Annually on the evening of the 6 January (Twelfth Night), the main streets of certain towns around Iceland (especially in Vestmannaeyjar, and in the north and east of the country) find themselves inundated by processions of torch-bearing ‘álfar’ (elves), all of them clad in versions of Icelandic national costume past and present. These odd figures proceed to head for a large bonfire about which they dance before firing a seemingly endless fusillade of fireworks (costing thirty to forty pounds a piece) up into the night sky. The álfar are commonly led by figures representing a king and queen, and are often divided into groups of so-called “dókk” (dark) and “ljós” (light) álfar (comparable to demons and angels).

Over and above the dramatic qualities of this Icelandic phenomenon, the tradition is of particular interest because the costumed processions it centres around actually have little or nothing to do with the Icelandic folk belief that is supposed to fuel them. First of all, according to Icelandic folk belief of the past, the álfar are supposed to be on the prowl at Christmas or New Year, rather than on Twelfth Night (often called þrettandinn [the thirteenth]), which in Iceland is more directly related to the final departure of another set of Christmas beings, the so-called jólasveinarnar (Christmas lads) who have earlier left out presents for the children of Iceland.

1 Sing. Álfur: On the meaning of this word in Iceland, past and present, see further Terry Gunnell, “How Elvish were the Álfar?”, in Andrew Wawn et al., ed. Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 111–130.


3 On other Nordic customs of this kind, see, for example, Terry Gunnell, ed. Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area (Uppsala: Kungl, Gustav Adolfs Akademien, 2007); and The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

earlier accounts of Icelandic folk belief say little about the Icelandic álfar or huldufólk (hidden ones) ever being ruled by kings and queens. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Icelandic folk belief has never tended to divide its álfar into dark and light groups. The concept of demonised álfar is essentially a literary, academic idea inherited from the Middle Ages, which was itself apparently based on medieval concepts about different angelic worlds. The idea never caught on in popular Icelandic belief where (according to later folktales) most álfar appear to have become Christian (at least in some form).

What, then, is the background of these costumed traditions? They are a text-book example of the transformation of folk culture into national culture in the form of national heritage, and simultaneously a direct result of the intimate interface between the collection of folk culture and the creation of ‘national’ drama and ‘national’ theatre forms which occurred in many northern European countries in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. They also underline the long term effects of material being transferred between genres, moving from the field of the intimate oral narration, which works on the imagination and changing cultural memory of the rural community, into the shape of the multi-dimensional but essentially visual stage performance which is presented before a well-dressed urban theatre audience in a ‘national’ theatre. Almost immediately, changes take place. The ‘hidden’ female álfrur has become a national Icelandic symbol (see below) and the ‘troll’ has turned into an apparently diminutive Johnny Rotten figure decorating the windows of countless Norwegian souvenir shops.

The National Romantic movement of the nineteenth century manifested itself in a variety of ways, centring first of all on the identification and then collection of material that apparently reflected the ‘national

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