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Two wise women and their young apprentice

A miscarried magic class

1

Magic training in literature did not begin with Harry Potter and The Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In this article, I will discuss a different narrative, focused on a less institutionalized school of magic, and use this to examine the relationship between magic knowledge and gender. My reason for largely confining this study to one text is simple: Magic is an extremely complex subject.¹ So is gender. So is otherness. I will thus be focusing on one text, indeed on a single episode from a larger text, in an attempt to not have to discuss each and every example of magic in mediaeval Iceland (or Scandinavia or the whole of Europe) and in the end saying very little about them. This discussion of magic and gender is partially a reaction to a new and thought-provoking book by Catherina Raudvere (2003: 112–18). She in turn is partly reacting to thought-provoking studies by Helga Kress and others (e.g. Helga Kress 1993: 34–60; Jochens 1991). Although

¹ François-Xavier Dillmann's recent massive and learned study (2006) certainly often serves as a warning to those who would wish to draw sweeping conclusions about the subject.

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Abstract: This article is concerned with an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga*, the feud between the two wise women Geirriðr and Katla, who vie for the attentions of the same young man as a student of magic. Through close reading of this episode, the author examines the relationship between age, knowledge and gender. He discusses the two women as mother figures and suggests that they might be representations of the uncanny side of the mother as an archetypical figure. The author also draws attention to the problematic relationship between gender and masculinity, represented by the eager magic student Gunnlaugr.

Keywords: Old Norse magic and mythology, *Eyrbyggja saga*, gender, knowledge.

they differ in their interpretations of the relationship between magic and gender, both agree that the relationship is indeed a real and an important one. The narrative I am about to discuss is, in my opinion, a good example of that.

Eyrbyggja saga is a saga of the Snæfellsnes region, often dated to around 1250, which means that it was composed, in its present form, in the death throes of that system which is often referred to as the Icelandic commonwealth.² Not surprisingly, in times of change, its subject is the past and its attitudes towards the past are very ambiguous, or even problematic. The past in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not only a time which has passed, it is also the home of various strange beings, rituals and beliefs that are interesting but still fundamentally opposed to the world order of the present, which in this instance is the catholic world view of 13th century Europe. The word “forneskja”, which may mean ancient lore, heathen wisdom or simply magic, is actually quite rare in the sagas,³ frustratingly so if one would like to construct grand theories around it. It occurs, for instance, just once in *Eyrbyggja saga*. This does not necessarily mean that the connection between sorcery, heathenism and the past is not there. In fact, the saga is characterized by a distinct interest in various kinds of ancient beliefs, superstitions and rituals, some of which public and respected, others secret and detested.

The clash between public and secret ancient lore is played out in an episode somewhat early in the saga (chs. 15 to 20). We are introduced to the first of our three protagonists, Geirriðr who lives in Mávahlíð along with her son Þórarinn. This Geirriðr is the granddaughter of a popular Geirriðr who originally settled in Borgardalr and apparently ran one of the first public houses there. Her son was the viking Þórólfr lame-foot who later became a notorious ghost, or vampire or incubus

² The oldest surviving manuscript of the saga is AM 162 E fol. from the thirteenth century (for a detailed discussion of the manuscripts, see Scott 2003). Einar Ólafur Sveinsson (1935: xliii–lii) has argued that the saga was probably composed around 1220. Bjarni Guðnason (1993: 220–23) has, on the other hand, argued that *Eyrbyggja* was several decades younger, composed around 1265. For my purposes in this article, the exact dating of the saga is irrelevant.

³ I only found fifteen examples in the Orðabók Háskólans wordlist, located on its website (<http://www.lexis.hi.is/corpus/leit.pl>). Three come from *Grettis saga*, two from each of *Bárðar saga*, *Hallfredar saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Heimskringla*. The other examples are from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Sörla saga sterka* (a legendary saga). In seven of the examples, the word occurs in combination with another term (galdrar three times, illr átrúnaðr twice, heidni and kynngikraptar once each). In thirteen out of 15 examples, the term clearly means either magic or heathen practices.

— I will discuss some of these terms later.⁴ His children are the second Geirriðr, the one in Mávahlið who is the hero of our tale, and the chieftain Arnkell. We learn right away, in ch. 15 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, that this Geirriðr, the second one, is “margkunnig” (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 28) (“knowledgeable about magic”) (Quinn 1997, 142), stated somewhat neutrally. And close by lives another woman with her son, a widow called Katla. She is a beautiful woman but “not popular”, as the saga has it. Her son is described as a loud and talkative man, a troublemaker and a slanderer. Thus: a good woman who knows ancient lore, and a widow who is unpopular and with a troublesome son.

The duel between these two women starts when Gunnlaugr Þorbjarnarson, the nephew of the famous and wise chieftain Snorri goði, starts visiting Geirriðr. This young man is said to be “námgjarn” (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 28) (“eager for knowledge”) (Quinn 1997, 142), and starts studying magic with Geirriðr.⁵ This displeases Katla and once, when Gunnlaugr stops at her place on his way to Mávahlið, she says that more women may know a thing or two than Geirriðr. Katla keeps inviting Gunnlaugr to stay the night but he always refuses. Then disaster strikes. One evening Geirriðr asks Gunnlaugr to stay because she seems to sense mares in the air (her actual words are: “margir eru marliðendur”) (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 28), and somewhat cryptically adds that an ogre may hide beneath fair skin. She also remarks that Gunnlaugr does not seem very lucky at this moment. Indeed, she turns out to be right in that respect. After that night, Gunnlaugr is found unconscious and bloody, his flesh torn from the bone. Katla quickly points the finger at Geirriðr and claims that she is a night-hag, a succuba. Gunnlaugr’s somewhat foolish father believes her, accuses Geirriðr of being a “kveldriða” (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 29) (“night-rider”) (Quinn 1997, 142), and is aided in this lawsuit by Snorri goði. However, her brother Arnkell and other chieftains are allowed to swear an oath on her behalf. Thus Gunnlaugr is out of the story (*Landnámabók* (p. 112) has him dying soon afterwards), and for now the duel between Geirriðr and Katla is at rest.

⁴ On Þorólfr and his nature as a ghost, see Ármann Jakobsson (2005a). He is, indeed, also a troll, see Ármann Jakobsson (2007b).

⁵ This is not the only episode in the Sagas of Icelanders where the study of magic is featured (see Hermann Pálsson 1997: 131–40; Dillmann 2006: 591–94). In *Bárðar saga*, it is told that Bárðr studied magic with the mountain-dweller Dofri in Norway (*Bárðar saga*, 103). Unlike Gunnlaugr, he survived but the saga is vague on the subject of his use of magic, and whether he is, in fact, to be considered human at all (see Ármann Jakobsson 2005b).

The strife between Þorbjörn and Geirriðr's son Þórarinn escalates and eventually results in battle. In this battle, Oddr Kǫtluson cannot be hurt since his mother had just made him a tunic and no weapon could touch him. This is, as it were, the first real indication that Katla's boast that more women may know a thing or two is not an idle one (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 34 and 36) (Quinn 1997, 145–46). Geirriðr has also played her part in this conflict, inciting Þórarinn by claiming that his disposition is unmanly (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 36) (Quinn 1997, 145). Thanks to his magic tunic, Oddr emerges unscathed from the battle but soon starts boasting about having chopped off the hand of Þórarinn's wife, although he had claimed at the time that Þórarinn had done that himself by accident (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 37 and 50) (Quinn 1997, 146 and 152). Geirriðr soon picks up on this and tells Þórarinn and Arnkell, thus directing their wrath towards Oddr and Katla. As Miller (1986: 110–16), has noted, they would in any case be ideal scapegoats for what has happened.

Arnkell and Þórarinn go and seek Oddr at Katla's abode, but she hides him from them, using simple illusions.⁶ It is not until Geirriðr herself joins the search that Oddr is found. Katla is understandably not pleased, saying that now "Geirriðr trollit" (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 53) ("the troll, Geirriðr") (Quinn 1997, 154) is there, illusions will not suffice. Geirriðr arrives in her black cloak, walks directly at Katla and pulls a sealskin bag over her head, thus implying that Katla is a witch who might perform evil magic with her eye, as witches and sorcerers were known to do in the sagas.⁷ Then Oddr is found and hanged, and Katla is stoned to death. Before her death, she proudly admits having caused the injuries of Gunnlaugr. Furthermore she curses Arnkell for having said to Oddr, when he was kicking on the gallows, that he had an evil mother. To this Katla replies that Arnkell will get more evil from his father than Oddr from her, which is indeed how things turn out much later in the saga (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 54) (Quinn 1997, 154). Thus this small episode has important repercussions in the greater scheme of the saga. The main protagonists in the drama of Gunnlaugr's magic studies are, however, never mentioned again. We are not told whether Gunnlaugr

⁶ This narrative closely parallels an episode in *Brennu-Njáls saga* (216–20) where Þráinn Sigfússon hides Hrappr from the wrath of Earl Hákon. On the ritualistic nature of this event, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1997: 151–53.

⁷ The evil eye of the sorcerer is a well-known theme from other sagas, such as *Laxdæla saga* (107 and 109) and *Vatnsdæla saga* (70). See also *Gísla saga*, 60, and examples in Hermann Pálsson 1997: 120–21.

lives or not, and Geirriðr vanishes from the story, along with the wicked Katla, who, unlike many other evil beings in *Eyrbyggja saga*, happily stays dead.

2

For those interested in magic and trolls, this small episode has many interesting aspects (see e.g. Dillmann 2006: 332–35, 432–39, 527–37 and 577–78; Raudvere 2003: 186–95). I will only discuss three in detail here, those pertinent to the theme of gender and magical knowledge. One is the important difference between good and bad knowledge, represented in this narrative by the magic of Geirriðr, on the one hand, the witchcraft of Katla on the other. Another aspect is the role of the apprentice in this narrative. The third is the role of the old woman, and the relationship between magic and older women.

There are many tiny details in the narrative which to my mind reveal that it is, at least partly, symbolic. For example, the name Katla is a recognizable witch name from *Harðar saga* (p. 63, see also Dillmann 2006: 381–82), where it is used as a sobriquet. It is derived from the name Ketill, which means “kettle”, an instrument that can be used for brewing magic potions (Finnur Jónsson 1908: 289; Lind 1920–21: 191).⁸ Her name alone thus positions Katla as a sorceress, a somewhat undignified one, unlike Geirriðr, whose name suggests valkyries, Geir- (“spear”) being a popular prefix of valkyrie names (Geirsköggul, Geirϕnul, Geirahϕð) (Norrœn fornkvæði: 15 and 84; Edda Snorra Sturlusonar: 40; cf. Guðrún Kvaran & Sigurður Jónsson 1991: 241). The second part (-riðr) refers to riding, and valkyries may occasionally be seen riding in the air in Eddic texts (Norrœn fornkvæði: 15). Katla, however, uses this riding to her advantage when she accuses Geirriðr of a different kind of riding, of being a night-hag.⁹ This apparently means a creature not unlike the Central European *mora*, who may be described as a succuba or a vampire.

There are some instances of “riders” and other such beings in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. They have various names, such as “fylgjur”, “hamhleypur”, “marliðendr”, “troll”, “kveldriður”, “myrkriður” and

⁸ Torfi H. Tulinius (2004: 25–34, 71–73) has argued convincingly that the name Ketill is extremely important in *Egils saga*, as a structural element but it may also have symbolic associations with the kettle.

⁹ The connection between witches and riding is also well-known in various phases of history (see e.g. Flint 1991: 116–26; Rose 1962: 106–29).

“túnriður”, sometimes they are in the shape of an animal, and in fact these beings may be classified both as shape-shifters, and at the same time regarded as the travelling souls or minds of sorcerers and witches (see Strömbäck 1935: 160–90; Strömbäck 1975; Hermann Pálsson 1997: 97–111). The terminology is a subject for a separate study. What I would like to do here is merely to point out the variety of names used for these phenomena. And they do not only occur in the North, but are, in fact, very much like various other creatures of the folk beliefs of different people in different phases of history, such as the mora, the succuba, and the vampire, which represent more or less the same danger, in that they “ride” their victims and suck the life out of them. According to the Hungarian folklorist Éva Pócs (1999: 32), these creatures, the moras,

are generally human beings who are able to send their souls out at night while in a trance. Thus they can make journeys by assuming the shapes of animals (snakes, butterflies, mice, hens, cats). They infiltrate peoples dwellings as incubi, confinement demons, or even as vampires, and they “ride upon” or torment people.

The affinity with ghosts or the living dead is clearly present,¹⁰ and Pócs also mentions that another name for the mora is “night-goer” (1999: 46). The parallels with the Gunnlaugr case are thus close.

As it turns out, perhaps not altogether surprisingly, it isn’t actually Geirriður who is the vampire but Katla herself who has deviously been accusing her antagonist of her own crimes. The way that Geirriður is vindicated is also significant to the study of magic. It is revealed in the beginning that Katla is unpopular (“eigi við alþýðuskap”) (Eyrbyggja saga, 28). Although nothing is said about Geirriður, it is soon evident that she is, on the other hand, very popular with those who count. Twelve men come forward and swear that she is innocent of this crime and thus the case against her is quashed (on the historical veracity of this, see Eyrbyggja saga 30 note 3). Studies of later cases of witchcraft trials in Iceland, and probably elsewhere as well, have revealed that unpopular people were more likely to be accused of sorcery and seemed to be in most danger of being convicted and burned at the stake (Ólína Þorvarðardóttir 2000: 316; cf. Asmark 2006: 115).

¹⁰ Keyworth (2006) has recently drawn attention to the affinities between Icelandic ghosts and Eastern European vampires, as I have also done myself (Ármann Jakobsson 2005a).

The sorceresses' apprentice is at the heart of this conflict and yet he is strangely passive. The desirable teenager Gunnlaugr comes across as vulnerable, almost like an object that the two wise women both want for themselves. This desire becomes evident in the exchange between Gunnlaugr and Katla when he stops at her place on his way to Mávahlíð. She immediately asks whether he is going to Mávahlíð "ok klappa um kerlingar nárann" (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 28) ("to stroke the old woman's groin") (Quinn 1997, 142), revealing perhaps that no matter whether Gunnlaugr is providing Geirriðr with sexual favours for his tutoring or not (we have no particular reason to believe it), Katla attributes Geirriðr's interest in him to lust and is herself lusting after the youngster. He replies that Katla is no younger than Geirriðr and thus reveals that age is also an issue. This is indeed an episode concerned with age and gender, with young men and old women, where the old women have the knowledge and the power and the young man is the object of desire, not merely as a desirable young man but as a student of magic. Modern authors like Philip Roth, and others, have written at length about the master and student, an older man and a younger woman. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the situation is reversed. The women have the desired knowledge, the young man has his youth and is sexually desirable (on this motif in other sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson 1998). But he turns out to be reluctant to accommodate the women. He not only denies time and again to spend the night in Katla's home, but his undoing is his refusal to spend the night of Mávahlíð, when Geirriðr invites him.

Gunnlaugr may be said to be further objectified when he is ridden by the vampire. As a victim, he is vulnerable, not merely the object but also the prey. Indeed his main role in the episode is to be victimized, and indeed young men in the sagas are sometimes portrayed as vulnerable, not unlike women in that respect (see Ármann Jakobsson 2003). Somewhat contrarily, as the desired male, he also has all the power, the power to refuse both women to spend the night at their abode, to choose his own master in the occult, and, somewhat in the fashion of other Old Norse teenagers, he is not afraid of these women, although perhaps he should have been.¹¹ As an apprentice, he is not just their conquest but also their heir. Geirriðr and Katla both desire him as a pupil, if nothing else. He is a surrogate son to both these women,

¹¹ I am thinking of the example of Sigurður Fáfnisbani. The theme of the fearless youth obviously requires a separate study, which I am undertaking at present.

whose common trait is that they are both mothers, that is how they are introduced in ch. 15 of *Eyrbyggja saga*.

If we were to regard this symbolic episode as a “family drama”, following Derek Brewer (1980), Geirriðr and Katla are both playing the role of a surrogate mother. Gunnlaugr’s real mother does not really figure in this episode, although she is one of the central figures of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þuríðr at Fróðá. Some other important witches in the sagas are mother figures, such as Ljót in *Vatnsdæla saga*, or the nanny of Þorbjörn ǫngull in *Grettis saga* (cf. Dillmann 2006: 143–67 and 422–31). But before venturing into the subject of age, there is the issue of gender. Magic is stereotypically feminine in most mediaeval European sources (see Kieckhefer 1989: 29–33; Russell 1972: 279–84; Graf 1997: 189; Flint 1991: 122–23). In Old Norse texts, there are some striking examples of this, which have been much debated by scholars.

To begin with, in *Ynglinga saga* (ch. 7), the “seiðr” of Óðinn is described as follows: “Óðinn kunnir þá íþrótt, svá at mestr máttur fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ǫrlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mǫnnum vit eða afl ok gefa ǫðrum. En þessi fjölkynngi, er framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skammlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kennd sú íþrótt” (*Ynglinga saga*, 19) (Óðinn knew the most powerful skill which is called magic and could practice it himself so that he could know men’s fate and things not yet passed, and he could cause men grief or make them sick or kill them, and take their wits and powers and give to others. But this witchcraft, when practised, is so queer that men cannot do it without shame so that the goddesses had to learn this skill). This seems to clearly indicate that both “seiðr” and “ergi” do not fit very well with proper masculinity.¹² Loki seems to confirm this in *Lokasenna* (v. 24), when he claims that Óðinn has acted as a witch (or, more precisely, as a *vala*, a sibyl): “Enn þic síða kǫþo / Sámseyio í, / oc draptv a vétt sem valur; / vitca líci / fórtv verþiþ yfir, / oc hvǫða ec þat args aþal” (*Norræn fornkvæði*, 117) (“But you once practised seid on Samsey, / and you beat on the drum as witches do, / in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed among mankind, / and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert”) (Larrington 1996, 89). In this stanza and with his accusation, Loki is countering Óðinn’s claim that Loki has carried children in his womb like a woman, so it seems evident that “seiðr” and sorcery are

¹² Dillmann (2006: 450) does not think this extends to magic in general.

very unmanly, almost up to par with bearing children. And in *Gisla saga* we have yet another example of the coupling of “ergi” and “trollskapr” in the sorcery of Þorgrímr nef: “Nú flytr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi ok skelmiskap” (*Gisla saga*, 56–57) (“He prepared what he needed to carry it out, building a scaffold on which to practice his obscene and black art in despicable perversity”) (Regal 1997, 21).¹³

Considering the reputation that went with hand in hand with *seiðr*, as described not just in *Ynglinga saga* and *Gisla saga*, but in several sagas (see e.g. *Laxdæla saga*, 95, 99 and 106–109; cf. Dillmann 2006: 505–47, Raudvere 2003: 142–54), Gunnlaugr’s interest in the occult, and in these queer practices, seems ill-advised. Bósi in *Bósa saga*, in fact, rejects magical instruction from his nanny Busla, claiming that he would rather progress in the world through his “karlmenska” (manliness) (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda II*, 196; cf. Mitchell 2000). Apparently magic is not a part thereof.

Why, then, would a young man of good family wish to learn witchcraft? It has to be kept in mind, though, that theory and practice do not always go together. In spite of being a witch, Óðinn remains the patriarch of the Æsir, and there are also cases of men who seem to have some kind of magical abilities and still retain a great amount of dignity in the Icelandic commonwealth, such as Gestr Oddleifsson and Njáll of Bergþórshváll, one of whom is never considered unmanly (Sverrir Jakobsson 2007).¹⁴ We must note that Gunnlaugr might not wish to become a sorcerer, although he desires some knowledge about ancient lore. His motives are unclear, he is simply referred to as “námgjarn”, eager to learn, a very attractive attribute in the young.

There is yet another aspect to the relationship between the youngster and the two wise women. While the link between gender and sorcery is fundamental, age is just as important in this narrative. Geirriðr and Katla are not just women, they are mothers and the saga accentuates that by their introduction. Their age is also the topic of discussion in the aforementioned conversation between Katla and Gunnlaugr where she derides Geirriðr for being old and he reminds her of her own age.

¹³ I discuss definitions of both “ergi” and “trollskapur” elsewhere (Ármann Jakobsson 2007b, Ármann Jakobsson 2007c). For a relevant discussion of ergi, see also Meulengracht Sørensen 1980; Gunnar Karlsson 2006.

¹⁴ Neither do I believe that Njáll’s alleged lack of manliness is connected to his knowledge of the future, although that is, of course, a debatable point.

Magic is not just connected to women but to old women (cf. Dillmann 2006: 161–67), and, in this instance, to mothers.¹⁵

3

Their combined roles as mothers and witches make Geirriðr and Katla uncanny figures. They are familiar and yet unfamiliar, old-established in the mind and yet alienated from it. One role represents the pinnacle of familiarity, what could possibly be more familiar than the place from which we all emerged? The other role, the role of the witch, might seem to epitomize the improper, the strange and the occult.¹⁶ The name “forneskja” (ancient lore) somehow seems to have similar uncanny connotations.¹⁷ The past should be familiar, more so than the future, since it has already happened and is known, whereas the future is unknown (hence our eagerness to know it). And yet, the past is still uncanny, since in the passing of the past lies the doom of the future, which makes dead people frightening, especially ghosts of those we used to think we knew, of whom we have several examples in *Eyrbyggja saga* — Geirriðr’s father being but one example (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 2005a). Thus death is uncanny and so are fathers and mothers, in that they symbolize the past and birth and thus at the same time continuation and death (see Ármann Jakobsson 2007a).

If we regard the two wise women of this episode as mothers, they would seem to represent the uncanny face of the mother, her intimate alterity, the mother as a representative of ancient lore, of danger, of

¹⁵ There are echoes here of the well-known pattern of the hero and the giantess, most common in legendary sagas (see McKinnell 2005: 172–96), where the giantess may function both a surrogate mother, sexual partner and a supernatural aide. In *Örvar-Odds saga*, there is a pun on this double function (mother/sexual partner), when the giantess Hildigunnr originally mistakes Oddr for a child, puts him in a cradle and starts chanting lullabies (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* II: 234). After the mistake is cleared up, she soon becomes pregnant with his child. In this narrative, misalliance in size perhaps symbolizes misalliance in age, and the same may be the case in folktales like the narrative of the giantess Loppa who steals a human and tries to stretch him, along with her sister, in order to make him big enough to father their child (*Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* I: 191–92).

¹⁶ According to McKinnell (2007), the same juxtaposition of the familiar and the strange occurs in the legendary sagas, where the simultaneous affirmation and denial of a mother-son relationship between the hero and the giantess characterizes the narrative. He sees the giantesses in these narratives as representing the dual nature of the mother in the life of a teenager, as an oggress and a figure of benevolent authority.

¹⁷ The uncanny is a concept well-known from the study by Freud (1919), which has recently been elegantly explored by Royle (2003).

death. Of course, Geirriðr and Katla are two vastly different faces of death. Geirriðr suggests a valkyrie, a noble creature who serves the gods and brings dead men to Valhøll. And still even the noble death on the battle-field is frightening and unfamiliar to the living — skaldic poetry about death in battle seems on the whole to be less preoccupied with the joyous afterlife in Valhøll than in the carcasses and corpses on the battlefield and, especially, the ravens and wolves feasting on the lifeless bodies (Meissner 1921: 116–26 and 202–8). Katla is perhaps less ambivalent and more frightening. She is the mother as lover, as a forbidden figure of lust, who invites Gunnlaugr to her bed, but whose flirtations mask a grave danger.¹⁸ What she really wishes to do is to ride him until he is close to death. This siren is also a succuba, a vampire, a mare.

Is knowledge (what the saga refers to as “kunnátta”), then, good or bad? Or, to be more precise, is that kind of ancient or occult knowledge which may be studied with the wise women of the Snæfellsnes, good or bad? *Eyrbyggja saga* is strangely vague when it comes to that point, its attitude towards heathenism and ancient knowledge seems in general to be somewhat ambivalent. When it comes to being good and bad at the same time, these witch mothers may resemble the giant mothers of the *Snorra-Edda*. The giant is just as ambiguous, and even uncanny, as the representation of the mother in chs. 15–20 of *Eyrbyggja saga*. He is both antagonist and ancestor to the gods, as the *Æsir* group includes several giant women, including Skaði and Gerðr. Óðinn himself has a mother who is a giant, Bestla Þorþornsdóttir (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*: 14). There is no mention of him studying magic with his mother, although he seemed to be interested in gaining ancient knowledge from the sibyl (who perhaps was also a giantess) in *Völuspá*. Gunnlaugr, in his wish to imitate Óðinn in learning about sorcery, seems to be seeking a giant mother in the neighbourhood, and it may be his undoing that there happen to be two, one good and one bad. Together they form a unit not unlike the figure of the Old Norse giant: old, powerful, helpful, dangerous, wise, wild, ambiguous, uncanny.

Does that make Gunnlaugr guilty of “ergi”? It is very hard to tell; we might just as well ask whether Óðinn’s “ergi” hampers him in any way. However, we can safely say that when the giant mother is divided into two representatives in the flesh, one is good and the other is bad. But

¹⁸ In this, she is an exception among Icelandic sorcerers, according to Dillmann (2006: 432–39).

if Geirriðr and Katla are the two faces of one figure, is this symbolic figure they both represent, the witch mother, *is she good or bad?* Not so easily understood, she is uncanny, and it is notoriously difficult to state anything about the uncanny, that is why it is uncanny. If Gunnlaugr had not failed, had not been ridden, the episode might have provided an example. Gunnlaugr's story might have become one to be imitated: How to gain knowledge of a witch to your own future success? A failure is harder to interpret, like an unhappy family, every failure has (at least) the one tiny flaw which makes it a failure, but there is much variation in the flaws, making the failures more diverse than the successes. So in the end, we cannot say what Gunnlaugr did wrong or whether he was bound to fail. We know only that in the end his youthful eagerness for knowledge resulted, as my title has it, in a miscarried magic class. And when magic fails, it must fail dramatically.

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