

## Enabling Love: Dwarfs in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances

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For the last seventy years, most people in the Western hemisphere have known from early childhood that a good romance contains a beautiful, persecuted heroine, a handsome prince, an evil stepmother, and, of course, dwarfs, who by the graces of good fortune play a pivotal role in bringing the romance to its only acceptable conclusion: love, marriage, and retribution. Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* familiarized the masses with romance dwarfs, though Disney neither invented the romance nor the dwarf. The film is ultimately a twentieth-century appropriation of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the brothers Grimm, which in turn hail from a long tradition, where love, adventure, and dwarfs are intertwined.<sup>1</sup> One branch of this tradition are the late mediaeval Icelandic romances, to which Marianne Kalinke's article in *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* serves as an indispensable guide,<sup>2</sup> and which include a number of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*.<sup>3</sup> Many of these romances deal not

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1. As Paul Battles, "Dwarfs in Germanic Literature: Deutsche Mythologie or Grimm's Myths," in *The Shadow-Walkers. Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey, pp. 29–82 (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), puts it: "The continuity between medieval and modern depictions of dwarfs remains striking" (p. 69).

2. Marianne E. Kalinke, "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)," in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 316–63.

3. See Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*, *Islandica* 46 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 7–9.

merely with love and adventure but also with dwarfs. But how do dwarfs fit in with the romantic idealism of these narratives? What exactly is their function? And how does their presence in the romances reflect their previous tradition in Iceland as somewhat shadowy figures in Eddic poetry and the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson?

In Old Norse-Icelandic literature, dwarfs may be classified into three categories:

1. Individual Eddic dwarfs. Very few dwarfs appear as characters or play an active part in an Eddic narrative (in the *Poetic* or the *Prose Edda*); those that do occur appear mostly in supporting roles.
2. Generic dwarfs. The *Eddas* provide generic information about dwarfs (including two different versions of their origins) as well as a large number of dwarf names.<sup>4</sup>
3. Later dwarfs. The dwarfs of romances and folktales.

This study is concerned with dwarfs of the third type. About the other two groups, it is at this point sufficient to mention the amusing coincidence that only seven dwarf characters appear in Eddic narratives: Alviss in *Alvíssmál* and Andvari, Fjalarr, Galarr, Brokkr, Eitri and Littr in Snorri's *Edda*. In addition, there is the dwarf in *Ynglingatal*, who lures King Sveigðir into a stone, from which he never emerges. More curiously, the most prominent Eddic poem, *Völuspá*, dedicates eight whole verses (out of 59 or 63, depending on the manuscripts) to dwarf names. Since *Völuspá* is concerned with matters of great importance, such as the beginning and the end of the world, as well as its history and cosmology, the dwarf names may seem strangely superfluous, not least since dwarfs seem at first sight to occupy a limited role in Old Norse mythology.<sup>5</sup> As Lotte Motz puts it, they "are not drawn in the fullness of life, but in the narrowness of their employment."<sup>6</sup> Kevin Wanner notes the striking "uniformity which these figures exhibit across the range of Norse literary genres" and

4. See my article, "The Hole: Problems in Medieval Dwarfology" *Arv* 61 (2005): 53–76 and references there, esp. p. 4.

5. This is discussed in more detail in my article, "The Hole."

6. Lotte Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain: Form, Function and Significance of the Subterranean Smith: A Study in Folklore* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1983), p. 92.

points out that their role as providers of precious objects to the gods is characterized by their inferiority.<sup>7</sup>

This may very well be the case, but when the dwarfs of romance are taken into consideration, the situation becomes much more complex. Dwarfs do not figure in the Sagas of the Icelanders and the contemporary sagas (*Sturlunga saga* and the sagas of bishops). Furthermore, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson noted long ago, dwarfs are mostly absent from Icelandic folklore of the nineteenth century, which leads him to speculate that perhaps they did not survive the Christianization of Iceland,<sup>8</sup> though the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the brothers Grimm bear witness to the fact that this is not the case when it comes to European folktales in general. Nevertheless, the lack of dwarfs in Old Norse-Icelandic myths and folktales of the modern period makes their prominence in the late mediaeval romances even more curious. It is tempting to explain their presence as a result of foreign influence, and, indeed, the dwarf of the Icelandic romances is in a way a replica of a type known from Celtic, German and French sources.<sup>9</sup> However, the fact that this type of narrative, along with its dwarfs, was so readily adopted by late medieval Icelandic romance writers and their audience also indicates that there pre-existed a notion of dwarfs with which the dwarfs of romance were compatible.

This article seeks to determine if a close reading of some of those Old Norse-Icelandic romances in which dwarfs have a prominent role leads to a better understanding of what the figure of the dwarf meant to a late medieval Icelandic audience. Rather than presenting examples, I have chosen to focus on the role of each dwarf within the narrative. Although the dwarfs of the romances are the primary object of scrutiny, I also use comparative material from other sources.

7. Kevin Wanner, "The Giant Who Wanted to be a Dwarf: The Transgression of Mythic Norms in Þórr's Fight with Geirröðr," *Scandinavica* 40 (2001), pp. 204 and 213–14. See also Anatoly Liberman, "What Happened to Female Dwarfs?" in *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz (1922–1997)*, ed. Rudolf Simek and Wilhelm Heizmann, *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 7 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2003), who laconically suggests that this accounts for their diminutive size: "servants never grow up" (p. 260).

8. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Um íslenskar þjóðsögur* (Reykjavík: Ísafold 1940), p. 140. See also Helmut de Boor, "Der Zwerg in Skandinavien," *Festschrift Eugen Mogk zum 70. Geburtstag 19. juli 1924*, ed. Elisabeth Karg-Gasterstädt (Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1924), p. 545.

9. On mediaeval German dwarfs, see esp. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 50–67. On the dwarfs of the Celtic tradition and in romances, see Vernon Harward, *The Dwarfs of Arthurian Romance and Celtic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1958).



**Möndull, the evil helper**

In a somewhat unusual turn of events in the fourteenth-century *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the hero finds himself without a leg to stand on in a literal sense, for his treacherous page Vilhjálmr has chopped off both of his legs. But out of the blue, he promptly receives help, though in this case not from someone good and deserving, but from someone who may be regarded as even more wicked than Vilhjálmr. This someone is Möndull Pattason, who has presented himself at the Danish court and slowly ingratiated himself with Earl Þorgnýr, while slandering Hrólfr's friend Björn and poisoning his wife Ingibjörg so that she loses her mind. Ultimately, Möndull causes Björn to be arrested and has his way with his wife with Björn as a spectator.

When Möndull first arrives at the Danish court, we are not told who he is: "gekk maðr ókunnigr fyrir jarlinn, ok nefndist Möndull Pattason" (a stranger came to the Earl and introduced himself as Möndull Pattason).<sup>10</sup> After the legless Hrólfr has crawled into his friend's house, he sees Ingibjörg, now deformed and blue in the face. Björn arrives, led in fetters by a man "í skarlatsbúnaði ok skarband um enni af gulli gert, hann var lágvaxinn ok miðdigr" (dressed in scarlet and with a golden ennisband, he was short and thick around the waist).<sup>11</sup> Möndull, then, is small and evil, and at this point the likelihood that he will contribute anything positive to the romance is remote, and, indeed, he does not do so of his own free will. It is Hrólfr who turns the tables when he puts his arms around Möndull's throat and threatens to strangle him, no small feat for a man with no legs. Möndull immediately pleads for his life and promises to heal Hrólfr: "hefi ek svá mikil konstr til læknisdóms, at ek má allt heilt vinna, þat lífs er von, innan þriggja náttu; ek vil þér ok kunngera at ek er dvergr í jörðu byggjandi, ok dvergsnáttúru hefi ek á kynstrum til lækidóms ok hagleiks" (I have such an aptitude for healing the sick that I can heal everything that has some life in it within three nights; I would also like to inform you that I am a dwarf from the underground and have plenty of dwarfish nature for wonders of healing and craftsmanship).<sup>12</sup>

10. Carl Christian Rafn, *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, 3 vols. (Copenhagen: Popp, 1829–1830), vol. 3, p. 298.

11. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 307.

12. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 308.



After this somewhat shocking revelation, Möndull also announces that his aim was to lure noble women to him and that in spite of his evil mission and all the mischief he has caused, he will from now on remain faithful to Hrólfr, for he will never betray someone to whom he owes his life. Hrólfr accepts his offer, even though he suddenly notices that Möndull is “svartr ok ljótr eptir skapan sinni” (black and ugly according to his nature).<sup>13</sup> From this point on, Möndull is commonly referred to as “Möndull dvergr,” although it needed his confession to make the other characters realize that he is a dwarf.

Möndull not only heals Hrólfr but also becomes his loyal servant.<sup>14</sup> His supernatural powers make him a very useful aide, and his past crimes are never referred to again. Vilhjálmr the traitor, on the other hand, is unmasked when Hrólfr returns. He tells a rather sad story of his miserable youth and, like Möndull, pleads for his life. Unlike Möndull, however, Vilhjálmr is promptly hanged for his crimes. Cleary, Möndull, as a dwarf, is not regarded as wicked in the same way as Vilhjálmr. In fact, people at the court agree that the dwarf must have been “honum sendr ... til happa” (sent to him ... for good luck).<sup>15</sup>

Having been a powerful adversary, Möndull is now a powerful ally in Hrólfr’s expedition to Garðaríki. His short and sturdy appearance is again mentioned, and Möndull himself remarks that he is not exactly valiant in battle. Nevertheless, he proves himself useful by countering the spells of some twelve magicians sent by the evil Grímr the terrible, a demon or magician, to kill Hrólfr and his men. Through the counterspells of the dwarf, the magicians become crazy and kill themselves. Möndull shows little modesty and promptly remarks that Hrólfr would have had few men left, if he had not been there to counter the spells.<sup>16</sup>

In the final battle with Grímr, Möndull again proves his worth. This time he stands on a hill and shoots enemies with his bow, then hands Hrólfr a magic cape, and concludes by walking “tysvar rángsælis kríngum valinn; hann blés ok blístraði í allar ættir, ok þuldi þar forn fræði yfir, ok sagði þann val eigi þeim at meini verða mundu” (twice

13. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 309.

14. This loyalty amazed Jacob Wittmer Hartmann, *The Gøngu-Hrólfs saga: A Study in Old Norse Philology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), p. 9.

15. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 314.

16. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 319.

counter-clockwise around the field, blowing and whispering in all directions and mumbling ancient lore, and then he told them that this field would not harm them).<sup>17</sup> He helps Hrólfr by lending him his coat, which cannot be penetrated by the venom and fire spewed by Grímr; by striking Grímr from the back; and finally by preventing him from cursing Hrólfr in his death throes. Möndull then heals the wounded and is praised by all.<sup>18</sup>

Even when exhibiting his positive side, Möndull cannot be regarded as a good Christian, for his usefulness is based on magic of the same kind as that used by Grímr against Hrólfr. After the battle, he explains to Hrólfr that when Grímr chased him into the ground he was helped by the fact that he had more friends down there than Grímr had.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he never loses his appetite for noble women, for the sister of Hrólfr's enemy, the king of Garðaríki, disappears, and Möndull is suspected of having abducted her.<sup>20</sup> But according to the moral of the story, supernatural harm done to enemies is very different from supernatural harm done to its heroes. The dwarf has proven to be a loyal and useful helper to Hrólfr, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his wickedness.

If we regard Möndull as an archetypical romance dwarf, his characteristics are as follows:

1. He is small. When Möndull is first introduced, he is described as "lágr á vöxt ok mjök riðvaxinn, fríðr at yfirlitum, utaneygðr var hann mjök" (small in stature and very corpulent, quite good-looking but with very protruding eyes).<sup>21</sup> When Hrólfr first sees him, it is reiterated that he is "lágvaxinn ok miðdigr" (short and thick around the waist). And when he arrives to join Hrólfr on his expedition to Garðaríki, he is once more described as "lágr ok digr" (small and sturdy).<sup>22</sup>

17. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, pp. 328 and 336–37.

18. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, pp. 343–45.

19. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 346. Cf. John D. Martin, "Hreggviðr's Revenge: Supernatural Forces in Göngu-Hrólfs saga," *Scandinavian Studies* 70 (1998), p. 321.

20. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 348.

21. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, p. 298.

22. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, pp. 307 and 316. On shortness as an attribute of dwarfs in French romances, see Harward, *The Dwarfs*, pp. 28–32.

2. He can be both good and bad. At first Möndull appears to be no less evil than the demonic Grímr the terrible or the thief and traitor Vilhjálmr. When Hrólfr tries to strangle him and then allows him to live, Möndull becomes loyal to Hrólfr,<sup>23</sup> which, of course, does not necessarily make him good in any moral sense. In fact, he uses the same kind of magic against the demons of the other side as they themselves would use.
3. He possesses all sorts of magical abilities. Möndull himself refers to his craftmanship. He soon turns out to be a remarkable healer, and his magical powers are tested in the war against Grímr the terrible, where he proves to be an extremely powerful magician, maybe more powerful than any Eddic dwarf.<sup>24</sup>
4. He lusts for women who are clearly superior to him. The womanizing aspect of dwarfs is well attested to, especially in *Alvíssmál* and *Sörla þáttr*. In the former, the dwarf Alvíss performs the role of the “unsuitable suitor,” a role more often filled by a giant or a berserk. In the latter, dwarfs trade their craftmanship for sexual favors. In both cases, the dwarfs, like Möndull, seem drawn towards women considered too good for them.<sup>25</sup>

Clearly, Möndull is a complex character. He is evil but does good; he equals Hrólfr’s formidable adversary, Grímr the terrible, in magical skills; and his shortness does not prevent him from desiring important women. But how does this compare with the image of dwarfs in the Old Norse mythological sources? And how typical a romance dwarf is Möndull?

### Defining dwarfs

Keeping in mind that Möndull is somewhat special, all his traits may be perceived as dwarfish in that they are also found in other dwarfs.

23. Cf. Margaret Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1934), p. 146.

24. See Ármann Jakobsson, “The Hole.”

25. On dwarfs and sex, see Paul Acker, “Dwarf-love in *Alvíssmál*,” *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, pp. 213–27 (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 215–17; Harward, *The Dwarfs*, pp. 132–35. On the erotic aspect of Möndull, see Davíð Erlingsson, “Fótaleysi göngumanns: Atlaða til ráðningar á frumþáttum táknaðs í sögu af Hrólfi Sturlaugssyni.—Ásamit formála,” *Skírnir* 170 (1996), p. 354.



I have argued elsewhere that the dwarfs of Snorri's *Edda* and Eddic poetry (mythological dwarfs, as it were) are first and foremost negative creatures, and that most of their characteristics have something to do with "lack" or "absence." Two of the seven Eddic dwarfs are killers, and one is killed for no reason. The *Ynglingatal* dwarf is instrumental in the demise of a king—or, more accurately, his disappearance and absence. Three Eddic dwarfs may be classified as "reluctant donors," smiths and keepers of great treasures. And Alvíss in *Alvíssmál*, the only Eddic dwarf not in a supporting role, is outsmarted and turned into stone.<sup>26</sup> All in all, there are strikingly few mythological narratives about dwarfs. It is also striking how little information the *Eddas* yield about them and how vague their identities seem to be. They vanish into stones, appear to belong to the night rather than the day, and seem to have a connection with death. They are small in size, have no women, and are usually rather passive, and in the only poem named after a dwarf, the dwarf is the loser in a contest of wits. And even when they appear in considerable numbers, in *Völuspá*, there is no clear reason for their presence, a fact that has prompted scholars to regard the dwarf verses as secondary and unimportant to the structure of the poem.<sup>27</sup>

In his recent and excellent study of Old Norse-Icelandic and Germanic dwarfs, Paul Battles evaluates Grimm's ideas about Germanic dwarfs, and although I am not searching for a Germanic *Ur*-dwarf, his careful analysis of the primary traits of dwarfs is extremely useful. Among these is the ability to vanish, which Battles sees as a German rather than Germanic motif,<sup>28</sup> and which I believe is associated with "absence" as a defining feature of dwarfs, a motif that is so clearly present in the Eddic texts that it cannot be regarded as only German. Battles also discusses two old and now rather unpopular theories of the origins of dwarfs that focus on their absence and negativity. One is that the dwarfs were originally spirits of the dead, which Grimm adumbrated but which was more elaborately argued for by Chester Gould, who used dwarf-names as his main evidence.<sup>29</sup> The other is

26. Cf. Acker, "Dwarf-lore," p. 219.

27. See Ármann Jakobsson, "The Hole," p. 75, n. 3.

28. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 79–80. He discusses Old Norse-Icelandic sources in particular on pp. 36–49.

29. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 31–32 and 71–72. Cf. Chester Nathan Gould, "They Who Await the Second Death: A Study in the Icelandic Romantic Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies and Notes* 9 (1926), pp. 167–201, and "Dwarf-Names: A Study in Old Icelandic Religion," *PMLA* 44 (1929), pp. 939–67.

that the dwarfs represent an aboriginal race driven from their lands by invaders and replaced by humans, and that they survive only in memory as mythological dwarfs with unclear meaning.<sup>30</sup> These old theories continue to fascinate scholars and from the point of view of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, they have one merit: the peculiar and lengthy list of dwarf names in *Völuspá* may be important, if it reflects an idea that dwarfs predate humans and then make way for them, and also that their disappearance is somehow fundamental to the survival of humans.<sup>31</sup> But even if the list of dwarf names in *Völuspá* owes something to a notion that dwarfs are spirits of the dead or aboriginal cousins replaced by humans, this view is nowhere apparent in those Old Norse-Icelandic texts where dwarfs actually appear. And yet there are common links: negativity, absence, and lack. Battles also discusses the term *dvergmál* (echo), resounding calls in the mountains that might be interpreted as answers from dwarfs, which also characterizes the dwarfs as absent beings. Like dwarfs, the echo is not really there, it is merely an auditory illusion.<sup>32</sup> Grimm's belief that *dvergmál* had something to do with actual dwarfs in mountains actually fits in very well with his idea that dwarfs may have been spirits, perhaps of the mountain.<sup>33</sup> This is an idea that is possibly reflected in the mythology of Snorri's *Edda*, where four dwarfs hold up the planet.<sup>34</sup> As Terry Gunnell notes, they have parallels in the structure of the pagan hall, suggesting that these narratives may be rooted in religious beliefs.<sup>35</sup> While the tentative link between dwarfs and the elements should not be denied, it is difficult to find tangible evidence for a cult or any actual belief in dwarfs, as Helmut de Boor

30. Cf. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 72–73, who mentions David MacRitchie and Walter Scott as the proponents of this theory.

31. Ármann Jakobsson, "The Hole," pp. 66–67.

32. Battles, "Dwarfs," p. 80.

33. Battles, "Dwarfs," p. 72. An old and somewhat popular theory is that mythological dwarfs derive from the court midgets of the Middle Ages; see Fritz Wohlgemuth, *Riesen und Zwerge in der altfranzösischen erzählenden Dichtung* (Stuttgart: A. Bonz' Erben, 1906), and Harward, *The Dwarfs*, pp. 21–27). I have previously discussed and argued against this theory in "The Hole," pp. 67–68.

34. Lotte Motz, "The Host of Dvalinn: Thoughts on Some Dwarf-Names in Old Icelandic," *Collegium medievale* 6 (1993), pp. 81–96, is one of few scholars to focus on the four dwarfs, who represent the four main directions (east, west, north and south) and hold up the world.

35. Terry Gunnell, "Hof, Halls, Goðar and Dwarves: An Examination of the Ritual Space in the Pagan Icelandic Hall," *Cosmos* 17 (2001), pp. 3–36.



remarked long ago.<sup>36</sup> There is much more evidence for a belief in the powers of elves, although it can hardly be called exhaustive.<sup>37</sup> This again brings us to the link between elves and dwarfs in the sources, which underlies both Snorri's lack of differentiation between dwarfs and *dökkálfar* (dark-elves) and the fact that many dwarf-names sound more like elf-names.<sup>38</sup> Yet another link between elves and dwarfs is their prowess in the smithy, though in her tireless quest for the origin of the subterranean smith, Lotte Motz shows that it is difficult to demonstrate which of the two was originally most closely connected to the forge.<sup>39</sup> There also remains the problem of whether that particular attribute is a primary or secondary characteristic of dwarfs.

The craftsmanship of the dwarfs is a motif which is present in various types of sources and not least in the romances, along with other attributes that might seem to go hand in hand with it.<sup>40</sup> Battles includes a good discussion of the dwarfish traits that are more prominent in the Old Norse-Icelandic romances than in the *Eddas*. One is the power of healing, wherein Möndull the dwarf's importance to Göngu-Hrólfr lies. Battles argues that Möndull's claim that he has supernatural skills in medicine and that he is a dwarf from the earth is a fair indicator that the two go hand in hand, and that powers of healing are a dwarfish attribute.<sup>41</sup> These powers may, of course, be part of the dwarf's function as an "equalizer" in the romances. Battles takes note of de Boor's study of the "grateful dwarf" episodes in the *fornaldarsögur* (examples of which are discussed below),<sup>42</sup> but he disagrees with de Boor's differentiation between the mythic and the

36. de Boor, "Der Zwerg," p. 545. Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, "The Hole," p. 54; Battles, "Dwarfs," p. 77.

37. See Ármann Jakobsson, "The Extreme Emotional Life of Völundr the Elf," *Scandinavian Studies* 78 (2006): 2272–254; Terry Gunnell, "How Elvish were the Álfar?" in *The Fantastic in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature—Sagas and the British Isles: Preprints of the 13th International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th–12th August, 2006*, 2 vols., eds. John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), vol. 1, pp. 321–28.

38. Cf. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 70–71; Ármann Jakobsson, "The Extreme Emotional Life," p. 236; Lotte Motz, "Of Elves and Dwarfs," *Arv* 29–30 (1973–74), pp. 93–127.

39. See esp. Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain*.

40. See, e.g., Inger M. Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*. Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana 27 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), p. 109.

41. Cf. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 74–75.

42. de Boor, "Der Zwerg."



literary aspects, arguing that mythic elements may well have survived in literature centuries after their true meaning was forgotten.<sup>43</sup> It could be added that their function in a romance might then be entirely different from their original significance.

The last dwarfish trait examined by Battles is the desire of the dwarfs for women of other races, which is present both in German and Old Norse-Icelandic tradition.<sup>44</sup> While scholars (influenced perhaps more by *Snow White* than they like to admit) have tended to regard dwarfs as asexual beings,<sup>45</sup> it is nevertheless noteworthy that not only does the motif of dwarfish lust lie at the heart of the frame of *Alvíssmál*, but it is also very prominent in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. Both narratives begin with dwarfish lust, but they take different directions. Þórr triumphs over the dwarf and turns him into stone, while Hrólfr uses the dwarf to gain victory over Grímr the terrible.

Möndull resembles the dwarfs of the *Eddas* in various ways. Like Alvíss, he is lustful. Like Fjalarr and Galarr, he is evil. Like Brokkr and Eitri, he possesses skills that prove important to his benefactors. Like the *Ynglingatal* dwarf, he is associated with stone and an enigmatic underground world. However, his role as a supernatural helper also has its unique features. One difference is that unlike Alvíss, his lustfulness is not repressed, and eventually he succeeds in winning his bride.

In spite of these similarities, this particular romance dwarf is a refreshingly novel character. He is forceful and aggressive, vanishes only to reappear twice as powerful and remains with Hrólfr throughout the narrative. While the Eddic dwarf is somewhat ill-defined, in that he is neither good nor bad, more absent than present, more negative than positive, in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* the dwarf emerges as a trickster, who has a great impact on the narrative and successfully transforms himself from villain to helper.<sup>46</sup> In the *Eddas*, the meaning of the dwarf is

43. Battles, "Dwarfs," pp. 75–76.

44. Battles, "Dwarfs," p. 79.

45. Acker, "Dwarf-lore," p. 216; Liberman, "What Happened to Female Dwarfs?" p. 260.

46. I use the word "trickster" more as a metaphor than to suggest that Möndull may have been a mythological figure. In fact, he seems very much to serve a narrative purpose and need not have any cultic significance. Möndull may be regarded more as a knave than an antagonist with trickster-like features such as his double character, his amorality, and trickery, and his status as superhuman and animalistic at the same time. See Amory, "Three profiles," pp. 9–11.

vague. The dwarf's origin, nature, status, and abilities are hard to pin down. Perhaps this is the reason why the dwarf becomes much more prominent in the romances than elves or giants.<sup>47</sup> Unlike, for example, the Eddic *jötnar*, the dwarf is not imbued with Eddic significance and preconceptions. One might speculate that a romance author was allowed to take more liberties with dwarfs as characters than with the more clearly defined anthropomorphic beings. Perhaps it is precisely the vagueness of Eddic dwarfs that makes dwarfs more prominent in the romances.

### Proficient ogres

In her *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Inger M. Boberg divides the bulk of her examples of dwarfs into four categories: their appearance, their homes, their characteristics, and their interaction with humans.<sup>48</sup> Examples of all four are to be found in *Viktors saga ok Blávus* (preserved only in fifteenth-century manuscripts and younger), which, unlike *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, takes place in distant lands rather than the distant past. The dwarf in this saga is a very typical romance dwarf.

*Viktors saga ok Blávus* tells that knights dress up for a tournament, put on golden helmets, and then compete with each other in every kind of sport.<sup>49</sup> An Icelandic *riddarasaga* hardly get more glamorous than this, though, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson points out, this glamor is not characteristic of the entire saga.<sup>50</sup> The dwarf of the saga appears when the foster-brothers Viktor and Blávus have challenged the most famous Vikings of the North to a combat but need help. Their wise advisor Kódér leads them to a scruffy island hermit called Skeggkarl, who in turn leads them to his own trusted friend and helper:

47. On elves in the romances, see Ármann Jakobsson, "The Extreme Emotional Life," p. 232. On giants in the legendary sagas, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants" in *Fornaldarsagaerne: Myter og virkelighed*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2008).

48. Boberg, *Motif-Index*, pp. 108–111.

49. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands, 1964), p. 7.

50. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, "Viktors saga ok Blávus: Sources and Characteristics," in *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Handritastofnun Íslands, 1964), p. clxxx.

ganga þeir þa þar til at þeir koma at storum steini heyrdur þeir til barna dvergsins ok at þau mælltu at þeim fielli allr ketill j eld ef dvergnum fodur þeirra yrði nockut. Skegg (karl) geingr at steininum ok klappar a lofa sinum ok lykzt wpp steinninn. geingr þar wt dvergrinn Dimus. hann var fótlagur ok skamhryggiadr. middigr ok miog baraxladr handsijdr ok hofud mikill

(they walk until they reach a large stone. They hear the children of the dwarf, who remark that they will be destroyed if something should happen to their father, the dwarf. Skeggkarl walks right up to the stone, pats it with the palm of his hand, and then the stone opens. Out walks Dimus the dwarf. He was short in the legs and back, barrel-bellied and skinny-shouldered with long arms and a huge head).<sup>51</sup>

The narrative depicts both a dwarf's abode and his appearance. Like the dwarf that lures King Sveigðir into his rock in *Ynglinga saga*, this dwarf lives in a stone. But unlike any Eddic dwarf, he is graphically described as a monstrous and misshapen being, perhaps even more to be pitied than feared. The concise *Ynglinga saga* narrative of the dwarf and King Sveigðir is eerie, perhaps frightening, but this depiction is close to the comical.<sup>52</sup>

The second description of Dimus in the saga is hardly more flattering: “fylgdi þar með einn undarligr maður ef mann skyldi kalla. hann var j skinn kufli og hafði jarn staf j hendi. hann var laagr ok læra mikill þunnleitr ok þíoa brattr. út eygur ok ennis miór haals langr ok hofud mikill. handsidr ok herda mior boginn ok barraxladur” (there followed a strange man, if you could call him a man. He wore skins and had an iron staff in his hand. He was short and thick-thighed, with a shallow appearance and a curved ass, wide eyes and a thin forehead, a long neck and a huge head, tiny shoulders and a crooked back).<sup>53</sup> The accuracy of the description is obviously secondary to a need for alliteration, but clearly Dimus is more of an ogre than a human. His

51. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 18–19.

52. See John Lindow, “Supernatural Others and Ethnic Others: A Millennium of World View,” *Scandinavian Studies* 67 (1995), p. 9.

53. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 43.



ugliness groups him among savages and beasts rather than formidable antagonists,<sup>54</sup> and it is not surprising that the people of India refer to him as an “ouættur” (ogre).<sup>55</sup>

There is nevertheless more to Dimus than meets the eye, for this small and ugly family-man, who lives quietly in a stone, possesses magical powers that make him a useful supernatural helper. He turns out to be the very “duergr klokur ok kyndugur” (clever and skilled dwarf), who made powerful magic weapons for the foster-brothers’ chosen adversaries.<sup>56</sup> When Viktor and Blávus first meet him, he is asked to do the same for them. He is a “reluctant donor” until Skeggarl chastises him, quoting *Njáls saga* almost verbatim.<sup>57</sup> The dwarf is easily subdued by his friend’s indignation and not nearly as formidable as Möndull, but he is extremely skillful, providing the foster-brothers not only with clever advice but also aid in battle, in which his physical strength turns out to be impressive. It is further revealed that Dimus is a master of disguise, probably through magic since presumably a dwarf would be easily recognizable.<sup>58</sup> When Dimus and Blávus part, Dimus asks him to mention his name if he is ever in dire need. And indeed, Blávus does need Dimus later in the saga, and when he calls for him all the way from India, the dwarf magically emerges from out of a mountain in the vicinity and is able to help “med sinu kukli” (with his black magic).<sup>59</sup>

*Viktors saga ok Blávus* gives a conflicting image of the dwarf. Not only is he a reticent creature, who lives a simple life in a stone with his children, but he is also a monstrosity, an aberration from human perfection; and not only is he a skilled craftsman, but he is also strong in battle, a master of disguise, and well versed in all kinds of magic.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, he is a loyal friend. Like Möndull, Dimus is a versatile supernatural helper, who may or may not be good, and while Dimus does not betray his desire for human women or use his skills to satisfy his lust for power, he has in the past made magical weapons

54. Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, “Identifying the Ogre.”

55. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 43–44.

56. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 14.

57. See *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), p. 298.

58. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 21–22 and 25.

59. *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 28 and 43–44.

60. On dwarfish strength in the romances, see Harward, *The Dwarfs*, pp. 117–19.

for the adversaries of the foster-brothers. As in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, the dwarf's magic seems to be available to both good and bad people, but in the end the dwarf sides with the good ones.

Many of the same motifs appear in *Samsons saga fagra*, which may date from the fifteenth century. The thief Kuintelin, a seducer and son of a troll-woman, needs supernatural help after his mother's untimely death. His father directs him to a dwarf in the vicinity:

skamt burt hiedan j skoginn stendur einn steinn. þar byr j duergr miog klokr er Grelent h(eiter) ... Kuintelin situr vm duerginn. ok eitt sinn getur Kuintelin vigt hann vtansteins ok tekur hann hondum ok ognar honum dauda. duer(gurinn) m(ællti) litil fremd er þier at briota min stuttu bein vil ek helldr leysa mitt líjf. ok giora nockut þat þrek er j.

(not far from her in the woods stands a stone. Inside it lives a very smart dwarf called Grelent ... now Kuintelin stalks the dwarf and is able to come between him and his stone once. He captures him and threatens him with death. The dwarf says: "There is little glory in breaking my short bones, but I would rather buy my life and accomplish something for you ...").<sup>61</sup>

This description corresponds well with that given in *Viktors saga*. The dwarf lives in a stone (in this instance in the woods). He is short and ugly (according to some manuscripts), and he is also able to make a wheelcart "med undarligum hagleik" (with wondrous skill), which is used to kidnap the hero's fiancée. She, however, resists, and neither lady nor dwarf wins victory, suggesting that Grelent does not possess superhuman physical strength.

Here again, the dwarf has undergone a conversion. He asks Samson not to kill him, arguing that he was forced, and is allowed to swear allegiance to him.<sup>62</sup> He then helps Samson capture Kuintelin and is sent on a mission with the thief, who has his own agenda, and his story ends in further betrayal and, eventually, his hanging, for a thief

61. *Samsons saga fagra*, ed. John Wilson, Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 65 (Copenhagen: [n.p.] 1953), pp. 21–22.

62. *Samsons saga fagra*, ed. Wilson, pp. 22–27, 29–31, and 43–45.

can only meet one end in a proper romance. The dwarf, however, does not betray his master, and although Grelent is less impressive than Möndull or Dimus, the similarities among them are obvious: a useful dwarf who is reluctantly drawn into the story does mischief at first but eventually redeems himself.

In *Áns saga bogsveigis*, too, the protagonist gains power over a dwarf by coming between him and his stone (“vígja utan steins”):

hann sá þar stein einn standa mikinn ok mann hjá einum læk;  
hann hafði heyrt nefnda dverga, ok þat með at þeir væri hagari  
enn aðrir menn; Án komst þá á millum steinsins ok dvergsins, ok  
vígir hann utan steins, ok sagði hann aldrí skulu sínu inni ná, nema  
hann smíðaði . . . Svá gjörði dvergrinn, sem fyrir var skilit, ok með  
aungum álögum.

(He saw a big stone and a man by a creek. He had heard of dwarfs and that they were more skilled craftsmen than other men. Án positioned himself between the stone and the dwarf and prevented him from entering the stone and told him that he would never reach his home, unless he forged items . . . The dwarf did as requested and with no spells).<sup>63</sup>

This dwarf is called Litr, which is also the name of the dwarf who is kicked into the fire during Baldr’s funeral in Snorri’s *Edda*. Unlike Möndull, Dimus, and Grelent, he does not exhibit many talents; his only role is to be a smith. It is worth noting that the dwarf is here referred to as a human (“enn aðrir menn”), and yet he is clearly not merely a midget, since he possesses an extraordinary talent, if only one. It may be that Án is simply too young to make full use of his dwarf talents.<sup>64</sup>

63. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 2, p. 327.

64. Cf. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, “Kolbítur verður karlmaður,” in *Miðaldabörn*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Torfi H. Tulinius (Reykjavík: Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2005), p. 94. Interestingly, in *Nítida saga* King Liforinus gains the services of a dwarf using the same trick, for he wants the dwarf to help him with “kynstri og kuckli” (magic and witchcraft) And like the four dwarfs already mentioned, he is no oathbreaker. See Agnete Loth, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 5 vols. Editiones Arnarnagmagnæ, Ser. B, vols. 20–24 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962–65), vol. 5, p. 22.



Generally, there seems to be two kinds of dwarfs in the Old Norse-Icelandic romances. The fourteenth-century *Gibbons saga* has both. There is on the one hand the dwarf Lepus, who has been in the service of Queen Greca for a long time and is a loyal and trusted servant. On the other, there is the dwarf Asper, whom Gibbon catches in a wood, and who is extremely ugly: “einn duergr furðv líkr sialfum fiandanum ath yfir liti” (a dwarf looking remarkably like the devil himself).<sup>65</sup> However, this demonic creature turns out to be a useful and independent helper, not unlike the trickster Möndull. While Lepus remains a servant, Asper ends up as an earl for his faithful service.

### Trollish vengefulness

Whether good or bad, the dwarfs are always helpful. They never break an oath and faithfully serve their masters. Although sometimes they begin by serving evil purposes and are themselves evil, they always redeem themselves.

The examples above suggest that it is sufficient to gain power over the dwarfs or, as in the case of Dimus, shame them into becoming helpers. However, Old Norse-Icelandic romances also provide instances of reciprocity, that is, the narrative motif of the “grateful dwarf.” *Sigurðar saga þögla* (which has been dated to the fourteenth century), tells that while strolling through a forest Sigurðr’s son Hálfðan comes to a creek. Close by is a large stone resembling a house (“vaxinn nær sem hus”), where he encounters a strange creature:

Hann sier þaa ofan fra sier eitthuert kuikuende er honum þotti unndarligt. aa þui uar mannz mynd. þat uar utlima stort og hendur fotsijdar. enn fotleggirnir stuttir suo at eigi uoru þuerar handar. vid þat glotti Half(dan) og uar sem vtan vid lægi augun. Half(dan) tok upp einn steinn og sendi til þessa kuikindis og kom aa kialcann. geck hann j sundur. enn duergsbarn þetta bra vit med suo jllre Raust ath slict þottizt hann eckj sied hafa og þui næst war þat horfit og uissi hann alldre huat af þui uard.

65. *Gibbons saga*, ed. R. I. Page, Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, Ser. B, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), p. 19.

(He then saw above him a creature he found very strange but it had a human form. Its limbs were very large, its hand reached the ground but the legs were shorter than the width of a hand. Hálfðan smiled and its eyes seemed to pop out. Then Hálfðan took up a stone and threw it at the creature and it hit it in the jaw and broke the jaw-bone. But this dwarf-child uttered a cry with such an evil voice that he had never seen the like. And then it was gone and he never knew where it had gone).<sup>66</sup>

The following night, a dwarf appears to Hálfðan in his sleep “og var storum ofrynligur” (and was very menacing). This dwarf, who is larger than the other creature, curses Hálfðan for mutilating his child and strikes Hálfðan with his staff. The prince wakes up with such a headache that he is bedridden all day. His brother Vilhjálmr goes to the same creek and sees the dwarf-child, but he has a very different strategy and presents it with a gold-ring. And indeed, the dwarf appears to him “med blidligu yfirbragðe” (with a gentle expression) the following night, promises to relieve Hálfðan of his headache (but not his misfortune), and gives Vilhjálmr the sword Gunnlogi.<sup>67</sup>

The story exhibits well-recognizable folktale elements. One brother meets an Otherworld creature, treats it badly, and pays dearly. The second (or, more often, third) brother is kind to the creature and is rewarded. Clearly, Vilhjálmr is aware of this pattern, for when Hálfðan tells him what happened during his encounter with the dwarf-child, Vilhjálmr predicts that this will lead to misfortune for Hálfðan “þuiat nær aull troll og alfar eru hefnesom ef þeim er misradit e(dur) misbodith. og eigi sijdur leggja þau kapp aa at launa uel ef þeim er uel til gert” (because almost all elves and trolls are vengeful if they have been ill-treated or scorned, and they are also eager to reciprocate in kind if well-treated).<sup>68</sup> The laws of supernatural reciprocity could hardly be stated more clearly.

The fact that Vilhjálmr speaks not of dwarfs but of trolls and elves indicates that dwarfs may be grouped with trolls and elves in the romances, at least when it comes to matters of reciprocity. As noted

66. Loth, ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 2, pp. 113–14.

67. Loth, ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 2, pp. 114–17.

68. Loth, ed., *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, vol. 2, p. 114.

above, dwarfs and elves are closely linked, though this link is not very prominent in the romances, since elves rarely appear in them. It seems that Vilhjálmr is simply making a statement applicable to all Otherworld creatures, and his use of the terms trolls and elves accentuates a lack of familiarity with dwarfs, although this, of course, does not excuse Hálfðan's behavior towards the dwarf-child.

The motif of the grateful dwarf also appears in *Þorsteins saga víkingssonar* and *Egils saga ok Ásmundar* (both of which are preserved in manuscripts from the fifteenth century). The former tells that Þorsteinn encounters two dwarf-children, male and female, by a creek. No mention is made of their appearance. Þorsteinn bribes the children to fetch their father, Sindri the dwarf. When Sindri arrives, he is cheerful, and although he discourages Þorsteinn from attacking the Viking Ötunfaxi, he gives him a knife and promises him help later, should he need it. Þorsteinn calls on him, when he is in dire need, and Sindri promptly arrives and helps him. The latter, *Egils saga ok Ásmundar*, tells of the equally amicable dealings of Egill with dwarfs. Egill, who has lost his hand in a battle with a *jötunn*, goes to a creek and sees a dwarf-child fetching water. Egill gives it a golden ring, and in return the child's father heals his hand and makes him an excellent sword.<sup>69</sup>

The motif of a large stone inside the woods appears also in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, where it is related that King Svafrlami is able to acquire the assistance of two dwarfs when he “vígði þá utan steins” (separated them from their stone). He seems to know not only their names, but also that they are “allra dverga hagastir” (the very best dwarf-smiths), and asks them to make him a magical sword. However, when they part, one of the dwarfs places a curse on the sword that it will be used for horrendous deeds and will kill the king himself.<sup>70</sup> Why the dwarf curses the king is unclear, for elsewhere those who capture a dwarf earn his ever-lasting allegiance simply for not killing him. Yet the same happens in *Völsunga saga*, which relates that when Loki has stripped the dwarf Andvari of all his gold, the dwarf retaliates by cursing the last ring Loki takes from him.<sup>71</sup> This aggressiveness

69. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 3, pp. 388–89.

70. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 414–15 and 514.

71. Rafn, ed., *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, vol. 1, pp. 152–53.



of the “reluctant donors” of *Völsunga saga* and *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* contradicts the image of the dwarf in most of the late medieval romances. Although these dwarfs are, like the others, sought out, the overwhelming majority of romance dwarfs end up aiding the heroes, no matter how ugly or evil they might be at first sight. The single common denominator of these dwarfs is that they are agents of positive events.

### The significance of the romance dwarfs

The seven dwarfs of the *Snow White* folktale are not unlike some of the dwarfs in Old Norse-Icelandic romances, although in the former they have moved from stones into comfortable cottages. While the link between the romances and the Disney film seems clear and unbroken, the link between the dwarfs of the romances and the dwarfs of the two *Eddas* is less clear. A brief comparison may be in order:

1. The romance dwarfs live in stones, often in the woods and near a creek or a stream. They have children, and their domestic life is quite similar to that of an Icelandic farmer. No information is given about the abode of the Eddic dwarfs. There is, for example, no mention of a stone when Fjalarr and Galarr invite the giant Suttungr to their home. The dwarf who lures King Sveigðir away lives in a stone but the stone is much more frightening.
2. The small size of dwarfs is specified in both genres, but given less emphasis in the mythological narratives, where it is more often implied than explicitly stated.<sup>72</sup> In the *Eddas*, there is no mention of deformity or ugliness, but the romances are often quite graphic, and the dwarfs are described as being so ugly that they may well appear monstrous or demonic.
3. In some narratives, reciprocity is stressed, but in others it seems to be sufficient for a human to gain power over a dwarf to make him swear allegiance. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, the dwarf is his own avenger, but it is much more common for the dwarfs

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72. Many scholars believe that the stunted growth of dwarfs is an incidental characteristic or a later development; see, e.g., Liberman, “What Happened to Female Dwarfs?” p. 259.

of the romances, who never break oaths, to remain loyal helpers or servants to the end.<sup>73</sup>

4. As evident from *Gibbons saga*, there are two different types of dwarf-helpers in the romances. One is docile and servant-like. The other is independent and has ambitions and aspirations of his own, and this type has some of the characteristics of the trickster.
5. As supernatural helpers, the dwarfs possess various skills. Not only are they excellent smiths, but they also possess extraordinary healing powers and occasionally superhuman strength. They give good advice, are good strategizers in battle, and may appear or disappear at will. Not all dwarfs possess all these abilities, and I am reluctant to claim that any particular special skill should be considered an essential skill of dwarfs in the romances. If they have a defining attribute, it is the power in magic, which makes them so useful.
6. The dwarfs are always agents of love. No matter how demonic they look or how wicked they are at the beginning of the narrative, they always end up being supportive in the course of the romance.
7. The assistance which lovers get from dwarfs may seem paradoxical, considering the fact that the dwarfs themselves are not exactly romantic creatures. Yet they marry and have children. Some of them even lust for human women. And one of them ends up with a relationship with a noble lady, though the success of their union remains unknown.

Considering the fact that the dwarfs are unlikely to be the romantic ideal of any audience, one may speculate why dwarfs seem be essential to Old Norse-Icelandic romances, and why dwarfs serve the romance plot so well. In Old Norse-Icelandic mythological narratives, the dwarfs are defined by their absence. Their common features are all negative: they are small, have no wives, always occupy minor roles. Yet their absence is fraught with meaning—it is a hole which, like Ginnungagap, acquires its significance from its emptiness. The

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73. Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 145–46, drew attention to this feature.

negative nature of their existence is a reflection of the positive nature of our own existence. The dwarfs are needed as a metaphor for the past, the elusive, and the negative, and their most important role is to vanish to make way for us.

In the romances, dwarfs gain a new meaning for the medieval Icelandic audience. In these narratives, they are the agents of love. Davíð Erlingsson argues that Möndull may be regarded as Eros:<sup>74</sup>

Möndull er feiknilegur giljari og ástnautnarmaður. Nafn hans hefur, auk tæknilegu merkingarinnar öxull o.s.frv., einnig merkinguna reður, og frummerking indóevrópsku rótarinnar telst vera að snúa. Læknirinn sem græðir meinið að síðustu er því eiginlega ástarvættur eða-guð, Eros sjálfur, en eðli hans er vitanlega demónískt.

(Möndull is a great fornicator and lover. His name, apart from being the technical term for an axle, can mean penis, and the original Indo-European root would have meant “turn.” The physician who finally heals the wound is thus really a love spirit or love god, Eros himself, but his nature is, of course, demonic).

While Möndull is unique in many respects, the most important role of any romantic dwarf is, directly or indirectly, as an agent of love. It is tempting to apply Davíð’s observation about Möndull to the dwarfs of the Icelandic romances in general, where a development of dwarfs—partly due to foreign influence—seems to be apparent: from being a mythological metaphor for the negativity of the past, the dwarfs have become a metaphor for love and life itself. The dwarfs may continue to live in stones and be small, but their function is dramatically different. No longer representing Thanatos, they now represent Eros, a strange symbiosis indeed.

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74. Davíð Erlingsson, “Fótaleysi göngumanns,” p. 354.



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