The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North

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The vulnerability of youth, the perversity of magic and its strong connection to erotic desire are all played out in a narrative found in *Eyrbyggja saga*, a saga— as mentioned above— much concerned with the advent of Christianity and the heathen past with its sorcerous “forneskja” and its rituals, both open and clandestine. Indeed the clash between public and respectable ancient lore and clandestine nefarious magic lies at the heart of an episode found in the early part in the saga (chs. 15 to 20). On the one hand there is Geirríðr in Mávahlíð, daughter of Þórólfr twistfoot, later a notorious vampire, mother of the quiet and placid Þórarinn, and sister of the popular chieftain Arnkell, who is upon introduction said to be “margkunnig” (wise in lore). On the other hand is her neighbour, a widow called Katla, beautiful but unpopular, at least according to the saga, and her son Oddr is described as loud and talkative, a troublemaker and a slanderer.

The ancient wisdom is there to be harnessed, but it takes a youth to upset it. Conflict arises between these two women when Gunnlaugr Þorbjarnarson, the nephew of Snorri goði, begins to pay frequent visits to Geirríðr. This young man is “námgjarn” (eager to study) and in fact studies magic under Geirríðr. Katla is not pleased and once, when Gunnlaugr pays her a visit on his way to Mávahlíð, she remarks that more women may know a thing or two than Geirríðr. Katla insists that Gunnlaugr stay the night, but he continually refuses. Then, one evening, Geirríðr asks Gunnlaugr to stay with her, and seems to sense
mares in the air (“margir eru marlíðendur”), cryptically adding that fair is foul and foul is fair. She also remarks that Gunnlaugr does not seem very lucky at this moment. Such a portent is rarely innocent or proven unfounded in the sagas, and indeed, later that night, Gunnlaugr is found witless and bloody, his flesh torn from his bones. Katla and Oddr are quick to point the finger at Geirríðr and call her a succuba. Gunnlaugr’s foolish father then accuses Geirríðr of being a “kveldriða” (night hag) and is aided in seeking legal redress by the ubiquitous Snorri goði. However, Arnkell and other chieftains are allowed to and do swear an oath on Geirríðr’s behalf.

After a brief respite, the strife between Þorbjörn and Geirríðr’s son Þórarinn escalates and ultimately results in battle. Oddr Kótluson cannot be hurt since his mother has made him an impregnable tunic, a token that Katla’s boast that she too knows a thing or two was not an idle one. Geirríðr has also played her part in the conflict, inciting Þórarinn by calling his placid disposition unmanly. When Oddr begins to brag about having hewn off the hand of Þórarinn’s wife, after previously claiming that Þórarinn had done it himself by accident, Geirríðr seizes her chance and informs Þórarinn and Arnkell, guiding their wrath towards Oddr and Katla.

The two magnates seek Oddr at Katla’s abode, but she hides her son from them using illusions. It is not until Geirríðr herself joins in the search that Oddr is found. When Katla sees her rival, she remarks that now “Geirríðr trollit” (“Geirríðr the troll”) has arrived, knowing illusions will no longer suffice, rather labelling her rival a “troll” and making full use of the fear and loathing connected to the word. Geirríðr arrives in her black cloak, walks straight towards Katla and pulls a sealskin bag that she has fortuitously brought with her over her rival’s head, thus implying that there is a risk of Katla using her eyes to perform evil magic.
Oddr is now found and promptly hanged, one male youth slain in compensation for another. Katla herself is stoned to death, but before her execution, she proudly admits to having caused Gunnlaugr’s injuries. Furthermore she curses Arnkell for having remarked to Oddr, when the latter was about to swing from the gallows, that he had an evil mother. She claims that Arnkell will indeed get worse from his father than Oddr from her, which indeed comes to pass much later in the saga. Thus the episode carries heavy repercussions in the greater scheme of the saga. The primary protagonists in the drama of Gunnlaugr’s studies of the occult are, however, never mentioned again. The audience is not even told whether or not Gunnlaugr survived the ordeal, Geirríðr vanishes from the story, and the wicked Katla, unlike some other demonic figures of Eyrbyggja saga, remains dead.

In this episode, good and bad lore are presented as fundamental opposites, with Geirríðr’s wisdom, on the one hand, pitted against Katla’s witchcraft on the other. The primordial character of these actors is somewhat suggested by their symbolic names, Katla’s bringing to mind a magician’s cauldron and Geirríðr’s name indicating that she is indeed a “rider,” a transubstantiate being that may also be called a “fylgja,” “hamhleypa” or be grouped with “marlíðendr,” “kveldriður,” “myrkriður” and “túnriður”: hags, shapeshifters or peripatetic minds of sorcerers and witches. Their affinity with ghosts and the undead is unequivocal, and the attack on Gunnlaugr smacks of the actions of vampires and succubi. In spite of her suggestive name, though, it is not Geirríðr who acts the vampire but rather Katla who may, like a modern tv villain, even have committed the crime with the primary intention of framing her rival.

The method by which Geirríðr is vindicated is also highly relevant to the dichotomy the two women seem to represent. It is revealed early on that Katla is unpopular (“eigi við alþýðuskap”). On the other hand, it soon becomes evi-
dent that Geirríðr is very popular among those who count. Twelve men of good standing swear that she is innocent of the crime she is accused of, and thus the case against her is abruptly quashed.²⁰⁹ This was a well-known method to dispel witchcraft accusations for centuries, meaning that unpopular people were more likely to be accused of sorcery and, consequently, convicted and executed for the crime.

The nature of one’s relationship with the netherworld may thus descend into a popularity contest in which one is judged according to their relationship with the upper class. A woman with important family connections knows and makes use of “ancient lore” whereas the woman with no such connections, who is also possibly foreign, is a sorceress, a practiceneer of rather “dark arts.” A witch with important relatives may emerge unscathed from serious charges, even if opposed by the wily Snorri goði, whereas the witch with no noteworthy family hardly merits a trial at all, and is, as it were, already condemned by her own unpopularity. Witchcraft, like so much else, ends up being a question of upbringing.