



## The Fantastic and the Supernatural in the Medieval Germanic Traditions

II AIFG PhD Conference  
Padua, 11-12 December 2024

Ther saugh I pley jugelours,  
Magiciens and tregetours,  
And Phitonesses, charmeresses,  
Olde wyches and sorceresses  
That use exorsicacions  
And eke thes fumygacions -  
And clerkes eke, which konne wel  
Alle this magikes naturel

Geoffrey Chaucer - *The House of Fame*, vv. 1259-1266<sup>1</sup>

The Middle Ages were steeped in mythological and cultural traditions that profoundly shaped the thinking and imagery of Germanic societies of that time. In particular, the Fantastic ("a marvellous universe that complements the real world without subverting it or destroying its coherence"<sup>2</sup>) and the Supernatural ("a scandal, a laceration, an unusual, almost unbearable irruption into the real world"<sup>3</sup>) emerge as dominant components of those traditions. Superhuman and mythological elements, metaphysical experiences, and paranormal events played a significant role in shaping the worldview and beliefs of medieval Germanic communities, both diachronically and synchronically. Their literary representations are fertile ground for philological and linguistic analysis and enrich our understanding of the past by stimulating reflections on the sociocultural influences that permeated the life of the time, suggesting new research perspectives<sup>4</sup>. Medieval Germanic authors drew on elements from the Latin and vernacular traditions, as well as from the historical memory of each community, for their representation of the world and the Otherworld. These characteristics substantially contribute to diversifying the literary narrative domains of the many Germanic traditions.

Religious literature, for example, is rich in portents and *mirabilia* that transcend reality<sup>5</sup>; this is particularly evident in rewritings of sacred history, translations of saints' lives, religious poetry or *gesta episcoporum*. Visions and apparitions of saints and demons (e.g. the tempting demon in Cynewulf's *Juliana*<sup>6</sup>), miracles and divine punishments characterise and enliven the hagiographic

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<sup>1</sup> Havelly, Nick (ed. by). 2013. *The House of Fame*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Caillois, Roger. 1991. *Dalla fiaba alla fantascienza*. Roma-Napoli: Theoria, 19. (Our translation).

<sup>3</sup> *ibidem*. (Our translation).

<sup>4</sup> See Sinisi, Lucia, Nichilo, Angelo (ed. by). 2015. *Il fantastico nel Medioevo di area germanica. Atti del XXXI Convegno dell'Associazione Italiana di Filologia Germanica (Bari, 25-27 maggio 2011)*. Bari: Edipuglia.

<sup>5</sup> See Golinelli, Paolo. 2018. *Il Medioevo degli increduli: miscredenti, benefattori, anticlericali*. Milano: Mursia; Gurevič, A. J. 1986. *Contadini e santi: problemi della cultura popolare nel Medioevo*. Torino: Einaudi.

<sup>6</sup> Damon, John Edward. 2003. *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 96-99.

corpus (*The Life of Saint Christopher*, *Heilagra manna sögur*) as well as the lives of both canonised and uncanonised bishops (*Biskupa sögur*, *St. Erkenwald*). The fascination with the supernatural, especially when linked to the pre-Christian past, influenced catechetical teaching, where Germanic languages implement translations and adaptations from Latin texts<sup>7</sup>, provided this does not discredit the tenets of the Christian faith<sup>8</sup>.

In the secular tradition too, the Fantastic and the Supernatural are prominent in narratives about monsters, bizarre and unnatural creatures, and magic. The Nowell Codex, a significant manuscript of Early English literature, includes a variety of tales in both verse and prose, such as *Beowulf* and *The Wonders of the East*. Following Kenneth Sisam, scholars have long considered it as a collection of fantastic narratives<sup>9</sup>. As for the magical domain, there are many examples of spells and formulas that have their roots in the ancient oral tradition, as exemplified by the *Merseburger Zaubersprüche*, in which deities from the Germanic pantheon are explicitly mentioned<sup>10</sup>. Overall, the process of Christianisation mitigates but never erases the literary connotations related to myths and magic. The Nibelung-Volsungic legend is a significant example, where Christian and courtly values greatly influence elements of the legendary, folkloric, and mythological tradition.

Elements that are often labelled as 'folklore' or 'superstition' (magical practices, rituals, representations of alternative worlds and belief in superhuman entities foreign to Christian doctrine) are long-lasting, especially in the Nordic context, where they originate a grey area of narrative representations that oscillate between reality and fantasy and in which the author's creativity often prevails over historicity or plausibility<sup>11</sup>. In post-classical *Íslendingasögur*, for example, precision in chronological, historical-geographical and genealogical details helps to make the narrative more realistic and authentic. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the significant presence of supernatural elements, therefore extraneous to natural laws, is considered an integral part of the narrative reality. On the other hand, authors of *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* show a particular partiality towards the fantastic and the exotic, creating narrative worlds built on the imaginary rather than the domain of experience<sup>12</sup>.

Inspired by the numerous studies on the subjects<sup>13</sup>, the II AIFG PhD Conference is intended as a space for further investigation and new evaluations of the Fantastic and the Supernatural in the field of Germanic Philology and Linguistics. The Graduate Conference aims to promote interdisciplinary dialogue between the Germanic traditions and bring together early-career researchers and established scholars in the field.

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<sup>7</sup> Battista, Simonetta. 2003. "Interpretations of the Roman Pantheon in the Old Norse Hagiographical Sagas". In *Old Norse myths, literature and society*, Clunies Ross, Margaret (ed. by). Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 175-197.

<sup>8</sup> Ferrari, Fulvio. 2022. *Le saghe nordiche. Eroi, vichinghi e poeti nella Scandinavia medievale*. Milano: Meltemi, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Sisam, Kenneth 1953. *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Leonardi, Simona 2022. "La letteratura in antico altotedesco". In *Le civiltà nel Medioevo Germanico*, Battaglia, Marco (ed. by). Roma: Carocci, 117; see also Cianci, Eleonora. 2004. *Incantesimi e benedizioni nella letteratura tedesca medievale (IX – XIII sec.)*. Göttingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 77-83.

<sup>11</sup> Ferrari 2022, 93.

<sup>12</sup> See McKinnell, John, Ashurst, David and Kick, Donata (ed. by). 2006. *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature. Sagas and the British Isles: Preprint Papers of the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th-12th August, 2006*. Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

<sup>13</sup> Among the many contributions on the topic, see: "Magia e testi nelle tradizioni germaniche medievali" *Filologia Germanica-Germanic Philology*, 13. 2021; "North and Magic" *AION Sezione Germanica*, 26/1-2. 2016; Rosselli Del Turco, Roberto (ed. by). 2021. *Sogni, visioni e profezie nella letteratura germanica medievale*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

We encourage prospective participants to submit proposals related, but not limited to, the following themes:

- Magic (spells, exorcisms, curses, blessings, etc.)
- Visions, apparitions, dreams
- Oracles and prophecies
- Representations of supernatural and fantastic beings (ghosts, mythological creatures, etc.)
- Miracles and prodigies
- Connections with the Otherworld and extracorporeal experiences

#### **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

To apply, please send an abstract of a maximum of 1000 characters (including spaces), together with a short bibliography and a bio, to Martina Giarda at [martina.giarda@unibg.it](mailto:martina.giarda@unibg.it) no later than June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (23:59 CET). The call is open to PhD students and PhDs (who obtained the title from March 2023 onwards) in the research fields of Germanic Philology. Papers should be 20 minutes in length, followed by 10 minutes of discussion.

The acceptance of proposals will be notified via the official email address, [dottorandiaifg@gmail.com](mailto:dottorandiaifg@gmail.com), by July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024 (23:59 CET). Following the conference, the papers accepted by the scientific committee and subjected to a process of double-blind peer review will be published in a thematic volume.

**Working languages:** Italian, English, German.

**Head of the scientific committee:** Professor Alessandro Zironi.

**Scientific committee:** Professor Alessandro Zironi, Professor Omar Khalaf, Fiorella Di Fonte, Giulia Fabbris, Giovanni Nichetti, Davide Salmoiraghi.

**Organising committee:** Salvatore Caccamo, Martina Giarda, Nicola Pennella.