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“Donning the Skins”: The Problem of Shapeshifting in *The Saga of the Volsungs*

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M. A. Seton Hall University, 2019

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

Seton Hall University

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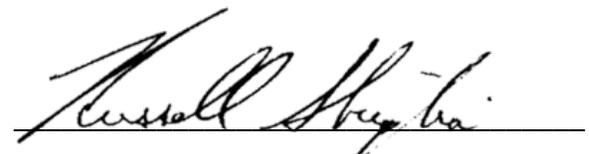
This Thesis, "Donning the Skins": The Problem of Shapeshifting in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, by David Mudrak has been approved for submission for the Degree of Master of Arts in English, Literature Spoke, by:

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“Fafnir became so ill-natured that he set out for the wilds and allowed no one to enjoy the treasure but himself. He has since become the most evil serpent and lies now upon his hoard” (Byock 59). Regin, recounting the tale of his brother’s transformation to Sigurd, describes an act of shapeshifting, a magical transformation of one’s body. While many scholars of Icelandic sagas focus their attention on the family sagas because of the clear message they provide for the Icelandic society, the magical elements of the mythical sagas also offer insight into the cultural workings of that people. In Regin’s tale, he explains that Fafnir transforms as a result of his greed, literally becoming a monster in order to protect the treasure he so desired. This transformation leaves Fafnir with no need for treasure, as a serpent has no need of money, as well as no honor, as he has lost his family name and ability to defend his person. Fafnir’s transformation is a punishment. Throughout *The Saga of the Volsungs*, characters are punished for or by shapeshifting, marking the act with a negative connotation.

However, it is unclear why this correlation exists within the saga. A pattern involving more than five separate accounts of punishment and shapeshifting being correlated is a clear choice by the story teller or transcriber to send a message to the readers. It is possible that shapeshifting was looked down on as it is an act that is only reserved for the Gods – as Odin and Loki are able to use it without dilemma – constructing a very visible barrier between the abilities of men and gods. However, it is also possible that the transcriber of the story, working after the Christian conversion of Iceland saw fit to defend the sanctity of the body that is so important to the Christian ideal. This paper will defend the claim that shapeshifting is viewed as a negative action as well as investigate the possible reasons for why this correlation exists. In doing so, this paper will provide insight into the Icelandic culture and people as well as force self-reflection on readers as they consider what messages are contained in the media they consume.

Upon first reading *The Saga of the Volsungs*, one scene puzzled me as I was unable to understand any reason for the actions of the characters or why the events were present in the text. The scene I refer to is that of Sigmund and Sinfjotli being transformed into werewolves. This single scene remained lodged in my head while I read the whole saga; I could not grasp why an event that felt significant was never referenced again and was never provided with a reason for occurring. Although I pursued a logical answer through research, I found that not much has been written on the subject, and absolutely nothing is said in a definitive manner about the scene that troubled me.

To appease my curiosity, I decided to formulate an answer myself by closely analyzing the text and utilizing outside sources to better understand the Icelandic people and the historical context of when the piece was written. My early investigation focused solely on the text and led to the discovery that throughout *The Saga of the Volsungs* a number of shapeshifting incidents occur that all result in a loss of honor, or simply a negative outcome.

Turning specifically to that first confusing scene, in regards to a negative outcome, I came to the conclusion that Sigmund and Sinfjotli are forced to transform as recompense for crimes that they were accessories in. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, an outline of the ancestry of Sigurn, involves both Sigmund and Sinfjotli. These two men are required to live in the wilderness, biding their time until they may rise up and have vengeance on the King that destroyed their kin. During their years spent living in the forest it is suggested that they went on many adventures, slowly honing their skills as hunters and warriors. One such adventure is described: "One time, they went again to the forest to get themselves some riches, and they found a house. Inside it were two sleeping men, with thick gold rings. A spell had been cast upon them: wolfskins hung over them in the house and only every tenth day could they shed the skins"

(44). Sigmund and Sinfjotli find two men who are cursed, and as such they must exist as werewolves. Although not explicitly stated, the description of their inability to remove the skin depicts that they are werewolves, or in the very least men bonded to wolfskins, which would be its own special type of punishment. The short description of the two men residing in the house also mentions that the men are forced into this situation because they are cursed, which applies a negative connotation to the werewolf. However, it is not the two men who are the prior owners that are of interest because their stories are too thin to make meaning of. Rather, it is what Sigmund and Sinfjotli experience after finding the men that allows for shapeshifting to be further interpreted.

Instead of simply leaving the men to their troubles, “Sigmund and Sinfjotli put the skins on,” and find that they, “could not get them off,” becoming werewolves themselves (44). By doing so, they align themselves with Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s concept of the “fear of becoming the monster” from his essay “Monster Theory (Seven Theses)”. The transformation is complete on the two men as “they howled like wolves, both understanding the sounds” (44). The three quotations above are all that is mentioned of why and how the two men transform into monstrous beasts making the incident feel indifferent, more akin to an experience than a punishment. However, “donning the skins” is a punishment from the onset as it damages the men’s honor. The men sacrifice the honor they possess as they lose their human form and become animals. The act of becoming werewolves further reduces the honor of Sigmund and Sinfjotli as they are symbolically marked as criminals much like Sigi of the opening of the saga was for the killing of the thrall.

In the opening scenes of the Saga, Sigi, son of Odin, is introduced and depicted as committing a crime. While out on a hunt with a fellow man’s slave, Sigi becomes unhappy with

the slave: “He said he wondered that a thrall should outdo him in hunting. For this reason he attacked and killed Bredi and then disposed of the corpse by burying it in a snowdrift” (35). Resulting from a fit of passion because Sigi’s honor was damaged by the thrall performing better than he in the hunt, Sigi kills him. However, this act of violence was not associated with the proper feud system and was an act of vengeful murder that needed to be punished. As Sigi’s punishment, “He was then declared an outlaw, a ‘wolf in hallowed places,’ and now he could no longer remain at home with his father” (35). While being outlawed is a common form of punishment in many cultures, it is a heavy one for Icelandic culture as the focus, as noted before, is on honor. Sigi is essentially banished from his home and family, losing honor. Furthermore, Sigi is marked as a *Vargr*, which translates to a wolf or monster (112). Sigi is literally defined as a monster because of his heinous crime, removing the honor he once held. Additionally, this mark of being a *Vargr* suggests that one “could be hunted down like wolves” as they are not seen as law-abiding or honorable citizens after committing such a crime (112).

While Sigmund and Sinfjotli are not declared *Vargr*, they are marked with the symbolic equivalent, which is further exemplified in their need to live in the wild as men without homes or family. Furthermore, in becoming werewolves, the two men physically act out the mark of the *Vargr*, embodying the criminal wolf. They resemble the *Vargr* as they are hunted by men throughout the episode. Sigmund warns Sinfjotli, “men will want to hunt you,” which parallels the *Vargr* description of “outlaws who could be hunted like wolves” (44, 112). The strong symbolic connection to the *Vargr* distinction and the werewolf incident demonstrates that this is a punishment that is meant to reduce the honor of these two men.

Moreover, when Sigmund and Sinfjotli “don the skins” they, specifically Sinfjotli, experience severe hardships and danger, which identifies the incident as a negative one and thus

a further punishment. During the adventure, Sigmund outlines a set of rules for the two to follow to keep them both safe: “They agreed then that they would risk a fight with as many as seven men, but not with more, and that the one being attacked by more would howl with his wolf’s voice. ‘Do not break this agreement’” (45). It is this set of rules that, when broken, causes harm to Sinfjotli. Instead of asking for help, Sinfjotli attempts to push his luck and demonstrate his strength by fighting eleven men on his own. He endangers himself and receives further punishment than simply requiring time as a werewolf as the Saga offers:

Before Sinfjotli had traveled very far in the forest, he met with eleven men and fought them. In the end he killed them all. Badly wounded, Sinfjotli went under an oak tree to rest. Then Sigmund came and said: ‘Why didn’t you call?’ Sinfjotli replied: ‘I did not want to call you for help. You accepted help to kill seven men. I am a child in age next to you, but I did not ask for help in killing eleven men.’ Sigmund leapt at him so fiercely that Sinfjotli staggered and fell. Sigmund bit him in the windpipe. (44-45)

By not listening to the rules set by Sigmund, Sinfjotli is dangerously wounded by the eleven men who try to hunt him down. This harm not only constitutes a clear hardship but also a loss of honor, as he is damaged and only partially wins the battle. Because being attacked by eleven men could not be enough violence for an Icelandic saga, Sinfjotli is then jumped by Sigmund and has his windpipe severed as a result of Sinfjotli breaking the rules that were set before heading out. He only survives because Odin steps in and provides magical medical help (45). Sinfjotli is being punished further for his character flaws. By being prideful and disrespecting his elders, he faces a much harsher punishment than Sigmund does while they are in the skins, further illustrating that the punishments depicted in the saga work on a scaled system, relating to the severity of the misdoing.

The werewolf transformation is also deemed negative by the attitudes with which the two men treat the wolfskins. Immediately following his attack on Sinfjotli, Sigmund curses the skins, acknowledging that he does not want to hurt Sinfjotli but the transformation has made him a beast who is unable to fully control his actions. Furthermore, when they are finally able to remove the skins, instead of simply leaving them on the ground “They [take] the skins and [burn] them in the fire, hoping that these objects would cause no further harm” (45). By burning the skins, the men define them and the experience involved with them as negative, undesirable, and a form of punishment.

At this point, an obvious question may be, what were Sigmund and Sinfjotli being punished for? While they are never seen partaking in any crimes prior to this event and the only direct punishment illustrated is on Sinfjotli for not following rules, they do have one shared bond: they are father and son. While being relatives does not require punishment in Icelandic culture, the way in which they became father and son does. First, Sinfjotli is a result of incestual relations between Sigmund and Signy. Secondly, Signy deceives Sigmund by shapeshifting with another woman before having sexual intercourse with him. As a result, Sinfjotli is both a product of shapeshifting and incestual relations, which he must be temporarily punished for.

While coming to this conclusion felt satisfying for the werewolf scene and provided depth to many other scenes throughout the saga, it also created a new problem in my understanding of the saga: why does a negative pattern of shapeshifting exist in the text? Moving from an acknowledgement of a pattern to an attempt at deciphering the motives of people who lived more than a thousand years ago required an approach that relied much more on historical context than literary analysis alone. Although the literature provides a hint to a possible solution, it is only through the application of cultural practices, as in the use of sagas to be cultural

education tools and the possible changes that resulted in the sagas when they were finally written down after the Christian conversion of Iceland, that allow a final hypothesis of why there is such a negative connotation built on the concept of shapeshifting. While *The Saga of the Volsungs* originates as an oral tale, the written version comes from Christian monks who began writing down the stories of these new people. In the process of writing down the stories, it is possible – and likely – that these monks saw the need to keep using the saga as a device for cultural education, but wanted to instill Christian concepts into this newly converted land, thus applying a more severe focus on the need not to change one’s God given form. In the following pages, I will first illustrate the extent to which shapeshifting was depicted as negative, and then, in closing, I will look to the possibility of this being done as a result of a Christian desire for reeducation of the Icelandic people.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* has been largely ignored by critics. Over the last few years, there have been only a few major articles concerning the text. Andrew McGillivray recently published, “The Best Kept Secret: Ransom, Wealth, and Power in *Volsunga saga*.” McGillivray turns his attention towards the treasure present in the saga and how it compares with ideas of medieval treasure as a whole. Ultimately, he argues that the treasure is tied to specific German and Nordic cultural ideals, as unlike other representations of treasure in the medieval period, this treasure does not necessarily increase wisdom or power (1). The other recent work involving *The Saga of the Volsungs* comes from Christopher Abram who writes, “Bee-Wolf and the Hand of Victory: Identifying the Heroes of Beowulf and *Volsunga saga*.” Indicative of the lack of scholarship on the Volsungs, this Abram’s piece largely focuses on *Beowulf* and the Germanic Sigmund, who also is a key figure in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Abrams compares the two heroes explaining that they inhabit the same heroic archetype for German myths. While these two pieces

are very diverse in view and do not assist in my reading of shapeshifting, they do however demonstrate the deep complexity offered in *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

The lack of scholarship may result from the trend to treat the more realistic family sagas as the main subject, leaving *The Saga of the Volsungs* untouched. The majority of writing on the Icelandic Sagas focuses either on elements of feud or on the categorization of genre and the actual writing of the tales. While the latter of these is important, I will be focusing on the former as the treatment provided to the family sagas can aid a reading of *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Jesse Byock, who also translated *The Saga of the Volsungs*, has written a number of books on Icelandic Sagas, including *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* and *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. These two books, although differing on specifics, provide insight into how the sagas were used to construct the culture of the Icelandic peoples. In *Feud*, Byock explains how feuds were used as a means of settling problems between individuals because the government was often hands off. He explains that the rules of how to properly participate in feuds were often provided through the sagas (x). Viewing the sagas as a cultural education tool will be necessary for investigating the pattern of shapeshifting as well. While the events of shapeshifting can be seen as an entertaining piece of the story, it can also be viewed as a useful pattern, instructing listeners or readers on how to view the concept. To establish the framework for his feud concept, Byock studied the family sagas, as they offered the closest connection to reality and thus the easiest connection to instructional material for the culture. Although I will be using Byock's groundwork, I will be applying it to the *foraldarsögur*, or the "mythical heroic sagas," which are largely avoided by him and other scholarship.

Many critics of Norse literature, as noted above, work with the family sagas. The focus on the more realistic sagas creates a lack in the scholarship on the old heroic myths. While this is

certainly the current dilemma, it does not have to be one that persists as I hope to show that many of the practices that critics have already been using to study feuds in the family sagas are transferable to the heroic mythical tales, specifically *The Saga of the Volsungs*. However, the ideas that critics like Jesse Byock or William Ian Miller present cannot be simply ported on to the *Saga of the Volsungs*. To shift between the realistic cultural focus of the family sagas and the mythical cultural commentary provided by *The Saga of the Volsungs*, works focused specifically on mythical elements, such as Jeffery Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" and Margaret Clunies Ross' "Realism and the Fantastic in Old Icelandic Sagas" need to be used as a bridge. These two articles show the relevance of mythical or fantastical elements in criticizing and crafting a cultural norm.

"Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" offers two maxims that demonstrate a means to translate the shapeshifting events of *The Saga of the Volsungs* into cultural commenting incidents like the feuds of the family sagas. Jeffery Jerome Cohen explains that the othering that occurs in texts involving monsters almost always happens for a reason. While he offers various ways in which monsters can be interpreted within literature, two of his main concepts apply well to the shapeshifting depicted in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Cohen explains, in his first thesis, that "The monster is born...as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (4). He continues, remarking, "The monstrous body is pure culture" (4). Monstrosity and the culture it originates from are intimately tied together, allowing an analysis of one to help provide information on the other. With this in mind, it is clear that monstrous details in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, like shapeshifting, must be analyzed closely, as they may offer rewarding results like the feud studies of the family sagas have. The concept that Cohen has outlined is what the critics mentioned before have already been doing, as they are applying details and patterns from the literature to

help define the culture. The only difference between the two is the variation between realistic and fantastical details. Analyzing the mythical and thus monstrous details of the *fornaldarsögur* sagas can be as important and rewarding as studying the feud cycles of the family sagas.

Cohen's first thesis supports the investigation of culture through monster analysis, but it is his fifth thesis that provides a way to analyze shapeshifting events present in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Cohen explains that, "From its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as a warning against exploration against certain demesnes" (12). Here, Cohen is offering his reasoning as to why and how a literary monster can symbolize the border of what is socially or culturally accepted. As he notes, the monster is present at the very edges of what can be considered accepted by a society. One might imagine a standing army surrounding a circle in which everything inside is what is accepted into the culture. It may be more simple to imagine a ring of the most horrific monsters, or for the sake of this analysis possibly a group of werewolves as patrolling the boundary. These monsters are able to keep the norm within a certain limitation by highlighting what is not accepted and by pushing back against those that attempt to deem it acceptable. It is important to see the border as made up of the very monsters themselves as Cohen notes, "the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions" (13). Thus, the border, or rather what is deemed unacceptable, is policed by the very thing that it outlaws, both preventing crossing but providing a warning for what exactly cannot be crossed.

More specifically, Cohen offers two ways in which monsters can function as a means to keep citizens within what is acceptable – within the boundaries of the norm – stating, "To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself" (12). These two possibilities for how monsters can function as a

warning directly maps on to the ways shapeshifting functions within *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The act of shapeshifting either functions as a punishment for an action, aligning closely with the concept of becoming the monster, or is an action that is punishable, which functions similarly to being attacked by the monstrosity. Cohen remarks, “The monster prevents mobility...delimiting the social spaces in through which private bodies may move” (12). Within *The Saga of the Volsungs*, bodies are limited from shapeshifting because of the monstrous depiction they receive from being designated as an evil and heretic adjustment to the human body.

While Cohen’s theory begins to bridge the gap from moving from family saga to mythical saga, it is Margaret Clunies Ross’ “Realism and the Fantastic in Old Icelandic Sagas” that finishes the connection. Ross examines the role of the fantastical within the genre of Icelandic sagas, explaining that these elements have been often avoided by many critics (445). However, Ross agrees with these same critics in acknowledging that the details amongst the sagas are of value, noting, “There is no doubt that saga literature was central to the development of an independent self-image among medieval Icelanders, and it continues to constitute a significant part of contemporary Icelanders’ sense of national identity today” (443). Ross’ claim not only backs the study of concepts like feud, but argues that the identity created by the genre of the sagas is the same cultural identity that persists today. Furthermore, her claim supports the idea that the details of the sagas have helped to create cultural norms. To further express the importance of studying the literature and not just the histories of the Icelandic people, Ross notes that the Icelanders, “composed *for* themselves a narrative...to construct an interpretation of the past that satisfied personal and family pride and national consciousness” (443). The literature of the sagas, according to Ross, is not some happenstance placement of historical stories or small town events. The genre of the sagas is a true body of literature that requires its details analyzed

as such. Acknowledging the fact that these stories were carefully crafted to help create an identity, a culture, it becomes clear that the fantastical elements are of extreme importance. No detail of the sagas is a mistake, and patterns that are repeated, such as shapeshifting, are present for a clear cultural purpose.

Ross is adamant about the value of the fantastic and the sagas as a whole as she remarks, “Increasingly, what can be learned of the relationship between society and literature in medieval Iceland is considered a productive nexus for our understanding of the genesis and character of saga writing” (444). It is clear that Ross supports the same claims that Byock has made in noting these sagas have some impact on the society that they exist in. However, Ross’ approach aligns more closely with Cohen, or in the very least deviates from the earlier critics as she opts to focus on the elements of the fantastic. If scholars accept that these texts are literary creations and that they speak to aspects of society, then they must also acknowledge that there is a need to face the more difficult mythical sagas and take a stab at how one might interpret the use of fantastical elements if they are to gain the most from this body of literature.

The fantastical details are what provides many cultural commentaries in the mythical sagas and is paramount to analyzing *The Saga of the Volsungs*. As Ross explains, “The fantastic mode in the sagas frequently occurs precisely where there is some uncertainty as to the nature of reality, or where the social norms of the culture are subverted, or where the present confronts the past and the author needs to produce an explanation of how and why things have happened or people have acted in certain ways” (449). She argues that, due to trusting authorial intent, there are carefully considered reasons for using the fantastic. Ross’ argument works hand-in-hand with Cohen’s as monsters are an aspect of the fantastical, allowing Cohen to better outline how one can use Ross’ theories on the sagas more fully. One way in which this can occur is through the

study of shapeshifting in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The action of shapeshifting is fantastical and because it is depicted within the context of a negative pattern it can be considered monstrous. Here, the two terms come together to provide the possibility that some of the fantastical details that Ross refers to, can in fact be monstrous ones that function as a boundary for the Icelandic people. By using Cohen's concept of policing, the events of shapeshifting can be seen as societal instruction for the Icelandic people. A pattern is developed in the text that demonstrates shapeshifting as either a direct punishment or an act that results in punishment. This pattern constitutes the creation of a monster and warning for the Icelandic people and society.

Before investigating the pattern of punishment demonstrated in the saga, a base line must be set for the concept of punishment. While people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century interpret punishment to mean various forms of legal ramifications such as prison time, older forms of punishment more closely related to the Icelandic peoples and the time of the sagas writing was much different, as they were often physical and made to be a spectacle. Most importantly, the Icelandic people saw honor as a value and the loss of it as punishment.

Both Jesse Byock and William Miller explain that the central area of importance of the Icelandic people is the system of honor. Miller, in his book *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, provides details about the view of honor in Icelandic culture, stating "Status had to be carefully maintained or aggressively acquired: one's status depended on the condition of one's honor, for it was in the game of honor that rank and reputation was attained and retained" (29). Miller depicts a tight arena of competition in which every single adult is in conflict for honor. While this may not seem related to punishment, the fact that honor ranks so high among the people of Iceland also makes it a strong indicator of

what the people saw as punishment. Simply put, anything that reduced honor was seen as a punishment.

As Miller explains, “honor was a precious commodity in very short supply,” and that quite often, earning honor was rather simple: it was “acquired at someone else’s expense” (29, 30). Honor, in Icelandic culture, is perceived much like energy. It cannot be created, but it can be transferred repeatedly through similar actions, much like Newton’s famous laws. This sets the stage for the study of feuds, as they created a map for people to transfer and avenge honor in socially acceptable ways. While feuds are made up of various dimensions, including family relations, friendship, loyalty, and social practice, among others, Miller elucidates that, “the overarching image, the non-reducible core of what it meant to be in a state of feud or to have feuding relations, was ultimately the obligation to have to kill and in turn to suffer the possibility of being killed” (181). Feuding culture, such as the Icelandic one, is structured on honor and the honor in question can be transferred through various means. While Miller offers that something as simple as seat placement can be a challenge of honor, he also admits that quite often the transfer of honor came to the spilling of blood (28, 181). The concept of punishment must be tied to the concept of honor in the Icelandic culture. Small punishments may result in the temporary loss or removal of a small amount of power, while more severe punishments may include a large loss of honor or even death, which would transfer all honor from the deceased to the avenger.

Fortunately, for scholars of Icelandic sagas and especially that of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, concepts of punishment are further defined within the text itself. In the opening pages, as mentioned earlier, the concept of the Vargr is the first instance of the piece showing a punishment being carried out and while it is not one that is specifically of the body as the perpetrator is merely exiled, the title of Vargr is one that creates a spectacle and defines the

person's body as symbolically tainted, both of which would damage the honor of the person. Miller and the opening pages of *The Saga of the Volsungs* demonstrates how intricately tied honor is with punishment for the Icelandic peoples of the medieval period.

Moving beyond symbolic forms of losing honor, *The Saga of the Volsungs* often depicts people changing physical form, or in other words, shapeshifting. The pattern of these events can be broken into two categories, which I noted earlier. While some acts of shapeshifting result in a negative outcome for the user sometime later, there are incidents where the act of shapeshifting constitutes the punishment. The times in which people are punished from shapeshifting will be focused on first in this paper, as these events will further help define the concept of punishment within the sphere of *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Similar to the decree of Sigi as Vargr, as he was made to be a symbolic wolf, people who are forcibly transformed lose honor and are either permanently or temporarily separated from their family and lives.

Fafnir, the dragon of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, was not always a terrifying beast. Regin informs Sigurd that his father had three sons, "One of his sons was named Fafnir, another Otr, and I was the third" (57). Fafnir, Regin's brother, was simply the son to an apparently great and wealthy man. Little information is provided of Fafnir's early history, but it seems safe to claim that there was nothing abundantly special or unique about him. He was not the son of Odin, he was not a wizard or a powerful priest; He was simply a son and brother. However, Fafnir dies as a feared serpent.

Fafnir's greed and patricide results in his transformation, as a form of punishment, into a dragon. It is depicted in the saga: "'Afterward Fafnir killed his father,' continued Regin, 'and it was murder since he hid the body. I obtained none of the treasure. Fafnir became so ill-natured that he set out for the wilds and allowed no one to enjoy the treasure but himself. He has since

become the most evil serpent and lies now upon his hoard” (59). Rather than being brought to trial or given a penalty of *Vargr*, Fafnir is transformed into a serpent as a result of his crimes. Ragnir’s wording, as he notes “Fafnir became so ill-natured,” alludes to the fact that Fafnir transformed as a direct result of his behavior. By depicting the transformation of Fafnir directly after the description of his crimes, an association is made between shapeshifting and punishment. Fafnir is not accidentally transformed but is purposefully punished for his wrongdoing. While there may be some readers who question if his transformation is not a result of the cursed treasure that he stole, it is still apparent that the transformation is a punishment and negative action. Furthermore, his crimes led him to possessing the cursed treasure, nullifying any reason to argue over which is the true cause.

Fafnir’s transformation is one of the ways in which shapeshifting is depicted as a negative action. As Cohen describes monsters policing the border, in *The Saga of the Volsungs* that is represented by Fafnir, or transformed beings. Fafnir acts as a warning against greed and patricide, as well as against shapeshifting as a practice since it is being painted in such a negative light. Because of his transformation Fafnir loses his honor as animals do not retain honor. Furthermore, much like the *Vargr*, he is marked as a criminal and must display his crimes publically. Although not as clear as Fafnir’s example, there is another incident in the text that depicts shapeshifting as a punishment.

While incidents like the Dragon transformation or the earlier Werewolf one depict shapeshifting as a punishment whereby the character is forced to become the monster, Signy’s experience illustrates that the use of shapeshifting will be punished. It is in this way that *The Saga of the Volsungs* displays both concepts that Cohen shares as a means to police against shapeshifting. After being forced to marry a king she does not want to, and then watching as he

killed off most of her family, Signy desires revenge on King Siggeir. According to the feud practices mentioned earlier in this paper, Signy's desire for revenge is not wrongful and would not be punished in the culture. However, Signy's way of achieving revenge crosses cultural normalcy barriers and thus deserves punishment. Signy first attempts to enact her vengeance by sending her sons to her brother Sigmund, to help him ambush and kill Siggeir (42). Her plan fails, as all of her children with Siggier are weak and unable to fight with Sigmund. To solve this problem, Signy opts to take extreme measures and seeks the assistance of a sorceress: "It is now told that once while Signy was sitting in her chamber, a sorceress, exceedingly skilled in the magic arts, came to her. Signy said to her: 'I want the two of us to exchange shapes.' The sorceress answered: 'It shall be as you wish'" (43). At this point, Signy has gone beyond what is acceptable practice as she is now using powers beyond the capabilities of human responsibility. Although it is not clear from this scene that Signy will be punished, she does receive punishment after her plan succeeds.

In order to successfully enact her revenge, Signy uses shapeshifting to deceive her brother and have a child with him. After changing places with the sorceress, Signy goes off into the woods and finds her brother: "And when they had eaten their fill he told her that he wanted them to share one bed that night. She did not object and he had her next to him for three nights in a row. After that she returned home, met with the sorceress, and asked that they exchange shapes again, which the sorceress did" (43). The plan unfolds exceedingly well with no one noticing the deception that took place and the incident resulting in a strong and capable son. Because Sinfjotli is born strong and Signy is not caught, it seems that Signy has not been punished for her choices. However, this is an incorrect reading of the text as everyone involved in the incident is ultimately punished. Sigmund and Sinfjotli are forced to spend time as werewolves, as their

involvement in this event is less egregious. Although she is not immediately punished after conception, in fact it takes many years for her to receive her retribution, Signy does eventually experience her punishment when she commits herself to an early death. Because of the large time gap between Signy's death and the shapeshifting incident, it seems logical that the two events are not related. The amount of time between action and punishment is not a valid concern though, as feuds in Icelandic culture could last generations seeing whole families hold grudges against each other. This same type of feud mentality can be applied to Signy's penalty. Moreover, details within Signy's last words highlight the involvement of the shapeshifting event with her death.

While Signy's choice to use shapeshifting allows her to enact revenge on Siggeir, it is not done without fault and Signy ultimately dies because of it. After Sigmund and Sinfjotli kill Siggeir, Sigmund asks for Signy to rejoin her family. Instead of happily joining her family, Signy bids them farewell, explaining:

Now you shall know whether I remember the slaying of King Volsung by King Siggeir. I had our children killed when I thought them too slow in avenging our father, and I came to you in the forest in the shape of a sorceress, and Sinfjotli is our son. Because of this he has so much zeal; he is the child of both a son and a daughter of King Volsung. In everything I have worked toward the killing of King Siggeir. I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live. (47)

While her explanation to why she must die is ambiguous, she does suggest that she partook in unforgivable actions to achieve this revenge. Of the items of concern that Signy mentions, there are only three that are detailed and direct actions: Killing her children, deceiving Sigmund, and Sinfjotli being their child. It is clear through this admission of guilt that she views her deception of her husband and birthing Sinfjotli as sinful and thus further aligns negative emotions to the act

of shapeshifting. Much like Sigmund's view of the wolfskins, Signy views her actions as negative. Furthermore, Signy's statement of, "I have worked so hard to bring about vengeance that I am by no means fit to live," is ambiguous enough to assign at least two meanings to it. While she may be stating that she deserves to be punished because she lost her identity in being so focused on revenge, she can also be remarking that her partaking in shapeshifting was too excessive of a choice. The action of her appealing to her family, and explaining what she has done comes across as a type of confession, further associating shapeshifting with sin. Signy must admit her wrongdoings before she can peacefully extinguish her life. Her choice to commit suicide is the last element that demonstrates shapeshifting as negative, as she accepts that she needs to be punished for her actions and that this punishment should be a loss of honor through giving up her life in a dishonorable manner.

The text's overall pattern show that Signy's death is related to her use of shapeshifting. Beyond Signy's experience, there are other incidents of shapeshifting that result in negative outcomes. While each incident on its own may not be much of an argument, together, these events constitute a negative association and pattern with shapeshifting that cannot not be overlooked. Two of the remaining scenes are incredibly short on detail and are made up of only a couple of paragraphs. Although they are short on detail, the two scenes display the negative results of using shapeshifting.

The first of these shorter incidents involves wolves yet again. Instead of immediately killing Signy's brother's when he betrayed her, Siggeir opted to send them into the woods to be slowly killed by wolves (42). While this treatment worked for nine of the brothers, the tenth survived the ordeal. With the help of his sister, Sigmund is able to grab the wolf's tongue with his teeth. Although the wolf jerked back and attempted to get away, "Sigmund held on so tightly

that the wolf's tongue was torn out by the roots, and that was her death" (42). What does Sigmund's killing of a wolf have to do with shapeshifting? After the killing of the wolf it is noted that "some men say that the she-wolf was Siggeir's mother, who had assumed this shape through witchcraft and sorcery" (42). Her working with a sorceress, her transformation into a wolf, and her participation in killing these brothers, caused Siggeir's mother to experience a gruesome death. Her negative result is directly related to her shapeshifting as she died as a wolf, in a situation she would not have been in. Furthermore, the symbolic elements of the wolf work in this scene, as it is not a mistake that she transforms into a wolf, the image of a criminal, in order to partake in both murder and misusing magical ability. Finally, shapeshifting is aligned with negative views through the term witchcraft. It is said that she was able to shift because of her use of witchcraft and this term is usually assigned to more negative views of magic.

Unfortunately, it is not only wicked and evil characters who are punished for shapeshifting. While Regin's brother Fafnir becomes a dragon because of his crimes and is ultimately killed for both his crimes and his dragon form, Regin's other brother is also killed for participating in shapeshifting. Unlike Fafnir, Otr, Regin's other brother, does not shapeshift as a punishment. Rather, he seemingly shapeshifts through acting out a lifestyle too fully or out of sheer ability. Regin describes: "My brother Otr had a different occupation and nature," insinuating that he was different from most people (57). Regin later explains, "He had the likeness of an otter during the day and was always in the river bringing up fish in his mouth" (57). The description Regin provides suggests that Otr does actually become an otter as he uses the term likeness, referring to his physical appearance. Furthermore, Regin's tale demonstrates that Otr is not harming anyone or shapeshifting with poor intentions; he is simply being himself.

Otr's punishment comes when Odin, Loki, and Hoenir encounter him. Instead of simply walking past Otr, who was only eating a fish and "half dozing on the riverbank," Loki picks up a stone and kills him with it. This brutal murder is only provided one line of description and there is no reasoning as to why Loki would do this. With a lack of reason, it becomes apparent that Loki feels a need to kill Otr for his use of shapeshifting. Otr's description only highlights his ability to be an otter and fish well. With the small amount of information provided, the saga must be insinuating that Otr's death was a result of the one thing readers know about him, his ability to shapeshift. The disturbing murder further associates shapeshifting with negative outcomes and more importantly as a negative action. In Loki's killing of Otr, a warning is implied that the Gods should not find humans using this magical ability. This warning would function much like the feuds in the family sagas as a way to demonstrate the outcomes that shapeshifting would constitute. Furthermore, the lack of a true reason for his death makes this description especially disturbing and highlights the negativity of shapeshifting as even decent people – since readers do not know if Otr is a bad person – will also receive punishment for shapeshifting. This same dilemma will be repeated once more as the last shapeshifting event, involving Sigurd, is equally confusing and problematic.

While the various incidents of shapeshifting begin to build a motif, the culminating event that solidifies shapeshifting as negative is the death of the great Sigurd, the protagonist who slew Fafnir. The most central and heroic figure of the tale, Sigurd, is described in such glowing terms that one would think he is beyond the human realm, similar to a demigod perhaps. Soon after Sigurd arrives at King Gjuki's kingdom, Grimhild, the king's wife, notes, "The most valiant hero that can be found in the world has come here" (79). For Grimhild to bestow such a claim on a new addition to the community - Sigurd only stays in the kingdom for two and a half years in

total - and remark that this stranger is better than all of her own sons exemplifies how highly regarded he was by the people in that area. Grimhild's daughter, Gudrun furthers this sentiment about Sigurd as she remarks, "Everyone agrees that no one at all like him has come into the world," arguing that he is the best example of humanity (83).

The descriptions provided by Grimhild and Gudrun have limited power, as they come from other characters who may have their own agendas when making these statements. However, the narrator of the text, an accurate and unbiased source for information within the text, makes similar statements about Sigurd, supporting his lofty position in the society. For example, after Sigurd had killed Fafnir, the narrator notes, "When all the mightiest champions and the most famous chieftains are reckoned, he will always be counted the foremost. His name is known in all tongues north of the Greek Ocean, and so it must remain while the world endures," arguing that he will be the best of the humans until the end of time (72). Even in death, the narrator supports that Sigurd was the best of people, stating, "Everyone who now heard the news said that no man of Sigurd's like remained in the world, and never again would a man be born equal to Sigurd in all things. His name would never be forgotten in the German tongue and in the northern lands, as long as the world endures" (93).

Although these claims are hyperbolic, they create the sense that Sigurd, if not the absolute best man ever, is still an outstanding person who is considered better than most in his society. Thus, when even he is punished for his use of shapeshifting, it solidifies the message that shapeshifting is not to be toyed with for even the best will receive terribly brutal consequences for its use. Moreover, the complex situation in which Sigurd finds himself killed for using shapeshifting further depicts the unwavering requirement that those who shape-shift, under nearly any circumstance, will face death and other harsh consequences.

Not only does Sigurd's death demonstrate that no human deserves to wield the ability of shapeshifting, as even the best of those that use it must fall, but it also depicts the unwavering nature of the punishment as Sigurd is illustrated as being tricked into the situation in which he uses magic, attempts to use it for good purposes, and learns the ability from someone else, and yet, must still be punished. Earlier in the text, Sigurd swears an oath to Brynhild, a type of marriage pact, so that his winning of Brynhild for another man, Gunnar, as well as Sigurd's own marrying of another woman, would seem terrible. However, the only reason these events take place is a result of Grimhild and her sorcery as she drugs Sigurd so that he forgets his past, including Brynhild (Byock 79). Sigurd's confused state creates a situation in which he is attempting to do right by his friend and help him earn the wife that he is seeking - an action that would normally be applauded as it indicates loyalty and care for members of the tribe. Without knowing about his previous pact with Brynhild, Sigurd is more than happy to "exchange shapes" with Gunnar so that he might ride through the fires protecting Brynhild's estate, securing her as a wife for his friend Gunnar (80). Sigurd demonstrates the ease in which he considers the action as he does not hesitate before choosing to do this for his friend and after the events transpire it is described, "Sigurd and Gunnar changed back into their own shapes and then rode to Hlymdale and related what had passed," openly discussing the events of the shapeshift, rather than hiding it like a criminal would do of a crime.

While Sigurd's circumstances would seem to make him innocent, the text continues to provide a defense for him as he learned magic from the woman who was tricking him in the first place. Grimhild, the queen and poisoner, teaches Sigurd and Gunnar how to perform the shift, implicating her as the true source of the crime, and yet, Sigurd, as well as Gunnar, will ultimately

have to suffer for they partook in the actions (80). When it comes to shapeshifting, there is no mercy.

Brynhild, the woman who loves Sigurd and ultimately kills him, further solidifies the unwavering nature of the need for those who use magic to shapeshift to be punished by her ability to be the one to act out against him and provide his punishment. While it must be difficult for a person to kill the one they love, Brynhild's situation is even more complex, as she knows all of the evidence that makes Sigurd innocent, for she recounts that this will happen earlier in the text after having a vision of the future. So, after years of living peacefully as friends, loving Sigurd with all of her heart, and knowing of his innocence, Brynhild still orders him to be killed.

Brynhild's strange decision to finally order Sigurd killed depicts a few key ideas of the Icelandic culture, mindset, and view on shapeshifting. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Brynhild was living near Sigurd for years after the shapeshifting event occurred. While the length of Brynhild's grudge seems unrealistic, it was not uncommon in Icelandic culture for feuds to last for years or generations. Once a wrong had been done, there needed to be some form of justice to correct the wrongdoing. Although the length of Brynhild's vengeance may have been a product of this cultural practice, her great sadness afterwards and her clear love for Sigurd, complicates the reading of her choice. After news that Sigurd has been killed, Brynhild cries over the loss, showing that she may not have actually wanted to have Sigurd killed. Even the narrator of the text seems at a loss, noting, "Now no one thought himself capable of understanding why Brynhild had requested with laughter the deed that she now lamented with tears" (91). Just as the greatness of Sigurd marks this moment as truly defining shapeshifting as an illegal and punishable act, Brynhild's lack of desire to kill him but following through on the action, demonstrates that there was no way out of the consequences that come from using that

kind of magic. Brynhild, in her moment of ordering Sigurd's death, may be acting out a cosmic or divine order, with no possibility of her own person intervening. Earlier in the text, when Brynhild predicts the future based on Gudrun's abstract dream, she does not offer options of how to get around the problems that will be coming, rather, she states them as a sad fact, even admitting that the man she has married will end up with Gudrun, the woman she is speaking (77). The certainty which Brynhild approaches this situation is mirrored in her actions against him, as she is acting out something that is fated, or universally needed. Brynhild has no option in ordering Sigurd's death, resulting in her strange breakdown following his death. Brynhild's actions, along with the soon to be horrific death of Gunnar, who also participated in the shift, depict the unwavering need for those who shapeshift to be punished. The motif now solidified with this last scene, now eight instances in all, show that the law against shapeshifting is unbreakable. Whether one is being punished, or must be punished for using it, shapeshifting is an extremely negative action.

As clear as the shapeshifting motif is, it is challenged by one individual, Odin. Counter to the expected process of shapeshifting being punished, Odin changes appearance throughout the saga while avoiding any clear penalties. Although this may seem to be a problem to the reading of shapeshifting being both punishable and a punishment, Odin's actions are an exception to the motif because of his unique status, his distinction as a god, which offers a hint at why shapeshifting may be present in such numerous quantities in *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

Odin appears many times throughout the saga, often lending a helping hand or taking part in a pivotal albeit secretive action to the plot of the story. At least three of the times he appears in the text, he is specifically described as being in disguise or unnoticeable, suggesting that he was utilizing magic, very likely shapeshifting, to mask his identity. Although the text opens with

Odin, it is not until later, when he issues the sword challenge, that he is described as being unrecognizable: “It is now told that when people were sitting by the fires in the evening a man came into the hall. He was not known to the men by sight” (38). Noting that the most famous of gods in (Norse) society was not recognized by the people suggests that something strange is occurring. Furthermore, the specific wording of “by sight” hints that there was something amiss with Odin’s appearance, almost as if he had changed it in order to remain unknown to the people. Finally, the description offered of Odin in this scene, “He was dressed in this way: he wore a mottled cape that was hooded; he was barefoot and had linen breeches tied around his legs,” comes separated from the act of the people not recognizing him, so that his actual appearance, his face, and looks, are separate from his clothes (38). While both certainly play a part in the disguise, it seems likely that there is something strange with Odin’s appearance here. Importantly, nowhere in this scene, or any that later that are tied to this event, is Odin described as committing a crime or being punished for his disguised and shapeshifted appearance.

Encounters like this first one continue, and each time, Odin is described differently, at times goes unnoticed, and remains unpunished or more importantly metes out punishment on the humans. Soon after Sigurd enters the text, Odin appears to him as just a simple old man: “The next day Sigurd went to the forest and met an old man with a long beard. The man was unknown to Sigurd” (56). Similar to the last appearance, Odin is not recognized by people who should know of him. The text specifically uses general language like “old man” and directly notes that the “man was unknown to Sigurd” (56). It is likely that Sigurd would know of the god and yet he is unable to recognize him here, suggesting that Odin altered his appearance to be able to speak with Sigurd without his knowing. The narrator eventually confirms that this old man was indeed Odin, reporting, “It was Odin whom Sigurd had met,” highlighting that it is important for readers

to understand that Odin is able to appear to people in disguise and not let anyone mistake this enigmatic man as just a wise elderly person. Again, as before, Odin is able to carry out his plans, through the aide of shapeshifting, and is not punished in any clear way.

The final time Odin clearly appears in disguise concludes the entire saga and depicts him using his powers to make sure that world events unfold in the manner that he would like them to. Iron was of no avail against the brothers. Then a one-eyed man, tall and ancient, came up and said: “You are not wise if you do not know how to kill these men.” King Jormunrek answered: “Advise us how, if you can.” He said: “You should stone them to death.” Thus it was done and from all directions stones flew at them. So ended the lives of Hamdir and Sorli. (109)

Odin comes to King Jormunrek to advise him on how to kill Hamdir and Sorli and end the Volsung line. While the description is that of the classical image of Odin, he is described in the text not by name but image, “a one-eyed man, tall and ancient” (109). The lack of naming the person as Odin in many of these encounters suggests that he was in disguise, and shapeshifted to prevent people from being aware of his actions in the world. Furthermore, this event, out of the three discussed here, most clearly shows these actions as world-altering as Odin is responsible for having these brothers killed. Whereas other moments of shapeshifting that involve changes in world events, like Gunnar marrying Brynhild for instance, all of the involved parties are punished and most often killed. However, in this scene, Odin is allowed to meddle in others’ affairs but is not punished, which is certain at this moment as the saga concludes shortly after, with no mention of Odin facing any penalties as he is the ultimate purveyor of the punishments as his role of being a god.

Some critics may point out that the encounters listed above are not a strong case for Odin’s freedom to use shapeshifting because the term shapeshift is never used. It is true that

Odin, in these scenes, is described as simply unrecognizable and often times disguised. For those readers who do not consider this enough evidence for a divide between human and godly magic use, there is then one moment, early in the saga, that solidifies Odin and Odin's servants as capable of utilizing shapeshifting without punishment. When King Rerir is struggling to have an heir, putting the line of the Volsung family in danger, he reaches out to Odin asking for help with fertility and Odin does assist. Rather than simply coming down and instilling the family with pregnancy or a baby, Odin sends one of his wish maidens:

Odin was not without resources. He called one of his wish maidens, the daughter of the giant Hrimnir, and placed in her hand an apple, telling her to present it to the king. She took the apple, assumed the shape of a crow, and flew until she reached the place where the king was sitting on a mound. She let the apple fall into the king's lap. (36)

Clearing up any possible doubt that Odin was not involved in shapeshifting this event labels him as ordering one of his servants, a wish maiden, to assume the shape of a bird a deliver a magical apple to the family. The actions of the wish maiden are remarkably similar to a number of the other magical events that have been discussed. Although the maiden takes the shape of an animal just as Siggeir's mother did, the maiden does not face a brutal death like her. Furthermore, the wish maiden is attempting to help, similar to what Sigurd had thought he was doing for Gunnar, and yet, Sigurd was punished for his attempt at helping. So what makes the wish maiden's actions different? The main variant between this scene and all of the others is that this woman is a servant of Odin, a god, and is commanded to take part in this action for him. This passage, although describing her actions, are mostly about Odin and his ability. The wish maiden remains just that, as she is not named and is only an intermediary of an action. It is Odin, in this moment, who is pulling the strings and using the powers of shapeshifting to achieve his desires. Odin's

and the wish maiden's lack of punishment for their use of magic solidifies the clear divide between humans and gods in the saga.

The various suggestions here, of at least three times that Odin appears to people in disguise or shapeshifted form, as well as his use of shapeshifting for his own goals, signifies that he is above the penalty of shapeshifting. There is a clear divide between how humans and gods, specifically Odin, are treated after they perform magic to shapeshift. The divide created is indicative of Cohen's monster theory as a clear boundary was made in which the Icelandic people could see what would result in them being punished or becoming a monster. Furthermore, the extreme repetition present in the shapeshifting incidents demonstrates the desire for the writers to make sure no reader would miss this newly created barrier. As a result, it is probable that the divide was meant to be instructive, illustrating the difference between man and god and the clear social boundaries of what men ought to take part in. However, this idea may not have been that of the original Icelandic peoples.

While interpreting an instructive divide between humans and gods from the motif that is developed in *The Saga of the Volsungs* is a valid position based on the evidence noted above, it would be a partial error to do so. Although the divide is present in the saga, the message the motif is implying - that shapeshifting is not meant to be performed by humans - was most likely not a concern of the Icelanders who originally told the story. Before their conversion to Christianity around the year 1000, Icelanders believed in the power of magic and sorcery. In contrast to *The Saga of the Volsungs* treatment of shapeshifting, the use of magic by people prior to the conversion did not seem to be punishable. Neil Price, in his piece "Sorcery and Circumpolar Traditions in Old Norse Belief," explains that there is a rich history of magic throughout Icelandic history, so much so, that it seems magic would be a commonplace idea in

most Icelandic homes. He further explains its normalcy by writing, “When we take these sources together, it seems that (seior) - and other named forms of magic such as (grandr, galdr, utisetar) and so on - formed a kind of collective, a package of techniques and principles for contacting the supernatural powers and either binding or persuading them to do one’s bidding” (Price 244-245). Magic or sorcery, as Price notes, was often referenced in many forms of the literature and even the archaeological evidence. Here, he discusses the use and understanding of magic as a tool, not something specifically negative or evil, but simply something that existed. Price also notes that while the use of magic started with the gods, “Sorcery was also learned by humans,” showing that the divide depicted in *Saga of the Volsungs* is not indicative of the beliefs held by the people who originally told the stories (245). In fact, many of the people who could perform magic, especially seeing into the future, were applauded and valued in society, which is a far cry from how they are treated in the saga, which was written after the Icelanders conversion to Christianity and thus their abandonment of any occult or magical abilities.

Price is not the only scholar to make this assessment as Catharina Raudvere makes a similar claim in her discussion on magic and the Icelandic peoples. Raudvere hints at some of the believed uses of magic as she writes, “Fortune was considered a settled fact of life - something that could be altered only through the sorcerer’s charms and incantations” (239). This type of magic, although not shapeshifting, is still described as being, like Price mentioned, a tool to help a family or community. There is no clear indication that it was only looked down upon, rather, it had both good and bad possibilities like anything else (239). Raudvere connects these more accepting views of magic to shapeshifting specifically as she offers, “There were many names for persons with the capacity to change their shape and temporarily act outside the ordinary body,” indicating that this practice was seemingly commonplace, or at least comfortably

discussed in the culture, as the Icelanders had many names for the action implying that it was not a hidden, illegal action, but an open and discussed ability (241). Finally, Raudvere highlights the fact that people with the ability to use magic and shapeshift “appear in both the mythological narratives and the sagas,” further illustrating how interweaved magic, culture, and society were (241). The idea that magic was a part of the culture and social systems of the Icelandic people relates to how their pagan belief system functioned.

Before Christianity arrived in Iceland, the people worshipped many different gods, such as Odin, and their pagan belief system was deeply woven into the fabric of their everyday lives and social systems (Hultgard 212). The close involvement between daily life and religious practice resulted in some differences in how the Icelandic people viewed their relationships with the gods. Unlike Christianity, where God is removed from society, beyond human capability and understanding, the Icelandic pagan system saw relationships with gods as close and personal.

Anders Hultgard, in his piece “The Religion of the Vikings,” explains:

Combining the scraps of evidence from the written sources with the archaeological record (mostly amulets and divine symbols of various kinds) we are, however, able to get glimpses of genuine personal devotion to a particular deity. Literary sources sometimes characterize this individual devotion by saying that the deity was considered a person’s *fulltrui* ‘confidant’ or *astvinr* ‘close friend’. (213)

The personal type of relationships that people had with their gods suggests a more intimate relationship than Christianity required. This type of relationship would lead to less of a focus on showing the disparity between human and godly ability in the sagas and culture, suggesting Christian influence had a direct impact on the saga motif of negative shapeshifting.

Hultgard's findings, or rather his struggles in finding adequate information for his research, shows further evidence of Christian influence on both the culture and the sagas as the Christian leaders attempted to remove or adjust anything that was related to the pagan system. Hultgard, reflecting on his investigation of the Icelandic peoples worship habits, noted, "But only few traces of such individual relationships have survived the shift to Christianity. In addition, what has been preserved is often discarded as due to Christian influence and as being alien to Sandinavian 'paganism'" (Hultgard 213). The Christian conversion eliminated or altered many pieces of the pagan past, including how people interacted with or saw the gods. Although Hultgard is specifically working with the religious systems of the time, his troubles demonstrate the level of involvement Christians had in trying to alter the Icelandic culture. Thus, the same level of commitment can be expected in Christians writing down the originally oral sagas, as they would take advantage of any opportunity to exert Christian ideals on the people. The motif depicted in the saga, building a divide between human and divine interactions, is most likely a result of this intense influence.

The Icelandic conversion from a pagan to a Christian belief system had far reaching changes because, as noted before, the pagan religion they practiced had become a part of their very culture and social systems. Stefan Brink supports this idea, noting:

In the longer perspective the change to a new religion was very profound, probably the biggest mental and social change Scandinavia has seen in history, that is, concerning policy, society, economy, art, gender relations etc. Gradually the Scandinavians exchanged an entire pre-Christian world system, including constitutional beliefs on life and aftermath, to a new, Christian world-system. (621)

The idea of a gradual change is one that is often forgotten, with many authors noting that Iceland converted to Christianity near the year 1000. As Brink points out, a change involving so many intricate pieces of society, such as ideas on government, gender, and even art, cannot simply be adopted in a specific year. A slow process in which people are not contractually converted but culturally converted to Christianity must take place, where Christians begin to adjust and influence many facets of everyday life for Icelanders. This same practice was seen, as noted before, with the personal relationships people held with the gods. Because this concept did not fit with the new Christian beliefs, they were scrapped, eliminated from the record and social memory in an attempt to shift pagan's views to that of the Christians.

The influence that Christians had over nearly every aspect of the Icelandic society and culture provides the most likely answer to the negative motif of shapeshifting offered in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Just as scholars accept the conversion and process of Christianization of social systems, they also note that the very act of writing the stories of the Icelandic people is a product of the Christians, as the Icelandic people relied on oral storytelling prior to the conversion. Ross explains that it is impossible to view the sagas as original Icelandic ideas, writing, "To the extent that orally transmitted Old Norse myths inspired the creation of written mythological literature in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages, we can speak meaningfully about the creation of Old Norse mythology, viewed retrospectively through medieval Christian eyes" (Creation - Ross 231). Ross notes that the sagas have a clear bias in them as they were created from the perspective of Christians interpreting and rewriting the original Icelandic tales. She further explores this issue, explaining, "The problem is how to access it from sources available to us now, most of which date from the period after the Viking Age, when the new religion of Christianity caused people to qualify and sometimes reject the old traditional mythology" (231).

It was common practice for the Christian scholars at the time to adjust or even eliminate aspects of the culture and especially the stories. Brink supports this claim, offering, “They (Scandinavians) transcended into a society based on documents and the written word, where the scribal technology was in the hands of a new social elite, the clergy” (Brink 622). The general public was not in control of the creation of the body of literature that is now tied to the Icelandic peoples. Rather, it was this clergy social class, the Christians, who were both saving the Icelandic tales and making changes to them to better illustrate the belief systems of Christianity.

The concept of common people performing magic, including shapeshifting, is one that would not be acceptable to the belief systems of Christians, forcing them to make changes to the story in an attempt to not only produce a literature that depicted a Christian Iceland, but also a story that would instruct Icelanders of Christian ideals through the stories they already told each other. While Odin is clearly not the Christian God, the saga does depict a clear separation between him and the humans in the text, indicative of the relationship that Christians felt they had with God. Furthermore, shapeshifting goes against many of the religious teaching of Christianity, such as the idea of humans being created in God’s image, thus altering one’s body would be an act against what has been ordained. Similarly, being able to change bodies and forms complicates the concept of the soul in many complex and challenging ways, which by Christian standards, may have even made people monstrous. Rather than address and argue these concepts, an action that would result in direct tension and most likely not be as persuasive as desired, the Christians opted to change the narrative and create a negative view of shapeshifting by showing it as a punishment and an action that is punishable within the Icelanders’ stories, including *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The Christians’ adjustments created a monstrous barrier around the concept of common individuals performing magic, such as shapeshifting, while

allowing the Icelandic people to feel that their culture was not being crushed by outside forces since the new ideals were pushed on them through stories that they were familiar with.

Although once confusing, Sigmund and Sinfjotli's experience with the wolfskins ties together both the negative motif surrounding shapeshifting and the Christian influence that altered the sagas. The first conclusion, that this strange scene is simply one that builds into a theme instructing people that shapeshifting should be looked upon as negative, becomes a means to an end when a fuller picture is considered. In light of the possible Christian influence and their goal to culturally convert Iceland, Sigmund and Sinfjotli's odd and disconnected experience makes perfect sense. The scene's dissonance compared to the rest of the tale is likely a result of Christian writers trying to force their ideals wherever possible and sacrificing the narrative cohesion of the piece. A small scene like this, one that would be easily forgotten when mixed into the whole of the tale, is a perfect target for alterations. Although the scene does not seem to fit or be needed in the saga, it actually shines a light on much of the historical context of Iceland at the time and offers the first clue in unravelling why the negative shapeshifting motif exists in Icelandic sagas like *The Saga of the Volsungs*.

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