

Supernatural Beings in the Far North: Folklore, Folk Belief, and The Selkie

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Within the world of folklore, stories of people turning into animals are well known. Either by accident or by design, a person may become a malevolent wolf, a swan, a helpful bird, a magic seal, a dog, a cat. Sometimes these stories are presented as folktales, part of a fictitious, make-believe world. Other times they are presented as legends, grounded in a narrator's credibility and connected to everyday life. They may be sung as ballads or their core truths may be implied in a familiar proverb. They also affect human behavior as folk belief. Occasionally, sympathetic magic is involved: the human imagination infers a permanent and contiguous relationship between items that once were either in contact or were parts of a whole that later became separated or transformed. A narrative found in Ireland, England, and North America depicts a man who spends a night in a haunted mill, where he struggles with a cat and cuts off the cat's paw. In the morning, the wife of a local villager has lost her hand (Baughman: 99; Disenchantment / Motif no. D702.1.1). France, French-speaking Canada and French-speaking Louisiana have stories of the *loup-garou*, a shape-shifter who is a person trapped in the body of an animal. One might suspect that he or she has encountered a *loup-garou* if that the animal is unusually annoying, provoking anger and hostile action. One penetrating cut will break the spell that has kept it trapped in animal form. In a Cajun variant of this tale, a woman who is vexed with a dog that will not leave her alone throws a knife at the dog and cuts it on the nose. As soon as it begins to bleed, it turns into a man. 'Thank you very much, Madame', he says. 'You have released me from a curse' (Ancelet: 160).

Countless variants of the Grimm brothers' famous fairy tales 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Frog King' describe magical transformations. Pursued by an animal suitor, the heroine has conflicting feelings of obligation to her parents, who support the union, and a personal revulsion at the prospect of an animal lover. 'As her duty', she dines with, entertains, and finally is faced with the ultimate sacrifice of going to bed with a pig, a snake, a goat, a donkey, a mouse or a frog. In nearly every variant, it is an act of compassion (accepting the beast) or an act of furious defiance (attempting to harm the beast in a fit of rage) that has the power to disenchant, and the beast becomes a handsome prince (Tatar: 29).

From northern seas of the world come a number of folk narratives, ballads, proverbs and folk beliefs about magical creatures known as selkies, supernatural beings who are capable of transformation from human form on the land to seals in the water. Selkies are similar to but not the same as mermaids, women of wondrous beauty who have both human and marine physical characteristics in the same body. Neither are they the same as kelpies, water creatures that assume the form of a beautiful horse in order to capture and drown their human victims (Douglas: 112-16), or njuggles (or neugles), the Shetland equivalent of a water horse. A njuggle will appear as an ordinary Shetland pony, which, if mounted, will 'plunge in the twinkling of an eye into the nearest burn' (Robertson: 274; also Blind: 188-205).

Selkies are often found along a shore, at the edge of the ocean, where human life and marine life meet. The water's edge, like all liminal locations, can be the setting for extraordinary experiences. Those who frequent such locations, such as fishermen, are poised between the familiar world of their

local community and the vast expanse of unpredictable sea. From this expanse, a magical creature emerges and comes ashore, where it transforms itself into human (often female) form. Thus disguised, it attracts people with its startling beauty, sometimes for amorous purposes and sometimes to lure them into the sea. Selkies can be found on rocky coastal outcroppings, where gray seals typically reside. Here the selkie will shed her sealskin and bask in the sun. If a man manages to locate the sealskin and take possession of it, the selkie who has shed it will become his ‘property’ and will have to stay with him. Selkies who come ashore as men are also physically attractive, so it isn’t difficult for them to woo young women and father their children, who will in turn become selkies or will possess physical ‘seal-like’ attributes, such as webbed fingers and toes.

The ballad ‘The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry’ (Child 113) is well known by ballad scholars and by folksong revivalists introduced to selkie lore through the singing of Joan Baez in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This sparse and haunting ballad reveals the dramatic highlights of a story of a transformation from seal to man. Francis James Child received a text for the ballad from a Shetland correspondent, William Macmath. In his notes for the ‘The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry’, Child wrote: ‘The ballad . . . would have followed No. 40 had I known of it earlier’.¹ A forward movement of this ballad (from number 113 up to number 40) would have put it among ballads about shape-changers and mortals who move with the folk of the otherworld, a more likely harbour within Child’s vast collection.

Macmath’s Shetland text comes from an 1852 volume of the Scottish Society of Antiquaries, and contains the following key elements of plot: 1) a woman nurses her son, lamenting that she hardly knows the father, or even less, where he is from; 2) a man comes to her and identifies himself as the father, apologising for his ‘grumly’, or fierce, appearance; 3) he explains that he is a selkie; and 4) he offers her a purse of gold in exchange for his son; 5) he prophesies his own death and the death of his son at the hand of the woman’s future husband, a ‘proud gunner’. The ballad’s sparse narrative style raises as many questions as it answers. How did this woman come to be the lover of a selkie? Does she accept the bribe of a purse of gold in exchange for her own child? Is the selkie’s prophecy carried out? In her notes for ‘The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry’ in *Scottish Ballads*, Emily Lyle sheds further light on relations between humans and seal people:

Humans are thought of as close kin of the seal people and the fairy people and can have fruitful relations with them. Even so, the child of the mixed union is doomed in this ballad version, and will fall victim to the human husband. Seal people and fairy people are closely associated in the legend that fits them into the biblical scheme of things, it being said that, when Lucifer was driven out of heaven and fell down to hell, some of the angels who had supported him did not fall as far as hell but landed on the earth and became fairies, or in the sea and became seal people (274-75).

Child 113 The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry²

An eartly nourris sits and sings,
And aye she sings, Ba, lily wean!

Little ken I my bairnis father,
Far less the land that he staps in.

Then ane arose at her bed-fit,
An a grumly guest I'm sure was he:
'Here am I, thy bairnis father,
Although that I be not comelie,

'I am a man, upo the lan,
An I am a silkie in the sea,
And when I'm far and far frae lan,
My dwelling is in Sule Skerrie.'

'It was na weel,' quo the maiden fair,
'It was na weel, indeed,' quo she,
'That the Great Silkie of Sule Skerrie
Suld hae come and aught a bairn to me.'

Now he has taen a purse of goud,
And he has pat it upo her knee,
Sayin, Gie to me my little young son,
An tak thee up thy nourris-fee.

An it sall come to pass on a simmer's day,
When the sun shines het on evera stane,
That I will tak my little young son,
An teach him for to swim the faem.

An thu sall marry a proud gunner,
An a proud gunner I'm sure he'll be,
An the very first schot that ere he schoots,
He'll schoot baith my young son and me.

According to Alan Bruford of the School of Scottish Studies, the selkie ballad 'may have been based on a tale that had been told in Norse, even on a Norse ballad, but as we have it, it was launched into and carried down on a Scots stream of tradition' (1974: 77). Alongside this stream of tradition, as Bruford has described it, was a dramatic poem, 'The Lady Odivere', whose length exceeded 90 stanzas. This longer work, collected and published by Walter Traill Dennison, is an epic narrative with some of the same elements of plot that are found in Child's ballad text, such as the woman with a selkie lover, the birth of a selkie son, the selkie lover's offer of payment to the woman for nursing the child, and the death of the selkie son. Although much of this poem has, according to Bruford, 'a core of tradition,' there is evidence of creative editing in Dennison's text (Bruford 1974: 70-77). 'The Lady Odivere' can be found in Dennison's *The Scottish Antiquary*

(1894), G. F. Black's *County Folklore* (1903), and in Ernest W. Marwick's *An Anthology of Orkney Verse* (1949). Its most recent reprinting is in *Orkney Folklore and Sea Legends* (Dennison: 90-103). The contemporary Orkney writer George Mackay Brown incorporated 'The Lady Odivere' into a dramatic reenactment, 'The Ballad Singer', in *An Orkney Tapestry* (1973). Brown described it as 'a great unknown ballad' (4). The American folksinger Gordon Bok adapted the work and set it to music in a 1989 production, 'The Play of The Lady Odivere'.

The plot of 'The Lady Odivere' is elaborate. The heroine is courted by Odivere, a man of great physical strength who cannot resist women: 'he lo'ed de sword, he lo'ed de sang; But aye he lo'ed the lasses mair'. He woos her, enticing her not into Christian marriage but by 'Odin's oath,' apparently deceiving her.³ He departs, leaving her waiting and hearing no word of him. She eventually realises that her marriage was not valid, and she is left with 'peerie' [little] joy:

Her bony een blinked so sae bright,
Her reed an' white grew white an' grey,
An' ilka day shü wised for nicht,
An' ilka nicht shü wised for day.

*Her lovely eyes their brightness lost,
What had been red and white grew white and grey,
And each day she wished for night,
And each night she wished for day.*

Lady Odivere meets and falls in love with a selkie, and gives birth to a son. Here, as in the Child ballad, she laments her lack of knowledge of the father, whereupon he appears, not as a 'guest', as in Child's collection, but a 'gest,' or apparition (Dennison: 95). The selkie offers to pay her for nursing his child, promising to return in six months. He does return at the appointed time, his hands full of money, which she takes for her 'services'. She then places a golden chain around her child's neck ('Hid for her sake shü bade him wear'). The selkie claims his son, bidding his lover farewell. 'Doo'r anither's wife [You are another's wife]', he explains. Lady Odivere is left alone.

The scene shifts to the return of Odivere, to his great hall, where he boasts of killing a selkie and has brought along the corpse as evidence. When Lady Odivere arrives, her husband has something to show her. It is the golden chain, taken from the seal's body: 'Here's de gowd chain ye got fae me. Tell me, gudewife, who cam it here?'

Lady Odivere collapses in tears; she throws her arms around the seal. She confesses to having a selkie for a lover and explains that this slain selkie was her son. Odivere's reaction is one of indignation:

'Wi' selkie folk du's led a life!
Awa, ye limmer slut fae me!
I wadno hae dee for a wife,
For a' de gowd I' Christendee!'

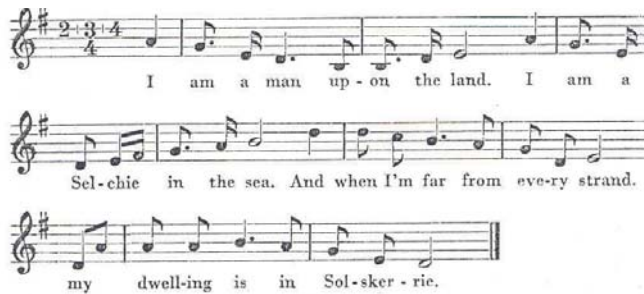
'With selkie folk you've led a life?

*Away, you wretched slut, from me!
I would not have you for a wife
For all the gold in Christendom!*

Odivere orders his men to lock his wife in a tower. Soon after, her selkie lover (disguised in human form) steps forward and announces that whales are near (in the North Sea). Odivere and his men depart 'wi' muckle speed' to hunt them, but they catch nothing. Discouraged, they return to the great hall to find every door wide open, including the door to the tower. Lady Odivere is gone: 'De lathie fair was clean awa,' / An' never mair bae mortal seen'. Odivere remains a lonely man, ruing the day he took the oath of Odin.

Discoveries of other versions of the shorter selkie ballad, made in years following Child's publication of Macmath's text, are worth noting. In the summer of 1938, Finnish folklorist Otto Andersson spent several days collecting ballads in the Orkney Islands. Not only did Andersson publish a version longer than the Shetland text, but he also made it complete with a tune. Here is Andersson's account of his find, made while interviewing a farmer, Mr Sinclair, on the island of Flotta (Andersson 1954: 39).

The second song later revealed itself as the tune to the 'Great Selchie of the Sule Skerries'⁴ (Child 113). I had no idea at the time that I was the first to write down the tune to this famous ballad. Its pure pentatonic form and the beautiful melodic line with its charming rhythm in irregular time, which gave the text a natural rendering, showed me that it was a very ancient tune I had set on paper.



I am a man up - on the land. I am a
Sel-chie in the sea. And when I'm far from eve-ry strand.
my dwell-ing is in Sol-sker - rie.

Mr Sinclair was only able to recall one stanza of text, the heart or 'emotional core' of the ballad:⁵ 'I am a man upon the land. I am a Selchie in the sea. And when I'm far from every strand, my dwelling is in Solskerrie'. However, Andersson eventually published a 14-stanza variant with this tune, having found a more complete text in the Orkney newspaper, *The Orcadian* (January 11, 1934). *The Orcadian* text includes a refused wedding proposal, possibly an allusion to fuller accounts of the selkie story: He says, 'My dear, I'll wed thee with a ring, With a ring, my dear, will I wed with thee'. She says, 'Thoo may go wed thee weddens wi' whom thoo will, For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me'.⁶

'The Grey Selchie of Shool Skerry'

In Norway land there lived a maid,
 'Hush, ba, loo lillie' this maid began,
 'I know not where my baby's father is,
 Whether by land or sea does he travel in'.

It happened on a certain day,
 When this fair lady fell fast asleep,
 That in cam' a good grey selchie,
 And set him down at her bed feet.

Saying 'Awak', awak' my pretty fair maid,
 For oh, now sound as thou dost sleep,
 An' I'll tell thee where thy baby's father is,
 He's sittin' close at thy bed feet'.

'I pray come tell to me thy name,
 Oh, tell me where does thy dwelling be?'
 'My name is good Hein Mailer,
 An' I earn my livin' oot' o' the sea.

'I am a man upon the land,
 I am a selchie in the sea,
 An' when I'm far from every strand,
 My dwelling it is Shool Skerry'.

'Alas, alas this woeful fate,
 This weary fate that's been laid on me,
 That a man should come frae the Wast o' Hoy,
 To the Norway lands to have a bairn wi' me'.

'My dear, I'll wed thee with a ring,
 With a ring, my dear, will I wed with thee'.
 'Thoo may go wed thee weddings wi' whom thoo wilt,
 For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me'.

'Thoo will nurse my little wee son
 For seven long years upon thy knee;
 An' at the end o' seven long years
 I'll come back and pay the nursing fee'.

She's nursed her little wee son
 For seven long years upon her knee,

An' at the end o' seven long years
He cam' back wi' gold an' white monie.

He says, 'My dear, I'll wed thee wi' a ring,
Wi' a ring, my dear, I'll wed wi' thee'.
'Thoo may go wed thee weddens wi' whom thoo will,
For I'm sure thoo'll never wed none wi' me'.

'But I'll put a gold chain around his neck,
An' a gey good gold chain it'll be,
That if ever he comes to the Norway lands,
Thoo may hae a gey good guess on he'.

'An' thoo will get a gunner good,
An' a gey good gunner it will be,
An' he'll gae oot on a May morning
An' shoot the son an' the grey selchie.

Oh, she has got a gunner good,
An' a gey good gunner it was he,
An' he gaed oot on a May morning,
An' he shot the son and the grey selchie.

(When the gunner returned and showed the Norway woman the gold chain which he found round the neck of the young seal she realized that her son had perished, and gave expression to her sorrow in the last verse.)

'Alas, alas, this woeful fate,
This weary fate that's been laid on me'.
An' ance or twice she sobbed and sighed,
An' her tender heart did brak in three.

While traditional ballads about selkies are limited to the Orkney and Shetland Islands, stories of a human taking the form of a seal or other marine animal, although dominant in northern seas, can be found worldwide. In narrative form, the selkie story is identified as Christiansen's (1958) type ML 4080, 'The Seal Woman'. It also can be classified as a subtype of AT 400 (ATU 400), 'The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife,' II. (e) The Enchanted Princess (the hero steals one coat and will give back to the owner only if she will marry him; IV. (d) The swan-maiden finds her swan coat and flies away. Donald Archie MacDonald classifies it as F75 'Man captures fairy woman by hiding her seal's etc. skin. After may years she finds skin (usually through one of children) and goes A) taking children; B) Leaving children; C) Leaving some special blessing on husband (MacDonald: 53). Variants involving human-mermaid interaction include the human stealing her cap (Croker: 240-41), her cloak (Ó Duilearga: No. 123), or her

fish-tail (Lessa: 120; Bruford and MacDonald: 273-4; 477). The closest Motif-Index identification for the story of human-seal interaction comes under the category of transformation: D327.2, Seal becomes person. Other motifs include B601.18, Marriage to seal, and B631.2, Human beings descended from seals. The story of seal-human interaction follows the following plot: A selkie meets a mortal who is walking by the edge of the sea. He steals her sealskin. As long as he has the sealskin, she is in his possession. However, she eventually discovers the location of the sealskin and leaves him as soon as she reclaims it.

In most variants of 'The Seal Woman', the selkie is free and at ease in the world of nature, swimming among the waves in the sea as a seal or dancing along the shore as a woman. The man who finds her, however, is able to curtail her freedom by taking and hiding her seal skin. Once her skin is 'taken', she also is removed from her animal life and must conform to human society. She often longs for the sea, but she resigns herself to her fate and becomes a dutiful wife and mother. It is only by chance – a key accidentally left behind, a casual reference to the hiding place, an innocent question from one of her children – that she is given the opportunity to find her seal skin and return to her previous state. She always does, sometimes with sorrow and sometimes (less often) with playful humour.

'The Seal Woman' appears to have a westerly, Atlantic distribution. According to Alan Bruford, this story is widely known on the western and northern coasts of Ireland and Scotland. Variants involving mermaids can be found on the east coasts, where the Atlantic grey seal is prevalent (Bruford 1986: 171-74). Francis James Child quotes Grimm's *Mythologie I* (354f) in drawing Scandinavian and German parallels to the seal-woman theme:

'Finns', as they are for the most part called, denizens of a region below the depths of the ocean, are able to ascent to the land above by donning a seal-skin, which they are then wont to lay off, and, having divested themselves of it, they 'act just like men and women'. If this integument be taken away from them, they cannot pass through the sea again and return to their proper abode, and they become subject to the power of man, like the swanmaidens and mer-wives of Scandinavian and German tradition. Female Finns, under these circumstances, have been fain to accept of human partners. (Child: 494)

Otto Andersson also wrote of his fascination with the appearance of the swan maiden in tales of the North European literary tradition and with other figures such as the 'seal-man' and 'fish-girl' of Celtic and Scottish folklore and the 'porpoise girl' of Oceanic folklore (Andersson 1967: 1-6; also Lessa: 120-67). 'The theme of the Scottish ballad 'The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerrie' is certainly related', he said, 'and so in my opinion is a motif in the famous Finnish epic *Kalevala*' (Andersson 1967: 1). The *Kalevala* contains an episode in the adventures of Vainamoinen, which describes how Vainamoinen is about to slit a fish that he has caught so that he can eat it for his breakfast. The fish, which is unusually beautiful, leaps back into the water, where it assumes female form and speaks to him. She says that she is Aino, the girl whom he wanted to marry, but had let her go. She then dives under the waves, never to be seen again.

In a 1938 letter to Otto Andersson, Anne Gilchrist wrote: 'These seal legends are extremely interesting, for there seems to be, as you will know, a belief around the northern shores of Scotland

that they [seals] are real half-humans - the children of the kin of Lochlann [Scandinavia] under a spell; and the members of a family who were more or less webbed between their fingers and toes were believed to show in this way the traces of their seal descent' (Andersson 1967: 3-4). Walter Traill Dennison recalls stories in Orkney about selkie descendants whose fins were clipped regularly: '... the fins not being allowed to grow in their natural way, grew into a horny crust on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet' (Dennison 1995: 86). Orkney scholar Ernest Marwick also writes about 'the descendants of a Stronsay woman, who sprang from her union with the seal-man she loved, had a thick horn skin on the palms of their hands and on the soles of their feet. In one of the race, known to the present writer, this was a greenish-white tegument fully a sixteenth of an inch thick which was cracked in places and had a strong fishy odor' (Marwick 1975: 28). In another account, the seal-human connection is suggested through ancient or incomprehensible speech. A captured 'Finn woman' (seal woman) would sometimes leave her human husband and 'go down amongst the rocks to converse with her Finn one; but the inquisitive people who listened could not understand a single word of the conversation' (Blind Part II: 405).

In *Scottish Traditional Tales*, Donald MacDougall's narration of the selkie story, set in North Uist, is entitled 'MacCodrum's Seal Wife'. It is framed with a reference to the family as 'the MacCodrums of the seals' (Bruford and MacDonald: 365; also MacAulay: 1-9). A text from Scotland, 'Tom Moore and the Seal Woman', also concerns this family. 'No man of the MacCodrums', it states, 'would kill a seal' (Curtin: 151). Ronald MacDonald Douglas writes in *The Scots Book of Lore and Folklore* that 'although it is not usual for there to be any fruits of a human and a fairy union, it is well-known, of course, that all the MacCodrums, for one clan at least, are descended of a seal'. Further,

Shetlanders, without knowing it, often take fairy-seal-women for their wives. And sometimes very good wives they are, until the day comes when they have to return to the sea, and so to fairyland. And this is how a Shetlander may take a seal-woman for his wife, and know nothing about it until the day she vanishes; and even then he may not understand - he may only think that his wife has run away with a foreign sailor, or something of the kind. When a seal-woman comes ashore, perhaps having failed to entice the man she wants into the waters, she puts off her seal skin and becomes to all outward appearances a normal-looking woman—but always a very beautiful one. As a beautiful woman she has little difficulty in courting the man of her choice, and eventually becoming his wife. Then the day is sure to come—and it may be after years—when her own doffed sealskin is put before her by some mysterious means. Then is she powerless. She can do no other than put on the skin, and when she has done that she must make for the sea, and plunge into the waves, to be seen on earth no more. (Douglas: 111)

From Deerness, Orkney, comes the narrative 'The Selkie Wife', transcribed by J. A. Pottinger. This text contains touches of everyday life, such as a credible justification for the selkie's desire to reconnect with her sealskin ('Mebbe she wanted tae feel the auld selkie skin on her back again') or the description of her subsequent and hasty departure, in which she leaves

her clothes scattered everywhere (in a 'raffle').

A man wanders near the banks of the sea, he hears 'a soond o' fiddles playin' and folk dancin' and laffin' and caerryin' on'.

He hides behind a large crag to observe 'bonnie, nakit weemen' [beautiful, naked women] dancing and playing on the rocks. Lying nearby were 'mair than a score o' selkie skins' [more than 20 seal skins]. He manages to grip a hold of one of the skins. The lass who owned it 'skreekit oot' [cried out] for him to return it. 'I'm tellin' thee the selkie can spaek tae ane anither as weel as thee or me'.

He carries her, fussing all the way, to his home. Eventually she calms down and gets more accustomed to human ways. She is beautiful; he takes 'a fancy tae her'. They marry and live together as man and wife.

One day he goes off into town and takes the bairns with him. She comes across the key to the chest where her sealskin is kept.

'Mebbe she wantid tae feel the auld selkie skin on her back again. . . Onnyway, when her peur man cam back, there was no wife'. The kist [chest] was o[p]en, the skin wasna to be fund and a' her claes [clothes] were lying about i' a raffle'.

He never saw her again. I've heard say that when her bairns take a walk along the banks on a summer's evening, 'they wad hear her greetin' like tae brak her hert'. (Pottinger: 173-5)

A Shetland variant of the same folktale, collected by James Nicholson, describes a Finn

[selkie] maiden's discovery of her skin and subsequent return to the sea:⁷

He did not destroy the skin, contenting himself with hiding it where it was thought there was little chance of her coming across it. The pair married and several children were born. It happened, however, that one of the bairns came across the skin one day in his father's absence, and unthinkingly gave it to his mother. The latter at once left the house, taking the skin with her, but it was said that she cried at parting with the children.

When the father returned he found the bairns in tears. On hearing what had taken place, the distracted man ran instantly to the seashore, just in time to see his wife shaking flippers and embracing a seal. On seeing her husband on the rocky shore, she cried:

Blessins be wi' de,
Baid de an' da bairns:

Bit du kens, da first love
Is aye da best.

*Blessings be with you,
Both you and the children:
But you know, the first love
Is always the best.*

An Icelandic version of ‘The Seal Woman’ refers to the divided sympathies of the departing selkie as she says good-bye to her children, as well as to the subsequent luck of the selkie’s husband, a fisherman:

. . . She had taken the key, looked into the trunk out of curiosity, and found the skin. Unable to resist the temptation, she then had said good-bye to her children, put on the skin, and plunged into the sea. But before she did, the story goes, she recited these words, as if to herself:

‘Of two minds must I be:
I’ve seven children in the sea
And seven more on land’.

The husband is said to have grieved for her deeply.

Later, when he went out fishing, a seal would often circle around his skiff, and sometimes it looked as if tears were running from its eyes. The man had the best of luck in his fisheries ever after, and the sea washed many things up on his shore. People often noticed that when his children happened to be walking on the beach, a seal would swim offshore along with them and throw them multicolored fish and pretty seashells.

But never again did their mother return to land. (Hallmundsson: 96; See also Simpson: 101)

Key characteristics of the selkie story are represented in these texts: The discovery of the selkie; the luring of the human into the selkie world, through music, beauty, nakedness, and charm; the union of the selkie and the human; the discovery of the sealskin; and the inevitable return of the selkie to the sea.

My own fieldwork in Orkney led to this spirited narration from Willie Thomson of

‘Neven’, on the northernmost island of North Ronaldsay.⁸

It was about the Christmas time, and of course everybody had some ale about the New Year, to welcome in the New Year. You see, this laddie, oh, he was what you call a confirmed bachelor. Women were all right in their place.

Aye that! They called for marriage for him and all and would be nagging away 'boot this and that and spoiled a man's freedom. The good wife o' Langer says, 'Now look, Laddie, I can see it coming. Thoo are going to be trapped wi' a lassie and be happy'. 'Ach! Stuff and nonsense,' he says, you see?

Anyway. He was walking along the beach one day a while after, and could he hear some music or something? He couldna say where. He looked all around and thought it was coming from the sea gulls. So he got down among the rocks and there were five or six lassies dancin' away. Not a stitch o' clothes on. Beautiful, that! Then he saw the sealskins lying. So he got around the corner where no one could see him and then he got it, he got a skin pulled down. So then he made a noise or something and then of course everyone grabbed their skin and they all jumped in the sea and away. This poor lassie couldna. So she pleaded wi' him and pleaded wi' him ta give him the [skin]. 'No, no, no,' he said. Oh, he fell in love w' her nearly first sight! [laughter] It was exactly as the old wife o' Langer had foretold, you see.

So anyway, he got her persuaded and she came back to the hoose, and of course they had ta be married. And the minister came and he married them, but they said of this lassie, she put her fingers in her ears during the ceremony. For you see they were supposed to be of the faith of Odin, not Christians, you see? They're spirits. And they were turned into seals on the day [time?], and they could come ashore at certain times.

Well, they did all right, and he had, was it, three children, or four, w' her. Oh, they was there for years and years! Because he were out for the fishing one day with the eldest, who was, say, maybe 12 or 13 years old, with his boat. But the youngest lassie, she hurt her foot somehow, oh, maybe a thorn in it or something. Nothing serious. And her mother kept her in this day, you see, and she was bathing her foot and all and telling her it would soon be better and then she was telling stories, and then the lassie says to her mother, 'Mother, what is that beautiful skin I've seen Daddy looking to sometimes? And he strokes it and strokes it and puts it back and hides it away up there in the corner?'

So, of course, her mother got her a chair. Up she goes. And here was her skin. Seal skin, you see. She took her skin, she kissed her lassie, and she away, down to the sea.

When the man o' the boat came back, there she was, swimming around. And she cried to him. She says, 'I've had a good time together, boy! Take care o' the bairns. I'm off!'

[laughter] But they said -it was said, you know, that sometimes, when the lassie

come doon ta' the rocks on the seashore, she [the selkie] would come o'er there and comb her hair and see if her clothes was all right and everything. Yes. That's what they said.

Willie Thomson's version of 'The Seal Woman' is lighthearted, bringing the fantastic closer to real life through the use of ordinary language and irrepressible humor. Instead of weeping tears of regret, the selkie in Thomson's narrative calls out to her husband ('Boy!') as naturally as any Orkney wife might address her man. She has enjoyed herself as the wife of an Orkney fisherman, but now she is free: 'Take care of the bairns. I'm off!'

Selkie lore can also connect with everyday life through personal and historical legends about deliberate human attempts to help or to harm a selkie. From Shetland comes a legend of how three men arrived at the Ve Skerries (small islands west of Shetland, near the island Papa Stour) with the intention of killing seals for their pelts.

They were in a small boat, but a heavy sea was running and one of them, named Herman Perk, managed to get ashore while the other two agreed to remain in the boat, keeping it a short distance from the rocks. Unfortunately the weather worsened, and the two men in the boat were forced to leave their companion behind. They struggled at the oars against wind and sea and eventually reached Papa Stour, where they set out at once for Herman Perk's house to convey the sad news to his family. They were naturally surprised to find their companion sitting warming himself at the fire.

He had a strange story to tell. After the other two had left him a large seal came up to him and said: 'Herman Perk, you have destroyed many of our folk in your time. Yet nevertheless if you will undertake to do me a service I will carry you in safety to Papa Stour. Some time ago my wife Maryara was made captive in Papa. Her skin is hanging in the skeo [a hut built for drying fish] at Nortoos and without it she cannot return with me to Finnmark. It is the third skin from the door and I wish you to bring it to me'.

Herman agreed to the seal's request and was told to cut two slits in the creature's back as support for his feet, and to place his arms firmly round its neck. The seal then plunged into the sea and within a short time Herman found himself at Papa Stour. True to his promise, he went to the skeo and carried the skin down to the beach where the seal was waiting with his lovely wife. (Nicolson: 88)

Some narratives about the consequences of deliberately harming a selkie (or even speaking ill of them) are full of doom. The selkie may be beautiful, but she is also dangerous. This early account of Shetland belief, narrated by George Sinclair, incorporates the ritual of magic conversion (the use of silver) to offset the power of the shape-shifting Finns:

Sea monsters are for [the] most part called 'Finns' in Shetland. They

have the power to take any shape of any marine animal, as also that of human beings. They were wont to *pursue boats at sea*, and it was dangerous in the extreme *to say anything against them*. I have heard that *silver money was thrown overboard to them* to prevent their doing any damage to the boat. (Blind: 404)

In *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and of Sailors*, Fletcher Bassett remarks that on the west coast of Ireland, fishermen fear killing seals, for they might possess ‘the souls of them that were drowned at the flood’. Greenlanders, he wrote, also think that people’s souls inhabit the bodies of seals.⁹ According to Icelandic folk belief, ‘sea people’ were said to have descended from Pharaoh’s soldiers, drowned in the Red Sea. They lay aside their skins and resume human form once a year, on Midsummer Eve or on the twelfth day of Christmas (Simpson: 102). A legend collected in the Faeroe Islands describes selkies as ‘people who of their own free will plunged themselves into the ocean and drowned. Once each year, on Twelfth Night [January 6], they get a chance to take off their sealskins, and then they look just like everyone else’ (Kvideland and Sehmsdorf: 264).

An early account of Shetland folklore notes ‘an aversion to and superstitious dread of killing a selkie, lest it should be a metamorphic Finn’ (Spence: 24-25). Folklorist Margaret Baker confirms the notion of ill-fated human–seal involvement: ‘Scottish fisherman’, she writes, ‘regarded seals as women under enchantment, disposed like mermaids to marry ashore. . . . For this reason and because they embodied drowned souls, there was often a marked reluctance to kill seals, and uncanny tales recited the fates of those who did’ (Baker: 146).

One of those tales comes from the Orkney island of Sanday. Orkney scholar Ernest Marwick relates the following:

The mystery inherent in a true folk tale permeates a story about the Holms of Ire, north-west of Sanday. The holms are little tidal islands, and the crofters [farmers] in the neighbourhood had grazing rights on the outer holm, which is the bigger one. In summer, when all the ewes had lambed, they put sheep there. One man, the story goes, put seven ewes and their followers there one year. On his way over with this little flock, he killed a seal burd [pup]. That night all his sheep disappeared without trace. All the rest of the sheep on the holm were completely safe. This occurred in good summer weather, when there was no question of the sheep being swept away. Moreover, the ewes were well-used to being on the holm in summer. Local opinion attributed the disappearance of the sheep to the vengeance of the seal-folk. (Marwick 1991: 295-96)

A similar story comes from Seal Harbor, Maine, on the other side of the Atlantic. The narrator is fisherman Stanley Hadlock:

The seals were a problem, keeping the herring in the harbor. One of the men told the others he would get rid of the seals. One moonlight night he loaded his shotgun and rowed off into the harbor until he saw the old seal and the pup sittin' on a rock. He rowed as near as he dared and laid down the oars and took up the gun. He gave it to the mother with the first barrel and she just rolled off the rock and never came up again. He was goin' to shoot the pup

too, but somehow he couldn't quite bring himself to fire and the chance was lost. The baby seal dove overboard after its mother and the man rowed home and told them he'd shot the seal.

For three weeks after that the little seal swam around the harbor all day long, looking for its mother. Back and forth, back and forth, and at night it would haul itself out on the rock where its mother was shot and cry and whimper just like a baby all night long. It seemed to get thinner and weaker every day and it didn't make so much noise [at] nights toward the end of it and then one mornin' it was gone. And the herrin' was gone.

From that time to this no seal has ever come back to the harbor and after that pup seal left it or disappeared there hasn't been a herrin' ever come into the harbor again. That was a long time ago now and there still aren't any herrin' in the harbor. The fellow that shot that seal felt pretty bad about it and he tried to catch the little one but he never did, you know. It sounded just like a baby and he made up his mind never to shoot another seal and he never did. I was that man. (Beck: 205-6)

In recent decades, in both Orkney and Shetland, there has been active public protest of the widespread killing of seals. Seal pups are killed by fishermen, who claim that the seals consume too much of the local supply of fish. Pups are also killed for their skins. In 1978 Greenpeace, an internationally known environmental action group, staged a dramatic encounter with a Norwegian ship that had arrived in Orkney to cull the seal population. The Greenpeace ship sailed persistently between the Norwegian ship and the seal pups; the Norwegians were never able to get close enough to the seals to shoot them, and were finally discouraged enough to sail home. Obvious reasons for the protest can be found in environmental and humane principles. Less obvious reasons reside in folk beliefs about seal-human interaction.

Ballads, legends, folktales, and even films, such as *The Secret of Roan Inish* (set in Ireland), keep alive the concept of capricious, loving, vengeful or life-saving selkies.¹⁰ At the edge of the sea, an interaction with a magical creature constitutes a core experience in which the supernatural world and the natural world intersect. According to David Hufford (11-45), these sorts of core experiences are crucial to establishing and nurturing spiritual belief. Selkie lore, which focuses on the incursion of the supernatural into everyday life, reveals several provocative beliefs: 1) seals may have special powers; 2) they can move in and out of society, interacting with people who do not know of their powers; 3) in these interactions, selkies are capable of both compassion and revenge.

What meaning can we derive from these beliefs? On an *environmental* level, the selkie stories allow us to consider how we interact with the natural world, how we regard the animal life that surrounds us, and what consequences those interactions might have. Folk legends linking living people to selkie ancestors serve as everyday reminders of the interconnectedness of all life, giving fair warning to those who kill seals for sport or personal gain. The man who kills a seal only for its skin may have a poor season of fishing or he may be lost at sea. Further, the folk belief that the selkies contain the

souls of humans recalls the concept of a larger, sympathetic force.¹¹ Nature and humanity are thus linked: If the seals are harmed, the humans who inflict the harm will suffer as well through illness, bad luck in fishing or emotional distress. Many aspects of these stories recall Sir James Frazer's law of contagious magic. The selkie and her skin are connected spiritually, even when they are physically separated. Even while the selkie is unable to reclaim her stolen or hidden skin, she retains a strong connection to it (a longing for it). Further, destruction of the sealskin could likely cause harm to the selkie as well (Frazer: 45-58).

On the level of *gender relations*, selkie stories provide a context for considering issues of balance of power between men and women. The male 'keeps' the female by claiming a part of her and keeping it hidden from her. The sealskin, so much a part of the woman's first identity, is taken away from her. As long as it belongs to the man who has found her, she must allow that man to have the position of power. Her life on the land is physically and socially contained. Her world is narrow and its rules, determined by her husband and his community, are rigid and predictable. She is obedient. She bears children and feeds and cares for them lovingly. However, the selkie 'keeps' a sense of self through sympathetic connection with her sealskin. Even though she is physically separated from it, she maintains a longing for it and for the freedom that it represents. As soon as she discovers it, she wastes no time in returning to the sea. If the selkie is a male, he does not give up his sealskin and belong to a woman. The sealskin is not mentioned in regard to male selkies—they seemingly come and go as they please between the land and sea. Although they interact with their female lovers, the interaction focuses on their payment of gold, a type of alimony, for the care of their offspring.

In some of the selkie narratives, however, the sealskin gives the female selkie a chance to escape her marriage and frolic with new lovers. A Shetland text describes the horror that a man feels after discovering that his selkie wife has reclaimed her sealskin and abandoned him:

When the father came home, he found the children in tears, and on learning what had happened, bounded through the standing corn to the shore, where he only arrived in time to see, to his grief, his good wife shaking flippers and embracing an ugly brute of a seal. (Blind: 405)

Although women do not relinquish their skins when they pledge themselves in marriage, they do relinquish certain freedoms. Their world shrinks as it becomes focused on domestic concerns and child rearing. They may feel a loss of self as they focus exclusively on their husband's and their children's domains. 'The Seal Woman' texts remind us of tensions inherent in marital life, of freedoms relinquished and adaptive measures taken to 'make the best' of a confined domestic world and a longing that will not go away. If marriage turns sour, women may wish for a return to their former 'self', just as the selkie longs for the sea, but such a change, so vital and inevitable in the selkie folktale, is complicated in real life. The desire for escape from marital bonds has especially poignant implications for women who are caught in abusive relationships and feel powerless to leave them. There is nothing hidden away in a chest somewhere, no magical object that will allow escape through transformation.

The selkie and her sealskin are eventually reunited. This skin, an essential part of the selkie's original identity, has been in the hands of her male captor and husband, sometimes for years. Even

if the union of selkie and human has been a satisfying one, it cannot last indefinitely. The reunion of the selkie with her skin marks the moment of departure from marital life and confirms her inherent ‘otherness’. Although the selkie can live among humans, she is not one of them. Her husband’s attempts to own her by hiding her sealskin cannot succeed. Once a selkie reclaims her individuality, she will, and indeed *must* return to the sea and to her previous state of freedom and uncertainty. A Scandinavian proverb recalls the power of the sealskin: ‘He couldn’t control himself any more than a seal that finds its skin’ (Kvideland and Sehmsdorf: 265).

How do we consider the offspring of selkie-human marriages? These children may be marked with physical features that recall their selkie ancestry, but they may also be given special powers, such as the ability to see the future or uncanny luck at catching fish. Embedded in the concept of supernatural-human union is a sense of reciprocity: the human is ‘captured’ by the beauty of the selkie; he falls in love with her ‘at first sight’ and decides to form a union with her (Thomson). She eventually leaves him to return to the sea, but she also leaves her offspring behind. She swims back now and then to keep an eye on them, watching them when they come to the shore, grooming them, or leaving gifts of seashells. They are aware of their selkie heritage, as are other members of their community. Although the husband ‘captures’ his selkie bride by stealing her skin, he cannot ‘own’ her. After her departure, he assumes his parenthood for their offspring, his ‘payment’ for having taken her from her natural home. The marriage has not been forged without risk or obligation, just as any relationship that involves unions of two previously unrelated groups. Imbedded in the selkie tales is a warning: ‘Beware, for these are in-laws like no other!’ Yet there is also a challenge to take the risk and love a creature from another realm. In his provocative discussion of cosmic intermarriages in Native American origin stories, Gregory Schrepp notes,

‘... such relationships do not always work: they sometimes have disastrous consequences. But these failures do not diminish the value of such relationships as ideals, and, indeed, there would seem to be as much risk in foregoing them as there would be in attempting to create them’ (Schrepp: 23).

On a *cosmological* level, selkie stories may function to keep us aware of larger rhythms and their meanings. The selkie is a supernatural creature that participates in ordinary life, though only for a brief time. The rhythms of her sea-life and her earth-life evoke key moments of our own life-cycle. As she emerges from the salt sea, evolving into human form, so we emerge from the sea of the womb to join our own families and societies. And as the selkie will leave her human form, so will we eventually die, leaving our body behind and returning to nature. This is certain: One day, years from now, the sealskin will be found, but the selkie does not know when or how this will occur, just as we remain unaware of the details of our own release from life on earth. The discovery of the sealskin is always accidental. A key carelessly left behind by the husband or a casual remark from one of the children will take the selkie woman to the place where it has been hidden. In one variant of the story from the Hebridean island of North Uist, a blast of wind causes the cottage door to bang shut with a clash that dislodges the sealskin from its hiding place on the lintel (Wilson: 6). Once a selkie reclaims her original self, there is no turning back. Even though she has proven herself capable of love, patience and compassion in her human form, she leaves that world behind in one

hasty and irrevocable moment of transformation.

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NOTES

¹ See Child 2: 494. Time does not permit a lengthy discussion of the significance attributed to numbers in Francis James Child's opus. In short, lower numbers sometimes mean older, which, by his discernment, may also secure higher value.

² Child 2: 494. Sule Skerry (Skerrie in the ballad text) is a small, rocky, uninhabited island about 40 miles west of the Orkney Islands. Those who have been there describe it as well populated by seals.

³ Odin (Old Norse *Óðinn*), one of the principal gods in Norse mythology, is the Scandinavian representative of the Germanic deity Woden. In Northern belief, he was the son of the god Borr and the giantess Bestla. Odin was a war god; he protected heroes, and fallen warriors joined him in Valhalla. He also was regarded as the great magician among the gods. He was depicted as a vigorous man of about 50, dressed in gray with a cloak and hood of blue. In Christian times, Odin was often identified with the Devil.

⁴ There is much variation in the title of this ballad: 'The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry' (Child, Bronson); the selkie of Soola-Skerry (Brown); the selchie of Shool Skerry (Andersson). The grey seal is a more logical adjective than the great seal, although the grey seal is, indeed, larger than the common seal. For the sake of consistency and place-name accuracy, I will refer to this story as that of the grey selkie of Sule Skerry.

⁵ See Coffin for a definition of the ballad's emotional core.

⁶ See Bronson 1976: 271.

⁷ Sea monsters are often called *finns* in Shetland. (See Andersson 1967 : 4-5). They have the power to take any shape of marine animal. In seal form they come ashore to dance on the sands. They cannot, however, return to the sea without their skins. (See Blind: 403-4).

⁸ Excerpt from an interview with Willie Thomson, North Ronaldsay, Orkney, Scotland., July 31, 1983. Field tape no. 9. Transcribed by Nancy C. McEntire. See also ‘The Goodman of Wastness and the Selkie’ in Philip: 457-59.

⁹ Bassett: 245–46. Bassett also comments on the acute hearing of the seal and its fondness for music. In Iceland, he writes, ‘the seal is a *sjovite*, or animal that will come when called.’

¹⁰ *The Secret of Roan Inish (Island of the Seals)*. 1993, Skerry Movies Corporation.

¹¹ While the transformations described in this article are assumed to be physical (from seal to man or from seal to woman), they may also be accomplished through a trance. The distinction is not always clear. While most of the stories of seals returning to human form focus on implied physical transformations, a few refer to changes that are less tangible. For example, in his investigation of accounts of shape-changing in the Old Norse sagas, H. R. Ellis Davidson identifies shape journeys, in which a shaman or someone with magical powers leaves his or her body in animal form while resting in sleep or in a trance. In these cases of shape-shifting, the return of the spirit to the body can be a difficult process. For example, a girl who assumes the form of a porpoise and returns to human form becomes weak and has to be revived with wine (Davidson: 156).

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