



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Getting rid of the changeling: Disability in Icelandic folklore

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Old folk stories about Changelings

Stories about a child that was replaced by
a old (male)elf

The changeling is different – he is not
human

“Whenever a cretinous or diseased child made its appearance in a family, it was usually regarded as a changeling” (Spence, 1948)

- The role of the changeling was to explain the existence of the disabled child and to free the parents from the responsibility of giving birth to a child like that
- Emphasis is on getting rid of the changeling
 - They were beaten
 - With the help of the Church

These stories are not only about the changelings

They are as much about society and its reactions to
disability



How societies have reacted to disabled children

- Sparta 940 bf C, Athen 640 bf C and Roma 450 bf. C
- New borns were left to die
- Eugenics
- Hidden children
- Isolated institutions
- Selective abortion
- “Wrongful life”

Final words

- The old changeling stories are about who we are, who we welcome in our society and whom we do reject
- The question is:
What has changed?