), which are animated ghosts who, as mentioned above, are “sent” at their master’s command in order to do harm to others. Einar goes on to say that “Attendant spirits’ are people called up from the dead, ghosts raised by a magician.”<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt that a significant overlap existed between the two folk figures—i.e., often *fylgjur* are also *sendingar*<sup>16</sup>—but there may be more of a distinction than has previously been acknowledged on this point.

*Sendingar* are prevalent in the later folk belief, but however connected the *sendingar* may be to a corpse, it is difficult to call them a ghost, zombie, or reanimated corpse. They do not walk of their own accord; they do not have their own will; they often embody only a small part of the original corpse (a bone or a heart); and in some cases the *sendingar* roam as a vapour or a fly, not apparently contingent upon a corpse at all. They furthermore do not have their own identity, a point driven home by the earliest evidence of *sendingar*, in the fourteenth-century narrative entitled *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds* (The Tale of Þorleifur, the Earl’s Poet), in which the *sending* is actually given a new name.<sup>17</sup> Nor do they have their own strength, for the magician must strengthen (*að*

**11** Erlendur Haraldsson, “Psychic Experiences a Third of a Century Apart: Two Representative Surveys in Iceland with an International Comparison,” *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research* 75 (2011): 86.

**12** See also Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir’s excellent MA thesis, “Ég er aldeilis ekki ein ...: Framliðnir sem fylgjur og verndarvættir í þjóðtrú” (MA thesis, Reykjavík, 2015) for a thorough discussion in Icelandic of beliefs in *fylgjur*.

**13** See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 91.

**14** See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 187–88, and sources cited there, for a more involved discussion of the later evidence.

**15** Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 187–88.

**16** For the most thorough and recent discussion on *sendingar*, see Gunnell, “Waking the Dead,” 235–66, especially 239–53.

**17** This saga may be the earliest Icelandic testimony to *sendingar*, but their origins may be much more complex. For an engaging discussion on possible Sámi origins, see Gunnell, “Waking the Dead,” 253–59.

*magna*) the *sending* in order to animate it. While there is sufficient evidence that *fylgjur* at times share some of the same characteristics,<sup>18</sup> there is also evidence to suggest that the *sending* group and the *fylgja* group should at times remain separate because, as will be argued here, the *fylgjur* of post-Reformation folktales have a much stronger connection with their distinctive pre-Christian predecessors than has previously been acknowledged. While the later types of *fylgja* represent a much-changed version of their medieval ancestors, significant similarities persist between the earlier and later *fylgja* figures. Understanding how *fylgjur* from the earlier and later eras relate to one another facilitates a better understanding of how belief developed throughout religious development in Iceland, starting in the pre-Christian era and moving through Christianization and beyond.

### Pejoration and Attendant Spirits in Old Norse Sources

The term *fylgja* has a long and rich history, if not a consistent one. Even in Icelandic belief today, *fylgjur* must be separated into two distinct groups: one that “follows” a specific family and another that is more of a spirit that accompanies a specific person.<sup>19</sup> Regarding earlier beliefs in *fylgjur*, it is generally correct to acknowledge, along with Jón Árnason himself in his introduction to the *fylgja* group, that the tales collected in the nineteenth century are not themselves the same as the stories of *fylgjur* we see in Old Norse sources. Yet there persists enough diachronic, comparative evidence to indicate that the later *fylgja* tales are the late offspring of those earlier mythological beings, and acknowledging such a heritage brings us closer to understanding the development of folk belief in Iceland.

In Old Norse myth and literature, three supernatural beings, *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* (sg. *hamingja*), and *dísir* (sg. *dís*) were identified as attendant spirits. Linguistically, the terms *dís* and *hamingja* hold more straightforward connotations. The word *dís* generally refers to a goddess or priestess, but in the terms discussed here it denotes a female guardian spirit.<sup>20</sup> The word *hamingja* can suggest outright luck or fortune while still holding on to the meaning of a guardian spirit. Cleasby and Vigfusson remark that *hamingja* and *fylgja* are contextually almost synonymous, for *hamingjur*, like *fylgjur*, often take the shape either of an animal or of a human, typically female. The *hamingjur*

<sup>18</sup> For the connections between *sendingar* and *fylgjur*, see Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 188; Gunnell, “Waking the Dead,” 250; Ármann Jakobsson, “Vampires and Watchmen,” 282.

<sup>19</sup> See Terry Gunnell, “Modern Legends in Iceland,” in *Narratives across Space and Time: Proceedings of the 15th Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (June 21–27, 2009, Athens)*, 2 vols. (Athens: Academy of Athens, Hellenic Folklore Research Centre, 2014), 1:345n12.

<sup>20</sup> I skip over the notion of a *dís* as a “sister.” Cleasby and Vigfusson discuss the etymology of the word in their entry in their *Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Especially of interest is Grimm’s suggestion that Tacitus may have corrupted *Idisavisio* from *Idisavisio*, “the virgin-mean.” See Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *dís*.

may be connected to the *nornir*, or the “*hamingjur* of the world.”<sup>21</sup> The word *fylgja*, however, has more diverse connotations. As a noun it can hold the connotation (even in modern Icelandic) of a spirit or ghost, but it can also refer to the placenta, meaning that which follows or attends the newborn child.<sup>22</sup> In Old Norse, specifically, the noun *fylgja* can refer to a spirit, especially to a pagan female attendant spirit,<sup>23</sup> who watches after and sometimes reveals the fate of the individual it attends. As mentioned above, the verb *að fylgja* means “to follow,” “help,” or “guide.” The attendant spirit grants assistance to a person or a family, and also goes before them, which supports the notion, discussed below, of a person’s *fylgja* appearing somewhere before they do. The connotation “to back,” or “to help,” leads to the prefix *fylgi-*, meaning help or support.<sup>24</sup> A *fylgisamur* is a faithful follower, *fylgð* is a “following” or “backing,” and the adjective *fylginn* means “adherent.”

Clearly, the terms are complicated, as they appear in different contexts and circumstances that often shade meaning.<sup>25</sup> Even acknowledging the differences between the *fylgja* and the more Christian version of a soul, *fylgjur* often appear as rather unique figures in the Old Norse literature. Some *fylgjur* act more like the Valkyries of Norse mythology, serving to direct the fates of living individuals. These attendant figures, who, as noted above, are variously referred to as *fylgjur*, *dísir*, and *hamingjur*, stand as independent entities, bear no resemblance to the soul, though very much interested in the fate of the individual they serve. Hilda Roderick Ellis remarks on the difference between the two types of figures, making a distinction between animal *fylgjur*, which more closely resemble the soul, and another type of *fylgja*—often a *fylgjukona* (*fylgja*-woman) or *kynfylgja* (family-*fylgja*)—which functions as more of an attendant of the

21 Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. *hamingja*. The word has come to be a blessing in Christian times: “leggja sína hamingju með e-m.”

22 The notion is not surprising, given the remarkable mythological significance attributed to the placenta in various cultures.

23 See below for my discussion of Else Mundal’s monograph on *fylgjur* in Old Norse sources, where she points to the importance of the feminine associations with these medieval supernatural creatures. See Else Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1974).

24 Cleasby and Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, s.v. *fylgi*.

25 As Margaret Clunies Ross points out in *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, The Viking Collection 7 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 245, several scholars have debated the meanings of these words. See Folke Ström, *Diser, nornor, valkyrjor. Fruktbarhetskult och sakralt kungadöme i Norden*, Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Handlingar, Filol. –filos. Ser. 1 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1954); E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964); Peter Hallberg, “The Concept of Gipta-Gæfa-Hamingja in Old Norse Literature,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference, University of Edinburgh, 1971* (London: London Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 143–83; Mundal, *Fylgjemotiva*; Dag Strömbäck, “The Concept of the Soul in Nordic Tradition,” *Arv: Tidskrift för Nordisk Folkminnesforskning* 31 (1975): 5–22; Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

individual than it does a soul or spiritual extension of the person.<sup>26</sup> She later sharpens the image, saying of the two types of attendant spirits:

one is that of the animal *fylgja*, which might be translated “fetch”; it accompanies a human being through life, can be seen by others in dreams or in waking hours if they have the gift of second sight; and the life of the owner depends on its well-being ... The other conception ... is that of a supernatural woman guardian, who attends an individual until death, and survives him; after his death he is able to enter her abode, and she then attaches herself to another, often in the same family.<sup>27</sup>

Independent though they are, a certain type of *fylgja*—as personal spirit—clearly symbolizes much about the character, origins, and fate of the person(s) it attends. In the only monograph-length study of *fylgjur* in Old Norse sources, *Fylgjemotiva i Norrøn Litteratur*, Else Mundal follows to some degree the work of Ellis and separates animal *fylgjur* from female *fylgjur*. The former, if they appear alone, tend to represent the alter ego of the person attended and, if they appear in groups, tend to represent a warning of an enemy’s attack.<sup>28</sup> The latter function reflects the guardian spirit of a group or clan and may ultimately be connected to worship of maternal goddesses.<sup>29</sup>

Literary evidence in Old Norse sources is diverse. In chapter 11 of *Hallfreðar saga*, a *fylgjukona* comes to Hallfreður and declares that their relationship has come to an end (of course, this bodes ill for Hallfreður); she then negotiates the transferral of her guardianship to Hallfreður the younger, an arrangement that seems to please all parties involved.<sup>30</sup> Ellis observes in this passage and numerous others like it<sup>31</sup> that spiritual

**26** Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), 130–31. Ellis remarks in a footnote that this concept of a guardian attendant might be accounted for by Christian teaching, particularly in light of *Njáls saga*, in which Hallr agrees to the conversion to Christianity only if St. Michael will become his *fylgjuengill*, his *fylgja*-angel (*Road to Hel*, 130). However, as DuBois and Clunies Ross argue (see below), while the notion of attendant spirits would have found a correspondence in Christianity, the notion has a prevalent place in Norse paganism as well. The important question to ask here, then, is how the belief actually metamorphosed, what with the likely correspondence between the two belief systems. The current chapter suggests that the attendant figures fragmented throughout metamorphosis, rather than preserving an intact development.

**27** Ellis, *Road to Hel*, 138.

**28** See Hedin Brønner’s review of Mundal’s monograph, in *Scandinavian Studies* 48 (1976): 335.

**29** For a thorough discussion of one candidate that fits this paradigm, see Gunnhild Røthe, “Þorgerðr Hölgabrúðr: The *Fylgja* of the Háleygjar Family,” *Scripta Islandica* 58 (2007): 33–55, especially 46–47 and 53.

**30** *Hallfreðar saga*, in *Vatnsdæla saga: Hallfreðar saga, Kormáks saga, Hrómundar þáttr Guðrúnarsonar*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 8 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzk Fornritafélag, 1939).

**31** For instance, *Vatnsdæla saga*, chap. 34; *Völsunga saga, Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda* 1, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan Haukadalsútgáfan, 1953–54), chap. 4; *Helgavkiða Hjörvarðssonar*, in *Edda: Die Lieder Des Codex Regius Nebst Verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1983); *Göngu-Hrólfs saga. Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda* 3, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan Haukadalsútgáfan, 1953–54), 161–280, chap. 32; *Óláfs*

attendants (whether called *fylgja* or *hamingja*) work to affect the fate of the individual(s) under their protection. Generally, the guardian spirit's services benefit the individual, though not always; the *fylgjukona* in *Hallfreðar saga* is often an agent of the ill fate suffered by the one under her care. At certain significant times, the guardian spirit will transfer its allegiance to another individual, often a descendant or friend, and at other times, it will be lent to another individual, as in chapter 22 of the much later *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (The Saga of Þorsteinn, Viking's Son).<sup>32</sup> The diversity of references to *fylgjur*, *hamingjar*, and *dísir* makes it difficult to set down an accurate description of these supernatural figures. It is important to note the distinction between the two types of attendant spirits in Old Norse belief, but while Ellis's distinction appears to hold fairly consistent, there do not appear to be any hard and fast rules that articulate the characteristics of these figures.

After the introduction of Christianity into the Norse belief system, these attendant spirits take on a different functional identity in narratives about conversion. The shift can be seen in a number of places, perhaps most remarkably in the well-known story *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls* (The Tale of Þiðrandi and Þórhall),<sup>33</sup> where two competing bands of *fylgjur* vie for the life of Þiðrandi at the farmstead of Síðu-Hallur, who, incidentally, is said to have played a key role in Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Nine horse-women in black tear Þiðrandi to pieces before nine women in white can arrive to defend him. From the arrival of these apparitions, the prophet Þórhallur predicts that conversion is imminent. Of the episode, John Lindow states, "some time between the late twelfth and late fourteenth century, a learned author saw little difference between *fylgjur* and *dísir* and saw no difficulty depicting them in terms of color symbolism to represent opposition between the old faith and the new."<sup>34</sup> Thomas A. DuBois similarly suggests that the concept of attendant or guardian spirits has a long and rich representation in all Nordic religions, remarking further that the tradition would have found a likely correspondence in the Christian concepts of the guardian angel and saints.<sup>35</sup> Be that as it may, it seems unlikely that the Nordic figures would have derived from the same tradition as the Christian guardian angels. Margaret Clunies Ross argues that "the concept of a tutelary spirit is widespread in early Norse culture

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*saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla* 1, Íslenzk Fornrit 26, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941), 225–372, chap. 1. In some of these examples the attendant spirit is referred to as a *hamingja*. Ellis discusses many additional examples of a similar ilk; see *Road to Hel*, 130–38 for her analysis.

**32** *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, in *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954 [1981]), 3:1–73.

**33** *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*, in *Íslendinga sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, vol. 10 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan Haukadalsútgáfan, 1953–54), 371–78.

**34** John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 97.

**35** Thomas Andrew DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 57.

and is unlikely a foreign import.”<sup>36</sup> Along this line of thinking, it seems unlikely that the *fylgja* as attendant spirit would have vanished without a trace after the medieval period.

In a study adjacent to Ellis’s, Dag Strömbäck examines the concept of the soul in Nordic tradition, stating that one consistent theme in the Norse concept of the soul is “the belief in the soul as a spiritual element, not only incorporated in the individual but also more or less invisibly emanating or—if I may say so—radiating from an individual and capable of exercising influence at a distance.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the latter portion of this statement can be attested to by the fact that *fylgjur* often act as an agent for the one they attend, going before them and causing a drowsiness or other affliction to come over their attendee’s enemies, as in *Sturlunga saga*, *Njáls saga*, and other sources.<sup>38</sup> Strömbäck also cites examples of this phenomenon in later Nordic folktales in the form of an attack (Icelandic *aðsókn*, a term that, according to Strömbäck, refers specifically to this sort of aggression) that one’s soul can make on another individual. In the later traditions the attacks, interestingly enough, can be involuntary, in which case the individual whose “soul” has executed the attack must often pay compensation for the damage done.<sup>39</sup>

These literary instances may serve as markers of the attendant spirit’s place in Norse pre-Christian belief, though more likely (at least more verifiably) they indicate how early Christian Icelanders viewed them. Both possibilities are worth noting, but in order to discern how the perception of attendant spirits resolves, we must turn to the folktales of a later, post-Christianization, post-Reformation era. Jón Árnason dedicates a section of his folktale collection to *fylgjur*, citing their similarity to the attendant spirits of earlier belief. Árnason includes in his classification *hamaskipti* (shape-shifters); *mannafylgjur* and *aðsóknir* (individual “followers” and attendants);<sup>40</sup> *ættardraugar*, *mórar og skottur* (family ghosts called *mórar* and *skottur*);<sup>41</sup> and lastly *bæjardraugar* (farm ghosts). The classification of these beings as *fylgjur* is problematic, however, since it remains questionable how much they ought to conjure images of attendant spirits from Old Norse accounts. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson agrees that all of these figures are

**36** Clunies Ross also remarks that, unlike Old Icelandic prose, the terms *fylgja* and *hamingja* are rarely used in the mythological poetry and in Snorri’s *Edda*, the term *norn* being found more frequently to identify guardian figures (Clunies Ross, *Prolonged*, 246). On the *norn* see: Karen Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2011).

**37** Strömbäck, “Concept of the Soul,” 16.

**38** See Strömbäck, “Concept of the Soul,” 5–7, for additional commentary and examples of this type of agency.

**39** Strömbäck, “Concept of the Soul,” 14–15.

**40** The word *aðsóknir* obviously has a strong connection to the verb *að sókna* or *sókna*, which Strömbäck refers to as an act of aggression. See above.

**41** The words *mórar* (sg. *móri*) and *skottur* (sg. *skotta*) are commonly viewed as proper nouns though Einar Ólafur Sveinsson translates them as “Rufuses” and “Long Caps.” I will use the Icelandic forms here.

certainly attendant spirits, but he also makes a distinction between them and the *fylgjur* of earlier Norse belief:

The belief in “attendant spirits” is clearly no new thing here at this time, but it is unlikely that it was very widespread until the late seventeenth century, or even until on in the next century ... These “attendant spirits” had one thing in common with the class of spirits known by the same name in ancient Iceland (*fylgjur*, “guardian spirits”), they went in front of the person to whom they were attached, but these did nothing but evil, both to that person and to others, while the ancient guardian spirits did no harm, unless their “owner” was an evil person or in an evil mood ... The two types of spirit have thus little more than the name *fylgja* in common.<sup>42</sup>

While the differences between the ancient belief and the later are inescapable, I suggest four additional similarities between the ancient supernatural attendant spirits and those ghosts in the *fylgja* folktales collected by Jón Árnason. First, we cannot ignore that these later ghosts are “inherited,” as it were, by family members of subsequent generations, which indicates a familial connection like that observed in *Hallfreðar saga* and other stories. Second, certain of the later tales present a *fylgja* as soul, much in the same forms indicated by Ellis and observed in more detail by Strömbäck. Third, despite the fact that the later ghosts generally do harm, they are often observed trying to do something akin to a beneficial service, demented though it may be, for their “owner.” True, their efforts never turn out well, but the benevolent intent remains. Fourth, much like earlier versions of *fylgjur*, who exacted punishment upon their owners, the *fylgjur* of the later folktales punish their owners for the evils they commit. These common traits of the earlier and later attendant spirits of Old Norse/Icelandic sources indicate a pejoration process—similar to what occurred in the development of the “Deacon of Myrká.” Thus, when viewed through a functionalist lens, the evidence suggests a stronger continuity between the earlier and later traditions of attendant spirits than has traditionally been assumed.

## Post-Medieval *Fylgja* Tales

### Inheritance (Genealogically and Geographically) of Attendant Spirits

Unlike, for instance, tales about God and the Devil or otherworldly journeys, *fylgja* tales are more likely to have developed around specific localities and persons, which makes it not altogether surprising to find information of this sort in them. Even so, two significant points may be drawn from the prevalence of such details. For one thing, information on persons and places lends a substantial sense of verisimilitude to the tales, not only for the reader but also, and more importantly, for those who transmit them orally from one person (or group of people) to another. In the tale “Hvítárvala-Skotta” (The *Skotta* of

<sup>42</sup> Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, 188. Simpson echoes this sentiment in her note to “Írafells-Móri,” one of the few *fylgja* tales to have been translated into English (*Icelandic Folktales*, 161–62), although her translation cuts out portions of the original.

Hvítárvellir),<sup>43</sup> the narrative begins with a detailed account of who was involved, what their occupation was, and where they were born and to where they lived later. A portion of this information, such as the dates of Sigurður's service as district magistrate in Borgarfjörður, might have been verified and supplied by the recorder of the tale, but those who told and heard it would have known the information (perhaps including the rough dates of his appointment). Throughout the tale, we are given Sigurður's descent through four generations, and the hauntings are traced throughout, complete with details about second marriages and speculations on which generations were most affected by Skotta's hauntings. The "hauntings," interestingly enough, seem to follow the female line, rather than the male.<sup>44</sup> This makes a great deal of sense, given that Skotta began haunting the family, it is supposed, because Ólöf, Sigurður's wife, offended a scorned suitor. Likewise, after the death of Jón's daughter Ragnheiður, Skotta began to follow her daughter, Kristín, who had by that time married. Other tales exhibit a similar dependence upon genealogy. "Hleiðrargarðs-Skotta" (The Skotta of Hleiðrargarður)<sup>45</sup> and other additions to the tale, "Árbæjar-Skotta eða Nýjabæjar-Skotta" (The Skotta of Árbæjar or of Nýjabæjar)<sup>46</sup> most directly, but all the tales about *mórar* and *skottur* rely either upon genealogy or, on occasion, close friendship to solidify the logical progression of hauntings. Sometimes the curse is given a specific time limit, nine or fifteen generations, and other times the haunting lasts an indefinite amount of time. In all the tales, however, the genealogy fixes the haunting in a "reality" that would otherwise never be realized by listener or reader.

Genealogies, historical characters, and specific geographies also, speaking to the second point of interest, enable a special kind of intimacy both between the persons referred to in the stories and between the characters in the stories and those who told and heard the tales of Icelandic *fylgjur*. This may be the most important aspect of these stories, as it illuminates a fundamental truth about *fylgjur* of any era, early or late. In the plainest of terms, the *fylgjur* follow; they attend; they guide; and they persist. For better or worse, as a help or a hurt, the supernatural creatures in these stories are *in the lives* of those to whom they tend. As such, they take upon themselves the identities of their respective families, so that the appellations of *ættarfylgja* (family ghost), *mannafylgja* (personal attendant spirit), and *bæjardraugur* (farm ghost)—problematic though they may be—carry important connotations of closeness and intimacy. The names and locations offered in these stories are important not merely because they can be verified now, long after they were recorded, but most importantly because they would have meant something to the people telling the stories in the first place. It is

43 JÁ 1:348–52.

44 Sigurður had no female offspring, and his son Jón was curiously unaffected by the haunting. Not until Jón's daughter, Ragnheiður, reaches a marriageable age does the haunting continue. The same trend is apparent in "Sels-Móri eða Þorgarður" (JÁ 1:373–76).

45 JÁ 1:354–58.

46 JÁ 1:360–61.

perhaps difficult for the modern mind to perceive, but in both the medieval and post-medieval Icelandic world (even into the nineteenth century, when these tales were recorded), the farmstead was the centrepiece of the entire social structure. Kirsten Hastrup notes that one social constant during the late medieval and post-medieval periods was

the conception of the *bú* and farmstead, *bær*, as the pivot of social organization, in relation to which more peripheral orders were “measured.” This remained true right up to the end of the nineteenth century, for no urbanization took place until then. This is one of the main differences between Iceland and other Nordic countries, for in the latter the social division of labour was reflected in geographical separation. In Iceland all specialist tasks had to be carried out within the household during the entire period.<sup>47</sup>

With this social structure in mind, it must be clear that the specific personal names and geographic localities referenced so frequently in *fylgja* tales were not points of interest to the historian only; they would have been known by the tellers and hearers of the stories. The eighteen names and six generations of the Þorgarður narrative were not merely detached or unknown to the people telling the story. Listeners might easily have been related to these people; they certainly could walk the landscape around their farm to find the places where certain narrative events occurred. Thus, much as the attendant spirits perceived in the Old Norse tradition, the *fylgjur* of later folktales are transmitted along genealogical lines.

It will not be surprising, then, that Jón and Guðrún of the Þorgarður narrative are haunted all their lives, and that their only child, a daughter named Þorgerður, inherits the *fylgja*. So it goes for the six generations referenced in the story. Þorgerður marries Halldór Bjarnason, and they have two children, Bjarni and Jórunn. Interestingly, as in the case of several other *fylgja* tales, the male child is exempt from the haunting here (though Bjarni’s daughter, Þuríður, is later haunted). Jórunn, Halldór’s daughter, is greatly affected by Sels-Móri (as Þorgarður comes to be known), and is even cursed by another ghost. Jórunn marries Eyjólfur, and their child, Þorgerður (named after her grandmother), grows up to marry a good man named Eggert. No doubt this emphasis on the female heir goes back to Guðrún’s, not Jón’s, rejection of Þorgarður.

At this point geography becomes a vital factor, as Eggert and Þorgerður move east, escaping the family curse presumably because the ghost cannot be in two places at once (he still haunts Jórunn at this point). Things go well until Jórunn dies from her affliction and Þorgerður goes south to mourn the loss. When the couple get close to her parent’s home, Þorgerður becomes infected by her mother’s insanity and dies shortly thereafter. As is clear from the tale, Móri’s haunting obeys what seem to be predetermined rules of inheritance. This and other tales go so far as to establish the number of generations that will suffer under the ghost’s curse. More importantly, people close to the family seem to understand the logic behind the rules, for many warn Eggert against the journey south.

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<sup>47</sup> Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, 48.

### **Fylgjur as Souls (*Aðsókn* or *Hugr*)**

In the Old Norse sources there is one conception of an attendant spirit that stays with an individual through life as a kind of alter ego or perhaps soul, sometimes translated as a “fetch.” Most often thought to take an animal form, fetches tend to go before the individual they attend, announcing their arrival or presence, as well as betraying various characteristics of the person. They can be seen by those who have second sight, and the well-being of an individual depends upon his or her fetch. These mythical figures have a direct correspondence in the later *fylgja* tales, and often these later figures act in much the same way as their Old Norse predecessors. In Jón Árnason’s collection, five *fylgja* tales deal with this type of figure: “Dalakúturinn” (The Treasure Cask),<sup>48</sup> “Tvær sagnir um fylgjur” (Two Stories about *Fylgjur*),<sup>49</sup> “Þeir koma þá fjórir” (They Come then Four),<sup>50</sup> “Galtardalstófa” (Galtardalur’s Fox),<sup>51</sup> and “Anna á Bessastöðum” (Anna at Bessastaðir).<sup>52</sup> In “Dalakúturinn,” a group of travellers stops to rest and all but one go to sleep. This last man sees a blue light escape the travellers’ tent, and he follows the light over the landscape to a certain point, before returning. When the sleepers wake, one of them (from whom the light originated) gives an account of a strange dream he had in which he went on a journey to find a chest of gold. The waking man then laughs, saying that he had seen the man’s *fylgja*, at which point they all follow the same path to find the gold. The tale mirrors the Old Norse belief that certain clairvoyant individuals can see the *fylgja* of another person, and somehow benefit from this ability.

This tale type (ML 4000: Soul of a Sleeping Person Wanders on its Own) is prevalent across Scandinavia and, remarkably, the Albigenians circulated a strikingly similar variant<sup>53</sup> in southern France throughout the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. The connection between the two tales is inescapable, but equally striking are their different conclusions. In the Albigenian version, the events proceed much the same way: One individual goes to sleep and another sees a lizard come from the sleeper, cross a river in the same manner as in “Dalakúturinn,” and attempt to return to his body. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, the Albigenian tale foregrounds and exemplifies the transmigration of an individual’s spirit. At its conclusion the two characters are baffled by the events and go to a *parfait* (an Albigenian “priest,” as it were) for aid. The *parfait* interprets the event, saying, “the soul ... remains in a man’s body all the time; but a man’s spirit or mind goes in and out, just like the lizard which went from the sleeper’s mouth to the ass’s head and vice versa.”<sup>54</sup> The function of the spirit here is nearly identical to

48 JÁ 1:342–43.

49 JÁ 1:344–45.

50 JÁ 1:345.

51 JÁ 1:345.

52 JÁ 1:346.

53 The Albigenian account is recorded in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: Braziller, 1978), 351–52.

54 Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou*, 352.

that of the *fylgja* in the Icelandic tale, yet the tales' purposes differ greatly. Whereas the Albigensian tale means to promulgate doctrine, the Icelandic tale means only to share an anecdote about treasure hunting, in which transmigration merely plays a certain role. The difference indicates that *fylgjur* of this sort had strong roots in the Norse tradition, for in the tale there is no need for the characters to question or inquire of a wise man, nor are they baffled by the *fylgja*. It is simply something that happens. In contrast, the Albigensian transmigration sparks inquiry and wonderment, indicating that the culture was not as comfortable with the concept.

A similar clairvoyance plays a role in “Tvær sagnir um fylgjur” and “Þeir koma þá fjórir,” in which the ability to see the *fylgjur* of others lends motivation to the anecdotes. In “Anna á Bessastöðum” the concept of the fetch plays a more vital role. The tale takes place in a fishing village, where Anna, herself clairvoyant, serves the fishermen, making them coffee and doing other such things to help around the fishing camp. One morning she goes down to the shore and sees sixteen men coming out of the sea, all of them soaked. When she asks whether they have just landed, she gets no answer. Thinking this strange, she goes into the house where the fishermen stay, only to find them around the fire, having not even put on their fishing clothes. Knowing that she has seen their *fylgjur*, Anna warns them not to go out that day, as the omen bodes ill for them. None listens to her, and all die in a horrible storm. Here, the *fylgjur* clearly represent the souls of the men, much as they would have in Old Norse belief; being clairvoyant, Anna takes on the role of guardian figure, rather than the *fylgjur* (of a different sort) guarding over the individuals they attend. As such, the tale suggests a kind of split from the old belief. Anna is a female guardian (in Old Norse, *fylgjukona*), and looks after certain persons, but rather than being a *fylgja* herself, she must rely upon her ability to see the fetches to indicate when danger is near.

In “Galtardalstófa” the role of a female attendant echoes that of Anna. This time, however, the fetch does not reflect the person under guardianship but rather the perpetrator of the offence. The same clairvoyant girl who sees the *fylgjur* in “Þeir koma þá fjórir” here sees a rust-brown fox that stands before a man (a clear reference to the older concept of a *fylgja* as one who “goes before”) who wants to marry a certain woman, Margrét, though she has rejected him. The fox bears with it a curse that the woman will not be happy in her chosen marriage, as she will develop a spoiled temper. The curse echoes the reputation of the fox, for just as in English, the word *tófa* has in Icelandic the same connotation of a vixen, or a spiteful, mean-spirited woman. The second-sighted Guðrún sees the fox from afar and warns the appropriate parties, thus taking on the role of a guardian figure herself; and when people learn of it, they reckon that this fox is a *sending* conjured by the man she has rejected. The notion of the fox as a *sending* is an interesting one if taken alongside Dag Strömbäck's study of the soul in Norse societies. Strömbäck discusses the soul in terms of a spiritual extension of the individual that can actually have an effect on other people. These “emanations or radiations,” as Strömbäck describes them, manifest in *fylgjur* as an attack upon another person, sometimes in the form of drowsiness, sneezing, or hiccups, or, in the more sinister forms, of sickness or death. Strömbäck refers to these attacks as “aðsókn,” appealing to the Icelandic verb

(*að sækja*). “Galtardalstófa” suggests a similarity between this function of the soul or *fylgja* and the function of a *sending*, which serves much the same purpose and is often conjured from similar motivation.

The connection holds particularly true in those cases where the *sending* is not an actual corpse but, as is often the case, a mist, a fly, or some sort of animal, which would be more characteristic of a *fylgja*. It is not too far afield to suggest that some crossover has taken place between the two folk beliefs, and this is certainly the case in “Galtardalstófa.” With its references to the *sending*, the notion of a fetch as a soul, and the presence of the second-sighted guardian figure, this short tale (only about two hundred words) serves as a point of convergence for a variety of Icelandic motifs, though the intersecting motifs seem to hit upon a similar kind of life experience. It remains to ask how they are similar. For one thing, the characterization of the fox as both *sending* (as the people reckon) and the scorned man’s fetch (*aðsókn*, to use Strömbäck’s terminology) must suggest some association between the fox and, if not guilt, per se, then certainly offence. The woman stands guilty of an offence and she must suffer for it accordingly. The same sort of romantic offence motivates other tales about *fylgjur*, particularly those concerning malignant attendant spirits. As the discussion shifts from fetches to these *ættardraugar*, the relationship between culpability and attendant spirits becomes more pronounced. In these tales, however, punishment for the offence takes the form of either a young boy or girl (*móri* and *skotta*, respectively), who plays harsh tricks on the individual, killing livestock, destroying property, and sometimes even killing people. These ghosts also attach themselves to a certain family, transferring their attendance, much like the *fylgjur* of pagan belief, from one generation to the next.

### Pejorated Assistance

Nowhere is the pejoration process in the development of *fylgja* tales clearer than in their function as spiritual helpers. Though they always ultimately bring about strife, it does not appear to be the case that the *fylgjur* of later folktales always seek to do their owners harm. Of family ghosts, or *ættardraugar*, one of the few translated *fylgja* tales (and, at that, only about half of it has been translated into English) shares the motif of a scorned lover. “Irafells-Móri” (The *Móri* of Irafell),<sup>55</sup> shares the long and involved tale concerning Kort and his wife Ingibjörg and their descendants. Just as in “Galtardalstófa,” Ingibjörg has rejected many lovers in order to marry Kort. Here, however, the rejected lovers collectively pay a wizard to dispatch a *sending* against the family, and demand that the ghost should follow the family for nine generations. People call the ghost *móri*, as he is seen wearing grey breeches, some sort of hat, and a rust-brown (*mórauða*) sweater, thus attaining his name (all *mórar* share a similar description). As the tale proceeds, however, the significance of the initial motive fades, and the haunting bears a distorted resemblance to the attendant spirits of Norse paganism. In one episode, one of Kort’s sons, Einar, goes on a journey to Skrauthólar, and arriving late at his destination he looks

55 JÁ 1:364–73.

in the cowshed for shelter, since he does not wish to disturb his hosts. Finding a stall in which to spend the night, he goes to sleep, but in the morning he discovers that the *móri* has actually arrived ahead of him and killed the cow that had occupied the stall, thus making room for Einar to sleep.

Two interesting aspects of the tale arise: First, that the *móri* precedes Einar indicates the same kind of motif intersection observed in “Galtardalstófa,” in which the fox (a *fylgja*) goes out ahead of the haunted woman, Margrét. Irafells-Móri acts as Einar’s fetch when he goes ahead of him, and yet the *móri* remains the *sending* charged with haunting Einar, son of Kort. Likewise, while inextricably bound to (and responsible for) the actions of his attendant spirit, Einar possesses no control over *Móri*’s actions. In this episode, the *móri* stands, in a way, in the same position as the old pagan attendant spirits, for they too would act both according to their own volition and yet on behalf of the individual they served. The difference, of course, is that the pagan attendant spirits (generally) served the best interests of their charge, whereas the *móri* can hardly be said to do so. Nevertheless, and this brings me to the second point, although killing the cow remains consistent with Irafells-Móri’s typical pattern of destruction, in this particular instance the destruction was meant as a service to Einar.<sup>56</sup> The same type of service motivates the events of another anecdote later in the story of “Irafells-Móri,” when Kort Kortsson lends his leather jacket to a friend, Þorsteinn, for a windy horse ride home. When the two riders reach the point at which their paths diverge, Þorsteinn goes on his way, forgetting to return the jacket to Kort. As he begins to ride away, Þorsteinn feels something pulling at the jacket, and his horse falls down dead beneath him. It is believed in the tale that the *móri* was trying to return the leather jacket to Kort. True enough, this *móri*’s “service” in both instances invariably does more harm than good, but it remains a distorted, perhaps grotesque, shadow of the attendant spirits of Norse pagan belief.

Though the account of Þorgarður does not directly mention any assistance to his family or attendee, it is clear from other post-medieval *fylgja* stories that such assistance—twisted though it may have been—was prevalent in other stories of *fylgjur*. One might deduce that some similar stories existed about Þorgarður, crass and vengeful though he might have been.

### Retribution and Punishment

In several cases the motivation for the haunting derives from a specific event, as in Þorgarður’s narrative. Likewise, in the tale “Móhúsa-Skotta” (The *Skotta* of Móhús),<sup>57</sup> the attendant spirit begins its haunting not because of scorned love but because she herself has been scorned. The *skotta*, the female version of the *móri*-style *fylgja*, is so-called because she often wears the traditional Icelandic headdress, which is twisted or turned backwards on her head and dangling behind her like a tail (*skotta*). In “Móhúsa-Skotta”

<sup>56</sup> Conceivably, the service is a kind of mockery, but even so, the distorted process remains intact.

<sup>57</sup> JÁ 1:347–48.

a certain man, Jón Þórðarson, lives in West Móhús, where he strives to acquire a fortune. On a night of particularly inclement weather, a young girl comes to his house asking for lodgings for the evening, but Jón turns her away for no apparent reason. The young girl dies of exposure and thus the haunting begins. Wherever Jón goes, she is nearby, going ahead of him to kill livestock and play evil tricks. That the *skotta* goes ahead of Jón recalls again the characteristic of the pagan *fylgja*, particularly the fetch-like version discussed by Ellis. Associating the *skotta*'s fetch with the young girl's death suggests that the *skotta* also represents the girl's soul taking revenge upon Jón for not helping her, but unlike Strömbäck's *aðsókn*, the motif of a fetch has shifted from an extension of the soul to the soul itself.<sup>58</sup> The benevolent ancient attendant spirit has become an avenger of wrongdoing, again a grotesque and twisted version of the old guardians. Even her name *skotta*, as mentioned above, refers to a tradition (the traditional headdress) that has been "twisted" backwards. But it must be remembered that pagan attendant spirits often punished those who had offended them. Lindow points to passages in *Ynglinga saga*, in which King Aldis is thrown from his horse and killed while riding by a site reserved for sacrifice to the *dísir*.<sup>59</sup> It seems then that the role of attendant spirit as benevolent guardian figure has fallen by the wayside and only the vengeful figures remain in the later folktales.

The same holds true in the two other significant tales: "Hítardals-Skotta" (The *Skotta* of Hítardalur)<sup>60</sup> and "Hörgslands-Móri" (The *Móri* of Hörgsland).<sup>61</sup> In "Hítardals-Skotta" the motivation for haunting arises again as a point of interest. Here, the priest Vigfús has been friends with another priest for many years, but when this friend commits a certain crime, the punishment of defrocking the priest falls to Vigfús. Afterwards, the defrocked priest vows revenge, and shortly thereafter Vigfús's demeanour changes for the worse and a *skotta* is seen near him. The defrocked priest clearly sends the *skotta* against Vigfús, and thereby the tale echoes stories of *sendingar*, but it also conjures images of the *aðsókn* mentioned above, and again the *skotta* serves as a vengeful spirit. Perhaps even more important than these observations, the tale confronts the audience with the question of whether Vigfús acts rightly when he defrocks his friend. Clearly, his friend sends the *skotta* to haunt him for this express reason (as no others present are cursed), and the particular curse laid down implies that the defrocked priest expects his friend to defend him: "Þú varðst þá, vinur, fyrstur til að færa mig af hempunni; vera má að þér þyki jafnmikið sem mér nú áður langt um líður" (You were then, friend, the first to defrock me; it may be that you will seem equally hard done by as I do now, before

58 A like motif appears in tales about *útburði*, or exposed children. In "Móðir mín í kví, kví" (JÁ 1:217–18) a mother exposes her newborn baby girl, but later on, when she wants to go to a party but has no dress, the ghost of the girl appears to offer her mother her baby dress.

59 *Yngvars saga víðförla*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda 2*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976), 423–59.

60 JÁ 1:351–52.

61 JÁ 1:363–64.

too long).<sup>62</sup> The haunting by the *skotta* serves as a kind of penance for Vigfús, and the subsequent haunting as a reminder to his family.

The tale “Hörgslands-Móri” tells the moving tale of the priest Oddur and his son, who died very young. On a certain winter day the priest rides away from home over a stretch of solid ice, but when the boy sees his father leaving, he runs after horse and rider and, hitting a weak point in the ice, falls through and dies. After the incident the priest slips into deep despair, and his wife—partly because of her own grief and partly because of her husband’s despair—divorces him. The tale states that the priest then sends a *sending* in the form of a dog after his wife for her betrayal. The *sending* is called a *móri*, first, (apparently) because it follows the woman’s family for nine generations and, second, because it acts typically like a *móri*. This explanation aside, it seems fairly clear that the *móri* in this case represents, at least figuratively if not overtly in the narrative, the young boy who was lost beneath the ice. Characteristic of a fetch (in the sense of a soul), the *móri* in this tale can shift its shape from a dog to a mist, and it seems in keeping with the interpretation that the *móri* would begin its haunting with the mother who abandoned the beloved father, thus breaking up the family from which he originally came. This again situates the motivation for the haunting in the realm of vengeance, though in this case the father finds himself free of that vengeance since he clearly suffers enough grief at his own hands. Instead, the mother, who is perhaps deemed more worthy of blame because she leaves her husband, becomes the object of the *móri*’s haunting, and for nine generations it serves as a reminder of her mistake. Additionally, here again the *móri* acts as a more grotesque and even petty remnant of pagan attendant spirits, causing mischief and madness most often. Both of these tales exhibit the vengeful nature of the *skotta* and *móri*; the nature of their hauntings and the characteristics of the *fylgjur* suggest a connection to older concepts of fetches and the *aðsókn*, while at the same time serving as reminders of the importance of familial and filial faithfulness.

Retribution and punishment are clear themes in Þorgarður’s narrative as well, for Þorgarður, who has been condemned to death for a crime and has been wronged by Jón and his wife, Guðrún. Þorgarður’s retribution must be seen as an ironic twist on the genealogical quality of a family *fylgja* passed down from generation to generation. The bitter Þorgarður responds by cursing the couple with his companionship for nine generations: “Ekki mun hér skilið með okkur; því ekki er það meira en fyrir mig að sjá svo um að kveðja mín fylgi ykkur hjónum og ætt ykkar í níunda lið” (We are not done with each other here; because that is not more than for me to see to it that my *fylgja* will bid farewell to the two of you and your family in the ninth generation).<sup>63</sup> This may be understood as Þorgarður’s *álag*, his curse, in which the word *fylgi* is most important to the present discussion. *Fylgi*, a neuter nominative plural noun, is the subject of the verb *kveðja*, a third person plural with future implication. Thus, Þorgarður will not say farewell for nine generations, but the implication of the third person plural noun, *fylgi*, and the

62 JÁ 1:351.

63 JÁ 1:374.

plural verb, *kveðja* (say farewell), implies that it is not just one haunting (Þorgarður's) that will carry through the generations but several in succession. In this way, *all* of the subsequent hauntings of this family fall under Þorgarður's *álag*, not just those stories associated with his name.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the retribution and punishment in these stories take an unmistakably generational identity.

### Final Thoughts: Þorgarður, Pejoration, and Angry (Pagan) Spirits

The folk traditions of the *fylgja* group discussed here do not have what can be called a "clean" literary or folkloristic heritage, yet it is their dirtiness that makes them interesting as lenses into cultural memory. The changing identities of *fylgjur* represent the malleability of cultural memories of attendant spirits. In the medieval and post-medieval stories, the identities and classifications of different types of *fylgja*—be they spirits, personal attendants, farm ghosts, or family ghosts—intermingle. Even in modern Iceland, as Terry Gunnell's work indicates, two distinct types of *fylgjur* populate Icelandic beliefs—one associated with a family and another associated with a personal spirit<sup>65</sup>—yet all of these types of *fylgjur*, whether in the medieval, post-medieval, or modern eras, have one common trait: they are attendants (for better or worse). In some cases, even in stories about the same *fylgja*, the different categories of attendant spirits discussed here seem to become confused or intermixed. For example, in the stories about Þorgarður, the *móri* of Sel, later generations were not affected in the same way as their forebears. Þorgarður is said to be a *móri*, which implies more of a physical presence, for the early generations, yet Þuríður, of a later generation, is affected by something much more like a psychological disorder, as is Þorgerður, who is of an even later generation. Þorgarður is clearly a family spirit, as he is called an *ættarfylgja* (family *fylgja*). However, the "ghost" that afflicts both Þuríður and Þorgerður is also said to be an *ættarfylgja*. It seems possible that this one *ættarfylgja* is in the cultural memory imprinted upon these stories blending or vacillating back and forth between two different types of *fylgja*: one that is more spirit than body (in the later generations) and another that is more physical (in the earlier).

While this type of muddling of traditions may create problems for the folkloristic classification of *fylgjur*, on a functional level, it is nothing but fascinating. The group of tales about these attendant spirits in later Icelandic folklore show signs of their origins. Based on the tales discussed here, there seems to be a connection between Old Norse and post-medieval belief systems, but the connection is more on a functional footing than a morphological one. Understanding this functional connection requires acknowledging that, functionally, the attendant spirits within the Old Norse narratives have been pejorated dramatically throughout the legacy of *fylgja* tales, yet the differences between the *fylgjur* of the Old Norse literature and those of the later Icelandic folk tradition

<sup>64</sup> Special thanks to Shaun F. D. Hughes for pointing out these important linguistic details.

<sup>65</sup> Gunnell, "Modern Legends," 345.

do not preclude a relationship between them. The similarities between them in fact indicate that the later tales bear a morphological heritage of their predecessors, while both the similarities and the differences between earlier and later narratives can tell us something about the means by which belief developed in Iceland from the pagan era (or at least the early literate era) to the post-Christianization, post-medieval era.

*Fylgja* stories seem to have been a kind of battleground on which questions of belief were worked out. In the earliest stories, *fylgjur* are benevolent attendant spirits, but something quickly changes in conversion stories from the medieval period, such that the *fylgjur* represent the anger of pagan spirits that rages against those who take the new religion. Such anger is not uncommon in Old Norse narratives. The saga about Bárður the god of Snæfellsnes (*Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*), as discussed in [chapter 1](#) (42)—shows the staunchly pagan Bárður come back to terrorize his son Gestur, who has converted to Christianity under the influence of King Óláfur Tryggvason. Such, also, is the fate of Þiðrandi in *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls* (see above, 76). At some point between those medieval stories and the *fylgja* stories collected by Jón Árnason, *fylgjur* took on a grotesque, simplistic, and nasty demeanour, perhaps due to the influence of the *sending* stories so closely related to them, to become something less majestic and mystical than the *fylgjur* of the pagan past. But the core attributes of the attendant spirit remains: Some *fylgjur* pass from one generation to the next, and the next; some take on the sense of a spirit, or *aðsókn*; some offer assistance of a sort; and some, not unlike the nine black riders from *Þiðranda þáttr*, execute moral retribution against whomever they deem deserves it.