

# DISSERTATION

ON THE

CRY OF THE MASKERS AT CHRISTMAS, OR YULE.

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## SECTION I.

I PROPOSE, in the following pages, to offer some illustrations of the verses we hear, every returning Christmas, recited by our young people, who, about that time, run about the streets in antic dresses, with vizards on their faces, and cudgels in their hands, repeating the following uncouth lines:—

Hogmanay,  
Trollolay;  
Gie me o' your white bread,  
I'll hae nane o' your grey.

The two first words have given rise to innumerable conjectures, more ingenious than true. By some, *hogmanay* has been derived

from “*Αγία Μηνη*, *Sancta Luna*, or the Holy Month,”—as it was generally thought that our blessed Saviour was born at that season of the year. We shall not spend time in shewing the utter improbability that this word should be derived, to our remote ancestors, from the Greek,—a language they were unacquainted with at the period when this custom first began. Had this phrase been deduced from any term of the Roman Liturgy, something might have been allowed to its credibility. But no term is found in the rubrics of the Roman Church, that has the most distant affinity with the word we are now examining. A conviction of this has put others upon seeking the origin of the term in the French language; and, with much critical acumen, they conjecture the two words to be a corruption of the French,—

L'Homme est nè,  
Trois rois là:

alluding to the birth of our Lord, and the subsequent adoration paid to him by the three wise men of the East, whom the Church of Rome has thought proper to make kings, without any warrant from scripture. But, to add weight to this curious interpretation, it would have been proper to have ascertained, by sufficient evidence, that such a song was used by the French themselves, at any period during the festival of Christmas. Had it been in such general use as has been pretended, some vestige of it would have been preserved to the present age; or, at least, it would have been mentioned by some of the French historians or antiquaries, as Mezerai, Menage, or Pasquier. But these writers, as well as every other whom I have had occasion to consult, are totally silent as to this usage. We must, therefore, look for their origin somewhere else. I flatter myself that I have discovered it in the language and manners of our Scandinavian ancestors.

Let us observe, then, in the *first* place, that all the northern tribes paid a sort of religious veneration to the *night* rather than the day. This custom has not escaped the observation of Cæsar and Tacitus. The first of these authors has the following words:—“*Galli se omnes ab Dite patre prognatos prædicant; idque ab Druidibus proditum dicunt. Ob eam causam spatia omnis temporis, non numero dierum, sed noctium, finiunt; dies natales, et mensium et annorum initia sic observant, ut noctem dies subsequatur.*”—*Lib. vi. cap. 18.* And Tacitus, speaking of the Germans,—“*Coeunt—certis diebus, cum aut inchoatur luna, aut impletur: nam agendis rebus hoc auspiciatissimum initium credunt. Nec Dierum numerum, ut nos, sed Noctium computant. Sic constituunt, sic condicunt; nox ducere diem videtur.*” Hence the reason of the Germans enouncing the moon in the masculine gender, and not in the feminine,—saying *Der Mon*; while, of the sun, they say *Die Son*, in the feminine. They also figure the moon in the habit of a man. (*Spelman. Gloss. in Monath.*)

This predilection for the night induced our ancestors, the Saxons, to begin all their computations of time from the night rather than the day; and the beginning of their year from winter rather than summer. They brought this custom with them, when they established themselves in Britain; and the vestiges of it are yet to be found in the ancient Saxon laws, and in our common form of speaking. Thus, in the laws of King Ina, we read, “*Cild binnan thrittigum nihta,*”—“Let a child be baptised within thirty nights.”—*Cap. 2. Ed. Lambard.* And in those of Alured against perjury, “*Beo feowertig nihta on carcerne,*”—“Let him be confined forty nights in prison.”—*Cap. 1.* We observe, by the way, that the learned editor has not been sufficiently correct in his version

of these passages, putting days for nights in his translation. For the same reason, they used the term *winters* for *years*; saying, "*Wintra dæl hæfeth*,"—"He is of sufficient age;" and "*Thurh alle wintra*,"—"Through every year;" and the like. In the same manner, we compute time when we say, fortnight, se'ennight, &c. Chaucer has,—

Of twenty winters old he seemed to be.

WIFE OF BATH.

The Saxons divided their year simply into winter and summer, as Bede informs us (*De Rat. Temp.* cap. 13), beginning always with winter; the first month of which (answering to our October) they called *Winterfylleth*, a compound word, denoting the season of the year and the first full-moon of that period. (*Spelm. Gloss.* p. 417, col. 1.) The same historian says, that they began their civic or artificial year, "ab octavo calendarum Januariarum die, ubi nunc Natale Domini celebramus (*viz.* Christmas, or the 25th December), "et ipsam noctem nunc nobis sacrosanctam, tunc gentili vocabulo, "*Modranecht*, id est, *matrem* appellabant *noctem*, ob causam, ut "suspiciamur, ceremoniarum quas in ea pervigiles agebant."—*Beda, Cap. 15.* Thus, the priority given by our Saxon ancestors to the night is clearly ascertained. But, after their conversion to Christianity, they substituted the religious festival of Christmas for the rites of Paganism used in this *Mother Night*, from which they commenced their computations; and in this they have been followed by our oldest English historians, Florence of Wigorn, William of Malmesbury, Matthew Paris, and many others. This alteration, however, of the religious ceremonies in the month of December, made no change in the name. It continued to be called *Helig Monath*, or the Sacred Month. (*Spelm.* p. 419.) We find also

September called by the Saxons *Halig Monath*, because in it they set apart the victims they meant to sacrifice in December following, which also went by the name of *Winter Monath*.

But let us not suppose that the Saxons first invented these names, or first celebrated this festival. They had both the one and the other from their Scandinavian ancestors. By the Scandinavians, I understand those northern tribes who first peopled Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and, in process of time, the island of Iceland. The festival we speak of was celebrated, from time immemorial, by these people with sacrifices, and other religious rites, in the month of December, hence called *Hogmonat* and *Blotmonat*, signifying the month of immolation or sacrifices; *blod*, in the ancient Icelandic, signifying blood, and *blot* a sacrifice. (*Worm. Fast. Dan.* p. 42, 43.) This winter feast was also called *Haukunnott* or *Hokanot*, the etymon of which I shall not attempt to assign, after Torfæus, the most learned of the Danish historians, has declared his ignorance of it.—(*Hist. Norweg.* vol. ii. L. 5. c. 7. p. 215.) We find this winter festival called also *Thorabloth*, *i. e.* Sacrificium in media hyeme peractum, as Gam explains it. (*Not. ad Ara Frode*, p. 112.) But this name is foreign to our present purpose.

As this festival was always celebrated at the winter solstice, when the sun returns upon the zodiac, it was called *Iol*\* (*Yol*), whence we formed the word *Youl* or *Yule*, the common name still used by our peasants for Christmas. Hence December was called by the Saxons *Giuli*, (*Spelm.* p. 419); *Geol* and *Geolden* signifying to return; so that Bede was right when he explained it *Giuli*, a conversione solis in auctum diei. From *Geol*, to turn,

\* Torfæus, as above quoted, vol. ii. &c. says,—“Quò vero facilius festum ethnicorum, *Iol* dictum, in id, quod natalitiis Servatori sacrum est,” &c. EDIT.

comes our word *goal*, the boundary whence the racer measures back the ground he had gone over; and *wheel*, as the learned Stiernhielm observes, in his *Anti-Cluverius* (*Acta Lipsiæ*, vol. v. p. 33.)

It was a curious fancy of Buchanan to derive, from the affinity of sound, this word *Yule* from Julius Cæsar (*Hist. lib. 5.*). But this is not the only blunder he has fallen into, from his total ignorance of the ancient language of his native country, as Loccenius has observed. (*Ant. Goth. l. 1. cap. 5.*) From this word *Iol*, comes *Iolbock*, *Iulbrod*, *Iulhalm*, which are all Scandinavian terms, and are explained by the learned antiquary *Ihre*, as well as the original *Jul*. (*Gloss. Suiog. in. Jul. Keysler, Ant. Sept. p. 159.*)

From the foregoing observations, it is easy to see that *Hogmanay* is only a corruption of the Icelandic *Hogmanat* and *Hokanot*, the original names of this festival; and that the present term only serves to announce that the sacred festival was begun.

It is no indistinct elucidation of the truth of the interpretation I have given of this word, that it is yet to be found in Normandy, whither it was carried by the Scandinavians, who, under their leader Rolf, or Rollo, conquered that province during the reign of Charles the Simple. The ingenious Gebelin, in his *Monde Primitife*, tom. v. p. 554, says, that *Haguinetes*, or *Hoguinetes*, is the name of those gifts which are offered by friends to each other on the last day of the year; and he adds, they were always demanded in song. He cites the following couplet:—

Si vous veniez à là dépense,  
A la dépense de chez nous,  
Vous mangeriez de bons choux,  
Ou vous serviroit du rost,

*Hoguino.*\*

\* In Gebelin, the word is *Hoguino*. EDIT.

Menage has preserved another of them, which was sung in his time, in the city of Rouen.

Donnez mois mes *Haguinetes*  
Dans un panier que voici,  
J'ai l'acheta i Samedi,  
D'un bon homme de dehors,  
Mais il est encore a payer,  
*Haguino.*

The learned Gebelin has observed that this word was derived from the ancient cry of the Druids, *a gui*, the new year; but if he had remembered the Scandinavian term *Hogmonat*, he would have found the etymon nearer home, as well as nearer the meaning of the word used in Normandy.

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## SECTION II.

HAVING, in the former section, endeavoured to ascertain the meaning, and unfold the etymology, of the first word of the *chant* used by our maskers at Christmas, I proceed now to explain the next word, *Trollolay*.

In this term we find plain traces of the Icelandic word *Trolldr*, by which the Scandinavians denoted those evil genii who devoured unlucky mortals who went near their haunts. At other times, they appeared to men in hideous forms, and either devoured them immediately, or carried them off. Thus, *Trollolay* will signify,—“Away, ye evil genii,”—be ye far from our solemn meetings.

The ancient historical monuments, and Runic poems, are full of

accounts of the nature of these spectres; whence it would appear that they were of a mixed race,—partly mortal, having wives and children, and subject to death,—and partly spiritual, appearing or concealing themselves as they chose; endued with strength far above that of men; and assuming whatever form suited their purpose best. From the accounts preserved of these *Trolldr* in the Edda (Edda Resenii, Cap. i. ibi not.), and other Runic monuments, the following general idea of them is presented to the reader by the learned antiquary Torfæus, (Hist. Nor. v. i. p. 113).—“ Illud  
 “ enim aut prorsus confictum Malorum Geniorum ludibrium exis-  
 “ timo, specie quidem humana, sed valde monstrosa mole corporis,  
 “ cum tauris sacrificio delectis certans, carbone nigrius, interdum  
 “ calvastre, interdum comâ in speciem densissimæ jubæ equinæ  
 “ explicatâ deforme, quale in vita Ketillis Hængi describitur, ubi  
 “ eorum comitia Rexque memorantur. Extant etiam in Islando-  
 “ rum monumentis quædam istius generis exempla, conflictus,  
 “ cædesque, variæque etiam in hunc diem, et miræ de eo narra-  
 “ tiones,” &c.

The ingenious Mallet, from the same authorities, gives the following account of these beings:—“ This monstrous race is said to  
 “ have subsisted for a long time in the mountains and forests of  
 “ Norway, where they continued down to the ninth century; that  
 “ they fled from the open day, living only with those of their own  
 “ species in solitudes and clefts of the rocks; that they fed on  
 “ human flesh; and were so skilled in magic, as to be able to fascinate  
 “ the eyes of men. In process of time, they mingled with women  
 “ of our species, and produced demi-giants, who, approaching nearer  
 “ to the human race, at length became mere men.”—(North. Ant. v. i. p. 36.)

Their skill in magic was reputed so great, that *Troll*, in general, is used to signify magic, as the learned Ihre informs us. “ Puta-  
 “ bant enim veteres, per illicitas et diabolicas incantatorum artes  
 “ fieri potuisse, ut homines, deposita figura humana, in satyrorum,  
 “ bestiarum aliasque figuras converterentur, quæ adeo *Trolls ham*  
 “ dicebantur: *Trolldom*, veneficium.” In the Icelandic Bible, a witch is called *Trollkona*. But *Troll*, or *Trull*, is commonly used to signify one of those spectres we are now treating of, as in the following verse,—

Ther blefvo ey *Trull*, eller ormar quar  
 There remained neither spectres nor serpents.  
 Ap. Ihre in *Troll*.

It is remarkable that the whole Gothic nations were by their neighbours the Vandals called *Troll*, though from what reason does not clearly appear. But the fact is certain (Vide Junii *Batavia*, cap. 27). To return from this digression, I observe that the name of these Genii was known to foreign nations; for they are mentioned by Cunrad, surnamed the Celt, in his *Hodæporicon*; (Ap. Arn. *Ion. Spec. Island.* p. 118.)

Est locus Arctoo, qua se Germania tractu  
 Claudit, et in rigidis, Thyle ubi surgit, aquis,  
 Quam juxta infames scopuli, et petrosa vorago  
 Asperat undisonis, saxa pudenda, vadis:  
 Orcadas has memorant, factas è nomine Græco,  
 Atque has perjuris, exilium esse, Diis.  
 Accola mutato, quos dicit nomine *Drollos*.

The whole strain of the passage plainly evinces that the last word should be written *Trollos*; as it is well known that the Orkney islands were for many centuries possessed by the Norwegians, to whose language the word belongs. There are many places in Scandinavia still retaining the name of these *Trolldr*. Such is

that great cataract near Gothenburg, in Sweden, called Trollhæta, mentioned by Ihre.\* Numberless are the examples of these *Trolldr* appearing to men, under various shapes, sometimes carrying them off, and often fighting with, and being overcome by, those of our race. Tradition says that one of the noblest and most ancient families of Sweden owes its surname, *Troll*, to its founder having fought with and destroyed one of these monsters.

To confirm my explication of the word *Trollölay*, as referring to the Genii, I would farther observe, that they appeared most commonly at the festival of Iul or Yule, during the long nights of December. Thus, in one of the ancient Runic monuments quoted by Torfæus, “Hedin, Helgii frater, cum, festi Jolensis tempore, solus ex sylva domum iret, obviam habet fœminam Giganteam. Hæc lupo insidebat, et serpentes habenarum loco habuit.” In Grettars Saga, we have the history of one of these monsters, who dwelt in a cave fifty fathoms deep, and had carried off one of the inhabitants, *præcedanea Natalitiorum feria*, upon the preceding festival of Yule; and another the year following. The third year, the hero Grettar attacked this demon; and, after a long combat, cut off one of her arms, and threw her over a rock into the sea. It were easy to adduce many other examples from the Icelandic poets and historians; but these I have quoted are sufficient to prove the great antiquity, and universal belief which prevailed over the north, that such spectres did exist, and often appeared to men, fought with, and were sometimes overcome by them. Hence, the reason of our maskers carrying sticks in their hands, and skirmishing with them, though they are ignorant of the reason for doing so.

\* There is a singular rock projecting from a promontory of Vaagoe, one of the Faroe islands, called *Trollkone fingeren*, the Witch's Finger. May not our word *Droll* be derived from the word *Troll*? and also the French *Drole*?—G. M.

Akin to this, too, is the story of Fingal attacking the Spirit of Loda, as described by Ossian with amazing strength of fancy and glow of expression: “A blast came from the mountain, and bore on its wings the spirit of Loda. He came to his place in his terrors; and he shook his dusky spear. His eyes appear like flames in his dark face; and his voice is like distant thunder. I turn the battle in the field of the valiant. I look on the nations, and they vanish;—my nostrils pour the blast of death.” “The gleaming path of Fingal's steel winds through the gloomy ghost. The spirit of Loda shrieked, as, rolled into himself, he rose on the wind.” It is here to be observed, that Ossian places the scene of this transaction, either on the coast of Norway, or in one of the adjacent islands.

Besides the general name *Trolldr* given to these demons, we find them also called by the Runic poets *Risar*, *Bergrisar*; as inhabiting the mountains, *Bergbuar*, *Jotnar*, and *Thussar*; and their wives *Gygim*, giantesses. Some of these females were of a most extraordinary size. One is mentioned to have been thrown out by the sea, anno 1520, of such prodigious stature, that the tallest man could not reach her knee.

These demons, or spectres, were not always disposed to do mischief. We find them sometimes appearing to men, and reciting poems, some of which are said to be still preserved in the ancient annals of Iceland; at other times reciting stories of ancient transactions. Such was that spectre, or demon, that is said to have appeared to King Olaf Trygwason, mentioned by Torfæus. Perhaps, from the history of these good demons, may be derived the legends of the *Brounies*, formerly so common in Scotland, who are said to have assisted mortals in their household and farming busi-

ness. Of these I have formerly said something in my notes on the *Paradise Lost*, Book I. p. 163.

From the preceding remarks, I trust it will now appear more than probable that the song of our maskers, used at Christmas, derived its origin and language from the ancient Scandinavian festival called *Giul*, or *Iol*, whence comes our term *Yule*. More proofs might have been added; but I have already exceeded the ordinary bounds of a dissertation.

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It is somewhat curious that the following passage in *Torfæus* (*Orcad. lib. i. cap. 38, p. 146. Ed. Havniæ, 1715.*) should have escaped the memory of the ingenious author of the foregoing essay:—

“ Addunt monachi, quos miracula delectant, medio supplicio  
 “ virginem *Divam Trollhænam* (*Scotiæ tutelarium numinum unam*)  
 “ ab Episcopo invocatam, dimissumque in clivum quendam proces-  
 “ sisse, ubi mulierem quandam eamque solam deprehenderit, cujus  
 “ auxilium nuper implorasset. Quæ conspecto sanguine e facie  
 “ ejus manante, imperato silentio, libenter se opem ei laturam re-  
 “ sponderit, delatumque deinde Episcopum ad locum, ubi *Diva*  
 “ *Trollhæna* requiescit, restitutum in integrum, visum fandique  
 “ facultatem recuperasse.

It does not seem less probable that *Trollollay* has been originally an invocation to *Trollhæna*, than that it meant a denunciation of the *Trolldr.* And it would appear, from what may fairly be pre-

sumed to be the etymon of *Trollhæna*, that she was invoked to defend those liable to be attacked by the *Trolldr.* *Hæna* may have been originally *Hægna*, a Scandinavian word, meaning to defend, or inclose. Hence *Trollhæna* may have been, “ The Defender from  
 “ the evil genii.”

The above passage from *Torfæus* occurred to us accidentally while transcribing this essay for the press.—G. M.