

Biological Science", in which he promoted "the possibility of discovering in the phenomena of civilization, as in vegetable and animal structure, the presence of distinct laws" (1869:121). He further entreated his audience (and in this the polemical value becomes apparent) to abandon approaches incongruous with this disciplinary affiliation: "The treatment of accounts of the civilization of tribes of man as details of local geography is connected with a popular notion that these topics are finally disposed of by descriptive treatment; and this notion, in the writer's opinion, is prevalent enough to be a serious obstacle to knowledge ... details of human culture should come under discussion as topics of biology, where, if they have any claim to attention, they must be treated as facts to be classified and referred to uniform and constant laws" (120).

5 Indeed, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) took his predecessors to task for their organicism and their use of illogical and animistic metaphors for language (Salverda 1998:192). Despite these objections, however, and in spite of his radical break with traditional philological practices, there is a pronounced continuity between Saussure and his forerunners precisely with regard to biological metaphors. Thus, as Reinier Salverda notes in an article on the use of biological metaphors in the study of language, Saussure defined "the langue, the central object of the new science of language of the twentieth century, as 'un système ou un organisme grammatical'" (*ibid.*:200).

6 For a more recent endorsement of biological metaphors of genre, see an interesting discussion of "Literary Genres as Biological Species" in Fishelov 1993:19–52.

Grýla, Grýlur, "Grøleks" and Skeklers: Medieval Disguise Traditions in the North Atlantic?¹

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One of the oldest Icelandic folk traditions – if not the oldest – is that connected with the figure of Grýla, the hideously ugly, ever-ravenous mother of the Icelandic *jólasveinar* (Christmas Lads).² In modern day Iceland, Grýla is well-known to all young children. Along with the dreaded *jólaököttur* (Christmas Cat),³ she annually strikes terror in the hearts of under-six year olds every Christmas when she descends from the mountains in search of badly-behaved children to eat (see further Árni Björnsson 1996:338ff). Despite the recent efforts of certain parties to ease the fears of the young by prematurely announcing Grýla's death in a popular Christmas song, the ancient ogress seems to hang on interminably in folk memory. She has lived over eight hundred years, and, quite understandably, is not so easily persuaded to give up the ghost.

Perhaps the most famous descriptions of Grýla are those given in the first volume of Jón Árnason's collection of Icelandic folk tales from the middle of the nineteenth century. Jón introduces this material as follows:

Þó nú gangi ekki lengur nein munnmæli um Grýlu að teljandi sé verður allt um það að geta hennar að því sem finnst um hana í fornum ritum og þulum og manns hennar Leppalúða, því á fyrri öldum hafa farið miklar sögur af þeim, en einkum henni, svo að löng kvæði hafa verið um þau kveðin og mörg um Grýlu. Þau áttu bæði hjónin að vera tröll enda er Grýla talin í tröllkvennaheitum í Snorra-Edda. Mannætur voru þau og sem önnur tröll og sóttust einkum eftir börnum þó einnig þægju þau fullvaxna menn. En eftir að farið var að hætta að hræða börn í uppvextinum með ýmsu móti hefur Grýlutruin lagzt mjög fyrir óðal því Grýla var mest höfð til að fæla börn með henni frá ógangi og ærslum ... (Jón Árnason 1954–69:1.207; see also 207ff; and 3, 283ff)

[Even though little real information exists about Grýla in the oral tradition today, it is nonetheless necessary to mention her, not least because of the information given about her and her husband Leppalúði [Patch-fool] in early Icelandic works and name lists. In earlier centuries, numerous legends must have been told about them, and especially her, for long poems were composed about them, and many about Grýla herself. The couple were both supposed to be trolls; indeed, Grýla is numbered amongst ogresses in the list of ogress names in *Snorra-Edda*. They ate people, as did others of their kind, and were particularly interested in children, although they also accepted grown-ups. But since people stopped frightening children in various ways as part of their upbringing, the belief in Grýla has dwindled greatly, since Grýla was mostly used to frighten children, and keep them safe and quiet.⁴]

As the above quotation demonstrates, Jón Árnason, like any good Iclander, was well aware of the age of Grýla. What he seems to have been less aware of, however, was exactly how widespread the Grýla tradition was (from the Swedish lakes to western Norway, and from Shetland to the north of Iceland), or that all indications point to her having regularly appeared "in person" to the people inhabiting the North Atlantic islands in the early Middle Ages. In fact, there is good reason to believe that in Grýla we have some of the earliest evidence of a disguised, house-visiting tradition in Scandinavia, potentially the "missing link" between pagan ritual drama and later Scandinavian traditions like that of the *julebukk*.⁵

As has been noted above, the earliest references to Grýla are found in the thirteenth century, where her name appears not only in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, but also the contemporary historical sagas, *Íslendinga saga* and *Sverris saga* (the first part of which is named after Grýla). Her presence here should remind us to be wary of imagining that even the contemporary sagas provide a trustworthy picture of everyday life in early medieval Scandinavian society. There is a great deal that the sagas do not tell us. Indeed, as other scholars have pointed out, those things that tend to be placed on record are actions or objects that are out of the ordinary, or have an important role to play in the narrative. Daily activities and well-known stories, legends and beliefs are commonly taken for granted, as can be seen, for example in the scarcity of accounts of spinning in the sagas (cf. Opland 1980:97; Jón Hnefíll Aðalsteinsson 1997:134–161). With regard to Grýla, the number of extant thirteenth-century references stresses that the associations of her name must have been well-known to most people. No record, however, was ever made of what these associations were. So exactly who or what was the original Grýla that people knew in the thirteenth century, and why, of all figures, should her name have been given to a medieval book written about a male Norwegian king (*Sverrir*)? Some reading between the lines is necessary, but if all the extant jigsaw pieces are assembled, there seems to be a clear overall pattern.

Two different early official explanations exist for why the first part of *Sverris saga* should have been called *Grýla*. According to the prologue of the saga contained in AM 327 4to (c.1300):

Oc sua sem a liðr bokina vex hans (*Sverris*) styrkr. oc segir sa hinn sami styrkr fyr[ir] hina meiri luti. kallaðu þeir þa N lut bocar fyrir þui Grylu. (*Sverris saga* 1920:1)

[As the book progresses, his [*Sverrir*'s] strength grows. And the main part tells about this same strength. That is why they called that part of the book *Grýla*.]

These words sound uncertain, and, as will be shown below, this explanation is extremely odd in the light of all the other references made to Grýla during this period, none of which ever states anything about the lady's strength. The explanation for the title given in the *Flateyjarbók* version of the prologue to *Sverris saga* (c.1390) makes much more sense:

Kölluðu men þui enn fyrra lut bokarinnar grylu at margir menn toledu at þa efnadiz nockurr otti edr hræðzla sakir mikils strids ok bardaga enn mundi skiott nidrfalla ok allz eingu verda. (*Flateyjarbók* 1860–68:2.534)

[People called the first part of the book *Grýla* because many people believed that worry or fear to do with great wars or battles might arise, but that they would then quickly fade away and vanish into thin air.]

Whatever Grýla was, there seems little question that in Iceland at this time, her name was synonymous with something threatening. This can be seen in the early expression "að gera grýlu" (lit. "to make a *grýla*"; i.e. to show enmity; to tease, or play practical jokes on someone: see Jón Jóhannesson & al. 1946:2.307), which is found, for example, in the statement in *Þorgils saga skarða* that "Sturla ... þótti þeir gört hafa sér grýlur um sumarit" [Sturla ... felt that they [Þorgils Böðvarsson and Þorvarðr Þórarinnsson] had behaved like grýlur [i.e. been threatening] during the summer] (*Sturlunga saga* 1878:2.213). The same meaning applies in *Þórðar saga hreðu* (1959:188), when Ormr Þorsteinsson says to Sigríðr Þórðardóttir: "Ekki hirði ek um grýlur yðrar" [Your threats do not bother me], the "grýlur" in this case being the threat of Sigríðr's brothers. A third reference of the same type occurs in *Michaels saga* (*Heilagra manna sögur* 1877:1.683):

Her hia fram kostar uvininn aa ... at maðrinn ... teli þat sem optaz i huginn, at kristnir menn ok skirðir meghi ekki firirfaraz, þo at læ(r)ðir menn geyri grylur afheimis ok sege slikt. er þeim likar.

[Here, the Arch-enemy does his best ... to make man ... imagine that no Christian will ever suffer damnation, even if learned men make threats / ugly images of the afterlife and say whatever they wish.]

It is worth noting that in all three cases, the word *grýla* is used in the plural (as *grýlur*).

In general terms, there would seem little question that the same general association is implied in *Íslendinga saga* when Loftr Pálsson quotes a verse about Grýla while riding to attack Björn Þorvaldsson and his associates at Breiðabólstaðir, in the south of Iceland, in 1221 (*Sturlunga saga* 1878:1.246). Loftr, however, is referring to one particular figure rather than a breed:

Hér ferr Grýla í garð ofan
ok hefir á sér hala fimmtán.

[Here comes Grýla, down into the field,
with fifteen tails on her.]

As Jón Árnason pointed out, the fact that Grýla must have been a recognised ogress in early medieval Icelandic folk belief is clear from the appearance of her name alongside those of other *trollkvenna* (troll women) in a *pula* (a name list in verse) attached to the AM 748 version of that part of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, known as *Skáldskaparmál* (*Edda* 1926:197).⁶ The verse fragment quoted by Loftr Pálsson, however, contains the only visual *description* of this figure in early medieval sources.

The striking point about all of the above references is that they all depict men putting themselves or other men in the role of Grýla / grýlur (cf. the name Grýlu-Brandr in *Sturlunga saga* 1878:2.171), yet nowhere is there any intimation of unmanliness in this comparison.⁷ That is certainly not what Loftr Pálsson had in mind when he used the verse about himself. Furthermore, as has been mentioned above, *grýlur* were obviously imagined to exist in the plural. Grýla herself, however,

was not merely seen to exist. She came from the wild, *outside* the civilised surrounding of the farm (see also Hastrup 1985:136–154). Furthermore, she was associated with deliberate, planned movement in a particular direction, towards the area of settlement. This is not only indicated by Loftr's verse, but also by another odd Grýla verse from *Íslendinga saga* apparently uttered by Guðmundr Galtason before he and Jón *sterki* (the Strong) rode off to visit Brandr Jónsson at Staðar in Hrútafjörður, where they maimed Brandr's follower, Vandráðr:

Hvat er um? hví kveðum sæta? heim gengr sterkr af verki?
Vitu rekkar nú nokkut nýlegs um för Grýlu? (*Sturlunga saga* 1878:1.283)

[What's going on? Why talk of making terms? Is Strong going home from work?
Have you warriors heard anything new about the travels of Grýla?]

Even more interesting is the fact that one of Loftr's main targets at Breiðabólstaðir (especially in the last part of the battle which Loftr refers to as "Steingrímslota", or Steingrímr's turn) is a man from Ísafjörður in the isolated western fjords of Iceland, by the name of Steingrímr Skinngrylson, "son of Skin-Grýla" (*Sturlunga saga* 1878:1, 244ff). Steingrímr was almost certainly one of the Breiðabólstaðir men who had infuriated Loftr on a previous occasion when they "færðu ... Lopt í flimtan, ok görðu um hann danza marga, ok margs-konar spott annat" [had made mocking verses about Loftr, many dance songs and other kinds of joke] (*ibid.*:245). Things were not improved when, at another important farm (Oddi), on St. Nicholas' Mass, "sló ... í orða-hendingar með þeim Lopti ok Birni, ok vinum hans ... Var mest fyrir því Steingrímr Ísfröðingr" [Loftr, Björn and his friends had thrown around words ... Steingrímr from Ísafjörður was most involved in this] (*ibid.*:246). One can understand Loftr's rage. However, the name Skinngryla is particularly intriguing because, apart from providing a second example of a man using this female name (cf. Grýlu-Brandr above), it points to an association between Grýla and animal skins. Furthermore, when attached to Steingrímr it raises the possibility of links with public entertainment. In general, it can be no coincidence that Loftr Pálsson decides to use the Grýla verse (which was obviously quite well-known*) when going to attack the son of Skinngryla. The verse and the name must have been associated in some way.

In very general terms, considering Steingrímr Skinngrylson's probable associations with the "danza marga" at Breiðabólstaðir, it is tempting to consider the possibility of a link between the two verse fragments uttered by Loftr Pálsson and Guðmundr Galtason and the medieval verse accompanying the so-called "Theoderik version" of the cursed dance at Kölbigk as it is described in the *Old Swedish Legendarium* from c.1340–50 (*Et forn-svenskt Legendarium* 1847–58:2,876ff). The Kölbigk tale is based on events that supposedly took place in Germany in the eleventh century (cf. Strömbäck 1961 and 1970), but in the *Legendarium*, the setting is transferred to Orkney, north of Scotland. In brief, the account tells of how a group of young men lured the daughter of the priest at St Magnus' church in "Celoberka" to dance with them outside the church at Christmas. They ignored the priest's orders to stop dancing, and "Sidhan the vildo honom ey lydha tha sagdhe han swa gudh ok sancte magnus læti idher ey j aare atir vænda aff

thenna danz ok ængin fra androm skilias" [Since they would not obey him, he said: "May God and St Magnus not allow you to leave this dance this year, and not part from each other."]. The curse then immediately took effect, aptly demonstrating Magnús' power.

In the *Legendarium*, the verse sung by the group to accompany their linked dance runs as follows:

Redh(u) kompana redhobone jwer thiokka skogha
Oc gildo mz synd venisto jomfrw.
Hwi standom vi hwi gangom vi ey.

Loosely translated, this means "The prepared company rode over (through) thick forest / and banqueted (?) with their loveliest of maidens. / Why do we stand? Why do we not move?" (In the *Legendarium* the verse is written as prose.) The original Latin verse contained in the twelfth-century account on which the *Legendarium* was based reads:

Equitabat Bovo per silvam frondosam,
Ducebat sibi Merswinden formosam,
Quid stamus? cur non imus? (Strömbäck 1961:9)

As Steenstrup points out (1918–20:242), the first line in the *Legendarium* account probably should have been translated as "Redh(u) Bovi og kompana ywer thiokka skogha" (cf. Mannyng's translation of the same line in *Handlyng Synne* (l. 9051–9056) in the thirteenth century: "By þe leued wode rode beuolyne": Mannyng 1983:226).

The parallels between this verse and those to do with Grýla are faint, but cannot be totally ignored, since both sets of verses not only include the motive of a devilish figure (Grýla and Bovi, the leader of the dance) travelling through the countryside, but also two rhetorical questions about the lack of movement. Furthermore, the *Legendarium* proves that oral versions of the Kölbigk tale must have put down firm roots in Orkney, if not further north, before the end of the thirteenth century. Regarding the figure of Bovi, it is also worth considering another possibly related thirteenth-century account given by a Danish Franciscan monk named Petrus in Dublin. According to Petrus, the name Bovi was given to a "possessed" straw figure that was carried by certain Danish women as part of a ring-dance which had been designed to entertain a pregnant friend (Olrik & Olrik 1907:175f). Petrus' account, which has a different verse ("Canta Boui, canta Boui, quid faceret"), must have also existed within the oral tradition, since the same motif later reappears in several folk legends from Denmark and Sweden. In one of these, the possessed "Bovmand" that the farm-girl of the story dances with has become a straw *Julebukk* (cf. Olrik & Ellekilde 1951:932f).⁹ All of the above raise the question of whether both the Grýla figure and the Grýla verse might go back to a popular dance song from the early thirteenth century (cf. Tydeman 1984:15 on the possibility that the Kölbigk story was enacted in dances), or even owed their continued existence to contemporary sermons that were being preached against the growing Scandinavian dance traditions.

The "Celoberka" parallel is challenging, but it is far from proven, and does not explain why Grýla should have been more threatening than any other troll. Nor

does it explain her "travels", why *men* should have been associated with her, why she had fifteen tails, or the context for the name "Skinngryla", which, as Finnur Jónsson pointed out, must refer to a form of "skind-uhyre" ("animal skin monster") or "skind-skræmsel" ("animal skin bugbear") (Finnur Jónsson 1907:347).

Noteworthy is the fact that several other variants of the Grýla verse uttered by Loftr Pálsson seem to be well known, even today, on the Faroe Islands, and that yet another was recorded at the end of the nineteenth century on Foula in Shetland (Jón Samsonarson 1991:48–54). One version of the Faroese verse runs as follows:

Oman kemur grýla frá gördum
við fjöruti hölum,
bjálg á baki, skálm í hendi,
kemur at krívja búkin úr börnum
ið gráta eftir kjöti í föstu. (Hannershaimb 1849–51:308; cf. Thuren 1908:65)

[Down comes Grýla from the outer fields,
With forty tails,
A bag on her back, a sword/ knife in her hand,
Coming to carve out the stomachs of the children
Who cry for meat during Lent.]

Another variant reads: "Oman kemur grýla av gördum/ við fjöruti hölum,/ bjölg á baki, skölm í hendi./ kemur at skera búkin hurtur úr börnum/ ið gráta eftir kjöti í föstu" [Down comes Grýla out of the outer fields./ With forty tails./ Bags on her back./ Swords [or] knives in her hand./ Coming to cut the stomachs away from the children/ Who cry for meat during Lent] (Rasmussen 1985:140; cf. Williamson 1948:247f).

An even more recent version quoted on the Faroese television programme *Manna millum* (17 February 1991) has yet another variation of the violent fourth line, in which Grýla "kemur at skera tungum úr börnunum" [is coming to cut the tongues out of the children].¹⁰

The less common, but no less important Shetland variant from the isolated island of Foula reads as follows:

Skekla komena rina tuna
swarta hæsta blæta bruna
fo'mtena (fjo'mtan) hala
and fo'mtena (fjo'mtan) bjadnis a kwara hala. (Jakobsen 1897:19)

Loosely translated, this means "Skekla (an ogress) rides into the homefield/ on a black horse with a white patch on its brow,/ with fifteen tails/ and fifteen children on each tail". The connection between the above verses would appear to go back to before 1500, since after that time, Shetland's direct, regular connections with the Faroes and Iceland broke down, and the differences between the languages would have made it difficult to allow the comfortable transference of oral material between north and south (Jón Samsonarson 1975:428; Smith 1978:23ff; Manson 1978:13ff; and Crawford 1983).¹¹

The close textual relationship between the Grýla verses quoted above does not constitute their only interest. An even more intriguing question is what kept them alive for so long. Indeed, the Grýla verses in the Faroes and Shetland are never associated with Loftr Pálsson or Iceland,¹² although the mentions of Grýla riding a horse (Foula) and carrying a "skálm" (Faroes) might help to explain why Loftr chose to quote the verse while riding to attack Björn and Steingrímur. The variants, however, prove that the Grýla verse must have lived within the oral traditions of the North Atlantic Scandinavian settlements, and altered in accordance with local vocabulary and traditions. It was no learned literary phenomenon, but was firmly rooted in popular culture. Yet a verse of this kind needs some form of context to survive. Since this verse was not closely connected to any historical context and has no gnomic value, it must have had other associations. Was it related perhaps to a weather belief, Grýla's fifteen (or forty) tails referring to an equal number of days of similar weather that were believed to follow a particular date? Considering the thirteenth-century evidence mentioned earlier, such a solution seems highly unsatisfactory. The only answer would appear to be a shared myth of some kind relating to an adult-created bugbear that in later times was used to frighten the children of the North Atlantic islands. Yet such figures also tend to be related to a specific date, and as will be shown below there is little agreement about the precise time of the ogress' arrival in the Grýla and Skekla beliefs of the Faroes, Shetland and Iceland. Certainly Loftr Pálsson does not seem to link his verse to any particular date. It was the figure itself that was important. So, what other context might have kept these verses alive?

Something that has received very little attention previously from scholars is the fact that both the Shetland and the Faroese verses have a close association with popular costumed traditions involving disguised, and originally female "monsters" which, clad in tattered animal skins, straw or seaweed (and more recently plastic masks bought at the local store), are still known to visit farms and villages at different times during the winter period to demand "offerings". These offerings originally took the form of meat, wool or clothes (referred to in the Faroes as *grýlubita*),¹³ but more recently come in the shape of sweets, biscuits, money or alcohol, for example.

The Faroese *grýlur* usually appear on *grýlukvöld*,¹⁴ the first Tuesday in Lent (Rasmussen 1985:140), although this Christian association must be regarded as a later development (Thuren 1908:66; Joensen 1987:204). Nonetheless, on the evidence of Svabo's *Dictionarium Færoense*, it seems clear that the present tradition was well known in the late-eighteenth century, at which time the costumed figure was also simply known as "Lengefösta", "langafösta" or "Lengefaste" (i.e. "Long Fast") (Svabo 1966:491). The same dictionary describes a "grujla", like *Lengefösta*, as being a "Bussemand hvormed man skræmmet Børn i Fasten. Manducus" [a bugbear used to frighten children at Lent; a costumed figure], a related word being the adjective "grúliur", meaning "abominable" (*ibid.*:290).¹⁵ In one early account from 1821, the figure of "Lengefasten" is described as having a "stor Tangstakke, som slæbe bag after hende som Halen og en rustet sort Krog i hver Haand" [a large coat of seaweed which dragged behind her like a tail, a rusty black hook in each hand], and "paa Bagen en stor Skindpose, som hun rasler med" [on her back a great skin bag which she rattled] (Thuren 1908:67f). This description closely parallels that of the costumes used by two poverty-stricken young children from Miðvágur

who, at the turn of the last century, used to dress up as *grýlur* as a means of collecting food:

Tári varð hongdur uttan á tær spjarrarnar, tey vóru í, nakað tvörtur um herðarnar, og nakað upp á eitt sterkt beltisband. Um hálsin hövdu tey ein bleytan skinnlepa, og upp á skövningarnar vóru drignir fiskamagar til niuffur. Reipatari og hoytari varð vavdur upp á hövdið til hár. Gekkaskort hövdu tey ikki, men vóru málað svört við kjönnroyki, og síðst fingur tey ein tongul til hala. (Rasmussen 1985:140)

[Seaweed was hung on the outside of the tattered clothes they were in, some across their shoulders, and some tucked into a strong belt. Around their necks they had a wet piece of animal skin, and drawn up on their arms like "muffs", they had fish stomachs. Other forms of stringlike seaweed (sea thongs and algae) were wrapped around their heads in the form of hair. They had no masks, but their faces were blackened with chimney soot, and last of all they had another piece of seaweed as a tail.]

The most interesting description, however, is that given of the traditions on the somewhat isolated island of Svinoy¹⁶ by William Heinesen in his short story "Grylen" (1957), which was based on an account Heinesen heard from Esmar Hansen, a wholesale merchant from Svinoy (letter from Jóan Pauli Joensen, dated 20 January 1994).¹⁷ The single Grýla in this tale seems to be a predominantly feminine being, but is enormous, "söm en tørvestak at se, en lang, raslende hale slæber hun efter sig, den runger og skramler som af tomme kedler og kasseroller" [much like a stack of peats, she drags a long, rustling tail behind her, which rattles and bumps like empty kettles and pots] (Heinesen 1970:38). "Hun er meget lådden og bærer horn og hale" [She is very shaggy, and has horns and a tail] (*ibid.*:33) and surprisingly enough also has a large, wooden phallus ("standaren") which supposedly has the quality of being able to bestow fertility on barren women (*ibid.*:39). Furthermore, she has the ability of altering her size, occasionally stretching herself: "Undertiden standser Grylen, lægger sig udslettet med trynet i jorden" [Meanwhile the Grýla stops, and lies down, stretched out full length with her snout to the ground] (*ibid.*:38). There is little doubt that Heinesen's account has been fictionalised to some extent, but a television interview from the early nineties with certain older inhabitants of Svinoy has confirmed that the basic features of the costume described by Heinesen were correct, at least as regards the use of a wooden mask, animal skins, and a bag for offerings. These informants also agreed that on Svinoy, Grýla was usually played by the same man (*Manna millum*; see above).

Neither the Svinoy Grýla or the costumed children described by Rasmussen spoke in their normal voices. Instead, they tended to make animal noises and use "reverse speech" like the disguised *julebukker* in Norway, as a means of covering up their identity (Heinesen 1970:33ff, 38, 43; *Manna millum*; Rasmussen 1985:141; Gunnell 1995:117).¹⁸ The same thing applies in many places in the Faroes today (conversation with Lena Reinert, March 2000).¹⁹ Heinesen's "Grylen", however, occasionally "kvæder gamle rim og forblommene omkvæd" [chants old rhymes and dark refrains] (Heinesen 1970:33f). These "old rhymes" probably refer to the fact that in earlier times the *Langefaste* is said to have introduced herself with the Faroese Grýla verse, albeit spoken with a "fordrejet mæle" [twisted voice] (Hammershaimb 1849–51:308). Other direct associations between the Faroese Grýla verse and the costumed



Full Skekler costume used alongside other naval and military guising costumes: Up Helly Aa festival in Lerwick, Shetland. c. 1920? Courtesy of The Shetland Museum.

tradition are seen in the features of the ragged, tailed costume, the regular use of a staff and bag, and the fact that the costumed figures tend to come in from outside the farm.

Unlike the Faroese Grýla verse, there is no direct evidence that the variant from Foula in Shetland was ever spoken by a costumed figure. Yet in spite of this, the connections between the Foula verse and seasonal disguised house visits in Shetland are just as intimate as those in the Faroes. One of the most intriguing features of the Foula verse is the fact that the name Grýla has been substituted with that of "Skekla",²⁰ a name that was used for a bogey, troll-like figure not only on the northern island of Unst, but also in the Faroes and northern Norway where the terms *skekel* or *jólaskekel*, *joleskjeke* are known to have been applied to the same sort of being (Jakobsen 1897:53; Jakobsen 1928–32:2,778f; Lid 1928:62). So why was the name altered? And how did the verse come to exist in Shetland in the first place?

In Shetland, long before the late nineteenth-century institution of the well-known Up-Helly-Aa festival in Lerwick, with its costumed, fiery celebration of Viking origins,²¹ there seems to have been a much more widespread "guising" tradition in which groups of costumed figures, wholly disguised in decorative straw suits and hats,²² and sometimes also in white shirts or petticoats, used to visit houses (go "hoosamylla") on "Winter Sunday" (14 October); around All Saints' Day/

Hallowe'en (1 November); at Martinmas; during the Christmas period; at New Year; and (more rarely) at Shrovetide.²³ On the island of Unst in particular, these figures were known as *groleks* (*grolek* being spelled variously as *grol*, *grölik*, *grulek*, *gruli*, *grulick*, *grulja*, *grülik* and *grillock*); in other words, *grýlur*.²⁴ On Yell, Fetlar, and in some parts of the northern Mainland, however, the same figures went under the name of *skeklers* or *skekels*, a name that seems to have become more common, but is nowadays only recognised in a few limited areas by older people. Both types of guisers, usually in groups of six,²⁵ appear to have been led by a leader known as the *skudler* (*skudlar*, *skuddler*, *scuddler*) especially on those occasions when they appeared to bless weddings.²⁶

It is worth giving two early descriptions of the performances given by these figures. John T. Reid, in his *Art Rambles in Shetland* from 1869 gives the following account of New Year "guisers":

In the olden time, on the last night of the old year, five young lads, consisting of a "gentleman", a "carrying horse" and three others, all disguised, went from house to house, singing what they called a "New'r Even's Song," and collecting provisions for a banquet on New Year's Night. The "gentlemen" wore a cap made of straw with his name lettered on the front, a collar of straw around his neck, a belt of straw round his waist, and a band of straw round his right arm. It was his duty to sing, which he did standing outside the door, and when the song was finished, if invited, he would enter the house, and introduce himself as Vanderdigan come from Drontheim, pronounced Dronton. (Reid 1869:58f)

The effect of meeting these veiled figures in full straw costume in an isolated dark farmhouse on a winter's night is no better described than in the following account published in 1884 by R. Menzies Fergusson. Fergusson received it from a fellow tourist to Shetland who had stayed with a woman who had recently moved into the area and was ignorant of the local traditions:

I saw the kitchen full of beings, whose appearance, being so unearthly, shook the gravity of my muscles, and forced the cold sweat to ooze out of every pore in my body. There they stood like as many statues, one of whom was far above the rest, and of gigantic dimensions. Eyes, mouths, or nose had they none; nor the least trace of a countenance. They kept up an incessant grunt, grunt, grunt, or a noise partly resembling swine and turkey cocks. Their outer garments were as white as snow, and consisted of petticoats below, and shirts on the outside, with sleeves and collars. They were all *veiled*, and their head dresses or caps were about eighteen inches in height, and made of straw twisted and plaited. Each cap terminated in three or four cones or a crescent shape, all pointing backwards and downwards, with bunches or ribbons of every colour raying from the points of the cones. The spirits, for such they appeared to be, had long staves, with which they kept rapping on the floor. Between them and the door stood one as black as 'Horn' but more resembling a human being than any of the others. His head dress was a *South-wester*, and he had a *keskie* [a bag made of straw] on his back. My landlady by this time had considerably recovered and the sight of the *keskie* tended greatly to allay our doubts, and we all ventured into the kitchen.

Immediately upon our entering the kitchen they formed themselves into pairs and commenced hobbling and dancing. When asked what they wanted the *keskie* was presented; and in it was a piece of mutton and other eatables. Their chieftain, or leader, muttered in a disguised and guttural tone of voice, that they would take anything we chose to give them. My landlady gave them some mutton and oatcakes, with which they appeared highly elated,

and returned thanks with bows and curtsies; but still kept up the incessant grunting. Before leaving the house, however, they inquired of me, in the same guttural tone of voice, if they should go to the Minister's. "Certainly," said I: "be sure you go there, and give him a specimen of your dancing; for the minister is a very liberal gentleman, and will, I doubt not, fill your *keskie*." (Fergusson 1884:160f)

Fergusson goes on to note that the leader of this group was called the "Scuddler", and that the figure with the blackened face was called "Judas" (*ibid.*:161f).

The behaviour at weddings was similar, but somewhat more formalised, as the following account (also by Reid, referring to the parish of Walls²⁷) shows:

About nine o' clock, commotion and whispering being observed amongst those nearest the door, the fiddler stops, dancing ceases, and the "honest man" informs the company that the "guisers" have arrived. On the best man announcing that there is plenty of both meat and drink for all comers – five gallons of whisky it may be yet untouched – the fiddler is told to "play up the guisers' spring"²⁸ when in walks a tall, slender-looking man, called the "scuddler", his face closely veiled with a white cambie napkin, and on his head a cap made of straw, in shape like a sugar-loaf, with three-loops at the upper extremity, filled with ribbons of every conceivable hue, and hanging down so as to cover the cap. He wears a white shirt, with a band of ribbons around each arm, and a bunch of ribbons on each shoulder, with a petticoat of long clean straw, called "gloy" which hangs loosely. The moment he enters he gives a snore, and having danced for a few minutes, another enters, called the "gentleman", somewhat similarly attired: he too, having danced, a third, called the "fool," appears, and so on till all are in. And it is really a strange sight to see six tall young men dressed thus fantastically, and dancing with so much earnestness. They are careful to speak not a word lest they reveal their identity; and not a sound is heard but the music of the fiddle, the rustle of the straw petticoats, the thud of their feet on the earthen floor, the laughter of the "fool," and the whispers of the bride's maidens guessing who the guisers may be. (Reid 1869:62)

The folk-religious role of the *skudler* at weddings is particularly clear from this following account by Laurence Williamson of Yell from early in the last century:

The guizers gud ta da weddin hus. The skudler bore in his hand a neat besom [broom] of strae on a stick. They fired a shot at the door. If it was not returned they went home but if the company wished to "tak wi dem" they returned the shot and out came the bridegroom, best man and married man and invited them in. Each guiser kissed the bride and her maidens. Next they got drams [of whisky]. Den de danced wi da bride and her maidens. Da skudler danced around da hus, drawing his besom over the head, back, breast etc. of the bridegroom, bride and all. After the dance they got a special dinner and then went home unless invited to stay longer. (Johnson 1971:130)²⁹

As Fergusson's account demonstrates especially well, the Shetland *groleks* and *skeklers*, like the Norwegian *julebukker* and the Faroese *grýlur*, did not speak in a normal fashion when visiting in the night (see references in Gunnell 1995:117). Instead, they went out of their way to avoid recognition, making animal-like grunting noises, or (more recently) using "reversed speech", in other words, speaking while inhaling (Marwick 1975:116, 91). It is also noteworthy that, like the Faroese *grýlur* and mainland Scandinavian *julebukker* (Weiser-Aall 1954:24, 76), the *groleks* and *skeklers* used to demand some form of offering when they made their visits, most particularly meat (Marwick 1975:116). They gave nothing.



Children from Fetlar, Shetland, in skekler costume: c. 1930? Courtesy of The Shetland Museum.

As with the *grýlur*, there are no records of the *skekler* and *grølek* traditions before the nineteenth century. The first description of them appears in 1809 in Edmondston's *A View of the Ancient and Present State of the Zetland Islands* (64). It is clear from the later descriptions, however, that these activities represent an intriguing blend of several related traditions found in all of Shetland's "neighbouring" countries. The "carrying horse" figure mentioned by Reid, for example, was also known in Orkney (Macleod Banks 1946:27–33), and may have a faint relationship to the Danish *Hvegehors*, the Faroese and Norwegian "Christmas horse" mentioned below, and the "hestur" that had a role in the Icelandic *vikivaki* dance games of the early nineteenth century (Gunnell 1995:150, 157). The idea of the disguised figures originally having had roles (even though they avoided words in many cases) also suggests links with the southern Scottish mumming tradition, known as "Galoshins", which also involved ribboned hats, and a character known as Judas who carried the group's "purse" (see Hayward 1992:11f, 28, 65f, 67ff).³⁰ Other obvious links are seen with the Gaelic traditions of the west coast of Ireland where similarly dressed "strawmen" or "straw-boys" used to visit weddings to bestow "luck" by dancing with the bride and other women present (see for example Gailey 1969:74f, 91ff; Danaber 1972:45).³¹ These Irish figures, however, were much less closely linked to seasonal festivals than the *grøleks* and *skeklers*, the names of which are also unquestionably Scandinavian.³² In general, the Shetland customs point to a blend of three main dramatic folk traditions, one coming from Ireland or the Hebrides, another from Scotland, and the third from Scandinavia (something also reflected

by the references to "Drontheim" and the "Vanderdigan" in Reid's account). Indeed, it should be noted that straw-clad figures very similar to the *skeklers* also existed in Sweden as part of the *Halm-Staffan* tradition (Olrík & Ellekilde 1926–51:2, 1079f; Celander 1928:274, 277; Gunnell 1995:100ff), and considering the account of Bovi given above, it seems clear that such "living" straw figures must have also been known in Denmark at one time. It is nonetheless a little difficult to visualise any large straw figure like the fully-clad *skeklers* attempting to "rina tuna" [ride onto the home-field], as is suggested in the Grýla verse from Foula. The likelihood must be that the costumes connected with "Skekla" were originally simpler, and possibly even made of skin. Indeed, A.W. Johnston proposed that the word *skekler* might be related to the Old Icelandic word *skekill*, meaning the "shanks or legs of an animal's skin when stretched out" (Macleod Banks 1946:76; Cleasby & Guðbrandur Vigfússon 1957:543).

Of course, there is a six hundred year gap between the accounts in *Íslendinga saga* and Edmondston's early description of the *skeklers* in Shetland. Yet it is probable that the annual reappearance of the *skeklers*, *grøleks* and *grýlur* provided a living context for the Grýla verses in both Shetland and the Faroes and kept them alive. And since these variants of the Grýla verses were so closely associated with seasonal disguise traditions, all logic suggests that the same must have also applied in Iceland where the earliest example of the verse is found being uttered by a man who is obviously placing himself in the role of Grýla. Certainly, a tradition involving a horned, skin-clad being like that described by Heinesen would help explain the name "Skinngryla", and why Grýla should have been visualised from the start as having so many tails (linked to a tattered costume). Furthermore, the fact that men tended to act the *grýlur* elsewhere as part of a "custom" or "game" that even in later times often involves some degree of cross-dressing might help answer why it was not considered offensive for a man to be compared with such a figure.

It should be stated immediately that there is no direct evidence for a costumed Grýla tradition ever having existed in Iceland. Yet it is interesting to note that when Þorsteinn Pétursson wrote his *Manducus eður leikfjela* attacking the *vikivaki* games in the mid-eighteenth century, he made use of the expressions *Grýlu andlit* [Grýla face], *Grýlu maður* [Grýla man] and *Grýlumynder* [Grýla images] when referring to the disguises used in these games and to other devilish animal guises known to have been adopted in mainland Europe (MS JS 113 8to, 43[42]v, 47[46]v, and 48[47]v: the numbering of the pages is questionable; see also Jón Samsonarson 1964:1.xliii, and Ólafur Davíðsson 1894:23). The words *Grýlu maður* are applied to a man in Europe acting a satyr (*skógvættur*), while the expression *grýlumynder* is used in a general sense for all such costumes. Séra Þorsteinn clearly saw Grýla in visual terms, associated her with animal disguises, and expected his readers to do the same. Furthermore, he associated her directly with the costumed figures of the *vikivaki* dance games like the *þingálp* monster, the *hjörtur* [hart], the hestur [horse], the *kelling* [old woman] and *Háa-Þóra* [Tall Thora] (cf. Jón Samsonarson 1964:1).

Considering séra Þorsteinn's application of the expression *Grýlu maður* to animal-like guises, it is worth noting the earliest detailed descriptions of Grýla written by poets in the seventeenth century. In Stefán Ólafsson's poem, "Grýlukvæði", which is contemporary with earlier accounts of the *vikivaki* games, Grýla is described as being three-headed, and having a *hrútsnef* [a ram's snout], a beard, a "kjaftur eins

og tík" [a mouth like a bitch] and eyes like burning embers (Stefán Ólafsson 1948:18ff). In Guðmundur Erlendsson's "Grýlukvæði" (1650) she has "horn eins og geit" [horns like a goat's], "hár um hókuna / sem hnýtt garn á vef" [hair on her chin like knotted wool on a loom], and "tennur í óhreinum kjapti" [teeth in her dirty mouth], and goes about in "loðnu skinnstaks tetri" [shaggy tattered skin coat], bearing "sína rauðbrota staung" [her iron staff] (quoted in Ólafur Davíðsson 1898–1903:114f).

In the eyes of these particular poets, Grýla seems to have borne a very close resemblance to the Svinoy "Grylen", and the supernatural Faroese Grýla which is described as having "a sheep's body, but walking upright like a man" (Williamson 1948:248). In very general terms, she looks less like a woman, and more like the figures of the earlier mentioned *julebukk* and *julegeit* which were once well known all over Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Like the Faroese and Shetland *grýlur* and *groleks*, the *julebukker* used to visit houses seasonally, terrify children and demand offerings. The archetypal *julebukk* costume involved a pole topped with a horned goat's head (made of various materials) which had clacking jaws. The performer holding this would then be covered with a sheet or skins (Lid 1928:34–55; Celander 1928:305ff; Weiser-Aall 1954; Eike 1980; Gunnell 1995:106–128). Once again, records of such traditions do not go back much further than the mid-sixteenth century (Gunnell 1995:114). Nonetheless, it seems that the same being and same costume were probably already known at this time in Iceland, albeit under a different name. This is suggested by Jón lærði Guðmundsson's brief account of the "Fingálpn" monster that he saw in his youth in the late-sixteenth century (Jón Samsonarson 1964:1, clxxiv). Jón never describes this costumed creature in detail, but the *pingálp* described as appearing at *vikivaki* gatherings during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is evidently the same kind of creature. It is described as having not only been equipped with two ram's horns, but also sheep-skin cheeks and clacking jaws (*Níðurráðun* quoted in *ibid.*:lv). The fact that the *pingálp* had its own name, and is never compared to a *julebukk* by contemporary commentators suggests that while they share the same roots, both traditions must have existed separately, and unknown to each other for some time. The same applies to yet another figure with clacking-jaws, known as the *jólhestur*, which seems to have appeared at Faroese Christmas dances at one time (Joensen 1987:197f; Poulsen 1994:49ff).³³ The roots of all of these disguises have to be old. Indeed, it might also be noted that just as the enacted Grýlur supposedly had supernatural counterparts that lived in the mountains, so too did the *julebukk* and the "Fingálpn" which according to folk belief lived for the rest of the year "á heiðum og skógum" [on the heaths and in the woods] (Jón Samsonarson 1964:clxxiv; Bø 1970:146).

Returning to the naming of the first part of *Sverris saga*, it should now be a little clearer why somebody should have chosen to compare the first part of King Sverrir's life to that of a fearful figure like the ragged supernatural "Fingálpn" or *julebukk* which lived in the mountain wilderness for most of the year, and periodically descended, inspiring terror and demanding offerings. Up until the time that Sverrir and his men took to the sea and fjords after the taking of Trondheim in the late twelfth century, he and the Birkibeinar had been forced to survive like outlaws "on the heaths and in the woods", living off "borcr af viði oc safe oc þau ber er undir snio höfðo legit" [the bark of trees, and juice, and those berries which had lain

under the snow] (*Sverris saga* 1920: ch.12:13). Things got so bad that it became hard to know "hvart þat varo menn eða dyr" [whether they were humans or animals] (*ibid.*, ch. 12:12). Indeed, they were probably clad in skins as often as birch bark. One also notes the account of how Sverrir swooped down from the mountains to demand food from people's tables one Christmas in Østerdalen (*ibid.*, ch. 22:42f), and Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson's warning to farmers against providing Sverrir and his men with food and clothes (*ibid.*, ch. 28:53). Also worth noting is the uncertainty surrounding the way Eysteinn describes Sverrir's approach on Nidaros:

Eysteinn ... kvaz hafa spurt til Birkibeina. at þeir varo ofan comnir norðr i Naumo-dal ... oc væntir os segir hann at þeir myni vitia hingat fiarþarins. *En mer er sva sagt at þeir hafi litit lið oc sma scip ok þó liðit mott ok vesallt ...* (*Ibid.*, ch. 28:30). (My italics.)

[Eysteinn ... said that he had heard that the Birkibeinar had come down into Namdalen, and "we expect," he says, "that they will visit the fjord here ... but I am told that they are few in number, and have small boats, are weak and with diminished power ..."]

For the common people of the settlements of Norway, and almost certainly for their children, Sverrir must have commonly been seen as an ever threatening spirit that could appear in human form anywhere, at any time, to make demands of food and shelter. One can see how Sverrir's name and that of the travelling, skin-clad "Grýla" who demanded offerings in winter time might even have become synonymous.

Certainly the appearance of Grýla's name in connection with *Sverris saga* on the surface suggests that the beliefs and/or traditions related to Grýla must also have existed in Norway at one time (if they did not stem from there), although the dispute about the name in the two versions of the prologue to the saga might raise doubts about how widespread this was. Nonetheless, as other scholars have shown, vague similarities do exist between the modern image of Grýla as a female troll and the Norwegian folk figures of Guro Rysserøver, Stallo, and the ogress Lussi who occasionally appeared "in person" at farms in the area around Vest Agder, Hordaland, Rogaland and Telemark to check on the preparations for Christmas (Árni Björnsson 1996:312; Lid 1928:60f; Lid 1933:44–63; Weiser-Aall 1954:32f; Eike 1980:264ff). Considering the Shetland form of the word *grolek*, it might also be noted that the term *grokle* used to be applied to a *julebukk* or *jolegeit* in Kviteseid, Telemark (Weiser-Aall 1954: 80, note 100).³⁴ The word *skekler* also has parallels in the Norwegian words *kveltsjogl* / *kveltsgjøgla* / *kveltdkjøgla* used as alternative names for house-visiting *julebukk* figures in Nissedal and Vest Agder (see Lid 1928:40f; Eike 1980:268f), and *skulkar* meaning a (probably disguised) party gate-crasher (see Eike 1980:260).

Returning to Loftr Pálsson, Steingrímur Skinngryluson, and the other references to Grýla in the contemporary sagas from the thirteenth century, there is little question that a disguise tradition of the kind described here, whatever its original context, would help explain the various references to Grýla's mysterious threatening nature, her "travels", her arrival from the outside "wilderness", and her many ragged tails. Indeed, both Steingrímur and the later Faroese *jólhestur* find interesting parallels in a document from Bergen dated 1307 which refers to a man known as Arnaldus *Jolahest* [Christmas horse] (*Diplomatarium Norvegicum* 1871:8, 29).

As I have shown elsewhere, figures dressed in horns and / or animal skins appear to have played a central role in Scandinavian pagan ritual as late as the time of the Oseberg burial (c. 850), and two full-sized, tenth-century animal masks have recently been found in the harbour in Hedeby which once belonged to Denmark (Gunnell 1995:36–99; and Hägg 1984:69ff referring to fragments 14 D and 25 from the 1979/80 excavation). Furthermore, it seems likely that some of the dialogic poems of the Edda were still being presented in an elementary dramatic fashion somewhere in Scandinavia as late as the early thirteenth century (Gunnell 1993, 1995:182–329). Even though the sagas give no solid evidence on the subject of such activities (see nonetheless Gunnell 1995:80–92), it is highly unlikely that the thirteenth-century Scandinavians were so unique that they lacked all forms of dramatic tradition. Considering the information given above, the existence of a custom involving mid-winter house-visits by a masked "Grýla" figure (or a group of *grýlur* on horseback like the later Staffan riders in Norway: see Eike 1980) would make much sense and help fill in the gap between the earlier pagan costumed ritual and the later disguise traditions that were so widespread all over Scandinavia. If this was so, the likelihood is that while the farm-visiting traditions further south continued (in mainland Scandinavia, Shetland and the Faroes), the Icelandic *Grýla* moved indoors as the weather worsened, and eventually became part of the *vikivaki* dance games.³⁵ Such an argument can never be anything more than hypothesis, but the evidence that is available seems to suggest that *Íslendinga saga* and *Sverris saga* provide us with some of the earliest valuable references to popular dramatic disguise traditions known in northern Europe.

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Abbreviations

AM	Manuscript belonging in the Arnarnagnæan Collections in Reykjavík and Copenhagen
JS	Manuscript belonging in the Jón Sigurðsson Collection in the National Library of Iceland
MS	Manuscript

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1 This article is a revision of a paper which first saw the light of day in the Preprints of the Ninth International Saga Conference (Gunnell 1994). Much of the material was later considered in a wider context in Gunnell 1995 (*The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*). I welcome the present opportunity to update the earlier paper, not least in the light of new information gained from fieldwork in Shetland in June 2000. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson; Prof. Jóan Pauli Joensen and Turid Sigurðardóttir of Fróðskaparsetur Føroya; Brian Smith, Shetland Archivist, and Angus Johnson of the Shetland Archive; Ian Tait, Assistant Curator of the Shetland Museum;

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- 2 The *jólasveinar*, closely linked to the Norwegian *jolesveinar* (see, for example Lid 1933:44ff; and Eike 1980:232ff, 264–273) come down into the settlements from the mountains one by one in the days leading up to Christmas, and daily leave small gifts in the shoes that have been left out by children (potatoes for those who have misbehaved). The behaviour of these figures has mellowed somewhat over the years, and their garb has come under strong influence from Coca Cola adverts. Over the last few years, however, the Icelandic National Museum has been fighting to redress this state of affairs by inviting children to meet these figures as they arrive in their "true" nineteenth-century Icelandic clothing. See further Jón Árnason 1954–69:1,208ff, and 3,283ff; and Árni Björnson 1996:341–353.
 - 3 The *Jólaöttur* eats those who are not wearing any new items of clothes at Christmas. See Árni Björnson 1996:368ff.
 - 4 Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations from Icelandic or Scandinavian are by the present author.
 - 5 I should stress that when I use the word "drama" here, I use it as any modern actor will, to describe first and foremost the act of live performance, where "the performer is engaged in the momentary living creation of an alternative world (or a section of it) within this one, to the extent that what he is acting is not himself but someone or something else that belongs to a different time and/or place. This 'illusion' of double reality creates its own costume and setting in the minds of both the performer and beholder. It is in these features, the imposition of 'make believe', the creation of the living double reality, and in the 'act' itself that the essence of drama is to be found" (Gunnell 1995:12). In short, stages, scenery, and texts with a beginning, middle and end are quite unnecessary for the appearance of drama. See further *ibid.*:10–22.
 - 6 The name Grýla, like many of the other giant names found in Old Norse mythology (such as Þrymr and Ymir) seems to have its root in a verb for a growling sound: cf. the Danish and old Norwegian dialect word *gryle* (meaning to murmur, mutter or grunt: *Ordbog* 1918–56:7,214; and Aasen 1983:249). This is especially interesting in the light of the sounds made by the disguised figures from Shetland and the Faroes described above.
 - 7 In Old Norse society, any suggestion of unmanliness was regarded as *níð*, the subject being entitled to carry out the direst form of retribution. See, for example, Ström 1973.
 - 8 See below, on the other versions of the same verse from the Faroes and Shetland.
 - 9 For references to further examples of this unclassified migratory legend, and further information about one from Iceland, see Gunnell 1995:158, n. 321.
 - 10 Yet another slight variation of the fourth line is found in a recent web newsletter from the Faroes. There the verse, which mainly follows the second variant given here, reads "kemur at skera búkin upp á börnum" [to cut the stomachs up on the children], and begins with the words "Trun trun, tra la la". The words of the verse are said to be "brummede" (mumbled or muttered) by the Grýla (see further above): Blaasvæ 2000:1.
 - 11 Informal connections between Shetland and the Faroes remain, but there is no known explanation for how this verse should have come to Foula and been adapted so well to the Shetland circumstances in later times. No trace of it remains in modern Shetland traditions.
 - 12 In fact the people of Shetland, Iceland and the Faroes seem largely unaware of the fact that "their" tradition is shared with other countries.
 - 13 Nowadays it is mainly the young people that "ganga grýla" [walk Grýla] in a variety of masks. See most recently Blaasvæ 2000:1. For photographs of the recent tradition, see Bregenhøj 1974:88; and Joensen 1987:202.
 - 14 The Faroese newsletter referred to above also talks of a "grýluveitslan" [Grýla party] which would take place in the evening of the festival.
 - 15 For further brief dictionary definitions, see Jacobsen & Matras 1961:131; and Jakobsen 1891:97.
 - 16 Referred to here as the island of "Stapa".
 - 17 Translations here are based on those of Hedin Brønner, in Heinesen 1983:15–26.
 - 18 Cf. Note 6 on the meaning of Grýla's name.
 - 19 Lena Reinert has confirmed for me that, as in many other disguise traditions from Scandinavia, much of the modern game involves trying to prevent the household that is visited from guessing who is inside the costume. See further Bregenhøj 1974:92. To the best of my knowledge, no overall study has yet been undertaken into the present day nature and distribution of the Faroese Grýla tradition. It is hoped that this will be rectified over the next couple of years as part of the overall survey into Scandinavian disguise traditions at present being organised by a number of scholars in each of the Scandinavian countries, with the support of NOS-H.
 - 20 As will be noted below, there are no agreed spellings of words like *Skekla* in Shetland. These are terms used predominantly in speech, rather than in writing.
 - 21 See in particular Callum Brown's excellent new survey of the tradition from 1998.
 - 22 A recent reconstruction of a straw costume can be seen in the Shetland Museum in Lerwick. With regard to the straw guises, it seems that the last full straw costumes worn as part of the house-visiting tradition were seen in Haroldswick in Unst just before world war two. The straw hats may have continued a little longer in some places, as in Cullavoe in North Yell, where the hat itself used to serve as a mask, covering the entire head. On the island of Whalsay, the hats are still recognised by old people (and called "Skudler's hats"), but more as an item to show or make rather than as an essential feature of a living disguise tradition. Few in Whalsay now know the origin of the word "skudler". The only person left who remembers their use as part of a costume in Whalsay is over one hundred years old.
 - 23 The most common dates seem to have been Hallowe'en, Christmas and New Year's Eve. For primary source material on the dating and characteristics of the Shetland seasonal "guising" traditions, see the following (where particular islands or parishes are named, this is indicated in brackets): Hibbert 1931:289, 293; Edmondston 1869–70:471f (Fetlar); Reid 1869:58f; Fergusson 1884:158ff; Spence 1899:189; Jakobsen 1928–32:274; Saxby 1932:77, 86 (Unst); Stoughton Holbourn 1938:158ff; Macleod Banks 1946:44, 75ff, 83, 92f; Venables 1956:42; Black & Thomas 1967:203ff; Johnson 1971:132f3 (Yell); and Shetland Archive SA 3/1/273 (School of Scottish Studies: Interview with James Johnson conducted by Elizabeth Neilson in 1961); and TA 05A (Stirling University Collection: an interview conducted by Tom Anderson with Jackie Mouar and Lizzie Priest from Unst). More recent reviews of this earlier material are given in Marwick 1975: 106 and 115–117; Balneaves 1977:230f; Newall 1978; and Nicholson 1981:141f, 146, 148f.
 - 24 As with the word *skekla/skekler*, these are words used predominantly in speech. It is evident that, even today, nobody in Shetland who still knows these words is sure how the words should be spelled. Concerning the etymological links with Grýla, see Jakobsen 1897:104; and Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989:284. The link is supported still further by the fact that outside Unst (in Yell and Whalsay, for example), old people see the "grölis" as having been supernatural troll-like figures.
 - 25 Six is the number needed to dance a Shetland Reel, which the groups often performed; hence the name "dancing gröleks" used at one time in northern Unst: see Shetland Archive TA 05A.

- 26 These Shetland house-visiting traditions are still alive in certain parts of the islands, although they more commonly go under the more general term of "guising", and tend to involve the use of old clothes and masks (and occasionally cross dressing) instead of straw, which is no longer seen. I hope to publish a more detailed study of these traditions in the next few years, based on recent fieldwork.
- 27 Walls included the islands of Foula, Papa Stour and part of the western mainland.
- 28 The "Guisers' Spring"/"Guisers' Reel"/"Guisers' Jig" is not available on any record, and not widely known today. Recordings of it being played by Tom Anderson and others nonetheless exist in the Shetland Archive. See for example Shetland Archive TA 121 (Fraser Hughson, Tom Anderson and Willie Pottinger) on this tune; and Shetland Archive tapes 02F; 66F (SA 1970/254); and 84A (all involving Tom Anderson).
- 29 For other primary source information on the disguised groups that visited and blessed weddings in Shetland, see Edmondston 1809:64f; Stewart 1986:133 (written in 1875); Stewart 1892:220; Macleod Banks 1946:44, 83, 92f; Black & Thomas 1967:210ff. More recent reviews of this earlier material are given in Marwick 1975:91; and Nicholson 1981:163f.
- 30 This idea is supported by the early existence of a "sword dance" play with an English text in Papa Stour, described in Hibbert 1931:289ff; Wilson 1842:355–366; and Scott's note to the *Pirate* (Scott 1996:350ff. Scott's description of the masquer-like guisers ("Shoupeltins") in the novel itself (127ff), however, has little basis in reality: see Gunnell 1999:91f.
- 31 The idea that people in disguise had permission to join wedding parties was nonetheless well known in the west coast of Norway, and apparently still exists in the outer Shetland islands known as Skerries. Interestingly enough, this tradition has recently adapted itself and taken on a new lease of life in the modern-day "hen" parties in Lerwick and elsewhere in Shetland, where *all* the party guests commonly arrive in disguise or other garish costumes.
- 32 On the term *skekler*, see further below. As Hibbert (1931:293) has suggested, the name "Skudler" for the leader may well be related to a similar term once having being used for the pilot of fishing boats. See also Shetland Archive SA 1961/90 (interview by Elizabeth Neilson of the School of Scottish Studies with George Nelson of Tingwall, Mainland, in 1961), where a similar idea is expressed, and the "horse" mentioned.
- 33 Poulsen's article contains all the available references to this figure, which seems to have had a large clacking mask, and was evidently sometimes acted by two men. Most of the references come from the islands of Sandoy and Skúgoy, and refer to a tradition known at the end of the last century.
- 34 Furthermore, as Bengt af Klintberg has pointed out to me, Lars Levander uses the term "Vattugryllan" for a water troll in one part of Sweden in Levander 1946:13. See also Levander & Björklund (1970–80:2,784) who note that in Dalarna dialect, the word *grylla* referred to a "fat, uncouth and dull woman".
- 35 A similar development is seen with the Faroese *jólhestur* mentioned above.

Forging Traditions: Oral and Literary Multiforms of *Kämpen* *Grimborg* (ST 7)

STEPHEN A. MITCHELL

Introduction

Few topics have fomented as much debate in ballad scholarship as have questions concerned with the character of composition and performance in traditional balladry. These are points of view which have old roots but which often crystallize around the perceived polar opposites "memorization" and "composition-in-performance".¹ To a great extent, the debate is one concerning the degree to which Milman Parry's and Albert Lord's findings on the character of Serbo-Croatian epics (classically formulated in Lord 1960) may be broadly true of other genres and other language traditions. Forty years since the findings in *The Singer of Tales* were applied to the ballad, the central difficulty of this comparison remains: how do we arrive at provable conclusions concerning these divergent views as they pertain to such historical (and thus largely irretrievable) data? If we in the humanities had the same opportunities for experimentation as our colleagues in the laboratory sciences, we might design a procedure capable of testing various hypotheses concerning what happens when a ballad is passed from singer to singer, or how the ballad text is transformed in oral tradition. In our case, we would prepare our test instruments: we would drop our sample text into a living ballad community; and in the end, we would measure the results over time and compare our findings against a control group. This procedure is, of course, just the sort of thing Parry and Lord undertook in the living tradition of the Serbo-Croatian epic by re-recording from the same singers after an interval of days and years, by claiming mechanical difficulties which necessitated singers starting over again, and so on.²

We have no opportunity to construct the perfect field or laboratory experiment to resolve the issue of performance-through-memorization versus composition-in-performance in the by-gone world of the 18th- and 19th-century North Sea ballad community, but some important opportunities are to be found in our historical data, and to this end, I offer the following example from a group of Swedish (and Finno-Swedish and Norwegian) ballad texts from the 18th and 19th centuries.³ My purpose here is to revisit the cherished conundrum of ballad composition in the context of a single *untraditional* ballad (but with important connections to the Nordic ballad tradition). Most importantly, this essay looks to discover where we arrive in our understanding of the character of oral-written interplay in Scandinavian balladry by exploring the relationship between the texts transcribed from oral tradition and those constantly reworked in the chapbook and elite traditions, as well as to assess



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