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Lost in Translation: Adapting Supernatural Concepts from Old French Chivalric Literature into the Old Norse *riddarasögur*

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This dissertation sheds light on the effects that the process of translation had on various Old Norse supernatural concepts. First, the supernatural motifs of *fées* [sg. *fée*, ‘fairy’], *nains* [sg. *nain*, ‘dwarf’], *jaiants* [sg. *jaiant*, ‘giant’] as well as magic and magic wielders are examined in 12th- and 13th-century Old French courtly literature. Then, the respective Old Norse translations dating to the 13th and 14th centuries are scrutinised regarding the presentation of those figures as *álfar* (sg. *álfr*) or *álfkonur* (sg. *álfkona* [‘álf-woman’]), *dvergar* (sg. *dvergr* [‘dwarf’]), *jötnar* (sg. *jötunn* [‘jötunn’]) and magic and magic wielders. Following this, differences and similarities in the depiction of these characters are analysed in order to shed light on the perception of these supernatural motifs in Old Norse mythology and contemporary saga literature (such as *fornaldarsögur* and indigenous *riddarasögur*). This is done in order to grasp how these notions may have been altered either by the influence of the foreign Old French courtly literature or by the translators who, naturally, translated with their indigenous Old Norse audience in mind. The dissertation’s thesis comprises a total of four articles, three of which focus solely on the translation of one specific supernatural concept, and one being concerned with the portrayal of magic and magic wielders. While

each article deals with its own issue, the overall theme of the dissertation is nonetheless woven into them in order to engage the underlying research question: *How influential was Old French courtly literature, and the translations thereof, on the inner-Scandinavian (and especially Icelandic) development of the supernatural motifs in question?*

The first article of the dissertation, “Of Magical Beings and Where to Find Them: On the Concept of *álfar* in the translated *riddarasögur*” (Lummer 2021a), investigates instances of appearances of *fées* or *álfkonur* in the material of the translated *riddarasögur* and their respective source material, such as in *Erec et Enide* and *Erex saga*. It must be noted, however, that, in the examined Old Norse material, no *álfar* are featured, but only *álfkonur*. While considering the background of *fées* and *álfkonur* at the time of the works’ creation and translation, as well as their function in mythology and literature, the examination focuses on instances of the translation of *fée* as *álfkona*, or the lack of such translations, in order to find similarities and differences in the depiction of these figures. Thus, the accumulated information forms the bedrock for the questions regarding whether these divergences can be accounted for, for example, by social or cultural preferences. Of particular interest are *fées* and *álfkonur* who

are portrayed in positions of craftsmanship, their tremendous beauty and their respective roles regarding fate and changelings.

The second article, “‘ek hræðumz ekki þik’ – The *dvergar* in translated *riddarasögur*” (Lummer 2021b), examines Old French courtly works and their respective Old Norse translations that feature either *nains* or *dvergar* or both. Old French courtly literature knows two different types of *nains*, the so-called *petit chevaliers* [‘little knights’] and the servant-*nains* (Martineau 2003: 17–22, 70–73). It is the latter kind that is found in the translated *riddarasögur* and therefore subject of this article. Unlike their Old Norse counterparts, Old French *nains* only have few mythical traits, if any. On the other hand, the *dvergar* appear as well-established mythological figures. Keeping these differences in mind, this article considers the translation of *nain* as *dvergr*, or the lack thereof, in order to deduce valuable information about the acculturation that might have taken place during the process of translation. Interestingly, later Old Norse sagas did not make use of the Old French *nain* in their figure inventory, rather staying with the known creature type of Old Norse mythology. It may be said that the *nain*-like *dvergar* of translated *riddarasögur* appeared to not have caught on outside this specific literature style. It appears as though, over time, the perception of the *dvergar* as rock-dwelling, metal-working beings reflected in Old Norse mythology faded, with only the most interesting stories being preserved in Iceland.¹ Apparently, there seems to have been no place for the ‘alien’ literary construct that was the *nain* – like *dvergr* of translated courtly literature in then-active Scandinavian folk belief.

The third article, titled “Solitary Colossi and Not-So-Small Men: A Study on the Effect of Translation on the Old Norse Supernatural Concept of the *jötunn*” (Lummer 2022a), follows the overall theme of the dissertation project by studying the mentions of *jaiants* in Old French courtly literature and that of *jötunn* in the material of the translated *riddarasögur*. Numerous different types of *jaiants* encountered in the Old French chivalric literature have been identified, two are relevant here, namely the “Saracen champion” and the “terrorizing giant” (Dubost 1978: 300), none of

which have much relation to the mythological Old Norse *jötunn*. In their narrative guise, these figures are two dimensional with two features being considerably prominent: (a) their size and (b) their diabolical aspects (which are commonly connected to their Muslim faith in the narratives) (Dubost 1978: 302–307). Further features heavily depend on the narrative in question and mostly revolve around the respective *jaiant*’s physiognomy. As figures of considerable strength, they wield crude weapons such as cudgels, staves or whips. Arguably, their only superhuman feature is that, somewhat like the *jötunn*, they live on in folklore as creators of Neolithic tombs (Sébillot 1904–1907 IV: 32–33). Evidently, the Old Norse *jötunn* Snorri was describing at the same time that the *riddarasögur* were being translated are quite different. Essentially mythological creatures, they are the most active group in Old Norse myth after the *æsir* and *vanir*. As Ingunn Ásdísardóttir has stressed, the mythological *jötunn* have few associations with size apart from Ýmir (2018: 213–214, 237). Regarding the translated *riddarasögur*, one notes that the word *jaiant* is consistently translated as *jötunn*. Furthermore, where the demonic aspects of the *jaiants* are underlined with the use of words like *malfé* [‘devil’], one notes that the translators occasionally call them *tröll* [‘troll’], a word that was evidently closer to the demonic (see e.g. Ármann Jakobsson 2008). This case study thus points to several significant things. First of all, the transformation of *jötunn* into *tröll* was beginning. Second, the aspect of size was becoming a steadfast aspect of the image of the *jötunn* by the early 13th century. Indeed, this seems to correspond to the Scandinavian development of the concept of the *jötunn* starting to move away from their mythological origins as they began to merge with other large, supernatural motifs. Therefore, the depiction of the *jötunn* in the translated *riddarasögur* embodies another step in the attenuation of the *jötunn* into the dull, large and cruel trolls that would come to dominate the later *Märchen* and folk legend tradition (Kvideland & Sehmsdorf 1988: 301–317).

“The Translation of Magic in the translated *riddarasögur*” (Lummer 2022b) is the fourth and final article of this collection and aims to investigate the various forms and depictions of

magic and magic wielders in the Old French courtly literature and the translated *riddarasögur*. Due to the limitations of an article-length analysis and for comparison's sake, Kieckhefer's general dichotomy of magic as an act that "uses demonic aid or occult powers in nature" is employed (Kieckhefer 1990: 14). Subsequently, a magic wielder is an actor utilising such an action. This case study naturally bears in mind the fact that ideas relating to medieval magic found in the *riddarasögur* needed to be comprehensible not only for learned individuals but also the common populace. Owing to restrictions in space, the article does not discuss magical items, prophecy, and divination or shape-shifting. In the Old French and Anglo-Norman narratives considered here, many (especially female) figures are presented as being knowledgeable in alchemy and/or herbalism, both of which are used to heal wounds and to concoct potions to cure diseases. While Old Norse literature mentions several essentially male figures, who work as healers, these are never presented as magicians, and the work of *seiðkonur* (sg. *seiðkona* ['a woman performing *seiðr*']) was different in nature, focusing chiefly on prophecy (Mitchell 2011: 94–98).

This dissertation's thesis as a whole emphasizes the importance of considering the role of translation – and the omnipresent human element in that process – on ways of thinking, something that is particularly applicable when it comes to the tricky question of the translation of concepts and not least supernatural concepts. While some things are lost in the process of translation, other things are gained. Naturally, as these concepts were mostly introduced via literature, one can expect much of the influence to have been essentially literary. Something that tends to receive less attention is the fact that these stories were popular amongst people at large, and that they were also read out aloud in farmhouses alongside other local materials during *kvöldvökur* ['evening wakes'], thereby reflecting a complex interaction between two kinds of culture, the written and the oral. What seems clear is that, for one reason or another, some motifs were more influential on local beliefs than others. The new *nain*-form of *dvergar* appears to have largely been confined to literature, partly because belief in *dvergar* as

beings in our world seems to have been waning in Norway and Iceland. As the respective articles demonstrate, things seem to have been different with the *álfar* and *álfkönur*, while in the case of the *jötnar*, it seems apparent that the influence of the translated *riddarasögur* tapped into an ongoing developmental process whereby they were gradually becoming aligned more with the notion of the *troll*, moving out of the pre-Christian mythological domain and into our modern(?) world. Regarding the translations of magic and magic wielders, the influences and developments seem to be much more complex. As noted at the start, it is my hope that this dissertation has opened a few doors with regard to this process, not only for work on the *riddarasögur*, but also other types of translation. Of course, one always needs to bear in mind the problems of working with the extant material: a great deal is missing in the puzzle. Nonetheless, what is always unescapable here is the nature of the end result which, when compared to the extant Old French, suggests that the flavour of the soup has subtly changed as the recipe has been passed between cultures. *Why that happened on the way will continue to be open for debate.*

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Notes

1. Kvideland & Sehmsdorf do not list any legends relating to dwarfs (1988: 224, 227 and 230–1). Regarding Swedish folklore, af Klintberg knows four tales revolving around so-called 'mountain smiths' (2010: 135). Jón Árnason (1954–1961 I: 453–455) only knows of a few tales of dwarfs in Iceland.

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