Of Magical Beings and Where to Find Them
On the Concept of *álfar* in the Translated *riddarasǫgur*

Felix Lummer

1. Introduction

The process of translation attempts to enable the understanding of foreign concepts and ideas, something which naturally involves the use of both words and concepts that are already extant in the receiving culture. This naturally involves linguistic problems, but more interestingly often results in the overlapping, alteration and merging of concepts, something that can have long-term consequences on language and cultural understanding. This article aims to explore how the Old Norse mythological concept of the *álfar* in the Nordic countries (especially Iceland due to its preserved manuscripts) may have been altered through the influence of the translation of Old French romances into Norwegian and Icelandic during the Middle Ages. As will be shown below, the mythological concept that lies behind the introduction and use of the female variant of *álfar* (sg. *álfr*) known as *álfkonur* (sg. *álfkona*) in Old Norse literature (and culture) appears to have been that of the Old French *fée* (pl. *fées*). Indeed, prior to the translation of foreign (especially Continental) works, some of which appear to have been initiated by the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson (1204–1263) in the early thirteenth century, the *álfkona* (and motifs associated with her) seem to have been mostly absent in Old Norse

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literature and folk belief (one minor exception is, for example, *Fáfnismál* st. 13).[1]

The present investigation will thus consider those instances in which Old Norse *álfkonur* appear in the corpus of the translated *riddarasǫgur*, exploring the concepts that lie behind them in the respective source material, and noting similarities as well as discrepancies in the said concepts. In so doing, various questions will be posed, such as: What caused the need to introduce the new concept of *álfkonur* when other supernatural female beings (*nornir* and *dísir*, for instance) already existed in Old Norse, especially if the various attributes of the Old French *fées* seem to have warranted a translation using either *dís* or *norn*? How much potential background was there for the development of the concept of the *álfkona* in local folklore and popular beliefs in the Nordic countries in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? Last but not least, the article will consider how far reaching the influence of translators and their attempts to adapt foreign material to fit local beliefs was and what influence it had on the nature of the translated stories. This last question is of particular interest as it appears that in most cases the respective Old Norse translators seem to have regularly transformed, altered and adapted their material to fit the worldviews of their new Nordic audiences, either on the basis of demands by the commissioner of the translation or because of their personal urge to do so (possibly simply in order to enable or further understanding by the designated audience or because they themselves misunderstood the original concepts).

It needs to be borne in mind that supernatural concepts, especially those of the *fées* and *álfar*, cannot be regarded as having been steady concepts. As will be demonstrated below, they changed over the course of various centuries and of course varied by area. The question of how such conceptual translations resonated in the receiving society at any given time thus naturally presents several problems. These evidently include various conundrums regarding how the sources were understood at the time of translation, the time span involved in the process of writing and translating, and the taxonomy of the supernatural concepts investigated. The sources and the concepts used in them pose similar difficulties, one being that the act of tracing developments in two different cultures over

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all information regarding Eddic poetry, such as the number of stanzas cited are taken from the two-volume edition titled *Eddukvæði* by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason published in 2014.

the course of at least two centuries on the basis of translated works can only use extant material which has been randomly preserved, meaning that the available evidence has been conserved by chance. In other words, while the picture one might reach on the basis of comparing the extant Old French and Old Norse literary *corpora* to examine the translation of *fées* to *álfkonur* may be tangible, it is bound to be somewhat speculative. It is also evident that the multi-facetted supernatural concepts involved seem to have been undergoing change between the late 12th and 14th centuries, in both France and in Scandinavia. Because of the difficulty in finding any term in modern English that encompasses the meaning of the original terms,[2] in the following, the concepts involved will be addressed using the indigenous expressions for the said concepts, that is *fée* (sg.) or *fées* (pl.) for the Old French texts and *álfr* (sg.), *álfar* (pl.) as well as *álfkona* (sg.) and *álfkonur* (pl.) for the concept referred to in the Old Norse works. With regard to the overall shared concept involved (in other words an overarching term for the general class of being represented by "*fées* and *álfar*/*álfkonur*"), the English lexeme "fairy-folk" (in quotation marks) will be used here flavorlessly, void of the modern connotations attached to it in the longer, more general introductory and concluding sections. While being another unsatisfactory translation, it nonetheless avoids unnecessary repetition of all of the original terms in each case. Indigenous words and phrases will be given in italicised form to enable them to portray their initial, unspoiled meaning, English translations being provided in brackets.

Before the investigation can be commenced, the etymology of the two main Old Norse and French terms for "fairy-folk" must be addressed, explaining in part how and why certain key characteristics are frequently associated with each of them. The root of the Old Norse *álfr*, Anglo-Saxon *ælf* and Middle High German *alp*, appears to be the Indo-European root **albho-* meaning "white" (Pokorny 1959: 30).[3] This stem has cognates in various languages, for example, the Greek *ἀλφός* ('white rash'), the Latin *albus* ('white'), the Cymric *elfydd* ('earth, world') as well as the Old High German *albiz* (also *elbiz*), the Anglo-Saxon *aelbitu* (or *ielfetu*) and the Old Norse *elptr*, all of which mean 'swan' (Pokorny 1959: 30).

[2] Terry Gunnell has shown that the word *álfr* has had different meanings attached to it throughout the ages (2007: 111–130).

[3] Jan de Vries has suggested otherwise, namely that the word may derive from the Sanskrit ऋभु ('*ṛbhu*') denoting divine and very skilled artisans (de Vries 1956: 257, n. 2). With regards to *ælf*, see, for example, Peters 1963: 250–257.

Interestingly, Julius Pokorny suggested the terms *álfr*, *ælf* and *alp* may initially have denoted “whitish mist shapes” (1959: 30). Whatever the case, clear connections exist with the word ‘white’ – and therefore a suggestion of brightness and/or fairness – an attribute that will prove to be fairly common to both the *álfar*, the *ælfe* and the *fées*, as will be shown in the following.

As Claude Lecouteux has highlighted, the masculine term *elf* (pl. *elfes*) has only existed in the French language since the nineteenth century arising as a loan word from German (Lecouteux 1988: 121–122). The original French term for supernatural (albeit usually female) figures of the “fairy” kind was *fée* (pl. *fées*). The supposed etymology for the word *fée* is more nebulous than that for the Old Norse *álfr*. The first two proposed origins interpret the word as being a derivate of other words or forms. The first idea is that it derives either from the Persian word یرپ (sg. *pari*, pl. نايرپ *pariān*; known in Turkish as *peri*), which refers to winged spirits that are well-known for their beauty, or from the second syllable -*pha* of the Latin *nympha*, a word that ultimately derives from the Ancient Greek word *νύμφη* (*nymphē*; ‘bride, nymph’) (Williams 1991: 462). The other suggestion is that it derived from other words with similar semantic fields, denoting similar concepts, such as the Old English *fægen* (‘joyful, glad’) or the Latin *fatuus* (‘silly, foolish’) (Williams 1991: 462). The most accepted proposal is that the origin of the word *fée* lies in the Latin *fatum* (‘things said’), neut. pl. *fata* (Williams 1991: 462; Simek 2001: 225–226). This word *fatum* was apparently misunderstood (or reimagined) by some in the Early Middle Ages, the sg. fem. being used for ‘fate, female goddess’, and later, the *matronae* (figures of Roman mythology potentially equivalent to the Old Norse *dísir*) (Briggs 1969: 174 and 1978: 37; Williams 1991: 462; Simek 2011a: 220–223). It is this latter etymology which has led Williams to argue that the initial meaning of the word *fairy* was ‘fatedness’ (since he understood the *matronae* to be goddesses of destiny) (Williams 1991: 472).

The following two sections will consider the medieval perceptions of *fées* and *álfar* as well as that of the culturally connected Anglo-Saxon *ælfe*, examining both their shared features and the unique attributes each of these supernatural concepts were seen as having (at different times) in their respective cultures. Following this, the article will go on to consider the problems involved in translating the Old French *fée* with the Old Norse *álf-kona*, considering the use of these terms in the written evidence, that is in both the translated *riddarasǫgur* and the respective French source material.

1.1 *Fées*

Prior to the emergence of *fée*-like creatures in the written material, it is evident that various other concepts appear to have been circulating in medieval France, some of which bled into, shaped and/or gave rise to the later perception of the *fées*. France naturally had its fair share of pre-Christian mother goddesses and various other local beliefs in supernatural beings that had over time been imbued or transformed by Christianity (Saintyves 1936: 163–170; Walter 1992: 12–16). Indeed, the history of France in the Middle Ages shows many different cultures bringing their culture and (folk) beliefs into the country, making it a fertile breeding ground for a rich inventory of folklore and folk material. In the beginning of the sixth century, various tribes, such as the Franks, Burgundians and Vandals, had ventured into French territories, and these had been followed by Viking raids from the last decade of the eighth century onwards, which concluded with the appointment of Rollo I as Duke of Normandy in 911 (Ferro 2001: 37–40 and 56). All of these naturally introduced a range of new cultural concepts. Additional Muslim influences, propelled by the early Muslim conquests instigated by the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, became tangible in France in the decade from 720 to 732 (Ferro 2001: 51–52). It was against this tumultuous historical background that the medieval French folk beliefs were taking final shape from the eleventh century onwards.

From the period of the fifth century onward, it is evident that Latin works such as *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) and *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella (active in the fifth century) use words like *fata*, *nympha* or *dryades* to denote various supernatural beings of the "fairy" kind known in southern Europe.[4] In scholar-

[4] Isidore of Seville, for example, states in Book 8 *De Ecclesia et Sectis* of his *Etymologiae*: "Nymphas deas aquarum putant, dictas a nubibus. … Ipsas autem dicunt et Musas quas et nymphas, nec immerito. Nam atque motus musicen efficit. Nympharum apud gentiles varia sunt vocabula. Nymphas quippe montium Oreades dicunt, silvarum Dryades, fontium Hamadryades, camporum Naides, maris Nereides" (Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum Sive Originum Libri XX 1911: 8.96–97) ("They believe *nymphae* to be the goddesses of the waters, so called after the clouds. … Moreover, they also call *musae* [those] which are *nymphae*, not undeserved. For, also, [their] motion produces music. Among the pagans exist various names for the *nymphae*; since they call *nymphae* of the mountains *oreades*, of the forests *dryades*, of the springs *hamadryades*, of the plains *naides*, of the sea *nereides*." [Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this article are those of the author]). In Book 2 §167 of his work *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, Martianus Capella (fl. c. 410–420) conjures the following image of all kinds of beings living in nature:

ship, such figures are described as *fées marraines* ('Godmother *fées*') to highlight their origin and to differentiate this type of *fées* from another incarnation, namely that of the *fées amantes* ('lover *fées*') encountered in later vernacular literature (see below) (Harf-Lancner 1984: 27–34 and 2003: 25–43).[5] As with the *álfar* and *ælfe* respectively (see below), it seems clear that the *fées* and their predecessors experienced demonization under the Christian faith, something that can be seen in, for example, *Sermon XV* of the collection of sermons entitled *Super Apocalypsim* by Geoffrey of Clairvaux (also of Auxerre; c. 1115/1120–after 1188) (see sections 1.2 and 1.3 below) (Goffredo di Auxerre 1970: 185; Lecouteux 1992: 83; Harf-Lancner 1984: 411–416 and 420–431 and 2003: 175–180, 205–210 and 214–218). While this had an influence on their presentation – as can be seen in the narratives related to the *Chevalier au cygne* cycle or the ambivalent development of the figure of Morgan le Fay, for instance – this did not seem to impede the popularity of the *fées* in popular tradition (Harf-Lancner 1984: 184–196 and 390–409 and 2003: 59–65 and 175–203). Indeed, over time, a different image of the *fée* started emerging in the literature of the aspiring social cast of the knights which drew heavily on earlier popular folk motifs and traditions. As Harf-Lancner has argued, it appears to have been this advent of *aventure*-literature in the twelfth century (represented by, for example, the *lais* of Marie de France and the *chansons de geste*; see below) that gave rise to the *fées amantes* as literary entities (Harf-Lancner 1984: 34–42 and 2003: 47–65). It is worth dwelling on these figures a little longer, for they are the most prominent "type" of *fées* encountered in the literature considered for this article.

As has been discussed above, medieval France was a cultural melting pot in which Roman, Christian, Muslim and pagan cultures had contributed to a broad variety of different folk beliefs and traditions. In his work La Fée à la Fontaine et à l'Arbre (1992), Pierre Gallais has proposed the idea of an essentially literary archetype for the *fées amantes*. Gallais argues that this trope consists of a specific set of motifs, namely the idea of a

"… qui habitant siluas nemora … lacus fontes ac fluuios appellanturque Panes Fauni Fones Satyri Siluani Nymphae Fatui Fatuaque uel Fantuae uel etiam Fanae a quibus fana dicta quod soleant diuinare"(Martianus Capella 1866: 45) ["… which [i.e. the earth] they inhabit forests, woods, …, lakes, springs and rivers and they were addressed as Pans, Faunuses, *Fones*, *Satyri*, *Silvani*, *Nymphae*, *Fatui*, *Fatua* and even *Fantuae* and also *Fanae* after which temples [lat. sg. *fanum*, pl. *fana*] are named because they would be used to divine"].

[5] As late as 1881, Paul Sébillot recounts a story collected in Le Gouray, Brittany, that a group of *fées* called Margots give presents to newly born infants of nobility and predict their future (Sébillot 1882: 110–111).

solitary, supernatural woman (the *fée*) being encountered by the hero of the narrative by a beautiful fountain or a lone tree (a *locus amoenus*) something which always has consequences (1992: 331; Sébillot 1905: 190–191 and 195–199). He argues that this initial concept of the *fée* and her connection to woodland is the embodiment of a re-invented and perception of nature re-imagined under a Platonian *Demiurg* and made prominent by the troubadours and the *pastourelle* in the twelfth century, an image which was then seized on and developed by other writers in the thirteenth century who gave the *fée* the shape of the mother of all beauty (Gallais 1992: 326–330).[6] As Gallais notes:

> Pour les romancier "symbolistes" du XIIe siècle et du début du XIIIe, comme pour les conteurs populaires, la Fée à la fontaine, emanation de son *locus amoenus*, personification des forces naturelles de vie, unissant le charme de la jeune fille à l'efficacité protectrice de la mère, est une representation pure de l'*anima*. (1992: 332)
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> (For the 'symbolist' novelists of the twelfth and early thirteenth century, as for the popular storytellers, the 'Fairy by the Fountain', the emanation of the *locus amoenus*, a personification of natural forces of life uniting the charm of the young girl and the protective efficacy of the mother, is a pure representation of the *anima*.)

One can summarise the most prominent traits of the medieval French *fées* as being that besides their supernaturality and femininity and their connection to trees and water, they are fair and possess magical capabilities (divination, prediction of destiny, and illusions) (Sébillot 1882: 73–74 and 1905: 410–414; Harf-Lancner 2003: 214–218). They tend wounds, and, while they are not described as fighting, they are very capable at textile work – both spinning and weaving – as well as the crafting of weaponry and armour (see, for example, *Élie de Saint-Gilles* discussed below) (Harf-Lancner 2003: 148). Although the above features are not limited to the accounts of *fées amantes*, they are most prominent in these accounts. Another important aspect that needs to be borne in mind in this respect, however, is the potential connection of the earlier *fées marraines*

[6] A *pastourelle* is a terse narrative that describes a meeting between a knight and a beautiful shepherdess as well as his advances and the outcome thereof from the knight's point of view. The *pastourelle* was very popular in thirteenth-century France and especially in the Provence (Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, s.v. "Pastourelle").

with the idea of changelings, something that can be seen most clearly in the association of the *fées* with childbirth (see above and section 2.2).[7]

The narrative prominence of this type of *fées* can be roughly said to begin in the twelfth century, gradually fading out in the fifteenth century congruently with the fall of the chivalric class and the literature associated with them. It must be borne in mind, however, that these changes did not only affect the conceptualisations of *fées*, who were but one of a variety of other supernatural creatures known in France in the Middle Ages (Harf-Lancner 2003: 239–241).

1.2 *Álfar*: An Enigma of the North

The *álfar* seem to have experienced a more troubled history of development than the French *fées*, going through various stages from their earliest appearances, often under influence from other concepts, some of which appear to have been foreign. At one point, we even find them being separated into two distinct groups of beings (light and dark) by the early Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) under apparent influence from the Old Norse translation of the Christian *Elucidarius* (dated to c. 1200).[8] The *álfar* are nonetheless tangible figures in Old Norse textual accounts between the eleventh to the mid-fifteenth century, going on to take an enduring role in Icelandic folklore, even today.[9]

Mentions of the *álfar* reach as far back as the earliest surviving mytho-

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[7] The literary and folkloristic *fées* have amongst their ranks various famous named figures, such as Mélusine and Morgan le Fay. The figure of Mélusine will be of interest in the discussion of the connection of *fées* and *álfkonur* as progenitors of lineages (see section 2.4 below). It is nonetheless worth bearing in mind that the *mélusienne* accounts ('Mélusinian stories') highlight the "positive" aspects of women (such as motherhood, protectiveness, fidelity in marriage), while the *morganienne* stories on the other hand revolve around features that are perceived as more dangerous (such as magic skills, sexual desire, and deviousness) (Sébillot 1882: 117–119; Gallais 1992: 12; Harf-Lancner 2003: 149, 151–155 and 214–418).

[8] See Skáldskaparmál 1998: 41 and 45; and Elucidarius 1992: 8–11. Various research questions have arisen from Snorri's distinction between the *ljós-* ('light'-), *døkk-* ('dark'-) and *svartálfar* ('black *álfar*') in *Skáldskaparmál*, and not least in connection with the description of angles in *Elucidarius* (See, for example, Holtsmark 1964: 37; Gunnell 2007: 127–128; Hall 2007: 23–27; Simek 2013: 335–336 and 2017a: 211–212). Owing to limitations on length, it is impossible to take this question further here.

[9] As has been recently highlighted by Gunnell, the *álfar* appeared to have retained some actuality in Icelandic learned works during the late Middle Ages and the Age of Enlightenment (2018: 191–209). Gunnell has also highlighted traditions regarding *álfar* that are still practised in present-day Iceland (2012: 301–323 and 2014: 338–342).

logical material, the most prominent mentions appearing in the manuscripts of the so-called *Poetic Edda* in the late thirteenth century, in which the *álfar* never appear as protagonists. They nonetheless appear frequently in various re-occurring and frequently used formulaic phrases that show their close connections to the two divine lineages, the *æsir* and *vanir* (Shippey 2005: 177–178; Gunnell 2007: 121–123; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 216).[10] The Eddic connections between the *álfar* and the *vanir* gods nonetheless appear to have had more gravity than the others. For example, the *vanir* god Freyr is said to receive the world of Álfheimr as *tannfé* (a gift received upon growing or losing one's first tooth) in *Grímnismál* st. 5, and the sun which Freyr seems to be closely connected to is referred to as *álfrǫðull* ('*álf*-wheel') in *Vafþrúðnismál* st. 47 and *Skírnismál* st. 4 (Simek 2017a: 208; Motz 1973/1974: 95). These aforementioned links between gods and the *álfar* in earlier times may also be inferred from the verses the early Icelandic poet Egill Skallagrímsson utters in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (dated to the first half of the thirteenth century) before he erects a *níðstǫng* against the Norwegian King Eiríkr *blóðøx* and his associate Queen Gunnhildr, calling on a god about whom he uses the (potentially) synonymous terms *landálfr* and *landáss* (Almqvist 1965: 92–93 and 108–109; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999: 153–157),[11] suggesting that the words *áss* and the *álfr* were also synonymous (Gunnell 2007: 121; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 216). Other surviving secular texts from the same period relating to the history of Iceland nonetheless use the term in a different sense, suggesting a development in meaning. The idea of an *álfablót* (a seasonal sacrifice to the *álfar*) is mentioned in st. 5 of the *Austrfararvísur* of the *skáld* Sighvatr Þórðarson (995–1045).[12]

Works such as *Landnámabók* (thought to be composed in the twelfth century) mention beings and concepts such as *landvættir* (referring to both nature spirits and the spirits of the dead) or *bergbúar* ('rock dwellers') and tell of people who were believed to "die into the hills".[13] At first, the

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[10] The formulaic use of *álfar* has been extensively studied, especially with regard to mentions of them in the role of demons and illness-causing entities: see various publications by Rudolf Simek (2011b: 26–47; 2017a: 206–212; 2017b: 140–141).

[11] The reference to *landáss* is in *lausavísa* 28 (A-redaction of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*; *lv*. 27 in B-redaction; *lv*. 26 in C-redaction) and that to *landálfr* in *lausavísa* 29 (A-redaction; *lv*. 28 in B-redaction; *lv*. 27 in C-redaction). The *níðstǫng* is erected in chapter 57 in the A-redaction of *Egils saga*: (Egils saga 2001: 105–106 and 110).

[12] All references to Skaldic poems are to the versions contained in the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages database (https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php).

[13] It may suffice to refer to two examples given in *Landnámabók*, namely the chapters 68

landvættir appear to have been seen as something quite different to the *álfar*, hinting at the two being quite different concepts, as can be seen in *Egils saga* (Gunnell 2007: 117).[14] However, over time a development seems to have started taking place whereby the word *álfr* was also starting to be used (as now) for beings related to rocks or *hólar* (Gunnell 2007: 118–119). Such a development can be inferred from a description which is preserved in chapter 9 of *Heimslýsing ok helgifræði* contained within the *Hauksbók* manuscript (composed around 1300), describing how women sacrifice food to rocks to please entities referred to as *landvættir* (*Hauksbók* 1896: 167; Shippey 2005: 182–183; Gunnell 2007: 120). In short, the *álfar* were becoming *landvættir*. The best example that highlights this development is the early thirteenth-century *Kormáks saga*, in which a blood sacrifice to a rock prior to a *hólmgangr* duel is described as an *álfablót* rather than making any reference to *landvættir* (*Vatnsdœla saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Hrómundar þáttr halta*, *Hrafns þáttr Guðríðarsonar* 1939: 288; Shippey 2005: 183; Gunnell 2007: 118–119; Simek 2013: 329 and 335).

From here onwards, the *álfar* appear to take diverging roads in Christian works, being either classed with other *óvættir* ('fiends, evil entities') as in, for example, *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (dated to the early fourteenth century), or even made synonymous with angels (Gunnell 2007: 119–120; Simek 2013: 327–328 and 2017a: 206 and 219).[15] The same process of demonization which, as noted above also applied to the *fées*, is effectively highlighted in various medieval lead amulets that have been discussed by Klaus Düwel and Rudolf Simek (Düwel 2001: 237–252; Simek 2013: 326 and 329–335). The lead amulets in question here are dated to a time between the eleventh and twelfth centuries and have been found in an area spanning Jutland, Schleswig and Halberstadt (in the eastern region of Saxony-Anhalt, Germany). The most interesting incision is preserved on a small lead sheet found in a church in Romdrup near Limfjord, Jutland (Denmark) and is dated to shortly before 1200. It features the following

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and 85 (as given in *Sturlubók*, dated to between 1275 and 1280). Chapter S68 mentions how Sel-Þórir and his retinue think they would die into Þórisbjörg, whereas chapter S85 (H73) imparts how Þórólfr and his kinsmen believe they would die into Helgafell (Íslendingabók, Landnámabók 1968: 94, 96, 98 and 124–126).

[14] From Egill's curse it becomes apparent, that the *landvættir* he calls upon indwell the landscape rather than living inside mountains, and that they can be subjected to the effects of the *níðstǫng* (Egils saga 2001: 110).

[15] Similar ideas can also be found, for example, in st. 2.1 of the so-called "Buslubæn" curse in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda 1944: 474).

adjuratory formula: "*adiuro uos eluos uel eluas aut demones* …" ("I conjure you, elves [masc.] or elves [fem.] and demons …" [Simek 2017a: 215]) (Düwel 2001: 239; Simek 2017a: 215). What is worth highlighting here is the fact that the formula seems to distinguish between male and female elves which the forms *eluos* ('male elves') and *eluas* ('female elves'). As will be stressed below, however, this is the only mention of female *álfar* in the period alongside *Fáfnismál* (see above). It should be borne in mind that inscriptions such as this may reflect the notion of an omnipresence of demonic or malevolent entities in medieval times (Simek 2013: 321–325 and 328–329; 2017a: 213–219 and 2019: 377–386).

Ultimately, it is likely that the brief outline given above only scratches the mere surface of how the *álfar* might have been perceived in the Nordic countries in the early Middle Ages and how this perception changed over the course of time. One can nonetheless draw some conclusions. As Terry Gunnell has underlined, the obvious multifarious concept of the *álfar* suggests that, like the *fées*, these beings cannot be viewed as having constituted a single concrete group like the *æsir* or *vanir*, for example (Gunnell 2007: 129; Ármann Jakobsson 2015: 216 and 220). They rather appear to represent a broad concept which rejects any attempts to categorise them in simple terms. Their character was evidently both volatile and changeable. The Nordic *álfar* of the Middle Ages are fittingly be summarised in the following statement by Rudolf Simek:

> What must be kept in mind … is that detailed concepts of what an *álfr* actually was and did may have varied widely in time and space over the Germanic area, even after the time of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century and up until the High Middle Ages, when the *álfar* were still conjured up, even if to ban them from harming people. (2017a: 219)

It is nonetheless clear that by the time of the translated *riddarasǫgur*, the *álfar* in Iceland were beginning to take on the role that they have maintained since in Iceland, as a kind of nature spirit, albeit one that at this stage was essentially male, and had few connections with magic, childbirth or textile work. As the above quote suggests, similar developments appear to have been taking place in Anglo-Saxon England, both preceding as well as simultaneously to those shifts in the perception of the Nordic *álfar* that have been outlined above. Naturally, both areas have a similar cultural background, meaning that it is also worth briefly investigating the Anglo-Saxon perception the *ælfe* if we wish to understand the overall background of this concept and its potential for change and adaptation.

1.3 The Anglo-Saxon *ælf*/*ælfe*

The perception of figures associated with the *álfar* (usually referred to as *ælf* (sg.) or *ælfe* (pl.) in Old English) are tangible in various written accounts from Anglo-Saxon England going back to the eighth century. That the perception of the *ælfe* was as multi-facetted in Britain as it was in Scandinavia can be seen in a variety of sources. A good example is found in the early Old English glosses on various Latin works dating to the ninth and tenth centuries which highlight the existence of a broad variety of "types" of *ælfe*,[16] *driades* ('dryads') being described as wood-*ælfenne*, and *musae* ('muses') being described as *landælfe* among others. One naturally needs to bear in mind that like the translated *riddarasǫgur*, these glosses constitute somewhat problematic sources (Hall 2007: 78–79 and 81–83).[17] All the same, a recurring feature of the Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* (like their Scandinavian counterparts) is their brightness or beauty, as can be seen in the use of the Old English poetic term *ælfscinu* which translates as '*ælf*-beautiful' (Shippey 2005: 172; Hall 2007: 88–94). The usage of this word can be substantiated on three different occasions, all of them being connected to the description of females (Hall 2007: 92–94).[18]

Negative connotations like those associated with the *álfar* are also encountered with the *ælfe*, some potentially deriving from their possible association with other, known, antagonistic supernatural beings known in Britain. Indeed, it might be argued that even at this time, the *ælfe* were regarded with more severity in the Anglo-Saxon world than in the Nordic countries, perhaps because of the church which was well established much earlier in Britain (during the sixth to eighth centuries) (Padberg 2009: 74–93). As Alaric Hall, in particular, has shown, in Britain the *ælfe* were frequently interpreted as being the root of physical afflictions. Old English preserves various words for manifold illnesses that are thought to have been caused by *ælfe*, the most prominent of which is *ælfe gescot* ('*ælf*-shot') mentioned at an early point in the well-known late tenth-/

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[16] See, for example, the *Carmen de virginitate* by Aldhelm (c. 639–709) (Aldhelmi Opera 1919: 353).

[17] It may suffice to mention one example here, namely the *Third Cleopatra Glossary* which contains, amongst other texts, *Carmen de virginitate* by Aldhelm which was discussed above. It thus comes to no surprise that Aldhelm's terminology can also be found in the glossary (Gretsch 1999: 132–184 [especially 140–141]).

[18] The word *ælfscinu* appears two times in *Genesis A* (ll. 1827 and 2731) and once in *Judith* (l. 14), (The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 1931: 55 and 81 and 1965: 99).

early eleventh-century text commonly referred to as *Wið færstice* in the collection of texts known as *Lacnunga* (Anglo-Saxon Remedies 2001: 90–95; Hall 2007: 96–118).[19] The idea is that of a stinging pain induced by an outside (supernatural) force by the means of a shot projectile (Cameron 1993: 140–144).[20]

Of particular interest is, as with the Nordic *álfar*, that the Anglo-Saxon *ælfe* almost exclusively seem to point to *male* figures. As has been stated by Hall, it is noteworthy that the glossators of eighth century England used the Latin loanword *nympha* when referring to potentially female *ælfe*. This suggests that there was no vernacular Old English word for a female counterpart to the *ælfe* (Hall 2007: 83). It is only later, under the influence of foreign narratives, that changes start taking place. One of many examples is Laȝamon's description of Queen Argante in his late-twelfth-century *Brut* which points to the late development of the word *alven* (to denote specifically female *ælfe*) (Shippey 2005: 175–176; Hall 2007: 75–76).[21] As Hall remarks:

> The rise of the female denotation to *ælf* appears concurrently …, with the transference to *ælf* to the weak declension. But although this morphological change could have been a factor in creating the conditions for semantic change, it is not a sufficient explanation for it: other innovative early Middle English weak plurals like *cnihten*, *kingen* or *brethren* continued to denote males alone. The arrival of female *elven* in English culture must have involved other factors, linguistic and extra-linguistic. (2007: 88)

As with the Icelandic *álfkonur* (see below), the *elven* should thus be seen as additions that were introduced at a later stage when the concept of the male *ælfe* (and *álfar*) had been established for many centuries. It is tempting to speculate whether this development, like that in Iceland, was prompted by the influence of Anglo-Norman, Breton or generally French literature like that which will be considered in the following section.

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[19] Regarding the dating of Harley MS 585 which contains the *Wið færstice* text, see http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?-ref=Harley_MS_585. The belief that ailments or even death could be caused by elvish projectiles remained popular even in later centuries in the British Isles (Hall 2005: 19-36).

[20] Similar ideas are found in the Nordic countries, as has been pointed out by Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 51 and 87–88) and Lauri Honko (1959: 41–48).

[21] In his twelfth-century work entitled *Brut*, Laȝamon describes Queen Argante in l. 28613 as *aluen swiðe sceone* ('an elf most fair') and in l. 28639 as *fairest alre aluen* ('the fairest of all elves') in the Cotton Caligula A.ix. manuscript (Laȝamon's Brut 1847: 144–145).

2. Of Magical Beings and Where to Find Them

2.1 Introduction

As has been stated in the introduction, the aim of this article is to research the changes and alterations in concept that took place as the Old French term *fée* was translated to the Old Norse *álfar* and *álfkona* in the translated *riddarasǫgur*. Since translation usually involves translocation (even if it is as abstract as text or language), it will often involve concepts being moved from one culture to the other. This seems to have been particularly the case in this example since, as has been noted above, the image of female *álfar* is almost totally absent in both textual as well as archaeological evidence in the Nordic countries prior to the arrival of the translated *riddarasǫgur* and their continental motif inventory (see above). There is thus good reason to consider whether that the concept of female *álfar* was introduced into the Old Norse sphere through intercultural interactions between Scandinavia and the Continent in the thirteenth century, at a time when the *fées* had already manifested their position as narrative devices in France (see above).

This naturally brings us to the question of which narratives and the translations should be included in the current investigation. Logically, those Old French narratives that have no surviving Old Norse translation (regardless of whether any translation ever existed) are excluded, as are those translated *riddarasǫgur* that do not feature the word *álfkona*/*álfkonur* in their Old Norse rendition. Thus, narratives of this kind are not considered here, with the exception of the Breton *lai Guigemar* which features the only description of a woman as being "beautiful as a *fée*" (Sinaert 1984: 61) which has been transported into the Old Norse corpus of translated *riddarasǫgur*.

The sources upon which the following investigation rests are thus limited to four French works that feature *fées* and their respective Old Norse redactions:[22]

- *Érec et Énide*, surviving in thirteen manuscripts (two of which are fragmentary) and generally dated to c. 1170, and the translation

[22] Unless otherwise stated, all information regarding the various Old Norse manuscripts, such as their dating and the number of extant manuscripts are taken from the *Ordbog over det Norrøne Prosasprog database* (http://onp.ku.dk/onp/) and from Sif Ríkharðsdóttir and Stefka G. Eriksen (2013: 24–25).

Erex saga dated to the mid-thirteenth century, which is extant in three manuscripts dating from the sixteenth century (*Erec et Enide* 1968: III–VI and XXVIII–XXXII; *Erex saga* 1999: 219–220). The narrative follows the Arthurian knight Érec (Erex) who finds his wife Énide (Evida in Old Norse) during his first adventure and, giving in to love, loses sight of his chivalric duties. He is urged on to a second series of quests by his wife which leads to his reinstatement in rank and glory.

- *Élie de Saint-Gilles*, which survives only in the BnF 25516 manuscript[23] which is dated to the latter two decades of the thirteenth century, and the translation *Elís saga ok Rósamundu* (henceforth *Elís saga*), which has been preserved in over forty manuscripts dating from between the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The original translation is dated to the first half of the thirteenth century (*Élie* 2013: 9–10; *Elis saga* 1881: VII–XVII). The story tells how Elye (Elís), the son of a Provençal ruler named Julien (Juliens) is reprimanded for being an unpromising knight and leaves his father's court. During his travels, he rescues four Christian knights but gets captured in the process. Elye manages to vanquish the antagonistic king Lubïen de Baubas (Jubien) with the help of the pagan princess Rosamonde (Rósamunda), who promises to be baptised and the two return to France. (The Old French original continues, making Elye the godfather of Rosamonde. While some Icelandic translations break off here, other later renditions have the two marry.)
- *Le mantel mautaillé* (also known as, for example, *Le court mantel*), surviving in six manuscripts and dated to the late twelfth / early thirteenth century, and its close Old Norse translation *Mǫttuls saga*, dated to the mid-thirteenth century, and surviving in six manuscripts (*The Lay of Mantel* 2013: 5 and 7–8; *Mǫttuls saga* 1999: 3–4). The story tells of how a stranger brings a mantle to Arthur's court, offering it in reward to any lady that it fits. However, the mantle has been enchanted, becoming either too long or too short whenever the maiden in question has been unfaithful to her love, something which humiliates almost every woman at court until one finally proves worthy.

[23] For a description of the manuscript BnF 25516 located in the Bibliothèque national de France, Déparement des Manuscrits (National Library of France, Department of Manuscripts): see (in French) https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc71766w.

- The Breton *lai Guigemar* attributed to Marie de France, surviving in four manuscripts, and dated to the later decades of the twelfth century, and its two translations *Guiamars ljóð* contained within the *Strengleikar* compilation (and preserved in two fragmentary Norwegian manuscripts dated to the thirteenth century) and *Gvímars saga* (extant in the Icelandic Lbs 840, 4to manuscript which is dated to 1737) (*Die Lais der Marie de France* 1925: LX–LXI and LXIV; *The Lais of Marie de France* 2009: 8; *Gvímars saga* 1979: 108–109 and 112–120).[24] This tells how the outstanding knight Guigemar (Gviamar or Gvijmar) gets wounded during a hunt, then finding a fair woman and following her to her realm. He takes his leave after being healed. His love follows him some time later but is captured by the king Mériaduc (Meriadus). Guigemar then vanquishes Mériaduc, takes over his kingdom and rescues his beloved.

The scenes in which the *fées* (*álfkonur* in the translations) appear can be roughly grouped into three groups which will be covered in the following sections which will focus on: 1) craftsmanship; 2) the bestowing of fate and changelings; and 3) beauty.

2.2 *Fées* and *álfkonur* as Exceptional Craftswomen

That both the *fées* and the Icelandic *álfkonur* of later times are seen as being exceptionally skilled in the art of crafting objects, ranging from wonderful clothes and shoes to magical items has been long accepted. It thus comes to no surprise, that the translated *riddarasǫgur* and their respective Continental sources that feature such beings in their narratives after make use of these tropes in order to explain the origin of magical objects. Three of the four narratives that involve *fées* and/or *álfkonur* show them as supernatural artisans who produce either beautiful and exquisite or magical objects (four times a mantle and once a weapon).

No better point of departure for such an investigation can be found in Old French chivalric literature than in the elaborate description of a mantle given in Chrétien de Troyes' *Érec et Énide* ll. 6671–6743 (*Erec et Enide* 1968: 203–205). The description is given as part of the coronation

[24] Regarding the difficult transmission history and the interdependence of the manuscripts and the possibility of *Gvímars saga* being acutally closer to an original than the extant Norwegian manuscripts (Brügger Budal 2014: 40).

scene of Érec, in which he receives the piece as one of his coronation gifts. The account opens by describing the mantle's origin, namely that it was fashioned by four *fées*, and then continues with an in-depth description of the embroidery with which the mantle was adorned,[25] depicting the four liberal arts (also known as *quadrivium*): geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy (in that order), each *fée* being responsible for the crafting of one illustration (*Erec et Enide* 1968: 203–205).

Erex saga contains a loose translation of this passage, although interestingly enough, here Evida is granted the mantle instead of Erex. The corresponding passage, which is not as exhaustive as its French counterpart, runs as follows:

> Artús kóngr gaf Erex kórónu af gulli gerva í vígslunni … En Evida gaf hann [that is King Arthur] dýrliga skikkju; þar váru á skr<i>faðar allar höfuðlistir. Hún var öll skínandi ok svá dýr at engi kaupmaðr kunni hana at meta. Hún var ofin níu rastir í jörð niðr af fjórum álfkonum í jarðhúsi, þar er aldri kom dagsljós. (*Erex saga* 1999: 258)

> King Arthur gave Erex a crown of gold at the consecration … But to Evida gave he [that is King Arthur] a precious robe; on it were depicted the liberal arts. It glittered all over and was so precious that no merchant could estimate its value. It was woven by four [*álfkonur*] in an underground dwelling nine leagues under the earth where no daylight ever reached. (*Erex saga* 1999: 259)

A striking point in this translation is that fact that the Old Norse deviates in its depiction of the *álfkonur* working in the darkness below the surface of the earth – an aspect one might associate rather with *dvergar* – something that the Old French does not mention. The translator thus seems to be building on Snorri's idea of the *svartálfar*, rather than *álfar*, who, as noted above, tended to be associated with light.

Another account that features *fées* as craftswomen is the Old French *lais Le mantel mautaillé*, in which another very prominent magically induced mantle serves as the driving force for the narrative. This mantle was also meticulously woven by a *fée* as the following vivid description shows (ll. 193–211):

> Si en a tret fors .I. mantel;
> Onques nus hom ne vit tant bel,

[25] Ll. 6682–3 describe the origin of the mantle: "Quatre fees l'avoient fet / par grant san et par grant mestrie" (Erec et Enide 1968: 203) ("… It was woven / By four fairies, working / As great and masterful craftsmen" [Erec and Enide 1997: 212; here ll. 6747–9]).

> Car une fee l'avoit fet.
> Nus hom ne savroit le portret
> Ne l'uevre du drap aconter.
> Or lesson de l'ovraigne ester,
> Si vos dirai une merveille
> A qui nule ne s'apareille:
> La fee fist el drap une oevre
> Qui les fausses dames descuevre.
> La dame qui l'ait afublé,
> Se ele a de riens meserré
> Vers son bon seignor, s'ele l'a,
> Li manteaus bien ne li serra.
> Et des puceles autresi:
> Cele qui vers son bon ami
> Avra mespris en nul endroit,
> Ja puis ne li serra a droit,
> Qu'il ne soit trop lonc ou trop cort. (The Lay of Mantel 2013: 68)

> And drew out from it a mantle;
> No one has ever seen one so fine,
> For a fairy had made it.
> No one could describe it.
> Or account for the workmanship in the cloth.
> Let us now forget the workmanship,
> And I shall tell you a marvel
> That has no equal:
> The fairy incorporated into the cloth a device
> That reveals unfaithful ladies.
> If the lady who has put it on
> Has done wrong in any way
> Towards her good husband, if she has one,
> The mantle will not fit her properly.
> And the same for the maidens:
> Any one of them who towards her beloved
> Has erred in any respect
> Will find that it will never fit her truly,
> Without being too long or too short. (The Lay of Mantel 2013: 69)

The corresponding passage in *Mǫttuls saga*, features a close translation of the Old French section and reads as follows:

> Þenna [that is the mantle] gerði ein álfkona með svá mörgum ok ótrúanlegum hagleikum at <í> öllum þeim fjölda, er þar váru saman komnir hagra manna ok hygginna, fanz eigi sá er skynja kunni með hverjum hætti klæðit var gert. Þat

var allt gulli ofit með svá fögrum laufadráttum at aldri váru ein önnur þvílík sén, þvíat engi kunni finna enda né upphaf, ok þetta á ofan sem kynligast var, at þeir sem gerast hugðu at, þeir gátu sízt fundit hversu sá hinn undarligi hagleikr var samtengdr. (Mǫttuls saga 1999: 12)

An [*álfkona*] had fashioned it [that is the mantle] with such great and inconceivable skill that in that whole assembly of skilful and intelligent men gathered there, there was no one who could perceive in what manner the garment had been made. It was shot through with gold in a pattern of such beautiful embroidered leaves that never the like was seen, for no one could find either the beginning or the end. What was strangest, moreover, was that those who scrutinized it most closely could least discover how that wondrous piece of workmanship was put together. (Mǫttuls saga 1999: 13)

Mǫttuls saga then goes to great lengths to establish for the audience that the court and especially the ladies in the court understood how the background of the mantle came about and what the spell it was imbued with causes,[26] resulting in no lady being interested in owning it (Mǫttuls saga 1999: 16–17).

In short, both accounts iterate the same qualities – the *fairy*-esque origin of the mantle, the magic spell that was woven into the cloth, its beauty and the outstanding craftsmanship that goes along with it – encapsulated in the same narrative frame that the said mantle is used as a means of compromising the women at King Arthur's court.[27]

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[26] The saga explains the nature of the mantle as follows: "En álfkonan hafði ofit þann galdr á möttullinn at hver sú mær sem spilz hafði af unnasta sínum, þá mundi möttullinn þegar sýna glæp hennar er hún klæddiz honum, svá at hann mundi henni vera ófsíðr eða ofstuttr, með svá ferligum hætti at þannig mundi hann styttaz at hann birti með hverjum hætti hver hafði syndgaz" (Mǫttuls saga 1999: 12) ["The [*álfkona*] had woven a charm into the mantle so that the misdeed of every maiden who had been intimate with her beloved would be revealed at once when she dressed in it: it would become very long or very short in a flagrant manner so as to reveal how she had sinned" (Mǫttuls saga 1999: 13)].

[27] It is interesting to note here, that an indigenous *riddarasaga* from the fourteenth century, *Samsons saga fagra*, mentions a similar mantle of supernatural origin and powers that, according to the saga itself, echo those of the mantle in *Mǫttuls saga* (referred to as *Skikkju saga*). The mantle in *Samsons saga fagra* nonetheless appears to be different from that in *Mǫttuls saga* in numerous aspects: It is said to have been 18 years in the making before it was considered finished by four *álfkonur* below the earth in a *hellir* ("cave"). The four *álfkonur* are here said to be the daughters of the *þurs* Krapi, retainer to King Skrímnir of Jǫtunheimr, and are said to operate a weaving mill. The mantle is described as having various natures. For example, it shows when women break their oaths or are indolent to their tasks and shortens when the respective lady gives herself to an extramarital lover (Samsons saga fagra 1953: 31, 34, 36, 40 and 47). The same mantle also occupies a focal position in *Skikkju rímur* (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2017: 342 and 347).

Interestingly enough, *Elís saga* features an additional description of a mantle or cape, worn by Elís' lover Rósamunda which is not featured in *Élie de Saint-Gille*. The description occurs when Rósamunda is asked to appear before her father King Malkabres of Sobrieborg because his rival King Jubien has demanded that Malkabres not only pay tribute to him but also give him Rósamunda in marriage. Rósamunda dresses herself in her best attire before entering the throne room only to reject Jubien's demand. The description of her garment is the following:

> en mottull sa hinn litli, er hon toc yfir sik, var sendr uestan or hæiðinni undan solar setu, or landi þui, er hæiter Occidens; þriar alfkonur vafu þat klæði þraðum hins bezta gullz með allzconar haglæiki með sua miclum uirkðum, at þer satu yfir IX vetr þessu klæði, fyrr en full ofit væri. þessi mottull var allr ofinn storum fuglum, allr með gulli, oc setr hinum agætostum gimstæinum. (Elis saga 1881: 86)
>
> (And the small mantle that she pulled over herself was sent westwards from the pagan world below the sunset, from the country which is called Occidens; three *álfkonur* weaved this cloth with threads of the best gold, with sundry skill and with such great carefulness that they set over this cloth for nine winters before it had been completed. This mantle was embroidered with large birds, all with gold, and edged with the most beautiful gemstones.)[28]

In the original, the Old French version only describes the mantle as being the gift of a wealthy emir (clearly foreign origin) to Rosamonde, stating that it took a considerable effort to produce such attire. The account lacks any reference to *fées* in particular (ll. 1693–1700):

> S'est faite la puchele gentement atorner:
> En son dos a vestu .I. hermin engoulé,
> D'une lasnete d'or ot estrais les costés,
> Unes cauches molt riches, solers bien pointurés;
> Un mantel covoitous ot a son col jeté:
> Uns rices amiraus li ot fait presenter,
> .III. ans mist on a faire, ains que fust parovrés,
> Et fu d'un cabetenc tout environ ourlés. (Élie 2013: 214)
>
> And she had herself nobly attired.
> She put on a collared ermine robe –

[28] The above cited passage is from *Elís saga* as preserved in the De la Gardie, 4–7 fol. manuscript. It might be noted that variant readings offered in other manuscripts, replacing the amount of *álfkonur* with four (Holm. perg. 7 fol.) or omitting the number entirely (Holm. perg. 6, 4to) and changing the time it took to create the mantle to seven instead of nine years (Holm. perg. 7 fol.) (Elis saga 1881: 86–87).

With a golden cord she had bound the sides –
And wore rich hose and exquisitely-painted slippers.
She put around her neck an envy-inspiring cloak
A gift from a powerful emir.
It was [three] years in the making before it was completed.
Its expensive cloth was embroidered all around. (Elye 2011: 111)

This leaves us with an interesting question: Why add *álfkonur* when the original does not feature *fées* in this specific section? Is the translator simply borrowing the motif from Chrétien de Troyes (or elsewhere) as a means of underlining the wonder of the garment? Is this similar to the oral tradition where formulaic motifs are commonly added to extend a scene (Lord 1981: 130–131 and 138)? Is it a borrowing of motifs from elsewhere since the details are otherwise in the written saga?

The *Élie de Saint-Gille* narrative nonetheless does elsewhere feature *fées* that are skilled in the art of crafting objects. In this particular case, however, it is not a textile that is beautifully woven or has a spell woven into it as in the case of *Le mantel mautaillé* and *Mǫttuls saga*. In this case it is a staff or cudgel which Elie's henchman Galopin is said to go into battle with and is made by four *fées* on an isle in the ocean (ll. 2370–2374):

Quant Galopins le vit, li preus et li senés,
Rosamonde la bele a congiet demandé.
De la tor avala les marberins degrés,
En la bataille entra, coureçous et irés.
En sa main le baston, u tant a richetés,
Que les fees ovrerent en .I. ille de mer. (Élie 2013: 238)[29]

When Galopin saw him [that is Elie in grave danger], the worthy and wise man,
He asked leave of the beautiful Rosamonde.
He ran down the marble steps of the tower,
He entered the battle, angry and sorrowful.
In his hand was the richly decorated staff,
Which fairies had made on an island in the sea. (Elye 2011: 155)

[29] The motif of crafting *fées* working on an island in the sea seems to also be used employed in the *Continental Version I* (dated to the thirteenth century) of the *Beuve de Hamton* in which the *fées* craft a hauberk (a section is not in the Anglo-Norman version or *Bevers saga*) which runs as follows (ll. 7522–7527): "Vest un hauberk qui molt fist a löer, / Fees le fissent en un ilse de mer, / D'or sont les mailles, d'argent sont li clavel …" (Der festländische Bueve 1911: 248) ("[He] dons a hauberk which many would praise / *fées* crafted it on one island in the sea / The meshworks are made of gold, the rings are made of silver").

It is noteworthy, however, that in this case none of the Old Norse redactions feature a correlating passage. While the idea of Elís fighting certainly exists in the Old Norse translation, the remark with regard to Galopin's cudgel does not.

In a brief excursus it might be added that *Tristrams saga ok Ísǫndar* features an episode in which Tristram receives his utmost stalwart hunting hound from a Polish duke as a reward for ridding the duke's dominions of a *jǫtunn* (with regards to the information presented in this paragraph see *Tristrams saga* 1999: 152–159). The duke is said to have himself received the dog as a token from an *álfkona* from the island of Polin in Álfheimr. The hound is of wondrous colours, has a soft fur and a sweet-sounding bell attached to his collar, all of which makes Tristram forget his sorrows. Unfortunately, due to their fragmentary nature, both the *Tristan* of Béroul (active in the late twelfth century) as well as that of Thomas d'Angleterre (fl. c. 1170–1180) do not preserve this episode. Thus, the significance of this story remains questionable.

Considering the translations of passages in which *fées* appear as craftswomen in the stories noted above from a Scandinavian perspective, one might argue that on the basis of the local tradition it would have been more natural for the translations to show powerful magical women or sorceresses crafting these cloths rather than *álfkonur*. Certainly, the image of women crafting noteworthy clothing is not uncommon in saga literature dating to roughly the same period of the translations (albeit in other sagas than the translated *riddarasǫgur*), be the clothing normal or magically enhanced. For example, *Landnámabók* mentions the two women Hildigunnr Beinisdóttir (S75/H63) and Ljót, mother of Hrolleifr *enn mikli* (S180/H147).[30] While Hildigunnr is said to craft clothing twice, the *kyrtill* ('tunic') of Hrolleifr may be inferred of having been made by Ljót. However, the clothes' feature seems to be that they are impenetrable by iron. Furthermore, one might think of the cloth described in the late 13th-century *Ǫrvar-Odds saga*,[31] or *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*,[32] where

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[30] All following information with regard to *Landnámabók* is taken from *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* (1968: 106–107 and 220).

[31] While in Ireland, Oddr raids the underground home of four women, the fairest of which he intends to take hostage. However, the woman offers a magical shirt in exchange for her freedom, the magical qualities of which are manyfold and include the wearer not becoming hungry and sleepy as well as being invulnerable to sword strikes unless he flees (Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda 1944: 313–314).

[32] Before departing on his last raid, Ragnar is said to be given a shirt by his wife Áslaug.

the clothes are admittedly practical rather than beautiful or intricate. All the same, the changing of the amount of *álfkonur* crafting Rósamunda's mantle from the Old French four to the more local number three, does show a more effective adaptation of foreign ideas to local ones, three (or a multitude of it) being apparently a commonly used number in Old Norse and especially when it comes to powerful women.[33]

Be that as it may, the problematic scene featured in *Élie de Saint-Gille* and dropped in *Elís saga* in which *fées* manufacture a cudgel on an island still remains. As noted above, the *álfar* are not connected to the crafting of weaponry. One might thus be forgiven for assuming that the translator, with a Nordic audience in mind, avoided a direct translation as it did not reflect the culture and worldview of Scandinavian recipients. Granted, such a contemplation only retains validity if the manuscript/manuscripts that served as a template for the saga definitely featured this scene. However, as said, since *Élie de Saint-Gille* only survives in one manuscript, we may most likely never know whether there were other versions of this story which make no mention of such an origin of Galopin's weapon and might have served as a model for the Old Norse translations. All the same, however, it is clear that the introduction of *álfkonur* into the Old Norse literary inventory is new, as is the idea of them living underground – a motif that clearly caught on in both the sagas and folklore (see further below).

2.3 Fate and Stature

The investigation will now turn to consider the textual instances in which *fées* and *álfar* respectively are associated with the bestowing of fate on Galopin in both *Elye de Saint-Gille* and *Elis saga*.

The story tells how during his adventure, Elye encounters four robbers and asks to share their meal, which they agree to. They nonetheless request his steed in payment, something Elye adamantly refuses. In the ensuing brawl he brutally slays two of the robbers while the third flees into the woods. The remaining man falls to his knees begging for mercy. In his

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The shirt is said to make him invulnerable to sword blows (Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda 1944: 132–133; Finnur Jónsson 1973: 257).

[33] Regarding the importance of the triad in connection with powerful women, see, for instance, in *Vǫluspá* st. 20 the three *nornir* or the *þursar meyiar* ('*þurs*-maidens') in st. 8 and the thrice burned and thrice reborn Gullveig in st. 21. See furthermore, for example, Schück 1941: 22–29 and Wagner 1980: 202–208.

appeal for clemency, the thief reveals his identity as Galopin, recounting the fate that has befallen him (ll. 1183–1191). The Old French passage runs as follows:

> A l'ore qui fui nés ceste paine m'avint:
> .IV. fees i ot; quant vint al departir,
> Li une me voloit a son eus detemir,
> Mais les autres nel vaurent endurer ne soufrir,
> Et prïerent a Dieu qui onques ne menti
> Que jamais ne creüsse, tous jors fuisse petis,
> Se n'eüsse de lonc que .III. piés et demi,
> Et s'alaisse plus tost que cheval ne ronchin.
> Certes, et je si fac, por voir le vous plevi. (Élie 2013: 197)

> At the hour I was born, this tragedy befell me:
> Four fairies were present. When it came time to take leave,
> one of them sought to keep me as her servant.
> But the others wouldn't endure or bear it,
> And they prayed to God, who never told a lie,
> That I'd never grow more than three and one half feet in height,
> And that I'd run faster than a warhorse or packhorse.
> Believe me, I swear it's true … (Elye 2011: 77)

In short, in the Old French three *fées* who come to the birth quarrel with a fourth who wishes to take Galopin as an apprentice, prays that God will curse him with restricted growth while granting him equine swiftness. This idea of quarrelling fairies would of course be reflected later in the start of the German folktale *Dornröschen* or *Sleeping Beauty* (ATU 410) collected by the Grimm brothers, in which twelve fairies are invited as guests at the birth of Beauty, while a thirteenth is not invited owing to the lack of cutlery (Grimm and Grimm 1812: 225–229).[34] As in *Elye de Saint-Gille*, the evil fairy curses while the others attempt to mitigate the curse. In *Elís saga*, the correlating passage runs as follows:

> Sem moðir min hafði fœtt mik, þa toku mik i brott um nottina þriar alfkonur or buri þui, sem ec var i lagðr, oc villdi æinn af þæim raða mer oc hava með ser; en hinum firer þotti tuæimr, oc mællti þa huar þæirra til annarrar, at ec skyllda alldre upp vaxa ne mikill verða, en sua mikit laupa skyllda ec, at alldregi skop guð þat kuikuendi, er iammikit ma fara. (Elis saga 1881: 65)

> (After my mother had given birth to me, then three *álfkonur* took me from the

[34] Charles Perrault collected a French variant of this tale in 1696 called *La Belle au Bois Dormant*, in which the number of fairies is seven (Perrault 2012: 342).

cradle in which I had been laid, and one of them wanted to command me and have me with her; but this displeased the other two, and one said to the other that I should never grow up nor become large, yet should run faster than any other being that God had created.)

While the above passage does not preserve the correlation about Galopin's agility to horses, it otherwise for the main part follows the Old French closely except for the fact that the number of *álfkonur* is once again given as three (the B-redaction, however, keeps four *álfkonur*). Another interesting deviation made in the Old Norse saga away from the Old French source text is that the saga omits the invocation of God's curse by the three *fées*, the mention of God here being transferred to the animals He has created. It is possible that the translators feared this might hint at a connection of the *fees*/*álfar* to God (and therefore Christianity) which Old Norse beliefs did not reflect.[35]

It is worth bearing in mind the fact that here, once again, new talents are being bestowed on *álfar*: In Old Norse belief, while the role of deciding fate at birth is given to females (often three as in *Vǫluspá* st. 20), it is traditionally in the hands of *nornir*. Also worth noting, is the way in which the Old Norse subtly alters small details. As pointed out above, the Old French describes the *fées* as *being present at* Galopin's birth (the *fées marraines* trope: see above), while in the Old Norse account the *álfkonur steal* Galopin *after* his birth, changing the overall *topos* entirely into one potentially relating to changelings. Nevertheless, as Roger Sherman Loomis pointed out, the Old French section presents a picture that closely resembles the visit of the *nornir* at the birth of Helgi Hundingsbani as described in *Helga kviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* sts 2–3 (Loomis 1959: 108). Be that as it may, as Séamas Mac Philib has pointed out, this theme (ML 5085) is found in both Celtic and Germanic folk narratives (Christiansen 1958: 109–113; Mac Philib 1991: 121). It deals essentially with the abduction of a human child, which is replaced in its

[35] If we focus on the missing invocation of God in the Old Norse variants, it is worth noting that in the Old Norse world figures such as the *nornir* are the figures most commonly linked to the concept of fate in Old Norse beliefs. *Álfar* seem not to ever have such a function. As an example for the connection of *nornir* and fate, one may quote *Fáfnismál* st. 11 which offers the term *nornar dómr* ('The Judgement of the Norns') as a kenning for death: "'Norna dóm þú munt fyr nesiom hafa / Oc ósvinnz apa; / Í vatni þú drucnar, ef í vindi rœr: / Alt er feigs forað'" ("'The judgement of the norns you'll get in sight of land, / and the fate of a fool; / you'll drown in the water even if you row in a breeze; / all fate is dangerous for the doomed man'" [The Poetic Edda 1996: 159]).

manger by an elven changeling, which can range from an (old) elvish man or child to a simple log of wood. Scholars such as Mac Philib, Susan Schoon Eberly and John Lindow have all suggested that this idea tries to culturally and logically explain why some children may be born deaf, mute or with deformations (Mac Philib 1991: 131).[36]

It seems safer to assume this section in *Elís saga* shows a subtle movement away from the unnatural idea of *álfar* deciding fate to a more local tradition of nature spirits stealing children, an idea that became very popular in more recent times in Iceland. One might even go so far as to suggest that this brief episode in *Elís saga* is one of the earliest (if not the earliest) account of a changeling narrative in the Old Norse record. However, in later Icelandic folktales, it is evident that the idea of changelings came to be associated with the notion of the later *huldufolk/álfar*.[37]

One nonetheless wonders why the translator chose *álfkonur* and not *nornir* if they wanted to follow the original text directly?[38] Was the passage deliberately altered in an attempt to suit Nordic expectations (*nornir* never being closely associated with the fates of the lower classes in Old Norse texts)? This is worth further investigation.

2.4 Beauty and Seduction

It has been stated at the outset that narratives involving to the F302 (Fairy Mistress) motif would not be considered due to the absence of references to the women as *fées* in the French source texts. The exception is *Guigemar*, a Breton *lais* attributed to Marie de France which features the only characterisation of a woman as being as beautiful as a *fée*, which was also rendered into Old Norse in the translation. Two extant Old Norse translations have been preserved: one is *Guiamars ljóð* preserved in the *Strengleikar* compilation, the other being *Gvímars saga* (see above). The

[36] Regarding the possibility of disabilities influencing folk beliefs in generally and changelings in particular, see Susan Schoon Eberly (1988: 58–77) and John Lindow (2008: 218 and 232).

[37] See, for example, the stories given by Jón Árnason in the section dedicated to stories regarding *álfar*, *huldufólk* and *umskiptingar* ("changelings") (Jón Árnason 1862: 40–45). The earliest surviving mention of the term *huldufólk* can be traced back to around 1500 in *Jarlmanns rímur*, as Haukur Þorgeirsson has pointed out (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2011: 53). And as can be seen from the material presented above, the use of the term *álfar* is older.

[38] It is worth noting that the only connection between *álfar* and *nornir* is made in the earlier-noted *Fáfnismál* st. 13 where Fáfnir describes how some *nornir* are *álfkunngar* (i.e. from the *álfar* lineage).

reason why these works will be considered here is because they are the only instance of a correlation between *álfkonur* and beauty in the corpus of translated *riddarasǫgur*.

The section of interest in *Guigemar* happens after Guigemar and his lover become separated and her ship runs ashore in Brittany with the wreck being subsequently discovered and searched by the local king Mériaduc. He finds Guigemar's lover inside the wreckage and is stunned by her beauty which is akin to that of a *fée* (ll. 699–706):

> Il [that is Mériaduc] descendi par un degré;
> sun chamberlain a apelé.
> Hastivement a la nef vunt;
> par l'eschiele muntent a munt.
> Dedenz unt la dame trovee,
> ki de belté resemble fee.
> Il la saisist par le mantel;
> od lui l'en meine en sun chastel. (Die Lais der Marie de France 1925: 33)

> He [that is Mériaduc] went downstairs
> and called his chamberlain;
> quickly they went to the ship,
> climbed up its ladder;
> inside they found the woman
> who had a [*fée*-]like beauty.
> He took her by the cloak
> and brought her with him to his castle. (The Lais of Marie de France 2009: 49)

The same segment is fairly accurately rendered in *Guiamars ljóð* as follows: "oc gængo [that is Meriadus and a servant] þæir þa baðer skyndelega ovan til skipsens. oc fundu þæir þar æina friða fru sæm alfkona være. oc tok hann þa i skikkioskaut hænnar oc læidde hana með ser i kastalann" (*Strengleikar* 1850: 11–12) ("and then they both went quickly down to the ship and found there a woman as beautiful as an *álfkona* would be. And then he took the skirt of her cloak and led her with him to the castle"). The same holds true for the account given in *Gvímars saga* which is almost identical: "… og geingu þeir [that is Meriadus and a servant] þä skindelega ofan til skipsens og fundu þar svo frijda frü, sem älfkona være, tök hann þä i sckickiu skaut hennar og leidde hana med sier til kastalans …" (*Gvímars saga* 1979: 134) ("… and then they went quickly down to the ship and found there such a beautiful woman as an álfkona would be. Then he took the skirt of her cloak and led her with him to the castle.")

Both accounts thus echo the idea of the Breton *lai* that the beauty of Guigemar's lover is like that of a *fée*. Following the original, both Old Norse translations then go on to explain how Meriandus' court marvels about her beauty, further underlining the implicit attribute the lady's exceptional fairness.

The fact that the Old Norse renditions translate this passage accurately without alterations underlines that the concept caused no problem, since, as noted above, the Scandinavian sphere already attributed *álfar* with beauty.

3. Conclusion

The above investigation has considered the way in which the concept of the magical creative *álfkona* was brought into Old Icelandic in the mid-13th-century as a result of the translation of Continental romantic works which demanded the creation of conceptual terms that had not previously existed in the indigenous cultural vocabulary of the north. Apparently, the use of the word *álfkona* as a translation for *fée* rather than any other term was not seen as being problematic with regard to the local understanding of the *álfar* in Iceland at this time, as they were already beginning to blend with nature spirits. Nonetheless, it did involve the introduction of a female equivalent to a group of figures that were previously largely male like the *dvergar* if we trust the evidence of the Eddic poems and *Snorra Edda*. This motif of a specifically female sex of *álfar* had clearly entered the Scandinavian realm by the thirteenth century. As has been shown, these new figures are intrinsically connected to textile weaving and the crafting of beautiful magical garments. That this motif seems to have occasionally been adapted to local beliefs can be seen from the changing of the numbers of the *álfkonur* in the account of Galopin's fate demonstrated above, a development which is worth further investigation.

There nonetheless appears to have been more wariness with regard to the adoption of the seen attributes of prophecy, cursing and fate associated with *fées*. These were abilities commonly associated with *nornir* rather than *álfar* in the Old Norse worldview and were thus clearly unfitting for the *álfkonur*.

Equally intriguing, however, are other motifs that may well have come from the translated *riddarasǫgur* if they had not come from the folklore

blend of *álfar* and *landvættir*: this was the idea of beings being taken into mountains (also referred to as *bjergtagning* in later folk legends)[39] something that builds on the idea of *álfkonur* working below the surface of the earth in some of the accounts given above, as well as the changeling motif (ML 5058),[40] which would prove to be a very rich idea in folkloric literature. As has been shown above, the Old French version of *Elye de Saint-Gille* has four *fées* arguing about one of them wanting to have Galopin as her servant. While the Old Norse transports this general idea, the motif of the *fées*' argument *at* his birth is changed to the idea of the *álfkonur stealing* him *after* Galopin being born. It nonetheless needs to be borne in mind that unlike later Icelandic folk stories such as the famous "18 barna faðir í Álfheimum" ("The Father of 18 Children in Álfheim") or "Tökum á, tökum á" ("Let's seize it, seize it"), no substitution with a changeling child is made here (Jón Árnason 1862: 42–43 and 43–44 respectively).

Despite the cautiousness with which the translators operated, carefully selecting and/or adapting the motifs of the *fées* to fit the Scandinavian worldview of their audience evidently worked as the tropes that were kept clearly clung on in local tradition. The creating of garments has already been addressed above and it thus may suffice to mention the Icelandic account of "Sýslumannskonan á Bustarfelli", as just one of the numerous folktales which depict *álfkonur* (or *huldukonur*) as having particular weaving or embroidery skills (motif number F271.4.2) (Thompson 1975: 53),[41] this account telling of a beautifully crafted altar cloth which is obtained by the woman from a *huldukona* (Jón Árnason 1862: 13–15).[42] The fact that stories of the "fairy-folk" being skilful tailors has roots elsewhere is nonetheless reflected in the way stories of this kind have certainly lived on in Celtic-speaking areas. In Scotland,

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[39] For information regarding the motif of *bjergtagning*, see, for example, the work by the Danish folklorist Feilberg (1910).

[40] For the changeling in general, see the publication by Christiansen (1958: 109–113). With regard to the motif in France (see above), see, once again, the work by Sébillot (1882: 117–119). For the motif in the British Isles, see, for example, the articles by Katharine M. Briggs (1957: 274-5) and Donald Archie MacDonald (1994/1995: 51–52 [here listed under type numbers F61–66]). For Ireland, see the above-quoted article by Mac Philib (1991). With regard to Sweden, see the monograph by Bengt af Klintberg (2010: 192–197 [here grouped under types K141–169]).

[41] Another narrative that mentions how an altar cloth is donated to a church by an *álfkona* is "Rauðhöfði" (Jón Árnason 1862: 83–84).

[42] Interestingly, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands (The National Museum of Iceland) has an altar cloth on display which is said to be the cloth from the folktale: see http://www.culturehouse.is/-vefleidsogn/inn/room-iii/alfkonudukur-fra-bustarfelli-en.

various narratives describe fairy women working a spinning wheel, giving help with spinning, doing “wool work” or waulking, which have been collected under the Scottish type number F118 “Fairies Help With Clothworking” by MacDonald (1994/1995: 76). In Ireland, meanwhile, similar stories involving the common motif F343.5.1 “Fairy Gives Magic Cloak (And Shirt)” have been noted by Cross (1952: 261). This motif is nonetheless less common in the Nordic countries.

Another connection which seems to have quickly caught on was that of the connections to rocks and underground dwellings, something that can be seen from the earlier-mentioned *Ǫrvar-Odds saga* for instance. This the saga tells of how Oddr finds an underground dwelling place of four women, the most beautiful of which he intends to take hostage. This woman, however, promises him to craft him a shirt, the magical properties of which include the feature that the wearer feels no hunger or cold and is invulnerable to sword blows except when in flight (Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda 1944: 313–14). The parallels to the translated accounts noted above are striking.

Other sagas, such as two fourteenth-century indigenous *riddarasǫgur Hektors saga* and *Vilmundar saga viðutan* play on exactly the same idea. In *Hektors saga*, a knight by the name of Trancival meets an *álfkona* living in a hillock and saves her abducted son. In return, Trancival receives a beautiful armoured horse in reward as well as the promise that he will receive any information he desires from the *álfkona*. The same *álfkona* and her skills are referred to later in the same saga when Ector recalls her divination abilities (Late Medieval Icelandic Romances 1962: 107–110, 124–126, 131 and 170). *Vilmundar saga viðutan*, meanwhile, notes how Vilmundr’s future wife Sóley is given to a foster-mother and her daughter who live in a stone to be educated. These women then give the saga protagonists foreknowledge of various events so that they can react accordingly (Late Medieval Icelandic Romances 1964: 153–155, 162, 182–184 and 194–197). There is little question that the foreign concept of the underground weaving and prophesying *álfkonur* had become a literary tradition. Since such works were read out aloud alongside other stories in the so-called *kvöldvökur* (‘Evening Wakes’) one can understand how the translated foreign material would have impacted upon local oral tradition (*Elís saga* with its more than 40 surviving manuscripts underlines both the popularity and influence of some of these translated works) (Hermann Pálsson 1962: 14–15, 19 and 39–47; Magnús Gíslason 1977: 57–60 and 77–87). While Einar Ól. Sveinsson, in his Um íslenzkar þjóðsögur, sees

the most influence on folk tradition as having arisen from the indigenous *riddarasǫgur* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1940: 157–158 and 2003: 80), the probability is that one needs to go back even further, considering where the writers of the indigenous sagas got their ideas and concepts from. Certainly, some aspects of the *fées* were dropped or altered by Old Norse translators, as has been highlighted above. Others, however, lived on. This applies particularly to the *álfkonur*, as one can see from their process from the translated and indigenous *riddarasǫgur*. However, their most prominent association of creating beautiful cloths would be taken further in the local tradition. It would not be long before they were not only stealing children (see above), and issuing curses (as in "Álfkonan í Skollholt" or "Álfkonan í Múla") and spinning (for example, "Álfarnir og Helga bóndadóttir" and "Ingibjörg á Svelgsá og álfkonan"), but also entrancing young males (as in, for instance, "Frá Eyjólfi og álfkonu" and "Sagan af Álfa-Árna"), giving birth to children (for example, "Stapa-álfarnir" and "Álfkona í barnsnauð"), washing clothes (for example "Álfkonan og áfaaskurinn") and asking for milk (for instance, "Álfkonan þakkláta" or "Borghildur álfkona"); in short, all the "archetypical" roles one might expect of powerful, supernatural women (Jón Árnason 1862: 7–9, 15–16, 34–37, 82–83, 93–100 and 120–123; Einar Guðmundsson 1981: 26–27).[43]

As noted above, the introduction of *álfkonur* may well hint at changes that were already beginning to take place both in mythological and folk traditions, suggesting that Old Norse mythology and folk belief – in a land that had a multi-cultural background – were seen as being comparatively malleable, ideas coming in and fading out in accordance with needs, new ideas or regional preferences.

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[43] With regard to the trope of *álfkonur* giving birth to children, a wide-spread motif which is catalogued under the signature ML 5070 "Midwife To The Fairies" (Almqvist 2008: 273–322; Mac Cárthaigh 1991: 133–143).

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Summary

This paper forms part of a doctoral thesis in Old Nordic Religions at the University of Iceland, which seeks to examine the use of Nordic supernatural concepts (such as *jǫtnar*, *dvergar* and *álfar*) in the Old Nordic translations of Old French, Occitan and Anglo-Norman chivalric and courtly romances and *lais* in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. This present article focuses on the use of the word “álfar” as a translation for the French word “fées”, considering not only the narrative purposes involved in the choice of such a word, but the potential influences on Icelandic folk beliefs that might have been caused by such a translation (as these translation were read out alongside more local narratives).

Keywords: Old Nordic Religion, *álfar*, translated *riddarasǫgur*, Folklore, Translation Studies

Felix Lummer
University of Iceland
Faculty of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics
ORCID iD 0000-0002-6867-8921