

Warlocks, Valkyries and Varlets: A Prolegomenon to the Study of North Sea Witchcraft Terminology

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Despite centuries of commercial and cultural contacts between the British Isles and Scandinavia – the codfish, ballads, and oil rigs that contribute to the idea of a “North Sea community” – until recently, little has been written about the transfers of witchcraft ideology between those areas. Now, however, scholars have begun to turn their gaze in this direction (e.g., Hagen 2001) but there remain important shared aspects of witchcraft from the medieval and early modern northern climes as yet unexplored. One problematic issue in this regard is the nomenclature of witchcraft in English and the Nordic tongues, especially with respect to some of the more archaic terms whose semantic similarities (and possible etymological ties) project an impression of overlapping and shared backgrounds. Some are obvious (e.g., English *spae*; Old Norse *spá*); others less so (e.g., English *valkyrie*; Old Norse *valkyrja*); and some are especially thorny (e.g., English *warlock*; Old Norse *varðlokkur*). This essay looks to introduce a discussion of exactly these witchcraft-related dyads.

The *locus classicus* for such a discussion – and one of the most celebrated accounts of magic in Nordic sources – is the section of *Eiríks saga rauða* (“The Saga of Erik the Red”) which describes in detail the performance of a prophesying ceremony. The saga was written in the 13th century and preserved in 14th-century manuscripts, but purports to tell of events from around the millennium in the then-most-recently established West Norse outpost, the fledgling Greenlandic colony:

At that time there was a great famine in Greenland. Men who went out hunting for food had little success, and some never came back. There was a woman in the settlement named Þorbjörg; she was a seeress [*spákona* “spawife”] and was

called the Little Sibyl [*lítil-völva*]. She had had nine sisters, all of whom were seeresses, but she was the only one still alive. It was Þorbjörg's habit during the winters to attend feasts, and she was invited most by people who wanted to know their futures, or about the coming season; and since Þorkell was the chief farmer thereabouts, it was thought to be his responsibility to discover when these hard times would come to an end. Þorkell invited the seeress to his home [...] And the next day as it got late, she was supplied with the outfit she needed to perform the witchcraft [*seiðr*]. She asked for the aid of women who had that knowledge which was necessary to the witchcraft called *varðlokur* [MS variants *uardlokr*; *varðlokkvur*]. But no such women were found. Then an inquiry was made among the household to see if anyone knew [it].

Guðríðr says then, "I am neither a sorceress nor a witch, but in Iceland my foster-mother Halldís taught me that song [*þat kvæði*] which she called *varðlokur* [MS variants *vard lokr*; *vardlokkvr*]."

Þorkell says, "Then you are wise at just the right moment."

She says, "This is the sort of affair I want no part of, for I am a Christian woman."

Þorbjörg says, "It might happen that you could be of help to others in this and yet not be a worse woman than before. But I must depend on Þorkell to get what is needed."

Þorkell now pressures Guðríðr, and she says that she will do as he asks. The women now formed a circle around the scaffold upon which Þorbjörg sat. Guðríðr sang the song [*kvað...kvæði*] so beautifully and well, that no one who was there believed they had heard sung a song [...*kvæði kveðit*] more beautifully. The seeress thanked her for the song [*kvæði*] and said "many spirits have come here and think it beautiful to hear the song [*kvæði*] so well delivered [*flutt*], spirits who previously stayed away and would not grant us obedience. And many are now apparent to me which earlier had been hidden from me and many others. And I can say this to you, Þorkell, that this famine will not last longer than this winter and things will improve with the spring. The epidemic which has been on us will improve more quickly than expected. And as for you,

Guðríður, I will reward you right away for your help, for your future is laid out before me. You will make a most distinguished match here in Greenland, although it will not last long, for your paths lead to Iceland [...] And now farewell, my daughter.”

Then men went to the prophetess and each asked what he was most eager to know. She was free with her information and few things did not turn out as she said. Then she was sent for from other farms; then she departed for them. Þorbjörn was sent for, for he had not wanted to be home while such idolatry had been practiced.¹

Guðríður's fascinating if enigmatic comment that her foster-mother had once taught her something called *varðlokkur* has occasioned much debate. Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson, for example, with their incomparable style of turning medieval Icelandic texts into natural-sounding modern English, manage to incorporate into their translation of this passage two centuries of scholarly debate: “Then Gudrid said, ‘I am neither a sorceress nor a witch, but when I was in Iceland my foster-mother Halldis taught me spells which she called Warlock-songs’” (Pálsson and Magnusson 1983: 82).² Indeed, the tricky phrase *varðlokkur* and its apparent similarity to English *warlock* has been the subject of much discussion, notwithstanding the rarity of the term in Icelandic literature. In fact, this passage provides a useful fulcrum for prying apart the largely shuttered medieval North Sea world and shedding light on its magical idiom, specifically such problematic dyads as *varðlokkur-warlock*. This essay looks to demonstrate how a range of materials relating to witchcraft beliefs, revealed as much through a pragmatic application of chaos theory as through traditional philology, may be made available to us through an examination of these terms in their historical, cross-cultural contexts.

WARLOCK

The association by lexicographers of Icelandic *varðlokkur* with English *warlock* dates back at least to the 18th century, when Dr

Johnson notes in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson 1785):

“War’lock War’luck n.s. [vardlookr; Islandick, a charm; Saxon, an evil spirit. This etymology was communicated by Mr. *Wise*] A male witch; a wizzard.

Warluck in Scotland is applied to a man whom the vulgar suppose to be conversant with spirits, as a woman who carried on the same commerce is called a witch...”

In contrast to Johnson’s certainty about the gender of warlocks, the entry in *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* underscores that there may be some doubt: “A person (chiefly or only a man) in league with the Devil; one possessed of occult powers; a sorcerer or wizard. Freq. in collocation with WI(T)CH *n.*” (Craigie 1937-2002: XII. 31-2). One important element to consider is the nature of this gender-based distinction between female witches and male warlocks – to anticipate already at this juncture some of this essay’s conclusions, this sex-linked conceptualisation may have been imposed by scholarship or a revitalised early modern use of the term by demonologists and poets and not, in fact, represent an evolution from the earliest evidence. This gendered view is, for example, present already in Robert Burns’s “Warlocks and witches in a dance” in *Tam o’ Shanter* (and in precisely the sort of alliterating collocation with *witch* Craigie notes), and can be seen in such hallmarks of popular culture as the television series, *Charmed*, where “female witches” are equated with all that is good, while “male warlocks” (or demons, since there is little distinction in the show’s scripts) are equated with all that is bad.

This Modern English *warlock*, marked by word-final *-k*, is not in evidence before the 16th century and occurs at that point solely in Scottish sources. As the *warlock* form spreads more broadly throughout English, it always appears in the sense of “wizard” and so on (Simpson and Weiner 1993). The earlier forms associated with the term – *wárlosa*, *warlau* – are in evidence already in very early English sources, but here a high, although familiar, degree of polysemy prevails, with the word designating devils, reprobates, traitors and monsters. This earlier *wárlosa*, etc. appears to be easily etymologised from Old English *wár* “covenant” (cognate with Old

Norse *várar* “vow”) and a form related to Old English *léogan* “to lie, deny”. Thus, *wærlosa* – both etymologically and in Old English usage – refers to (cf. Bosworth, Toller, and Campbell 1972):

- 1) “oath-breaker” and the like. It is in this sense that we see the word in the earliest poetry, such as *Widsið* 9, where Eormannic, king of the Ostrogoths, is said to be *wraþes wærlogan* “hostile to traitors” (Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 149).

Other uses attested in Old English include:

- 2) “A wicked person; a scoundrel, reprobate; a general term of reproach or abuse”,
- 3) “The Devil; Satan”, and
- 4) “A savage or monstrous creature (hostile to men).”

It is not difficult to imagine that these terms were seen to be close to the sense we encounter in the early modern period, although none of them fits exactly.

wærlosa and similar forms are used in these four senses throughout much of the Middle Ages. The now familiar “fifth” meaning of, as the *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath and Kuhn 1952-2001) states it, “one who is possessed of occult knowledge or clairvoyance, a soothsayer; one who practices occult arts, a sorcerer, warlock”, appears in contexts that affirm the connection with magic and witchcraft only near the close of the Middle Ages, such as in the 15th-century *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (“weches and warlaws”; Krishna 1976: 57, l. 613) and the 15th-century Towneley play (“yond warlow with his wand”; Towneley. *VIII. Pharoah*, l. 232 [England and Pollard 1966: 71]). In other words, there is no evidence for the term being directly associated with witchcraft or magic in the Anglo-Saxon period, nor is there any until the 15th century, or perhaps the very late 14th century, when it appears in *Cleanness* (or *Purity*), the first extant evidence of the word in the sense of wizard or witch:

Penne þe bolde Baltazar bred ner wode,

And [b]ede þe cete to seche segges þurȝout
 Pat wer wyse of wychecrafte, and warlaȝes oþer
 Pat con dele wyth demerlayk and devine lettres.
 (*Cleanness* 1558-61 [Menner 1920: 58])

Then bold Belshazzar nearly became mad,
 And sent men searching the whole city round
 For men wise in witchcraft, or warlocks perhaps,
 Who dealt in demonology and could decipher dark lettering.
 (Stone 1971: 142)

Alongside this important semantic testimony, we need to place the corresponding phonological evidence for *warlock* with *-k/-ch* referred to earlier. As we see, not a single one of the extant Middle English forms reflects, even when the term is used in the apparent sense of “wizard”, anything other than what one would expect, namely, the development of Old English word final *-osa* to *-ow* or *-au* (cp. OE *boga* > ME *bow*), nowhere showing a sharpening to *-k*. The first evidence for this semantic and phonological combination (i.e., modern *warlock* in the sense of “wizard”) comes only in the late 16th century in Alexander Montgomerie’s *Ane Invectione against Fortun*: “That witch, that warlok, that vnworthie wic[ht]” (Cranstoun 1887: 129, l. 25). Here is our modern warlock, fully developed phonologically and semantically, and in collocation with both *witch* and *wicht*. This phonological saltation event has been at the heart of the *varðlokkur/ warlock* discussion ever since. The treatment of this peculiar word history by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson and Weiner 1993; emphasis added) is worth quoting at length:

This [i.e., an oath-breaker, etc.] seems to have been the original sense of the present word, but the special application to the Devil (either as a rebel, or a deceiver) was already in OE. the leading sense. The applications to sorcerers, with especial reference to the power of assuming inhuman shapes, and to monsters (esp. serpents), appear to be developments, partly due to Scriptural language, of the sense “devil”.

The modern forms with final -(c)k are of obscure origin, for they appear first in Sc. of 16th c., and owe their spread to Sc. writers, and so cannot represent, as has been assumed, a Southern sound-substitution of (k) for the -ch (x) of some of the rarer North. and Sc. forms. From the first they have been used exclusively in the sense "wizard". *Some other word, lost or not discovered, has perh. influenced both form and sense.*

The editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* notably go on to add, "ON. *varðlokkur* wk. fem. pl. (cf. also *urðar lo(k)kur*) ? incantation, suggested already in Johnson, is too rare (? occurring once), with regard to the late appearance of the -k forms, to be considered." Although the Old Norse term is indeed rare, it is less clear that a possible relationship between *varðlokkur* and warlock does not warrant consideration.

VARÐLOKKUR

Turning to the "rare" Icelandic form, preserved in two 14th-century manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða*, even this seemingly meagre codicological testimony exhibits considerable diversity: the word is used twice in the saga, but appears in different forms in the two manuscript traditions: *Skálholtsbók* (AM 557, 4¹⁰) shows *uardlokr* and *vard lokr*, whereas *Hauksbók* (AM 544, 4¹⁰) has *varðlokkvur* and *vardlokkvr*.³ In addition to these 14th-century manuscripts, the eddic-style poem, *Grógaldr*, preserved only in post-Reformation manuscripts, is also relevant to our discussion. In this recitation of spells, Gróa tells her son that *Urðar lokkor* (manuscript variants: *lokor*, *lokr*) will protect him from all sides (*haldipér öllum megom*) if he finds himself in a humiliating position (*erþú á smán sér*).

Finnur Jónsson associates the second element with the verb *lokka* "to entice or attract to oneself" (*að laða að sjer*; Jónsson 1892) but remains uncertain about how *varð-* should be understood. He asserts unambiguously, however, that the form *Urðar lokur* of *Grógaldr* is unconnected with the term found in *Eiríks saga rauða*. The principal study of *varðlokkur* was presented by Magnus Olsen (Olsen 1916). His is a detailed treatment, the bulk of which is devoted to arguing for

an etymology connecting the first element to *vörðr*, “ward, warder; guard, watch” as a kind of guardian spirit, for which there is significant dialect and ethnographic documentation. The second element, he argues, must derive either from *lúka*, “to lock, shut” or *lokka*, “to entice, allure”. Drawing on this semiotic background and on *comparanda* from the sagas presenting images of rituals apparently similar to those in *Eiríks saga rauða*, Olsen concludes that *lúka* “lock” is the actual etymon and that *varðlokkur* indicates songs “that enclose spirits” (*som indeslutter aanderne*) for the purpose of the ritual. Some years later, in his major study of the forms of Nordic magic called *seiðr*, Dag Strömbäck argues that *varðlokkur* may be best explained by comparison of the scene described in *Eiríks saga rauða* with various ethnographic observations of shamanic practices among the Sámi, which similarly require the assistance of a young, unmarried woman’s songs in order to return the soul (= *vörðr*) of the shaman.⁴ The scholarly record trails off at this juncture: subsequent discussion has endorsed now one, now the other view, but has been muted at best with respect to suggesting other possible interpretations. The 1935 standard edition of the saga, for example, notes that through the *Varðlokkur*, guardian spirits are locked in around the singer, who may also come to be called a *varðlokkur*.⁵

An alternative etymology does suggest itself, one that differs from these earlier theories, although its effect is in the end to support aspects of Strömbäck’s important observation concerning Sámi practices. First of all, I accept Finnur Jónsson’s and Dag Strömbäck’s view (*contra* Magnus Olsen) that the older *Hauksbók* form *-lokkur* is correct and that ultimately the phrase is connected with enticing or beckoning something to oneself (rather than locking or closing something) not only because of the logic of such an etymology (cp. Old Norse *lokka* “to allure, entice”), but because it fits neatly with other evidence. Specifically, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists have long studied a song genre, usually performed by women in pastoral settings in Scandinavia proper, known as the *lokk* or *lock*.⁶ These tunes are typically used to gather animals together for milking, feeding, and so on, especially in the context of the warm weather use of the shieling. Within the framework of farm life, those who sing this “herding call” need not be women, that is, the singers are by no means necessarily gender-defined; but given the division of labour

lokkan “allurement”), perhaps suggesting “enticer of whales” (?). Similarly, it should be noted that such herding melodies are associated in Norway and Sweden with magical abilities that give the singer power over wild animals, such as wolves and bears, *as well as* supernatural creatures, such as trolls and giants.⁸ As to the question of what cultural context might explain the use of *varðlokkvur* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, surely the image of women singing songs (and it is specially *women* [*konur*] the seeress in *Eiríks saga rauða* asks for), songs which the text later maintains draw a number of spirits or powers to the area (*náttúrur*), is well, and perhaps even best, explained as just such a *lokk*, if of a highly specialised sort. Moreover, although one might easily regard Guðríðr as intoning a spell or charm, the text reminds us through its reference to Guðríðr’s beautiful voice that she likely sings a song.⁹

On the other hand, this very expression of the song’s intent – namely, to entice spirits, *náttúrur*, to a place – may have misguided earlier scholars into certain interpretations. Keen to see in the etymology of *varðlokkur* a direct connection with the apparent desired goal of the singing, earlier scholars have perhaps, been overeager to assume that the first element of *varðlokkur* necessarily suggests “ward, warder; guard, watch” or “soul”. Exception must be made here for Finnur Jónsson, who freely admits his uncertainty (“*En hvað varð- merki þá, get jeg eigi skýrt*”; Jónsson 1892: 19). First of all, with respect to linguistic forms, no one seriously disputes that the original form must have been < *varð(a)lokkur* “the *lokk* ‘song’ of the *vörð*”. Earlier commentators have largely been unified by seeing in this term, *vörðr*, a masculine u-stem noun with an underlying stem -a- that reappears in such forms as the genitive plural, *varða*, and cognate with English *ward*, *warder*. There is, of course, no reason why this cannot be the proper etymon, but there is at least one other possibility, one which has been regularly overlooked in such discussions: the feminine i-stem *vörð* “(young) woman” (also cognate with English *ward*, in the sense of a young person under the guardianship of an adult). This word likewise shows an original underlying stem -a- in such forms as the genitive plural, also *varða*. So, in addition to a meaning of “the calling of the warders” as one possible interpretation, **varðalokkur* could alternatively be understood as “women’s calling song”, as I suggest here. Such a term

would be by no means unusual and would parallel similarly structured phrases for various sorts of Old Norse genres in evidence in medieval manuscripts, such as *stjúpmæðra-sögur* “stepmother sagas”; *stjúpmæðra-sköp* “stepmother curses”; *konuvísur* “songs about a woman”; *kerlingabók* “an old woman’s tale, nonsense”; and *kerlingavilla* “an old woman’s tale, nonsense, superstition”. Importantly, it would also directly parallel other known terms connected with calling songs, such as Norwegian *huldrelökk* “elf call”, i.e. a herding call made by a spirit.

The etymology I am suggesting, “women’s calling song”, or perhaps more narrowly, “women’s spirit calling song”, appears rather unexciting when set against such notions as Olsen’s idea of a ritually enclosed area guarded by spirits, but such an understanding would fit neatly with Strömbäck’s view that *varðlokkur* can be explained by comparison of the scene in *Eiríks saga rauða* to Sámi shamanic practices, which require the singing by young women of songs in order to return the soul of the shaman (Strömbäck 1935: 139). “Women’s calling song” is not only a philological possibility but would also fit other aspects of what we know or believe possible about the scene in *Eiríks saga*, especially the emphasis on female singers, female teachers, and the Sámi *comparanda*.¹⁰ Moreover, another argument favouring this interpretation is the fact that it assists us in understanding and addressing the problematic *Urðar lokkor* of *Grógaldr*. The language of the text and the context of Gróa’s statement suggest to most observers that there is a connection between these phrases. *Urðar lokkor* is generally translated as “Urth’s magic songs”, “the spells of Urðr” and other attempts to tie the phrase to the Norn Urðr, and many observers (although not Jónsson 1892 or Strömbäck 1935: 139) have believed that *Urðar lokkor* is ultimately linked with *varðlokkur*. Indeed, Vigfusson and Powell even go so far as to emend the text to *varðlokkur* in their *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Vigfusson and Powell 1883). One advantage of the reading of *varðlokkur* proposed here is that the phenomenon referred to in *Eiríks saga* and in *Grógaldr* may be understood as one and the same, without necessitating changes in the manuscript readings. The resolution of this seeming paradox depends on a commonplace in Norse tradition, i.e., the simple device of substituting a female mythological name for all females. Thus, for

example, *Hlín bauga* = Hlín (a goddess) of rings = woman. Thus, *Urðar lokkor* can be understood as an incantation connected with the Norn Urðr representing women in general but looking like a corruption of our *varðlokkor*. This wide-spread Nordic poetic convention thus allows us to interpret the phenomena referred to in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grógaldr* as being one and the same type of song, while at the same time, necessitating no codicological gymnastics to explain the relationship between the two sources.

WÆLCYRIE

A dyad shared throughout much of the North Sea world with apparent overlooked relevance in this discussion is that relating to the valkyries – Old English *wælcyrrie*, Old Norse *valkyrja*. Etymologically, the two are identical and long-established scholarship derives them from “chooser of the slain” (< *valr-/wæl-* “dead, slain” and *kjósa* “choose”). Although the details of this figure’s evolution in Nordic mythology has been the subject of a long debate, we can safely say that they represent supernatural figures who frequently carry out the designs of Óðinn and are clearly connected with fate on the battle-field. But for as generally clear as the broad outlines of the valkyrie role is in Scandinavian mythology, the situation in Anglo-Saxon England is less certain. To be sure, roughly comparable understandings can be – and are – *read into* much of the Old English materials: typically when *wælcyrge* (*walcyrge*, *walcrigge*) is used as a gloss on the Roman goddess of war, Bellona, or on the Furies. As one noted scholar remarks, “*Wælcyrge* ‘chooser of the slain’, the Old English equivalent of Old Norse *valkyrja*, consistently refers to creatures that were malevolent, destructive, corrupt, and associated with slaughter” (Damico 1984: 48). Apparently, however, a secondary meaning of *wælcyrrie* develops by early 11th-century England, according to which *wælcyrrie* comes to be associated with magical practices and means “witch” or “sorceress”. But this gloss on late Anglo-Saxon uses is debatable, as there is no information other than the association with witch (i.e., the collocation itself) to imply that the word means “sorceress” or anything like it. Helen Damico, for example, rejects the assumption that we should

understand the term in these later contexts as necessarily meaning “sorceress”: “Although *wælcýrean* is usually translated as ‘sorceresses’, there is no indication [...] that the creatures being referred to are not the baleful war-spirits” (Damico 1984: 44).¹¹ The most significant challenge to this view comes when, in the early 11th century, Wulfstan refers to *wyccan and wælcýran* “witches and valkyries” in his catalogue of sinners (Napier 1883: 298). Such usage hardly seems likely to have been random, and lexicographers have no doubt been led to tie this figure to the witch image by virtue of the fact that the list of sinners in which the word appears would seem to demand reference to a fallen, all-too-human moral agent rather than a semi-divine figure. On the other hand, Wulfstan’s fondness for alliterative word-pairs has perhaps here overwhelmed the strict sense of the word. My insistence on dragging up the question of the valkyries is connected with our treatment of *wærloza*, *warlaw* and its peculiar odyssey in Old and Middle English, which I believe may parallel the question of the valkyries. One stunning fact about virtually every case of *wælcýrie*, i.e., those believed to be meant in the sense of “witch” and so on, is that, like the example from Wulfstan, it is routinely paired with a form of the word *wiccian* itself, as in “...7 mansworan, 7 wiccean, 7 wælcýrian, 7 æbreccan...” (from an 11th-century land charter; Earle 1888: 231) and “*Ne wiche ne walkirie...*” (from a 13th-century manuscript of *Body and Soul*; cited in Kurath, Kuhn, and Lewis 1952-1999).

In his commentary to the Middle English *Cleaness*, Gollancz notes that apart from the various mythological glosses, valkyrie only appears in the apparently supportive context of one specific lexeme, “witch”, and remarks, “I am inclined to think that the whole phrase ‘wychez & walkyries’ maintained itself as an OE alliterative formula” (Gollancz 1921: 103). This is an interesting possibility, but we might reasonably tie to Gollancz’s suggestion the northerly connections of several of the texts, especially the oft-noted Scandinavianisms identified in several of them. The collocation of witch and valkyrie is itself a matter for some considerable eye-brow raising, but there is a further concatenation at work, and one at the heart of our discussion here: witch, valkyrie and *wærloza* in the sense of “warlock = male witch”, appear together in several texts, as in the following case from Wulfstan’s 11th-century *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*:

... her syndan *wiccan and wælcerjan*, and her syndan ryperas and reaferas and woruldstruderas and ðeofas and þeodscaðan, and *wedlogan and wærlogan* (Napier 1883: 165; emphasis added).

Similarly in *Cleanness, Þat wer wyse of wychecrafte, and warlazes...* (ll.1558-61) is followed a few lines later by:

As þe sage sathrapas þat sorsory coupe,
Wychez and walkyries wonnen to þat sale,
 Devinores of demorlaykes þat dremes cowþe rede,
 Sorsers, and exorcismus, and fele such clerkes;

(ll. 1576-9; Menner 1920:58)

Sage old satraps, steeped in sorcery,
 And wizards and witches went to the palace,
 Diviners of dreams, demonologers,
 Sorcerers, spirit-charmers, and many sorts of magician.

(Stone 1971: 143)

CONCLUSION

How then do we understand these various terms in English and the Nordic languages and the relationship, if any, between them? Is it possible that Norse *varðlokkur* was much more wide-spread and influential than its sparse tracks in the literature suggest, and that in some fashion, it helped shape the character of first Scots and later English *warlock*? Of course, of all the possible conduits in and around the 16th century between the Nordic dialects and Scots, the most obvious are the northern islands, Orkney and Shetland, especially as the period during which Montgomerie's first recorded use of modern *warlock* corresponds well to increased Scottish interest in and contact with these areas. A significant debate rages concerning the character, and especially the longevity, of Norn in post-impignoration Shetland (e.g., Barnes 1996, 1998; Rendboe 1987;

Smith 1996). Still, the discussion has mostly concerned itself with consideration of Norn as a living language – the date at which it ceases to exist in this sense, the nature of its demise, and whether one is to envision Scots-influenced Norn turning into Norn-influenced Scots or, more simply, that by the 19th century, we witness the emergence of a particular form of Scots with a Norn sub-stratum. No one, however, as far as I can see, doubts that Norn still existed in the later Middle Ages and in the early Reformation era. But as Norway's influence waned in the islands and Scotland's role increased on many fronts – economic, political and cultural – there arose a number of multilingual islanders, and not just in Norn and Scots, as Smith notes (Smith 1996), but perhaps also in German, Dutch and other important mercantile languages. Our interests here have less to do with Norn as a system of communication, of course, than with the possibility of individual lexemes influencing English usage, and here even what Low, Marwick and Jakobsen were able to preserve in the last two centuries (Low 1879; Marwick 1929; Jakobsen 1985), whatever their motivations and interpretations, is enormously useful. Toward that end, existing wordlists of the Shetland and Orkney dialects exhibit a substantial number of probable Norn-derived terms relating to witchcraft and magic. Although I do not attempt to present all terms relating to the supernatural (e.g., *trou*) from the published vocabularies of Jakobsen and Lamb (Jakobsen 1985; Lamb 1988), a significant number of recognisable terms are distinguishable:

ORKNEY

carlin(e) “witch” (< *kerling* “an old woman”)
frootery, freutery, feuterics “superstition” (< *fróðr* “knowing, learned, well-instructed”; cf. *fróðleikr* “knowledge, with a notion of sorcery; witchcraft”)
spo “to foretell” (< *spá* “to prophesy, foretell”)

SHETLAND

furdæn “bewitched, cursed, burdensome, heavy” (a combination of *fyrirgerðr* and Eng. *done*, perf. part.)
frolik “an old, magic rigmale or formula” (< *fróðleikr* “knowledge, with a notion of sorcery; witchcraft”)

fron "superstition; superstitious ceremony; magic formula" (< **fróð-* cf. *fróðr* "knowing, learned, well-instructed" and *fræði* "knowledge, learning, lore")

gandaguster "a strong, sudden gust of wind" (< *gandr*; cf. *gandrekr* "gale brought about by witchcraft")

gander "1) sudden feeling of powerlessness, sickness at heart. Orig, prob. 'sickness caused by witchcraft'; 2) the fish will not bite, poss. 'the fish are bewitched'"

ganfer "a crackling sound in the atmosphere" (< **gand-fer*; Nwg. *gandferd*; cf. *gandreið* "the witches' ride")

spo "to forebode, foretell" (< *spá* "to prophesy, foretell")

trullascud "witch, witch-like woman" (< **tröllskottinn* "troll shot" cf. No. *trollskot*, Sw. *trollskott* "elf-shot")

trolleman "wizard, sorcerer" (< **trollmaðr*; cf. *trollmenni* "giantlike man"; *trollkarl* "wizard, sorcerer, male witch")

As a group, these terms represent useful testimony to the apparent resilience and vitality of Nordic witchcraft terms as aspects of the Norn substratum of English in the northern isles, and to them, one must add the following terms, to the best of my knowledge, never before noted in discussions of this problem:

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varl "by witchcraft to take away the profit of a piece of land" ("to varl de land") ("Abbrev. form of an older *varlek*? Cf. O.N. *varðlok(k)a*, f. "a kind of magic song")

varlet "warlock or wizard" (The same word as Eng. warlock, sb., but the initial *v* is ON. See prec.)

Jakobsen's collecting techniques, as Michael Barnes frequently notes (e.g., Barnes 1996), are anything but transparent. We know, however, that the case of *varlet* he plucked from an early 18th-century traveller's description: "There is a House called Kebister, where a Varlet or Wizard lived." (Brand 1703: 110) Jakobsen's suggestion that both *varl* and *varlet* are reflexes of *varðlokkur* is far from certain. The derivation for *varlet*, at least, strikes me as opaque, and is complicated by the appearance of the "parallel" French-derived word

varlet in the sense “rogue” or “rascal” already in the 16th century. What, one might reasonably wonder, are the odds for two historically unrelated but semantically conjoined *varlets* emerging in roughly the same period? Already in this era the term – as *varlot* – is associated with witchcraft and magic by no less than Reginald Scot in his *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584): “...a notable cousening varlot, who professed Alcumystrie, juggling, witchcraft, and conjuration...” (Scot 1972: 206). *varl*, on the other hand, as a verb meaning “to deprive through witchcraft a land of its value” seems plausible at least, and if correct would, together with the *Grógaldr* references, rescue *varðlokkur* from the relative obscurity of the two 14th-century manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* – the term and its referent may indeed have been more widespread in the insular West Norse world than generally acknowledged.

Our consideration of these important pairs of witchcraft terms in the North sea area have allowed us to come to the following conclusions:

1) *wærlosa*, *warlau*, the apparent etymon of “warlock”, can be understood as a semantically sensible source for modern “warlock” by the later medieval period and the same phonological development is paralleled elsewhere (i.e. *elbo/elbok*, *wyndo/wyndok* in Craigie 1937-2002);

2) Old Icelandic *varðlokkur* appears of obvious relevance but has been deemed irrelevant because of its uncertain meaning and relative rarity; I suggest that it derives from terms meaning “women’s call” or “women’s herding song”, specialised to mean this kind of ceremonial song, a view that complements, rather than competes with, the understanding that the term implies the beckoning of spirits in a ritual context; moreover, this reading allows us to understand the connection between *varðlokkur* and *Urðar lokkor*, but does not force us to argue that they are literally the “same” phrase;

3) a related – perhaps even parallel – case is that of Old English *walcyrie*, a word that reflects important aspects of Teutonic mythology and may evolve into the image of a witch or sorceress;

4) many of the sources of information about these terms derive from manuscripts reflecting Nordicism and other suggestions of Scandinavian influence; the terms themselves appear in close

proximity to one another and are frequently used in alliterating pairs of the sort, *wyhecrafte and warlase* and *Wychez and walkyries*; and

5) the oldest evidence for *warlock* in that form and with its modern meaning is from the late 16th century in a Scottish poem.

One imagines that competing (if indeed that is the right word) in the late medieval and early modern period for the niche meaning “male witch, wizard, scoundrel” were the various forms of *wærloza*, *varlet*, and perhaps some evolved form of *varðlokkur* (*varl-*). Returning to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s comments about *warlock* that “Some other word, lost or not discovered, has perh. influenced both form and sense” (Simpson and Weiner 1993), my suspicion is that in this linguistic stew from the 15th- and 16th-centuries, *warlock*’s “form and sense” have been shaped by knowledge of these other terms. But even if this conclusion is on the right track, there is much left unanswered: What, for example, should we make of the gender aspects of the terms? How does a term I suggest was once associated specifically with women and the magico-religious world of medieval Scandinavia come to mean “A person (chiefly or only a man) in league with the Devil”? Clearly many answers remain wanting, but in the important terminological exchange centring on magic and witchcraft one envisions taking place between Norm and Scots in the 15th and 16th centuries, the enigmatic *varðlokkur* may yet have a key, if still elusive, role to play.

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Notes

- 1 Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 206-9; my translation. It should be noted that the term I translate here as “song”, *kvæði*, can also be glossed as “poem”.
- 2 “*Hvárki em ek fjölkunnig né vísindakona, en þó kenndi Halldis, fóstura mín, mér á Íslandi þat kvæði, er hon kallaði Varðlokur*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 207-8).
- 3 Jansson 1944: 44. Jansson’s ground-breaking investigation of the manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* remains the seminal study of this problem.
- 4 “*Varðlokkur syftar på den speciella sång, som användes för att återkalla den schamanerandes själ till den i extatisk utmattning liggande kroppen*” (Strömbäck 1935: 139).
- 5 “*Með Varðlokum varð vörðurinn, verndarandinn [sagnarandinn, einn eða fleiri] lokaður inni í hring þeirra, er sungu [og sem voru ef til vill einnig nefndar varðlokur]*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 207).
- 6 Early anthologies and studies of this genre include: Dybeck 1846; Carlheim-Gyllenskiöld 1892; and Reinton 1955. Considerable recent attention has also focussed on the genre, including Johnson 1986 and Tellenbach 1999. For a technical consideration of the unusual register in which these tunes are produced, see Uttman 2002.
- 7 “*I sume av dei kallingsorda som er bruka på sætrane enno, er det truleg leivningar av ordelag frå dei eldste tider*” (Reinton 1955: 303).
- 8 “*Det ansågs nämligen besitta magisk kraft som kunde besegra de vilda djuren, men även de hemlighetsfulla väsen, vittror, jättar eller troll, som ansågs befolka skogarna.*” Ling 1971: 22; cf. Reinton 1955: 312-3.
- 9 “*Kvað Guðriðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi þóttisk heyrt hafa með fegri rödd kvæði kveðit, sá er þar var hjá...*” (Sveinsson and Þórðarson 1957: 208)
- 10 I note too that a recently completed study of the term *gandr* (Mitchell 2003) further supports this view.
- 11 Gollancz writes that there is an Anglo-Saxon gloss on *venefica* using *wælcyrrie* (Gollancz 1921: 103). I have not located this instance in any available catalogue, dictionary or word list, including the *Concordance*

of *Old English*. (Healey and Venezky 1980-83). Still, I suppose we must hold out the possibility that there is evidence to prove the valkyrie/witch relationship.

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