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## Role of the Body – Scandinavian Ballads vs. Old Norse Literature

### ABSTRAKT

Denne artikkelen undersøker forskjeller mellom forståelsen av kroppen i norrøn litteratur og i skandinaviske ballader og analyserer hvordan dette begrepet har utviklet seg. To fenomener er valgt ut: kroppslighet til gjengangere og hamskifte. Kroppslighet er typisk for norrøne gjengangere, de er identiske med sitt lik. I skandinaviske ballader, kommer gjengangere oftest frem mens de besøker sin festemø og også her ses separasjon mellom kroppen og sjelen. Hamskifte i norrøn litteratur forener vanligvis metamorfose av ytre form og forandring av indre egenskaper. I ballader finnes to forskjellige grupper som beskriver hamskifte. Hvis ordet ham er brukt i selve teksten, er metamorfosen frivillig og egenskaper til dyret som man forandrer seg i er viktige. Hvis ordet ham er brukt bare i tittel og kommentar, er metamorfosen en forbannelse og har ikke lenger noe å gjøre med indre egenskaper. Det kan vise hvordan kropp og sjel ble separert i løpet av århundrene. Undersøkelsen av kroppens begrep i ballader bekrefter derfor at det finns spor av eldre forestillinger som har overlevd mye lenger enn i den offisielle kulturen, men samtidig kan veien til den moderne forståelsen følges.

Comparing the Old Norse literature and Scandinavian ballads, this paper wants to show how the concept of the body has developed since the Middle Ages in the North. Pre-Modern society had no strict division between body and soul<sup>1</sup>, the analysis also touches upon phenomena that from a contemporary point of view would be categorized as mental.

In Old Norse text, there was no dichotomy between inanimate matter and thinking ego as might be seen already on a lexicological level: the term for soul *sál* as an opposite to body *likamr* appeared in Old Norse

solely in the translations of Christian texts, and all Old Norse terms, which can in some context be translated as soul – *fjör, qnd, odr, hugr, hamr, fylgja, hamingja* – include meaning of both soul and body.

The interconnection between soul and body can be shown from different points of view, but this article concentrates on two of them, namely on the concept of *hamr* and of the posthumous body of revenants. These two themes can reveal the specificity of the Old Norse concept of body. The main research question in this paper is, how these two concepts are shaped in Scandinavian ballads, given the supposition that archaic concepts could survive longer in folkore than in the official Christian literature.

For this purpose, the situation in Old Norse literature will be reviewed in the beginning of each chapter, followed by detailed analysis of six ballads. In the first chapter – discussing physicality of revenants – the ballads „Riddarin Klæmint“ (A 72) and „Fæstemanden i Graven“ (A 67) are used. In the second chapter, on the concept of *hamr/ham*, the „Jomfruen i Fugleham“ (A 16), „Jomfruen i Ulveham“ (A 19), „Jomfruen i Ormeham“ (A 28) and „Jomfruen i Hindeham“ (A 27) are cited. Except for „Riddarin Klæmint“, which is a late Faroese ballad, I use the Danish text versions of the ballad types, although in many cases a Norwegian and/or a Swedish variant has also been preserved.

## **Posthumous Body**

### *Old Norse Revenants*

In Old Norse literature, all examples show that even after the death, when the separation of soul and body seems evident to us, people retain their body. Both the concept of afterlife in Valhøll and that of returning revenants – whether living in mounds (*haugbúi*) or wandering freely (*draugr*) – shows that dead people retain their own bodies. The corporality of Old Norse revenants is their distinctive feature, and it distinguishes them from revenants in many other cultures (Davidson 1978:130).

Nowadays, scholars analyze what stories about revenants might convey and arrive at various answers: revenants represent turbulences of the 13th century (Merkelbach 2012) or uncertainty of social status of those who encounter them (Kanerva 2013). Being aware of these views, I do not here take into account various possible functions of the revenants in the narratives, but rather I just concentrate on the phenomenon of their corporality.

From sagas about revenants, most of which are vengeful, we can

draw well-founded inferences about their corporality. They look like living people but some of them bear signs of decomposition, blackening etc., and because they are corporal, they can be fought and killed again – which is something they fear. The deceased is here identical with his corpse – if it is beheaded, the deceased is also headless, he has the same wounds as the corpse, and if he leaves his gravemound, it is empty (Klare 1933, Gunnell 2012).

As in ballads we find examples of revenants mostly in stories about a woman having a dead lover, I will here analyze a story of the most famous Old Norse dead lover: Helgi in „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II“ (Neckel 1962: 150-161). Helgi is killed by Sigrún’s youngest brother after having killed her other male relatives. Sigrún is filled with longing for her dead lover and goes to his mound, where her servant maiden saw him. Helgi says that Sigrún’s weeping covers him with blood (stanza 45). Then she asks for a kiss and wants to sleep on Helgi’s arm in a bed, she prepared in the mound, just as if he were alive (stanzas 43-7).

Helgi says he was allowed to return just for one day. Sigrún dies shortly afterwards of grief, as the prose explains.

According to McKinnel, an on-going sexual relationship is implied (McKinnel, 2005:225), but there is no explicit evidence for this statement in the text itself.

‘Her hefi ec þér, Helgi,  
angrlausá miðc,  
vil ec þér faðmi,  
sem ec lofðungi

hvílo gorva,  
Ylfinga niðr,  
fylkir, sofna,  
lifnom myndac.’

‘Nú queð ec encisc  
síð né snimma,  
er þú á armi  
hvít, í haugi,  
oc ertu qvic,  
(Neckel 1962:160: 47-48)

ørvænt vera,  
at Sefafiqlom,  
ólifðom sefr,  
Hogna dóttir,  
in konungborna.

In stanza 47 we do not read about physical intercourse but about a woman’s wish. In the next stanza Helgi states that Sigrún sleeps on his arm, which might be understood as a euphemism for their sexual relationship. In either case, the physicality of Helgi’s presence is undeniable.

### *Revenants in Ballads*

McKinnel suggests that the pattern of „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II“ has been transformed into several British ballads, an Icelandic folktale and – what is here of our interest – into two Scandinavian ballads (McKinnel 2005: 222): „Riddarin Klæmint“ (CCF 145, A 72) and „Fæstemanden i Graven“ (DgF 90, A 67).

If we compare these stories with the Old Norse story, what differences will we find in terms of corporality?

In „Riddarin Klæmint“, we find a revenant, knight Klæmint. Fulfilling her destiny, young girl Medallín seeks out a man 15 years dead, knight Klæmint, and becomes pregnant. When she is about to be burnt because of this, Klæmint rises up from his grave and saves her, subsequently returning to his grave. Medallín gives birth to his child.

„Riddarin Klæmint“ appears to be independent of all the other ballad versions about a dead lover, as it contains a lot of motifs not found in other ballads: it is the only ballad, where the heroine spends her night with the dead man in his grave. The man is not a former lover of hers (but as the name and experiences suggest, she is a reincarnation of her mother, who possibly had relationship with Klæmint 15 years ago, while he was alive), and she does cry over him. The bloodstained lover motif (in both previous cases caused by tears of the girl) is probably transformed into the bloody clothing of the girl:

„Statt upp, frúgvín Medallín,  
blóðgað vóru hennar klæði,  
„far tú tær til hallar heim,  
og bæt so fyri os bæði!  
(CCF VI, nr. 145:136:32)

In contrast to all other versions where the dead lover never returns, Klæmint returns once more to save the girl and his unborn child. In this context, it might be of interest that according to Marnersdóttir, „Riddarin Klæmint“ was among the ballads that were chosen by female informants when they commented on situations where female identity was in danger. This ballad was in the repertoire of Anne Sofie Iversdatter, who has generally been interested in suffering women, mistress problematics and necrophilia (Marnersdóttir 2001:158).

The place of the pair's first encounter is here close to the situation in „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II,“ where we get confusing information about where Helgi is dwelling: he is coming from Valhøll to his gravemound

to encounter Sigrún? In a similarly confusing, but opposite direction, Klæmint is in his grave when God sends St. Michael to summon him, but before he took Frú Medallín 'far into another world' to have sex with her:

Tók hann hana í grøvina niður  
langt fyri annan heim,  
tað er mær av sanni sagt,  
hann gat við henni svein.  
(CCF VI, nr. 145:136:19)

Also in terms of corporality, „Riddarin Klæmint“ is unique because when the return of the deceased is described in other ballads, the relationship remains unconsummated. Here the consequences are almost fatal, but the knight saves the heroine at the very last moment. Klæmint is so corporal that he is able to impregnate a woman. No Old Norse revenant was able to do that.

The prominence given here to the Virgin and St. Michael suggests pre-Reformation (McKinnel 2005: 244), late medieval origin, since it shows signs of Catholic beliefs in what was a Protestant community in the time, when it was collected. Also in the aspect of the body image it is closer to „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II“ than the next ballad, „Fæstemanden i Graven“.

McKinnel argues that in „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II“ we can see an imaginative way of escaping a women's dilemma in the 13th century when suicide was forbidden, but they still might feel guilty about not dying with their husbands (McKinnel 2005: 229). Sigrún goes through a symbolic funeral in the mound, but she is said to die of grief. Ballads have already forgotten about this dilemma, and their moral is that for the girl it is necessary to separate from her dead lover and continue her life. In „Riddarin Klæmint,“ this separation is explicitly expressed in terms of two different worlds, one for the living, one for the dead.

Eg fari mær í grøvina niður,  
langt fyri annan heim,  
far tú tær til hallar heim,  
tú føðir ein ungan svein!“  
(CCF VI, nr. 145:136: 33)

In the Danish ballad „Fæstemanden i graven,“ a man, Herr Åge – whose name may be derived from Helgi (McKinnel 2005: 224) – dies just before

his wedding. His beloved grieves so much that his coffin is filled with blood whenever she weeps and he is disturbed in his grave and goes to her bower. He remains there till cockerow, then he must return to the grave. She dies shortly after (within a month – A and B versions – or eight days – D version).

His body is described in stanza 7:

Saa saare gred iomfru Else-lille,  
sine hender hun sloe:  
det hørde ridder her Aage  
under sorten iord.

Op staar ridder her Aage,  
tager kisten paa bag:  
saa laker hand til sin festemøes bur  
med saa megen umag.

Hand klapper paa dørren med kiste,  
for hand haffde iche skind:  
„Du stattop, stalten Else-lille!  
du luk din festemand ind.“  
(DgF II, nr. 90 A: 495: 5-7)

The revenant takes his coffin on his back to bang on the chamber door with it, because he has no skin. Here we see an important difference: as in the Old Norse literature the deceased was identical with his corpse. This macabre accent, physical horror of death and the dead body is neither present in „Riddarin Klæmint“ nor in „Helgakviða Hundingsbana II.“ In the latter, the first encounter with the deceased is also described: when Sigrún's maiden saw dead Helgi coming back, she asked whether it was an illusion or a sign of Ragnarok (stanza 40): she was afraid that the world-order was collapsing, not of the Helgi's appearance.

In ballads, we have found one dead person corporal enough to have intercourse with a living woman and make her pregnant – which might, however, be understood symbolically in the Christian context. We can conclude this section by saying that the prevailing aspects of revenants are more incorporeal than in the Old Norse literature, and that the main psychological motif is separation between the world of the living and that of dead.

## Concept of *hamr/ham*

### Old Norse Term *hamr*

The primary meaning of the Old Norse word *hamr* was skin, feathers, and membranes covering a baby at birth. The last-mentioned was probably the origin of the meanings of shape, form or image. The word is found in the context of shape-shifting, done by gods and giants (to be faster or stronger), by two specialized groups of people berserks (taking just *hamr* of wolfs or bears) and *seiðmenn* (magicians who in sagas often take no concrete form), and also by people that have no other special ability than this shape-shifting (Dillmann 2006).

In some cases, we have difficulties deciding from context, if it is an outer form of the body that someone takes (becoming a real eagle, hawk, troll, or wolf) or if the person is changing his inner qualities, abilities (becoming then faster, stronger, fiercer). These difficulties are not accidental, they reveal the core of the *hamr* concept and scholars always face them when dealing with the shape-shifting in Old Norse literature, as shown in the following citation:

...with shape-shifting it is assumed that either the soul is transported to another body, that is, into an animal's body (and thus people are described as *eigi einhamir*, „not restricted to one form“), or that the body undergoes a transformation, whereas in the berserk frenzy men acquire the attributes of wild animals; one could thus say that the berserk is a wild animal in the shape of a man. The condition is therefore psychological in the case of the berserk, but physical in the case of werewolves and other shape-shifters.

As might be expected, the distinction between the psychological and physical condition is not always clear-cut and sometimes depends on interpretation.

(Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2007: 280-281)

The term *hamr* mirrors a way of thinking where the body and soul are not separate, dichotomic entities, and where this word has occasionally been translated as referring to the shape of the body, and at other times as referring to the shape and abilities of the soul, which shows that these two ways of understanding soul and body are not contradictory in Old Norse literature.

### Ham in Ballads

The word *ham* also occurs in ballads in the context of shape-shifting.<sup>2</sup> We can see two different cases of the changing of someone's *ham*: the first case always concerns a female protagonist and her human shape is changed into that of an animal against her will by someone else (usually a stepmother of the girl) presented as a witch. The second case is a voluntary change of a male protagonist into an animal.

Let us look at the first case, and from this group of stories, the following four ballads will be analyzed (TSB: 29-32):

„Jomfruen i Fugleham“ (DgF 56, A 16)

„Jomfruen i Ulveham“ (DgF 55, A 19)

„Jomfruen i Ormeham“ (DgF 59, A 28)

„Jomfruen i Hindeham“ (DgF 58, A 27)

In the ballad „Jomfruen i Fugleham,“ a woman turns her stepdaughter into a hind. A knight tries to catch the hind and hunts it. It then turns into a bird. The knight breaks the spell by giving the bird a piece of his own flesh. Note that in the stanza about metamorphosis itself, no *ham* is mentioned:

Hun skabte mig till en liden hind,  
bad mig i skouffuen leffue:  
och mine siuff maer i ulffue-lige,  
hun bad, di skulle migh riffue.  
(DgF, nr. 56 B: 461:5)

In the ballad „Jomfruen i Ulveham,“ a woman turns her stepdaughter into various objects (a sword, a needle, a pair of scissors) and finally into a wolf<sup>3</sup> that cannot retain its human shape until it has drunk the blood of its brother (or stepmother). After eight years, the wolf has an opportunity to attack the stepmother, kills her and drinks her blood or the blood of her unborn child. The enchantment is thereby broken.

A similar story is present in „Jomfruen i Orneham“ where a maiden, changed by her stepmother into a worm or snake, reacquires her form after being kissed by a knight.

In the ballad „Jomfruen i Hindeham,“ the core of the story is similar to that of the previous ballads: a maiden is cursed into a hind, occasionally she reassumes her female shape (when talking to her brother), although it is relativized in the beginning, where her discussion with her brother is said to occur only in dreams. Her brother does not obey her instructions

and shoots the small hind. By flaying it, he finds his sister inside. The maiden rids herself of the curse with the help of her brother's blood, which he willingly gives her to drink from his hand.

In this ballad, we are given interesting details concerning the concept of the body, while the maiden's brother is flaying the hind:

Han flaade ned i Hindens Nakk',  
og der fandt han sin Søsters Lok.

Han flaade ned i Hindens Sid',  
der fandt han sin Søsters Hænder saa hvid'.  
(DgF II, nr. 58: 475: 14-15)

We can see that he finds his human sister inside a hind, similar to how the Little Red Riding Hood is found in the well-known fairy tale (ATU 333). His sister was not dead, even if the hind had already been shot – so there is no identification with the hind itself, as we have seen in the Old Norse sources. The change of shape is just a change of the outer appearance, a change of the physical skin, which has nothing to do with the inner abilities.

Interestingly, in these cases the term *ham* occurs just in the titles and in the commentaries: „da finder han sin Søster in Hindens Ham“ (DgF II: 474). The word *ham* is never used in the texts of the ballads. So even if in all these ballads we find the word *ham* in the title, the phenomenon described there has nothing in common with the changes of *hamr* known from Old Norse literature, as the transfiguration is made by a curse.

Let us look to the second category of ballads, where the word *ham* is used and a metamorphosis described. There is a basic difference there: they do not describe any curse, but rather a voluntary change of appearance of a male hero in order to achieve his goal.

In this category, we will analyze two ballads (TSB: 36):

„Ridderen i Hjorteham“ (DgF 67, A 43)  
„Ridderen i Fugleham“ (DgF 68, A 44)

In „Ridderen i Hjorteham,“ a knight uses the animal hide to charm a maiden. It is a trick and as we can read, it is considered as cheating her.

Overdrog hand dend hiorte-ham,  
Og den var svigefuld.  
(DgF II, nr. 67 E: 225:11)

The deer is chosen because of its psychological connotations: it is tame, and that is why the maiden is not afraid of it in the way she is of real men, as it is shown when he takes back his own shape.

Det da var Herre Peder,  
Hand kaste sin hiorte ham:  
„Saamænd ved, jomfru Uselille,  
Og nu er hiorten tam.“  
(DgF II, nr. 67 E: 225:19)

A similar story is told in „Ridderen i Fugleham,“ but instead the maiden herself causes the trouble: she says she will not accept any man, if he does not fly. A bird's *ham* is chosen again for its abilities, and he flies.

Denn herre saatt seeg y fieder-haam,  
saa fluo hand offuer till iumfruens land.  
(DgF II, nr 68 A: 228:22)

The fact that it is tame is psychologically also important, as we see in stanza 36:

Hand kaste aff sieg fieder-haam:  
„Mynn iumfru, nu er fuollen thaam.“  
(DgF II, nr. 68 A: 229: 36)

The topic itself, namely that a young man wins the love of a girl by taking the form of a bird, is well known from many fairy tales. Without going too deep into psychological connotations of this situation, i.e. on the function of the change of the shape, I would like to focus on what kind of change it actually is. It is not just an outer change of the body shape, as we have seen in the first group of ballads. Here the hero – as all shape-shifters, who change shape voluntarily – is assuming the inner abilities of a bird or a deer. And, interestingly, in this second type of ballads dealing with shape-shifting, we also find the word *ham* in the corpus of the text.

This presumption is also confirmed in the Faroese ballad „Riddarin Klæmint“ (mentioned above in the section concerning revenants), where the word *ham* is also used, again as a composite *fjøðurham*. This „feather coat“ is taken by St. Michel in order to fly in another realm to warn Klæmint that his beloved is endangered. God Himself says to him:

„Mikkjal, tak tín fjøðurham,  
flúgv tær yvir hav,  
í tann sama kirkjugarð,  
sum Klæmint lá í grøv.“

Mikkjal tók sín fjøðurham,  
fleyg sær yvir hav,  
í tann sama kirkjugarð,  
sum Klæmint lá í grøv.  
(CCF VI, nr. 145:135: 27-28)

As Ruggerini explains, this motif is probably connected to the fact that Michael was occasionally portrayed as a bird in the North-Sea area (Ruggerini 2002:227). Here again, the ability to fly is the only motivation for shape-shifting.

Therefore, we can conclude that there is a basic difference between shape-shifting stories in Scandinavian ballads, where the word *ham* is explicitly mentioned in the text itself and those where it is not. The former cases are more similar to Old Norse shape-shifting stories and to the use of term *hamr*. In the latter group describing a curse, the word *ham* is used just in title and commentary. As this word is not integrated in the text itself, it is possible that it was merely added later, or even when the texts were collected. In 19th century, the word *ham* meant just an outer shape, but in the time when the ballads were composed, this term still had connections to the mental sphere.

## Conclusion

In both of the themes researched in this paper we have seen that in the course of time from Old Norse literature to ballads, there might be observed a tendency toward separation of soul and body. Old Norse revenants do not differ from the living through their dearth of bodily characteristics – they are physical. In the case studied here, the return of a dead lover, a girl dies after having physically encountered her lover, i.e. she enters the world of the dead and the text does not express any moral against so doing. On the other hand, revenants in the Scandinavian ballads are generally more incorporeal than their Old Norse counterparts, and as shown, occasionally they do not even have skin. The main psychological motif seems to be separation between the world of the living and that of the dead (i.e. an incorporeal world) – female protagonists should manage to let him go and stay in the world of the living. In this way, in the section researching revenants, separation of soul and body could be seen as an ongoing process from the Middle Ages to Modern times.

In the chapter on *hamr*, this process was even more evident. In Old Norse literature, the word *hamr* always included both psychological qualities and outer appearance. We have traced two ways of using the

word *ham* in the ballads: first, the usage where the word in ballads refers to voluntary shape-shifting, where its meaning also includes inner qualities: *ham* is a part of someone's personality. In the second stage, namely in ballads where change of someone's *ham* is involuntary and forced upon them, it does not include any inner characteristics of the animal, and one might even be cursed into an object. *Ham* is then just an outer appearance, and the personality remains unchanged; the appearance and inner abilities are completely separated. In this case, the word *ham* appears only in the title – probably because this phenomenon could not be called a change of *ham/hamr* in the Middle Ages (and is never referred to in that way in Old Norse literature). We might conclude that this change in the meaning of the word *hamr/ham* illustrates the process of separating the physical appearance from the inner abilities, a separation of body and soul.

Ballads in this context represent a mixture of an early Modern concept with the more archaic one, surviving in the folklore for a long time. We can still trace some notions as for instance the concept of the corporality of revenants as a distinguishing feature of the Norse thinking, as well as a particular, in the time of collecting ballads already lost, meaning of the word *hamr*.

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## Notes

- 1 For detailed analysis of Old Norse concept of soul, see e.g. Strömback 1974, Mundal 1997, Reier 1976.
- 2 For an overview of the conception of soul in the Scandinavian folklore, see Alver 1971.
- 3 These ballads, together with the preceding one, seem to represent a late Scandinavian variant of the werewolf-motif, cf. Odstedt 1943.