

Gaelic love-tales in Iceland: a case of multiple introduction?

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1. Hálfdanar saga and its analogues

The Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* known as *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar* contains the story of a king's son whose father has gone to war on a neighbouring king, defeated him, and carried off and married his queen, though not before the other king's daughter, Ingigerðr, a lady who is very beautiful and as well-built as a man, has escaped with her foster-father. The queen comes to love her new husband, but when two jugglers arrive at her court and the younger one apparently tells her to leave the marriage chamber unfastened one night, she complies. Hálfdan falls into a trance that night while looking at the hand of the younger juggler, who until then has always worn gloves, and on awaking is told by its owner:

‘Eftir þessari hendi, gulli ok glófa skaltu leita ok preyja ok aldri náðir fá,
fyrr en sá leggr jafnvilugr afir i pinn lofa, sem nú tók á burtu’.

‘For this hand, ring and glove you will search and yearn and never find relief, until the one who now takes them away places them willingly again into your hand.’

The speaker then departs, the next morning the king is dead and both jugglers are gone, so Hálfdan sets out to seek them. He engages in a number of viking adventures, continues to search and be filled with longing, finally encounters the two jugglers, assists them, they are reconciled over the death of his father, and he marries the younger one, who is of course Ingigerðr. Reconciliation with the queen follows.

The saga contains traditional Scandinavian revenge and honour-killing themes, and a hero who is very well connected to a whole raft of legendary heroes. Beautifully constructed, and containing a complex plot with many inter-related adventures, the saga lays unusual emphasis on female consent for marriage arrangements. Were there no other similar themes in Old Norse literature the connection might be attributed to some romance source not vastly different from the many in which ladies, if usually inimical ones, turn up in pursuit of a relatively virtuous young man. However, the theme and the motifs of *Hálfdanar saga*, the yearning for an unobtainable lady who has arrived in the hero's land and sets him to seek her, are closely linked to three other groups of tales found in Old Icelandic literature and in a very few associated ballads.

The similarities are too close to be coincidental, and while there is a complex network of relationships between the tales in question, the quests for a lady to which a hero is bound, and in particular the specific formulae used for this binding, are very similar in Gaelic and Norse. There are also similarities in a medieval Welsh work, but the stories in question are not found in the general corpus of medieval literature. The themes are, in addition, fairly popular in Irish and Scottish Gaelic tradition collected in the last hundred and fifty years.

The three other groups of tales have been considered by a number of scholars, and in particular by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, who in 1975 published *Löng er för*, the completion of a lifetime's attempt to identify solid evidence for Gaelic influence in

Icelandic literature.¹ In the case of the story of Sveinn Múksson he concluded that his previously held conviction of Gaelic influence was unsound and that a literary text lay behind the apparent similarities to Gaelic tales; but that within the groups of inter-related tales involving a binding curse, there was strong indication of Gaelic ancestry. In their case they could not have been influenced by a single medieval romance work, for the linkages were too complex, and the evidence pointed to origins in Gaelic tradition. Further work on the themes has also indicated close connections between the Gaelic and Norse tales of this group.

The first of Einar Ólafur's three groups in which the Gaelic may be evident is the story of the 'loathly lady', often a princess under enchantment, who transforms to her true self when the hero kisses her. This theme is widely found in medieval literature, so Einar Ólafur did not pursue this, other than to point out that in Iceland a formulaic curse with direct Gaelic parallels was used to place enchantment on a person. The second group of tales involved a command, usually by a stepmother, that the hero go to the den of trolls and perform some specific deed. The third group concerns a stepmother or other opponent who commands that the hero searches for a lady for whom he is bound to yearn unceasingly. In these last two groups of tales, where the action leads to a quest for an unknown place, a formulaic curse is again used to bind the hero to action, and quite often he reacts by placing a curse on the opponent, who is required to stand in a high place until he returns. Sometimes the opponent then asks for both curses to be lifted but this is refused.

A fourth kind of tale, represented by *Hálfdanar saga*, can be identified, where the heroine herself puts a magic requirement on the hero to seek for her unceasingly. She then mysteriously departs, and the hero, without the opportunity or indeed the desire to counter-curse, sets off to find her, we assume in the original versions of the story to successfully find her, preserve her from danger which inflicts her, and find himself satisfactorily married to her. A partial Icelandic parallel is the first half of the later romance *Vilmundar saga viðutan*. An analogy is the fifteenth century Irish literary tale, the *Adventures of the Children of the King of Norway*. Similarities have been noted in the medieval Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen*.

While these are not the only quest tales found in the *Fornaldarsögur* and in the related literary and oral tales and ballads that appear to contain evidence of Gaelic influence, they have some special verbal affinities which, together with the nature of the tales, and the fact that they nearly all have very complex plots, make them particularly interesting. The tales contain a common group of motifs, and also the supernatural imposition of a binding command or curse, *geasa*, *álg*, enchantment imposed by one person on another, using a specific formula or 'run' which appears to have survived quite independently in the oral tradition of both the Gaelic world and Iceland over a long period of time. Even the variants within it appear to have survived as distinctive. The use and the wording, while closely related, moves from tale to tale

¹ The main exposition is the article in *Löng er För*, but the author also published a shorter version in English the same year. The *geasa/álg* themes have also been addressed by Christiansen (1959), Power (1987) and O'Connor (2000). There are other tales of supernatural quests in which appear to have Gaelic origins. For an overview of the discussion on Gaelic elements in Iceland, see Chesnutt (1968, 2001) and Gísli Sigurðson (2000).

within the group, suggesting that there was a pool from which the individual writers drew.

Hálfdanar saga involves love, marriage and revenge requirements in a much gentler setting than those of the Eddic poems. In the Irish *Adventures of the Children of the King of Norway*, and in numerous later oral tales of similar type, a young woman comes to land and sets an imposition – *geasa* – on the hero to find her and assist her in some way. The boat is usually self-propelled, the lady lovely but insistent, and the hero sets off on hot pursuit. We do not know if the love is unrequited on the lady's part, because at least in the literary version the hero fulfils the demand of the *geasa*, frees her land and kin from trouble, and promptly sets off in pursuit of some equally desirable but less demanding mate. The lady in *Vilmundar saga viðuitan* similarly gets acquired and then abandoned, but eventually the hero returns to marry her.

2. Other enchanted quests

Einar Ólafur's main example of the romance in which the hero is cursed by a malevolent stepmother to search and yearn for a certain lady, is the medieval Icelandic saga *Hjálmbés saga ok Ólvis*, of which two versions survive, one prose, one verse. *Hjálmbés saga* contains knightly themes and interwoven plots of a kind superficially reminiscent of some of the more complex products of medieval French literature. In *Hjálmbésrímur* the plot is slightly less complex, suggesting that the *rímur* may represent an earlier saga to which extraneous matter was added by the author of the extant prose tale. The main difference is that there are two initial reasons for the curse and consequent quest, both of which are found elsewhere within this pool of story and its Gaelic analogues.

Hjálmbér in the prose saga is a mature fifteen-year old, son of a recently widowed king. There arrives one evening a small boat, in which sits a lone woman. She becomes his stepmother, attempts and fails to seduce him, and then places *álgög* on him, and he responds with a counter-curse. She offers to have both lifted, but the hero refuses, goes on the requisite journey, achieves his quest, and the stepmother is punished by death.

The opening motivation for a quest or transformation can be the 'Phaedra motif', the attempted seduction by a stepmother, which is found in *Hjálmbés saga*, and is hinted at in the Irish *Art, Son of Conn*; and in the twelfth century poems *Grógaldr* and *Fjölvinnsmál*, which are apparently a single work and represent the oldest Norse version, another quest for an unobtainable lady. An alternative is that the stepmother is insulted, intentionally or otherwise, and initiates the action. This happens in the *rimur* version of *Hjálmbés saga* and in a Danish ballad, *Ungen Svendal*, which is apparently derived from *Grógaldr* and *Fjölvinnsmál*. Self-propelled boats with a single occupant spell danger in Irish tale, and this opening, or the alternative version in Gaelic folktales, is playing a game of *fidchell* – tables, chess, *skák* – are both used in medieval and later oral Icelandic tales. It seems that a variety of openings, all with Gaelic analogues were known, and that they moved around between tales.

Einar Ólafur saw the closest parallel in medieval Irish to be the story *Art, son of Conn*. In this story, the hero is cursed to find a lady, whose whereabouts are unknown:

'Thou shalt not eat food in Ireland again until thou bring with thee Delbchaem, the daughter of Morgan. Where is she? said Art. 'In an island amid the sea and that is all the information that thou will get.'

The yearning quest for the seemingly unobtainable lady begins. He endures various perils, eventually finds the lady, overcomes the difficulties of entering her castle, and the opposition of her relatives whom he fights, including her mother, Coinchend, who is to die at her daughter's marriage, and returns home successful. His own stepmother, who is not a villain on the scale found in *Hjálmpés saga*, is driven away.

Other significant motifs are also found in *Hjálmpés saga*. The lady he quests for lives with her father Hundingr, king of Hundingjaland, both of which echo Delchaem's mother's name – for both are derived from the word for 'dog'. *Hjálmpés saga* is packed with every possible motif from the genre, even to containing transformation curses, performed by the same stepmother on a previous family, and, while the chess motif is not used as an opening gambit, the sought-for lady turns out to be fond of the game.

3. Curses and retaliation

The greatest similarity between the tales in both Gaelic and Norse is the actual wording of the enchantment. The Norse texts are closest of all to certain Gaelic folk versions that have collected in relatively recent times, and the medieval literary versions appear truncated in consequence.

The enchantment in *Hálfdanar saga* is a relatively simple demand by someone who turns out to be marriageable. There is no retaliation by the hero, who sets out, and in the course of his adventures we are reminded three times of his yearning for the unobtainable lady. He finally hears of her possible whereabouts and sets out on the shortest route to find her, a journey through deep forests which takes him, though warned and protected, to combat with three increasingly fierce opponents; and then to the lady's castle, where she is standing on her battlements waiting to welcome him, and promptly send him to aid her foster-father in the crucial battle for which he has arrived just in time. He successfully ensures victory, which enables him to win Ingigerðr and to be reconciled with his father's slayer, her foster-father. In due course, on returning home, he is reconciled with his stepmother too.

Hálfdanar saga has a single enchantment imposed by a marriageable woman. Similarly, in *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, one of two heroines, living in the wild, loses her shoe. Her foster-mother assures her that it is impossible for her to seek it herself, for fear of the trolls, at which the lady replies that she will marry the man who finds it, a conversation fortunately overheard by the hero, though as he has already found her shoe, there is no quest to be had. All does not go smoothly, however, for he has to seek her out, her sister has to be provided for, and there is much unrelated matter to be got through before the marriage can actually take place. However, this opening sequence has many parallels in Irish oral tradition, particularly of those known as versions of *Loinnir mac Leabhair*, where one of the regular openings is the arrival of a young woman who places an injunction on the hero to find out where she put on her shoes and socks that morning, a demand that spurs the hero to action and usually

results, as in the thematically related *Hálfdanar saga* to him fighting a battle on her behalf in her own land before winning her.

However, matters are not so smooth when the stepmother or other initiator is vindictive and where the quest is intended not to help a lady in dire straits but to lead to the death of the hero. In these texts, of which *Hjálmpés saga* is the most obvious Icelandic version, the hero suddenly acquires magic powers and places a counter-curse. In an equivalent to the tale of a quest to trolls, most closely paralleled in Iceland in *Ála flekks saga*, a Gaelic folk tale has, as Reidar Th. Christiansen has it: 'I put you', the stepmother says, 'under geasa and under the affliction of years not to sleep a second night in the same bed, and not to eat a third piece of bread at the same table, until you bring me the head of the Brown Bull of the Western World'. The hero retaliates: 'I request and command according to my bargain, that the queen shall stand on the highest tower of the place until we come back, or she finds out that we are certainly dead, with nothing but a sheaf of corn for her food and cold water for her drink, if it should be for seven years and longer'. Without the counter-curse, a version in Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire* can be translated: 'I put you under geasa and the affliction of years that you do not eat two meals from one table, nor sleep two nights in one bed until you see the woman with hair black as a raven, her skin as white as snow and her two cheeks red as blood.'

In a Scots Gaelic variant, crosses and spells are put on a king's son by a giant who send him to finds how the Great Tuairisgeal met his death. The king's son asks for release and is refused. He promptly enchant the giant to remain facing the west, but with no food other than what the north wind draws from the glen of barley and no water but what the east wind drives from the loch, until the king's son returns. The giant not surprisingly requests they both release the other. This version also has an inset stepmother tale, the slaying of the villain with the sword of light, the usual quests, and the hero winning his lady, but as in many versions of the folktale categorised in the Aarne – Thompson *Types of the Folktale* as AT 313, as in *Hjálmpés saga*, he then forgets her until recognizing her on her wedding day.

The Icelandic wordings are: 'I lay it on you that you shall nowhere have peace, neither night nor day, until you see Hervör, the daughter of Hunding...' Hjálmpér retorts: 'You shall lay no more on me for your mouth shall stand open, for I think it of no worth to yearn for a king's daughter. There are two high crags standing down by the ships' berths. There you shall stand, with one foot on each crag, and four of my father's thralls shall kindle a fire beneath you, and on nothing shall you live but what the ravens bring you, until I return.'

In *Iluga saga Gríðarfóstra* two women are transformed. A counter-curse goes: 'I declare that with one foot you shall stand on this bower, and with another on the king's palace. Thralls shall kindle a fire directly between your feet. The fire shall burn both night and day, and below you shall be burnt by the fire and above you shall freeze, so that you never have ease. But if we, mother and daughter, come free of this álög, then you shall die and fall down into the fire.'

The Irish and Scots became so familiar with the theme that it becomes burlesque, when the giant, hag or other rudester coming by boat or otherwise to put *geasa* on the hero, arrives not only with a chessboard but with a steeple on their shoulder to assist their own punishment. The salient elements, the imposition of *geasa*,

and if appropriate the counter-imposition, remain, with the restlessness, lack of food, and enchanted yearning for a distant, unknown woman. The counter-imposition on a villainous character to remain where they are, on natural features or spread-eagled between buildings also remains, whether they are to crumble into dust or to be at the mercy of the elements until he hero returns, then to die. An Icelandic addition is a fire between the stepmother's legs, a suitable punishment for lasciviousness where this has been the cause but rather harsh when used out of context, for example where a stepdaughter is transformed. It may be that taken from tales of the punishment of the damned. The mouth forced open is a common Icelandic method of dealing with cursing villains of both sexes. The curse is also in a Faroese ballad, *Drósin á Girtlandi*, which is possibly derived from Icelandic sources where the stepdaughter is enchanted.

Both in the Gaelic world and the Norse the stepmother may suggest lifting the two curses, but this is rejected – a detail used the author of the prose *Hjálmpés saga* which is not present in the *rimur*.

In the case of *Háfdanar saga*, there is no inimical motif, no attempted seduction, and consequently no counter-curse. However, the simpler version may also indicate something of the development of the theme.

4. *Origins of Geasa*

The tales in their various related forms retained a place until recently in the Gaelic storytelling repertoire, but there are only a few examples in Icelandic folk tradition, such as the tale of Þorsteinn Karlsson.² In the sagas the quests are undertaken by Viking types, the otherworld is in the north, and the women, in spite of their unusually dominant position, are not allowed much freedom.

The use of *geasa* is widespread in the Gaelic world, in quest and transformation tales, and sometimes as in *Hjálmpés saga*, for both in the same story. The magic formulae make the tales work, but the attraction of the half-forgotten certainly appears to be at work too. If *geasa*, Scots Gaelic *geasan* were simply a matter, as it is in traditional Gaelic hero tales, of a negative limitation, it would not greatly differ from internationally-known themes of taboo. It is indeed used this way, in particular when referred to in the singular *geis*, and its survival in this form medieval romance has been noted. But the plural form *geasa* refers to a positive injunction, in particular to perform a specific and perilous action, like the plural Icelandic word *álog*, that which is laid on, imposed. Like *geasa*, it is laid by one person upon another rather than being, like *geis*, an attribute of a person ordained by their birth or heroic qualities.

The words *geis*, *geasa*, come, according to *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish language* (G.56-8), from *guidid*, 'prays'. John Revell Reinhard interpreted this as prayer-demand, a concept which invokes the use of power. It is a solemn affair, and the action may be initiated by persons not normally able to perform supernatural acts. In nearly every case, they only get one chance at imposing *geasa*, and for the remainder of their tale, heroes, whether Gaelic or Norse, have to rely on the normal

² Text in Jón Árnason v: 149-51, German summary in Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1929: 70-1.

dosage of heroic strength, friendly magical helpers and weapons with particular qualities.

David Greene followed a suggestion by T.M. Charles-Edwards that the origin of the concept of *geasa* can be found not in the world of supernatural activity but in early Irish legal and cultural concepts. For a hero to reject the advances of a presentable woman was to expose himself to ridicule and her to dishonour. The dishonour is not merely for herself, for this was inextricably bound up with the honour of her male kinsfolk. Concepts of kin honour lie, he believes, behind the stories of Deirdre and Noisiu and Gráinne and Diarmaid, in which the hero finds himself in a dilemma when he is chosen by a marriageable woman. The ensuing tragedy occurs when incompatible demands on honour are made.

Another level of complexity can be charted. The twelfth-century Book of Leinster contains the tale *Fingal Rónáin*. In this case the hero is desired by his own stepmother. Like the Norse heroes he avoids her, but she pursues him in private. He repudiates her advances as violently as Hjálmpér, insulting her, so she avenges herself by accusing him to his father and he is duly slain.

A third stage seems to have developed, presumably when the underlying concepts of honour were waning in popular understanding. This concerns a marriageable women who desires a man, and Geasa provides a story in which she can express it honourably and enable him to assist, and therefore receive the sanction of, her male kin. This seems to occur in Ireland in *The Adventures of the Children of the King of Norway*, and in the many folktales with similar themes, and in Iceland by *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*.

A fourth stage also occurred, perhaps when the concepts of honour had waned still further. Gaming episodes, which may have been originally a separate ingredient, were included. They appear in tales where the element of sexual honour, and indeed honour in general, is present only in muted form. The earliest is *Tochmarc Étaine*, which opens with a chess game between two men. A woman is present, who makes no advances but transpires to be the forfeit when the hero wins the third game. Here there is no element of *geasa*, but the story is not greatly different from tales where the forfeits from chess form part of the *geasa* – initiated quest. It is possible that two themes came together as the understanding of the concepts of honour became weaker, and that the combination assisted the development of tales using *geasa* which involved other than potentially marriageable women. In Iceland, as in the Gaelic world, hags and male villains can both impose *geasa* and be the object of a quest. While one of the recent writers on *Hjálmpés saga*, Ralph O'Connor, warns against the assumption of a linear development, it seems that all four interlinked possibilities, the element of simple sexual honour and insult; the desire of a woman for her stepson leading to a *geasa* injunction; the desire of a marriageable woman for a certain man; and the addition of the gaming episodes permitting the widening of the types of quests now available, all seem to have been current in the period in which the tales reached Iceland, and were reworked there into a new cultural tradition.

In this case, the element of supernatural magic which makes the tales so attractive was the last element to be worked in. The core tale was about honour and tragedy, themes which were very suitable for tales of the Viking Age, even in the muted manner in which it is treated in the *Fornaldasögr* and which distinguishes

them from the translated French romances or their home-made equivalents written about the same time or shortly afterwards.

5. Conclusions

The enchantment to yearn for an unknown and distant lady give a unique touch of mystery to these stories, which makes them attractive to the modern reader. While the original audience may have had no sense of their origins, they do appear to indicate multiple introduction of well-known stories from one linguistic and cultural area to another. The common pool of opening motifs that pass between stories with a degree of fluidity show that the original authors were aware of the common elements in these inter-related tales. The Gaelic analogues are so close that a number of versions must have arrived in Iceland at a time when all four variants were current in the Gaelic world, and then adapted and acclimatised. Similar tales from other parts of the Scandinavian world are found only in one Danish and a very few Faroese ballads. There are no close analogues in French romance, where occasional echoes of the themes may be found, but not the complex inter-relationships, the detailed motifs, or the formulaic curses and counter-curses with their close verbal similarities. Gaelic folktales collected relatively recently contain similar formulae and are in fact much nearer in this to their Norse counterparts than are the Irish literary tales.

It appears that the tales arrived in the Viking Age, when the Celtic element in the Icelandic population arrived, willingly or otherwise. There may have been sporadic later contact, mainly through the Western Isles of Scotland, but the evidence indicates that medieval contact did not as far as we know involve telling tales about a magical world, and was, moreover, usually through Norway, where tales of this kind have not survived.

These tales with diverse but related alternative openings, similar themes, and very similar verbal formulae to pronounce curses, survived for centuries in oral tradition and have at times been frozen in literature. In Iceland they show how themes were transposed to another culture and adapted to existing oral tradition, and to cultural and climatic circumstances while retaining their distinct themes, including the forcefulness of their women characters. Indeed, a modern audience may have some sympathy for the stepmothers, who are either married to an older man and will see any children they have supplanted by an adult stepson, or who are engaged in a power struggle with a stepdaughter; and one of the Icelandic oral versions, *Himinbjargar saga*, contains a good stepmother.

These groups of related tales in Iceland all tell of visits to the otherworld. An abiding feature of Gaelic story is the strangeness and freshness of the perilous otherworld. It was felt by the Norse settlers of Iceland and their slaves in a strange land, and remains attractive in our time with its own ways of creating a Celtic past.

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