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# The Bottle Imp

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**Selkies, Sex, and the Supernatural**  
**Donna Heddle**

**W**hy do Scots seem to have such an affinity with the supernatural? Scots literature and society in general is characterised by an awareness of the other in our environment, our history, and ourselves (no accident that it was a Scot who wrote *Jekyll and Hyde*). We should not then be surprised Scottish folklore in particular features shapeshifters and their articulation with the human world and that this theme of transformation is so prominent in stories of the Celtic Otherworld from earliest times to the modern day. Let us look at one very specific example.

## **A splash, a sinuous ripple ... Eyes looking at us from the sea ... a selkie.**

Shapeshifters such as selkies not only transcend the limits of the body, they also transcend liminalities by functioning on both land and sea. Very early folklore suggests that they were not always the gentle spirits of the sea they now appear to be and were closer to darker entities like the Finfolk and the merpeople. However, seals are visible sea creatures. They are closely affiliated with seafaring communities, where many people see and interact with seals on a regular basis. They therefore have come to combine otherness with a nonthreatening familiarity.

This is reinforced by the nomenclature used to describe them. 'Selkie' or 'selchie' is a diminutive form of the Scots word for seal, *selk* or *selch*, which is derived from *seolh*, the Old English term for a seal. The form 'silkie' may derive from the perceived softness of their pelt.

There are many theories regarding the origins of the seal folk. It has been suggested that the selkies may have been inspired by

real people such as explorers who wore heavy furs and visited Orkney (this might explain why the selkie tales are so prevalent here). A more supernatural theory is that they are the reincarnations of people lost at sea, or that they are humans trapped in the form of seals. There is also the Biblically inspired view that seals are fallen angels who landed in the sea – angels that fell on the land became fairies. Icelandic and Swedish folklore links the selkies to the story of the pursuit of Moses and the Jews by the Pharaoh across the Red Sea. The Pharaoh and his men were drowned by a huge wave and they then became seals. The seal bark is said to echo the soldiers calling 'Pharaoh'.

It is not hard to see how the legends surrounding the seal people came to be so prevalent in coastal communities. Duncan Williamson eloquently explained it:

[T]he importance of the selkie is its part in the Other World or after-life. For instance, if you were a fisherman and you lived with your daddy in a little croft by the seaside, and you had your brother, your grandfather or your uncle lost at sea; what would you do if their body was not found? [...] But if you thought for one instant that [he] never returned because he had joined the seal people, he'd become one of them; then how would you feel? [...] Now this is the legend. That's why it was told. To make people feel comforted if their loved ones were never found. They probably joined the seal people, became seal folk. And you'll see them again.<sup>1</sup>

What kind of a shape-shifter is a selkie? An important aspect of shape-shifting is whether the transformation is self-controlled, uncontrollable due to genetics, or imposed as a punishment or form of domination. Some shape-shifters are able to change form only if they have some totemic item, usually an article of clothing. Such shape-shifters are much more benign than shapeshifters such as vampires and werewolves who do not require this enablement.

This is the case with the selkie, which requires its seal skin to effect its magical metamorphosis. There is a difference in the treatment of male and female selkies in the canon. The most common use of this motif is in tales where a man steals the skin and forces the shape-shifter, trapped in human form, to become his bride. She must remain with him, usually most sorrowfully, until she discovers where he has hidden the article, and she can flee.

The fate of the female selkies mirrors that of the women of the culture which has created them. They leave their own environment of the sea to live in an alien setting under the control and sexual domination of a husband. Only when she finds her own form again can the female selkie be free. In this they are unusual as otherworld females tend to be more of the deceptive and sexually predatory kind rather than the gentle victims the selkie women would appear to be.

The males are much freer and can roam at will on both land and sea. They seem to be fairly well-meaning creatures who have a sense of family responsibility and an affection for their human wives and their offspring. Again, this is very unusual for the supernatural male.

Neither the males nor the females form lasting relationships, even with their offspring, always returning to the sea after a brief period on land. Popular belief states that, once a selkie has returned to the sea, it will be seven years before he or she is seen again.

Like other half-human, half-animal supernatural creatures, selkies seem to struggle with their dual identities. The sea identity always predominates and, given the opportunity, they will always return to their animal forms. The only negative trope about selkies in their animal forms is that they are dangerous to pregnant women and an encounter with them may lead to the child having scaly skin, webbed hands and feet, or seal like flippers for limbs. This fits in with the well-recognised tradition of using supernatural creatures to explain birth defects that can now be rationalised through medical knowledge.

What kind of stories feature selkies? Stories involving these creatures are usually origin myths or romantic tragedies.

A good example of the former is that of Clan MacColdrum of Uist, which tells of a union between the founder of the clan and a shapeshifting seal woman. The MacRoons (sons of the seal) too are very proud of their phocine origins! There is no shame in a selkie ancestor.

An example of the latter would be the very popular Orcadian ballad 'The Great Selkie o' Suleskerry' which combines the precognitive abilities of the selkie with a format making use of the prevalent trope of the selkies' affinity for song and music. In accordance with

their generally benevolent nature, selkies have the gift of foresight but do not practice magic or sorcery of any kind so they can see the future but cannot change it. This motif is explored in the ballad which tells the tale of a young maiden who loves a selkie man. He leaves her shortly after she has a son by him. He later appears to her as a grey seal one night as she rocks her child and asks her to tend the child for a traditional further twelve-month and a day (in some versions, this is the equally formulaic seven years). After the year is up, he returns with gold and silver for her and takes the boy away. He is compassionate towards the mother, pointing out a skerry where she can visit her son and, in answer to the question of how she will recognise him, says that:

The one who wears the chain o' gowd,  
'mang a' the selchies shall be he.

He then prophesies that she will marry a hunter whose first shots will kill both himself and his son. In some versions this actually comes to pass and the heartbroken mother knows what has happened to her child when her new husband gives her a gift of the gold chain from his neck. The intrinsic duality of the selkie is encapsulated in the balladic refrain:

I am a man upon the land;  
I am a selchie on the sea,  
and when I'm far frae ev'ry strand,  
my dwelling is in Sule Skerry.<sup>2</sup>

Suleskerry is itself of course a fundamentally liminal space – a rock far from land regularly washed by the sea.

Selkies are a continuous presence in our lives, popping their heads up in song, art, oral narrative, and fiction old and new. In the case of Eric Linklater's short story 'Sealskin Trousers', the whole selkie narrative as explored in the Suleskerry ballad is turned on its head and updated for the modern era. The story, told from the perspective of the abandoned fiancé who rehearses the events which have caused him to lose his bride, features a sexually charged encounter on a cliff top in what is clearly Orkney between a young female biology student from the University of Edinburgh and a fellow student she recognises as 'Roger Fairfield', who has a notable reputation for being an excellent swimmer

and is currently wearing interesting trousers. They are sealskin, of course, and in an unexpected twist are left behind when he returns to the sea, in direct opposition to selkie tradition.

In the course of the story, he helps her evolve into a selkie by explaining the process in a scientific fashion, for example discussing the activity of the pituitary gland, which has the effect of placing this supernatural evolutionary process into a scientific framework which is both comprehensible and familiar to her. Unusually, his intention is to take her away with him, rather than abandon her on his return to the sea as would be traditional. Having said that, the traditional lure of human women would appear to be missing here as he says "But I find it difficult to recognize people. Human beings are so much alike."<sup>3</sup> Her love of the sea clinches the deal, however. Her readiness to embrace his environment is the key. In true selkie style, he sings to her as she transforms:

After the first verse or two she freed herself from his embrace, and sitting up listened gravely to the song. Then she asked him, 'Shall I ever understand?' 'It's not a unique occurrence,' he told her. 'It has happened quite often before, as I suppose you know. (...) The one thing that's unique in our case, in my metamorphosis, is that I am the only seal-man who has ever become a Master of Arts of Edinburgh University. Or, I believe, of any other university. I am the unique and solitary example of a sophisticated seal-man.'<sup>4</sup>

The connection with traditional selkie lore is made when he sings the Suleskerry ballad, and the modern era is acknowledged when he notes his uniqueness among selkies in moving into a new environment to investigate humans on behalf of the selkie nation and to update their human folklore. The selkie story is well and truly updated.

### **A ripple in the water ... a swish of a tail ... and the selkie is gone.**

Why do such ballads and stories continue to fascinate us? Because it is an escape into a less ordered universe where neither the laws of time and space nor the ordinary societal roles and mores apply; a universe where you can be who you want to be when you want to be it – where your desires can figuratively run away with you – where you can quite literally be something else.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Duncan Williamson, *Tales of the Seal People: Scottish Folk Tales* (New York: Interlink Books, 1992), p. 1
- 2 Both quotes are taken from the version of the 'Great Selkie o' Suleskerry' ballad on *Orkneyjar: The Heritage of the Orkney Islands* [www.orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk/sulesk1.htm](http://www.orkneyjar.com/folklore/selkiefolk/sulesk1.htm)
- 3 Linklater, Eric, *The Goose Girl and Other Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991), p. 45
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 51



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