Witchcraft Epistemology

Focusing on the trolls’ use of language quickly leads us away from the trolls themselves and back again to the humans attempting to define the paranormal: from their trollspeak to our own. An investigation of the occult essentially becomes a journey into the human mind which entails a displacement from the artistic illusion of diversity: instead of trying to understand many species of paranormal others, the mysterious phenomena are taking place within the minds of only a single Linnéan species. Although distinction may prove a useful analytic tool in any cultural analysis of the paranormal, exploring the parallel functions of apparently diverse paranormal beings may be equally illuminating.

In various handbooks on supernatural beings from all over the world, a shrewdness of articles are accounted for on each supposed species of beings, if not all with their own identity card, at least with their own lexical entry. In reference works in which cultural variety is a primary concern, a zombie, a vampire, and an Icelandic draugr each must have their own entry. Although the geographical and chronological separation of various kinds of paranormal others is a worthy subject for investigation, these creatures, however, also share important common features and, more importantly, common functions within the narratives in which they appear. The same applies to the various types of moras, succubi, and old hags that magicians send to bother and even kill others, often in their sleep. Many types of imaginary beings have been so identified and categorised, and, of course, it is a significant cultural
historical fact that zombies come from Haiti and vampires from Eastern Europe.

However, when individual human experience is contemplated it might be even more fruitful to refrain from distinguishing and to rather consider the similar function of these diverse paranormal beings, keeping also in mind that unlike living creatures who may exist in the same way whether we refer to them as cats, dogs, seals, or walruses, these non-existent creatures do not exist independently of human thought and consequently of human vocabulary, terminology, and taxonomy. A living creature may not rely upon a name or a word to ensure its existence, but there is no paranormal being which “exists” independent of the vocabulary used to describe it. Rather than flesh, blood, and bone the paranormal is indeed wrought in thought, imagination, and in words.

But what is the nature of the efficacy of the words used to account for the paranormal? Though some of these will be examined below, it must be stressed that this vocabulary is not at all technical in its nature. One cannot assume that a single word always conveys the same specific significance or even that the same being is always referred to using the same word. While scholars often thrive on clarity and definitions, the medieval vocabulary of the paranormal tends to be a muddle and this is consciously reflected in some of the language usage of this book. Accordingly I have not hesitated thus far to call the same creature a ghost, a vampire, or a zombie, not because they are all apt words, but rather to create an estrangement effect as a reminder to the reader that we have entered an area without discrete and unwavering definitions, taking seriously and demonstrating the idea that Enlightenment-style taxonomy is not helpful in understanding medieval, occult phenomena. Thus all confusion of terminology is deliberate and serves as a reminder that we are moving away from technical language.101
As we have already seen, the vocabulary of paranormal otherness is far from unified or simple in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland. No word was commonly used to denote “the paranormal” as such, which may betray conceptions of any kind of strict binary between it and the “normal.” There is, however, an abundance of terms used to describe magic, and a large portion of that which is paranormal originates in the practice of magic and sorcery. Occult beings (trolls, giants, dwarves, elves, and dí-sir) tend to be associated with witchcraft. If we look first at English—the language of this book—the terms “magic,” “witchcraft,” “sorcery,” and “shamanism” all cover similar ground, though perhaps carrying different connotations. The term “shamanism” was popularised by Mircea Eliade some decades ago, and as a Tungusic word with currency in ancient Siberia has served well those scholars who suspect that there is a connection between Old Norse seiðr and the rituals of shamanism, although its use as a generic term for all witchcraft can be called into question given what is known of its specific origins. With their Greco-Roman roots, the terms “magic” and “sorcery” tend to carry negative connotations, having long been used pejoratively by Christian authorities, whereas “witchcraft” is a Germanic word, albeit one no less negative in the connotations it bears. None of these words are exact parallels for the terms describing the harnessing of the paranormal in the sagas, such as “fjǫlkynngi,” “forneskja,” “galdrar,” and “trollskapr,” all of which also bear connotations worthy of deeper exploration.

While the story of the creature in the cave described in Bergbúa þáttur takes place some time after the conversion of the North, the story of the two disobedient courtiers found in Óláfs saga centres directly upon it. King Óláfr was perhaps the leading figure in the conversion myths of Iceland, though several Icelanders also played their own significant parts, including Snorri goði, who will merit more attention below. Following the conversion of Iceland, this
important magnate from the West of the island calls on the aid of an old crony called Þrándr stígandi, described thus: “Þrándr var manna mestr ok sterkastr ok manna fóthvatastr; hann hafði verit fyrr med Snorra goða ok var kallaðr eigi einhamr, meðan hann var heiðinn, en þá tók af flestum trollkap, er skírðir váru” (Þrándr was a big man and strong and swift on foot; he had been with Snorri goði previously and was said to be not of one body when he was heathen, but trollishness faded from most when baptised).\(^ {105} \) The phrase “eigi einhamr” is a well-known element in the vocabulary of sorcery in the sagas; witches were believed to shift shape (“fara hamfǫrum”) when they performed their magic;\(^ {106} \) and such metamorphosis is mentioned, for example, in a graphic account of Óðinn’s shamanism in \textit{Heimskringla} (see “The Witchfather,” below).\(^ {107} \)

That his transmogrificative ability is connected with Þrándr’s pagan faith is evident from the narrative, as is the fact that such is implicitly counted as “trollskapr,” a word sometimes used as a synonym for both “fjölkynngi” and “fitonsandi,”\(^ {108} \) and in other cases clearly refers to magical powers, often possessed by paranormal beings and ogres (“óvættir”).\(^ {109} \) Sorcery and shapeshifting are commonly regarded as trollish behaviour in their very nature,\(^ {110} \) and in this account from \textit{Eyrbyggja saga}, it is suggested that such rituals were commonplace in pre-Christian times. Baptism more or less, if not altogether, terminates such trollishness, firmly relegating it to the past. Þrándr used to be “eigi einhamr” but his “trollskapr” seems to have evanesced along with the heathen religion, having no place in a new Christian world.

This chronological aspect of magic and the paranormal is even more evident in the term “forneskja,” which could be glossed as “ancient.” The word is used in the sagas as a synonym for each of “galdrar,” “fjölkynngi,” “kynngikraptar,” “hindurvitni,” and “heiðni”\(^ {111} \) to denote superstition, as well as all and sundry magical and paranormal behaviour,\(^ {112} \) and as a chronological term for the ancient pagan
past and the customs that belonged to that past. In another episode found in Eyrbyggja saga, also situated soon after the Christianization of Iceland, the word clearly suggests both the powers of magic and the belief that they essentially belong to the past. When Þóroðdr of Fróðá and his band of sea-dead men visit their previous abode at yuletide, when the wonders of Fróðá are beginning, the people at the farmstead are pleased rather than frightened: “Menn fǫgnuðu vel Þóroðdi, því at þetta þótti góðr fyrirburðr, því at þá hœfðu menn þat fyrir satt, at þá væri mǫnnum vel fagnat at Ránar, ef sædaugir menn vitjuðu erfis síns; en þá var enn lítt af numin forneskjan, þó at menn væri skírðir ok kristnir at kalla” (People welcomed Þóroðdr since this was seen as a good omen because men held the belief that people were made welcome at Rán if the sea-dead attended their own wake; but then the ancient lore had not been exorcised even though people were baptised and Christian in name). It is acknowledged here that the Christianization of the land is not accompanied by the sudden demise of all heathen customs, beliefs, and superstitions. On the other hand, it is accentuated that these beliefs are “forneskja,” that they belong to the past and do not have a bright future. The fact that “forneskja” and Christianity are opposites is also made very evident here, that although pagan beliefs and superstitions survive alongside Christianity their proper place is in the past, with the ancients.

The words “galdrar” and “fjǫlkynngi” are also terms commonly used to describe magic in the sagas. Of these, “galdrar” seems more neutral, originating in ritualistic acts themselves and, specifically, in the noise emitted during their performance. This is attested, for example, in the phrase “galdra þú mér gal” appearing in the poem Grógaldr (The Chant of Gróa (?)) and also in the behaviour of the witches Kotkell and Gríma, described in Laxdœla saga (see further “Immigrant Song,” below), who raise a platform and, apparently, stand upon it chanting: “þat váru galdrar” (it was magic). That “galdrar” involve noise is
also evident in poetic kennings in which the word is used along with a single weapon (as a *pars pro toto*) or weapons in general, in the same way that other words indicating noises such as “dynr” are used. Thus *dynr sverða*, *gnýr geira*, *gnýr stála*, *skjalda glymr*, *vápna galdr*, and *galdr hjǫrva* are six battle kennings in which weapons and noise go together.119 A metonymical shift can thus be noted, wherein the noise apparently accompanying acts of witchcraft ended up denoting the craft itself. In the sagas, the term “galdrar” is often used alongside “forneskja” and “fjólkynngi,” and, occasionally, with “görningar,” a less common word that mostly seems to relate to man’s interference with the forces of nature.121

Some less common words that may accompany “fjólkynngi” include “atkvæði,” another word signifying speech or chanting that seems to originate in the ritual of magic, and “kuklaraskapr.”122 While “fjólkynngi” (vast-knowledge) does not itself appear in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the wise Geirríðr—who will be discussed at greater length below (“Popular”)—is reported to be “margkunnig” (multi-knowledged),123 which obviously conveys similar connotations and runs to the heart of the semantics of the term itself, referring not to ancient knowledge but to great knowledge, wisdom, and learning that mostly characterises witches, trolls, and berserks but which remains far beyond the capabilities of the average man.124 Such knowledge is clearly coveted and can be both taught and learned,125 but it does not often appear without mention of its nefarious essence, evident in parallel constructions such as “illska (badness) ok fjólkynngi,” “eitur (malice) ok fjólkynngi,” and “grimmd (cruelty) ok fjólkynngi.”126 The term is pagan as well, indeed used to depict both Norse and Roman paganism,127 and the pagan god Óðinn’s “fjólkynngi” is clearly expressed in *Heimskringla* (see “The Witchfather,” below).128 These examples demonstrate that the knowledge in question is indeed magical knowledge, with the word “fjólkynngi” in particular having become a
generic word for magic at some point, although it seems to have been accompanied by a variety of synonyms, many of which seek to create distance while paradoxically bringing the reader closer to understanding.\textsuperscript{129}

The further one delves into medieval vocabulary, in stark contrast to modern scientific terminology, the more clearly its unspecific nature emerges.\textsuperscript{130} As one stands baffled, it is, however, possible to find incertitude pleasingly apt, an element of mystery befitting the subject. Thus we may approach an understanding of medieval attitudes towards paranormal activity by noting that the vocabulary of magic leaves us mostly with insinuations and vague implications, perhaps on purpose, as it is the nature of the occult to resist utter identification, arriving surreptitiously, catching us unaware.