

Learning Magic in the Sagas

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Introduction

The image of magic spells being taught by more seasoned practitioners to others eager to learn them comports well with what can be deduced about the actual practice of witchcraft and magic in medieval Scandinavia. For example, at the conclusion of that most remarkable document on love magic, jealousy and sexual intrigue from ca. 1325, *De quadam lapsa in hæresin Ragnhilda Tregagaas*, Ragnhildr tregagás of Bergen claims that the incantation and performative magic she uses against her erstwhile lover are ones she learned in her youth from Solli Sukk.¹ In a similar case from Sweden in 1471, a witch in Arboga referred to in the surviving records as *galna kadhryn* ‘Crazy Katherine’ instructs Birgitta Andirssadotthir on how to prevent her lover from pursuing another woman.² Another late 15th-century Swedish case likewise describes

¹ “Jtem interrogata respondit quod hujusmodi incantationes hereticas in juventute a Solla dicto Sukk didicit quas in hoc casu practicavit,” Unger and Huitfeldt 1847-, n:o 93. On this case, see Mitchell 1997b.

² “...hon høgh hoffwudith aff enne katto och fik henne och tez likis eth oxahorn och sagdhe til birgittho iak far tik hornit fult medh vatn sla thet pa hans dør oc se inthe athir æpthir tik tha thu

how Margit halffstop says that she learned from another woman, Anna finszka, the spell by which she could bewitch a man from a distance.³ The Norwegian laws, especially *Borgarþings kristinréttir hinn eldri* and *Eiðsivaþings kristinréttir*, express deep concern that people should not consult with the Sámi: *En ef maðr fær til finna* is a phrase which occurs often, and would appear to mean, as Fritzner writes about it in its nominal form, *finnför*, “Reise til Finnerne for at søge Hjælp af deres Trolddomskunst.”⁴ All of the terms in this complex (e.g., *finnvitka* ‘to Finn-witch, i.e., to bewitch like a Finn [or Sámi]’),⁵ terms which seem only to appear in Norwegian and Icelandic sources, turn on the presumed greater skill, magic or learning of the Sámi, and the practice of their sharing this learning or its outcome with others. This is precisely the sort of scene presented vividly in *Vatnsdæla saga*, when Ingimundr, Grímr and their men inquire of a visiting Sámi witch (“Finna ein fjölkunnig”) about their futures.⁶ In addition to such testimony targeting the “lower” practices of magic, church statutes (e.g., the Arboga statute of 1412) and other ecclesiastical writing (e.g., the late 13th-century *Fornsvenska legendariet*) often cite the existence of grimoires (*fjölkynngisbækr*, *galdrabækr*) and other learning aids associated with “high” magic.⁷ Nordic books of this sort are in fact known, albeit only from the post-medieval period,⁸ and are frequently mentioned in legends and other folklore texts (e.g., *Rauðskinna*),⁹ suggesting wide-spread familiarity with the idea. A fully developed narrative about such a magic book is found in the 14th-century story of the Skálholt bishop Jón Halldórsson.¹⁰ That the idea of learned

borth gaar,” Noreen and Wennström 1935-, I:360. The question of anaphrodisiac charms of this sort are taken up in Mitchell 1998.

³ Carlsson 1921-44, II:418, for March 10, 1490 reads, “Stode vp j røtten j forgittens Erich Thuressons nerwaran ok viderkendés, ath hon hade thakit Hans Mille allen sin förlich bort pa sin mandoms wegna etcetera, huilkit hon widerkendés at hon tet giort hade V (5) aar sidan pa then stad ther han hade standit och giort sit watn fran sig. Samme dach widerkerndés halffstopit, ath Anna finszka hon lerdhe henne then trolldomen, som war her Laureuse deyja j Börchlinge wiid Vpsala. Sade hon, tet Anna singerska gaff Hans Mille kattahiernan, at hon tet for henne hade til standit. Samma dach bekendés forscriffne Margith, tet hon sigh ey hade scriptat eller beret j V (5) aar.”

⁴ Fritzner 1973 (Rpt. 1886). E.g., Keyser and Munch 1846-95, I:350-51, 362, 372, 389-90, 403.

⁵ *Finnr* glosses both Finn and Sámi; for simplicity’s sake, given the geography involved, I hereafter use Sámi.

⁶ See Sveinsson 1939, 29.

⁷ Gummerus 1902, 30-31; Stephens and Dahlgren 1847-74, I:165, “S. Jacob den Störres Saga.” I take this opportunity to note on a related matter that I am keenly aware that I am not in this essay carefully keeping separate the distinctions often neatly clustered around the ideals of “high” and “low” magic, although I do occasionally, as in this instance, refer to the dichotomy— this choice is not intended to gainsay the excellent work of Kieckhefer, Cohn, Monter and others in keeping this categorization in plainview, but I do find myself agreeing on the whole with Peters and, to some degree, Russell, with respect to these questions. See esp. Peters 1978, 166-70.

⁸ E.g., Lindqvist 1921.

⁹ Árnason 1954-61 (Rpt.), I:499.

¹⁰ Jónsson 1948, I:484-85. *Index Exemplorum* lists this episode as #737 “A student caused a storm when he read his master’s book of magic. When the master returned and read a chapter in

clerics dabbling in the magical arts ran deep in the Middle Ages is also to be seen in the theme of “Escape from the Black School” (ML 3000), found in connection with Sæmundr the Wise already in *Jóns saga helga*.¹¹

Such belief systems do not develop in isolation, of course, and it is useful to recall that the image of goetic books plays an important role in the New Testament, when Paul’s missionary work in Ephesus leads many citizens to repent their use of magic: “...a good many of those who had formerly practiced magic collected their books and burnt them publicly” (Acts 19:19). References to texts of this kind increase quite notably throughout western Europe from the late 13th and early 14th centuries on.¹² In particular, necromantic writings take on new dimensions at the court of Pope John XXII: he both approves of a commission to look into the misuse of such books and is himself subsequently said to be the object of necromancy.¹³ Such texts as *Lemegeton* (also known as the *Lesser Key of Solomon*) and other pseudo-Solomonic works figure regularly in discussions of witchcraft and sorcery thereafter, and the widespread importance of such books of magic is conveniently captured by the Scots (and now more generally, English) ‘glamour’, ‘glamorous’ (< ‘grammar’, i.e., magical books) in their sense of ‘enchanted’ and so on. Of course, there exists, and existed, a great difference between the image of the *lifkona* ‘herb-woman’ and *myrkriða* ‘hag’, on the one hand, and the *galdrakona* ‘sorceress’ and *taufirmaðr* ‘sorcerer, enchanter’, on the other, that is, between what might be considered “village-level” witchcraft of popular traditions and something more akin to the “high” magic of élite culture (cf. n. 7). In fact, there raged throughout the 13th and subsequent centuries a debate among the Neo-Platonists about the precise dividing line between such activities as *goeteia* (or theurgy), *maleficium* and simple charm magic, such as the wearing of amulets (e.g., the late medieval amulet from Dømmestrup, Denmark).¹⁴ Protective amulets were likely to have caused only small alarm among the authorities,¹⁵ but they were surely more concerned when they encountered reports of *Finnfarar*, *spá*, *fordæðuskapr*, and *tryllska*, such as are addressed occasionally in the law codes.¹⁶

Against the background of the normative documents, the more

the book of equal length, the storm ceased. [*Islensk Æventyri*] #23,” but this description in Tubach 1969 hardly gives a full impression of this variation of the popular “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” story, which is a evidently multiform of AT 325* *Apprentice and Ghost*.

¹¹ Jónsson 1948, II:22-25.

¹² Cp. the older reviews in, for example, Lehmann 1920, I:185-219 and more recent treatments, such as Peters 1978, 63-84, 110-37, and Kieckhefer 1997, 1-21.

¹³ Cf. Kieckhefer 1997, 1.

¹⁴ Cf. Peters 1978, esp. 110-12. Flint 1994 is entirely devoted to perceptions of beneficial and harmful magic in the early medieval period.

¹⁵ See Flint 1994, 243-48 on this question.

¹⁶ The examples enumerated here all mentioned in *Borgarþings kristinréttir hinn eldri*. See Keyser and Munch 1846-95. I:350-51.

ethnographic, performative data, and the non-Nordic *comparanda* (but, given the increased presence of Hanseatic communities in non-insular Scandinavia beginning in the early 14th century, not necessarily *extra patriam*), I take up this particular aspect of medieval Nordic belief systems concerned with witchcraft and magic, i.e. of magic as a learned art, as it is presented in the Icelandic sagas. And as readers soon discover, the sagas are filled with many different scenes involving magic and witchcraft, topics which have given rise to a series of studies looking to account both for the nature and representation of these phenomena.¹⁷ In my own work on various aspects of witchcraft in late medieval Scandinavia, including questions concerning transvection, diabolism, charm magic, and gender,¹⁸ I have largely turned to non-literary sources (e.g., trial documents, laws, synodal statutes) and non-insular traditions (mainly those of Sweden and Norway). The resources in these areas are relatively rich with respect to historical materials and institutional considerations of witchcraft and magic; moreover, as texts granted more credibility because of their presumed greater historical verisimilitude, rightly or wrongly, protocols, laws and so on are not perceived to be as troubled by questions of authenticity versus invention as are literary resources.

The Sagas and the comparanda

What then do the sagas have to say, and teach us, on these topics, especially on the issue of the careful study of witchcraft and the presentation of witchcraft as learned art? Most prominently, many students of the sagas think, for example, of Gunnhildr's attempts to "nema kunnostu at Finnum tveim" ("to learn sorcery from two [Sámi]") in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (ch. 32),¹⁹ and of Busla's offer to teach magic to Bósi in *Bósa saga* (ch. 2):

Busla hét kerling, hún hafði verit frilla _vara karls; hún fóstaði sonu karls, þvíat hún kunn mart í töfrum. Smiðr var henni miklu eftirlátari, ok nam hann mart í töfrum. Hún bauð Bósa at kenna honum galdra, en Bósi kveðst ekki vilja, at þat væri skrifat í sögu hans, at hann ynni nokkurn hlut sleitum [*other mss: með göldrum*], þat sem honum skyldi með karlmensku telja. [There was an old woman named Busla, who had been Thvari's concubine, and fostered his sons for him. Busla was highly skilled in magic. She found Smid more amenable than his brothers and taught him a great deal. She offered to tutor Bosi in magic as well, but he said he didn't want it written in his saga that he'd carried anything through by trickery instead of relying on his own manhood.]²⁰

¹⁷ So, for example, Strömbäck 1935; Eggers 1932; Jaide 1937; Morris 1991; Dillman 1994; and Jochens 1996; cf. Jochens 1993. See also Kieckhefer 1989, 48-53, who uses the Icelandic materials as a primary example for his discussion of magic in pre- and post-Conversion western Europe.

¹⁸ E.g., Mitchell 1997a; Mitchell 1997b; Mitchell 1998; and Mitchell 2000.

¹⁹ Aðalbjarnarson 1962 (Rpt. 1941), 135; Hollander 1991 (Rpt. 1964), 86. Hollander uses 'Finns' here.

²⁰ Rafn 1829-30, III:195-96; Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 200.

Although Bósi rejects Busla's offer of instruction, a scene where a male purposefully sets out to acquire special knowledge of this sort from a female teacher is alluded to in *Eyrbyggja saga* in the following way:

Gunnlaugr, sonr _orbjarnar digra, var námgjarn; hann var opt í Mávahlíð ok nam kunnáttu at Geirríði _órólfsdóttur, því at hon var margkunnig. [Thorbjorn the Stout's son, Gunnlaug, had a passion for knowledge, and he often went over to Mavahlid to study witchcraft with Geirrid Thorolf's daughter, she being a woman who knew a thing or two.]²¹

Perhaps the single most apparent component of the sagas' collective presentation of instruction in witchcraft is the degree to which "otherness" plays a vital role: overwhelmingly, it is women who teach, or offer to teach, *galdr*. Both Busla and Gerriðr are presented in this way, and when Gúðriðr reluctantly admits in *Eiríks saga rauða* that she can assist in the *seiðr* that is about to begin, she notes that it was her foster-mother, Halldís, who taught her the *varðlokur* 'warlock songs' ("...kenndi Halldís, fóstura mín, mér á ðslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur").²² In a few instances, such as that of King Haraldr's son, Rognvaldr réttillbeini, how the individual learns magic, and the gender of the person from whom it is learned, is not specified in the sagas.²³ But even though *Heimskringla* does not detail what the source of Rognvaldr's knowledge is, Snorri surely intends Rognvaldr's Sámi heritage through Snæfríðr, Svási's daughter, as the implied explanation. *Historia Norvegiæ*, on the other hand, maintains that Rognvaldr learns witchcraft in the "traditional" manner, that is, from a female elder, his foster-mother.²⁴

As the case of Rognvaldr demonstrates, "otherness" need not necessarily only be marked by gender, however: one of the best-known exceptions to the dominance of female teachers occurs when Gunnhildr learns magic from two male Sámi in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, but I submit that this exception rather proves than disproves the point, for Gunnhildr goes to the one place and among the one people who can in social terms trump the "otherness" of being a woman in Old Norse society, i.e., people of an entirely different language, religion and culture. In a very similar fashion, the 10-year-old hero of *Bárðar saga* is sent to live among the otherworldly creatures of the Dovre mountains:

_ar réð fyrir sá bergbúi, er Dofri er nefndr [...] Síðan vandi Dofri hann á alls kyns íáþróttir ok ættvísi ok vígfimi, ok eigi var traust, at hann næmi eigi galdra ok forneskju, svá at bæði var hann forspár ok margvís, því at Dofri var við þetta slunginn; váru þetta allt samman kallaðr listir í þann tíma af þeim mönnum, sem miklir váru ðokð burðugir, því at menn vissu þá engi dæmi at segja af sönnum guði norðr hingat í hálfuna. [A cave-dweller

²¹ Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957 (Rpt. 1935), 28; Pálsson and Edwards 1989 (Rev. ed. 1972), 59.

²² Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957 (Rpt. 1935), 207-08.

²³ Aðalbjarnarson 1962 (Rpt. 1941), 138.

²⁴ "Rognvaldus rettilbein, qui a quadam fitonissa in provincia Halthalandia nutritus est et in eadem arte mira ut nutix operatus est." Storm 1880, 104.

ruled there named Dofri [...] Then Dofri trained him in all manner of crafts, and genealogy, and battle skills, and it is not certain that he did not learn magic and witchcraft so that he became wise and gifted with foresight, for Dofri was learned in these arts. These were all called arts in those days by men of power and prestige; for nothing was then known of the true God here in the northern hemisphere.]²⁵

Similar constructions of magic and witchcraft also lie behind the instruction received by that most remarkable of saga villains, Ógmundur Eyþiólfsbani, who is said in the later versions of *Qrvar-Odds saga* (i.e., in the 15th-century AM 343, 4 t:o and those manuscripts derived from it) to have been created by the Permians by taking an ogress, stuffing her full of magic, and having her sleep with the king of the Permians, a great idolator (*blótmaðr*). The three-year-old Ógmundur is subsequently sent “...á Finnþork ok nam han þar allzkyns galdra ok gørningar, ok þá er hann var í því fullnuma, fór hann heim til Bjarmalands: var hann þá sjau vetra...” (“...to Lapland where he learned all sorts of magic and sorcery, and as soon as he’d mastered the arts, he went back home to Permian. By that time he was seven...”).²⁶ These examples illuminate and underscore the remark in *Ynglinga saga* that it is Freyja, a female hostage from the Vanir, who teaches the Vanir’s form of magic to the Æsir (“Hon kenndi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vønum var títt”), combining in her gender and her race the two forms of “otherness”.²⁷ The non-literary evidence, on the other hand, is much more mixed: in one case, it is a man, Solli Sukk, who teaches Ragnhildr how to cast the spell which brings on impotence; in another, it is a woman, initially called ‘Wise Katherine’, and later ‘Crazy Katherine’,²⁸ who gives similar instruction, and in another case, it is, significantly one suspects, Anna *finszka* ‘Anna the Finn’, who teaches Margit the magic spell.

Against the image of the trained practitioner of magic, carefully learning spell after spell, that is, what is generally referred to in the anthropological literature, following the practice of Africanists, as a ‘sorcerer’, against that image, one needs to place the occasional reference to whole families who— it would appear— are perhaps closer to what might be called witches in the Africanists’ sense, that is, people who do not acquire their powers through the careful study of grimoires or through apprenticeships, but have such powers because they are born with them. Thus, in *Laxdæla saga* we meet the family of the Hebridean Kotkell:

Kotkell hét maðr, er þá hafði út komit fyrir litlu. Gríma hét kona hans; þeira synir váru þeir Hallþjórn slíkisteinsauga ok Stígandi. _essir menn váru suðreyskir. Öll váru þau miök fiqlkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn. [There was a man called Kotkel, who had only

²⁵ Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsón 1991, 103; the translation is from Skaptason and Pulsiano 1984, 5.

²⁶ Boer 1888, 126; Pálsson and Edwards 1985, 81.

²⁷ Aðalbjarnarson 1962 (Rpt. 1941), 13. See Ross 1994, 206-11, and Näsström 1995, 82-85, on this point.

²⁸ Cf. Noreen and Wennström 1935-, I:354-55.

recently arrived in Iceland. His wife was called Grima. Their sons were Hallbjorn Sleekstone-Eye and Stigandi. These people had come from the Hebrides. They were all extremely skilled in witchcraft and were great sorcerers.]²⁹

Of course, it is far from an established fact that this family cannot have acquired its knowledge of magic by way of study, but the image projected by the saga seems to say otherwise. Everything in the description, one suspects, suggests that this is a nest of witches born to the trade.

An outlier in all of these representations— in many respects— is *Piðreks saga*, both for its treatment of the topic and its reported origins in non-Nordic traditions. In it, Queen Ostacia acquires magical knowledge from her step-mother in childhood in a most remarkable fashion: “hennar stiupmoðir var sua fiolkunning at hon firir gerði henni i barneskio oc kastaði til hænnar sinni fiolkyngi sua at hon er nu iamkunnig sem firir henne var hænnar stiupmoðir” [“Her stepmother was so well versed in magic that she cast a spell on her in her childhood so that she put all of her knowledge of magic in the child so that she was just as well versed in magic as her stepmother”].³⁰ The two-step process described— first, the step-mother enchanting (*fyrirgerða*) the child and, then, sending (*kasta*) her sorcery to her— is remarkable, both for the passivity with which the youthful ‘apprentice’ acquires her knowledge, as well as for the image of the magical arts being passed to a new generation wholesale. This scene in *Piðreks saga* underscores a meaningful isogloss that runs between the historico-ethnographic data and the literary presentations, namely, the fact that in the sagas, those interested in learning witchcraft and magic seem to acquire knowledge of it as a whole— Gunnhildr looks to “nema kunnostu” ‘learn magic’ from the Sámi; in her conversation with Bósi, Busla offers to “kenna honum galdra” ‘teach him witchcraft’; Gunnlaugr “nam kunnáttu at Geirríði Þórólfsdóttur” ‘studied witchcraft with Geirríðr Þórólfsdóttir’; Rognvald réttilbeini “nam fjolkynngi ok gerðisk seiðmaðr” ‘learned magic and became a sorcerer’. Thus, the presentation of how one acquires magical knowledge in the sagas generally encompasses a comprehensive program of study, similar to the kind of activity envisioned in the “Black School” (ML 3000), whereas in the more ethnographic evidence— Ragnhildr tregagás learning a love charm from Solli Sukk, ‘Crazy Katherine’ instructing Birgitta on how to prevent her lover from leaving her, Margit halffstop learning how to remove a man’s penis from a distance from Anna finszka— instruction in magic relates to single, specific charms. We should perhaps not be surprised when we discover that the non-literary Nordic materials, modest in number as they may be, nevertheless parallel what ethnographers have tended to find in living traditions of instruction in holophrastic magic, i.e., that such teaching is done with care and

²⁹ Sveinsson 1934, 95; Magnusson and Pálsson 1969, 125.

³⁰ Bertelsen 1905-11, II:268-69; Haymes 1988, 215.

for specific, individual spells.³¹ By contrast, Joahannes Nider relates a story in his *Formicarius*, whose events are said to have taken place at the end of the 14th century, and which provides a further useful point of comparison.³² In a region controlled by the city of Bern, a group of witches is revealed and a recent convert relates that after certain rituals, he had been given a potion to drink, which resulted in his acquiring knowledge of the magical arts.³³ Here is a scene much more akin to the scenario presented in *Piðreks saga* in particular, and comparable in important ways to the testimony of the other sagas, where magic and witchcraft are treated as complete complexes, great chunks of unbroken learning, with respect to how one acquires them.

Interestingly, Nider's tale is something of an exception, as medieval and early modern European sources outside the Nordic world do not typically examine at length the issue of instruction with respect to "low" magic (NB: the details of the witches' rituals are often provided in abundance but not with respect to learning). That this is so depends on the fact that the answer to the question of how a person learned to be a witch is assumed to be contained in the idea of the *pactum cum diabolo*. Reports, on the other hand, that astrologers, necromancers and other practitioners of "high" magic— whether a youthful William of Auvergne (Bishop of Paris 1228-49) or a similarly youthful Jón Halldórsson studying in Paris (Bishop of Skálholt 1322-39),³⁴ or literary creatures such as the Nectanabus of *Konung Alexander* or the Merlin of Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Merlínuspá*— require a period of apprenticeship seem to be widely accepted in the western tradition. Thus, one of the things that particularly distinguishes the sagas from most other medieval sources is their treatment of this topic, i.e., their willingness as a group to treat magic, especially malevolent "low" magic, as something *other* than an issue mainly tied to the pact with the Devil. This diabolical explanation is, by way of comparison, present in, and exploited by, a number of texts in the roughly contemporary *Fornsvenska legendariet* (e.g., "Mannen som hade förskrivit sig åt Djefvulen," "Riddaren och djefvulen," "Troll-Karlen Gilbert och Djefvulen, eller Folksagan om Silvester Påfve," "Theophilus och Djefvulen"), and is part of the explanation Bishop Auðfinnr offers for the behavior of Ragnhildr

³¹ See, e.g., Fortune 1932, 147-49.

³² It is tempting to set against the Icelandic materials the now infamous witchcraft trials in Toulouse in 1335, long believed (e.g., Russell 1972, 182-4) to be the earliest evidence of judicial torture for this kind of offense and very early testimony to quite lurid descriptions of copulation with Satan and other practices at the Witches' Sabbath, as well as the acquisition of this sort of magical knowledge. These cases also have something to say about our topic here, but since two scholars independently showed these materials to be 19th-century forgeries (Cohn 1975, esp. 129-31, and Kieckhefer 1976), appropriate and contemporary *comparanda* has come to be much more difficult to identify.

³³ Hansen 1901, 94; cf. Cohn 1975 204-05.

³⁴ William is a forceful and outspoken opponent of magic but describes in that context how, as a student, he had himself handled books of magic. See Peters 1978, 89-91.

tregagás in 1324-25.³⁵ In contrast to the texts which look to the Devil for explanation, instruction in witchcraft and magic as it is portrayed in the sagas suggests something much closer to *perceived* pagan practice. The sagas thus differ from the norms of European textual sources by not employing the increasingly widespread Continental view of witchcraft as deriving from a pact with the Devil, while at the same time, differing from known Nordic explanations of performed acts of magic and witchcraft by treating instruction in these areas wholesale, i.e., as a collective form of knowledge about magic, rather than as specific charm- or spell-based knowledge.

Conclusions

What inferences are to be drawn from this particular case of seeming “Icelandic exceptionalism”? Does the sagas’ apparently idiosyncratic treatment of instruction in magic and witchcraft when viewed in the broader perspective of medieval literary sources enhance or detract from our confidence in them as ethnographic sources in this area? Although not easily susceptible to simple answers— there is no clear ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ here— certain things about the sagawriters’ handling of the issue are suggestive. Specifically, the sagas’ collective presentation of learning witchcraft:

1. is typified by the significant role played by “otherness” (i.e., with respect to gender and ethnicity);
2. displays an awareness of acquired (= learned) versus inherited ability in the magical arts (i.e., of “sorcery” versus “witchcraft” in the usage of Africanists);
3. differs from Continental treatments in its studious avoidance of the *pactum cum diabolo* as an explanation for the practitioner’s knowledge of the art; and, finally,
4. tends to portray wholesale instruction in magic, an image at odds both with modern, observed *comparanda* and with what we know from non-literary sources about spells learned elsewhere in medieval Scandinavia.

In sum, then, the sagas portray the acquisition of magical knowledge in such a way as to demonstrate the influence of both Continental and native thinking about witchcraft and sorcery; they are neither wholly dependent on foreign ideas and configurations of witchcraft, nor are they wholly independent of such constructions either. In the end, they are, of course, our best sources for, and our most promising hope of, evaluating the modes of thinking in the world of medieval Scandinavia, but caution is certainly called for: with respect to how one learns magic and witchcraft, as in so many other ways, the sagas are fraught

³⁵ See Mitchell 1997a.

with artful— and alluring— evidentiary ambiguities.

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