The uncanny nature of past and parent is well encapsulated in the youngest and strangest of all of the great Sagas of Icelanders, Grettis saga. As already mentioned above, Grettir has a strangely contradictory role as both an outlaw and a defender against the dark arts, and thus is he essential to the human society that counts him as only a borderline member. This society needs Grettir but also has reasons to fear him. For them he is a benevolent monster that might prove more dangerous than those enemies he fights and expels.

On the eve of Grettir’s supposed readmittance into society, he is finally vanquished by one of his many opponents, though he can only be defeated by the wiles of an uncanny creature from the past. It is indeed his primary antagonist’s nanny, whom Grettir himself refers to as a “fjandi” (fiend, or demon), who consequently curses him and sends him an enchanted tree that causes an infection and a fatal illness that enables his persecutors to slay him. The rituals that she performs when enchanting the tree are somewhat reminiscent of the aforementioned witch Ljót’s practices: “Hon gekk ǫfug andsœlis um trúit ok hafði þar yfir mǫrg rómnum ummæli” (She walked backwards and widdershins round the tree and spoke many potent curses). The nanny’s queer practices would probably have qualified as ergi in the sense of the terms use in Ynglinga saga; one can imagine the rear end functioning prominently here, as it had in the witchcraft of Ljót, and for the same reasons, as the abode of the demonic.
This old crone, when first introduced in the saga, is presented as a kind of nearly forgotten relic from the pagan past:

Fóstru átti Þorbjörn Óngull, er Þuríðr hét; hon var mjök gömul ok til lítils fær, at því er mönnum þótti. Hon hafði verit fjölkunnig mjök ok margkunnig mjök, þá er hon var ung ok menn váru heiðnir; nú þótti sem hon myndi öllu týnt hafa. En þó at kristni væri á landinu, þá váru þó margir gneistar heiðinnar eptir. Þat hafði verit log hér á landi, at eigi var bannat at blóta á laun eða fremja aðra forneskju, en varðaði fjörbaugssók, ef opinbert yrði. Nú fór svá mörgum, at gjörn var hónd á venju, ok þat varð tamast, sem í ðæsnum hafði numit. Ok svá sem Þorbjörn Óngull var þrotinn at ráðagöðum, leitar hann þangat til trausts, sem flestum þótti ólíkligast, en þat var til fóstru sinnar, ok spurði, hvat þar væri til ráða at taka hjá henni.

(Þorbjörn the hook had a nanny called Þuríðr. She was very old and of little ability as people saw it. She had been very sorcerous and very magical when she was young and people were heathen. Now it seemed that she would have lost it all. But even though the country was Christian, there remained many of the embers of paganism. It had been the law in this land that it was not forbidden to sacrifice in secret or commit other ancient witchcraft but was punished with lesser outlawry if it became public. Now it happened to many that the hand did as it was accustomed and it became handiest to do as learned in youth. And as Þorbjörn was out of ideas he sought trust where it seemed most unlikely and went to his nanny and asked her what he could do.)

The ancient nanny, Þorbjörn’s surrogate parent, clearly represents “forneskja,” that kind of witchcraft which is named for and associated with the age before Christianity’s
arrival, which is to say with the heathen past. Her grounding in the past and her paranormal powers are intimately connected; she exemplifies witchcraft as an ancient, partly anachronistic, and yet still potent force.

She is pagan since she is aged, having been born and raised before the advent of Christianity in Iceland, just like the ancestors of the sagas’ authors. Her knowledge of old magic, eventually of pivotal importance in bringing about Grettir’s downfall, is connected to her advanced age, the one foot that she has stuck in the pagan past, the embers of which have still not cooled. Thus, perhaps even despite all appearances, the heathen parent is monstrous and dangerous in this narrative also, no less so than Þórólfr twist-foot in Eyrbyggja saga, though in this case not necessarily to her own nearest and dearest. It is implied that only such a monstrous anachronism could defeat Grettir, although in resorting to black magic to defeat the outlaw, Þorbjörn and his nanny manage to lose all support from society; even Grettir’s sworn enemies cannot condone their “fjǫlkynngi” and “forneskja.”

In this narrative, the nanny’s aid is presented as a most unlikely cause of the hero’s downfall, the crone herself being old and infirm, more or less helpless, and a nearly forgotten relic from the past. However, she is in the possession of an ancient power and this is no mean thing. The past is never dead, like a revenant it survives its own death and can through its magic continue to be disruptive and destructive. Grettir’s own mother had feared for his life when she last met him and exclaimed: “fátt er ram-mara en forneskjan” (few things are stronger than ancient magic). Too noble to be a witch herself, the hero’s kind mother still seems to sense the evil of the antagonist’s pagan mother wafting through the air.

There is strength in the past; its magic does not vanish so easily. Though the crone is presented as alien in her monstrosity, Þorbjörn had originally sought her aid, as the saga has it, since he was governed by old habits: it being
The troll inside you handiest to resort to the knowledge picked up in youth. The nanny, out of place in the Christian world though she is, is still strangely familiar. She is that past which originally served as wetnurse to the present, and, in turning to her, Þorbjörn is turning back to his roots, an accursed root consequently serving him well as the device causing Grettir his ultimate grief. The past is alien and yet we cannot be entirely alienated from it: our origins are not so easily shed and they must forever remain a part of us despite any wish to relinquish them.

The kind of alien intimacy that the pagan past might hold within a community that has recently turned to Christianity may be inherent in all humanity aware of its own more uncivilized bestial past. As already mentioned above, Þorbjörn’s nanny is not the only demonic parental figure appearing in the sagas. Human descent from trolls is a more universal theme — the entire past is demonic. And yet is it also familiar; though to be feared the troll may well also be our nanny, the one to whom we go to seek comfort.

Coda: The Ancestor

The medieval Christian Icelander was not a pure invention untainted by a sordid past, but rather as a recent convert he was precisely the opposite. The impulse to venerate their ancestors may have clashed with the acceptance of a new religion, which meant that the ancestors, however revered, where still a part of a murky otherness that must be kept in the closet. In Tove Jansson’s Moominland Midwinter, the protagonist, young Moomintroll, having woken up accidentally while the rest of his family is in hibernation, discovers several strange winter creatures, including one who lives in a cupboard in the family’s bathing-house. In
an angry rebellion against his closest winter comrade Too-Ticky, he lets this creature out, only to learn that it is an older type of troll (Förfadern, an “ancestor”) and, according to Too-Ticky, who had already warned Moomintroll about letting the thing out of the cupboard, it can be very mischievous and unpredictable.

Even though Moomintroll is originally discombobulated by the relationship, never learning to communicate with this strange primitive creature, and having to seek comfort in the family album full of dignified family members, he begins to enjoy its propinquity. In his complex constellation of feelings Moomintroll may represent modern humanity itself, having a firm faith in progress and our own superiority to the dark ages of our past, but nevertheless feeling a strong affinity for the past. This belief in progress was not necessarily shared by thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders, and yet they too felt themselves superior to their pagan ancestors by virtue of the new and better religion, thus making the past uncanny, at once noble and worthy of admiration but yet also inferior and nebulous.

The strange and primitive thing in the cupboard, which must at all costs be kept in check, may turn out to be our own ancestor, a primitive hidden version of ourselves, that bestial alien yet familiar creature we used to be. We cannot know it, we cannot but know it.