

## **Fetchcraft: The Hidden Link between *Lik* and *Fylgia*<sup>1</sup>**

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*Flesh both inscribes and incorporates cultural memory and history .... Knowing is corporeal. One mimes to understand. We copy the world to understand it through our bodies.* (Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, 1997).

*Airt has her own rules and they're not the rules of common life .... A Fetch is an uncanny thing”* (Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders*, 1977 ).

One central element of our Gild-work concerns the mysteries of the human psycho-physical complex: the exploration of our multiple souls, as it were. Of all the components which make up the human being, from the *hug* to the *hamingja*, the *ond* to the *odhr*, perhaps the most subtle and mysterious of these is the *fylgia*, the Fetch. It is the most fundamentally *other* of the components of the Self: it has independent existence in ways that the other “souls” do not. It frequently appears to us in a form that accentuates its otherness (contra-sexual or animal). The Fetch, like Runa herself, is the object of our seeking. Mysteriously, (and in true Polarian fashion) this most subtle of the souls is closely tied to the most physical of souls, the Lich: the physical body itself. I hope, in this essay, to further illuminate the connection between Lich and Fetch, and offer as well some practical tools and techniques by which the individual Runer can come to know the body as the gate through which the Fetch can be sought. This brief examination is one facet of my ongoing exploration of the bodily aspects of our Runic work. As I said in my presentation at the 2001 international Gild Moot, much of our work in the Gild

involves the analysis of essentially mental artifacts (stories, poems, riddles, spoken spells). For this very reason, we must not lose sight of the meanings that are sought and made through traditional bodily behaviors. Our spiritual and magical ancestors possessed a very rich and sophisticated lore of the Body, and knowledge and experience of that lore is an essential and constant part of our Quest.

In the Gild we have evolved a fairly specific and fixed delineation of the Soul complex. However, in the oral traditions of Northern Europe and Scandinavia, the conception of the *fylgia* tends to blur and blend with related concepts and terms, including *vardoger*, and *mare* (O.Icelandic *mara*: (f) nightmare, incubus), and *hug*. Although initially somewhat confusing, this proliferation of terminology can be readily understood as a lexicon for different aspects or manifestations of the Fetch. A close reading of the lore reveals that there are common phenomena behind each of these disparate terms, an understanding of which can deepen our understanding of what the Fetch is, and better enable us to work with it. Looking at our contemporary understanding of the Fetch together with that of our magical ancestors, we come to understand this part of ourSelves as having the following essential characteristics and assuming the following functions:

- Although closely connected to the individual, the Fetch possesses autonomous existence... it can be passed transpersonally, and it both pre- and post- exists the physical body. It can appear either as the physical double, as a human body of the opposite sex, or as an animal (In Gild tradition, it can also be perceived as a geometric shape).
- It is separable, and can travel at will or accidentally.
- It is a guarding, protecting force

- It is a source and repository of transpersonal information. It can guide and advise. Thus when we find the term *hug* used to indicate an autonomous projection of the Self, the term suggests an awareness of the role which intense concentration or excited mental activity has in activating the Fetch. The *mare*, or nightmare, is a negative Fetch experience, during which one is attacked by the Fetch of another magician.<sup>2</sup> It is thus perhaps useful to understand these terms as referring to different phases of “Fetch activity.” This diversity of terminology should in no way be considered a breakdown or devolution of tradition. Rather, it is an experiential broadening of the Fetch concept, the natural result of varying personal reactions to a subtle numinous experience<sup>3</sup>. Ultimately, we know the Fetch viscerally rather than intellectually, and whether we call it *fylgje* or *mara*, the experience of it is largely the same.

Traditional beliefs closely associate the Fetch with the twin poles of incarnate existence: with the death and birth of the physical body. For most common, non-magical folk, the appearance of the Fetch is a death omen, presaging an unexpected or untimely departure from Midgard.<sup>4</sup> In this situation, the Fetch is often experienced as a physical double, or in its animal form.

[The Fylgia] only becomes visible to its master shortly before his death, warning him of the coming event. A bloody Fylgia will mean a violent death for the master; a quiet Fylgia a more peaceful end (Arrowsmith & Morse 1977, 24).

(From Denmark) “If a person meets his or her own *fylgje*, it is a sure sign that he or she will die soon.” (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 68).

(From Finland) “One evening an old man from Vardo came home from work and met himself. A week and a half later, he was dead.” (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 69).

This belief is recounted in *Njall's Saga* as well, when Thordhr tells Njall that he sees a bloody he-goat lying dead in a hollow, while Njall sees nothing:

Njall said that there was no goat there nor anything else. “What is it then?” said Thordhr. “You must be a “fey” man,” said Njall, and have seen your *fylgja*, so take care of yourself.” “That will be no help to me,” replied Thordhr, if things are doomed for me.” (cited in Ellis 1943, 128).

At the opposite pole, the Fetch is intimately connected to the mysteries of birth, in particular to those mysteries surrounding the caul or placenta. Those “born with the caul” (newborns whose faces or heads are still covered by the amniotic membrane) are considered to have a special relationship with the Fetch... as well as being clairvoyant or having other special skills. The caul and placenta of such infants are taken and treated in special ways (among other things, they may be buried beneath the threshold of the house so that the mother and newborn may walk over them when they enter or leave the house (this rite ensures the presence of the protective Fylgia in the child's life). Similarly, we read of a ritual involving the caul of a horse, which eases the mother's labor pains, but has a dramatic effect on the Fetch of her child:

“It was believed that a woman could ease birth pains by crawling through the fetal membrane of a foal. But her offspring would become a *mare*, if female, a werewolf, if male (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 54)

Both the shapeshifter and the *mare* may be understood as individuals with particularly active and powerful Fetches.

If we consider that the Icelandic *fylgja* is translated as “following spirit” we can see how the placenta, which “follows” the newborn into the world is strongly linked to the non-physical

“following spirit “ that is the Fetch (indeed, the word *fylgia* can be used interchangeably in Icelandic to mean both the spirit and the caul itself). And just as the placenta in the womb is the matrix which provides nourishment and protection to the growing fetus, so the Fetch provides information and protection to the developing Self.

During the course of one’s life as well, the Fetch makes it’s presence known in and through the body. In the sagas and the folkloric record, Fetch activity is persistently associated with involuntary bodily movements or sensations. Twitching, stumbling, trembling are all seen to herald the appearance of the *fylgia*, one’s own or that of another. Likewise, “if a person sneezed, yawned, hiccuped, or felt a tingling sensation, someone was thinking about him. Another person’s *hug* had just entered his or her body” (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 43). There are innumerable beliefs which suggest that the Lich is a effective barometer for the determining whether others are “thinking about you” (i.e. projecting their *hug* or *fylgia* at you) and likewise a tool for precognition. The presence of invisible beings or the onset of danger is felt first in the body... for example:

- “When your nose itches, someone is thinking of you.”
  - “When your ears ring, someone is talking about you. If your right ear rings they are saying something nice. If your left ear rings they are saying something nasty.”
  - “If your right eye itches, something bad is going to happen to you.”
- (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 44)

Tripping or stumbling, too can be a sign of an active Fetch, as suggested in this narrative from the *Flateyjarbok*, (*Thattr Thorsteins Uxafots*)<sup>5</sup> cited in H.R. Ellis’ The Road to Hel:

It happened one day that Thorsteinn came to Krossavik as he often did.

The householder's father, Geitir sat on the dais and muttered into his cloak. Now when the boy entered the hall, he came in with a great rush, as children usually do. He slipped on the floor of the hall, and when Geitir saw this, he burst out laughing .... The boy went up to Geitir and said: "Why did it seem funny to you when I fell just now?" Geitir answered: "Because in truth I could see what you did not." "What was that?" asked Thorsteinn. "I will tell you. When you came into the hall a white bear-cub followed you, and ran along the floor in front of you. Now when he saw me, he stood still; but you were going rather fast, and you fell over him and it is my belief that you are not the son of Krumr and Thorgunna, but must be of greater family" (Ellis 1943, 127).

Unnatural drowsiness or yawning often precedes the onset of a bout of Fetch activity. In *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, the seeress Heid yawns dramatically before prophesying: "Then [King Frodi] asked what [Heid] could see of the future. .... *She wrenched open her jaws and yawned deeply*, and this chant emerged from her mouth (Byock 1998, 6). [italics mine]

Likewise in *Egil's Saga*, Kveldulf's chronic tiredness and ill-temper were thought to mark him as a shape-shifter:

"But every day, as it drew towards evening, he would grow so ill-tempered that no one could speak to him, and it wasn't long before he would go to bed. There was talk about his being a shape-changer, and people called him Kveld-Ulf." (Palsson & Edwards 1976, 21).

Both soothsaying and animal shape-shifting are magical feats that can certainly fall under the province of the Fetch, as a source of supernatural counsel and guidance, or as an animal alter-ego.

The lore concerning the *mara* or mare, represents the most extreme example of physical response to Fetch activity.

In the old days people were bothered by the *mare* more often than they are

today. But I was really plagued by her one night in Veadal. I had locked the door and been in bed for some time. Then she came. She held me down so that I could not move, not even my hand or a single finger, nor could I talk or scream. (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 54).

Once the *mare* came to me in the shape of a cat. It was at night. I had just gone to bed. I had not been asleep yet and lay wide awake. Then I suddenly heard something padding across the floor. I thought it was the cat; it pads like that. It came closer to the bed, and suddenly it came up to me. It came from the foot of the bed and lay on top of me, pinning me down. I could not move a finger. (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 55).

The best treatment of the nightmare phenomenon in recent years is David Hufford's The Terror that Comes in the Night: an Experience-centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions. Hufford deals primarily with the *mare* experience as it is known in contemporary Newfoundland, where it is referred to as "The Old Hag" or simply "Hagging." Newfoundlanders are almost overwhelmingly of Scots descent. Since the Norse ruled over and intermarried with the Scots for hundreds of years during the Middle Ages, we can certainly expect some continuity of belief and practice here. Our expectations are most certainly rewarded. Hufford essentializes "hagging" thus:

The experience of being hagged as found in Newfoundland tradition, then, may be summarized as follows: (1) awakening (or an experience immediately preceding sleep); (2) hearing and/or seeing something come into the room and approach the bed; (3) being pressed on the chest or strangled; (4) inability to move or cry out until either being brought out of the state by someone else or breaking through the feeling of paralysis on one's own. (Hufford 1982, 10-11).

Hufford goes on to cite Ernest Jones for an etymological analysis of the term, *nightmare* which embodies the essence of the Old Hag:

The word nightmare, for example, originally meant specifically such an

attack. Ernest Jones has summarized the basic elements of the etymology of the word: "The word Nightmare itself comes from the Anglo-Saxon *neah* or *nicht* (=night) and *mara* (= incubus or succubus). The Anglo-Saxon suffix *a* denotes an agent, so that *mara* from the verb *merran*, literally means "a crusher," and the connotation of a crushing weight on the breast is common to the corresponding words in allied language (Icelandic *mara*, Danish *mare*, Low German *moore*, Bohemian *mara*, Swedish *mara*, Old High German *mara*) . . . From the earliest times the oppressing agency experienced during sleep was personified." (Jones, Ernest M. 1931. On The Nightmare, International Psycho-Analytical Library, no. 20, London: Hogarth Press, p. 243) (in Hufford 1982, 53-54).

We must, of course, note the obvious connection between the Newfoundland colloquial "Hag" and the Fetch cognate term "*Hug*" already discussed. In each of these accounts we see the common elements of physical paralysis and an involuntary sensation of pressure or suffocation associated with the presence of the Fetch figure.

In one of the most interesting passages in his work, Hufford recounts the tale of an informant who witnessed a local wizard "sending the hag," to torment a woman with whom he had some quarrel:

"He said the Lord's Prayer backwards; then jumped under the covers and took a knife from under the pillow and stuck it in the sideboard three or four times. After a while I put the kerosene lamp out and we all went to bunk. Every now and then we'd hear him bawl out, 'Hag, good Hag!' And that's how he hagged her . . . He, hisself, must have hagged her; because she could see him standin' over her with the knife; and she couldn't move because she was stopped still with fright. The foam was even comin' out of her mouth, and her father only got her back to sense by callin' her name backwards. . . His spirit, his spirit was what hagged her. She waid after, if she'd have knowed he was really goin' to hag her she'd had a bottle ready, and finished him before he'd have hagged her . . . See -- if you swing at a spirit with a bottle, the spirit who is hagin' you will die. So he never hagged her no more because he knowed she had a bottle ready." (Hufford 1982, 6).

This example is significant as it suggests a simple process by which the Fetch may be



projected in a terrifying and aggressive form<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the fact that the ritual relies in part on the manipulation of a knife is particularly interesting, as the knife is a traditional tool for divining the nature and character of one's own Fetch, or determining the presence of a hostile Fetch in one's immediate environment.

“If you want to know what kind of *vardoger* you have, there is a way to find out. You take your sheath knife, roll it up in a kerchief, and wrap it tightly. Then you pass this bundle from hand to hand, first in front of you, then behind you, three times. While moving the bundle you say: “A horse as a vardoger!” If your vardoger is a horse, the knife will lie outside the kerchief by the time you have passed it the third time. If it is not a horse the knife will still be wrapped in the kerchief. You proceed this way until you discover your vardoger, naming animal after animal until you find the right one.” (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 67).

The same technique can be used to identify and potentially banish an attacking *mare*:

“People think they are lying in bed awake and see a *mare* coming to their bed and lying down on top of the covers, but they still cannot do anything to defend themselves. At night she might even be in the room unseen. To find out, take a knife, wrap it in a handkerchief or garter and pass it from hand to hand around yourself three times, reciting: “Mare, mare mine, hear! Are you now inside here?”<sup>7</sup> If the knife lies uncovered after the third turn, the mare is not inside the house, but if the knife is covered, she is inside and you must wrap the handkerchief around the knife two more times and do the same as before if you want to get the *mare* out.” (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1988, 56).

If we take the time to de-construct this traditional technique a bit, it becomes fairly obvious to see why it is an ideal method for interacting with one's Fetch.

First and foremost, the technique essentially relies on involuntary physical movement, which as we have seen, is a hallmark of the Fetch.... through subtle and, one would hope, non-conscious movements of the hand, the knife is made to drop or emerge from the napkin. Like the

twitches, pulses, or spasms discussed earlier, these non-physical movements are ways for the Fetch to reveal itself.

We have already seen the close connection which our forbears drew between the Fetch and the caul / amnion. If we consider that the knife as analogous to the developing Self, the cloth which covers/wraps it is analogous to the amnion which covers and protects the fetus. Thus by extension it is linked to the Fetch itself. The paradigm of heroic initiation (Sigurd / Sigfried) represents the *Kinfylgia* alternatively as weapon and woman, shedding further light on this practice.

It is also my suspicion, based on limited personal experience, that passing the blade from right hand to left hand produces a simple kind of bi-hemispheric stimulation, that is, it rhythmically and alternately stimulates the right and left hemispheres of the human brain. Bi-hemispheric brain activity is associated with the “hypnagogic” (pre-sleep) state, which in turn is frequently accompanied by visionary states often involving geometric visuals or animal imagery. This is also a state which Hufford’s research associates with the appearance of the *mara* or Hag (suggesting a common source for both the appearance of the Fetch form as well as the relationship between *yawning* and Fetch activity).

Having established the traditional connections between Lich and Fetch, it is our responsibility as magicians to ask: “How might we apply this traditional knowledge to our work within the Gild?” One of the first steps in cultivating the Lich as a tool for communicating with the Fetch involves simply agreeing to recognize involuntary physical sensations and phenomena

as communications from the Fylgia. Engaging this perception is somewhat easier said than done however. You should begin by practicing attentiveness to the body's involuntary movements and feelings. Think of it as playing a game of "Stop and Observe" with yourself. When an unusual physical sensation takes place, immediately stop what you're doing and pay close attention. At the moment the sensation or movement occurred, what were you thinking about? What were you doing? How did you feel before? How do you feel now? Does the sensation or movement suggest any particular direction or course of action to you? Did you stumble when entering a room? Maybe your Fetch is telling you to leave! If you undertake this practice for a while, you may notice a repetition of different movements and sensations... some of these you may begin to recognize without motion in question as communications from the Fetch. Learn to observe the most infinitesimal of movements in yourself and others: blinks, eye movements, flaring of nostrils. If you practice this assiduously, you may find yourself establishing a personal "alphabet of the body," where a twitch of the hand may signify danger, a feeling of warmth on the neck indicates the presence of invisible forces, and a tremor in the back means "someone you know is going to telephone." That our magical forebears knew such practices is evident in the Norwegian belief that: "A throbbing sensation in your big toe means that someone is thinking about you. If it is the big toe of your right foot, it is a man; if it is the big toe of your left foot, it is a woman." (Kviedeland & Sehmsdorf 1998, 43). Any number of modern magicians from Franz Bardon to Jan Fries write of comparable experiences, and suggest similar exercises for making them a part of one's conscious magical work. Contemporary practitioners of NLP can

likewise testify to the importance of observing, cataloging, and analyzing the variety of non-conscious physical movements. Set a time period for yourself (nice and long, since ours is largely a body-hating and body-ignoring modern culture!) during which you vow to pay strict attention to all involuntary physical sensations and motions as communications from the Fetch, and interpret them accordingly. (Initially, try this for one full moon at least). Pay *particular* attention to sensations of *pressure* or *immobility* (complete or partial), since Hufford's research suggests that these sensations are intimately related to the presence of the Fetch. Record your thoughts and impressions in your Galdrabok. Devise tests for yourself so that you can gage the accuracy of this mode of communication. As you proceed, you may ask the Fetch to respond with particular sensations, or modify the degree of its communication (if you find that your Fetch likes to give you sneezing fits to get your attention, you may suggest that it "tone down" a bit and speak to you with milder sensations). If you persevere you will be rewarded. But be prepared for unsettling and pleasant results!<sup>8</sup>

You can also take a more active role, and use the traditional form of blade divination to interrogate your Fetch and allow it to respond through involuntary movement. First go to your Ve, (later, try this outside in some lonely wilderness spot... or better yet, at a crossroads!) light some candles, hallow your space with the Hagalaz-signing if you wish, and then relax as much as possible... cultivate an air of expectancy... believe that your Fetch wants to communicate with you as much as you want to communicate with it.

Now take your sax and a good-sized square of white cloth (large enough to wrap loosely

around your knife a few times). Wrap the blade in the cloth, tight enough that you can grip the cloth without squeezing the blade, but not so tight that the knife can't ever move or fall. When you feel relaxed and calm, tilt your head back and look skyward and northward (focus on the Pole Star if you wish). With your head still tilted back, begin passing the blade from hand to hand to warm up... Don't grip too tightly, don't grip too loosely. Relax and begin by asking your Fylgia to reveal its animal form to you. Pass the blade thrice in front of you (changing hands at the solar plexus), then thrice behind you (changing hands at the small of your back). Begin naming animals that you know and that you feel might be the form your Fylgia chooses to take. Allow yourself to pass the knife at least six times – three before, three behind – before you move on to the next animal. Hint: don't immediately name your "favorite" animal, and don't jump straight for the most noble or powerful of animals. *The less you care about the specifics of the result, the more likely you are to get a valid and meaningful answer.* If the knife drops from the cloth, or if it should work its way through the folds in the cloth, that's when you stop and record your answer. Again, don't judge the result at this point... just record the information and keep experimenting. You might also try just passing the blade circularly around your body, naming an animal every 6 passes or so. Either technique requires some getting used to... it's somewhat like dowsing or pendulum work. You'll spend quite a bit of time at the outset wondering: "Am I doing that? Did I just consciously let the knife slip?" Try to ignore these intrusions of an over-active conscious mind. Ask the question, and open up... let your Fetch speak through the Lich. Practice this technique daily if you can... think of other interesting questions to ask. As you pay

attention to these things, you'll start to understand them, and the Fylgia will respond by communicating more actively and specifically.

By exploring these intimate and secret connections between the Lich and the Fetch, we open ourselves up to deep understanding of the Rune of our own incarnation. Moreover, we help to reaffirm and re-awaken the powerful body-knowledge of our magical and spiritual ancestors. As Midgard is the crossroads of the eight other Worlds, so the body is the meeting place for the more mysterious parts of the Self. To know it as such is to know the mightiest of magical allies.

## NOTES

1. This essay is dedicated to the priestess Cerridwen, my Scarlet Woman, *Trollkona*, and Soror Mystica, without whose help in plundering a distant word-ward this work could not have been completed.

2. The *mara* may also be a negative experience of *one's own Fetch*. If the magician is not adequately prepared, or if he or she is unwilling to accept the transpersonal power and information that the Fetch brings, then the experience of the Fetch can be devastating.

3. Hilda Ellis (later Davison), addresses the fact that in the literary record of the Sagas there seems no good reason to conflate the animal form of the *fylgia* with the animal shape used by sorcerers in “shape faring,” or magical combat. She also asserts that “The idea of a double in human form is not found in Norse literature” (Ellis 1943, 130). While this may be true of the Saga material, it is not the case with the folkloric material or latter day beliefs (as we have seen). As I state above, I think this is largely due to the fact that the Saga writers (unlike the tellers of supernatural memorates) were not primarily concerned with recording and analyzing supernatural experience (although these experiences clearly figure largely into the Sagas themselves). The experience of the Fetch, while it displays consistently repetitive elements, is also highly individuated, and “slippery,” as numinous encounters are likely to be. Norse literature can provide an excellent window on archaic belief and practice... it does not show, however, the totality of belief, and its murky spots should be illuminated by a careful appeal to oral tradition or other facets of culture.

4. It is in part for this reason that an encounter with the Fetch, the *utisetar* is an integral part of the Gild's self-initiatory process. There are many deaths which the magician can taste before the death of the physical body, and all of these help to awaken him or her to the true state of his or her being.

5. Ellis' citation: *Flateyjarbok: Olafs Saga Tryggvasonar*, 1, 205, p. 252.

6. Interestingly enough, at the time of this writing, two of my regular traveling companions have experienced harrowing Hag experiences... both in hotel rooms and while sleeping in our van. To date, I have yet to be hagged myself... but those Gilders who know me personally likewise know that I am seldom without a bottle (or several!) beside my bed.

7. The chant actually continues, invoking the name of Sigurd for protection. Considering the link forged in the Sigurd legend between Fetch and Blade, this is worth considerable contemplation.

8. I should probably point out that for Runers at a certain advanced stage of the Gild curriculum, these phenomena are likely *already taking place*. It is your job to cultivate them consciously.





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