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Ageing in Germanic Cultures and Languages

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Ageing in Germanic Cultures and Languages

a cura di Maria Cristina Lombardi

Angela Iuliano

Young Victims, Malicious Adults and Old Witches. Age and Magic in some Swedish Medieval Ballads

In some Swedish *naturmytiska visor*, magic of transformation is presented according to a fixed narrative structure, which presents three main tale roles: victims of transformation spells, operators of transformation spells and those who break spells. The first role is always played by young girls and boys, often referred to as *jungfruar* and *svenner* (not yet married young women and men). Tale roles of the second type, i.e. spell casters, are always embodied by female figures, old witches or wicked stepmothers, with a frequent overlapping of roles. To the third type of tale roles different types of characters may correspond, very often connected to the first group through ties of kinship or love. In these ballads, the magic of transformation may be read from a symbolic perspective, as a passage from childhood to adulthood, thus providing precious information about gender and ageing.

[Swedish medieval ballads; ageing;
transformation magic; gender roles; adulthood]

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Ballads of the supernatural is the label given by Bengt Jonsson, in his 1978 *The Types of the Scandinavian Medieval Ballad (TSB)*, to a conspicuous number of Nordic ballads in which magic and supernatural beings play a main role. Among them, a smaller group is called *ballads of witchcraft and magic*, included in Jonsson's classification with the numeration A1-A46. Magic is here performed in different ways and by different agents. I will focus specifically on the ballads in which a significative role is played by magic as transformation: the main characters are all transformed into animals, plants, objects through magical intervention.

Transformation magic always shows two fascinating aspects: a symbolic one, that is to say, magic as a metaphor for growing up and for the passage from childhood to adult age; and a social and cultural one, that is to say, how characters who interact with magic are represented with regard to their age and their gender.

The ballads here examined are *Jungfrun i fågelhamn*, *Den förtrollade riddaren*, *Jungfrun i bindhamn*, *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind*, *Förvandling och forlösning*¹.

¹ The ballads here considered are in the Swedish version, and the titles reported are from the editions by Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983. Danish versions also exist.

I will briefly summarise the plots, following the guidelines provided by Bengt Jonsson². *Jungfrun i fågelhamn* (A 16) tells the story of a girl transformed into a hind by her stepmother. She is hunted by a knight and turned into a bird; the knight, eventually, breaks the spell by feeding the bird with a piece of his own flesh³. In *Den förtrollade riddaren* (A 19) a young boy is transformed into various objects (knives, needles and a pair of scissors) and finally into a wolf by his stepmother. He will not regain his shape until he has drunk his brother's blood. After eight years, as soon as the wolf/boy has a chance, he attacks and kills his stepmother, and drinks the blood of his unborn stepbrother, thus reacquiring his shape⁴. *Förvandling och förlösning* (A 22) tells of a mother and a daughter who are attacked by a fox and a wolf while the two women are working in the house. The beasts kill the women and drink their hearts' blood. At that moment, a sorceress comes in and touches the animals with her stick, turning them into two princes⁵. In *Jungfru i hindhamn* (A 27) a girl is transformed into a doe by her stepmother. Her brother/fiancé is warned against shooting the hind, but he forgets the warning and kills the animal. While flaying the doe, he finds some objects, which show him that he has killed his sister/betrothed⁶. *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind* (A 30) is the story of a girl transformed into a lime-tree by her stepmother. The tree asks a maid for help, saying that it can be released from the enchantment by a certain man (her betrothed, her brother, the king). The maid sends a message to the man, who comes and kisses the root of the tree, so the girl is thereby disenchant⁷.

² Jonsson 1978: 25-39.

³ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 35-36. The Swedish version is attested in printed texts from the 16th century; there are also versions in Danish, in manuscripts from the 16th century, Norwegian and Faroese (Grundtvig 1856: 158-168).

⁴ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 37-38. The oldest Swedish version is recorded in manuscripts from the 17th century. The Danish version, *Jomfruen i Ulveham* or *Mø i Ulveham*, is elder (16th century) and with a female main character. Similar to the Danish, are the Norwegian and the Faroese versions (Grundtvig 1856: 156-158).

⁵ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 52-53. Of Swedish origin, this ballad was recorded for the first time in the 19th century.

⁶ *Ibidem*: 63-64. The Swedish version is attested from the 16th century, the Danish one, *Jomfruen i Hindeham*, from the 17th century (Grundtvig 1856: 174-175).

⁷ The Danish version *Jomfruen i linden* is attested from the 16th century (*ibidem*: 214-219); the Swedish one from the 18th century. These ballads' narrative frame is shared with other Scandinavian ballads, such as the Faroese *Hindin*, in which the king's son is turned into a wolf by his stepmother, who had tried to seduce him and had been rejected (Niclasen 2003: 134) and *Grimur í fjallinum*, about a king's son transformed into an ogre by his stepmother (Matras 1941: 322); the Danish *Dalby björn* (Grundtvig 1856: 206-211), in which a prince is turned into a bear by his

1. Preliminary remarks

Before focusing on the selected ballads, a foreword about this peculiar literary genre is necessary. I do not intend here to delve into the debate about the origin of the genre or about its definition, for which I refer to the large literature on the theme⁸. I want to underline that the ballad, born in an aristocratic milieu, in the 13th century, then becomes a popular genre that will broadly circulate from the late 13th century until the proto-modern period, during which the first collections were printed, and new ballads were written. The huge geographical and temporal spreading of the genre is a fact of considerable importance: as it established itself as a widely popular genre, especially among lower classes, its themes and characters reflected widespread feelings and knowledge. The ballads were the bearers of cultural values and models, which over the time adjusted to the tastes and the interests of people.

Medieval ballads, and medieval literature as well, are in general, as Shannon Lewis-Simpson says, “living documents” that, as literary expressions, present the methodological problem about whose mentalities they reflect⁹. Whereas, however, Lewis-Simpson remarks that for the most part the aristocratic perspective is the most visible in the cultural record, this can be only partially valid with regard to the ballads, which suddenly became a widespread popular genre, though originated in an aristocratic context.

That is the reason why these compositions are essential to our knowledge of the cultural phenomena of the time, such as the representation of ageing and of magic as well. In the ballads here analysed, magic and ageing are closely related, in a sort of reciprocal influence. With ageing I will refer to the definition provided by Thijs Porck of *cultural age*, that is “a cultural construct, built up out of a society’s expectations, mentalities and ideas, as reflected in, and defined by, the society’s cultural heritage”¹⁰.

stepmother and damages the property of neighbouring farmers, to finally reveal his identity after having been defeated by a knight; or the Norwegian *Liten Lavrans* (Bugge 1858: 35-47), in which a queen transforms her stepson into a horse. When the king realizes what happened, she admits her guilt and turns the king and his son into bears, condemned to have that aspect until they have torn a child out of its mother’s womb and brought it up.

⁸ As to the origins of the Scandinavian ballad see Jonsson 1991: 148-155 and Colbert 1989. For an overview on the genre, see Colbert 1993: 29-34. As to the relationship between orality and literacy in Scandinavian ballads, see Vésteinn Ólason 1991: 136-138; Kværndrup 2006: 311-320; Solberg 2008: 121-133; as to the Swedish ballads, see Massengale 2019.

⁹ Cf. Lewis-Simpson 2008: 5, 9.

¹⁰ Porck 2019: 9.

2. Ballads of transformation

As I have already mentioned, one of the features shared by the selected ballads is the central role played by magic as transformation, which takes place according to a precise narrative scheme. There are three main *tale roles*, according to Vladimir Propp's definition of the term: victims of spells, operators of spells and those who break the spells¹¹.

The first of these tale roles is always played by young girls and boys; the second is played by female figures, in particular *käringar*, that is, old witches, and *styvmoder*, wicked stepmothers, with a presumable coincidence of the two roles, who use magic in a transformative sense for different purposes. Different kinds of characters may be related to the third role, which is often strictly connected to the first through ties of kinship or love.

2.1. Tale roles No. 1: the victims

In these ballads the victims of magic are always young people. Though no indication of the age of the young people is given, the words *jungfru* and *sven* are often used. The former is a term of Low German origin, originally only referring to women of noble descent, later extended to the bourgeois class, with reference to unmarried virgins; the latter, of Nordic origin, is used for unmarried young men¹². The dividing line between childhood and adulthood is thus provided by marriage and, consequently, by the role as a householder for men, with the burdens of social and legal responsibility, and the marital, and the subsequent maternal, status for women¹³. Marriage is, therefore, a crucial moment of transition, in which the individuals' relationship with public life takes on specific connotations. We can assume that the age of this transition was approximately fifteen¹⁴.

According to Catharina Raudvere, the phenomena of transformation in Nordic literature expose a pre-Christian cultural substratum that resurfaces. In ancient Scandinavian literature, in fact, we often read about transformations that, more specifically, involve both the *hugr* – the essence, personality, character of a person

¹¹ The wording *tale role* is here used according to the translational choice of David Buchan (1982: 160), who followed Jason/Segal 1977: 313.

¹² Cf. *SAOB*, <<https://www.saob.se/artikel/?seek=jungfru&pz=1>> and <<https://www.saob.se/artikel/?seek=sven&pz=1>>.

¹³ Cf. Jordan 2007: 577.

¹⁴ The age of coming of age for men, according to the *landskapslagar* (cf. Winroth 1913: 42). Fifteen is the legal age in the *Frostaping* code of laws of the Norwegian King Hakon IV Hakonsson (Larson 1935: 272 and 338-339). For women, we cannot refer to the laws, as they were legal minors, being in fact considered equal to a child under the age of 15 (with an exception for widows) (cf. Ekholst 2014: 65).

(something that we can loosely translate as “soul”) –; and the *hamr*, which stands for ‘form’ or ‘skin’, that is, the bodily appearance¹⁵. Episodes of transformation are frequent in Norse literature and mythology: suffice it to think about what the *Ed-das* say about Odin and his shamanic ability to change his *hamr*. Something similar also happens in the ballads of transformation: complying with pre-Christian beliefs, people’s *hamr* ‘form’ are turned, transformed and manipulated through magical intervention. Anyway, in a Christian perspective, soul and body are closely related, and any slippage or transition from one body to another, be it vegetable, animal or inanimate, as Caroline Bynum observes, would simply be inconceivable and abominable¹⁶. So, the transformations endeavoured by the protagonists of the ballads are total: the transformations of the young guys’ bodies involve their souls too.

In *Jungfrun i fågelbamn*, *Den förtrollade riddaren*, *Jungfru i bindbamn*, *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind*, *Förvandling och förlösning*, the transformed protagonists are placed in a liminal state, between the real and the supernatural¹⁷. There still is, sometimes, some trace of their humanity (*hugr*), as in the case of the lime-girl, in *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind*, who talks to the servant girl who stumbles over it, but often the protagonists’ humanity is annihilated, and a new condition replaces the human one. Humanity is only revealed when the spell is broken, as after the death of the transformed youth (the doe-girl in *Jungfru i bindbamn*, for instance, is killed by her brother or boyfriend and her figure comes out when he skins her), or when the human shape is restored with some magical tricks.

As I said before, magical transformations also provide other kinds of information, of social and cultural nature. The victims are young people, unmarried girls and boys, whose young age makes them designated victims because they are evidently weak and inexperienced. Their celibacy thus highlights, by contrast, the social importance of marriage which, signalling young people’s entry into society, remarks, for women especially, their belonging to a network of bonds and their need for protection. As Rachel Bott points out, the importance of building a network of social ties is evident in the ballad *Jungfrun i lindenbamn*, in which the young woman transformed into a lime tree manages to save herself by revealing to a servant girl how she can be saved: the servant writes a letter, which is entrusted to a hawk, which delivers it to King Magnus, who finally saves the young woman¹⁸.

¹⁵ Cf. Raudvere 2002: 102.

¹⁶ Cf. Bynum 1995: 22-23; Raudvere 2002: 130.

¹⁷ With *supernatural* I refer to the definition provided in Valk/Sävborg (2018: 17), as “cognitive category, testifying to the unknown, mysterious and transcendental aspects of reality”.

¹⁸ Cf. Bott 2020: 33.

From the Middle Ages on, childhood was considered as a weak condition. Though belonging to the society, young people were not independent and needed protection¹⁹. Achieving adulthood was necessary to become an active, independent, and productive member of the society, especially for male individuals. These ballads thus provide the representation of a rite of passage²⁰, during which the boy and the girl, through the mutation, acquire new skills which allow them to face the adult life, after they have regained their human shape²¹.

2.2. Tale roles No. 2: magical practitioners

The second type of tale role, that is, the one who performs magic, is always entrusted to an adult woman, a witch or a stepmother (a mother and a daughter in the case of *Förvandling och förlösning*).

The wicked stepmother as a *topos* can be found in countless literary texts and it involves social issues too. According to Michael J.G. Gray-Fow, who has studied the perception of stepmothers in the classical world, the negative image of the stepmother is not only due to the fact that the stepmother is a *new person* (*noverca* in Latin), an outsider who enters an already established family unit, but also to legal and inheritance issues: in order to gain an advantage, the *noverca* could, on the one hand, cunningly convince her husband to include her in the inheritance, and on the other hand she could try to limit the rights of other beneficiaries, first of all her stepchildren²².

Similar problems also existed in the Scandinavian world. In both the *Västgötalagar* first (13th century), in the chapter on inheritance, and then in the *Magnus Erikssons-* and *Kristoferslandslagar* (14th and 15th century, respectively), in the chapter about high crimes, there are laws which specifically protect stepchildren.

We read, in fact, in the *Västgötalagarna*:

Sva ær an kona friger stuþbarni sinu. vill sinum barnum arf vnnæ. væri sik mæþ hærærs næmd falz hvn þa haur hvn frigiort sær ok friþi sinum. (Äldre Västgötalagen)

Konæ firi giær stypbarnum sinum. vil barnum sinum arf vnnæ. fæller hana luct hæræz nempðin. þa haur hun firi giort firþi sinum. giui henni friþ dax ok nattar til skogs. (Yngre Västgötalagen)²³

¹⁹ Cf. Mejsholm 2008: 56.

²⁰ Cf. Larrington 2008: 151.

²¹ Cf. Clunies Ross 1999: 65.

²² Cf. Gray-Fow 1988: 741 and 755.

²³ Holmberg/Wessén 1946: 78: “So it is when a woman ‘destroys’ her own stepchild to get the inheritance for her children. Let her defend herself before the jury. If she fails in the defence,

In the *Landslagar*, there is an extension in terms of gender as for the perpetrator of the criminal action; in the *Magnus Erikssons* and *Kristofers landslagar*, in fact, we read:

Forgör man eller konas tiyghbarne sino, vill barnum sinum arff egna, vari lagh samu vm lifuit, ok stande vm arfuit sum laghbokin sigher (*Magnus Erikssons landslag*)
 Forgör man eller kona stiuffbarne sino meth wilia oc forakt, oc wil barnom sinom arff ægna, wari lagh samw om lifuit, oc stande om arff som laghboken j ærfta balkenom siger duodecimo capitulo (*Kristofers landslag*)²⁴

The examples given shed light on the image of the stepmother in the medieval Scandinavian world. Not only does the *Västgöotalagar* (13th century) remark that the stepmother is a person who can perpetrate such a crime for reasons of heredity; it also gives us information about what a stepmother could be capable of, being in fact a woman who could *förgöra*, literally ‘do evil deeds’. *Förgöring* is a calque on Latin *maleficium*, and the broader sense of *förgöra* being ‘to kill someone without hurting them, without using violence’; therefore, the term has been translated as ‘to destroy’, ‘to annihilate’, or even ‘to poison’²⁵. The *förgöring* can also be a ‘magical’ action, and that is evident in other chapters, in which the word *förgöring* is used along with the word *trolldom*²⁶.

We must therefore infer that infanticide at the hands of a stepmother was not a rare occurrence, if a specific law was needed to punish those who were

she will lose her life and peace”. *Ibidem*. 273: “If a woman ‘destroys’ her stepchildren because she wants to get the inheritance for her children, and is found guilty by the council, then let her lose her peace (be banished). Let her be left one day and one night in the woods”. All translations are mine, unless otherwise stated.

²⁴ Wiktorsson 1898: 166: “If a man or a woman ‘destroys’ their own stepchild, in order to get the inheritance to their own children, the same inheritance law shall apply as the code says” (*Magnus Erikssons landslag*); Schlyter 1869: 302-303: “If a man or woman destroys their own stepchild, intentionally to make their children acquire the inheritance, the same law applies to the inheritance as is said in the code in the chapter on inheritance, duodecimo capitulo” (*Kristofers landslag*). Noteworthy is the fact that *Kristofers landslag*, an amended version of the *Magnus Erikssons landslag*, was in effect in Sweden-Finland until 1734.

²⁵ Cf. *SAOB*, <<https://www.saob.se/artikel/?seek=f%C3%B6rg%C3%B6ra&pz=1>>. Stephen Mitchell (2011: 154) translates the wording with the verb ‘to destroy’, adding that “the terms *friigera*, *fyrirgera*, *förgöra*, and so on – ‘destroying’ or ‘killing’ – are generally associated [...] with witchcraft, a correlation frequently made in the Old Swedish provincial laws as well. [...] One suspects that poisoning may be the specific kind of witchcraft the law has in mind, as has been argued in detail by at least one scholar”. According to Ankarloo (1984: 35), witchcraft and poisoning are two kinds of *förgöring*, furthermore poisoning and *förgöring* were considered closely related and for that impossible to distinguish.

²⁶ See, for instance, the 14th article of the chapter about high crimes in *Magnus Erikssons* and *Kristofers landslagar* (Wiktorsson 1898: 166; Schlyter 1869: 302).

responsible for the crime. It is also possible that the wording in legal texts such as the ones mentioned above (connected to the *förgöring*) contributed to create a degrading image of stepmothers.

Apart from the *topos* and the prejudice, it is also presumable that, given the popularity of the ballad as a genre, the audience considered more acceptable or tolerable that the perpetrators of evil in a family were people without ties of blood to their victims²⁷.

As we have seen, the social aspects related to the second type of tale role is quite important. As to its symbolic and literary aspects, a general consideration about magic in the Nordic world is necessary. Those who do magic are able to manipulate reality, to subvert God's natural order for personal purposes (usually envy, greed, revenge). The use of magic in Nordic literature is usually stigmatised and referred to some external agent, be it the enemy, the stranger, the pagan, a supernatural being, or someone who lives outside the so-called civilised world. In the narrative of the ballads, the stepmother, being an external character who has later joined the family, perfectly embodies the magical other, the witch. She is, moreover, a person of experience, never a young person, always an adult or elderly woman.

As an 'exception' to this trend, in the ballad *Förvandling och förlösning*, the perpetrators of the transformation are not stepmothers, but a mother and her daughter who, having both become pregnant, tried to hide their children, allowing someone to turn them into animals. Once again, the family constitutes a danger to the young subjects. The humble context where the ballad is set (the women are engaged in household chores) does not help us reveal the reasons why the women have abandoned their children, whether out of honour or poverty.

Modren och dottren stod och bakade bröd
 In kom räfvén uti päls så röd
 Moder och dotter stod och silade vin
 In kom ulfvén i sitt gråa skinn²⁸

It is clear, however, that the abandonment and the subsequent demand that the children be turned into animals is considered an unworthy act, so that the anni-

²⁷ More to the point, as evidence of the pervasiveness of this myth in popular culture, John M. Ellis (1983: 73-76 and 102) points out how some evil mothers in the first edition of Grimm's fairy tales became evil stepmothers in later ones - in *Hansel and Gretel*, or *Snow White* for instance - in a process of 'softening' the evil characters within the family unit.

²⁸ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 52: "The mother and the daughter were baking bread | The fox came in in its red fur | Mother and daughter stood sifting wine | The wolf came in in its grey skin".

hilation of the parents is necessary to restore the natural order. From a cultural point of view, we may say that the two children, deprived of their humanity as infants, are as a consequence deprived of their *social birth*, as Lewis-Simpson defines it, that is, their entry into society which in many cultures represents the recognition of the individual as human being²⁹. In Christian society, the official entry into society is given by the sacrament of baptism; in such perspective the deprivation endured by the children is even bigger and heavier.

Magical knowledge goes well with the experience of age, as also evident in *Jungfrun i fågelhamn*. Here the protagonist undergoes two transformations. First, she is transformed into a doe, while she is busy with her domestic work, by her stepmother (who also transforms her servants into wolves that hunt her):

Jhn då kom min Styffmoder
 hon mig den skaden wålde
 Hoon skapte migh i en willande hind
 och badh migh åth Skogen löpa
 Och alle mina Möijer i Vifwer grå
 Som Migh skulle dageligh föösa³⁰.

Later the young girl is transformed into a hawk by a *fulbla Trollkiering*, an ugly witch. The Swedish word *kiering* (sv. *käring* or *kärring*) does mean ‘woman’, but it is used in a derogatory sense, often as a synonym for *häxa* “witch” and refers to women of a certain age³¹. It is safe to assume that the ugly witch is the stepmother herself.

Skam få den fuhla Trollkiering
 hon räddes för vngerswens liste
 Hoon skapte henne i en willande höök
 som flyger så högt vp i qwiste³²

²⁹ Lewis-Simpson 2008: 10.

³⁰ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 35: “Then my stepmother came in | she caused me that injury | She turned me into a wild doe | and commanded me to run to the forest | And all my maids into grey wolves | That would daily chase me”.

³¹ *Kärring* or *käring* are variants of the word *kärling*, which is a derivation of the word *karl* “man” and means ‘(old) woman’ and dates to the Middle Ages; see also *SAOB*, <<https://www.saob.se/artikel/?seek=k%C3%A4rring&pz=1>>. The word *häxa* is known in Sweden only from the second half of the 17th century (the old Scandinavian words for sorceress were *trollkäring*, *trollkona* or *trollpacka*); see also *SAOB*, <https://www.saob.se/artikel/?unik=H_2211-0005.SOF4&pz=3>.

³² Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 35: “Shame on the ugly old witch | she is afraid of young boy’s desire | She turned her into a wild hawk | which flies so high up in the twigs”.

In *Jungfrun i hindhamn* the main character's mother warns him that he can hunt any animal except for the doe, and in version B, his mother explains that his fiancée's stepmother turned his fiancée into a doe.

Du skiuth hjortar och du skiuth Råå,
 Du skiuth hiorter och du skiuth hara
 Men lätt den fagra hinden fara.
 Hennes Styfmoder togh fram Sax och lijn
 Och skapte din Fästemö Vti en hind³³

In *Den förtrollade riddaren* the evil stepmother turns the child into several objects, and finally into a wolf³⁴:

Först skapte hoon Migh i Nähler
 Och sade Jagh skulle tråhna.
 Så skapte hoon Migh i knijfver
 Och sade Jag skulle icke trifwas
 Så skapte hon Migh i Saxer
 Och sade Jagh skull' icke wexa
 Så skapte hoon Migh i Vlffwen grå
 Och bödh Jagh skulle åth Skogen gåå³⁵

The ballad *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind* is present in eleven versions in Jonsson, Jersild and Jansson edition (1983), and in versions C, D, E, F, G and I the guilt of the stepmother is made explicit.

Min styfmoder hon vart på mig vred
 Hon skapte mig till en lind satte mig i Jorden ned³⁶

In version D, the stepmother's evilness invests all her stepchildren, transformed into animals, and, apparently, is not even contrasted by her husband:

Jag var mig så liten jag miste min moder
 Min fader han gaf mig i styf-moders våld

³³ *Ibidem.* 63: "You shoot deers and you shoot roe deers | Let the blessed doe go | You shoot deers and you shoot hares | But let the beautiful doe go | Her stepmother took out scissors and string | And turned your fiancée into a doe".

³⁴ In Version B, the stepmother only turns the stepson into a wolf, and does not mention devouring his brother as a cure.

³⁵ *Ibidem.* 37: "First she turned me into needles | And said I would sigh | Then she turned me into knives | And said I would not thrive | Then she turned me into scissors | And said I would not grow | Then she turned me into the grey wolf | And commanded I should go to the forest".

³⁶ *Ibidem.* 88. Version C: "My stepmother was angry with me | She turned me into a lime tree and she put me in the ground".

– I år så blir det en Sommar
 Och jag hade bröder båd stora och små
 Och somma skapad' hon i biörna och ulvarne grå³⁷

As to the cultural aspect related to the tale role of the ‘magical practitioners’ there is something more to explore. Magic in these ballads is always performed by an adult or old woman. The woman who victimises young people is usually a stepmother, a mother in one case. Other magical performers are expressly referred to as witches; though the stepmothers themselves are not defined as such, their possession of magical faculties makes them witches too. Although medieval Norse literature shows individuals of both sexes involved in magic (there are numerous ballads featuring male protagonists using runes to create love spells), the ballads about transformation magic have only female performers. This also applies to *Den förtröllade barnaföderskan* in which a stepmother or a mother-in-law prolongs a woman’s gestation for eight years³⁸, as if the creation or the transformation of a body through magic, not unlike the act of giving life, were an exclusively female privilege³⁹. Nonetheless, the action of transforming is always expressed by the verb *skapa* “create”, “shape” in the phrasal form *skapa i*.

Although old Nordic literature equally features both males and females as magical performers, scholars like Jenny Jochens argue that in earlier times only women possessed magical powers⁴⁰. Also in Swedish medieval legal codes, when magic is mentioned, only female performers are referred to. Besides, witchcraft and *förgöring* are the only crimes for which women were considered liable, being for the other crimes considered as legal minor⁴¹. In the late Middle Ages, more-

³⁷ *Ibidem*: 88. Version D: “I was so little when I lost my mother | My father he left me to the stepmother’s violence | This year it will be a summer | And I had brothers both big and small | And she turned them into bears and grey wolves”.

³⁸ *Ibidem*: 136-146.

³⁹ Not in all ballads transformation magic functions according to this narrative scheme, but all still have female protagonists. The ballads that do not present this pattern of tale roles nonetheless feature interesting epilogues. In the Danish ballad *Forvandlingerne* (Olrík/Grüner-Nielsen 1967: 135-136), the author of the magic is a girl who cunningly and ingeniously uses magic to transform her beloved to escape the wrath of her father. In the Norwegian *Beiarblakkjen* (Espeland 2015), on the other hand, three old *kejerringar* create a horse out of the bones and the blood of a man, capable of travelling through secret worlds. Here the transformative act starts from inert matter (which must have some life in it) and becomes a sort of creative act. The three witches, reminiscent of the Norns, are here the repositories of ancient knowledge, able to manipulate natural elements and bring them to life.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jochens 1996: 130-131; Mitchell 2019: 137.

⁴¹ *Västgöta-, Östgöta-, Södermanns-, Västmanns-, Dala-, and Upplandslagar* assume that only women could commit crimes dealing with witchcraft or *förgöring* (cf. Ekholst 2014: 142-143 and 146).

over, writings like the *Malleus*, appeared in 1487, contributed to present magic as a female activity, fuelling older misogynistic stereotypes and asserting that women were more disposed than men to commit the sins of magic and superstition⁴².

As for the ballads, we know very little about the wicked protagonists. As to their aspect, we know for sure that the so called *käringar* are old and ugly, mirroring the archetype present in literature and folklore. We have actually scarce information about the (step)mothers: we can only assume that they are no elderly women and that they persecute their stepchildren out of envy and greediness (as we can infer, for instance, from the ballad *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind* in which we read, in Version E “Maglena hon hade en stjuftdotter rik”, in Version F “Malena hon hade en styf-dotter fin”, and from a widespread *topos*)⁴³. They have magical abilities that allow them to transform human beings and to invert the natural order.

These abilities, which enable them to subvert natural laws even though in some cases they intervene for good (as in *Förvandling och förlosning*), are a source of chaos. Their magic is always connotated with more negative traits than that of their male counterparts. Portraits of male practitioners of magic, in fact, are quite different: they are learned magicians, expert in runes, whose magic, though used for selfish aims, is not as armful as that of women. In the perspective of the medieval narrator and audience, to bend people’s willing to one’s own interest is undoubtedly an action to blame, yet subverting the natural order and transforming human bodies and souls are abominable activities.

So, unlike their male counterparts, stepmothers and old witches are outsiders, as they move and act, respectively, outside the familiar and social sphere: not only are they no longer young and ‘desirable’; what is even worse, they are not ‘real’ mothers. If marriage and motherhood is what marks the beginning of a social life for their young female victims, the absence of these two contributes to underline their outsideness. As outsiders, witches and (step)mothers in these ballads take their revenge on the society that does not need them anymore, embodying the evil side of magic and becoming the dark parody of their younger counterparts, still giving life but in a dysmorphic, artificial, monstrous way.

The old witches, moreover, represent a very peculiar kind of old women, quite in conflict with the image of female ageing in medieval Sweden. Old women were traditionally considered unproductive and in need for protection, as symbolically witness the fact that they received the same burial treatments as un-

⁴² Rider 2019: 344. See also Broedel 2003: 170 and 175-176.

⁴³ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 89, 90. Version E: “Maglena, she had a rich stepdaughter”; Version F “Malena, she had a fine stepdaughter”.

der three-year-old children or disabled people⁴⁴. The old *käringar* featured in the ballads strongly contrast with this idea of aged women: not only are they outside the social spheres traditionally reserved to women, but they are independent and in full charge of themselves.

Magic turns out to be, thus, a form of productiveness, which, as such, grants the old *käringar* status and respect. As Jón Viðar Sigurðsson explains, in fact, the trouble with ageing does not derive from the mere process of getting old, but from the progressive loss of productiveness and individual autonomy⁴⁵.

2.3. Tale roles No. 3: the saviours

Who restores the order? Who breaks the spell? The third tale role is played by those who provide a solution, for better or for worse. Apart from the deer girl, killed by her boyfriend/brother who did not listen to his mother's warnings, the young people in these ballads are finally liberated from the spell⁴⁶. The girl transformed into bird feeds on the flesh cut from the chest of the knight who saves her:

Så skaer han den bråden vhr sit bröst
 Och kaster så högt vp i qwiste
 Så ynckelig gielde den wille höök
 At han den så skulle mista.
 Höken togh den blödande bråå
 och satte sigh på en tufwa
 När han hade ätit den bråden vp
 Wear han stoltz Jungfruga⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Cf. Mejsholm 2008: 156.

⁴⁵ Cf. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2008: 242.

⁴⁶ In *Jungfru in bindhamn* the girl's slayer is her brother in Version A: "Hann flädde i hennes nacke | ther fann hann sinn systers gull locke | Hann flädde i hennes bryste | ther fann hann sinn systers gull kiste | Hann flädde i hennes bringe | ther fann hann sinn systers gulringe" (Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 63); "He skinned her neck | there he found his sister's gold lock | He skinned her breast | there he found his sister's gold chest | He skinned her brisket | there he found his sister's yellow rings"; he is her fiancé in Version B: "Herr Peder lade Bougen emoth sit knä | Skiöth så sin eigen fästemöö ihiehl | Herr Peder lade af sine handsker två | Så finner han sin Fästemöes hårlocker små" (Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 64); "Sir Peder put the bow against his knee | Then shot his own fiancée to death | Sir Peder took off his two gloves | So he finds his fiancée's small locks of hair". The first one may be interpreted as a paradigm of an incestuous desire. Version B could be read as a warning to young men who wish to consummate before the marriage. Both versions deal with the danger that can derive from forbidden desires and transgressions.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*. 35: "Then he cuts a piece of flash out of his chest | And throws so high up in the twigs | A so pitiful fee to the wild hawk | That he would then lose it | The hawk took the bleeding piece | and sat down on a tussock | When he had eaten that piece up | She was a proud maiden".

The lime-tree girl becomes human again after her beloved kisses the roots of the plant.

Konung Magnus han faller på sin' bara knä,
Och kysser så roten på Lindeträd.
När konung Magnus stiger opp, och ser sig omkring,
Så ständar där en Jungfru så fager och så fin⁴⁸

In *Den förtrollade riddaren* the protagonist, first transformed into needles, knives, scissors and finally into a wolf by his stepmother, regains his form by attacking the latter and devouring her foetus.

Så togh [Jagh] till medh harme
Hennes foster vhr hennes barme
När Jagh hade druckit min Broders blod
Wardt jagh en Riddarre bold och godh⁴⁹

In *Förvandling och förlösning*, the wolf and the fox, having eaten their mothers' hearts, are brought back to their original form by a witch.

Är icke du vår moder som icke gaf oss lif
I dag skall vi steka dig och äta dig med knif
Är icke du vår moder som icke gaf oss mat
I dag skall vi steka dig och lägga dig på fat
Är icke du vår moder som icke gaf oss dryck
I dag skall vi slagta dig och skära dig i styck [...]
De togo den modren och dottren så god
De drucko begärligt deras hjärteblod
Nu var modren och dottren död

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*. 86: "King Magnus, he falls on his bare knees | And then kisses the root of the limetree | When King Magnus rises, and looks around | So there stands a maiden so beautiful and so fine".

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*. 37: "So I took off with rage | Her foetus from her bosom | When I had drunk my brother's blood | I became a bold and good Knight". In Version B, once the wolf has eaten his stepmother's foetus, he turns into a *dräng*, "servant" or "young guy", and not into a knight (*ibidem*. 38). Worth mentioning is the Danish version of this ballad, *Jomfruen i ulveham* (Grundtvig 1856: 156-158). Here the main character is a young girl, turned into a *varulv* (a werewolf) by her stepmother who can regain her human state by drinking her brother's blood. The Danish female protagonist acts within more boundaries than her Swedish male counterpart, in a more limited space of action and with a more controlled ferocity. First of all, she does not kill her brother, but only bites his toe (biting off a child's toe was considered an apotropaic action, which could grant a long life to the kids, as stated in the old Norwegian law code *Ældre Borgarthings-Christenret*; see Keyser/Munch 1846: 362). Secondly, once the spell is broken, the *jungfru* must face the consequences of her deeds: having killed her stepmother she will retire to a nunnery. The Swedish version does not provide further information about the new turned knight, we only presume he will be back to his life.

De sögo och drucko deras blod så röd
 Ej förr de druckit deras varma blod
 Förrn Spåkvinnan alt för dem stod
 Hon rörde och slog dem med sin staf
 Och det blef en prins utaf dem hvar⁵⁰

The re-transformation, the counter-spell, in three cases, almost implies an act of cannibalism, because it is performed while the girl or boy still has an animal form. The process of ingesting human flesh is a process of appropriation and identification. As in ancient Nordic sources, food is a kind of extension of the one who eats it (as witness, for instance, Sigurðr, in *Fáfnismál* or in *Völsunga saga*, who, ingesting the blood of the dragon, assimilates its magical ability to understand birds; or the prohibition to eat food from the other world in the account of 'Thorkillus' journey in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*⁵¹). Moreover, since ancient times, blood had been considered as a cure for many diseases, on the belief that by drinking blood one would assimilate its vital elements⁵². As a consequence, whereas in the society of the time the transition from the status of a child/teenager to that of a grown-up person is, as already remarked, signalled by marriage or householding, in the ballads it is narrated as a sequence of symbolic rites of passage⁵³. Mary Danielli's insights about the initiation rites for the young Icelanders may be also applied to the stories narrated in the ballads. As rites of passages usually involve ritual encounters with bears and berserks, Danielli maintains, eating hearts and drinking blood is part of a ceremonial of initiation, representing a sort of ritual communion⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ Jonsson/Jersild/Jansson 1983: 52: "Are you not our mother who did not give us life | Today we will cook you and eat you with a knife | Are you not our mother who did not give us food | Today we will cook you and put you on a plate | Are you not our mother who did not give us drink | Today we will slaughter you and cut you into pieces [...] They took the mother and the daughter so well | They eagerly drank their hearts' blood | Now the mother and the daughter were dead | They sucked and drank their red blood | Not before they drank their warm blood | As soon as the sorceress stood before them | She touched and struck them with her staff | And there was a prince out of each of them".

⁵¹ Cf. Finch 1965: 33; Grundtvig 1868: 113-114; Friis-Jensen 2015: 602. See also in Silver (2005: 103-107) how widely spread the myth of the forbidden food is in many different cultures.

⁵² The practice was not unknown to Pliny, as Montesano (2022: 38) explains in an essay about the rejuvenating power of blood in Marsilio Ficino's studies. Moreover, according to a folk belief, reported by Kvideland (1988: 75-76), werewolves attacked pregnant women. As they were born by mothers who had eased their labour pains with the foal's caul, they would have regained their shape by tearing the foetus from the womb and eating the child's heart.

⁵³ Cf. Percivall 2008: 130.

⁵⁴ Cf. Danielli 1945: 244; Larrington 2008: 151-152. See also Hocart 1924.

As we can see, the young girls need an external male intervention, through an act of love in which the bodily aspect plays a central role. In *Jungfrun förvandlad till lind* this intervention is facilitated by the girl herself, even if she remains motionless; in *Jungfrun i fågelhamn* it is determined by the peasant's advice to the young man who tries to catch the bird. Once again, the magic of re-transformation stands as a metaphor for the marital and sexual bond that determines the girls' growth and their entrance into the public sphere. Young women from aristocracy (honourable women in general) were especially expected to get married so as to have someone who could act in their defence and favour, as witnessed by their transformation into 'prey' animals or plants, that is, entities whose agency is limited and dependent on other people.

The salvation of boys, on the other hand, depends essentially on themselves. The entry into adulthood is, thus, determined by self-assertion through acts of courage and strength. For this reason, the young protagonists are transformed into predatory animals, who achieve salvation by performing atrocious acts. These actions are functional to the restoration of the status quo; order is recovered thanks to the absence of humanity and the prevalence of a monstrous bestiality that make any foul deed somehow acceptable. When young men are in the state of bestiality, in fact, they are outside the human and outside any rule of human ethics, and they literally feed on life in order to regain it. As William Aird maintains, the major indicator of achieved manhood is the independence of action. Exhibiting one's own power is the first step toward the individual's affirmation as an adult, followed by the establishment of an independent household and the public recognition⁵⁵. Male adulthood is, thus, strongly connected to performance and its recognition⁵⁶.

The quality that is required of them is strength, and although they participate in magic, they are not possessors of magical knowledge. As we have seen before, in *Förvandling och förlösning*, beastly strength is not enough to restore order, and further magical intervention is needed: a *spökevinna* (sorceress) appears after the animals have torn out the hearts of the mother and daughter. We do not know whether the old witch is the person who had transformed them at the beginning; in any case, the woman, as the repository of magical knowledge, here takes the form of the executor and restorer of order.

The ballads, in their symbolic meaning, confirm what the achievement of adulthood represented. As Nic Percivall explains, adulthood is attained "through

⁵⁵ Cf. Aird 1998: 44.

⁵⁶ Cf. Percivall 2008: 146-147.

the acquisition of property, juridical authority, marriage, and physical or martial prowess” and with the “public recognition of his new status”⁵⁷.

3. Conclusions

As Raudvere suggests, we need to wonder whether or not the audience were able to mirror their lives and nightmares in the ballads⁵⁸. On the basis of my analysis the answer is quite positive. Magical elements contribute to turn the ballads into metaphors for life experience and difficulties. Magic constitutes a central element in the *naturmytiska visor*, but not an exceptional one. The everyday and the extraordinary are in fact inscribed within the same framework of possibilities⁵⁹.

As a matter of fact, very little do we know about how magic is actually performed and where it comes from: *Förvandling och förlösning* features a witch waving a stick and the stepmother in *Jungfrun i bindhamn* performs her magic by using scissors and string. What is essential, however, is that magic, as a narrative component of the ballads, brings to the fore issues of gender and ageing.

Young people of both sexes are the designated victims of magic; male victims have a higher level of agency since their liberation is entrusted to themselves, through violent actions, while female victims require external (male) intervention to be saved. Boys achieve their entry into adulthood in a self-assertive manner, through acts of courage and strength; girls, conversely, need love and/or marriage, which represent their both social and sexual rebirth.

When it comes to adult or old women, magic highlights notable gender and ageing aspects. Magic of transformation is always performed by an adult or old woman, i.e. a witch or a (step)mother. In this case, more than its symbolic meaning (obstacles and dangers on the road to adulthood), it is interesting to observe its cultural and social meaning. Magic of transformation, as an element that disrupts the natural order, is a prerogative of a certain kind of women who own a creational power *ante litteram*. The stepmothers are not only adult, experienced women, able to master the magic; they are also women cast at the margins of the family context. Both stepmothers and witches are thus placed in a liminal position that excludes them from the social order. In this liminal space, magic, though regarded as a negative element capable of disrupting the natural order and generating chaos, gives them a condition of autonomy and power, such as their gender and their age would never grant them.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibidem*: 131.

⁵⁸ Cf. Raudvere 2022: 741.

⁵⁹ Cf. Morgentaler 2007: 151.

As the transformation of the young people is a ritual passage from childhood to adulthood, the presence of the old witches, explicitly defined *käringar*, acquires an even higher role. They are, in fact, public and ‘official’ witnesses to this transition, necessary for the individual’s recognition as an adult.

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Insieme al nome sintetico abbiamo scelto come nuovo simbolo il punto e virgola, per distinguere ma al tempo stesso collegare tra loro i vari ambiti disciplinari della germanistica. Un segno di punteggiatura sempre meno utilizzato e per questo forse un po’ desueto, ma che ci sembra acquisire una particolare potenzialità semantica: pur marcando uno stacco più forte, il punto e virgola connette parti indipendenti e le pone in dialogo – ha qualcosa di interlocutorio, nella consapevolezza che voler costruire un discorso fatto di punti fermi sia oggi più che mai illusorio.

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