

TROLLING FOR MYTHS

April 2012

Can trolls be beautiful? John Bauer (1882-1918), a Swedish illustrator, believed that the “forest constantly feeds the imagination” and his depictions of trolls were no doubt inspired by Scandinavia’s mist-filled forests and landscapes in which figures seem to appear and disappear.



Paul Baxter

Everyone knows that trolls are giant, hideous brutes with long noses and grotesquely long arms. They are also incredibly stupid and easily tricked into giving up the treasures that they guard. But is this really all there is to trolls? The most intriguing troll may, in fact, be one who does not meet this description at all.

The Scandinavian *hulder* (indefinite singular: *ei hulder*; definite singular: *huldra*), who takes the form of a beautiful young milk-maid and lures young men to their doom. Follow her for her beauty and allure, but watch carefully as she turns around. Her

tail may be similar to that of a horse, fox or cow tail. But more disturbing is her back, which may be hollow or even rotten. If you are not careful, the *hulder* will lead you into a swamp. There, she will turn her back and disappear, leaving you alone to die. Sometimes she will allow you to have sex with her, only to kill you once you have satisfied her. The *hulder's* ability to disappear goes back to the *hulder's* very name, which is derived from the Old Norse verb *hylja* (to hide).

Hulders have a long history in Scandinavia. In the nineteenth century, as growing nationalism led

many Europeans to revive their own folk traditions, Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, the Norwegian Brothers Grimm, recorded dozens of stories about the *hulder*.

One of the great masters of nineteenth-century Norwegian literature, Henrik Ibsen, drew on this revived tradition in his epic drama, *Peer Gynt*. After seducing the bride at a wedding, Peer is exiled to the mountains. There, he rides on a giant pig with a young woman, a *hulder*, known only as “*Den grønklede*” (“the woman in green”). However, this *hulder* does not abandon Peer in a



Theodor Kittelsen's watercolor, "Huldra forsvant," depicts the moment when the huldra turns her back on a young man, disappearing and leaving her quarry trapped in a swamp. Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914), Public Domain

swamp. Instead, she takes him inside a mountain to meet her father, *Dovregubben* (the Old Man of the Dovre Mountains). Ibsen knew his folklore. The image of trolls capturing mortals inside their mountain lairs is so common that the Norwegian word for "enchanted," is "*bergtatt*" which literally means, "taken into the mountain."

As Peer's experience suggests, not all *hulders* are so hard-hearted, however. Some actually fall in love with their human prey. If a *hulder* succeeds in having a human man agree to marry her, she can become human by holding her wedding in a Christian church. A *hulder* who marries will even lose her tail ("*Soldaten som blei gift med ei Hulder*")."

Hulders have never lost their appeal among the Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, and they are well-known in Scandinavia today. The Norwegian film industry is betting that the *hulder* will be the next big thing in supernatural sex goddesses. The country

that brought you *The Troll Hunter* in 2011 has now released *Thale*, a tale of a *hulder* in modern Europe. The film opened in the U.S. in March, ensuring that the stories about the *hulder* will now cross the Atlantic.

For Further Reading:

John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*

Paul Baxter earned his PhD in Religion and Philosophy from Boston University, where his dissertation explored the influence of Hegel's Idealism on the drama of Henrik Ibsen. He is now the Associate Director of the City Mission Society of Boston, a faith-based social service organization with quite a bit of historical interest in its own right, having been founded in 1816.