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‘The Dead Bridegroom’ (ATU 365) in Iceland

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When the German scholar Konrad Maurer (1823–1902) came to Iceland in the summer of 1858, he travelled throughout the country and collected folktales, among other things.[1] He published them two years later as *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart*.[2] One of the folktales which appears there in print for the first time was the story of the deacon of Myrká, told to Maurer by Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874) the painter.[3] It is as follows:

> A young man had promised his beloved to accompany her, on Christmas Eve, to Christmas mass[4] at the church. He set out as planned; but when he wanted to cross a badly swollen stream, his horse shied from the ice floes which were being driven down, an unlucky tug on the reins caused it to sink, and during his struggle to save himself and his mount the rider received a wound on the back of his head from a sharp ice floe, which killed him at once. The girl waited for her lover for a long time; finally, late in the night, the rider came, silently raised her behind him on the horse, and rode with her to the church. On the way, he once turned to her and said:
>
> *Máninn líður,*
> *dauðinn ríður;*
> *sér þú ekki hvítan blett í hnakka mínum? Garún, Garún!*
>
> ‘The moon glides (*veðr í skyjum*, “wades in the clouds”, is the phrase normally used),[5] Death rides; Don’t you see the white spot on the nape of my neck, Garun, Garun?’
>
> The girl’s name is Guðrún, but the ghost cannot pronounce ‘Guð’ (God), causing the distortion of the name. The girl becomes fearful, but they continue to ride until they reach the church. Here the rider stops by an open grave, and says:
>
> *Bíddu hérna, Garún, Garún,*
> *meðan ég flyt hann Faxa, Faxa*
> *austr yfir garða, garða*
>
> ‘Wait here, Garun, Garun, while I take Faxi, Faxi (this is the name of the horse, derived from the word for a horse’s mane; as such it already appears in *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 34),

[1] Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, ‘Konrad Maurer: Cultural Conduit and Collector’, in *Grimm Ripples: the legacy of the Grimms'* Deutsche Sagen *in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022), 359–384.
[2] Konrad Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen der Gegenwart: Vorwiegend nach mündlicher Überlieferung gesammelt, und verdeutscht* (Leipzig: Verlag der J. C. Hinrichs’schen Buchhandlung, 1860).
[3] About Sigurður Guðmundsson the painter as a teller of tales, see Terry Gunnell, ‘Jón Árnason and the Collection of Icelandic Folk Legends: Ripples, Flotsam, Nets and Reflections’, in *Grimm Ripples: the Legacy of the Grimms'* Deutsche Sagen *in Northern Europe*, ed. Terry Gunnell (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022), 385–419; and Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir, ‘Konrad Maurer’, 381–382.
[4] Lutheran Icelanders refer to church services as ‘mass’.
[5] In fact, the phrase *veðr í skýjum* is not found in any of the extant Icelandic variants.

> east over the fence, fence'.[6] The words have a double meaning; it is customary that someone arriving at a farm ties up his horse outside the fence around the home-field, so that it will not damage the field; the cemetery, the dwelling-place of the dead, is also surrounded by a fence. When Guðrún hears these words she faints, but luckily the grave next to which she has been put down is right beside the lych-gate (*sáluhlið*), i.e. the entrance to the cemetery, over which bells often hang. As she falls, she grasps the bell-rope, and pulls it so hard it nearly breaks; of course the sound causes the ghost to vanish and she is saved.[7]

In his notes to the story, Maurer says that he does not need to point out for German readers the similarity between it and a German tale that is the basis of the well-known eighteenth-century poem, 'Lenore', by Gottfried August Bürger (1747–1794). In the German tales, like the Icelandic one, a rhymed verse about the moon and death which rides is common:[8]

> *[D]er Mond der scheint so helle, die Todten reiten schnelle* ['The moon shines so brightly, the dead ride fast.']

Then Maurer adds:

> Even with all these parallels, the above narrative is painted in thoroughly local Icelandic colours. The journey late at night to Christmas mass at a distant church, the ride through the swollen stream and its driving ice floes, without any kind of bridge, the lych-gate with the bell-ropes, the names Guðrún and Faxi, and finally the repetition of the last word of the verses which the *draugur* speaks, all this is as uniquely Icelandic as anything can be.[9]

It is noteworthy that the story is set in this specific place in Northern Iceland. Sigurður Guðmundsson grew up in the north, not in the area where the tale takes place, although it is known that he was in that region in the summer of 1856.[10] Someone might have told him the story on that occasion.

Jón Árnason´s collection of Icelandic folktales.

In the years after Konrad Maurer collected folktales in Iceland, Jón Árnason's great project of collecting Icelandic folktales began.[11] A few years earlier, Jón Árnason (1819–1888) and his friend Magnús Grímsson (1825–1860) had begun to collect folklore. They had published a small booklet of Icelandic folktales in 1852, but gave up because of the poor reception their effort had received in Iceland. When Maurer came to the country and learned of their work, he enthusiastically encouraged them to continue, and promised to find them a publisher in Germany. Magnús Grímsson died in 1860, and it fell to Jón Árnason to carry on. He did not himself travel throughout the country to collect

[6] The Icelandic word *garður*, translated as 'fence' by Maurer, literally means 'wall', i.e. a boundary wall, in Iceland made of stone and turf. The poem uses the plural form, 'walls'.
[7] Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen*, 73–74.
[8] Maurer, *Isländische Volkssagen*, 74.
[9] Although elsewhere he uses the more general German word *Gespenst* for 'ghost', here Maurer uses the Icelandic term, *draugur*, which denotes an animated corpse rather than a specter.
[10] This is known, among other things, because he drew a picture of an old Icelandic musical instrument at Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur, which is not far from the place where the girl in the story lived; see Matthías Þórðarson, 'Íslensk fiðla', *Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 34 (1919): 6–7.
[11] See Terry Gunnell, 'Jón Árnason and the Collection of Icelandic Folk Legends: Ripples, Flotsam, Nets and Reflections' in Gunnell (ed.), *Grimm Ripples*, 385–419.

material, but rather wrote to his friends and schoolmates, many of whom were priests in various parts of the country, asking them to collect material for him. He received four different versions, from different collectors, of the story about the dead lover (or rejected suitor) who visits his beloved. In addition, Jón Árnason himself wrote down the story of the deacon of Myrká and published it in the first edition of the collection in 1862.[12]

Jón Árnason had the story from ‘mistress Ingibjörg Þorvaldsdóttir’ (1807–1873) who was then a housewife in western Iceland, having grown up in the Westfjords.[13] In his copy of the story, Jón Árnason – like Maurer – also mentions Sigurður the painter as an informant, and explains that subsequent additions, corrections and comments were made by Páll Jónsson (1812–1889), a priest at Myrká and one of those who collected material for Jón.[14] It is this version of the story that has become best known. All Icelanders know it, and it has often been translated.[15] The main events are very similar to those in the tale Sigurður the painter told Maurer, the main difference being that everything is described in more detail – for example, the physical environment, which Maurer didn’t need to describe for German readers, but which Páll Jónsson of course knew very well; these descriptions are his additions.

The events of ‘The Deacon of Myrká’ can be summarized as follows. The deacon visits the girl, Guðrún, shortly before Christmas and invites her to a Christmas party at Myrká. On his way home he must ford a river, at which point he suffers an accident, dies, and is buried at Myrká a week before Christmas. The girl receives no news of his death, however, and on Christmas Eve the deacon comes to pick her up. She sits behind him on the horse, and when they cross the river the deacon’s hat is lifted up so that she can see his skull, at which point he says, ‘The moon glides / death rides / don´t you see the white spot / on the nape of my neck / Garún, Garún?’ She does not answer (others say that she lifts up the deacon’s hat, sees the white skull, and says ‘I see that which is’). When they come to Myrká they dismount and the deacon tells her – in virtually the same words as in Maurer’s version – to wait while he ties up the horse. Seeing an open grave in the churchyard, the girl is terrified but manages to ring the church bells. At the same moment she is grabbed, but as she has not had enough time to put more than one arm into her coat before leaving home, the garment is torn apart so that the ghost vanishes into the grave with the coat, except for one sleeve, and the grave closes. Then we are told that Guðrún continues to ring the church-bells until people come to rescue her. At this point, Páll Jónsson adds that it was on this night that the ghost begins to haunt Guðrún, and continues to do so for half a month, so that it is necessary to stay up with her when she sleeps, the priest sitting on the edge of the bed reading the psalter. Later, a magician binds the ghost under a stone by the farmhouse. After that Guðrún improves and goes home, but is never ‘the same as before’.[16]

[12] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri*, vol. 1. (Leipzig: Verlag der J. C. Hinrichs’schen Buchhandlung, 1862), 280–283.
[13] Lbs 533 4to, 75r–76v. https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/Lbs04-0533/160?iabr=on#page/75r/mode/2up.
[14] The manuscript in the Jón Árnason collection shows that Jón wrote up the story, and that Páll Jónsson subsequently added to it; see https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/Lbs04-0533/157#page/73v/mode/2up, items 89 and 90.
[15] It has been translated to Danish, there are many translations into German and some into English; see for example Jacqueline Simpson’s translation of ‘The Deacon of Myrká’ in *Icelandic Folktales and Legends* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1979 [1973]), 132–136.
[16] Haunting implies physical attack by the ghost.

Jón's version of the tale is followed by comments by Páll Jónsson about the stone at Myrká.[17] Páll mentions that he had read an account stating that the stone had been brought to Myrká from a nearby mountain during the age of settlement (the 9th–10th centuries), and says that when he moved to Myrká[18] he saw a stone by the farmhouse that was deeply sunk in the earth. The steward told Páll that he had planned to dig up the stone forty years previously, but that his wife refused to allow him to do so because the deacon was underneath it. Páll had the stone dug up anyway, and he sent Jón Árnason a detailed description of the stone and its shape.[19]

In addition to the story he had himself collected from Ingibjörg, the first edition of Jón Árnason's folktale collection contains a variant written down by the farmer Sæbjörn Egilssson (1837–1894) in eastern Iceland.[20] In Sæbjörn's version, it is a hired man who is in love with the farmer's daughter, who wants nothing to do with him. The members of the household are on the way to church on Christmas Eve and must cross a river. The hired hand wants to give the girl a ride across the river, but she rejects him, and asks an old man to do so. Then the hired man says he will take her over the river at Christmas the next year. He dies after Christmas, and the next year someone knocks on the doors to the farmhouse. This happens three times, and someone goes out, but doesn't see anything. Then the old man tells the girl to go out because the person who has come wants to see her, but tells her that she should not answer anything he said. When the girl goes out she sees a man on a horse, and he grabs her up behind him. He rides off and says 'In the hole, in the hole', and then 'What hangs on the nape of my neck, Garún, Garún?' When he rides in through the church-yard gate the girl is able to leap off the horse, and the ghost vanishes.

The remaining versions of ATU 365 collected for Jón Árnason did not appear in print until the entire collection of *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* was published in six volumes between 1954 and 1961. The first of these had been transcribed prior to the appearance of Jón's first volume, but the manuscript had reached him too late to be included. It came from another of Jón's correspondents, a different Páll Jónsson (1818–1870), also a priest from northern Iceland, who wrote down the tale as told by Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir (1825–1890). She had learned it in the north-east.

In this version, both the boy and the girl are hired hands on the same farm. The boy is in love with the girl, but she wants nothing to do with him. One Christmas they go to church together but can only get one horse. On the way, the hired man asks whether she thinks they will ride together the next Christmas, and she says 'no'. Then he says that they will do so, whether she wants to or not. Later that winter, the hired man gets sick and dies. The next Christmas eve, the hired woman (Guðrún) decides to stay at home while the other members of the household go to church. She is sitting with her coat over her shoulders, without putting her arms through the sleeves, when the ghost comes to fetch her on the priest's horse. She willingly gets onto it, behind the ghost, who rides off an then says: 'Garún, Garún, it is grey around the nape of my neck'. She tells him to be quiet and keep going. He stops by the churchyard and tells her, 'Wait, wait,

[17] For Páll's commentary, see Lbs 533 4to, 77r–77v, https://handrit.is/manuscript/view/is/Lbs04-0533/163?iabr=on#page/76v/mode/2up.
[18] Jón Árnason adds, '19 years ago'.
[19] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur,* vol. 1, 280–283. Páll told Jón about the stone in a letter dated 5 September 1859, when Jón had asked him about the story of the deacon. Páll asked Jón to send him the story so he could add to it. On Nov. 3, Jón sent Páll the story, and on Feb. 7, 1860, Páll sent him back the manuscript with the additions and notes (Lbs 533 4to, 77r–77v). The letters to Jón Árnason from those who collected folk-tales for him are preserved at the Árni Magnússon Institute of Icelandic Studies, shelf-mark NKS 3010 4to. Many of them have been transcribed and are accessible at https://www.ismus.is/tjodfraedi/bref/?samsafn=2.
[20] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur,* vol. 1, 283–284.

Garún, Garún, while I take Faxi, Faxi, over the walls, walls’. The girl at once throws herself over the church wall and runs to the church. As she escapes into it, the ghost grabs the coat, but Guðrún escapes because it was loose on her shoulders. She tells people what has happened. The priest’s horse is found dead in its stable with every bone broken, and Guðrún’s coat, ripped to pieces, is found in the churchyard.[21]

The fourth version of ATU 365 to be included in *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* was that of a farmer, Jón Bjarnason (1801–1873) who, like Sæbjörn Egilsson, was from eastern Iceland.[22] This version is nearly identical to Sæbjörn’s. Both Jón and Sæbjörn recorded stories for the priest Sigurður Gunnarsson (1812–1878), another of those who collected material for Jón Árnason.[23]

Finally, a third priest to send Jón Árnason a version of this folktale was Skúli Gíslason (1825–1888). He doesn’t mention the name of his informant, nor where he collected the story.[24] Skúli’s version tells of a lover who promises his fiancée, Guðrún, that he will take her to mass at Christmas, but forgets to add ‘God willing’. Shortly thereafter he dies, and on Christmas Eve Guðrún is outside when her lover comes and pulls her onto the horse, rides to the church with her and jumps over the wall. He says, ‘Wait here Gárún, Gárún, while I take Faxi, Faxi, over the walls, walls’. At that very moment, the church bells are rung, the ghost sinks down into the earth, and Guðrún escapes. Skúli Gíslason recorded many folktales and sent them to Jón, most of them in the early months of 1860. Perhaps Jón did not print this version in his first volume because it was so short.

Torfhildur Hólm’s version

Torfhildur Hólm (1845–1918) was an author and teacher who grew up in south-east Iceland. In 1876 she moved to Canada, where she began to write down and collect folktales from the Icelandic settlers, usually women. One of her informants was Sigríður Pétursdóttir (1841–1916), a housewife in Winnipeg who had emigrated to Canada from eastern Iceland the same year as Torfhildur. From her Torfhildur got the story ‘A ghost visits his intended wife’ and twenty-three other stories. As in other variants from eastern Iceland, it is a hired man who is in love with the farmer’s daughter, and during the summer he suggests that they should ride together to mass at Christmas. The girl says she always looks after the farm while the rest of the household goes to mass on Christmas eve, but he promises that she will nonetheless ride with him at Christmas. In the autumn, the hired man drowns in a pond and is buried in the churchyard. When the ghost arrives, the girl says she is ready to ride with him, but she must first run into the farm. There she puts on a large, old-fashioned cape of her father’s, and fastens it loosely around her throat. On the way, the ghost continually asks the girl to look at the nape of his neck, but she avoids doing so. When they come to the church, he asks her to wait while he takes care of the horse, but she runs off and has just escaped into the church doors when the ghost grabs the cape. The girl tells what has happened, and that the ghost had ridden the priest’s horse. The priest’s horse is found dead, with broken bones, outside the churchyard, and the cape on the grave of the hired man.[25] Torfhildur moved back to Iceland in 1889, and must have written the story down between

[21] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri*, vol. 3 (Reykjavík: Þjóðsaga, 1958), 352–353.
[22] Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, vol. 3, 353.
[23] Romina Werth, ‘*Vox viva docet’: Um tengslanet milli safnara og heimildarmanna við þjóðsagnasafn Jóns Árnaonar* (MA thesis, University of Iceland, 2015), 107–117.
[24] Many of the stories Skúli recorded are from the north, where he grew up, but others are from the south, where he was a priest. His version of ATU 365 appears in Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur*, vol. 3, 353–354.
[25] Torfhildur Þorsteinsdóttir Hólm, *Þjóðsögur og sagnir*, ed. Finnur Sigmundsson (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1962), 68–69.

1876 and 1889. It is striking that the girl seems to know what is going to happen and how she can protect herself using the large cape.

Characteristics of the Icelandic version

All these versions of the story have the Icelandic characteristics mentioned by Maurer: the landscape and society are Icelandic, and in all versions except that of Torfhildur the protagonist is named Guðrún. Its adaptation to Icelandic circumstances and the number of different variants from different parts of the country suggest that the tale has been known here for a long time. But what else is common to these variants, and how do they differ?

The table below summarises the Icelandic evidence by comparing motifs that appear in each of the seven variants studied:

SG (KM) Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874), as told to Konrad Maurer

IÞ (JÁ/PJ1) Ingibjörg Þorvaldsdóttir (1807–1873), as told to Jón Árnason, with commentary by Páll Jónsson 1 (1812–1889)

SE Sæbjörn Egilsson (1837–1894), as written down and sent by him to Jón Árnason

GG (PJ2) Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir (1825–1890), as told to Páll Jónsson 2 (1818–1870) and sent to Jón Árnason

JB (SG) Jón Bjarnason (1801–1873), as told to Sigurður Gunnarsson (1812–1878) and sent to Jón Árnason

Unknown (Skúli) Unnamed informant, as told to Skúli Gíslason (1825–1888) and sent to Jón Árnason

SP (TH) Sigríður Pétursdóttir (1841–1916), as told to Torfhildur Hólm

Informant (Collector)		**SG (KM)**	**IÞ (JÁ/PJ1)**	**SE**	**GG (PJ2)**	**JB (SG)**	**Unknown (Skúli)**	**SP (TH)**
Girl knows of man's death	doesn't know	x	x					
	knows			x	x	x	x	x
Male's status relative to female	higher		x					
	lower			x		x		x
	equal	x			x		x	
Form of death	drowning	x	x					x
	dies			x	x	x	x	
Speech of the *draugur*	'the moon glides'	x	x					
	'into a hole'			x				
	'nape of neck'	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
	'Wait'	x	x		x			x
Girl's response	answers *draugur*		x		x			
	says nothing	x	x	x		x	x	x
Whose horse?	rider's own	x	x					
	priest's				x			x
	not stated			x		x	x	
Girl saved by	bells	x	x				x	
	garment		x		x			x
	neither			x		x		

As regards the status of the protagonists, Ingibjörg Þorvaldsdóttir's version, told to Jón Árnason, is the only variant in which the man is of higher status (a deacon as opposed to a serving girl) – a detail

also present in the commentary by Páll Jónsson. The reverse is true in all of the eastern versions, where the protagonists are a hired man and a farmer’s daughter – the girl therefore possessing higher status than the man. For Sigurður Guðmundsson (Maurer’s informant) and for Skúli Gíslason’s unnamed informant the status issue is unstated, as they speak only of a ‘beloved’ (*unnusti*); for Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir, both the man and the girl are hired hands, thus of equal status.

The versions collected by Konrad Maurer and Jón Árnason share several attributes: only in them is the girl unaware that it is a ghost that has come to fetch her; only in them does he come riding his own horse; and only they contain the verse about the moon and death.

Other motifs characteristic of these Icelandic variants include the fact that something is wrong with the nape of the ghost’s neck; the fact that the girl is told to wait while he tethers his horse, and the fact that she does not respond to what he says. In three versions the girl is saved by the ringing of bells; in three others, by the fact that her outer garment is loose on her shoulders; while in the versions of Sæbjörn Egilsson and Jón Bjarnason she saves herself by leaping from the horse. Strikingly, in all cases the girl is saved; only in the commentary by Páll Jónsson do we learn that the ghost continues to haunt the girl after she escapes from him.

‘The Dead Bridegroom’ is known throughout Europe, and is included as ATU 365 in a category headed ‘Tales of Magic – Supernatural Adversaries’ in Hans-Jörg Uther’s update of the Aarne-Thompson classification system.[26] In the following, I will consider various possibilities of how the story may have reached Iceland.

Cultural memory?

Writing about Icelandic folklore, Eric Bryan has recently attempted to connect Icelandic folktales with religious change, both from paganism to Christianity c. 1000 and from Catholicism to Lutheranism in the mid-sixteenth century. He discusses the best-known variant of ATU 365, the one Jón Árnason collected from Ingibjörg Þorvaldsdóttir with the additions by Páll Jónsson, ‘because it is the most complete and most elegant’.[27] Claiming that the story ‘has deep roots in the Scandinavian beginnings of Iceland, reaching, [...] far back into Old Norse and even Proto-Indo-European origins’,[28] Bryan connects it to burial customs in pagan times, and with Eddic poetry in which a woman’s love, and her sorrow for her dead husband, are so strong that she is able to call him back from death to have a single night with her – or else she actually follows her husband in death. Bryan enumerates several ‘common elements’ which he says connect the medieval accounts and the nineteenth- century tale:

> (1) a man of good reputation—a deacon, chieftain, or hero—has died; (2) he is unable to complete his otherworldly journey to the afterlife; consequently, (3) certain burial proceedings are enacted that include the preparation of a beloved or bride.[29]

He then states that an important element in stories of the type ATU 365 is that they are not only about the loss of a beloved man, but also concern his preparation for the journey into the next world:

[26] Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*, 3 vols, Folklore Fellows Communications 284–286 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004), I 229.
[27] Eric Shane Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore and the Cultural Memory of Religious Change* (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2021), 25, n. 3. Bryan does not describe the other versions collected in Iceland.
[28] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 24.
[29] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 29.

> If [...] there is any value in the connections between medieval sources and post-medieval tales, then the difference between the early and late traditions indicate a kind of pejoration process in the development of ATU 365.[30]

This 'pejoration' is the idea that all sympathy that the people hearing the story might have had with the dead man has vanished, and in the stories from the nineteenth century it is apparently unthinkable that a living person would willingly accompany another into the grave, even though she loved him while he was alive.[31] Bryan then says:

> Acknowledging this pejoration process, however, points to a problem with the development of ATU 365. As the function of the bride's joining her fallen bridegroom in the grave becomes pejorated, the bridegroom's safe-conduct during his otherworldly journey to the afterlife is hindered. To put it another way, if the bride does not go with her bridegroom into the grave, then he cannot rest peacefully after death. 'The Deacon of Myrká' illustrates the problem quite well, for after Guðrún is saved from her fate that night, the deacon goes on to terrorize her and the farm at Myrká for two weeks. Only when the townspeople enlist the help of a *galdramaður*, a magician, is the deacon finally laid to rest, and then only after a great struggle in which a large boulder is set upon his grave.[32]

Bryan's conclusion, however, is questionable for several reasons. As has been noted, it is only in Páll Jónsson's addition that the ghost haunts the girl; in all the other versions of the story, she is saved, and that is the end of the story. Another feature of most other Icelandic versions is that, far from being his lover, the girl has not wanted to have anything to do with the man while he was alive. Often, she refuses to ride with him, only to have him threaten that she will do so at the following Christmas, whether she wants to or not. In this regard, the Icelandic stories resemble other tales in which the dead person returns to take revenge.[33]

Bryan also links the story of the Deacon of Myrká with 'Sweet William's Ghost' (Child 77), an eighteenth-century ballad which Francis James Child connects with the Eddic poems mentioned by Bryan.[34] Child himself, however, connects 'The Deacon of Myrká' with another ballad in his collection, 'The Suffolk Miracle', also known as 'The Holland Handkerchief' (Child 272).[35] Child's analysis also relies on the Jón Árnason / Páll Jónsson variant alongside the story as presented by Maurer, considering these two versions equal, and he provides a detailed analysis of the tale type, citing fifty-eight variants of the tale and twelve ballads from many European countries, from Russia to Iceland.[36] In nearly half of these variants the lover goes to war and dies in battle; in even more, the

[30] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 29.
[31] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 30.
[32] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 31.
[33] See Jón Jónsson, 'Heim sækir hefnd um síðir: Sekt og réttlæti í sögnum af afturgöngum', *Slæðingur* 1 (1996): 35–46.
[34] Bryan, *Icelandic Folklore*, 25; Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads,* 5 vols (New York: The Folklore Press; Pageant Book Company), vol. 2, 226–234.
[35] For connections with other ballads, see Ríonach uí Ógaín and Anne O'Connor, '"Spor ar an gcois is gan an chos ann": A Study of 'The Dead Lover's Return' in Irish Tradition'. *Béaloideas* 51 (1983), 138.
[36] Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 5, 58–67.

girl is saved by entering a building, most often a deadhouse in a cemetery.[37] Neither of these events is found in the Icelandic version – naturally enough, because neither of these elements reflects Icelandic conditions. The verse about the moon shining and death riding swiftly is found in all but twelve of the fifty-eight versions, including the Icelandic ones – though, as has been pointed out, only the two Icelandic versions recorded by Jón Árnason and Konrad Maurer include it. As Maurer himself noted, there are great similarities between the version he recorded from Sigurður the painter and German tales; even so, when they are examined carefully, it is only the verse, and the fact that the man comes on horseback and the girl sits behind him, which they have in common.[38] While it seems likely that the Icelandic version of the verse came from Sigurður the painter, it may be that he got it either from tales or from the poem by Gottfried August Bürger[39] when he was in Copenhagen from 1849 to 1858.[40]

Irish tales of this type don’t resemble the Icelandic ones much; in them, the horse is also dead, and the ghost vanishes at cockcrow, which is never the case in the Icelandic tales. Irish variants do, however, maintain that the girl does not know about the death of the young man, as in the versions from Maurer and Jón Árnason.[41] This is also true of most of the stories summarized in Katharine Briggs‘ *A Dictionary of British Folk-tales*[42], with the exception of the English ballad ‘The Suffolk Miracle’ or ‘The Holland Handkerchief’, which most closely resembles the Icelandic variant of any of those I have examined. The story might well have arrived in Iceland with English sailors, as discussed below.

Englishmen in Iceland

It is well-known that early in the fourteenth century the English bought fish from Iceland in Bergen, Norway. During that century, however, the Hanseatic League obtained more and more control there, to the detriment of the English, who therefore began to sail directly to Iceland, both for fishing and trade. Their presence in Iceland and its fisheries resulted in the historical designation of the fifteenth century as the ‘English Age’ in Iceland. Björn Þorsteinsson argues that between 1415 and 1475 the English appear to have been the only foreigners that came to Iceland (Norwegians were not

[37] A building in a churchyard where corpses could be kept until the funeral took place. Although Child does not mention examples from Norway or Sweden, in both examples I have found, the girl escapes into a deadhouse. In the Swedish version, the lover dies in battle, and the verse about the moon and death is lacking; the verse is, however, included in the Norwegian version (Lindow 1978, 191–193; Nicolaissen 1887, 26–27).

[38] See Ludwig Bechstein, *Deutsches Sagenbuch* (Leipzig: Verlag von Georg Wigand, 1853), 179; Karl Müllenhoff, *Sagen, Märchen und Lieder der Herzogtümer Schleswig, Holstein und Lauenburg* herausgegeben von Karl Müllenhoff (Kiel: Schwerssche Buchhandlung, 1845), 164; Otto Schell, *Bergische Sagen*, gesammelt und mit Anmerkungen herausgegeben von Otto Schell (Eberfeld: Baedekersche Buch-und Kuntshandlung und Buchdruckerei, 1897); Ulrich Jahn, *Volksagen aus Pommern und Rügen*, gesammelt und herausgegeben von Dr. Ulrich Jahn (Stettin: Verlag von H. Dannenberg, 1886), 404–407; and Gustav Jungbauer, *Böhmerwald-Sagen* (Jena: Verlag Robert Baierl, 1924), 220–221. The verse is found in all but one of them.

[39] The poem is printed in Grimm, Gunter E. (ed), *Gedichte und Interpretationen: Deutsche Balladen* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 1988), 69–76.

[40] Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell, ‘Stiklur úr ævi Sigurðar Guðmundssonar málara’, in *Málarinn og menningarsköpun: Sigurður Guðmundsson og Kvöldfélagið 1858–1874*, ed. Karl Aspelund and Terry Gunnell (Reykjavík: Opna: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, 2017), 21–23.

[41] See uí Ógáin and O’Connor, ‘The Dead Lover’s Return’ in Irish Tradition.

[42] Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language,* Part B: Folk Legends, Vol. I. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

considered foreigners!).[43] In his book *Sjórán og siglingar¸* Helgi Þorláksson discusses English trade with Iceland between 1580 and 1630.[44] Initially the English appear for the most part to have come from Bristol and Hull, but in the latter period they were usually from East-Anglia: Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk. English fishermen salted fish on board, but they also purchased dried fish and bought other kinds of wares, primarily

> stockfish, woollen cloth […] and train oil. The Elizabethians were also fond of Icelandic dogs. [...] Woollen stockings and mittens were certainly imported into Lynn. Hawks and falcons were also popular. [... The English] could supply grain, malt, beer, and honey, ironware such as horseshoes, swords and scissors, hats, shoes and tight boots, glasses and combs, needles, and thread. In short all that Iceland needed [although the Icelanders appear to have been primarily interested in textiles,] cloth and linen, even silk.[45]

Helgi Þorláksson points out that

> the English – were everywhere, on the Westman Islands, Snæfellsnes, the Westfjords, in the north and east. There were no fewer than c. 1250–1500 people, many of whom came annually, often for many decades. They were well-acquainted with many Icelanders, with whom they traded.[46]

It is often forgotten that such interactions could have had a great influence on the transmission of oral material between cultural areas and its re-creation in a new place. None of the discussions of their economic dealings considers what might have happened when Englishmen and Icelandic men and women met seasonally or lived in the same place.

'The Suffolk Miracle' (Child 272), published as a broadside in London in 1689, had undoubtedly been known for some time; the title indicates an origin in East Anglia. In that version of the story, the lovers are not able to marry, probably because the young man is not of high enough rank for the girl's father. (This difference in rank is also the case in three of the Icelandic versions, even though the father is not actively involved in the story.) The dead lover arrives on a horse belonging to the girl's father, and complains of a headache on the way, although the ballad gives no explanation of the headache. Child, referring to a Cornish version of the story, suggests that

> where the revenant complains of a headache, caused by the powerful enchantment which had been brought to bear on him, we may quite reasonably suppose that the headache in 'The Suffolk Miracle,' utterly absurd to all appearance, was in fact occasioned by a spell which has dropped away from the Suffolk story, but is retained in the Cornish.[47]

As noted above, in all but one of the Icelandic variants the ghost mentions or asks about something unusual at the nape of his neck. In the versions published by Maurer and Jón Árnason, the question

[43] See Björn Þorsteinsson, *Enska öldin í sögu Íslendinga* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1972).
[44] Helgi Þorláksson, *Sjórán og siglingar: Ensk-íslensk samskipti 1580–1630* (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1999). For a good survey in English, with reference to relevant publications, see Anna Agnarsdóttir, 'Iceland's "English Century" and East Anglia's North Sea World', in *East Anglia and Its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. David Bates and Robert Liddiard (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 204–216.
[45] Anna Agnarsdóttir, 'Iceland's "English Century", 211–212; also Helgi Þorláksson, *Sjórán og siglingar*, 292–295.
[46] Helgi Þorláksson, *Sjórán og siglingar*, 259.
[47] Child, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, vol. 5, 64.

is part of the verse about the moon and death; only in those variants is it explained that he was hit by an ice flow when he died in the river. Elsewhere the ghost’s headache is just as unexplained in Iceland as in Suffolk. Also notable is that fact that only in those variants does he come on his own horse, whereas in other versions he arrives on someone else’s horse, as in the English ballad. In all the Icelandic versions except the ones from the east (which may be considered a single variant), the man asks the girl to wait while he ties up the horse. In the English ballad the horse is covered with sweat, but in Iceland he has a worse fate; the horse belonging to the priest is dead with all its bones broken. None of these elements is found in the variants from mainland Europe which I have identified, nor in Child’s analysis.

Conclusion

It is clearly not possible to assert anything about the precise journey of the story to Iceland, but most likely at some point when Icelanders were getting linen in exchange for fish or mittens and socks the story of the miracle in Suffolk, or the Holland-linen handkerchief that was found in the grave of the dead lover, was discussed.[48]

This example shows that it is misleading to consider all Icelandic folktales as native products, as is often done, and assume that they have deep roots extending back to Scandinavian heathendom. Stories have arrived in Iceland, and enriched the oral tradition of its populations, at various times since its original settlement.

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[48] An English friend notes that Holland linen was often used in winding sheets, so it is appropriate in the story.

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