Empowering Voices: The Influence of Old Norse Mythology on Women's Writing from 1950-2012

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Acknowledgements

During the undertaking of this work, I have been indebted to a great many people; I will do my best to mention most of them here.

Firstly, to my supervisor, Professor Heather O'Donoghue, for all her help, encouragement and good humour throughout the process, and for giving a slightly off-piste subject a chance to flourish at Oxford. It was everything I wanted, and just what I needed at this juncture in my life. Next, to my Oxford colleagues, who became a wonderful friendship and support group on our joint journey; special thanks to Katherine Beard, Olivia Elliott-Smith, Matilda Eriksson, Mary O' Connor and Ashley Castelino. To all the other lovely colleagues and friends whom I have met on my travels around Europe, particularly in Iceland, and my wonderful 'alternative' Oxford crew, with whom I have had so much fun: thank you for all the adventures.

To Professor Terry Gunnell for all our earlier conversations about performance and folklore, and to Professor Mark Williams for lending his teaching wisdom, and (at times) his cloak and staff. I have learned so much from you both during my studies, and could not have asked for kinder, or more thorough examiners. To Professor Diane Purkiss and Dr. Alex Paddock, for your combined enthusiasm, wisdom and care: I have loved teaching with you both, and am immensely grateful to your calming influence and advice before viva. To Professor Gísli Sigurðsson for your interest in my work, and for helping me outline the key points and limits of my thesis argument; that conversation helped a great deal when writing up. To all those who have encouraged and invited me to work with them: to Henning Kure and Professor Simon Nygaard for arranging my performance at Aarhus University; that meant a great deal. To my kind host for the OxBer early career research fellowship at Berlin Humboldt University, Professor Lukas Rösli, who let me in on his classes, and invited me back to give my first lecture and academic workshop - a phenomenal experience. To my ONPIP committee, Richard Munro, Ben Chennells and Inés Garcia. To Vicky Mikkaelsen, for her endless enthusiasm, and for introducing me to the crazy, creative crew at *Midgardsblot.*

Last, and most certainly not least, I want to thank my wonderful family. My Mother, Jo, who first nurtured my reading craze, who was my earliest and longest standing English teacher, and who lent crucial emotional and financial support at difficult times. To my sister Victoria, who never fails to make me laugh, and whose visits I cherish. To my Grandma Norah, and my late, still very much missed Grandad, Joseph Nunn; without their generous gift, I might never have done a Masters, and might not be here now. To my godmother, Moya Whitworth, who was also once my teacher, and who remains a supportive and loving presence. Finally, to my cat Skaði Grimalkin, for lying on my papers, chewing my rucksack and generally reminding me that playtime is also important; I am so glad I invited your chaos in when I did.

Abstract

In the following thesis, I shall address a very particular lacuna in Old Norse reception studies; that of women's voices. In recent years, the main focus has been on Norse symbolism in politics, cinema, comics and gaming, or, in literary reception, how male writers like Tolkien, Lewis and Auden have engaged with Norse mythology. I now wish to explore the use of Old Norse mythology specifically in women's creative, original writing in the UK, and thus demonstrate the true flexibility of the pantheon as a signifier. As a summative study of women in this category would be too large, and would also risk binarization of writers, I shall instead explore how and why certain female writers have engaged with the particular sensations of power associated with Old Norse mythology, and what such engagement communicates about their own contexts.

My chosen period of focus is between 1950 and 2012, between the colonialist viking craze of the early twentieth century, and the neo-medievalist surge of 'viking' pop culture. As well as demonstrating the ongoing (albeit subtler) reliance on powerful Old Norse content in this period, I shall explore the ways in which usage of the mythology by women authors changed with the rapidly changing social climate. Each of my chosen writers - Sylvia Plath, A.S. Byatt and Kathleen Jamie - comes from a very different context within the twentieth century, but all, tellingly, have one thing in common: they have written about Old Norse mythology in a way which makes them feel powerful, whether through expressing intense emotions, breaking the boundaries of established thinking, or using their voice to address wider issues and empower others. While commenting on their writing, I shall also comment on the importance of such individuals to the ongoing arc of reception studies as a whole.

A Note on Referencing and the Use of Names

The discerning reader will realise that Icelandic names present an unusual problem, in that their 'surnames' are patronymics or matronymics, and so the individuals concerned would normally be referenced primarily by their first names in ongoing academic references. Had this been a thesis purely about medieval Icelandic literature, and thus more heavily populated with Icelandic scholars, I would have followed the traditional method. As this is a British reception studies thesis about modern works in English, however, Icelandic names punctuate far less frequently, which presents far greater stylistic irregularities in formatting. I have decided, therefore, to compromise: in first references, I have given the full Christian name and patronymic in the footnote (other authors are mentioned only by their initial in the first instance) and have used the patronymic only in any further references, as with any other surname. Similarly, in the bibliography I have used patronymics as I would regular surnames, for continuity's sake. Within the main body of the text, however, I have taken care to refer to Icelandic authors by their full name at all times, except in cases where the name is repeated very frequently within a short space, in which case the patronymic is used like a surname. The main example of the latter is Hermann Pálsson in Chapter 4, who wrote a crucial source, repetitions of whose name I have shortened to 'Pálsson'. Due to the frequency of its appearance, I have also chosen to anglicize any references to the Old Norse god Oðinn to 'Odin' for continuity's sake, unless it specifically appears as 'Oðinn' in a citation. I trust that I will be forgiven for my choices on this occasion.

Introduction: The Empowering Quality of Old Norse Mythology

This thesis is about Old Norse literary reception (i.e. literary texts which have been inspired, wholly or in part, by Old Norse mythology and literature). More specifically, it is about Old Norse literary reception works written by women living in Britain between the mid-twentieth century up to the first decade of the millenium (a group and time period in reception studies which, as I shall show, have already received insufficient coverage), whose writing in some way harnesses Norse mythological material in order to instil a sense of power. In the following chapters, I will examine select creative poetry and prose works by Sylvia Plath, A.S. Byatt and Kathleen Jamie, all of whom have been inspired by Old Norse literature and mythology in some capacity. These works could be described as works of female empowerment, in that they all to some extent reflect on and address the very particular tensions and pitfalls of life and writing as a woman in the later twentieth century.[1]

As this thesis sits primarily in the field of reception studies, I shall examine, first and foremost, the resuscitation and re-use of Old Norse material in my three authors' works, and the specific choices each has made in their adaptations and responses. It is worth mentioning that the question of how much knowledge these women had about Old Norse history, language or literature will not be of great importance to my study, despite the fact that I shall inevitably examine their use of sources. As it stands, the adaptation of such mythological material is in no way consistent or straightforward to describe, as the nature of the material itself is impossible to distil down to any level of 'purity' in the first place. Old Norse mythology, as it stands, is already a very simplified and weighted term, encompassing a vast range of material; this material has been received, reproduced and adapted multiple times in a variety of ways, and is evidenced by a canon of texts which are, in themselves, receptions of a larger, now defunct body of works that we can never recapture in full.[2] All of the texts analysed in this thesis occur at various degrees of separation from Old Norse source texts: some are influenced directly by Old Norse literature (mostly in translation), some are receptions of older Old Norse receptions texts, and some are a mixture of both. Although knowledge of Old Norse literature is certainly needed to appreciate the specific treatment or development of certain

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[1]During much of the period I am about to discuss, the terms 'woman writer,' and particularly 'woman poet' were still very much in use, almost as though one state of being cancelled out the other. For one of the most eloquent discussions of this issue, see E. Boland, 'The Woman Poet in a National Tradition.' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 76, no. 302 (1987), pp. 148–58, and her poet's biography at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/eavan-boland, both accessed 21 Apr. 2025.

[2]For further discussion of editing, contextualising and interpreting Old Norse texts, see, for instance, M. Clunies Ross, K. E. Gade and T. Wills (eds), *Poetry in Sagas of Icelanders*. (Turnhout, 2022), J. Glauser, P. Hermann, and S. Mitchell (eds), *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies : Interdisciplinary Approaches* (Berlin, 2018), C. Larrington, J. Quinn and B. Schorn (eds), *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry : Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 2018), T. Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge, 1994), and K. J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda : The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto, 2008).

paradigms, figures and symbols - and therefore part of this work will incorporate source analysis where appropriate - it would be impossible to reflect on the exact nature of the Old Norse works that are being responded to, or whether or not the responses deal 'accurately' with the material. This is not, I would argue, the main point of reception studies, nor is it an accurate reflection of the malleability of medieval literature, which itself forms more of a continuum than a series of discrete entities.[3] Instead, my investigation is primarily concerned with the more interesting question of the motivations behind these women' s modern interpretations of Old Norse literature and mythology. I have chosen to focus on Plath, Byatt and Jamie specifically, because - aside from their fitting into the period of focus I have chosen (see below) - each has made what I consider to be extensive, consistent and significant use of Old Norse material in either one work, or across several, demonstrating a deep engagement with the material which goes beyond scattered referencing. I shall examine their emotional responses to Old Norse material, how they adapted that material, where their works fit into the wider general picture of receptions of Old Norse mythology, and what their usage of said material communicates to readers about their own experiences, most notably the experience of being female under certain circumstances. In addressing these questions, I shall also consider the effects of the varying social pressures caused specifically by gender politics upon these three authors' particular interpretations of the pantheon, and finally how their works, in turn, present new ways to reflect retrospectively upon the sources and pantheon themselves.

In order to preface my particular reasons for this study, and for choosing these particular women, some context in Old Norse receptions is necessary. As Carolyne Larrington rightly states, Old Norse mythology is not simply 'having a moment' in pop culture, but has been a constant presence to varying degrees since the medieval period.[4] The particular Western obsession with Old Norse mythology and literature between the Romantic period and the turn of the century was a complex phenomenon with no one starting point, but rather represented a nodular interest comprising several sociocultural, political and emotional elements coming to a head within a certain timeframe. Among these, we may mention the general increase in Old Norse translations in the 17th century (particularly following the works of Paul Henri Mallet), Romantic anti-French and pro-Germanic sentiments, the wider cultural association of Old Norse literature with popular Ossianic poetry and Gothic fiction, and a drive to cement national identities based on heritage.[5] Between the Victorian

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[3]See, for instance, Paul Zumthor's theory of *mouvance* in P. Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, *Collection Poétique* (Paris, 1972), trans. as *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. K. Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis, 1990), and Carol Clover's discussion of editorship and imitation in C. Clover, "'The Same Thing - Sort Of.'", *Representations* 100, no. 1 (2007), pp. 4–12. For an exploration of the flexibility in transfer between orality and texts, see also Pernille Hermann's remarks on authorship and curation of memory in P. Hermann, 'Memory, Imagery, and Visuality in Old Norse Literature' in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, Number 3 (2015), pp. 317-340, and 'Memorizing by Way of Books' in *Mnemonic Echoing in Old Norse Sagas and Eddas* (Berlin, 2022), pp. 21-44.

[4]C. Larrington, 'Introduction,' in *The Norse Myths That Shape The Way We Think* (London, 2023), p. 8.

[5]See H. O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth* (Oxford, 2014), A. Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (Cambridge, 2020), and R. Rix, *Nordic Terrors: Scandinavian Superstition in British Gothic Literature* (London, 2025).

period and the turn of the century especially, Old Norse mythology became aligned with escapist, rugged fantasies (most often for men, who felt confined by the duties of bureaucracy and home life), and with the urge for colonialist domination in all fields; as Judy Quinn notes, Dr F. J. Furnivall once apparently remarked (as recorded in the Saga-Book of 1908-9) that

> he was glad that the viking spirit still prevailed. There was too much that was softening in modern English life, and it was a blessing to have a club that stood up for the old, strong spirit which was at the bottom of all the conquests England had made.[6]

Old Norse as a field became representative of individuals who deviated from the public school model, and from the Classical mythology that aligned with aristocratic privilege. Most famously, it also fuelled a great deal of nationalist propaganda and symbolism, culminating, as we are now all too aware, in the atrocities of the Third Reich.[7] Since then, the development of technology and media have ensured that the reproduction of Old Norse mythological content continues, and is taken to new levels of creativity with every iteration. Along with the gods, monsters, and vikings of film, theatre, television and gaming, all of which flourished as a result of postwar historical and fantasy literary genres, the music industry has also reached new heights, with a vast, eclectic upsurge of metal, folk, atmospheric and fantasy bands and artists inspired by Eddic and saga material. In short, creative responses to, and reproductions of Old Norse mythology have been so prolific, and for so long, that they now form a very large area in their own right within the general field of post-medieval reception studies.

Old Norse has been proven, above all, to be an extremely successful floating signifier; it can, and has represented what a variety of groups and people have needed it to represent, or to allow them to feel, at any given time.[8] It is, ultimately, a canon which inspires strong emotions. However, edited collections on contemporary receptions still tend towards the general and the summative, analysing the ways in which the content of various Old Norse sources have been adapted across a variety of genres. Although the subject of inspiration is more often touched upon with regard to wider and earlier cultural movements, there is far less attention to the emotional reasons why the material continues to be so attractive to so many creators. This seems remiss, considering that there is a

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[6]See Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 3-33 and J. Quinn, '*Vǫluspá* in Twentieth-Century Scholarship in English' in G. Barnes, M. Clunies Ross & J. Quinn (eds), *Old Norse Studies in the New World* (Sydney, 2006), pp. 120-136.

[7]N. Meylan and L. Rösli, *Old Norse Myths as Political Ideologies : Critical Studies in the Appropriation of Medieval Narratives* (Brepols, 2020). For a journalistic perspective, see also G. Khuri. "The Politics of Norse Medievalism in the British Press during the First World War" in *Studies in Medievalism 31: Politics and Medievalism (Studies) 3* (2022), pp. 79-106.

[8]NB. Throughout this thesis, I take my definition of 'floating signifier' from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who first coined the term. See C. Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker (London, 1987), and for a useful further analysis of this work, B. Groys and C. Strathausen, 'Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Mana*; or, the Floating Signifier', in C. Strathausen (ed), *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media* (New York, 2012).

whole canon of artistic receptions which has sprouted around the feelings of physical and spiritual freedom, bravery and sensuality which members of the public draw from Old Norse mythology.

To expand on the source of these feelings, I would argue that the theme or quality most closely associated with Old Norse mythology and culture, and which perhaps recurs most often in pop culture due to its close relationship with fantasy genres, is that of power. The word 'power' encompasses several different associations, such as martial prowess, strength of body, independence of spirit and/or mind, emotional stoicism, sexual potency and the ability to intimidate, all of which come to be collectively associated with one another in a cloud of meaning. A great many responses to, and adaptations of the mythology engage with this sense of power, and form a highly complex conglomerate. At the lower end of the intensity scale, 'power' may be said to represent any ideal with a basis in the idea of bravery, strength, valour and rebellion against negative forces.

One well-explored emotional area of receptions scholarship (with good reason), is the use of Old Norse mythology - which itself already contains violent, racist and misogynist material - to justify modern acts of aggression, violence and other antisocial behaviour. The ideology of Nordicism has been instrumental in shaping a highly toxic venn diagram of political and cultural sensibilities.[9] In and amongst the misappropriation of the term 'medieval' to mean 'violent' (physically and sexually), the misappropriation of Norse mythology and symbolism is a cross-cultural phenomenon; for many alt-right individuals in particular, it still offers a particularly attractive alternative to Christian, centralist and mainstream philosophy, instilling a sense of caucasian superiority disguised as 'traditional values' to excuse antisocial acts.[10] This is not, however, unique to the right wing; Stefanie von Schurbein has demonstrated how both right and left wing groups in Europe have adopted the symbolism of Old Norse, and to varying degrees of extremism.[11] Overlapping the political sphere in this venn diagram of receptions are those who employ the more general, anti-systemic, dark sense of 'nordicness,' commonly associated with Scandi noir and black

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[9]See G. E. Forssling, 'Introduction: Nordicism, Myth and Modernity and New Foundations: Nationalist and Romantic Visions of the Nordic in Northern Europe and America' in *Nordicism and Modernity*, (London, 2020), pp. 5-47.

[10]See, for instance, H. O'Donoghue, 'The Rise of Racism' and 'The Misappropriation of Mythology,' in *From Asgard to Valhalla* (London, 2025), Larrington, 'Vinland the Good' in *The Norse Myths That Shape The Way We Think* (2023), pp. 250-2, and V. Höfig, 'Vinland and White Nationalism' in T. W. Machan & Jón Karl Helgason (eds), *From Iceland to the Americas* (Manchester, 2020), pp. 77-100. For more general discussion of gritty and violent styles of medievalism, see S. Carroll, *Medievalism in A Song of Ice and Fire and Game of Thrones* (Martlesham, 2018), C. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham, N.C, 1999), U. Eco, 'The Return of the Middle Ages,' in *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays* (London, 1986), D. Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 15, and S. Rose, 'Norse Code' in The Guardian (22nd April, 2022), https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/apr/22/norse-code-white-supremacists-reading-the-northman-robert-eggers (accessed 10th February 2025). NB. The relationship between fantasy gaming and extreme politics is so well-documented that there is now even an Extremism and Gaming Research Network; see https://extremismandgaming.org/ (accessed 19th April 2025).

[11]See S. Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden, 2016).

metal.[12] For certain groups, it has provided inspiration to actively undermine and damage systems, institutions and objects of historic importance as a form of protest (such as the burning of stave churches).[13] For many, however, Old Norse mythology still remains an imaginative territory which affords a pleasurable frisson of satisfaction, catharsis, or higher energy drive, and engaging with it on any of these levels alone may lead to a sense of greater self-empowerment. Many engage with its sense of power and/or darkness simply for cathartic effect, to challenge institutional boundaries (such as modern cinema portraying extreme, violent behaviour by viking raiders) or as a means of escape from 'the horrors of respectable middle-class life in an affluent, enlightened European democracy.'[14]

Inevitably, impressions of what constitutes power affect public interpretations of gender: one well-known effect of the misappropriation of so-called 'Viking' symbolism is misogynist attitudes toward women. It is a very common assumption that the Old Norse mythological and fantasy diaspora is a 'boys' club. Scholarship has contributed to this bias in its own way: the current, major focus in 20th century Old Norse reception studies is (understandably) media-heavy: the history of political symbolism, journalism, gaming, cinema, television, comics and graphic novels, all of which have been, and are still mostly male-dominated industries, whereas a great deal of material by women specifically tends to fall in the category of literature. Moreover, in past Old Norse literary reception studies, the focus has been on the obvious, and extremely well-charted role of Old Norse material in the literary trajectories of male fantasy and fiction writers such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Walter Scott, William Morris, and Henry Rider Haggard, or in the works of poets like David Jones, W.H. Auden, Hugh MacDiarmid, Geoffrey Hill and Basil Bunting. In comparison, there is very little material on how women have responded to Old Norse mythology and symbolism, the main exception being analyses of children's literature written by women.[15] There has never been a book or exhibition specifically dedicated to Old Norse mythology in women's writing, let alone one dedicated to adult writing.

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[12]I use 'nordicness' in the rhetorical, flexible and very wide sense used to describe any general attempt to brand something as Scandinavian. See J. Strang, J. Marjanen and M. Hilson (eds), 'A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness: From Creating Unity to Exporting Models,' in *Contesting Nordicness: From Scandinavianism to the Nordic Brand* (Berlin, 2022), pp. 1-34. Neil Price also speaks about this sense of 'darkness' in a medieval context, in which the Vikings became a kind of 'dark mirror' for Anglo Saxon sensibilities. See N. Price, 'Mind and Magic' in *The Viking Way*, (Oxford, 2017), p. 331.

[13]See Helgason 'Odin: From Wagner to Viking Metal' and 'Leif: When Civilization was less Civilized', in *Echoes of Valhalla*, pp.133-183.

[14]S. Trafford and A. Pluskowski,'Antichrist superstars: the Vikings in hard rock and heavy metal', in D. W. Marshall (ed.), *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in popular culture* (McFarland, 2007), p. 71.

[15]See D. Clark, *Children's Literature and Old Norse Medievalism* (Leeds, 2023). While the term 'children's literature' can (rightly) be seen as problematic and overly prescriptive in certain circumstances, I see no problem in using it here to distinguish between writing suitable for, and clearly marketed towards child and earlier teenage audiences, versus mature content of a sexual, violent or sensitive nature that is meant for adults.

While there is, arguably, less Old Norse-inspired twentieth-century content written by women compared to men through sheer weight of numbers, the lack of academic coverage does not simply reflect a lack of available material. The inherent inequalities in the publishing landscape have meant less obvious mainstream attention to Western women's writing on the subject, but its output and range is more substantial and diverse than one might expect, and cannot be encompassed by this thesis alone. Furthermore, in this limited space, I believe that to analyse such writing solely under the heading 'women's writing' runs a further risk of gender binarization, oversimplification, or falling back into purely summative studies, when there is such potential to explore the emotional implications of its usage by women in certain contexts. I began, therefore, to address the question (as explored above) of power in relation to Old Norse and women writing: namely, what are the ways in which women have used Old Norse mythology to instil a feeling of empowerment in their work?

There is, of course, no one way that this has been done, and a great deal depends on period and context. Some female authors have written about Old Norse simply because it is alternative territory, or a good time to do so, and have thus become self-empowered through publishing apt content at the right time. Some have used Old Norse as the building blocks from which to create fantasy figures or situations, and some have used the stories as conduits to communicate their own experiences and feelings, and to take ownership of their own identity. Around the turn of the century, academic and creative women naturally began to take advantage of the relatively uncharted research territory that Old Norse afforded compared to the Classics, and a considerable body of Nordic-inspired work developed for that reason. The three approaches I mentioned in the last paragraph can all be identified in some way here. There was scholarship, in which individuals like Dame Bertha Philpotts, Olive Bray, and Ursula Dronke primarily made their mark, and more mainstream or passion-based creative literature, consisting of the novels, poems and stories written by authors like Ottilie J Liljencrantz, Julia Clinton-Jones and Mary Disney-Leith.[16] There is also the 'middle ground,' which forms the biggest category by far: academically and pedagogically-minded women from a range of backgrounds, who undertook Old Norse retellings at a time when there was high popular demand for educational and mythological collections of tales, and who thus provided the material that would inspire the next century of fantasy writers.[17]

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[16]Mary Disney Leith in particular seems to have identified Iceland and its literature with her own personal freedom and sense of adventure; her travels there began after the death of her husband, and resulted in an impressive output of travel writing, poetry and novels. There is no doubt that these experiences made her feel empowered, and that this was in no small part due to the strength she associated with Old Norse characters and landscapes. See M. Disney Leith, *Northern Lights and Other Verses* (London, 1920), *Three Visits to Iceland : Being Notes Taken at Sea and on Land : Comprising a Pilgrimage to Skalholt, and Visits to Geysir and the Njala District* (London, 1897). See also M. A. Wemyss. *Iceland*. (London, 1908) and J. Powney and J. Mitchell (eds), *The Lure of Iceland : The Northern Pilgrimages of Mary Gordon (Mrs. Disney Leith)* (England, 2018).

[17]For more detail on the commercial demand for medieval literature in children's books, see V. Richmond- Bourgeois, *Chivalric Stories as Children's Literature : Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures* (Jefferson, N.C., 2014), and for

Nora Chadwick, Hélène.A. Guerber, Annie and Eliza Keary, and, later, Jacqueline Simpson (who assisted Terry Pratchett in creating the folklore of the Discworld) are just a few names in this wide and well-documented group.[18]

Interestingly, both creative works and retellings, relying as they generally did on some form of historic research, contained a lot of relatively academic content, but not a great deal that was controversial in social or political terms, compared, for example, to the output of their Scandinavian female contemporaries.[19] The ways in which British and American women adapted Old Norse content was seemingly more a means of escapism than of criticising social norms, but I would argue that their canon may still be considered a vast, multilayered movement of female self-empowerment, in a different sense to that of writers like Sigrid Unset. The very acts of study and writing to carve out intellectual territory were empowering in themselves, especially when the nature of the mythic content being addressed was not traditionally considered feminine territory, meaning that advancement in this field pushed new boundaries of what was deemed 'suitable' (tellingly, Furnivall was still careful to refer to female colleagues at the Viking Society as 'the band of peaceful Viking invaders who have conquered the realms of English scholarship.')[20] The volume of material is evidence enough that many intellectual and creative women were naturally drawn towards this content, and it is clear that the aforementioned sensations of physical and spiritual freedom, bravery and sensuality associated with Old Norse culture were greatly desirable at this time of rapid social change.[21] A hundred years, and several steps in diversity later, the early millennial rise of Neo-medievalism in the media has seen another boom in Old Norse receptions by women. During the last decade alone, and particularly after the advent of the TV show 'Vikings' on

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an excellent, comprehensive list of ON retellings, see 'Popular Retellings of the Norse Myths', https://www.germanicmythology.com/works/popularretellings.html,(accessed 20th March 2025).

[18] The ongoing influence of this group of retailers is well charted. For instance, even before the publications of Kevin Crossley-Holland dominated the market, Dorothy Hosford's *Thunder of the Gods* (New York, 1952) is evidence of the ongoing strength of the retelling genre, and would go on in turn to inspire Mike Mignola's comic strip *Hellboy*, and both Joanne Harris's *Runemarks* series and two *Loki* novels (also inspired by Guerber). See 'Presenting Hellboy: The Bones Of Giants', https://www.darkhorse.com/Blog/3366/presenting-hellboy-bones-giants> and 'An Introduction to *The Gospel of Loki* from Joanne Harris', <https://www.joanne-harris.co.uk/books/the-gospel-of-loki/read-an-introduction-to-the-gospel-of-loki-from-joanne-harris (accessed 29th March, 2025).

[19] In Scandinavia, writers like Fredrika Bremer, Sigrid Unset and Thit Jensen, all of whom have used Eddic or saga material, have become canon because of their role in building a national identity, but also in using Old Norse material to discuss matters such as female emancipation, identity and gendered violence. See F. Bremer, *Hertha* (Stockholm, 1856), T. Jensen, *Nial den Vise* (Copenhagen, 1934) and S. Undset, *Gunnar's Daughter* (1909), and the *Kristin Lavransdatter* trilogy, consisting of *Kransen* (Oslo, 1920), *Husfrue* (Oslo,1921), and *Korset* (Oslo, 1922). For a brief exploration of identity building by Norwegian female authors, also see K. Alvestad, 'Mighty Lady and True Husband: Queen Margaret of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in Norwegian Memory', in *Memorialising Premodern Monarchs: Queenship and Power* (London, 2022). British and American novelists and poets, by contrast, seem to have been more invested in the mythology from a colonialist and adventure fantasy perspective.

[20] See J. Quinn, '*Vǫluspá* in Twentieth-Century Scholarship in English,' p. 121.

[21] See note 9.

HBO, a vast number of new Old Norse receptions works have emerged in literature, cinema, poetry, graphic novels, art and gaming. Aside from the more mainstream 'kickass' female figures aimed at young girls, there are many literary works by women and members of the LGBTQ community looking to enjoy the powerful sensations caused by imbibing Old Norse content for its own sake, or to self-empower by challenging pre-existing assumptions about Old Norse medievalism as a territory (see conclusion).

Compared to these two 'boom' periods, however, there appears to be a strange *Ginnungagap* in Old Norse-inspired works by women in the literary landscape of the mid-to-late Twentieth century and the early turn of the millenium, and scholarship on creative, original writing during this time is slim. David Clark has charted the ongoing production of children's and young adult literature in the twenty-first century, and Heather O'Donoghue, Carolyne Larrington and Geraldine Barnes (among occasional others) have written about the changing face of Old Norse in novels, poetry and retellings during the twentieth century, but neither focus particularly on women's original creative writing as a genre.[22] O'Donoghue in particular has led the charge in receptions, setting a standard for acknowledging the importance of the mythology in the English canon, and noticing the subtler ways in which it has persisted in collective literary consciousness. The majority of her analysis of later literary works, however, has a more summative approach, focusing mainly on identifying Old Norse references rather than going into their emotional usage in depth.[23] Larrington also references some contemporary women's writing in *The Norse Myths That Shape The Way We Think*, but, as the book is categorised by mythological figures and not period boundaries, these are relatively short and scattered, and the vast majority of contemporary artists referred to are still male; far more attention is given to addressing toxic masculine appropriations.[24] Moreover, in edited works that take more of a cross-genre and/or cross-period approach to Old Norse studies, chapters on and references to contemporary literary works (especially by women) are still in a minority, and interest in such subjects is generally regarding their significance in proving the longevity of a particular narrative.[25]

Overall, there is little to no discussion of how women writing creatively in the late twentieth century responded to the ongoing theme of empowerment in Old Norse, if at all, and how such

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[22]See O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth* and *From Asgard to Valhalla*, Larrington, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*, and G. Barnes, 'Nostalgia, Medievalism and the Vínland Voyages', in *Postmedieval* (2011), pp. 141–54.

[23]See especially O'Donoghue, 'Epilogue: New Images: Contemporary Poetry and Old Norse Myth', *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, pp. 200-14.

[24]Larrington,*The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*.

[25]For instance, in the collection *Cultural legacies of Old Norse Literature*, despite the extremely recent date of publication, Christopher Crocker's is the only article in the whole collection about a work published after the year 2000, and about a work by a known female author. See C. Crocker, 'Once More, with Fiction: Transforming Myth in Gerður Kristný's Blóðhófnir and the Eddic Poem Skírnismál', in Crocker, C. and Geeraert, D., (eds), *Cultural Legacies of Old Norse Literature* (, 2022), pp. 161–180.

responses manifested in their works. The lack of academic content in these areas would suggest that there is nothing new to comment on, but, again, this is not at all true. The changing face of Old Norse scholarship during the later twentieth century is one clue that interest in Old Norse (albeit it was still a niche area and very much an Oxbridge territory) was steadily growing, and that it continued to attract a female readership. For example, in 1976, Ursula Dronke, a former student of Tolkien (incidentally my supervisor's supervisor) became the first woman to receive the Guðbrandur Vigfússon readership in Ancient Icelandic Literature and Antiquities at Oxford. Dronke would go on to do groundbreaking work on the *Poetic Edda* (her influence may be seen in this thesis), and, even more importantly, to pave the way for what is still one of the most female-heavy Medieval Studies departments at Oxford. It is worth noting, however, that even up until the nineteen-eighties, Victorian and turn-of-the-century translations of Old Norse texts were still very widely circulated, and that more modern translations were published infrequently and years apart, even in academic settings. Apart from Dronke's first of three heavy volumes on *The Poetic Edda* published in 1969 (and that was still only the heroic poems in translation), the only other translation of this work published between the thirties and the eighties was a second edition of Lee M. Hollander's 1928 version, reissued in 1962.[26] It was, therefore, only natural that writers of Plath and Byatt's generation especially first encountered the rather old-fashioned Romantic and Victorian interpretations of Old Norse works which had flourished in the widening commercialism of the medieval, and that this coloured their approaches.

Similarly, the sheer amount of Old Norse-related children's literature produced in Britain between the fifties and early millennium - the product of turn-of-the-century and postwar generations of writers who had grown up with earlier story collections, as well as Tolkien's fantasy works - would also be evidence enough that the mythology had greatly impacted that generation, and was still very much in the public mindset during the period (two major examples being Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen in* 1960 and Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence, 1965-1977). There were, indeed, fewer adult works under the official 'headline' of Old Norse *per se*, and, as Geraldine Barnes argues, this is likely a reflection of the growing anti nostalgia and anxieties of the later 20th century.[27] However, the mythology has manifested itself in other, subtler ways in adult writing, and many works by well-known authors employ a more subtle, mixed usage of the mythology and symbolism. It was, in fact, a chance finding of a reference to valkyries in Sylvia Plath's letters (see next chapter) which first inspired the possibility of this thesis, and once I followed the line of enquiry, the vast potentiality of investigating women's writing about Old Norse through the lens of empowerment became clear. Moreover, the ongoing associations of power with Old Norse are also evident, and are fascinating in conjunction with the rapidly-changing social dynamic; the period beginning in the fifties and ending in the early

[26]See U. Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, *Vol. I: Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969) and L. M. Hollander, *The Poetic Edda (2nd Edition)* (Austin, 1962).
[27]Barnes, 'Nostalgia, Medievalism and the Vínland Voyages', *Postmedieval* 2, no. 2 (2011), pp. 141-54.

'noughties,' was a time of cataclysmic socio-political change, encompassing both Second Wave Feminism and the 'Me-Too' era, and so is, in itself, a fascinating timeline upon which to compare women's emotional responses to mythology.

It soon became clear that there were too many works by women to mention for the scope of this thesis (especially if one were to count young adult literature,) and that a great many references to Old Norse mythology in adult women's writing are scattered, fleeting, or form mythological hybrids. I have therefore limited my analysis to an interesting sub genre: female authors writing in Britain, who engage (or have engaged) with Old Norse material in more depth or with more consistency within their works, and who actively engage with the theme of power, whether to inspire similar feelings in themselves, to inspire others, or to comment on gendered perceptions and experiences within their own context.[28] My period of commentary is set between 1950 and 2012, the latter end of which I have very deliberately chosen as the cut-off point before the 'Vikings' TV sensation and the second boom in Neomedievalism.[29] I was particularly keen to focus on my chosen writers because neither Sylvia Plath, A.S. Byatt nor Kathleen Jamie's particular engagement with Old Norse mythology has been examined in great detail, if at all, and none of their names are automatically linked with the pantheon in public consciousness, meaning that some of my material is new to scholarship.[30] All of these women, crucially, write about women or female figures in some way that empowers the image of women, whether the author more specifically, girls or both. Moreover, all together they form an arc of receptions, in that the differences between their individual responses are somewhat reflective of the changing socio-political landscape for women in Britain.

Of course, women are never solely inspired by women, and I certainly do not intend to imply an essentialist definition of 'women's receptions' or a female-only 'tree' of lineage to instil a false alternative to that of male authors. As I shall show, many of my authors were inspired by men, their sources had a wide date range, and the nature of their inspiration is as diverse as the texts

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[28]For these reasons, I have left out historical novels like 'Avalon' by Anya Seton (1960) or 'Sword Song' by Rosemary Sutcliffe (1997). I have also omitted the rather amusing genre of romantic and erotic novels that has sprouted in answer to submissive fantasies, regarding which see E. R. Sigurdson, "Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction', in *Scandinavian Studies* 86 (2014), pp. 249-267 and K. Wilson, 'Ravished by Vikings' (15th July, 2016) <https://www.jprstudies.org/2016/07/ravished-by-vikings-the-pre-modern-and-the-paranormal-in-viking-romance-fictionby-kim-wilkins/> , (accessed 21st April 2025).

[29]This particular date boundary, along with the focus on adult rather than young adult (YA) fiction, is the reason why I have omitted Joanne Harris from the following study. Her novels about Loki mark the beginning of the boom period, not the last generation, with Byatt's last novel marking the crossover point. I certainly intend to write about Harris more in future publications on this subject, as she clearly finds Old Norse mythology empowering, but her treatment of women in her adult writing may arguably be interpreted as rather disempowering compared to her YA *Runemarks* series.

[30]Byatt is the possible exception, but nevertheless there is still not a great deal of scholarship that focuses on her use of mythology in its own right, as opposed to its usage as a signifier for other, subjective issues like environmental disaster.

themselves. I simply wish to address what I see as a substantial lacuna in Old Norse reception studies, particularly in light of the above assumptions I have mentioned on the mythology's 'masculine' audience, and the current focus on the ways men use it. I have also, very deliberately, avoided addressing the question of whether or not these receptions are feminist. This is partly because the word 'feminism' has become so vast and diverse in definition, and each of my authors are so different in their approaches, that there is a risk categorising each author's particular brand of feminism (or otherwise) will take up space that should be dedicated to examining their active use of Old Norse content in its own right. While it could be argued that literary feminism is, by definition, present in any text where a woman seeks to put her own desires into an aesthetic well known for its 'ownership' by men, I still prefer to leave readers to their own opinions on the matter. For my part, I believe their responses to and engagement with the mythology, and collective engagement with the theme of power (itself a root of the common issues that have made feminist politics necessary), is of most importance to my study.

Finally, although my main concern is to address the uncharted engagement with Old Norse in this particular group of women, my whole thesis may also be read as an illustration of the true adaptability of Old Norse: of how these storyworlds are the result of centuries of construction, events in readers' times and of a variety of minds, making them an organic and continuous entity.[31] My other intention, through this study, is to add to the voices now rightly commenting on the importance of reception studies in further understanding medieval sources themselves. To quote Jón Karl Helgason, there is every possibility that the authors and compilers responsible for the sources medievalists study today were 'driven by the same compelling need for self-expression' as the so-called 'more original' receptions works they later inspired, and thus receptions works themselves may be of some assistance in analysing the medieval mindset in retrospect.[32] It is the importance of studying inspiration and the need for expression that drives the following work.

[31]I use the term 'storyworlds' in the sense meant by Arkady Martine, taking my lead from Rebecca Merkelbach, who also draws upon Martine's work in her own illustration of Old Norse storyworlds. See R. Merkelbach, 'Dreamworlds, Storyworlds: Narrative Proliferation and the Case of *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*', in *JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 121, no. 1 (2022), p. 6-33.
[32]Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla*, p. 74-75.

Chapter 1. Sylvia Plath and the Valkyrie

Introduction

Few people, on reading the work of Sylvia Plath, would realise that she was influenced by Old Norse mythology, or rather by a very specific strand of Old Norse mythological receptions. In this chapter, I shall focus on the earlier Nordic and Germanic influences of Plath, reanalysing her works - focusing particularly on the parallel usage of certain references and imagery in her personal and professional writing - in the light of these influences. In order to understand the ways in which Sylvia Plath's work engaged with Old Norse mythology specifically, it is necessary to focus as much on her earlier influences as on her later ones, and on how these early texts contributed to her development overall. Plath's avid reading and inner storytelling, especially that of her earlier childhood and student years, is generally paid insufficient attention, and is too often passed over in favour of psychoanalysing events related to her personal relationships, most particularly her father's death and her marriage to Ted Hughes.[33]

While interpretation of Plath's work entirely according to her interpersonal relationships would be overly simplistic, divorcing her relationship experiences from her reading and art would be similarly so; despite the efforts of even the most committedly neutral reader to avoid a cause-and-effect mindset, so many critical parallels can be drawn between motifs found in the poems and concurrent events recorded in her biography, letters and journals. I believe it important, therefore, to highlight that there is a crucial difference between fixating upon aligning individual poetic references with minutiae in Plath's journals (which achieves little that is meaningful in analysing the poems themselves), and analysing her general writing output in the light of clear, ongoing patterns of storytelling, emotional content and symbolism, both received and constructed. In this chapter, I intend to use the latter approach, so as to achieve a more holistic view of the ways in which Plath constructed her imaginative landscape. As I shall show, the internalization of the valkyrie myth in her love life and aspirations made its presence felt in her poetic works, and set the tone for a great deal of the symbolism in which she invested throughout her career.

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[33]Ted Hughes himself was inclined to edit her works in the light of a binarised 'before-and-after,' relegating all poems written before the couple's meeting to an appendix section labelled *Juvenilia* in the collected works. In this way he both judged her poetry according to stylistic merit and maturity, and implicitly cast his own influence (or, rather, the effects of their relationship) as the starring role in her development. See 'Introduction,' *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* (London, 1981), pp. 13-17.

My investigation has been influenced a great deal by Judith Kroll's groundbreaking work *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. This book was the first of a new slew of criticism that would combat the idea of a purely biographical reading, showing that a great many of Plath's poems are also the result of her using mythological influences to chart (and sometimes even anticipate) biographical events.[34] Kroll illustrates how Plath's works are multilayered, with biographical events and the poet's conscious development of her own style deliberately adhering to and providing variations on the mould of a much wider, pre-existing mythos, based upon the life and sacrificial death cycles of pagan deities. With its roots in older world mythologies, and its later, somewhat esoteric form presented in Graves's *The White Goddess*, this mythos has its own established sets of imagery, with the figure of a goddess muse as its centrepoint - a figure to which Plath gave several guises and often placed at the centre of her poetic universe.[35]

While *Chapters in a Mythology* can be overly neat in its fitting of Plath's experiences and writing into this wider Gravesian mythos, the work is nevertheless highly valuable in that it casts doubt upon the purely biographical approach to criticism and dismisses the idea that Plath was simply a confessional poet - a reading of her work which completely fails to acknowledge her richness of metaphor, and which aided the populist, shallow image of a tortured woman, who was death-obsessed simply as an emotional response to personal events. In laying out her argument, Kroll draws attention to two major texts in particular that were crucial in forming the 'mythos mould' into which Plath poured her own experience - the aforementioned *White Goddess* by Graves and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.[36] It is important to note, however, that both of these books only became known to Plath after the beginning of her relationship and artistic collaboration with Ted Hughes, and that there is far more waiting to be examined in terms of her earlier development as a reader. Furthermore (and tellingly) Hughes himself officially approved Kroll's reading of Plath; although this does not, in itself, give grounds for invalidating her work, it does suggest a potentiality for bias, in that mythological readings like Kroll's divert attention away from or minimise the clear importance of earlier life events in her writing. Finding this out instills a further note of caution in relying upon general, or later mythological reading for a convenient overall interpretation, and in the too-wide separation of literary criticism from biography.

In the following work, therefore, I propose a symbiotic approach to biography and mythology, engaging with Kroll's idea of Plath's building an inner mythos based on texts, while also giving due importance to the ongoing, more spontaneous expression of emotions and ideas which contributed to the poet's building of her own self image. I propose that Plath's reading of, and responses to Old Norse and Nordic-themed material in childhood was what first triggered her development of her own inner mythology. Subsequently, it was this inner mythology which most heavily influenced the

[34]J. Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1976).
[35]R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (London, 1948).
[36]J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London, 1922).

ways in which she began to interpret major life events, and then express them through the medium of poetry, all of which would gradually lead to a poetic landscape of more universal, yet still compatible, mythological themes. Most importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, I intend to make a more specific case for the importance of one particular literary genre in her early development - that of Old Norse receptions texts. Plath also received a great deal of influence from other, more obviously Norse-inspired works which, unlike Frazer and Graves, were a part of her earlier reading before the age of eighteen, and became central to her personal mythology before she even met Hughes. One of the lesser-known, and yet most important of these to her imaginative development was *The Ring of the Nibelung* - an English translation of the works of Wagner. These earlier influences were to have a crucial effect upon her poetic voice and development, from early childhood to the *Ariel* poems, and would help build what Elaine Showalter accurately dubbed the 'myth' of Plath.[37]

In the following chapter, I intend to show how Plath's efforts to construct her own, powerful sense of self were most strongly influenced by her reading of Old Norse receptions, and that the subsequent, personalised Nordic symbolism proved a keystone in both her unique writer's persona and poetic landscape. My observations are not intended to work against Kroll's on the more general mythos around Plath, nor will they refute the importance of other texts and traditions in her development; instead, they are intended to add another, valuable interpretive strand to the already-rich store of material under investigation, and to reveal its (as-yet unnoticed) importance to her work. I wish to highlight above all the crucial role played by Old Norse receptions like Wagner's in Plath's developing sense of selfhood, and in her own feelings of self-empowerment through writing.

Earlier Life and Reading

The first thing to take into account when analysing Plath's development is the intense home atmosphere she was born into in Boston, Massachusetts, which encouraged and shaped her reactions to reading in very definite ways. Her mother's writing, and her correspondence with her daughter, reveal that Aurelia Plath was a highly ambitious and idealistic parent, combining a strong sense of tradition with the desire that her family should excel - a mindset which was very probably symptomatic of being both an immigrant and an intellectual. Even before having children, Aurelia discussed progressive child-rearing plans with her husband Otto, a university professor, rather as though anticipating an academic exercise than children:

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[37]See E. Showalter, 'Slick Chick,' *London Review of Books* Volume 13 (London, 1991.) https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v13/n13/elaine-showalter/slick-chick (accessed 10th January 2023).

The worlds of ornithology and entomology were opening for me, and we dreamed of projects, jointly shared, involving nature study, travel and writing. "The Evolution of Parental Care in the Animal Kingdom" was our most ambitious vision, planned to be embarked upon after we had achieved some lesser goals, and had established our family of at least two children...I was totally imbued with the desire to be a good wife and mother. At mealtimes we discussed the varying, and often conflicting, theories of child-rearing.[38]

When the children were born, their parents were avid in their documentation of progress, showing excitement at any signs of precociousness. As a father, Otto devoted the greater part of his time to academic work, but enjoyed his childrens' "attractiveness and progress"; time with them was often taken in formalised evening slots, during which they were encouraged to show off, presenting him with samples of their work or performing for him.[39] In such a household, signs of brilliance were rewarded, and became a means of obtaining attention - Plath once learned the Latin name of an insect, so that it would trip off her tongue when Otto 'tested' her in public.[40] Similarly, her parents thought of activities in terms of the level of achievement one could reach, rather than the straightforward pleasure of doing them; this is evident in letters from Aurelia, reminding her little daughter to colour neatly inside the lines, and the subconsciously guilty explanation Plath gave about stopping piano lessons, saying she was 'never very good.'[41] It is, therefore, no surprise that Plath's earlier endeavours were generally coloured by the expectation that she should excel, and the feeling that the better she behaved and the more she succeeded, the more she would receive love. When she was a little older, and after Otto's death, such feelings were given a more defined form in Aurelia's philosophical teachings: "As soon as my children were old enough to comprehend it, I shared with them the belief that my husband and I had held concerning the importance of aiming and directing one's life towards an idealistic goal in order to build a strong inner life."[42]

This ensured that, for the children, achievement now became not only an instinctive desire and expectation, but a concept dangerously synonymous with words like 'strength,' 'purpose' and 'meaning.' For most of her life afterwards, Plath's expressed levels of contentment or self-acceptance depended very much upon the amount she felt she had accomplished, especially in her artistic endeavours.[43] Her mother's sinister fixation upon planning and accomplishing over simply anticipating and experiencing - as expressed in the quotation above - emerged frequently in her own diaries. She would make lists of things she 'needed' to accomplish in order to reach her

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[38]S. Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, A. S. Plath (ed.) (New York, 1977), p.10.
[39]Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 16 and p. 19.
[40]L. Wagner Martin, *Sylvia Plath* (London, 1990), p. 27.
[41]Wagner Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, pp. 23-6.
[42]Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 31.
[43]It has been argued that the pressure upon the Plath children' s education correlated very closely with the frustration Aurelia had felt at giving up her own career and academic activities to be a full-time housewife. For a more in-depth exploration of the circumstances that led to this rather intense family dynamic, see H. Clark, *Red Comet* (London, 2020).

already-extreme standards of what constituted her own best self - generally a conglomeration of top scholar, brilliant writer and attractive, outgoing woman with prospects.

Such an environment in childhood naturally affected her reading, as some of her choices of and responses to literature became part of the bid to retain parental approval. As Wendy Whelan-Stewart has demonstrated, Plath's letters to Aurelia were highly performative, always written in mind of the version of herself she considered would most win her mother's approval in that moment; her adult missives give an idealised impression of femininity more reminiscent of *The Ladies Home Journal* than real life, and from her childhood letters it is clear that she learned this performative stance from a very young age.[44] In a letter from March 1943, written on a visit to her grandparents, she includes her own series of sugary rhyming poems about fairies that could have been lifted verbatim from Cicely Mary Baker's *Flower Fairies* series, the presence of which isA. S.then explained by a detailed description of the book she had just read: *A Fairy to Stay* (1929) by Margaret Beatrice Lodge.[45] Tellingly, she writes "I would like to give all these things (in the poems) to you but I know I can make it up by being good."[46] This reveals not only a talent for mimicry, but also the extent to which Plath absorbed and aped notions of ideal girlhood from more old-fashioned fantasy models - a behaviour for which, it is indicated, she received positive reactions.[47]

Ancestral awareness also played its part in this performance. Having German and Austrian parents, Plath was extremely conscious and proud of her heritage (a sentiment she probably also inherited and imitated), which she states in no small terms in letters to penpal Hans Neupert.[48] With this pride came a deep-seated awareness of German culture, and, from her own writings, it seems a great part of that knowledge was absorbed through reading traditional stories. In her letters and journals, she refers to motifs from German fairy tales, such as the 'legendary glass hill,' in an offhand manner suggestive of a native level of familiarity.[49] Aside from her clear love of stories, such references would have been another way of showing off her knowledge, both of literature and her parents' heritage, and earning further praise. To some extent, therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that

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[44]See W. Whelan-Stewart, 'Role-Playing the "Feminine" in Letters Home', *Intertexts* 12 (Texas, 2008), pp. 129-43, and p. 172, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA223824255&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=10920625&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7E5c2a4b9c&aty=open-web-entry (accessed 20th June 2021).

[45]Plath, *Letters Home*, pp. 6-7.

[46]Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 7.

[47]As Clark details in *Red Comet*, Aurelia was to write her own, equally saccharine verses for her daughter's coming of age, which were highly reflective of the style the younger Sylvia had used. These warned her of oncoming, more sober duties in matronly, finger-wagging tones that are better suited to a Louisa May Alcott novel than real life.

[48]Plath corresponded with Neupert between April 1947 and March 1952. For an example, see Plath, Letter to Hans Neupert, 14th April 1949, in P. K. Steinberg & K. V. Kukil (eds), *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Volume I: 1940-1956* (London, 2017), p.151.

[49]Plath, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 44.

'being good' would have become unconsciously linked, not only with academic achievement, but also with her ability to please her mother through absorption and imitation of Germanic literary and mythological motifs. It doesn't seem too great a coincidence that, for Christmas in 1954, Aurelia gave her daughter a copy of *Märchen der Brüder Grimm* with the inscription: "Sylvia [Plath], für ein gutes Kind von ihrer liebende Mutter."[50] Admittedly, the remark might have been meant jokingly (Plath was twenty two at the time) but the context of their relationship imbues it with a rather more serious underlying note.

Plath's knowledge of Old Norse mythology developed from such origins. At the time she was growing up, any German family would have nurtured a special relationship with Old Norse as part of their supposed cultural heritage; German-born parents living in America at the turn of the century, isolated *because* of their heritage in a period of growing anti-German sentiment, would have taken comfort in sharing certain references and stories amongst close family (it is telling that both Otto Plath's marriages were to German speakers).[51] There is evidence that the Plath children received some basic introduction to at least some of the main figures or stories from the Old Norse pantheon (see below). Furthermore, in much literature of, and following the first turn-of-the-century generation, a general atmosphere of Nordicism abounded for various reasons.[52] The Grimm generation's highly anthropological enthusiasm for cataloguing European folklore, often for similarly nationalistic and romantic purposes, had already played a great part in the association of such stories and mythologies with personal and national identity across Europe and America, causing deeply romantic associations which continued even after the war period. Due to the Victorian and Edwardian resurgences of medieval literature via retellings, which were often placed in the same commercial bracket as fairy tales, the kind of Germanic fairy tales Plath absorbed were often circulated in mixed collections containing stories from all across Europe, of which many of the most popular were chivalric or saga based.[53] Alongside these story collections came more developed novels with mixed Nordic motifs, some more inclined to the historic and some of a folkloric persuasion.

Such preoccupations were partly born of rising academic interest in Old Norse material, and partly a result of Western patriotism, in which stories derived from various Northern European sources were more widely circulated, with the ulterior motive of promoting a common Viking ancestry that

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[50]This translates 'for a good child, from her loving mother.' The underlining is mine. For any references to books in Plath's catalogue, especially ones not referred to obviously or directly in her journals and letters, see the excellent database at 'Library Thing', https://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary (accessed 10th February, 2021).
[51]Clark, *Red Comet*, pp. 29-30.
[52]See G.E. Forssling, 'Introduction: Nordicism, Myth and Modernity and New Foundations: Nationalist and Romantic Visions of the Nordic in Northern Europe and America' in *Nordicism and Modernity* (London, 2020).
[53]For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of children's publications from the late nineteenth-early twentieth century and beyond, see Richmond-Bourgeois, *Chivalric Stories as Children's Literature* (Jefferson, North Carolina, 2014).

could be used to bolster everyday patriotic values.[54] Different countries had their own takes on such political agendas. In the case of Britain especially, Old Norse provided an educational alternative to the snobbishly exclusive world of Classical literature, and provided more middle class and female scholars with fresh ground to claim. In many cases, such was the befuddled nature of this enthusiasm for general Nordicism, that there was often confusion between stories from the Medieval Scandinavian tradition and specific Old Norse texts; Asbjornsen and Moe's stories, for example, were often mistakenly referred to as 'Norse' when they mostly originated in later folk genres.[55] Similarly, thanks to Mallet's much earlier, and lengthily titled publication *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves* (1756), later writers and scholars, including Klopstock, Collins and Longfellow, would subsequently confuse the distinction between Celtic, Nordic and Germanic cultural motifs.[56] The mixed results of all these combined patriotic and the folkloric trains of thinking could be clearly seen in the next generation, whether through historical fiction like Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, a compendium of early British folklore and figures (including Vikings), or later fairy stories like Enid Blyton's *Tuppeny, Feefo and Jinks*, which very closely imitates a plot from Asbjørnsen's 'The Lad who went to the North Wind' (*Norske Folkeeventyr*).[57] This mixture of Nordic motifs and tropes continued well into the twentieth century (see below) and there is no doubt that such Nordic literary motifs would have been frequently absorbed by Plath as the norm, whether through her own collection, books she would have found on friends' shelves or those in public libraries and schools.

While it is impossible to name all the titles Plath herself came across during her lifetime, many of the works she actively references are in keeping with these literary tendencies. George MacDonald, the grandfather of folkloric fantasy, who inspired Tolkien, Lewis and Carroll (and who also owed much to Asbjørnsen) was apparently a favourite; Plath read *The Princess and the Goblin* in 1943, and *The Princess and Curdie* in 1944 - both of which deal with a race of supernatural beings similar to Scandinavian fairy-tale trolls - and *At the Back of the North Wind* in 1946. Her mother read *The Hobbit* aloud, which introduced her (albeit unconsciously) to an Eddic-inspired world of dragons, dwarves, treasure and hearty hospitality, which Plath later referenced in her diaries as one of the childhood worlds she 'knew, and felt, and believed' that made encroaching adult life seem

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[54]See Wawn, The Vikings and the Victorians, pp. 3-33, H. O'Donoghue, 'Representing Icelandic Saga Narrative for Victorian Readers," in J. Parker & C. Wagner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 616-31, and Quinn, '*Vǫluspá*in Twentieth-Century Scholarship in English' in *Old Norse Studies in the New World,* pp. 120-37.

[55]E. I. Thurin, *The American Discovery of the Norse: An Episode in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (London, 1999), p. 145.

[56]Thurin, *The American Discovery of the Norse*, pp. 21-22. The confusion persisted, despite the efforts of Bishop Percy to correct it in *Northern Antiquities* (published 1770, then republished with additions in 1847).

[57]See E. Blyton, Ch.8 'The Adventure of the Surprising Blue Tablecloth' and Ch.9 'The Black Cat and the Red Whip,' in *Tuppeny, Feefo and Jinks* (London, 1967), pp. 103-135, and P.C. Asbjørnsen & J. Moe, 'The Lad Who Went to the North Wind' in *Popular Tales from the Norse*, trans. G. W. Dasent (Edinburgh, 1841), pp. 250-4, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8933/8933-h/8933-h.htm (accessed 10th November, 2022).

off-putting in comparison.[58] In a more performative moment, she references Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'historic' *Tales of a Wayside Inn* in a letter to a friend.[59] This work most notably includes the figure of a musician, who is a tribute to Norwegian violinist Ole Bull, and into whose mouth Longfellow puts a long poetic sequence entitled 'The Saga of King Olaf;' the story draws a great deal upon material from *Heimskringla* and tells of King Olaf of Norway's quest for vengeance and repossession of his kingdom, urged on by Thor. Plath also received Maribelle Cormack's *Wind of the Vikings: a Tale of the Orkney Isles* as a school prize in November 1945, an Enid Blytonesque action adventure in which events, locations and objects from *Frithiofs saga* provide a framework for the main plot, which also explicitly references Scott's nordic mythology-inspired tale *The Pirate*.[60] While there is no entry in Plath's diary detailing her reading of this book, her prolific reading habits and natural sense of obligation seem reason enough to assume that she did. Moreover, certain distinct motifs from the story run parallel to other important ones which I am about to explore, and, as we shall see, align well with the personal mythos she was building.

Later in 1949-50, she would read Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, which, although it contained no 'vikings,' was set among the small homesteads and earldoms of medieval Norway, and paid homage to an ideal medieval female, part siren and part saint, who overcomes all obstacles to be with her chosen knight and later devotes her suffering life to God. Despite being set in a Christian world, the underlying presence of Scandinavia's supernatural pagan past is established early on in the book, when young Kristin sees an 'elf-maiden' in the forest.[61] Despite the disparity in their dating, and their intended audiences, all of these works ultimately follow a similar, and (up to then) very typical thematic pattern of combining nordic mythological and heroic material with christianised and/or modern behavioural examples. While it is too far to say that all of these works were intended as behavioural models for readers, it is worth noting that most of them link Old Norse and Germanic/Nordic material with a combined moralistic, aspirational and adventurous outlook, thus providing ample material to inspire anyone seeking an ideal.

We can measure the potency of the influence of Victorian and early twentieth-century retellings, simply by reviewing popular literature from the period directly preceding and following Plath's death in 1962; many other authors who had grown up on a similar literary diet to hers published fantasy fiction containing strands gleaned from Norse mythology, and mixed with popular content from Arthurian/Celtic legend and European folktales. The writings of Rosemary Sutcliff and

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[58]S. Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, K. V. Kukil (ed.) (London, 1999), p. 29. This emotional response is very similar to the one depicted by A.S. Byatt in *Ragnarok*, in which the girl protagonist engages with Old Norse mythology because it is where her mind is most 'alive'. (See my later chapter: 'War, Worldbuilding and Reading Women in A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok*.')

[59]Plath, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 34.

[60]M. Cormack, *Wind of the Vikings: a Tale of the Orkney Isles* (New York, 1937).

[61]S. Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, trans. Tiina Nunnally (London, 1995), pp. 16-17.

Roger Lancelyn Green, an abundance of fantasy novels from the 1960s-1980s, such as Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence, and a great many shorter childrens' tales about dragons, monsters and vikings - some written by celebrities like Harry Secombe and Terry Jones - are a clear testament to the inspiration provided by this turn-of-the-century slew of Celtic-Nordic influences.[62] Similarly, Plath's own exposure to Nordicism manifested itself in her poems in various motifs. As in later novels like Garner's, such motifs were often mixed with elements of fairy tale and, in her case, were autobiographically reflective; particularly notable instances are her use in poetry of Germanic witch or crone figures as the centre of quasi-anecdotal frameworks. Among her so-called 'Juvenilia' is a poem entitled 'The Princess and the Goblins' which essentially recounts the plot of MacDonald's novel, but with an emphasis on the themes of female power and disillusionment with men.[63] Old Norse motifs receive a similarly mixed treatment; sometimes there is a more definite reference, and sometimes an Old Norse interpretation provides a potential reading on more generic mythological symbolism, especially if her reading list and/or communications are compatible within the time frame of writing. A particularly interesting example of both definite reference and potential allusion appears in 'The Disquieting Muses', written in 1957, in which Plath recalls one very specific instance of her mother's mythological referencing, with the name of Thor implying both an early exposure to at least the major figures in the Old Norse pantheon, if not the stories themselves:

> In the hurricane, when father's twelve
> Study windows bellied in
> Like bubbles about to break, you fed
> My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
> And helped the two of us to choir:
> "Thor is angry: boom boom boom!
> Thor is angry: we don't care!"[64]

Interestingly, before telling this story, Plath's story 'Among the Bumblebees,' which is seemingly an idealised construction of her earlier childhood, originally assigned the Thor song to her father character, whom she depicted as "strong and superior" and on a familial team with the girl protagonist Alice, who is resilient, full of vitality and able to take the sun on her skin, unlike her asthmatic, sensitive brother (obviously more aligned with the 'tender and soft' mother).[65] There is a clear reference to Ragnarok in the lines "Alice believed that he was somehow connected with the miracle of fury beyond the windows, and that through him, she could face the doomsday of the world in perfect safety."[66]It is not difficult to work out where her personal mythology began to grow, or to see that her continued desire to be the model strong, beautiful girl - father's favourite,

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[62]See T. Jones, *The Saga of Erik the Viking* (London, 1983), and H. Secombe, *Katy and the Nurgla* (London, 1978).
[63]Plath, 'The Princess and the Goblins,' *Collected Poems*, p. 333.
[64]Plath, 'The Disquieting Muses,' *Collected Poems*, p. 75, ll. 17-23.
[65]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 45.
[66]S. Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, (London, 1977), pp. 263-4.

and better than her brother - originated in a meshing of early awareness of wider gender bias, notions of Germanic values, and her desire to achieve greater love and approval through excellence. As Clark comments, her later fetishization of health and strength was linked with the notion of her parents' very Germanic insistence on stoicism, diligence, and obedience.[67] Later after her death, old acquaintances of Otto Plath would claim that she had made a Teutonic menace of him, and Aurelia was quick to point out that he had never had any Nazi sympathies; what seems more likely is that she was giving a form to the Germanic structures which shaped her, and lashing out against their negative impact on her own self-expression and experience.[68]

There is certainly some evidence of this self-awareness beginning in 'The Disquieting Muses,' in which the figure of Thor, transformed by the figure of her mother into a bogey character for infants, is offered as a mockery of traditionally scary, patriarchal figures. Plath (wiser to her parents' flaws later in life) even seems to take up this mocking tone on a more personal level, with the pointed reference to her father's study in relation to the thunder god's temper.[69] This Thor is a direct contrast to the 'other', far grimmer and female brand of supernatural Plath claims called to her, and which she references at the beginning of the poem:

> Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
> Or what disfigured and unsightly
> Cousin did you so unwisely keep
> Unasked to my christening, that she
> Sent these ladies in her stead
> With heads like darning-eggs to nod
> And nod and nod at foot and head
> And at the left side of my crib?[70]

An Old Norse reader, on seeing the reference to a christening, would immediately think of the Norns; the question is, of course, where did Plath read about these? There are, naturally, wider possible interpretations of the poem as a whole; one might simply read it as an illustration of the poet's crossing a threshold into adulthood, with childhood represented by fairy-tales and maturity by the more ambiguous muses; their 'kingdom' is where the persona ends up dwelling, separated from her fairy-minded mother, who by contrast floats away on a green balloon 'bright with a million flowers.'[71] In the kingdom of the muses, the concepts of darkness, ugliness and tragedy are

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[67]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 45.
[68]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 15.
[69]A.S. Byatt, who was of the same generation, would also go on to make fun of Thor as a figure, and the toxic, patriarchal behaviour he represented. (See my third chapter, 'War, Worldbuilding and Reading Women in A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok*.')
[70]Plath, 'The Disquieting Muses,' *Collected Poems*, pp. 74-5, ll. 1-8.
[71]Plath, 'The Disquieting Muses,' *Collected Poems*, pp.74-5, ll. 41-56.

not simply a sign of wickedness, but are more in line with the persona's sense of disjunction from ideal girlhood, and her mother's wishes. As such, they are a power play - an embrace of the uncanny and off-kilter in acceptance of the self, and to spite gendered expectations from outside. It is easy to read a developing sense of resentment against aspects of Plath's upbringing in the contrast between the fairy world of the mother and the apocalyptic, blighted one of the daughter. There is, however, a further, separate significance, whether unconscious or deliberate, in the use of the three female figures in conjunction with Thor, and with certain other references in the poem.

While there is concrete evidence that Plath's three bald-headed muses were transferred to paper as a result of her seeing de Chirico's painting of the same title, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume, due to the inherently interlocking nature of mythologies and literary symbolism, that other, similar figures already present in Plath's consciousness might also have been superimposed or associated with those on the canvas.[72] This seems particularly likely, considering her sensitivity to allusion and referentiality, and her ready adoption of pre-existing symbolism to illustrate her own life. Even without this biographical knowledge, the fact that there are so many mixed allusions in the poem, including to Peter Pan, Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, and the well-known commonality of the group-of-three motif in tales, especially in children' s literature, would be reason enough to impose other allusions upon the mysterious muses ourselves, or to suspect the poet might have had them at the edge of her mind when she composed it. We might associate Plath's three sinister ladies with the Fates, the trio of goddesses who seek the judgement of Paris (Hera, Athena and Aphrodite), the group of three witch figures from traditional paganism (virgin, mother and crone) or even the witches in Macbeth; some, or all of these might come to mind for any well-rounded reader. We might also link the three with more abstract constructs, such as the three traditional wishes, or the three significant encounters which occur on fairytale journeys, claiming that they are a mockery of conveniences that are 'meant' to happen in fairy tales, as opposed to the uncanny 'reality' in which the persona has found herself situated.

There is, however, an additional possibility; the Sleeping Beauty story - whose motif appears in the opening reference to female figures at a christening - has two roots in Old Norse sources, either of which may have been in Plath's mind. One, which has more direct links with the supernatural christening guests motif, is the story of *Nornagests þáttr,* in which the Norns - a group of supernatural women who shape the destinies of men, and are often compared with the Greek Fates - arrive at the birth of the protagonist, Gestr. Although representations of norns and their numbers vary in Old Norse literature, in this tale (as in the poetic Edda) they arrive in a more distinct group of three: Urðr, Verðandi and Skuld. The first two bless the child with good fortune but Skuld, feeling slighted, declares that the baby will live no longer than the burning time of a nearby candle. Ironically, this works to the child's advantage, as Urðr immediately extinguishes it and gives it to his

[72]See 'Notes', *Collected Poems*, p. 276.

mother for safekeeping. He later takes ownership of the partially-burned candle, which allows him to live for three hundred years.[73] These links with, and potential allusions to old Norse mythology, imbue the Sleeping Beauty reference's proximity in the poem to the figure of Thor with a deeper significance. Interpreted in the light of such narratives, the three sinister figures around Plath's crib, with their strong links to needlework ('heads like darning eggs') could be seen as norns, who have often been portrayed as weavers in popular retellings, although in actual fact, as Karen Bek-Pedersen points out, they rarely engaged in the craft in Old Norse sources.[74]

The other Old Norse precursor to Sleeping Beauty is the story of the valkyrie Brynhildr being pricked by a sleep thorn and woken by the hero Sigurðr.[75] The figures could thus also be interpreted as valkyries, who, while in Old Norse tradition are very distinct from Norns, thematically overlap with them in post medieval texts regarding their control over men' s destinies, and also have some literary associations with weaving.[76] Such associations had entered mainstream literature with the publication of Thomas Gray's poem 'The Fatal Sisters: An Ode' in 1769 - a version of the poem *Darraðarljoð* in *Njals Saga*, in which valkyries use dismembered body parts and entrails to weave destinies in the context of battle.[77]

On one level, it is not worth demarcating either category too specifically: much as the various threads of mythology which Mallet confused, the figures of valkyries and norns have been confused and intermingled for a long time in Western literature, and are only large threads in a larger thematic textile of mysterious, supernatural women who weave. If we follow these associations to their full extent, and interpret them as valkyrie *or* norn-like (i.e. somehow connected to this raft of mixed tropes), Plath's muses become representatives, not only of a self-dubbed misfit child, but also of the very powerful, female brand of supernatural power which forms a strong baseline in Northern European mythology and literature. Such power holds an agency independent from archetypal, blustering males like Thor, and has long been alternatively vilified and fetishised within older, patriarchal frameworks of popular culture.[78] Nowadays, as mentioned in my introduction,

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[73]'Nornagests þáttr', *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* Vol. 1, Guðni Jónsson (ed.) (Reykjavík, 1954), pp.305-35. Although it is not a particularly well-known text, a good English version of this story can also be found in Nora Kershaw, *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past* (Cambridge, 1921), pp. 11-37.

[74]K. Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology* (Edinburgh, 2011), p. 123.

[75]Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 16 and p. 19.

[76]For an interesting, and recent take on certain links between the motifs of weaving, memorialization, destruction, women and valkyries in Old Norse texts, see H. O'Donoghue, 'Figura in Njáls saga', *Saga-Book* 42 (London, 2018), pp. 153-66.

[77]See *Gray's Poems* (London, 1768), pp. 73-84.

[78]There are far too many examples of such portrayals of powerful female figures to mention in full here, simply because such tropes have seemingly lasted as long as (and before) literature existed, and they appear in every known literary period. For more detailed summaries of the portrayal of supernatural female figures in Old Norse texts, see, for instance, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature : Bodies, Words, and Power* (London, 2013), Ármann Jakobsson, 'Oedipal Conflict', *The Troll Inside You* (Santa Barbara, 2017), pp. 113-17, J. Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 2016), and M. Roby et al. 'The Licit Love Visit: Masculine Sexual Maturation and the

representations of this nordic female power have become far more mainstream feminist signifiers, ranging from fictional and mythological portrayals in literature to female singers who harness mythological and historical detail as part of their performance.[79] As a group, this supernatural category can be said to encompass not only norn and valkyrie-like figures, but witches, seeresses (like the speaker of *Vǫluspá*) elves, giantesses and trolls. It is also present, not only in representations of leading females from Old Norse sources, but in representations of Anglo Saxon heroines like Judith and Wealtheow (who, as Helen Damico has shown, share some traits with certain literary representations of valkyries), and with later strong-willed medieval fantasy heroines.[80] As I shall later show, the more general power model of the supernatural nordic female manifested itself in the goddess-like figures Plath would evoke in her poetry; suffice to say here that it was clearly present in her mind, and had been for some time thanks to her contextual reading.

However, one particular reference provides a key indicator of the centrality of valkyries in particular within her personal mythos. In a letter from April 1953, four years before she wrote 'The Disquieting Muses,' Plath wrote a birthday poem for her mother:

> If I were a Walküre
> Full of sound and fury
> I'd mount my trusty stallion
> And with a whoop Valhallian cry
> Happy Birthday[81]

This is the most explicit clue as to her subconscious associations with valkyries. Both the birthday valkyrie here and the later potential references to norns in 'The Disquieting Muses' can, in part, be attributed to her reading of a variety of sources. Aside from any uncatalogued story collections Plath read, among the examples of literature already discussed above we can probably trace some of her inspiration to the aforementioned Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, which references the love rivalry of the valkyrie Brynhildr and Guðrun (on which more below), and, alongside descriptions of various powerful, whetting and vengeful women, also contains a number of references to Thor. We can also consider *Wind of the Vikings* as an inspirational possibility, since

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"Temporary Troll Lover" Trope', in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature* (London, 2020), pp. 37–58. The category of powerful, sensationalized female figures in Old Norse receptions is even wider, due to its overlap with other mythological, folkloric and gothic genres: two good examples of uncanny female figures 'enhanced' by the Romantic-Victorian male gaze include Walter Scott's crazed seeress Norna in *The Pirate* (Edinburgh, 1822) and Henry Rider Haggard's seductive, evil Swanhild who plots to disrupt the loving couple in *Eric Brighteyes* (Michigan, 1891).

[79]For instance, Genevieve Gornichec's *The Weaver and the Witch Queen* (London, 2023) is one very recent example of a feminist Old Norse receptions work about supernatural and magical women. In entertainment, Lagertha from the hit TV series *Vikings* is a figure much coloured by valkyrie and shield maiden tropes, and female artists inspired by rituals and the supernatural include Maria Franz of *Heilung* and Lindy-Fay Hella of *Wardruna* (see conclusion).

[80]H. Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow And the Valkyrie Tradition.* (Madison, 1984).

[81]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 24th April 1953, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 596.

Cormack compares her strong-willed and brilliant heroine Karin to 'a valkyrie of the storm' in a dramatic sea scene - a reference which, though it had little real use in enlightening young readers about valkyries in Old Norse literature, might have been recognised due its appearance in other stories.[82] A child with Plath's drive for shareable knowledge would probably have looked the word 'valkyrie' up in the dictionary, and there is a very good chance her mother first explained them to her. Other possibilities also present themselves; while there is no evidence that Plath read Matthew Arnold's 'Balder Dead', she certainly read, and was profoundly moved by 'The Forsaken Merman', and so might have explored Arnold's other works without recording the fact.[83] With reference to grim female figures or spirits, it is possible that at some point she encountered the doom-laden 'Valkyriur Song' by Felicia Hemans, or Thomas Gray's 'The Fatal Sisters: An Ode.' The latter especially would have been a good model for Plath's disquieting muses, who also determine the pattern of her life in the poem; the potential (albeit a slim one) of her having read Gray further raises the possibility that these figures could be interpreted as valkyries rather than norns.[84] Any, and all, of these could have contributed something to her understanding and visualisation of valkyries.

However, to chart the most concrete beginning of Plath's exposure to the Old Norse canon, and the most viable source for a norn reading of her bald muses, and the source of the valkyrie birthday poem, we must turn to a different keystone text she imbibed, which inspired so many later populist depictions of valkyries, and whose author read many of the same translations and studies of Old Norse as Longfellow: the libretti of Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*.[85] In this text, disruptive magic, martial feminine willpower and suicide became the ultimate plot vehicles, the sleeping Brynhildr is a highly rebellious, yet emotionally sensitive figure who falls prey to fate, and the norns feature distinctively as spinning figures similar to the Greek Fates and Shakespeare's witches - a framing that very closely matches the power balance between the muses and the female persona in 'The Disquieting Muses'. Once we analyse Plath's writing as a whole in conjunction with certain themes in Wagner, it becomes evident that this was a baseline text which would affect her subconsciousness for the rest of her life, and play a great deal into her ideas of self-empowerment. In the next section, I shall more fully analyse Wagner's apparent influence on the young Plath, and how she went on to build on the mythos of the valkyrie in her later life and works.

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[82]See Cormack, *Wind of the Vikings*, p. 45. Crucially for the young Plath, there is also a teenage love plot in this novel, in which this strong-willed young woman has *Friðþjófs saga*-themed adventures with, and falls for her (implied) future husband: a tall, dark, strapping Orkney lad who wants to be a ship builder. This aligns extremely well with Plath's reading of Wagner, as will become clear.

[83]Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, p. 32.

[84]It is also possible, albeit more unlikely, that Plath came across Julia Clinton Jones's *Valhalla: A Saga in Twelve Parts* either during earlier library forays or at university; as a potential source of Old Norse inspiration, this work would align better with other, more sexual motifs in Plath's poems than those found in 'The Disquieting Muses'.

[85]Thurin, *The American Discovery of the Norse*, p. 21.

Plath, Wagner and the Valkyrie mythos

According to her diary, the eleven year-old Sylvia Plath first finished reading Wagner's *The Ring of the Niblung* (which I shall refer to hereafter as *The Ring*) on the 20th January 1944, while ill at home with a cold.[86] It has been remarked upon that Plath developed a certain relationship with the state of being ill, in terms of infection or injury; such a state permitted her to be vulnerable and unconditionally coddled, and so permitted a rest from perfectionism in whatever stage of life she found herself. This state of combined home comfort, indulgence and heightened vulnerability may have contributed in some way to the manner in which she read and received the material, and subsequently the profound effect on her it seemed to have. It was thanks to Wagner's magnum opus that she encountered norns and valkyries earlier than many children do, and - whether by chance or by choice - she would also go on to study secondary material pertaining to the Old Norse source texts as a part of her college education, meaning that she encountered this mythological material twice at pivotal times in her development.

While the actual edition she read is uncertain, the date of reading and a later reference in her letters strongly imply that it was the 1911 version illustrated by Arthur Rackham: the octavo edition of the book was published by Doubleday in the United States, and would have been widely available.[87] Whatever the edition, however, it was a Christmas gift from Aurelia; considering her mother's enthusiasm for passing on her heritage, as well as her ambitious approach to education, it seems reasonable to suppose that the book became yet another fantasy Plath initially associated with the desire to please. Whether her enthusiasm for it began with an eye to pleasing her mother, however, the Old Norse motifs in *The Ring* would become some of the most significant influences upon Plath's imagination, her self-image and relationships and, as I shall show, her writing.

Precocious reader though Plath was, she still had a highly visual mindset, as evidenced by illustrations in her letters, and was at the age where eye-catching illustrations would have made a real difference in choosing between one book and another.[88] Rackham's rich, swirling renditions of gods, dragons, forests and otherworldly beings, whose burnished quality very closely mirrors the grandiosity of the mythological content, would have been incentive enough for any child to pick up what was an otherwise dense text, and Plath's letters make it clear he was a family favourite. Her description of a post-thunderstorm scene at camp in July 1946, '(like) one of Arthur Rackham's pictures...black, gnarled trees...' suggests that his work was very much at the forefront of Plath's

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[86]See Plath, *Diary*, 22nd Jan 1944, Plath mss. II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
[87]R. Wagner, *The Ring of the Niblung*, trans. Margaret Armour (New York, 1911). NB. Heather Clark says it was *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, but does not state any source other than Plath's diary. As Plath did not read German at this age, one can only assume that Clark is quoting the correct title of the original work rather than the edition Plath actually owned, or that Plath herself wanted to write down the original title.
[88]See illustration plates from Plath, *Letters* Volume I, pp. 236-42.

mind.[89] While this is not conclusive proof by itself that *The Ring*, and not just Rackham in general, was in her thoughts, and while we must also attribute some of the thinking behind the reference to Plath's virtue signalling (Arthur Rackham was an eminently suitable candidate for a model academic child to be seen to enjoy, much as an ambitious-minded child today might choose to refer to Beatrix Potter or, later, Philip Pullman and Tolkien), it is still important evidence of her tendency towards the Nordic fantasy mindset. It also seems reasonable to conclude that she might have been thinking of the dramatic scenery illustrated in *The Ring*, especially in the context of Thor-related weather. The illustrations would also have ensured the libretto's impact in a different way to opera, as they allow independence to a work otherwise dependent on extratextual factors like music for effect, giving it the more traditional appearance of a story book and thus encouraging it to be received as pure narrative, in spite of the clear character parts and performance directions within its layout. It was in this form that Plath unconsciously absorbed a great many of the major motifs which form the bedrock of Old Norse myth and legend, albeit in a much altered framework.

Although it may seem intuitive that the operas themselves constitute most people's first experience of *The Ring*, it is just as likely that many children who, like Plath, were too young to be exposed to opera, had their first encounter with Wagner's work, and with Old Norse mythology, through this very book. Its potential effect upon creative and romantically-minded children is very well evidenced by the reaction of C.S. Lewis, who encountered both the works of Wagner and further works from the Old Norse canon as a result of reading the Rackham version. Lewis documented his rapturous encounter with it, and the ways in which it dramatically altered his life, outlook and creative endeavours, in no uncertain terms:

> My eye fell upon a headline and a picture, carelessly, expecting nothing. A moment later, as the poet says, "The sky had turned round." What I had read was the words *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. What I had seen was one of Arthur Rackham's illustrations to that volume...Pure "Northernness" engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity... and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago (it hardly seems longer now) in *Tegner's Drapa*, that Siegfried (whatever it might be) belonged to the same world as Balder and the sunward-sailing cranes. And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country...I found the very book which had started the whole affair and which I had never dared to hope I should see, *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods* illustrated by Arthur Rackham. His pictures, which seemed to me then to be the very music made visible, plunged me a few fathoms deeper into my delight...

Although this affair will already seem to some readers undeserving of the space I have given it, I cannot continue my story, at all without noting some of its bearings on the rest of my life...First, you will

[89]Plath, *Letters* Vol.I, p. 74.

misunderstand everything unless you realise that, at the time, Asgard and the Valkyries seemed to me incomparably more important than anything else in my experience--than the Matron Miss C., or the dancing mistress, or my chances of a scholarship. More shockingly, they seemed much more important than my steadily growing doubts about Christianity...Secondly, this imaginative Renaissance almost at once produced a new appreciation of external nature. At first, I think, this was parasitic on the literary and musical experiences. On that holiday at Dundrum, cycling among the Wicklow mountains, I was always involuntarily looking for scenes that might belong to the Wagnerian world, here a steep hillside covered with firs where Mime might meet Sieglinde, there a sunny glade where Siegfried might listen to the bird, or presently a dry valley of rocks where the lithe scaly body of Fafner might emerge from its cave...[90]

Although Plath does not go into the detail Lewis does on *The Ring*, it seems reasonable to suppose that her emotional reaction to such romantic impressions of 'Northernness' might have been similarly powerful, and that it was through the same book's influence that she, too, began imposing both Old Norse and more vaguely Nordic motifs onto her own landscapes and creations (which I shall examine later), and to explore further into the Old Norse canon. As a child more than usually conscious of Germanic literature and proud of her roots, who spoke of the purity of Middle Earth in such glowing terms, it is also likely that Lewis's feelings of spiritual homecoming would have resonated with her in a similar, and perhaps even more patriotic manner.

It is important to specify here that, although the plots of the four operas which make up The Ring are a conglomeration of storylines, figures and themes gleaned from several medieval sources, and High German texts like *Das Nibelungenlied* and *Der Lied vom Hürnen Seyfrid* were an important source of inspiration, Árni Björnsson's in-depth study *Wagner and the Volsungs* demonstrates that it was, in fact, Old Norse - specifically Old Icelandic - sources from which Wagner drew the greater part of his material.[91] During the composer's lifetime, Germany was further ahead than many countries in its revival of Old Norse, and both scholars and artists had begun to show a more regular interest in the source material. The contemporary presence of translators like der Hagen, Simrock and Grimm, writers like De La Motte Fouqué and publishers like his friend Ludwig Ettmüller all ensured that Wagner had a keen awareness of Old Norse as a source of inspiration from the beginning of his career. With an academic-minded uncle in possession of an excellent library, it is likely (although there is no definitive catalogue to prove exactly which books were in the collection) that he at least had access to most of the small literary selection on Old Norse that had been published from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards.[92] The most notable texts Wagner took inspiration from in writing the libretti were *Völsunga saga*, the Poetic and Prose Eddas

[90]C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York, 1985), pp. 106-14.
[91]See Árni Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs: Icelandic Sources of Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (London, 2003).
[92]Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs*, pp. 91-7.

and *Þiðreks saga,* with some small details from *Heimskringla*, *Egils saga* and *Gísla saga*.[93] It is fair to say, therefore, that any impression the young Plath received of Norse mythology, although inevitably subject to Wagner's own particular reception of it, was not as far removed as one might expect from the source texts themselves.

While it would take too long, and would be irrelevant for the purposes of this thesis to analyse exactly which narrative strands came from which sources and how they have been altered by Wagner (and Arni Björnsson has already done this in depth), some key motifs as they appear in the opera are notable, both in terms of their relationship with the original sources and of the impressions Plath would have absorbed from them as a child (although later she would have the opportunity to study them in their medieval forms). Most relevant to her later writing are the idea of giants as sexually rapacious and domineering, the conglomerate themes of sacrifice, fire, love and revenge, the power of suicide, and the fear of weakness or loss of power in falling in love. Overall, with regards to both the theme of female agency and her own poetic development, the central Old Norse figures who seemingly inspired Plath are Wagner's representation of valkyries (which suggests a more concrete parallel between her reaction and Lewis's) and, most importantly, the central female character Brünnhilde, and her relationship with Siegfried. Even though Brünnhilde was never referred to directly in any of Plath's poems (or, apparently, her journals) by name, this particular valkyrie nevertheless became an influence in the her imaginative landscape to the extent that her friend Suzette Macedo, with whom she had been close near the time of her split from Hughes, directly referred to 'Siegfried and Brünnhilde fantasies' in an interview with Elaine Feinstein (1999), when referencing the late Plath's romantic tendencies.[94] The potential that such an influence might even have been partially subconscious in such a self-analytical writer only serves to suggest its power. The valkyrie would be Plath's first model for numerous poetic personae she later inhabited in her keynote works: favourite child, rebel, prized lover, superhuman goddess, dishonoured victim, angry avenger, and noble suicide.

Wagner's reception of Valkyries

By including valkyries in *The Ring* at all, Wagner was adopting a purely Old Norse motif, as there are none named in Old German literature.[95] However, one of the main problems in assessing the importance of the valkyrie figure as Wagner, and subsequently Plath, received it, is the fact that

[93]Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs*, p. 103. For a full, comprehensive analysis of the ways in which each source text contributed to the overall plot of *The Ring*, complete with charts, see pp. 128-274 of the book in question.
[94]The 'fantasy' to which Machedo refers appears in 'Ted Hughes corrected interviews & misc. Material' (1994-2001), Papers of Elaine Feinstein. University of Manchester Library. GB 133 EFP/4/4/10.
[95]Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs*, p. 156.

there is more than one level of interpretation to work through. Valkyries are notoriously difficult to define in a literary sense, as they are known only by a few allusions in Old Norse texts. Medieval sources differ greatly in their depictions of valkyries' appearances, specific actions and behavioural traits. Moreover, not only are some of these sources more vague than others, it is also greatly important to remember that the depiction of these supernatural women also varies depending on their apparent function within each source text. The more concrete image of the helmeted, spear-wielding maiden which features in modern popular culture has, much like the libretti of *The Ring* cycle, evolved from a conglomeration of these Old Norse literary motifs, and that is, in great part, due to the work of Wagner.

One of the most concise break-downs of the medieval figure of the valkyrie, which compiles and compares motifs from different Old Norse sources fairly successfully to form an overall picture, can be found in *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World* by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. In her introduction to the book, the author neatly summarises that valkyries (or *valkyrjur*) are traditionally shown as female supernatural beings who choose which men die and which live on the battlefield, protecting some but guiding spears and arrows towards others. She also clearly outlines the extreme ends of the scale of their depiction in Old Norse literature, from the highly violent, 'gleeful' beings of *Darraðarljoð* to the 'pithy and anaemic' version that Snorri presents, whose serving role is emphasised as much as the fighting one.[96] However, even with the most helpful showcasing and summarisation of literary versions, the problem of glossing still remains; as Wendolyn Weber points out, we must also take into account the double potential for bias in valkyrie depiction. In the first place, there is the possible bias from medieval authors like Snorri, who perhaps imposed more Christianised serving wench characteristics upon traditionally less docile valkyrie figures, either from personal preference, or because of the inherent conservatism in their intended readership that might otherwise prevent publication. There is also a danger of bias from later 19th-20th century translators, who were similarly inclined to bowdlerise and soften depictions of strong females, so as to keep them within the bounds of conventional attractiveness and decency, as opposed to the more recent, aforementioned enthusiasm for discovering and highlighting fiercer characteristics in female figures from medieval literature - an approach which, though understandable in the light of recent social politics, currently risks imposing more chutzpah/agency upon these figures than may have actually been the case.[97]

Even before we begin to analyse the effects of Wagner's use of medieval valkyrie material upon its further reception by writers like Plath, we must take into account the uncertainty of the definition of 'valkyrie' as the composer himself received it, due to the inconsistencies of depiction between Old Norse source texts. Suffice to say that academic efforts to produce more detailed definitions of

[96]Friðriksdóttir, 'Introduction', *Valkyrie : The Women of the Viking World* (London, 2020), pp. 1-7.
[97]W. Weber, 'Transmitting Fantasies: Sexist Glossing, Scholarly Desires, and Translating the Heroic Woman in Medieval Germanic Literature,' *Translation Studies* 5:3, pp. 312-26.

the literary valkyrie figure are still ongoing. Matthias Egeler has written a detailed comparison of literary valkyries with sirens and Irish *bodbs*, and Luke John Murphy at the University of Iceland has also written a comprehensive work on the evolution of the valkyrie figure, compared to other female spirits in Old Norse culture, from both a literary and archaeological perspective.[98] Unlike these works, the purpose of the current thesis is not to attempt to hone such definitions any further, nor to refer to all the texts in which they appear, but rather to recall the range of fascinatingly contradictory traits which made their way into Wagner's consciousness from the Old Norse sources he is most likely to have read. Rather than the linear evolution of one figure, therefore, this is a study of several, interlocking layers of receptions; the next section will briefly summarise the impressions formed by major Old Norse source texts, and the qualities that have since made their way into later artistic receptions.

Old Norse Literary Depictions of Valkyries

Valkyrjur (as I shall in future refer to the Old Norse versions of this literary figure, in order to separate them from the later Wagnerian variety) are often described in a way that is set apart from the more multidimensional world of female spirits known collectively as *dísir*, in that they were specifically depicted as battle spirits in most cases. Apart from the use of the noun '*valkyrjur*,' which does not always appear as a marker, the feature which often separates them from more generic spirits is their wearing of armour and bearing weapons. Their guidance of slain warriors, however, which has become a strongly-defined cultural motif referenced by many modern writers including Terry Pratchett, was not always so clearly defined in some Old Norse texts (although in these cases it is debatable whether the lack of clarity is due to the already-vague outlines of the literary definition of *valkyrjur*, or simply that they came with such strong cultural pre-definitions that writers saw no need to elaborate on their role).[99] In some of the texts Wagner studied, their exact role is more nebulous; the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá,* for example, simply describes a company of *valkyrjur* riding together, and only mentions their purpose to join battle on the side of the gods at Ragnarök:

> Sá hón valkyrior
> vítt um komnar,
> gǫrvar at ríða
> til Goðþjóðar;
> Skuld helt skildi,

[98]See M. Egeler, *Walküren, Badba, Sirenen* (Berlin, 2010), especially the very useful tables, and L. J. Murphy's MA thesis undertaken at the University of Iceland, *Herjans Dísir: Valkyrjur, Supernatural Femininities, and Elite Warrior Culture in the Late Pre-Christian Iron Age* (Reykjavík, 2013).
[99]T. Pratchett, *Soul Music*, (London, 1994), p. 78.

en Skǫgul ǫnnor,
Gunnr, Hildr, Gǫndul
ok Geirskǫgul.

Nú ero talðar
nǫnnor Herians,
gǫrvar at ríða
grund, valkyrior. [100]

She saw valkyries coming from far and wide, ready to ride to the gods' realm; Skuld shouldered one shield, Skogul was another, Gunn, Hild, Gondul and Geir-skogul - now the general's ladies are counted up, valkyries ready to ride over the earth.[101]

Here, while we do have evidence of their warlike appearance, we have only been notified of their intention to fight at the end of days. The word 'grund' (earth) refers to the earth they fly over, and so has no real significance with regards to human contact. The less specific description of their role in this case, however, seems less to do with the *valkyrjur* specifically being portrayed as mysterious than the nature of the poem itself; *Vǫluspá*is a dramatic, sweeping overview of Old Norse creation through the eyes of a seeress, which refers only allusively to many of the major events and figures mentioned in greater detail in *Snorra Edda*, meaning that all references made in it are fleeting and seem to assume pre-knowledge. It is noteworthy that the *valkyrja* name 'Skuld' (which particularly pertains to destiny, in that it can be translated 'shall' or the concept of debt) is also the name of a norn, when they appear as a threesome. Moreover, in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri refers to Skuld as the youngest valkyrie - a position parallel to her being the youngest norn in *Nornagests þáttr*. This highlights more than ever the overlapping nature of norns and valkyries in matters of fate and destiny in Old Norse literature.[102] In contrast to *Vǫluspá,* the very human-oriented praise poem *Hákonarmál* shows Odin sending the *valkyrjur* Gǫndul and Skǫgul 'at kjósa of konunga' (to choose between kings), and to bring the selected kin of Yngvi from the field to Valhalla.[103] In this context, their role is far more specific; they are not only actively controlling the outcome of a mortal battle and choosing those whom they believe worthy (although there is still some element of subservience to Odin), but are also the guardians and escorts of that selected human elite, and, moreover, form a connection with the humans in their charge, with both speaking directly to Hákon. They are intimidating figures when they arrive, addressing him from horseback in full battle gear, but are also, interestingly, described as 'hyggiliga' - prudent - which allows them a

[100] *Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda. Vol. 2, Mythological Poems*, U. Dronke (ed.) (Oxford, 1997), strophe 30, p. 15.
[101] 'The Seeress's Prophecy', *The Poetic Edda,* trans. C. Larrington (Oxford, 2014), strophe 31, p. 8.
[102] Bek-Pedersen, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology,* p. 86.
[103] R.D. Fulk, '(Introduction to) Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Hákonarmál*', in D. Whaley (ed.) *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035* (Turnhout, 2012), strophe 1, p. 171.

striking balance of both masculine, martial power and more traditionally female poise in the eyes of the men.

Along with their levels of agency and responsibility, the depicted literary behaviours of the *valkyrjur* themselves towards mortal men are similarly variable. Some are shown forming and initiating strong relationships with mortals, as evidenced by the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* in which the *valkyrja* Sigrún seeks out and, having been propositioned in no uncertain terms, offers to marry the hero if he can defeat her father's chosen suitor Höðbrodd - a man she describes as 'konung óneisan sem kattar son' (a king as impressive as a kitten).[104] In these lines, she displays a striking independence of mind, sharpness of wit and a clear hunger for a sexual relationship with the worthiest mate according to Old Norse social standards. It is also worth mentioning that Sigrún has a mixed and rather confusing identity; she is a mortal king's daughter (which might go some way towards explaining her sexual appetite for a mortal man) but is identified as a *valkyrja* by the poet, and also reborn as one after her death.[105] In cases like hers (and, in some texts, Brynhildr, as we shall show), the term *valkyrja* can seem to refer as much to a warlike quality and choice of life as to a supernatural status, and seems to have been confused with or made the equivalent of the term *skjaldmær* ('shieldmaiden'), human females who choose a warrior life. This, then, is a use of the word '*valkyrja*' which reflects a state of mind rather than an actual otherworldly identity. Sometimes, however, literary valkyries' feelings for mankind are less positively depicted, and their distance from humanity emphasised. In the Eddic praise-poem *Hrafnsmál*, the unnamed *valkyrja* is portrayed, unlike Sigrún, as an otherworldly creature through and through - desirable, but defiantly aloof:

> Vitr þóttisk valkyrja;
> verar né óru þekkir
> feimu inni framsóttu,
> es fugls rǫdd kunni.
> Kvaddi in kverkhvíta
> ok in glæ*hvarma
> Hymis hausreyti,
> es sat á horni of bjarga.

(The valkyrie thought herself wise; men were not pleasing to the aggressive maid, who understood the voice of the bird. The white-throated and bright-eyelashed one greeted the skull-picker of Hymir <giant> (RAVEN), which sat on the edge of a cliff.)[106]

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[104]J. Vésteinn and Ólason Kristjánsson, *Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði* (Reykjavík, 2014), strophe 18, p. 250.
[105]*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, in E. Pettit (ed. and trans.) *The Poetic Edda: Dual Language Edition* (Cambridge, 2023), strophe 18, p. 393.
[106]Þorbjǫrn Hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál),* trans. R.D. Fulk, in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, p. 91, strophe 2.

This scornful attitude is reflective of the purpose of the poem, however, in that, along with the raven to whom she speaks, the figure of the valkyrja here is a framing device rather than a developed persona, her questions designed to reveal little by little the worthiness of the poem's subject - King Haraldr hárfagri 'Fine-hair' Hálfdanarson. The poem does not exactly depict a conversion of her attitude, and we are never given the valkyrja persona's direct assurance that her dislike of men has met its exception in Haraldr, but nevertheless her initial negativity is followed by increasingly specific and positively-worded questions:

'Hversu es fégjafal,
þeim es fold verja,
ítr* ógnflýtir
við íþróttarmenn sína?'

(How generous is [he] to those who guard [his] land, the excellent war-hastener [WARRIOR} to his men of skills?')[107]

This unfolding tone of positivity and curiosity (much in the manner of a job interview, she goes as far as asking about his provisions for courtly entertainment) is all part of her poetic function, which is to make the subject seem even more praiseworthy by dint of arousing her hard-won admiration.

On the other side of the coin to these assertive characters, the literary *valkyrja* also exists in the guise of serving maiden. The role of *valkyrjur* in bolstering and flattering a warlike male ego has extended as far as their being a kind of glorified waitress in Valhalla, serving beer to the chosen - an image which, tellingly, grew more sexualised in Victorian literature.[108] Different levels of importance have been afforded this aspect of *valkyrjur* in Old Norse. In the Eddic poem *Grímnismál*, the tormented Odin speaks of the *valkyrjur* as beer-bringers to the warriors. While the poet does not use the noun '*valkyrjur*', some of the womens' names (Hildr, Skeggiǫld and Skǫgul among them) are recognisable *valkyrja* names from the poem *Vǫluspá*, and so their use here suggests they are from that same group of supernatural females.[109] Interestingly, in defining *valkyrjur* to his readers, Snorri quotes this section of *Grímnismál* in *Gylfaginning* before stating that they are also sent to war by Odin, thus prioritising their serving duties over their military ones.[110] In *Skáldskaparmál,* he also quotes the poem *Eiríksmál*, in which Odin describes a vision to Bragi, saying that he asked the *valkyrjur* 'vín bera' ('to bear wine') as if a king were coming - a line

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[107] *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)*, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, p. 91, strophe 15.
[108] O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, p. 78.
[109] *Grímnismál*, *The Poetic Edda* Vol. 2, strophe 36, p. 120.
[110] Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda,* Anthony Faulkes (ed.) (London: Everyman, 1995) p. 31.

which, rather confusingly, could indicate either a more general usage of *valkyrjur* as serving maidens, or that they only serve drinks on very special occasions when the personage is extremely high powered.[111] These two references are potentially given importance because, whether as a Christian himself or because he was writing for a Christian readership, Snorri was trying to play down aggressively sexual female behaviour and balance it out with the image of a more docile, feminine figure. Damico has charted several parallels between *valkyrjur* and mortal queens in identifying a base germanic 'genotype' of peace weaver, whose proffering of the mead cup is not only hospitable but highly ritualistic and symbolic of the power to alter the course of events.[112] It is also possible, within the performance space of the poem, that the mention of these supernatural women bringing drink might have been more of a performative technique, which the poet used to call for beer or to encourage others to drink. Overall, there is no way of telling whether the serving maid image came before that of psychopomp in public and poetic interpretations of *valkyrjur* in Old Norse, as both sides coexist in the accounts we have received as scholars. Nevertheless, this more domestic impression of *valkyrjur* is one that has remained strongly in literary and public consciousness, presumably as it has better served patriarchal fantasies across the board.

Another, very striking aspect of the literary *valkyrja* figure that must be mentioned, however, is as a type of witch, or other malevolent supernatural power. In this guise, she is not merely threatening because of her fierceness, but for far more sinister, emotional reasons. Probably the most famous example of this depiction occurs in the poem *Darraðarljoð* in *Njáls saga*, which is likely to have been an earlier text in its own right separately from the saga, and which Thomas Gray took as his inspiration for 'The Fatal Sisters.'[113] In the poem, the tall, sinister figures of *valkyrjur*, in a manner reminiscent of Macbeth's more modern witches, chant and weave mens' destinies using human guts as wool and skulls as weights. Heather O'Donoghue has drawn some extremely interesting parallels between the bloody, torn tapestry of entrails in *Darraðarljoð* and content from two other famous saga scenes. The first is an earlier scene from the same saga as the poem, in which Hildigunnr (whose name, rather tellingly, derives from the names of two *valkyrjur*) confronts her kinsman Flosi; this scene involves a torn hand towel and the slain Höskuldr's cloak, which 'rains blood' as Hildigunnr symbolically drapes it over Flosi's shoulders, goading him to shoulder the duty of vengeance for her murdered husband. The second scene is from *Laxdæla saga*, in which Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir greets her husband Bolli Bollasson on his return home from killing Kjartan, her former suitor and love interest; her comments on the contrast between women weaving and men killing (ironic, as her goading remarks caused Bolli to take part in the killing) seem to echo the motifs of the bloody tapestry and the destinies woven by the valkyrjur in *Darraðarljoð.* Both of these instances are clear examples of a saga writer echoing a more forceful, gruesome depiction of

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[111]Chadwick, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems* (Cambridge: University Press, 1922) p96, stanza 1, trans. Faulkes, Anthony, *Edda: Snorri Sturluson*, p. 69.
[112]See, for instance, Damico, *Beowulf's Wealhtheow And the Valkyrie Tradition*, p. 41.
[113]Gray, 'The Fatal Sisters,' *Poems*, pp. 49-52.

behaviour, and one clearly identified with pre-existing literary valkyrja figures (whether the original poem was older in origin than the sagas in question or the imagery used was part of an established tradition), in a human female character.[114]

While it would take a separate thesis to explore the possible implications, positive and negative, behind such a choice of imagery in relation to these literary womens' behaviour, what we can conclude is that strong, decisive, and violent female behaviour seems to have been inherently linked in Old Norse collective social and literary consciousness with the magical and supernatural, in a way that masculine decisiveness and violence were not. A further example of a witchlike *valkyrja* figure occurs in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, during the section in which Helgi and Höðbrodd exchange pre-battle insults:

> Þú vart in skœða,
> skass, valkyrja,
> ǫtul, ámáttlig,
> at Alfǫður;
> mundu einherjar
> allir berjask,
> svévís kona,
> um sakar þínar.[115]

(You were a harmful creature, a witch, a valkyrie, horrible, unnatural, with All-Father; all the Einheriar had to fight, headstrong woman, on your account.)[116]

Here, 'valkyrja,' despite the fact that it occurs in the competitive setting of a flyting (and so perhaps pertains more to the receiver of the insult in its suggestion of *ergi* than to actual *valkyrjur*,) becomes a troubling term, suggesting the kind of disruptive, or deviant sexual power that creates discord.

Ultimately, the fascination with *valkyrjur* as literary figures seems to tie with the fact that they may represent several desirable or extraordinary qualities at once, and representations of them can be paradoxical intertextually. They are sometimes presented as humans, sometimes as spirits, but even in human form there is something magical or otherworldly about them. They are to be feared, but also welcomed depending on the story in which they appear. They can serve or master, and be seen as a blessing or a curse. Their free will is questionable, as they are often paradoxically portrayed making choices, but still ultimately answering to Odin. There is a fluctuating blend of male and

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[114]O'Donoghue, 'Figura in Njáls saga,' *Saga-Book*, vol. 42, 2018, pp. 153–66.
[115]Kristjánsson and Ólason, *Eddukvæði,* Volume 2: *Hetjukvæði* (Reykjavík, 2014), p. 254, strophe 38.
[116]Larrington, 'The First Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani', *The Poetic Edda*, p. 115.

female in their depiction between texts, such that it has even been argued they constitute their own, separate gender.[117] They are often portrayed as beings set apart from humanity, but their attractiveness and potential for a more human kind of love is also often inherent in their appearance and strength of character, and in how other mortal characters react to them within narratives. They are capable of serious passion, of a directness in choosing that would be less seemly in a mortal woman, and of a burning scorn for any they find unworthy. All these ideas about valkyries, as I shall show, would become very important to Plath. Furthermore, in their more deviant literary forms, they are shown to be capable of wreaking sexual or magical havoc, and their names can become as much of a slur as 'witch'. Were they more easily defined, they would arguably be less fascinating, and their dramatic and disruptive potential would be lessened.

Ultimately, however, whatever variations the form of the literary *valkyrja* takes, and however impossible it is to define exactly what makes one in Old Norse terms, some general conclusions as to their nature and behaviour can be drawn from the above sources. All sources depict them as females of some level of divine status, whether born as such or awarded through merit, and with a power of varying levels over mortal men, whether antagonistic or benign. The main problem with interpretation of such personae is that any compilation of sources leads to rather self-contradictory figures and plots, the most notable example being *Völsunga saga*, as we shall see. It is this literary figure, with all its contradictions, which Wagner was to encounter and make his own through the epic framework of *The Ring*, and which, through his works, would go on to fuel Plath's passion in building her own mythology of a supreme poetic persona. As well as representing a conglomeration of the *valkyrja*'s various identities, however, Wagner also had the difficult task of compiling and adapting the specific sources pertaining to his leading heroine Brünnhilde, who was a character in her own right long before the operatic version of her existed.

Wagner's reception of Brynhildr from Old Norse sources

It is mainly thanks to the efforts of Wagner that the conglomerate story of Brünnhilde in the operas has become so well-known. She is rescued by Siegfried from an enchanted sleep on a mountain, falls in love with and is promised to him. She is betrayed, either by the hero's design or others' (see below): Siegfried marries Gutrune, and in turn wins her as a wife for Gutrune's brother Gunther. Realising the deception, she calls for Siegfried's murder to regain her honour and get revenge, and then spectacularly commits suicide on his funeral pyre. This figure, and her love story, have been reproduced, adapted and parodied many times in popular culture. Following the legend's aggrandisement in Nazi political propaganda, Disney lampooned it in his own war propaganda film, portraying Germany as an overweight, passive, beer-fuddled maiden (Brünnhilde) in a horned

[117]See K. Self, 'The Valkyrie's Gender: Old Norse Shield-Maidens and Valkyries as a Third Gender', in *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 1 (2014), pp. 143-72.

helmet; she is woken and 'rescued' by a skinny, bellowing Adolf Hitler (Siegfried) in armour, who can barely support her bulk.[118] Later, Warner Brothers produced the cartoon short 'What's Opera, Doc?', in which Elmer Fudd (dressed as Siegfried) sings Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' theme to the words 'kill the wabbit, kill the wabbit,' then passionately pursues Bugs Bunny, disguised as the valkyrie Brünnhilde.[119] In Terry Pratchett's novel *Soul Music* (1994), Susan Death encounters a singing troupe of very robust, brisk valkyries - clearly a parody of both operatic and boarding school mistress stereotypes - who ask her what vocal part she is, in the hope of acquiring extra members.[120] Comic book lovers often meet this figure for the first time through the Marvel series about superheroine 'Valkyrie,' and even Paul Stewart's children's fantasy trilogy *Muddle Earth* (2003) pays tribute to her with the muscular character of Warrior Princess Brenda.[121]

These watered-down versions of the opera figure are all accessorised with some version of what has become the traditional costume of horned helmet, long hair and breastplate; they are testament to her cultural impact, and the strength of the heroic and romantic miasma surrounding her. However, although most valkyries in popular culture are now based on the Wagnerian Brünnhilde, to add complication upon compilation, not only is her valkyrie identity derived from an already-vague type of mythological being (as shown above), she herself is a distinct individual distilled from various legendary fragments, and conglomerations of fragmented, medieval sources, all of which present her story slightly differently. In all these different fragments, Brynhildr's status and origins are somewhat confused - it is never clear whether she is one of Odin's elect, a mortal king's daughter or both.[122] Although sources are inconsistent in some ways, the sum of these versions is suggestive of a further 'cloud' of unseen oral and textual versions which painted a well-known general picture; much like the literary *valkyrja*, there were clearly some common medieval assumptions as to her identity and character, which Wagner in turn adopted. At this point, it would be too much of a divergence to give a detailed account of the origins and/or chronologies of all the different, and highly complex medieval narratives about Brünnhilde in any real depth, as this topic has already been extensively covered (by T.M. Andersson especially).[123] The reception and emotional evolution of the literary figure in Wagner's eyes, however, is of great

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[118]'Education for Death' was produced by Disney in 1943.
[119]'What's Opera, Doc?' was produced by Warner Brothers in 1957.
[120]Pratchett, Terry, *Soul Music*, (London, 1994), p. 78.
[121]For a comprehensive list of Valkyrie's appearances in the Marvel franchise, see http://www.marvunapp.com/Appendix4/valkyriebrunhilde.htm (accessed 13th April, 2025). Warrior Princess Brenda appears in the third book of Stewart's initial trilogy; see P. Steward, 'Doctor Cuddles of Giggle Glade,' *Muddle Earth* (London, 2003).
[122]As Henry Adams Bellows eloquently summarises, "Brynhild's dual personality as a Valkyrie and as the daughter of Buthli has made plenty of trouble." See H. A. Bellows, *The Poetic Edda* (London, 1936), p. 385.
[123]For a fuller academic comparison and analysis of the various texts concerning Brynhildr, see T. M. Andersson, 'The Lays in the Lacuna of Codex Regius', in *Speculum Norroenum* (Odense, 1981), pp. 6-26, and 'Beyond Epic and Romance: Sigurðarkviða in ed. R.Simek *et al*., Meiri' in *Sagnaskemmtun : Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson* (Vienna, 1986), pp. 1-12 and *The Legend of Brynhild* (New York, 1980).

relevance, and therefore it is worth briefly summarising the key qualities communicated about her intertextually in Old Norse sources. While Edward Haymes rightly emphasises (in response to Bjornsson's analysis of the opera's overwhelming debt to Old Norse sources) the importance of the *Nibelungenlied* to the development of *The Ring*, the fact remains that Brünnhilde's most striking aspects as an operatic character are almost entirely due to Wagner's continuance and adaptation of the *valkyrja* traits in her medieval counterparts.[124] In the following section, I shall outline the facets of the character Wagner would have encountered from Old Norse literature, how they compare to the opera character, and the resulting impressions the young Plath would have received of her.[125]

There are many minor literary variations on the depiction of Brynhildr's relationship with the hero Sigurðr, his treatment of her, and her justifications for causing his death, and, again, any lacunae in detail may be down to differing versions, or simply to information considered too well-known to be repeated. The most upsetting plot (in terms of the hero's behaviour) is that of *Þiðreks saga*, which Wagner also mentions as a source. In this version, Brynhildr is promised marriage, then consciously abandoned by Sigurðr because she has no brothers whom he can acquire as allies, only to be raped by him later at the request of her frustrated husband, to whom she has refused marital sex (a disturbing element which Wagner does not replicate, but imitates in tonality as I shall show later).[126] One of Wagner's main sources for his heroine (and one he 'considered a spontaneous product of the *Volk*' and therefore an emotional work, before later scholarship proved the deliberateness in its curation) was the Poetic Edda.[127] Despite the fact that Brynhildr (as I shall call the medieval Old Norse figure from this point onwards to distinguish her from the Wagnerian heroine Brünnhilde) is rarely referred to explicitly as '*valkyrja*' in the Old Norse canon, in Eddic poetry her name could be seen as synonymous with the *valkyrja* name Hyld/Hildi. Her *valkyrja* identity is also heavily implied by her behaviour, and what she says about her upbringing. In her afterlife confrontation with a giantess in the poem *Helreið Brynhildar*, Brynhildr is dubbed 'Buðla dóttir' (suggesting she is mortal), but also claims she was a swan maiden, which have been depicted as powerful magical beings synonymous with *valkyrjur*.[128] This suggestion she is a *valkyrja* is bolstered by her claim that she was known by the warlike name 'Hildi undir hjalmi' ('under

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[124]See E. R. Haymes and K. Fugelso, 'The Ring of the Nibelung and the Nibelungenlied: Wagner's Ambiguous Relationship to a Source', in *Studies in Medievalism* 17 (London, 2009), pp. 218–46, and Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs* (London, 2003).

[125]It is important to mention at this point that, due to limited space for content, I have omitted the *Nibelungenlied* from this general source analysis, as a.) relating its connections (or lack thereof) to various Old Norse sources would make this chapter even more lengthy, b.) the most obvious inspiration in Wagner's Ring Cycle is Old Norse mythology and c.) there is very little to suggest that Sylvia Plath really engaged with this version of the story. It is certainly my intention to include material on the influence of the *Nibelungenlied* in Wagner's operas, and any awareness Plath might have had of the story, in a future monograph.

[126]See *Þiðreks saga af Bern* Volume 1, G. Jónsson (ed.) (Reykjavík, 1951).

[127]S. Spencer, 'Or Strike at Me Now as I Strangle thy Knee'; A Note on the Text and Translation' in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, S. Spencer (ed.) (London, 1993), pp. 11-13.

[128]For an example of similar swan/valkyrja maidens, see *Vǫlundarkviða*, *The Poetic Edda* Vol. 2, pp. 239-328.

helm/the helmed,' - very likely an epithet for 'valkyrja'), and inclined to go on viking expeditions in the manner of a warrior.[129]

An important part of her portrayal as a *valkyrja* in the Poetic Edda is her strong will and self-esteem, which leads her to rebel in trying to get her way. In *Helreið Brynhildar*, she recounts the story in which she deliberately caused Hjalmgunnar, King of the Goths, to lose a battle against Odin's wishes, received a prick with a sleep thorn as punishment (as previously mentioned, one root of the Sleeping Beauty myth) and was destined to be awoken by a hero who knew no fear, suggesting her romantic demands to be above that of mere mortals. This storyline is another example of the choosing motif with which *valkyrjur* have come to be associated, and also of their being linked with destiny in some manner. Moreover, unlike the *valkyrjur* of poems such as *Hákonarmál*, who have some agency in choosing but are also ultimately obedient to Odin, this trope indicates that Brynhildr has sufficient independence of mind to disobey the direct orders of a higher power, even if she doesn't get away with it. This not only echoes one of the common paradoxes in *valkyrjur* depictions which makes them fascinating - the combination of independence and servitude - but, in the case of Brynhildr, makes her doubly fascinating in that she combines an awe-inspiring willpower with a (Romantic and Victorian writers might have said typically feminine) human fallibility.

She is also clearly a skilled and arresting speaker: it is implied that she wins her poetic confrontation with the giantess, as the closing dismissal, 'Sökkstu, gýgjar kyn' ('sink, giant's kin') is hers. This is highly reminiscent of similar poetic confrontations within the eddas and sagas, the difference being that it is normally a male hero who is the victor against a female troll, human females and male trolls being less inclined to make their points through verse.[130] Brynhildr's victory here, therefore, indicates that she has supernatural powers of speech, which places her a step above mortal women in her bearing and talents. This also aligns her powers of speech with the destiny-sealing wordcraft of the more witchlike manifestations of *valkyrjur* found at the gory loom in *Darraðarljoð*, and their goading human female counterparts (or 'whetters') in the saga genre. The *Sigrdrífumál* fragment (or *Brynhildarljóð*, as the parts of it referred to in *Volsunga saga* are known) portrays a similar power with words in the ecstatic, hypnotically-worded verses of the awoken *valkyrja*. Here, it is mostly assumed that 'Sigrdrífa' (victory-bringer) is not a name in itself, but rather an epithet by which Brynhildr is alternatively known.[131] Crucially, the Brynhildr/*valkyrja* of *Sigrdrífumál* enacts

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[129]See K. Von See, *Kommentar Zu Den Liedern Der Edda* (Heidelberg, 1997), strophe 7, l.2 and strophe 3, l.2, p. 492.
[130]S. B. Straubhaar, 'Nasty, Brutish, and Large Cultural Difference and Otherness in the Figuration of the Trollwomen of the Fornaldar Sögur (Icelandic Legendary Sagas)', in *Scandinavian Studies* 73, no. 2 (Wisconsin, 2001), pp. 105-124.
[131]Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 384-385. Regarding this point, it seems worthwhile to mention, although there is little space to fully explore this, that the compiler of the Codex Regius plays a major role in our interpretation of Brynhildr as well. We could, as Bellows and many others do, take it for granted that the *valkyrja* Sigrdrifa and Brynhildr are one and the same figure, and that the compiler made this decision based on previously established narrative threads within oral and literary tradition. However, if we assume that originally they were two separate figures (as Carolyne Larrington

the combined roles of master and consort: while she teaches the hero runic lore reminiscent of the poem *Hávamál*, thus associating herself with both Odinic mysticism and the particular branches of magic commonly considered to be associated with Freyja and wise women (*spækona*), she also offers mead like a hall mistress to an honoured guest, acknowledging his strength and giving it due praise.[132] This representation of her echoes both the assertive voices of valkyries like Gǫndul and Skǫgul in *Hákonarmál* and the more servile behaviour suggested in poems like *Grímnismál and Eiríksmál.* Whichever side of her is given most importance in scholarly interpretation, the combination is both compelling and seductive.

Another key element in the Eddic poems is the sense that Brunhildr has been (or feels she has been) betrayed, and that she causes Sigurðr's death as a result. The idea of predestination for Brynhildr and Sigurðr as a couple, the exact nature of the betrayal she encounters, and her behaviour when she learns of it would all prove important for Wagner's heroine (and for Plath, in a different sense); these themes seem to be another extension of the aforementioned *valkyrja* motif of superiority over men as a collective, of their warrior's sense of honour, and of their need for a superlative partner, if at all. Brynhildr's emotional response, both to betrayal and her love's death, is a key part of the canon. In *Guðrúnarkviða I* ('The First Poem of Guðrún') for instance, Brynhildr is shown to be more purely disruptive, and her paranormal nature given emphatic colouring. The poem opens with a group of royal women gathered around the dead body of Sigurðr; one by one, they relate horrific tales of mourning and humiliation at the hands of victors in a bid to make Gúðrun weep, the implication being that she will then recover from her initial shock and be able to grieve and recover properly. The key crux is that Brynhildr responds in a manner very different to the softer, wifely weeping of Guðrun (who compares herself to a willow leaf), in that her grief is mixed with warlike rage at the injustices done to her:

> Stóð hon und stoð,
> strengði hon efli;
> brann Brynhildi
> Buðla dóttur
> eldr ór augum,

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does), every depiction of Brynhildr's character after *Sigrdrífumál* in the manuscript must be interpreted separately from that of the *valkyrja*, and, while her behaviour after this point has some qualities of the literary *valkyrja* which seem superhuman, there is little to suggest that she is actually anything other than a mortal shieldmaiden of heroic, pagan bent and royal origins. The compiler's addition of *Helreið Brynhildar* is the main evidence that audiences might have seen the Brynhildr of the Sigurðr poems as a supernatural figure, and so might have been synonymous with Sigrdrífa in earlier versions of the legend.

[132]For more detailed explorations of magical and/or ritualistic female figures in Old Norse literature, and the gender distribution of magic in the medieval North in general, see Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996), S. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2022), L. Gardela et al (eds), *The Norse Sorceress : Mind and Materiality in the Viking World* (Oxford, 2023) and N. Price, *The Viking Way : Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Second Edition.), (Oxford, 2021).

eitri fnæsti,
er hon sár of leit
á Sigurði.[133]

She stood by the pillar, she summoned up all her strength;
from Brynhild, daughter of Budli,
fire burned from the eyes, she snorted out poison,
When she looked at the wounds upon Sigurd.[134]

This dragon-like portrayal communicates her terrible strength and otherworldly qualities in stark contrast to the other women; it seems readers are meant to find her emotional intensity and anger frightening above all.[135] The snorting also has strong intertextual echoes of the goddess Freyja's thunderous, angry snort in *Þrymskviða*, protesting against the suggestion that she be married to a giant in exchange for Thor's stolen hammer.[136] This reaction automatically creates an association between Brynhildr and the otherworldly, sexualised and magical. The way in which her angry pride and grief are shown struggling for mastery, emerging by turns at different moments in the narrative, renders her not only realistic, but surprisingly sympathetic despite the fact (or perhaps because of) her violent, sometimes antisocial behaviour. She laughs once, very loudly and harshly, when she hears Guðrún cry out at the moment of discovering Sigurðr's death, a response for which she is verbally abused by Gunnar: 'Hlærðu af því, heiptgjǫrn kona, glǫð á gólfi, at þér góðs viti!' (You're not laughing, woman bent on wickedness...with any good in mind.')[137] Her harshness is, it seems, another indication that her behaviour comes from a superhuman source.

The other key Eddic plot thread is Brynhildr's dramatic suicide with a sword. This is a highly masculine and warlike act, in that the depiction of suicide by weapon in the old Norse canon is generally a male domain.[138] *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* describes this act in great detail, along with her dying show of prophetic power, during which she predicts all else that will come to pass in the family dynasty. *Guðrúnarkviða I* mentions in its prose gloss, explaining that, while Guðrún continues to live out her existence, Brynhildr 'would not live' after Sigurðr's death; she has eight thralls and five serving-women killed for the funeral pyre, then kills herself with a sword so she may

[133] *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *The Poetic Edda: A Dual Language Edition*, E. Pettit (ed. and trans.) (Cambridge, 2023), strophe 27, p. 561.
[134] Larrington, 'The First Poem of Gudrun,' *The Poetic Edda*, strophe 27, p. 175.
[135] See K. Kanerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland: The Case of Brynhildr in Völsunga Saga', *Viator* 49, no. 3 (Berkeley, 2018), pp. 129-54.
[136] See *Þrymskviða, The Poetic Edda: A Dual Language Edition*, strophe 13, pp. 332.
[137] *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, *The Poetic Edda: A Dual Language Edition,* strophe 31, p. 578, and 'A Short Poem About Sigurd', *The Poetic Edda*, strophe 31, p. 181.
[138] A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* Volume 1: *The Violent Against Themselves* (Oxford, 1998), p. 403–413.

join him.[139] Whether her action was received by readers as heroic or a sign of extreme conduct (and responses, naturally, would have varied according to different contextual circumstances), it is a terribly striking final image - one which is symbolic not only of her rage and grief, but of her tremendous sense of self-value. As Terry Gunnell rightly states, her suicide is a highly performative act, designed to reinforce her claims, and so is inextricably linked with her righteous anger, pride and thirst for vengeance.[140] As Kirsi Kannerva comments, suicide also prevents her from being controlled and rehabilitated, through more traditional female grief displays, into the hierarchy that mistreated her, and allows her to control her own destiny.[141]

A great many of the Eddic impressions would come together and be embellished in *Völsunga saga* - the most popularly-known version of the legend aside from Wagner's operas. This is the source from which Wagner seems to have derived the greater part of his inspiration, partly from experience with the work itself, and partly from the similarly-inspired works of De La Motte Fouqué.[142] *Völsunga saga* is a late thirteenth-century prose amalgamation of far earlier sources, seemingly in an attempt to create one linear narrative out of the various versions of the story.[143] This has mixed, sometimes confusing results particularly regarding aspects of the love triangle plot, but, unlike the former poems, there is a far stronger sense of the author pressing their own emotional agenda. As Torfi Tulinius mentions, the duty of vengeance motif, and criticising it when it overrides contractual obligations, seems to be a major preoccupation; he views the earlier revenge of Signy and later revenge of Gúðrun as framing narratives to further enhance the central revenge plot of Brynhildr.[144]

Along with this pointed take on revenge, there is also far greater investment in the romantic story of Brynhildr and Sigurðr specifically, as opposed to a more general sense of grief, wrongdoing and anger, and most noticeably the author seems fully on Brynhildr's side, centring the story around her experiences. The part of the story that is most emphasised is her right to the dragon slayer's love, and the fact that outer forces conspired to separate them. Again, the key idea that Brynhildr has gone against Odin in a matter of war is mentioned, but this time with the explicit additional point that marriage itself is intended as a punishment for her, as it dissolves her powers as a virgin shieldmaiden - a trope shared by *Þiðreks saga*. She states that she herself made a vow only to marry the hero who knows no fear, thus taking some measure of control over her debasement. In *The*

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[139]See 'The First Poem of Gudrun', *The Poetic Edda*, p. 176.
[140]NB. This is a reference to material from an article by Terry Gunnell which is still in progress. The reference appears in the first footnote of Kanerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', p. 129.
[141]Kanerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', p. 153.
[142]Björnsson, *Wagner and the Volsungs*, pp. 97-9 and p. 126.
[143]This is, potentially in conjunction with the more general bid to seek and assert identity in thirteenth-century Icelandic culture. See T. H. Tulinius, 'The Matter of the North: Fiction and Uncertain Identities in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 242-65.
[144]See T. Tulinius, '*The Matter of the North:* Fiction and Uncertain Identities in thirteenth-century Iceland', in M. Clunies Ross (ed.) *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 247-8.

Poetic Edda, this matter is far less clearly outlined, meaning that in this retelling Brynhildr is given more agency, and the theme of power is far more explicitly linked with that of her sexual status.

Four main impressions of Brynhildr shine through this saga. All intertwine to compliment the main impressions of her temperament from the Eddic works, and to add extra tragedy to her story, and all of these would become very relevant to Wagner's valkyrie (and, indirectly, to Sylvia Plath's engagement with her). The first is her superiority, both in terms of courtly womanhood and as a paranormal being of wisdom. The scene with the freeing of the warrior-cum-valkyrie from her thorn-induced sleep (which was only forecasted, not related, in *Fáfnismál*) is included, as is her clear gift of wisdom, signified by the lore-teaching and beer-exchange seen in *Sigrdrífumál*. She is recognised by all involved as a phenomenal prospect for marriage, and descriptions of her beauty and grace are dwelt upon in far more detail than Guðrún's; Grimhildr's use of a potion indicates that, otherwise, her daughter would never have stood a chance. Tied in with Brynhildr's superiority is her superior claim upon the hero, with whom she has exchanged personal vows twice (once in an extra scene in a tower), all of which is symbolic of her predestination for him. Her thwarted romance is written to seem unnatural, and an outrage.

The second, and foil to her superiority, is Brynhildr's mistreatment at the hands of people indicated to be lesser; of all the figures in this story, she is the most truthful, and her inciting the death of Sigurðr, though brutal, is merely an heroic response to her honour being compromised. She is dishonoured and tricked on multiple levels: she is forced not only to see the man she loves leave her for another, lesser specimen (albeit a beautiful one), but to live with the knowledge that he is her deserved mate, as the superior woman. Worse, Brynhildr's shock discovery that everyone has tricked her is a revelation communicated by the very woman who took her place, who has clearly discussed her deception behind her back, and who brandishes her own ring at her as proof - this is the ultimate traumatic blow, as evidenced by her white-faced silence. While Brynhildr is called names by those present at the death scenes, one cannot help feeling that the valkyrja is the one whom the writer really admires.

The third is her bombastic and lengthy display of emotion on realising what has been done to her: her loud keening, far more disturbing than just weeping, her ripping of her own exquisite tapestry work, her sharp-worded tirades and her long periods of stunned silence. Before Sigurðr's death, such behaviour frightens and upsets (and, one senses, even embarrasses) everyone around her; although some of this may be put down to discomfort at knowing they have caused her grief, the indication is that such displays are also beyond what they consider decorous. Only Sigurðr displays a level of emotional reaction and understanding which equals hers - a further indication that he is her obvious, superhuman match. Once she has exacted her revenge, her reactions also differ a great deal from anyone else's - if anything, her sudden, calm determination to give out her gold and die is

even more chilling, as it seems to come from a very realistic numbness and grim determination beyond mere sadness.

The fourth impression, and the one perhaps most important for Brynhildr's reception in pop culture, is, again, that of her dramatic suicide, which in this text comes across as romantic, courageous and fitting of her warrior's spirit, albeit obviously tragic. In the face of everything she has experienced, it is implied, death truly is the only way to take control, reclaim her dignity and get revenge on the men who have so deliberately played her. As with the Eddic poems, it is an act which claims her true status as the hero's deserved wife, and also sets her apart as more masculine than traditionally feminine.[145] Furthermore, the act of suicide ultimately distinguishes her from Guðrún and other humans in character: uncanny, strong, fierce and extraordinarily disciplined:

> Unlike Guðrún's occasional fierceness, Brynhildr's trait is a permanent and exceptional one in both Eddic poetry and Völsunga saga...Her difference is not only ethnic, cultural, and related to ethical standards, but she is also represented in the sources as a self-determined active agent who is of different stock, comparable to *seiðkonur*, *trollkonur*, and giantesses in mythical and mytho-heroic sources.Guðrún, however, even though she possesses some strength, remains a human princess/queen in a courtly setting. From the perspective of those medieval West Scandinavians who considered Brynhildr their ancestress, descending from pagan and mythological beings such as giants, gods, and shield-maidens was an asset rather than a burden. Even though an ambivalent character in general—not only as a consequence of her suicide—Brynhildr was also admired. As *Völsunga saga* states, Brynhildr is "mestr skörungr"; that is, she has, in Anne Heinrichs words, "energy, dominance, proficiency, courage, and preeminence." Brynhildr, who dared to use violence against herself, clearly stands out from other exceptional women in the saga; she is of a different species, like many other ancestors of the Icelanders who could descend, for instance, from the giants, were thought to be. As a consequence of her inherent nature, she could wield a sword, either against others or against herself.[146]

Guðrún's actions display their own kind of strength, and she was a far more realistic model for most women in the Christian context in which the saga was written. However, as noted above, it is worth remarking that the emotional lynchpin around whom this narrative revolves is, indeed, Brynhildr, not Guðrún. Furthermore, only the reader - the one who, with Brynhildr, is 'in the know' - is completely party to the dramatic irony of everything she experiences, and sees the full extent to which her lack of agency tortures her. Subsequently, her pain and humiliation, along with the abuse by other characters, becomes even more agonising at second hand, as we feel her lack of control over what happens, and the magnitude of her pain and shame. Under such circumstances, her suicide becomes (and, to medieval Icelandic readers, would have been) a retaliatory and initiative-taking act that was considered admirable; even though it would have been considered a

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[145]Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* Vol. 1, pp. 403–413, and Kanerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', pp. 143-9.

[146]Karnerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' p. 148.

trope of the mytho-heroic past, and not an act to be encouraged in a Christian context, it was a narrative that clearly left a powerful impact.[147]

The continuous character factors in *Völsunga saga*, then, are that Brynhildr has supernatural powers, that she is an extraordinary, strong figure, that she has been greatly hurt (whether just in a marital and sexual, or also in a romantic sense) by the people around her. Constants in her persona are a mixture of warlike, powerful and decisive qualities which Carol Clover identifies as *hvöt* (the opposite of *blauðr*, i.e. gentle or soft), setting her apart in the medieval Icelandic mindset from victims and passive figures.[148] Her grieving behaviour, in particular, is supremely proud, scornful and angry, and her suicide is her trump card in self-empowerment. Whatever contextual responses to her might have been, it seems clear that we are meant to find her powerful, fascinating and highly impressive. Ultimately, this overwhelming sense of righteousness, sympathy and superiority was what Wagner would have experienced; how he worked with these main impressions, and the accompanying changes he made to the plot, were to prove very important indeed to Plath.

The operatic rebirth of Brünnhilde

In *The Ring*, Brünnhilde's role echoes and builds upon all these points - high status, honour, self-worth and loss of power - to varying degrees; she is one of the most central characters and one of the most consistent, appearing in three out of four of the operas - *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*.[149] As in the excerpts concerning her in *Völsunga saga*, she is the principal emotional lead, around whose experiences the crux of the dramatic climax revolves. The operatic transformation of her character is perhaps most interesting in terms of the very specific nature of the power dynamics Wagner sets around her. On the one hand, our first impression of her is immediate and powerful. Unlike the cloudiness of Old Norse source texts as to her exact status (mortal or supernatural), however, this Brünnhilde has no mortal lineage at all: in Wagner's story, she is the illegitimate daughter of Wotan (Wagner's version of Odin) and Erda - a mother-earth-goddess-cum-prophetess who also mothered the three Norns, and who is based on the *völva* figures of *Vǫluspá*and *Baldrs draumar*. Brünnhilde's pedigree is thus linked, not to the henpecking wife Fricka (Frigg) - who, as in *Grímnismál*, plays the jealous Juno to Wotan's Jove - but to a superior, far more eldritch female power, who, as in *Baldrs draumar*, is ranked even above

[147]Kanerva, 'Female Suicide in Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' p. 154.
[148]See C. J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex. Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum 68* (1993), pp. 363–387.
[149]NB. I will mainly be describing the effects conveyed by the operatic texts, as there is no indication that Plath ever went to see the opera itself. While the libretti alone obviously cannot convey the full, live effects of the shows, the stage directions mean that a great many of the desired settings, costumes and actions are communicated, and so the reader has a very good idea of what the experience of watching might be like.

Wotan in matters of foretelling.[150] This elevates Brünnhilde's goddess-like standing in far more obvious terms, lending a new, exaggerated light to her supernatural peculiarity. As such, her superiority of spirit, skill and beauty are not portrayed in a courtly fashion at all, and instead her valkyrie warrior maiden identity - already highlighted in the majority of Old Norse texts - is even more emphatic; from the moment she appears on stage, she is on horseback, fully armed, crying out exuberantly (the famous 'hojotoho' motif is one that only the valkyries sing.) Although she does retain the contrasting elements of fantasy serving maid and warrior, Wotan only mentions her role as his cupbearer later as she is being punished (see below.)[151]

In the operas, Brünnhilde is clearly Wotan's favourite daughter, acting as his emotional crutch and confidante against his wife Fricka, and he in turn shows great pride in her. Her interactions with her father (*Die Walküre*) and Siegfried (*Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*) communicate her strength of character, her mastery of self, and her warlike outlook, and thus set her apart from the likes of Gudrun and Siegelinde, who are far more passive. While her romantic verbosity may not resemble the sterner, more clean-cut Old Norse prose (which in that context is itself a sign of strength) her directness and expressiveness are also a forecast of her decisive, passionate behaviour, which is the quality that marks her out as a valkyrie as opposed to a mortal girl (the third gender mentioned by Kathleen Self).[152] With Wotan, they range between confident teasing (her mockery of his married strife with Fricka is practically bacheloresque, and she jokes about how even her love of battle will not countenance overhearing their argument), openly adoring and submissive (she kneels and puts her head in his lap at a tender moment), and calm rebelliousness, which in this case Wagner spins as her trying to give Wotan what he wants (the life of the warrior Siegmund), rather than what he has been ordered by Fricka to do. She represents, in a certain sense, the honest, heart's desire over dreary duty, and the playing out of the disobedience action sequence (which is only ever mentioned in retrospect in Old Norse texts) directly reflects the boldness of her free spirit.

The ensuing emotive content of her story somewhat contradicts this powerful opening impression. In Wagner's machinations from Old Norse text to opera, one inevitable effect upon the story is that certain plot points, which are only briefly be recounted in Old Norse prose (and often as flashbacks), are extended into long, discursive scenes, adding even greater emotional impact to what were originally more controlled, reported narratives, albeit ones with their own emotive depth in context (see above). One of the main knock-on effects of this is that, while Brünnhilde is more unequivocally depicted as a psychopomp, her powerful appearance and actions are juxtaposed by

[150]The power of Erda is one which very much fits into the conglomerate nordic inspirational category mentioned earlier on p. 24.

[151]NB. From this point on, in describing Wagner and Plath's treatment of these beings, I will substitute the word *valkyrja(/ur)* for valkyrie(s), in recognition of the fact that any mention of such figures is an adaptation of the old Norse type.

[152]See Self, 'The Valkyrie's Gender', in *Feminist Formations* 26, pp. 143-72.

extremely raw (and often erotic) moments of submission. One of the most important of these is the nature of Brünnhilde's punishment; as with *Völsunga saga*, she is threatened with the loss of her maiden powers through marriage, and initially it is intended that the first man who finds her will be her husband, as in 'Sleeping Beauty'. Wotan's description of this state of shame and her desperate reaction to it (explicitly aligning marriage with assault and imprisonment) are a matter of far more immediate horror in the moment:

Wotan: ...the maid's maidenly
flower will fade;
a husband will win
her woman's favours;
henceforth she'll obey
the high-handed man;
she'll sit by the hearth and spin,
the butt and plaything of all who despise her. [p. 182-183.][153]

Brünnhilde: If I must leave Valhalla,
no more to work beside you,
Henceforth obeying
a high-handed husband -
don't give me as prey
to some craven braggart:
let him who wins me
not be worthless...

Shield the sleeper
with hideous terrors
that only a fearlessly
freeborn hero
shall find me
here on the fell!

...Crush your child
who clasps your knee,
trample your favourite underfoot
and dash the maid to pieces;
let your spear destroy
all trace of her body:

[153]All ensuing quotations from Wagner's operas are taken from Stewart Spencer's translations in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion* (London, 2010), and will henceforth be referenced in short form as 'Wagner, *The Ring*, [page numbers].'

> but, pitiless god, don't give her up
> to the shamefullest of fates![154]

Unlike Brynhildr's self-made vow in *Völsunga saga* to marry only the strongest hero, which is an indication of her assertiveness and defiant independence even in the face of punishment, this abject begging puts Wotan fully in power, making her more submissive than in the Old Norse source. Wotan's emotional relenting to her plea, and his promise to encircle her with a 'bridal fire' (a sign of protection, and of her special predestination for the bravest of the brave) only serve to further reinforce the themes of menace and servitude around the concept of an 'ordinary' marriage, and to merge the themes of fire, purity, sacrifice and marriage - themes which would all become focal points for Plath. It is at the point of losing her that Wotan expresses the regret of losing his cupbearer; although not totally contradictory to Old Norse depictions of the *valkyrja* state of servitude to Odin (see p. 23-24) it is nevertheless an ironic, very domestic aside to the so-called freedom she is losing; clearly, it implies, she is capable of pouring beer for the right, powerful male, and so this will be an exchange of masters rather than a loss of absolute freedom. There is also more than a hint of the incestuous and erotic in this interaction, particularly the scene where Wotan 'kisses her godhead away' (a clear precursive nod to the maidenhead she will also lose in submitting to the hero) before sending her to sleep.[155] One cannot help but think of how Plath might have read such scenes in the light of her mythologised relationship with her own, exacting German father, whom she both idolised and resented, and whose untimely death only magnified his presence in her poetic landscape.

Brünnhilde's relationship with Siegfried constitutes another instance in which the material in the Old Norse source texts is vastly extended. The sense of destiny for the Old Norse couple, even at their most romantic, is very different: in the texts which foreshadow their meeting, the focus is on Sigurðr, who only comes to know about Brynhildr after killing the dragon, and, although Brynhildr indicates foreknowledge of him, this is only discussed in retrospect and in the moment. Their relationship is lent an even stronger, more cohesive sense of predestination in the opera, due to Wagner's involving Brünnhilde in the plot concerning Siegfried's father and mother (the incestuous couple Siegmund and Sieglinde). In sympathy for their love, she tries to help Siegmund rather than Siegelinde's lawful husband, and thus her rebellion takes on a far more romantic quality than the decision which the medieval Brynhildr takes to support one warring king over another. Her protection of Sieglinde also has a direct impact on the birth and protection of the boy Siegfried as it is the valkyrie who tells her she is pregnant and persuades her to save herself for the baby's sake; she even predicts his heroism to Wotan, thus directly linking her independence with the hero's very existence, and foreshadowing his reciprocal destiny as the most appropriate rescuer. One might say

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[154]Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 187-90.
[155]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 191.

that she has engineered her own perfect match, and there is a sense that she has 'earned' him through her own brave stand against the ruling hegemony, aligning destiny with emotional sincerity over logic and law. When the couple meet in the opera, therefore, the dramatic tension of anticipation has already been heightened to an overwhelming pitch; their coming together has far a more holistic, symbolic weight upon it within the work, and, even though her betrayal is not prophesied, we feel more fully what is at stake for the valkyrie, considering her devastating reaction to Wotan's punishment of marriage.

The Old Norse Brynhildr hesitates over accepting Sigurðr's proposal in *Völsunga saga*, based upon her visions, but this does not prevent her from sharing her wisdom on the hillside (which occurs even before mention of love, and is not a relinquishment of power), or welcoming and embracing him passionately on their second meeting. Although she is persuaded against her better judgement, her acceptance is reported as nothing more than a simple decision, showing confidence in his words. The opera meeting and acceptance, on the other hand, is practically a battle of the emotions, and the valkyrie herself, again, depicted as far more submissive and conflicted than her textual counterparts. Moreover, Wagner again builds emotively upon the ongoing trope of Siegfried's fearlessness (the original criteria for her rescue): his first sight of Brünnhilde teaches him fear and makes him vulnerable for the first time, thus maturing him from a jocular, rather callous youth to a tender, passionate man. This *bildungsroman* approach is a far cry from the Old Norse texts, which focus far more on his deeds than his emotional development. The lengthy duet begins joyfully, drawing upon the salutatory material from *Sigrdrífurmál* ('Hail to you, sun!/Hail to you, light!'). It then develops into an emotional battle between the valkyrie's terror and sadness at the prospect of compromising her power, and her ecstatic love for the hero, to whom she longs to surrender; indeed, her declaring her love is expressed in exactly such warlike terms. Horror-struck by her loss of power, and momentarily fleeing Siegfried's arms after he has tried to 'violently' embrace her (see below), she exclaims:

Brünnhilde: I'm stripped of shelter and shield,
a weaponless, sorrowing woman! [...]

No god has ever dared draw near me
in awe the heroes bowed
before the virgin maid:
she left Valhalla inviolate! -
Alas! Alas!
Alas for the shame,
for my ignominious plight!
He who woke me

has wounded me, too!
He broke open my birnie and helmet:
Brünnhilde am I no longer! [...]

O Siegfried! Glorious hero!
Hoard of the world!
Life of the earth!
Laughing hero!
Leave, oh leave me!
Leave me be!
Do not draw near
with your raging nearness!
Do not constrain me
with chafing constraint![156]

Thus, Wagner continues the Old Norse theme of Brynhildr's peerlessness as both supernatural figure and woman, but greatly enhances the thematic symbiosis of virginity, power, shame and status, equating sex with an honour battle. Although the comparison between penetrative lovemaking and battle injury is far from original, it is particularly important in this instance; the heroine's very clear evocation of her struggle as martial not only reinforces her valkyrie status, it also fetishizes struggle, and eroticizes violence.[157] Again, while the association of flames with desire is far from original, Siegfried's use of light and fire metaphors here is no less important, as it serves to connect both protective fire and the later suicidal pyre on a common basis of passion, violent and sacrifice:

Siegfried: ...now has the blaze
broken into my breast;
my blood is pounding
with rampant desire;
consuming fire
is kindled within me:
the flames that raged around
Brünnhilde's fell
are burning now in my breast! -
O woman, quench the fire now!

[156]Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 270-272.
[157]To clarify, the fetishization of submission and assault is so old a phenomenon that Wagner's use of it is not, in itself, notable. On this point see, for example, A. Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington, 1981), p. 5, N. Auerbach, *Women and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 150, S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley (ed. and trans.) (London, 1956), p. 416, and K. Wall, *Callisto Myth from Ovid to Atwood: Initiation and Rape in Literature* (Montreal, 1988). What *is* notable about Wagner's approach to this trope, as I shall show, is that his particular treatment of it is one which seemed to affect Plath as a reader especially strongly.

Quell this chafing rage!
(*He has embraced her violently. Brünnhilde leaps up, repulses him with the strength born of fear, and flees to the other side of the stage*.)

...Awaken, and be a woman for me![158]

If not an outright description of assault, the language of assault is certainly present. The ensuing surrender is described in similarly fiery terms, with both contributing to the destructive metaphor, indicating their shared, superhuman strength of personality:

Brünnhilde: Godlike composure
rages in billows;
the chastest of light
flares up with passion;
heavenly knowledge
floods away,
love's rejoicing
drives it hence! [...]

As my gaze consumes you
are you not blinded?
As my arm holds you tight,
don't you burn for me?
As my blood streams
in torrents towards you,
do you not feel its furious fire?
Do you fear, Siegfried,
do you not fear
the wildly raging woman?
(*she embraces him passionately*)

Siegfried: (*in joyful terror*)
Ha! -
As the blood in our veins ignites,
as our flashing glances consume one another,
as our arms clasp each other in ardour -
my courage returns...

Brünnhilde: ...laughing let us perish -
laughing go to our doom!

[158]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 270-1.

Begone, Valhalla's
light-bringing world!
May your proud-standing stronghold
moulder to dust!...
Rend, you Norns,
the rope of runes!
Dusk of the gods,
let your darkness arise!
Nights of destruction,
Let your mists roll in! -
Siegfried's star
now shines upon me;
He's mine forever,
always mine,
my heritage and own,
my one and all:
light-bringing love
and laughing death![159]

Again, unlike *Völsunga saga* (in which Brynhildr actually foresees disaster, but neither of the couple express their love in terms of violence), this couple's words already have a hysterical and suicidal undertone, and it is indicated that their personalities, though innocent, have great potential for instability. The whole scene is an exercise in romanticising loss of control and destruction, framing hesitation and persuasion as part of the titillating pattern on the woman's part. It is a perfect root example, not only of later, problematic Hollywood romance archetypes, but of the kind of ongoing violent sexual fantasies associated with vikings in popular culture.[160] Moreover, it goes much further than any surviving Old Norse text, in that it amalgamates the couple's feelings for one another (as already concretized and romanticized by *Völsunga saga*) with the themes of light and fire, and with the nature of their deaths. Within this thematic conflagration, their very predestination and elevated status as equal mates - both magnificent, both in need of a superhuman consort - becomes associated with violent combat, and fear of the stakes of such a clash. While both figures could be said to surrender something, inevitably it is Brünnhilde, the unreachable female, who enacts the physical surrender, playing sacrificial victim to the male flame. As Wagner writes it, Brünnhilde does not simply give up her martial and physical powers; upon transferring her magical knowledge and wisdom to Siegfried, he possesses it completely as though it were a physical object -

[159]Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 274-6.
[160] See, for instance, Sigurdson, 'Violence and Historical Authenticity, pp. 249-67.

she can no longer use it for herself. In the scene when they part (and, it is implied, after lovemaking) the valkyrie describes her state as 'bereft of wisdom but...rich in love.'[161]

The scene of their second meeting, in which he wins her for Gunther, is a sinister echo of the love scene; in light of Siegfried's disguise and magical obliviousness to Brünnhilde, her submission is far more cruelly enforced, and yet the struggle is reminiscent enough of their previous interaction to create a tragic sense of pathos. Siegfried does not demur in this scene - he announces straight away that he is here to 'tame you, if force alone can constrain you.'[162] Even though he does not take her in the sexual sense, the tonality of this scene is very much in keeping with the rape from Thidrekks saga, and shows a fetishisation of assault that is disturbing, if not uncommon as a literary trope. The stage directions speak for themselves, reading as follows:

He makes to attack her. They struggle. Brünnhilde breaks free, runs away and then turns to defend herself. Siegfried seizes her again. She escapes; he catches her. They wrestle violently with each other. He seizes her by the hand and tears the ring from her finger. Brünnhilde screams violently. As she sinks down in his arms as though broken, her gaze unconsciously meets Siegfried's. He lowers her fainting body onto the stone terrace outside the rocky chamber...Siegfried drives her away with a gesture of command. Trembling and with faltering steps, she returns to the chamber. Siegfried draws his sword...He follows Brünnhilde. The curtain falls.[163]

To put them in immediate context, these two scenes are also Wagner's centrepiece in a fantasy Old Norse world that has already established assault and cat-and-mouse games as the blueprint for sexual desire. The very first scene of *The Ring* cycle shows Alberich the dwarf pursuing, and being teased by Rhine maidens, whose sexual taunts essentially drive him to forswear love, and steal the cursed Rhinegold to make the ring. The next show of desire we see is the giants Fafner and Fasolt, who have been promised the goddess Freia as their payment for building Asgard's wall (a combination of the giant master builder story in *Gylfaginning* Ch. 42 and the story of the gold hoard from *Völsunga saga*) and who attempt to roughly carry her off, presumably to 'share' between them. Even Brünnhilde's own conception occurs (it is implied) because Wotan goes prying where he is not welcome, seeking further knowledge from the goddess Erda below the ground; this combination of allusions to Eddic sources (namely his interrogation of the vǫlva, and also his subterranean penetration into the giantess Gunnlod's territory, seeking the mead of poetry,) indicate that the sexual relationship with Erda is meant to have been in some way invasive, violent or at least taboo.[164] The only relationship between two humans in *The Ring* - and by far the most 'ordinarily' romantic or tender by the operas' standards - is the incestuous relationship between the

[161]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 285.
[162]Wagner, *The Ring,* p. 307.
[163]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 308.
[164]See *Baldrs Draumar*, *The Poetic Edda* Vol.2, pp. 154-7, and Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál, The Prose Edda*, pp. 63-4.

twins Sigmund and Sieglinde. The fact that Sylvia Plath would go on to fantasise about both water maiden types and giants, and their sexual proclivities (see next section for further details) is a sign of the impact such violent depictions of desire and sexuality had upon her imagination, and her ideas about how genuine love and passion played out.

The final scene of Brünnhilde's suicide is highly coloured by all the frightening depictions of her blazing temper and strength of will in Eddic texts and *Völsunga saga*, not least the notion that her suicide is a sign of this strength. Again, this is the most performative scene of the story - a way for the valkyrie to show off her power, fully vindicate her right to her dead husband, and put everyone in their place. In her longest death speech in *Völsunga saga*, the valkyrie is mainly preoccupied with predicting the future: she monologues at length on the fate of all those around her, states that all will be better for her death, and that by being burned with the hero she will follow right after him, proving her status as his wife.[165] All these words are delivered in a state of utter calm, which is partly a sign of her extraordinary, unfeminine strength; the ecstatic, hysterical and erotic tones of the operatic Brünnhilde could not be more different. As before, this scene has a certain amount in common with the Old Norse Brynhildr's death scene in terms of performativity - not least her vengeful pride and display, and her difference in emotional reaction to the others in the scene (as seen in *Guðrunarkvida*, when she 'snorts venom'). Her actual dying speech, however, is far more erratic, and the manner in which she behaves at the very end is far more theatrical and bombastic than strictly dignified.

At the beginning of the scene, Gutrune, restless and sensing doom, mentions hearing Brünnhilde's laughter and states that she is frightened of her.[166] Once the hero's corpse is revealed, the valkyrie herself begins by differentiating her behaviour from that of the Gibichung royal family (who are in varying states of panic, squabbling over the ring and who is to blame for Siegfried's murder); calmly advancing downstage, she speaks of her own satisfaction at revenge, and her scorn for their childish behaviour:

> Silence your grief's
> exultant clamour!
> His wife, whom you all betrayed,
> comes in quest of revenge...
> I heard children
> whimpering for their mother
> since they'd spilt some fresh milk:
> but no sound I heard

[165]See E. Magnusson and W. Morris, *Völsunga Saga : The Story of the Volsungs & Niblungs, with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda*, H. Halliday Sparling (ed.) (London, 1870), pp. 123-4.
[166]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 344.

of a worthy lament
befitting the greatest of heroes...
Wretched woman, peace!
You were never his lawful wife:
as wanton alone
you bound him.
His rightful wife am I,
to whom he swore eternal vows
ere Siegfried ever saw you.[167]

She commands the building of the pyre, lamenting that the gods caused this suffering through the ring's curse, and (in reflection of her mother Erda's prophetic tones) states that, thanks to the return of her power at Siegfried's death, 'all things I know,'/ all is clear to me now!'; she also makes a point of dismissing Wotan's ravens, knowing they are watching her every move (as they witnessed the disillusionment and death of Siegfried.)[168] Just as her first joyous speeches at her romantic union with Siegfried seemed to enact a kind of immolation, her last, ecstatic speech before she rides Grane into the fire is again full of the language of conflagration and sexual passion, coming full circle to make her suicide a re-enactment of her marriage:

Does the laughing fire
lure you to him?
Feel how the flames
burn in my breast,
effulgent fires
seize hold of my heart:
to clasp him to me
while held in my arms
and in mightiest love
to be wedded to him!...
Siegfried! Siegfried! See!
(*She has leapt on to the horse and raises it to jump*)
In bliss your wife bids you welcome![169]

In this scene, strength is not depicted by a stoically grandiose performance of dying, but by a grandiosity coupled with reckless passion. A crucial element in this very dramatic framing of the suicide, which is that Wagner couples the story of the ring's curse, and the doomed relationship, with the ending of the gods themselves, at Ragnarök; the implication is that this is a cleansing end,

[167]Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 347-8.
[168]Wagner, *The Ring*, p. 343 and pp. 349-50.
[169]Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 350-1.

though tragic, which will free the world from all corruption. This means that Brünnhilde's suicide coincides with her giving up of the ring, coupling her gesture and self-sacrifice with the immolation and saving of creation itself, and elevating the whole episode from personal to cosmic. One must also take into account the far more visual, dramatic aspect of this suicide compared to the reported speech of the Old Norse texts, all of which recount the scene at a distance, and none of which feature the valkyrie actually riding into the flames - in all other cases, she first stabs herself and is carried to the pyre. The operatic stage directions, in which the light of the flames engulf the stage, and Valhalla itself burns down, make even reading about the scene a far more emotionally charged experience. In the illustrated text by Rackham, this final image of Brünnhilde's suicide is extremely communicative of the emotional content of this finale, and is arguably the most beautiful and terrible in the book; at the centre, the valkyrie sits high on her rearing horse, towering over Siegfried's somewhat diminished corpse, sword raised, hair flying and already wreathed in flames. As I shall show, this was an image which seems to have remained in the mind of the young Sylvia Plath.

To sum up, Wagner took what had been a very warlike, stoic and angry character in Old Norse sources, and, in adapting Brynhild's character for a romantic work, imbued her with some very emotionally charged and sexual qualities that were not present before. While the sense of outrage, strength and emotional volatility is present, the fixation upon her virgin status grew, and her combined desire for, and fear of, sexual submission, was eroticised to become a core theme - one which matched the issue of her honour and betrayal in importance. Similarly, previous echoes in the fire of her sleep and of her suicide were also emphasised, so that the language of lovemaking and the language of suicide were both united in the language of conflagration.

As a female, germanic figure of uncanny power, who can hold her own against both the strongest and most talented men and the most talented and beautiful women, and whose righteous fury is permitted as a sign of her strength and superiority, the literary valkyrie alone (as portrayed by *Völsunga saga*) would have been prime fuel enough for any creative, frustrated young woman in Sylvia Plath's position. However, as I shall discuss in my next section, the romantic opera character of Brünnhilde would provide even more fuel to encourage Plath's pre-existing anxieties and desires, and the results for both her inner mythos and her poems would be long-reaching and explosive.

Valkyrie meets Autobiography

In this section, I shall briefly examine what I believe to be the effects of *The Ring* upon Sylvia Plath's imaginative development, which will foreground my commentary upon her own works - in

other words, how Wagner's reception of Old Norse mythology was itself received. At this point, some disclaimers are necessary: I do not wish to attempt a full psychological or autobiographical study of the author (this is not possible or appropriate in the space afforded me, and this is a literary study above all), nor do I in no way wish to express belief in Wagner's sole influence. However, in the case of Plath, it would be redundant not to acknowledge that certain mythological themes run throughout her work, particularly around the early 1950's, which seem too pointedly Wagnerian to be coincidental, and that Plath was a writer whose work was strongly reflective of her own lived experience. Just as Judith Kroll analysed Plath's manipulation of autobiographical detail and writing in conjunction with Graves's *The White Goddess*, I shall now outline how she assimilated the legend of the valkyrie lover (and other nordic motifs) into her own private mythos as outlined in her journals and letters, which I shall follow with a separate, more detailed section on her works. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that we may (at least in part) attribute her ongoing artistic engagement with female goddess tropes to her early reading of Wagner, and her need to identify with a strong, nordic heroine.

Some of Plath's receptiveness to the sexual paradigm drawn by Wagner can be explained by the environment in which she already lived. It would be difficult to overstate the toxicity of societal expectations and the dating scene in early- to mid-20th century America, particularly for young women. WASP traditionalist values joined forces with burgeoning commercialist ideals, both of which put tremendous pressure on girls to behave, think and present in very definite (and sometimes conflicting) ways. They were drilled on the one hand to seek 'the one' and prepare for marriage, as hundreds of years of literature and media had taught them to pleasurably anticipate; in 1955, Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson gave a speech at Plath's commencement ceremony at Smith College entitled *A Purpose for Modern Women*, which essentially explained that their top-drawer education was to mould them as wives and mothers.[170] On the other hand, they were made increasingly aware of change and opportunities to break the mould, all the while being commercially assaulted by beauty products and the glamorous vision of the power woman who 'has it all.' As a result, Plath's generation were under immense social pressure to be paradoxically virginal and sexually savvy. There was enough social change for them to push back more on boundaries experienced by the last generation, but not yet enough for open sexual behaviour or experimentation to sit comfortably for any save the most confident.

Plath's journal frequently references the desires and frustrations of being a girl who can only go so far: "Everything but: What a pretty compromise between technical virginity and practical satisfaction!"[171] As a girl brought up all her life to excel in a highly patriarchal, consumerist society, and under pressure to ape a domestic ideal, she was all too aware of the social kudos achieved by a

[170]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 2.
[171]Plath, *Journals*, p. 147.

husband, family and an enviable household. However, pride in her own intellectual prowess meant she also resented the pressure upon women to find domestic 'bliss' and compromise her own desires to support a partner, wishing instead to be seen as extraordinary in her own right, and for her own sake. In terms which ring all the truer in our current context of post #MeToo, she bemoaned society's double standards, in which women were shamed and cajoled by turns, but men still let off the hook.[172] Her journals also express the very genuine fear that sexual passion will destroy her incentive and ability to write.[173]

If she had to compromise for love and family ideals, she vowed to herself, she would do it with a man who represented the best of the best - intellect, passion, health and strength. "I am strong," her journal declared in 1953, "in spite of being childish and weak now and then. but I <u>am</u> strong , individual thinking, for all that. I need a strong mate: I do not want to accidentally crush and subdue him like a steamroller...I must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual."[174] In walking the tightrope between sage and seductive, discussion of lovemaking could be a double-edged sword in correspondence. Pressure from men to engage in sexual intimacy was roundly rebuffed, as evidenced by an angry letter to Melvin Woody: '...I deplore your unawareness of the real, provable end of 'fertility rituals,'...I see you making false and specious distinctions between "life" and "men"...[I] understand the meaning of [fertility], and therefore do not intend to desecrate it by pretending to act under its aegis; that will come later, and I intend to do full justice to it.'[175] Just over a week later, however, she was making a joke about 'sacrificing her maidenhood' in the streets for money (a glib remark in a letter to Phil McCurdy), seemingly to highlight and fetishize her own inexperience - yet another performative stance.[176] Both letters betray the wider popular preoccupation with submission and pagan-style fantasy, which undoubtedly provided both fuel and fertile ground for the fantasies she was developing.

Plath's disgust over Woody's fetishisation of 'fertility rituals' is highly ironic, as the theme of sacrifice became a well-used metaphor for her in the early 50s; her references to it interlace tightly with her observations on marriage, passion, submission and even assault. Plath also used the word 'rape' in a positive sense on numerous occasions (although evidence suggests that she mainly used it privately in her journals). She used it in describing fantasies and urges, both her own and those of partners, and quite often in reference to pleasurable events.[177] It would appear that, in this context, she was misusing its real definition and actually referring to dominant-submissive dynamic, calling

[172]Plath, Letter to Ann Davidow, 12th September 1951, *Letters* Vol 1. p. 372.
[173]Plath, *Journals*, p. 100.
[174]Plath, *Journals*, p. 173.
[175] Plath, Letter to Melvin Woody, 5th May 1954, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 744-6.
[176]Plath, Letter to Phil McCurdy, 13th May 1954, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 752.
[177] 'What is more wonderful than to be a virgin, clean and sound and young, on such a night? ...(being raped.)' The last two words in brackets were written in a different ink. Plath, *Journals*, p. 8.

to mind populist, romantic visions of submission to a strong man. This is a dynamic which she was far from alone in entertaining, and which her dates themselves often seem to have encouraged.Dick Norton, one of Plath's earlier, steadier boyfriends, went through a phase of describing his other experiences and conquests to her, very possibly in a bid to make her jealous; this included writing a poem about the fantasy of raping another woman of his accquaintance in a cabin in the hills. In a letter to her mother, Plath mocked him for the fantasy, which was very much in contrast to his clean, boy-next-door image, but herself rewrote it in her journals in a manner that suggested the image stayed with her.[178] Stating open desire was rebellious in its own way, and perhaps Plath was playing a game of dare with herself, uttering the kind of fleshly phrases in private that she knew would be disapproved of in public, simply for the thrill of undercutting the good girl image she played, but resented. This habit very much reflects her attitude towards seizing experience and challenging boundaries which scared her. However, her language choices, and the very serious pleasure with which she uses the word in certain instances, still speaks volumes about what excited her, and what influences had made the most impact upon her sexual fantasies. Phrases which describe consensual sweetness are generally absent, in favour of the language of submission, devouring and violence. Aside from in the more obvious sense, she also used the word 'rape' on occasion to describe acting, taking, enjoying, eating or using things in a rapacious manner.[179]

One journal entry in particular, written during the summer of 1951 (a year after Plath began attending Smith College,) seems to indicate that her reading of Wagner, and the love story of the valkyrie, was a major, root influence in this particular fascination with rape and submission. While the entry already commands attention regardless of context, purely because of its highly controversial and (for many) upsetting phrasing, what is less obvious is that it also heralds an important new level of engagement of the Norse material in Wagner, informed by adult desire:

Lying on my stomach on the flat warm rock, I let my arm hang over the side, and my hand caressed the rounded contours of the sun-hot stone, and felt the smooth undulations of it. Such a heat the rock had, such a rugged and comfortable warmth, that I felt it could be a human body. Burning through the material of my bathing suit, the great heat radiated through my body, and my breasts ached against the hard flat stone. A wind, salty and moist, blew damply in my hair; through a great glinting mass of it I could see the blue twinkle of the ocean. The sun seeped into every pore, satiating every querulous fiber of me into a great glowing golden peace. Stretching out on the rock, body taut, then relaxed, on the altar, I felt that I was being raped deliciously by the sun, filled full of heat from the impersonal and colossal god of nature. Warm and perverse was the body of my love under me, and the feeling of his carved flesh was like no other - not soft, not malleable, not wet with sweat, but dry, hard, smooth, clean and pure. High, bonewhite, I had been

[178] See Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 28th February-1st March 1953, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 573-74 and *Journals*, p. 174. Also see note 174 on 'fertility rituals.'

[179] 'We are raping the land' was a phrase used to describe the swift progress of a night train across France; see Appendix 6, *Journals*, p. 548. She also used the word 'rape' in reference to the poetic style and technique of Lucas Myers; see Plath, *Journals*, p. 211.

washed by the sea, cleansed, baptised, purified, and dried clean and crisp by the sun. Like seaweed, brittle, sharp, strong-smelling - like stone, rounded, curved, oval, clean - like wind, pungent, salty - like all these was the body of my love. An orgiastic sacrifice on the altar of rock and sun, and I arose shining from the centuries of love, clean and satiated from the consuming fire of his casual and timeless desire.[180]

Without deeper knowledge of Plath's childhood reading, a reader might link such rape fantasies and images of sun gods with her other poetic references to Classical mythology, which was an aesthetic Dick Norton also clearly favoured (in another letter, he shared a fantasy of throwing her, "Sabine-fashion", over his shoulder).[181] However, knowing she had already read Wagner (and enjoyed Rackham's illustrations), gives the fantasy a very important, extra dimension. In the opera, all scenes with the valkyrie (except the last two) are played out amongst rocks, and thus she is associated with the wilderness rather than the court. Among the Rackham illustrations in 'The Ring of the Nibelung' is one very striking depiction of the scene in which Siegfried first approaches Brünnhilde. It is set just at the point of day's dawning. In the gloomy foreground, the valkyrie is lying asleep on the flat rock, her byrnie already cut open by the hero's sword, her lustrous hair spread about her and her breasts bare: the very picture of erotic and languorous submission. The young hero stands to the right at the rear, his face managing to be both gravely strong and tenderly concerned, but, most strikingly, glowing gold like a sunrise.

The point is blatantly clear: Siegfried is the bringer of light, and all that is traditionally associated with it - warmth, goodness, growth and love - and his masculinity, which will awaken her longing, is portrayed as a vital, necessary force. The unspoken implications of what will happen next are all too easy to visualise from the postures of the couple. Moreover, in the following image of Brünnhilde's awakening she is sitting in a more actively sensual pose on the same rock, still naked from the waist up, her arms outstretched in joy and the warm glow of the sun now tellingly transferred to her face. The power of these images alone would account for a great deal of the aesthetic of Plath's sun god fantasy on the rocks, although certain aspects, such as the salt and bleached driftwood, quite obviously match the maritime surroundings in which they were dreamed up, and are very much connected with her early love of the sea - a good example of how she often superimposed biographical or twentieth century detail over other mythological templates. Moreover, as a part of her upcoming college module, Plath was due to reassess Wagner's works in the context of European culture, politics and philosophy, and it is therefore very likely that awareness of her upcoming studies would have brought the story to the forefront of her brain once more.[182]It seems that revisiting the already-familiar mythological territory she had read about as an eleven year-old, and which she could now understand from an adult perspective, inspired her afresh at a time in her life when she was highly preoccupied with thoughts of courtship, marriage and sex.

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[180]Plath, *Journals*, p. 74. The underlining is mine.
[181]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 168.
[182]Plath briefly references studying both Wagner and Marx in *Journals*, p. 58.

The above is the epitome, in fact, of the kind of sexual assault fantasies consistently attached to vikings and, as mentioned, such passive fantasies were extremely coherent with the atmosphere in which she was developing her experience.[183]

This fantasy Plath wrote out, therefore, seems to work on two levels - one instinctive, and one more intellectual. One may detect why the plight of the valkyrie would have been all too close to her heart: a tall, strong, beautiful, imposing presence of Germanic origins, with magical knowledge, who is her father's 'special' child, abandoned by him due to her independence of spirit, and left alone until she can find a man to match his mettle. Plath's education in over-achievement, and her resulting need to gain approval in every aspect of her life, meant that she could not countenance living without being a 'success' on every level; she was already defensive of being penned into a domestic role, and all too ready to find grandiose models in building her sense of identity. Brünnhilde's valkyrie 'otherness,' her imposing, warlike style of beauty, her superiority to mortal women and to most mortal men, and her unwillingness to be trapped was a mythological shape which would have fitted perfectly over this mindset. The idea of a fantasy submission to the one man who 'deserved' and matched her would have been a way to reconcile her need to excel and her fear of compromise.

The more overtly 'pagan' elements in the fantasy above, detailing ceremonial sacrifice and sexual rites, cannot be attributed simply to this one source of inspiration, but are nevertheless a clue that Wagner's works taught her to associate superlative love and sex with sacrifice and ritual surrender of power. Considering her attraction to alternativism, her growing desire for sexual freedom and her tendency to link writing and selfhood, we may count such visions of the sun, stone altars and sexual worship as an aesthetic Plath was trying on for size. At that time, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* would have been a likely source for such obviously religious motifs, but the fact that Plath received it as a gift from Aurelia in 1953 would suggest that she had not yet been exposed to that book at this point in time; that work would, instead, become a source which bolstered these earlier images of sacrifice and nature, and prepared her for the occult enthusiasms of Ted Hughes. A partial Freudian reading is inevitable here too, in that the implications in the later story of Alice and her father in 'Among the Bumblebees,' - in which the girl associates a suntan with resilience, vitality and her father's admiration - are very similar to this diarised fetishization of the sun on skin. Even more crucially, however, one source on her college reading list was Jessie Weston's *The Legends of the Wagner Drama: Studies in Mythology and Romance*. Thematically, this critical text presents strong similarities with those ritualistic elements of the journal entry (along with other details), and also goes some way towards explaining the link Plath made between the sun, vitality and her Germanic father.

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[183]See Helgason, 'Leif: When Civilization Was Less Civilized,' *Echoes of Valhalla*, pp.133-183.

Weston's book is something of a contradiction in terms: she introduces it with the claim that its purpose is to prove the extent to which most of the material which inspired Wagner is, at root, the 'primaeval heritage of the German people' (and therefore accomplish the opposite to the later work by Arni Bjarnsson): "For in spite of the fascinating garb in which, through the darkness of the long Northern Nights and sunless Northern days, the skill of Icelandic bards has clothed the story, the home of the legend was originally the home of the German folk, the Rhine-land."[184] Ironically, however, in the process of proving her point, Weston deviates somewhat from this thesis, and analyses the Old Norse sources at length in terms of what they individually bring to the legend as a whole, which rather distracts from proving their inferiority to the German root. Even in her introduction, she manages not only to demonstrate just how much of the content of Wagner's plots is taken from Old Norse versions of the legend, but to further romanticize the aesthetics of the Old Norse world for her readers:

> ...the story (of Siegfried), in this form, travelled North probably not later than the sixth century. Here, among the Scandinavian peoples, it found a congenial home, and became enshrined in a number of songs or lays, some of which are preserved in the Icelandic Eddas to this day. Out of these songs, and others now lost, an unknown compiler, in the twelfth century, constructed the *Volsunga-saga,* a prose recital of the origin and deeds of the race of the Volsungs, of which race Sigurd is the last and greatest hero. The story has, of course, undergone considerable modification by transmission from its original German home, and many of its special features are undoubtedly due to Northern influence, but it retains, far more strongly than the other versions, the mythical element undoubtedly present in the original story, and, on the whole, it may be considered as giving the oldest, as it certainly does the most complete and poetical, form of the legend. We also possess another Northern version, of somewhat later date, the *Thidrek-saga* (so called because its recital is the recital of the deeds of Thidrek of Bern), compiled probably by an Icelandic scribe in the middle of the thirteenth century; but inasmuch as the version given is based avowedly on German, and especially on Saxon, tradition, it represents the *German* rather than the *Scandinavian* form of the story. In this light, considering the fact that the legend is admittedly of German origin, the Thidrek-saga is especially valuable.[185]

Weston's project seems to have the same purpose as a great deal of literature and criticism at the turn of the century - to prove the strong links between Germanic and British heritage. This, subsequently, had implications for American claims as well, and so would have been of emotional interest to Plath in terms of patriotism on both sides of the Atlantic. Most crucially for the purposes of this thesis, however, the above passage is concrete evidence that Plath did learn more about the complex literary heritage behind the story she had read in Wagner, and, importantly, imbibed the names of the main source texts. It seems Plath read Weston's book thoroughly, not only based on reports of her aforementioned work ethic, but also from the fact that the book was

[184]J. L. Weston, *The Legends of the Wagner Drama: Studies in Mythology and Romance* (London, 1903), p. 9.
[185]Weston, *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, p. 14.

later found in her collection, inscribed with her married name and heavily highlighted - a strong testament to this author's importance in her 'mindscape.'[186]

Whether or not Plath went on to read all or any translated versions of texts like *Völsunga Saga* or The Poetic and Prose Eddas is besides the point - suffice to say that it is more than likely a student with such a naturally competitive and curious nature would have been drawn to read further, particularly into material around the legends in which her parents' home country had so eagerly, and often problematically invested for its formation of identity.[187] What is certain is that, through reading *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, she would have gained more than average knowledge of the content of the various texts and fragments which form the overall legend's conglomeration, including poems like *Helreið Brynhildar*. Reading Weston would also have enabled Plath to remember Wagner's retelling of the tale in a new, critical light, and to be more fully aware of the nature of the decisions he had made in selecting the motifs he did from the medieval material. She would have had the opportunity to study the various ways in which Brynhildr and her legendary love were portrayed, and also, crucially in terms of her sun fantasies, Weston would have taught her to draw parallels between the story of the awakened valkyrie, and the story of Freyr's pursuit of the giantess Gerðr, which is often interpreted folklorically as a metaphoric portrayal (or even ritual dramatisation in some cases) of spring overcoming winter.[188] Both Freyr and Sigurðr breach a barrier of some kind to forcefully win over their chosen woman, and Weston identifies Gerðr as an earth goddess, one aspect of a wider mythos of the earth awaiting delivery from darkness and fertilisation by the sun.[189] One may assume that all of the above would have further enriched and weighted pre-existing associations in her mind (born of Germanic and Wagnerian enthusiasms) between sunshine and health, her father/Siegfried and the sun, warlike valkyries and earth-mother types, fertility and rape myths, and what felt like a seductive dance between fighting and submission.

More generally, two other academic trains of thought are particularly pertinent to how Plath incorporated valkyrie and fire themes in her ongoing work. Firstly, she would have imbibed Weston's academic study of the valkyrie in the context of other, supernatural female figures. This study was very much of its time in terms of its interest in finding meaningful parallels between Celtic, Nordic and British folklore and mythology. Weston quotes Simrock's comparison of Hilde

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[186]See the database entry for this Sylvia Plath's book collection at https://www.librarything.com/catalog/SylviaPlathLibrary&deepsearch=weston (last accessed 20th Feb 2024).

[187]Plath was all too aware of the role of identity in politics and warfare. Her keen following of recent and ongoing global conflict can be observed in her teenage letters to her German pen pal, Hans Neupert, although it is sometimes difficult to tell how much of the distress expressed is genuine and how much, as was her wont, is performative. See *Letters*, Vol.I.

[188]Weston draws a clear line between the two stories, and the themes of rebirth and fertility. See Weston, *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, pp. 107-8.

[189]There are several references to this story, and the interlinking symbolism between the various figures, in Weston, 'Chapter 1: Introduction,' *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, pp. 1-8.

(a German war goddess) with Freyja ('the original Valkyrie'), and the belief that both are incarnated in Brynhildr.[190] She also makes links between the psychopomp status of valkyries and Celtic/grail legends, in which the agent of power is a hag or carlin. Reading Weston would have strengthened the thematic link between valkyries, witches and other female figures of power and wisdom in the young poet's consciousness. This proves highly important for understanding her usage of any such figures in her poetry: instead of reading more general Nordic witch and fairy tale imagery as loose fragments of a 'general' imaginative landscape, one may viably interpret them as more coherent parts of an holistic inner self-empowerment narrative, with the valkyrie as the foundational myth, and other persecuted and/or supernatural women as adjacent signifiers of Plath's need to feel 'special', 'powerful' or 'other'. Secondly, Weston highlights the notion that the fire-encircled sleep imposed upon Brynhildr in itself represents a form of death, and thus her sexual awakening becomes a form of rebirth:

> According to Grimm, the flames which surround the sleeping Valkyrie are the flames of the funeral pyre (*Scheiter-haufen*), which was customarily hung round with shields and costly hangings, and might therefore well be depicted as a *Schildburg*. The fact that the pyre was interwoven with thorns, and kindled with a thorn branch, and the idea that death was but a slumber from which the soul awoke to new life, gave rise to the expression of the sleep thorn.[191]

The fact that the valkyrie can be interpreted as 'dying' and 'being reborn' more than once (especially considering the intimation that she will join her love in Valhalla) is seemingly a hugely important part of Plath's inner mythos, as will become evident in the ways in which she linked the themes of fire, sex, love, destruction, death, rebirth and power. In the light of Weston's study, the fairy tale association with thorns and sleep (and any idea of a sleeping or imprisoned princess awaiting her hero) would also have gained a new interpretive weight.

Certain ensuing motifs in Plath's personal writings during the period of 1951-56 express her feelings about herself, her aspirations and her desires in mythological terms which very much align with both the Wagnerian take on Norse legend, and what she was learning of Norse mythology from other sources like Weston. The fact that she wrote the valkyrie-related birthday poem to Aurelia in April 1953, and that this poem corresponds closely with a particularly concentrated series of themed journals entries and letters (including the comparison of Dick and Myron, and her lists of her own qualities and ideals), is clear proof of that figure's centrality in her mind around that time; it seems she purposefully embodied the role of the superlative, powerful, beautiful woman - too extraordinary for an ordinary love, submissive to only the 'one' - as part of her performance, to herself and to others. The same fantasy tropes return multiple times, to the point

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[190]See Weston, *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, p. 87 (NB. her footnote reads CF.'Simrock, *Handbuch der Deutschen Mythologie,* p. 359').
[191]Weston, Legends of the Wagner Drama, p. 89.

that one can almost plot them like a graph. Above all, they detail her formation of, and search for an ideal 'mate' through whom she could, quite literally, marry all her conflicting desires. The fantasy shape which recurs is best described as an enactment of a modern-day Siegfried plot - someone intellectually and physically strong, who would live up to and worship the idealised version Plath had already formed of herself (an ideal which she constantly strove to live up to in turn). Only this type of man, as she saw it, could claim her, without her feeling ashamed of the sacrifice to her independence, or of the fulfilment of her sexual fantasies. The great irony of the Plath-Hughes romance being so idolised in modern history, and being put on such a public pedestal, is that the mythological figure she created very much preceded the real man; Plath's writing clearly shows that she was constantly testing her inbuilt mythological template upon likely candidates, and Hughes the person seems to have been a secondary concern compared with how well he fitted a certain shape in her imagination. Inevitably, her desires also seem to have fed into her neverending performance for her mother: '...I feel that I can have the best; I won't take an inferior. Falling in love is a lovely, ecstatic thing, and I think I might very well let myself do that this spring,' she wrote breezily to Aurelia in February 1953, after enlarging on a long list of her desired traits in a husband.[192]

What 'the best' meant soon became very clear; in the same letter which mocked Dick Norton for his rape fantasies, Plath compares him unfavourably with Myron Lotz, another suitor who had come into her life more recently: 'Dick is barely 6 feet tall & weighs 190; Myron is 6'4" and weighs 185. Also can carry women weighing 140 lbs. Ah me, comparisons!'[193] She also references 'the fire of my enthusiasm' - one of many times she equates her own qualities, or those of the men who are under consideration, with fire-related vocabulary. Her journals enlarge upon her plans for Myron, and, more importantly, the powerful ways in which she could drive and affect him: ' the main problem is to make him want and need me. only I don't even know if his is the life I want to put on...I can see the origin of his strong drives for success...I could be a spontaneous, fertile, creative, motivating, encouraging force, and never let him grow sterile or too discouraged...He also carries me places in his arms, and I feel so feminine and light...[He is a] Giant, superman: mental and physical. He is these. Physically, he meets all requirements...<u>power:</u> [Myron] offers that...myron is a hercules...for him I would enjoy, I think, home-making...while continuing to serve as a life force..."[194] One cannot help but hark back to the valkyrie's sharing of her supernatural knowledge with her chosen hero. Alongside the opportunity to become one half of a power couple and share assets, one other important aspect of 'mating' was seemingly to be an exception to previous women, which ballasted her sense of being extraordinary; her attraction to Myron's physique was spiced by his reputation for having not dated seriously up until her: '[Myron] looked at me with an amazing softness in his eyes...amazing for one who, the boys said, has a heart of mineral rock...The

[192]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 25th Feb 1953, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 570.
[193]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 28th Feb-1st March 1953, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 573-4.
[194]Plath, *Journals*, pp. 169-173.

great stone invulnerable man is coming up at noon saturday to drive me to New Hampshire and Vermont...'[195] In many instances, the theme of giants is combined with elements of the Siegfried-like hero; the idea of such a man transforming his outlook and needs upon meeting Plath specifically (although a fantasy not unique to *Siegfried*) is a power dynamic which, considering all the surrounding evidence, seems to have developed as a result of inspiration from the story of the valkyrie, and became important as a signifier of her own uniqueness.

Other, shorter men, also fell short of her mythological aspirations, and she worried at length about potential marital compromises: '...Ray has mind, with a weaker body; thin, with no height, and you think of flat shoes, all your life long feeling big and swollen, lying like mother earth on your back and being raped by a humming entranced insect and begetting thousands of little white eggs in a gravel pit...and he perhaps fickley loving delicate butterfly-like women of the insect kind...'[196] Plath's envisioning of herself as an earth goddess, her derisive comments about size, and her fears that certain men might reject her for her stature, make a great deal of sense in the context of Wagner's depictions of gods (especially Brünnhilde as the child of an earth deity), dwarfs (tin type racial inferiors) and sexually rapacious giants. Her above remarks also echo something of Jessie Weston's commentary on the Old Norse cosmos, based on Snorri:

> If we turn to Northern mythology, we shall find that dwarf and giant alike are closely connected with each other and with the earth; the world itself was said to be formed out of the flesh of the giant Ymir, the first father of the race; and according to the Edda the dwarfs were the maggots which bred in the flesh of the giant, and were endowed by the gods with the shape and mind of men.[197]

Plath's conglomerate association of sunshine and rebirth not only with strength and fertility, and her association of fecundity with superior knowledge - which also seemingly began with the valkyrie's story - would extend to creativity, as her poet's reputation featured so strongly in her sense of growing and perfecting her ideal self. One journal entry in April 1953 anticipates upcoming time with Myron ('sun, beach, strong good love'), and mentions the fertility of spring in conjunction with the genius of Auden, while recounting the memory of a reading in Elizabeth Drew's rooms.[198] In her journal, battling her worries, she urges herself to ' think & create & love people & give of self like mad. go outward in love and creation and maybe you will fall into knowing what you want simultaneously as what you want walks by your picket gate...'[199] Earlier in that same entry is perhaps the most self-aware and detailed run-down (up to that point) of her own

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[195]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 25th February 1953, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 571.
[196]Plath, *Journals*, p. 181.
[197]Weston, *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, p. 60.
[198]Plath, *Journals*, p. 180.
[199]Plath, *Journals*, p. 183.

strategizing, including the extent to which her valkyrie-triggered fantasy (although she does not explicitly refer to that story) had influenced her:

> '...there is not one I know well enough, surely enough, to say, if asked: "O.K., here is a certificate guaranteeing that a Smith Phi-Beta-to-be, (maybe) potential minor poetess & story writer, one-time dilettante artist, reasonably healthy and attractive, alive, thinking, tall, sensuous, powerful, colourful white woman, age 21, is handing you 50 years during which she will love your faults, honor your bestialities, obey your whimsies, ignore your mistresses...and adore you as her dying, mortal god...and remain faithful to you until you both rot..."...oh a love, a growing sharing would be so good, so uncomplex...one relies so on single symbols which supposedly presage large assumptions...let's face it, I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren't many around, I often unconsciously manufacture my own. and then, I retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward value is tangible and accepted...I want a romantic nonexistant hero...I want to live hard and good with a hard, good man. clean, brilliant and strong is how and with whom I want to live...the three men on the fringe are too far off in time and space and too like unloves and faithless, and though love be a day, I am afraid it will be only that; and though love be a day, I am afraid also that it will be more.[200]

The combination of eugenics-level description and 'hard, clean' goodness with dying godhood, and also her anticipation of unfaithfulness is particularly interesting, even if one can partially attribute the latter to fear caused by societal double standards of fidelity.

Plath's transfer to Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship in 1955 changed her horizons, but not the essential bedrock of these fantasy aspirations. She retained contact with another previous suitor, Richard Sassoon, whose mind and verve she adored (although he did not live up to her physical ideals) and upon whom she would continue to fixate even as Ted Hughes entered the picture. Her personal archive of fire-based sacrificial imagery gained a new and haunting addition when she went to see *The Passion of Joan of Arc* with Sassoon in Paris.[201] A year later, beginning to sense the limitations of that relationship, and wanting to get a foot in the door of the Cambridge poetry world (the best chance of which, she sensed, came from dating one of the circle) Plath continued to associate fire (or 'blazing') with brilliance and passion, and sexiness with violence, but she now put greater investment in adding poetic brilliance to her Siegfried fantasy template. Upon reading the poems of Lucas E. Myers in the St Botolph's review (the same journal in which she first read Ted Hughes's poetry), she begins to equate her creative skill with her feelings of entitlement to romance:

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[200]Plath, *Journals*, pp. 181-3.

[201]The experience, in all its raw, emotional detail, is related in a letter to Aurelia Plath. See Plath, *Letters* Vol.I, 26th January 1955, p. 864.

Luke is all tight and packed and supple and blazing. He will be great, greater than anyone of my generation whom I've read yet. So I am, however, not worth the really good boys; or is it me? If [my] poems were really good, there might be some chance; but until I make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets, away from [Richard] and the inevitable narrow bed, too small for a smashing act of love...I long so for someone to blast over Richard; I deserve that, don't I, some sort of blazing love that I can live with. My God, I'd love to...surge force into a man's dreams...'[202]

The reference to 'riding' in itself is interesting, and the words 'smashing' and 'blast' were to reappear with startling frequency after this point. It seems there was more than an element of agenda behind her words, as the very next day she knew she was to attend the review's launch party. As if on cue, after dancing with Lucas Myers (whom it seems she targeted first), the fabled meeting with Ted Hughes took place, the recounting of which is one of the most frequently-quoted excerpts of her journals. It is now worth quoting again, not only in the context of her words from the previous evening, but also in the newly-highlighted context of all the previous Wagnerian undertones in her writing:

'Then the worst happened, that big, dark, hunky boy, the only one there huge enough for me...came over and was looking hard in my eyes and it was Ted Hughes...and I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband off...and my favourite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek...Such violence, and I can see how women lie down for artists. The one man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge...strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself, thinking: oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you. The one man since I've lived who could blast Richard.'[203]

All the key elements are present - the fetishisation of struggle and violence, the idea of a superlative, domineering giant, the combination of self-sacrifice and seduction, and the language of fire and screaming. Even her use of 'hah' is reminiscent of the exultant, larger-than-life operatic laughter of Siegfried and the valkyries (see previous section). In the aftermath of her night, ashamed and hung-over, she immediately began to associate Hughes with her electroshock treatment, and again Wagner-adjacent images of rebirth, struggle, power, and even a Sleeping Beauty-style wall of thorns, entered her consciousness: 'I thought about the shock treatment description last night: the deadly sleep of her madness...the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman. I shall never see him again, and the thorny limitations of the day crowd in like the spikes on the gates at Queens last night...I could never sleep with him anyway...I would be the world's whore...I would like to try just this once, my force against his. But he will never come...'[204]

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[202]Plath, *Journals*, 25th February 1956, p. 208-9.
[203]Plath, *Journals*, 26th February 1956, pp. 211-12.
[204]Plath, *Journals*, 26th February 1956, p. 212.

A confused period of writing immediately follows, in which she simultaneously entertains the fantasy of Sassoon (from whom she still wanted more) and Hughes (whom she); repeatedly, her writing returns to the same paradigm of the warrior maiden, caught between battle and submission. A self-contradictory letter to Sassoon on the 6th March expresses both hatred of him for causing her to desire marriage, and frustration over his silence when, she claims, she will not seek to tie him down yet: 'why do you flee me, if you know I would rather make life rich under the shadow of the sword?'[205] On the 9th March, both her private writing and correspondence unite in framing the themes of battle and supernatural struggle as a means of success. 'I could write ten novels and vanquish the gods…' her journal declares.[206] That day, she sent her mother her latest poem, 'Pursuit,' which was 'triggered by' Ted but 'written for' Sassoon.[207] Thematically, her remarks align extremely closely with the valkyrie's awakening and suicide (see next section), and the language of weaponry and smithies is very evident, revealing the extent to which she built upon the story - not only romantically but creatively - in her own mythos:[208]

> It is, of course, a symbol of the terrible beauty of death, and the paradox that the more intensely one lives, the more one burns and consumes oneself; death, here, includes the concept of love, and is larger and richer than mere love, which is a part of it…Oh, mother, if only you knew how I am forging a soul!…I am fighting, fighting, and I am making a self…and I am being refined in the fires of pain and love…there is no being strong enough for my intensity…[209]

Plath knew that Hughes was in town at the time, and her anxiety over whether she would see him caused her writing in her journal, free from the positive performance of her letters, to become even more intense, and the most violent aspects of her Siegfried fantasies even more pointed, with a clear focus on predestination and impending disaster:

> 'Please let him come and give me the resilience & guts to make him respect me, be interested…He is probably strutting the backs among crocuses now with seven Scandinavian mistresses…I am so hungry for a big smashing creative burgeoning burdened love: I am here, I wait…I lay, burning, fevered with this disease…He is at a party now, I know; with some girl. My face burns, and I am turning to ash, like the apples of Sodom and Gomorrah…Men's voices downstairs. I am sick, sick.

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[205]Plath, Letter to Richard Sassoon, 6th March 1956, *Letters* Vol.I, p. 1128. In the same letter, she compares Sassoon to Ibsen's character of the priest, Brand. This is another indication of her attraction to Nordic aesthetics and stories, and her association of those things with the men she desired.

[206]Plath, *Journals*, p. 232.

[207]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 426.

[208]I say 'mythos' because it encompasses both her private thoughts and presentation, which overlap so closely that it is difficult to separate personal inspiration from the way in which she sought to appear. I suspect that trying to separate them would be a fruitless exercise, as this very symbiotic relationship between inner and outer is a clue to the source of a great deal of her anxiety.

[209]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 9th March, *Letters* Vol.I, p. 1133-4.

> With this desperate fury...Love turns, lust turns, into the death urge. My love is gone, gone, and I would be raped...'[210]

Already, as evidenced by the above two quotations, and her accompanying poems (for which, see next section) she is incorporating the idea of burning, (mostly violent) sex and destruction with the idea of both rebirth and sacrifice, both of which concepts became intricately- and highly toxically - intermingled in her consciousness.

A great deal of her fervour in all these writings seems to originate in her wanting to forget about Sassoon, and investing ever more in the fantasy ideal of Hughes - a more perfect model of every aspect of her fantasies - in order to do so. The fixation on her own annihilation through violent passion is very telling, and it is clear the fantasy regarding both men blurred into one, with the consistent factor being the Siegfried theme. The remark on rape might be read as a reference to the second scene of the valkyrie's struggle with Gunter-Siegfried, in which one ideal love takes on the unwelcome guise of another, and she is forced to submit. This indicates that Plath's leaning into the submission fantasy of Hughes was a way to deal with heartbreak and soothe her ego, and so became an odd form of self-empowerment; rejection from the one man, and fear over what might happen with the other, would have seemed more comfortingly grandiose when transplanted over her pre-existing Wagnerian mythology of destiny, battle and submission. The Gunter-Siegfried analogy is particularly relevant when we consider that the separate men represented one and the same thing - her all-encompassing desire for a certain type of partnership - and so become blurred together in her imagination. She was to be granted her violent replacement, and one which she continued to associate with sacrifice, even as she seemingly rejoiced; the first night with Hughes, just over a fortnight after this entry, was described as a 'holocaust night' which left her bruised.[211] A journal note, clearly aimed at Sassoon, relates her new relationship with Hughes with a very strange mixture of gloating and sadness, intimating that Sassoon's abandonment (in itself mythologised into something more calculated than it was) caused her to choose the other man, spending all her effort 'brutally' on giving to and loving him instead.[212] Although, admittedly, at this point she believed Hughes would soon move abroad, and she would lose him too, this seems nevertheless to be yet another facet of the abandonment and sacrifice fantasy paradigm she was invested in enacting, and indicates the complex nature of her feelings for Hughes himself.

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[210]Plath, *Journals*, p. 233-4.

[211]Plath, *Journals*, p. 552. This seems most probably meant in the original sense of 'sacrifice' at this point, although she would later, famously, make use of references to Jewish persecution.

[212]'...something very terrifying too has happened to me...when I came back to London there seemed only this one way of happening, and I am living now in a kind of present hell...I took care, such care, and even that was not enough, for my being deserted utterly. you said that you told me "brutally" your vacation would be spent. well, mine is spent too, brutally, and I am spent, giving with both hands, daily, and the blight and terror has been made in the choice...' Plath, *Journals*, p. 235.

Whether she was truly falling in love with Hughes, or was seeking a desired shape to bolster her ambitions (or, what was most likely, a mixture of both), Plath's correspondence proves her ongoing efforts to fit him into the pre-existing mythical shape of the valkyrie and her one true equal. As Heather Clark aptly phrases it, she first makes the situation 'real' by reporting it to her mother:'...in the last two months I have fallen terribly in love, which can only lead to great hurt...' her first letter announces, as though she is already bolstering against an inevitable doom.[213] For a full month, her letters home all rhapsodize about her new heroic 'giant';' ...he is big as I only thought a dream or a god could be; there were giants in the earth, and I think we come from another age to this world...'[214] In crafting her desired image, the same themes and phrases recur multiple times, with a frenetic, obsessive intensity that is frankly sinister. His strength, commandeering personality and capacity for violence is perhaps the most prevalent thread "... I met the strongest man in the world...his very power & brilliance & endless health & iron will to beat the world across is why I love him and never will be able to do more, for he'll blast off to Spain & then Australia & never stop conquering people & saying poems....he makes all others mere puny fragments.'[215] While she never mentions the name 'Siegfried,' the very 'elemental' descriptions are reminiscent of the young, isolated hero, brought up in a forest, away from civilization, and her ecstatic descriptions of his overpowering presence read very like Brünnhilde's outpourings of love at her awakening. Sometimes, her tone comes disturbingly close to pre-war Nazi propaganda: 'He is a violent Adam (a repeated image), and his least gesture is like a derrick...Living in this sick small insular inbred land he has gone wild...In the midst of my knowing there is no other man like this, no other man who could breed supermen, with all the vigor of mind and body in this world of cerebralism and with the primitive force too...'[216] The word 'übermensch' rather disturbingly comes to mind.

In keeping with the theme of the extraordinary pairing of valkyrie and warrior, an important focus became her own worthiness as a match, her own superlative strength and her thriving creatively in his company, now that she has submitted to the cause of loving him. '[I] am now coming into the full of my power' she writes to her brother Warren, '...in love with the only man in the world who is my match...worth me and all the strength and health I have...'[217] Her mother still received the greater part of her mythologising: 'I have never known anything like it: for the first time in my life I can use all my knowing and laughing and force and writing <u>to the hilt</u> all the time...I am growing and shall be a woman beyond women for my strength. I have never been so exultant, the joy of using all my wit and womanly wisdom is a joy beyond words; what a huge humour we have, what running strength![218] The sun, one of the strongest images she seems to associate with the awakening

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[213]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 17th April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1161.
[214]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 3rd May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1184-5.
[215]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 3rd May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1184-5.
[216]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 19th April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1164-6.
[217]Plath, Letter to Warren Plath, April 23rd 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1173-5.
[218]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 19th April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1164-6.

of the valkyrie, returns in one of her most passionate passages, and becomes mingled yet again with both her aspirations of strength and her tendency to anticipate a doom or death at the edge of love:

...radiance and love just surge out of me like a sun...although this is the one man in the world for me...even so, I am true to the essence of myself...and will live with her through sorrow and pain, singing all the way, even in anguish and grief, the triumph of life over death and sickness and war and all the flaws of my dear world. And this woman I am stretching to be is one whom no man can send crying out of life...my next months...will be spent making him learn with every bit of his mind and heart that my like is not to be found the world over...there are only the two of us who are whole and strong enough to be a match, one for the other...having been on the other side of life, like Lazarus, I know that my whole being shall be one song of affirmation and love all my life long...I have learned to make a life growing through toleration of conflict, sorrow and hurt...and turn myself to whatever trial...I feel like Job, and will rejoice in the deadly blasts of whatever comes...This faith comes from the earth and sun; it is pagan in a way...[219]

Here, she refers quite explicitly to the idea of betrayal leading to a strong death, again reminiscent of the valkyrie's lack of tears (although rejoicing in adversity is strictly not accurate to either the figure of Brünnhilde or Job), and also seems to be associating with Wagner's association of love with cosmic purification. Again, her 'pagan' reference seems to link to the 'sun rape' fantasy of 1951, in which she envisions herself being reborn on a rock.The reference to Lazarus is particularly interesting too, as it is a foreshadowing of one of her later, most famous poems, 'Lady Lazarus,' which also seems to reflect something of her preoccupation with the valkyrie and the pyre in relation to love and creativity (see next section.) As with her first journal entries about him, the violent struggling in the first love scene between Siegfried and the valkyrie remains a strong source of inspiration:

> I am coming into my own...I have, in a flash of clairvoyance, seen into him and into the colossal capacity he has for being strong and straight to the end of time...We are getting through, wrestling through, the unessential husks into the only real place in the world : that whistling desert where human beings stand naked before the sun and earth...there is no question of other faces or figures turning us aside...there is only one kind of commitment till the end of time, and this is what we are working to...I feel that all my life, all my pain and work...All the blood spilt, the words written...have been a work to fit me for loving Ted...I am good for him.'[220]

The idea of Plath's 'clairvoyance' or 'knowing' was, apparently, also important in relation to Hughes; she not only saw him as a partner who would enhance her most superlative, qualities, but needed to see herself as a partner who, like the valkyrie, could give him the benefit of her wisdom, and have the unique capacity change him into a being capable of vulnerability. She boasted to Warren that Hughes had 'done a kind of uncaring rip' through all previous partners, but that she

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[219] Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 29th April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1179-81.
[220] Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 3rd May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1184-5.

thought she could 'make him kind' and was, again, 'the first one who is as strong in herself...as he is...'[221] What added to her triumph was that Hughes, apparently, agreed: 'from being...despairing of ever being able to use our whole selves, our whole strengths, without terrifying other people, we have turned into the most happy magnanimous creative pair in the world: Ted says himself that I have saved him from being ruthless, cynical, cruel...because he never thought there could be a girl like me...I too have new power by pouring all my love and care in one direction to someone strong enough to take me in my fullest joy...'[222]

Part of her sense of power, importantly, came from being placed above other women in terms of her writing: 'Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine: they are strong and full and rich, not quailing and whining like Teasdale, or simple lyrics like Millay: they are working, sweating, heaving poems...'[223] It is not only in reflection of the elevated, powerful image to which she aspired, but also very typical of the period that she buys into the gendered stereotype of a 'woman poet,' (i.e. one whose writing reflects a 'softer,' more traditionally feminine tone, and whose subject interests are devalued by men as unimportant) seeking to disassociate herself and her own writing from it, and playing into the dynamic of 'more-than,' rather than refuting the stereotype altogether.[224] The accompanying poems in the letter ('Strumpet song', 'Complaint of the Crazed Queen' and 'Firesong') are full of the subjugation of awkward female bodies, deflowering, violence and burning. The most eloquent reflection of her preoccupation at the time is the final lines of 'Firesong' - 'brave love, dream/ not of staunching such strict flame, but come, /lean to my wound; burn on, burn on.'[225]This idealised image of fertile, strong womanhood manifested through poetry sometimes seems to align, even more interestingly, with her idealisation of Germanic and fantasy literature. She comments on how lovely it is to revisit the fairy tales and literature of her childhood with Hughes, praising his artwork ('You should see Ted draw! He is like Arthur Rackham, only better!') and, despite her later claims that her German is weak, mentions impressing him with her on-the-spot translations of Grimm.[226] She then follows these reminiscences with yet another, Wagnerian-tinged declaration of her future dreams: 'I shall be one of the few woman poets in the

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[221]Plath, Letter to Warren Plath, 23rd April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1173-5. NB. The truth was not quite so simple; Ted Hughes had had at least one other serious girlfriend, whom he had taken to meet his family. For more detail on the poet's life, see J. Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London, 2015).

[222]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 6th May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1189. Also see the next letter on 9th May, which is so close in parts to the previous that it is not worth quoting here.

[223]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 29th April 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 1179-81.

[224]Plath's approach to self-empowerment here is typical of its time, and is what would now be called a 'cool girl' or 'pick-me girl' attitude in popular culture. Such an attitude is the product of a kind of internalized misogyny, based on the assumed and very generalised devaluation of women, and is designed to show men, based on those assumptions, that 'I'm not like other women.' This reinforces not only a misleading sense of competition between women for male attention, both socially and professionally, but also a false gender binary in which so-called 'masculine' traits are implicitly assigned greater value and respect, because they are seen as strong or superior, and any 'feminine' traits subsequently viewed disparagingly.

[225]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 3rd May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1184.

[226]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 18th May and 26th May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1196, and p. 1200.

world who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or frustrated or warped man-imitator...I am a woman, and glad of it, and my songs will be of the fertility of the earth and the people in it through waste, sorrow and death. I shall be a woman singer...'[227] Her references to ecstatic singing (which occur more than once during this period) are a very clear sign of her engagement with the operatic text specifically, and she seems to be re-enacting the spirit of the first love duet in her own words; her claim to womanhood very much echoes Siegfried's plea to the valkyrie to 'awaken and be a woman for me!'

Although a certain amount of the above writing is undeniably performance, showcasing her arrival at the pinnacle (as she advertised it) of all her combined romantic and intellectual ideals, Plath's hyperbolic prose, with its references to wrestling, fire, suns, breeding, strength and death, was seemingly employed without a trace of irony. The couple's courtship lasted only two months, but the imagery of fire, purification and sacrifice was to persist long after the marriage ended; in October, Plath wrote to Hughes that thinking of him and loving him was a 'sheath of radiance which keeps me,' and spoke of being 'reborn' with him; she closed the letter with 'let [all my love] burn your mouth.'[228]The world of her childhood fantasies also stayed linked to the fantasy of the giant for some time, with both featuring heavily in the landscape of her ambitions: three years later, and in a far less euphoric state of mind, she was to write in adjacent entries of her journal, as though convincing herself: 'Ted is the ideal, the one possible person.' and 'Worked on German for two days, then let up when I wrote poems. Must keep on with it. It is hard. So are most things worth doing.'[229] Unlike the fire, however, the vision of the giant was not to remain; her poetic development would reveal a very definite development of her fantasies of fire, sacrifice, death and rebirth, which were first triggered by the idea of romance, but eventually were to become symbolic of disillusionment, independence and a desire for revenge.

Impact and Poetic Development

Thus far, it has been established that Plath's proven engagement with Old Norse mythology took place at various levels of removal from the source texts, as is usual for most readers with an enthusiasm for general mythology and fairy tales (although she may have read certain primary source material). All the above excerpts from her writing show that the Old Norse symbolism and stories she had absorbed through Wagner, and then again through her college studies, were becoming a huge part of a wider mythos in her imagination. This mythos also, and inevitably, became a medium for creative writing; over it, Plath would continue to superimpose her own

[227]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 26th May 1956, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 1200.
[228]Plath, Letter to Ted Hughes, 20th oct 1956, *Letters* Vol.1, p. 1317.
[229]Plath, *Journals*, p. 519.

emotional epiphanies and life events, with the resulting hybrid concepts forming the basis for her poems. This last section of the chapter will endeavour to show, through close reading, the ways in which Plath's reception of and response to Old Norse mythology, and especially to the story of the valkyrie, evolved over her lifetime. In these concluding pages, I hope to demonstrate the strong link between her inner mythos and these works, revealing how consistently the early, Nordic influences in particular played into the unfurling of her life and works up to, and especially during, these years.

As there is insufficient room for me to undertake a complete survey of every relevant reference, I will focus on several key pieces and references which show Plath's poetic development, and the ongoing consistency of her inspiration from Wagner and other Old Norse material.[230] In the collected poems published by Faber in 1981, Hughes also defines certain watersheds in the progression of Plath's writing, where it is possible to see a distinct maturation or stylistic change, but, as his primary focus for the purposes of the volume is the quality of the poems in themselves, he pays far less attention to the minutiae of the early, clumsier stages. As has been noted above, this demarcation is established particularly strongly by Hughes's opening the book with work from that year, and separating any pre-1956 poems into a back section labelled 'juvenilia'. As it happens, some of this work is very strongly affected by her inspiration from Old Norse mythology, and so is important for more reasons than craftsmanship. Just as her inspiration from Wagner was never fully acknowledged in the same, open manner in which she would express her enthusiasm for German fairy tales, or for individual writers by name, such as Auden, Yeats and Tolkien, none of her own works are titled in a way that directly indicates her unmistakable debt to *The Ring* and the Old Norse pantheon. Aside from a few brief, and obvious symbolic references made in passing (Thor in 'The Disquieting Muses being one such example), her reading list (and subsequently the Rackham images), the many pointed references in her journal and letters, and the interview with Suzette Macedo (see 'Introduction') are a great assistance in identifying Old Norse mythological references in Plath's writing. The greater part of her usage consists of brief allusions she made to certain figures or symbols (which are generally more obvious on second reading and in light of the above contexts), mixed with other mythological symbolism; although such references do not amount to a great deal individually, they demonstrate the importance of the nordic pantheon as a key part of her general consciousness and imaginative landscape. Certain keynote poems, on the other hand, show a more in-depth engagement with Old Norse and Wagnerian material, and do so at what are clearly epochal points in her life. It is at times like these when she clearly felt an emotional need to draw upon Old Norse-style fantasy, using it to address her fears, and to create a sense of empowerment and control. The ways in which she engages with the material also, predictably, change with age, experience and self-awareness.

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[230]NB. I intend to extend upon this work in a future monograph, by making a more complete survey of the poetic works and a closer literary critical analysis of each poem.

Few young poets have recorded or sent off their work as meticulously as Plath did, and so following her early progress and inspiration is relatively simple. She began, as is usual for children, with imitation: her poem about fairies (see previous section on 'Reading in Earlier Life') is just one example of other rhymes and jingles which she imitated from children' s books like *Under the Silver Umbrella* - partly to impress, as was her wont, but also for the sheer pleasure of wordplay. As she read more Romantic and Victorian poetry, her unequivocally childish poems gradually evolved into small pieces. These were less dependent on the rhythms and rhyme schemes imposed on children as the poetic ideal, and showed a growing awareness of imagery, rather than structures, as a means of stabilising a poem. One excellent example of this is the snow-themed piece she gifted to her grandfather (16th Jan 1946), in which she manages to combine both comforting and melancholic undertones in quite a sophisticated, even Frostian manner, considering her age:

> The moon hangs, a globe of iridescent light,
> In a frosty winter sky,
> While against the western glow one sees
> The bare black skeleton of the trees.[231]

The majority of the work during the next, clear stage of Plath's development (if such a compartmentalisation is justified), was produced from the late 1940s up to her college years at Smith.[232] Many of the poems included from this period in the Faber *Collected Poems* were written around, and sometimes for, her classes with Alfred Fisher.

The poetry at this adolescent period shows definite promise and quickness of mind, and a keen awareness of the power of colour and texture, as well as the highly physical effects that could be evoked in a reader by a well-placed, alliterative phrase or metaphor. In it can be seen the same, undiluted intensity of voice and force of feeling which she would later hone to great effect in the *Ariel* poems, and also a strong instinct for orality. However, as an artist inspired by everything, but still finding her own poetic standpoint, her imagistic style is still undeniably patchwork, drawing upon a bewildering amount of source material and voices she admired; sometimes, she went through periods of inspiration from one, particular poet, and sometimes the work is a bewildering tapestry of mixed metaphor.[233] In it, biblical references jostle alongside fairytale figures, and

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[231]See Clark, *Red Comet*, pp. 79-80.

[232]NB. The extent to which Plath's work has been categorized into such periods is undoubtedly due to how her work has been presented by Ted Hughes, who controlled her estate up until his death, then by Ted's sister, Olwyn Hughes, and by Faber.

[233]In a BBC documentary, Al Alvarez would later comment on this early habit as a typical part of poetic development, referencing T.S. Eliot's claim that immature poets always 'imitated a mature poet's steel.' A clip from one of Plath's interviews, in the same documentary, explained how there were certain times she would write almost exclusively based on one source - in her early Smith years, the poet W.H. Auden provided much material.

animals, stones, saints, insects, glass and blood (to name a few constants) appear again and again, poured out in highly allusive, packed phrases. One memorable poem of this ilk is 'April Aubade', which includes the lines 'diamonds jangle hymns within the blood' and 'a saintly sparrow jargons madrigals.'[234] While some originality of voice is already present, and she shares the same passion for sensation, materiality and symbol which one may recognise in the more honed, adult writing of A.S. Byatt (whom I shall discuss later), that instinctive voice is muffled by lack of experience. It is tripped up by its own unrestrainedness, by the stronger, canonic overtones of Medieval, Renaissance and Romantic works she was reading (and probably imitated to impress), and the, as yet, rigidly rhythmic qualities of the work. Plath herself would refer to the latter framework as a 'glass caul' from which she had trouble breaking free, preventing the true flexibility needed for the fullness of expression she craved.[235] This was still the work of a clever youth in love with 'faerie'; keen to demonstrate her intellectual capabilities and impressed by the stone-cut, grandiose tone of the old.[236]

It would be easy to discount the possibility of Old Norse influence at any stage of these very early poems, simply because they contain so many mixed references within the territory of Germanic-Nordic fairy tales, mythology and folklore, with which Old Norse tales share a great deal, thematically and aesthetically. As with the disquieting muses, who might easily be fates, witches, norns or valkyries, it is sometimes difficult to tell where certain images had their birth in her imagination, and nor should one assume there is any one starting place. Although not all the references are clearly and unequivocally related to Old Norse, this in its way lends a greater, rather than lesser, potential for such a reading, in that it allows for an intertextual approach: a reader who has experience of both mythic and folkloric canons, particularly a reader with Plath's constantly busy, multi textual consciousness, cannot help but think of several canons in parallel, as they share so many symbols, threads and stereotypes. In her mind, a reference to 'golden apples', of which there are a few in the early poems, might stem from fairy tales, Greek mythology, Wagner's *Rheingold* (in which the immortal apples of Asgard are kept by Freia (Freyja), not Iðunn, and are part of her lure as a wife for the giants) - or all three. In each instance, the general concepts of riches, wellbeing, long life and plenty, which the apples symbolise in some capacity within most literary contexts, is what seems of most importance to the poem.

Certain references admittedly lean more towards Plath's interest in her German heritage than her engagement with Old Norse proper, but even these point towards her awareness of both traditions

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[234]Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 312.
[235]See H. Clark, 'On Sylvia Plath's Creative Breakthrough at the Yaddo Artists' Colony,' *LitHub* (28th October, 2020), https://lithub.com/on-sylvia-plaths-creative-breakthrough-at-the-yaddo-artists-colony/ (accessed 21st April 2025).
[236]J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, C. Tolkien (ed.) (London, 1983), pp. 109-161. One may get a stylistic overview of the above points by reading the sections of collected and uncollected 'Juvenilia' in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, pp. 299-339.

as they appear in *The Ring*. In 1945 - as yet, very early in her writing career, but already published - Plath would play mermaids at summer camp, and write poems about Rhine Maidens back home in Wellesley; rhine maidens were the only characters in Wagner's work with no parallel in *Volsunga saga* or Eddic poetry.[237] These maidens also correlate with a German folk song about the Lorelei, which Aurelia sang to her around the same time, and so became a part of her general performance of the good German child.[238] Such figures were also a crucial part of building her own mythic selfhood as a Germanic 'bombshell' (rhine maidens, as mentioned in the previous section, were part of the teasing, supernatural sexual dynamic she came to associate with the nordic fantasy world.) Similar figures would return in 1958 in her poem 'Lorelei,' inspired, as she notes, by a session at the ouija board. Her engagement with them indicates her wider interest in the nihilistic and/or apocalyptic elements of the valkyrie love plot. '...Pan said I should write on the poem-subject "Lorelei" because they are "my own kin"...I did so, remembering the plaintive German song Mother used to play and sing for us...The subject appealed to me doubly (or triply): the German legend of the Rhine Sirens, the sea-childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song's beauty.' [239] This indicates that Plath's ongoing focus on the sea as a theme also had some alignment with female figures from Germanic folklore and Wagnerian retelling, and that they also came to be associated with the suicide drive embodied by Brünnhilde.

The early poem 'Gold Mouths Cry' is more clearly a nod to both the Norse and German halves of the Sigurðr/Siegfried legend, transplanting the triumphant mood of the young hero before his fall into a modern context, as a more general societal atmosphere of optimism. The poem was partly inspired by a statue on campus, but also by Plath's meeting an aristocratic boy named Constantine in October 1951, a mere three months after writing about her 'sun rape' fantasy on the rocks; a great deal of her personal writing indicates that Plath was already looking about her for the young man who could match up to her Siegfriedian ideal ('Constantine is my bronze boy. But I didn't know him when I wrote it.')[240] In it, the 'coming doom of gold' is a particularly pointed reference to the legend of the ring. Although overtly it seems like a reference to the general irrepressibility of the young hero's manner in the face of change and corruption, the image of leaves falling on his back could have been partly inspired by the linden leaf which provides the mechanism for Siegfried's later demise in *Nibelungenlied*, or (even less likely, but nevertheless possible) the forest episode in *Völsunga saga* in which Sigmund witnesses one weasel heal another with a leaf, and then heals his son Sinfjötli with the same leaf, conveniently dropped by a raven.[241] Prophetic, Eddic undertones also appear in the poem 'Recantation' (1956), in which the persona declares their abandonment of attempts to predict the future and, amongst a litany of failing or broken objects

[237]Clark, *Red Comet*, p. 74.
[238]See Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 5th July 1958, *Letters* Vol. 1, pp. 258-60.
[239]See Plath, *Journals*, p. 401 and 'Notes' in Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 287.
[240]Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath, 8th October 1951, *Letters* Vol. 1, p. 381.
[241]See F. S. Ellis, *Völsunga Saga : The Story of the Volsungs & Niblungs* (London, 1980), p. 22.

more traditionally associated with drawing-room fortune telling, 'Rather than croak out/ What's to come/ My darling ravens are flown' - lines highly evocative of the portents of doom before Ragnarök, and of the dying words of Wagner's valkyrie (see 'The Operatic Rebirth of Brünnhilde.')

Like Wagner, Plath could combine threads from either tradition she felt to be of relevance at any given time, but, as happened with the composer, there are also signs that the Old Norse pantheon as a whole somewhat eclipsed the German in her mind as she wrote. One poem 'Temper of Time', predicts the encroaching doom, through folkloric and fairytale omens, of a hero figure named 'Kilroy.'[242]

An ill wind is stalking
While evil stars whir
And all the gold apples
Go bad to the core.

Black birds of omen
Now prowl on the bough;
With a hiss of disaster
Sibyl's leaves blow.

In this case, the placing of the image of 'gold apples' next to the 'black birds of omen' calls to mind a story world of strictly Old Norse tradition, as both the immortality-giving apples of Iðunn, and the raven pair Hugin and Munin - the birds of Odin - feature at various points in the slow arc of asgardian rule and destruction, and at critical junctures in Wagner's Ring Cycle. It is not hard to imagine Rackham's visual influence in the imagistic juxtaposition of dull gold and black. Moreover, the appearance of the phrase 'Sibyl's leaves' immediately after the closely intertwined apple and bird symbolism, suggests Plath was thinking of Erda - Wagner's adaptation of the seeress speaker from the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá,* who foresees the end of the world at Ragnarök.[243] As well as Wagner's close adaptation of the words of this female figure, which did not stray that far from the Eddic material, Weston's writing would also have informed Plath of the existence of the poem *Vǫluspá*, and so it is possible the prophetic tone of 'Temper of Time' was also a nod to the source. These three early references, by their close proximity, suggest that Plath was already tapping into the

[242]This poem is far more political than it appears, as 'Kilroy' is probably a reference to the WWII meme 'Kilroy was here', first made famous in graffiti by American GI's in Europe, as a display of power and territory-marking during the conflict that followed D-Day. The name had a few positive connotations, as some, including poet Peter Viereck (who published a poem entitled 'Kilroy' in his collection *Terror and Decorum* in 1948), associated it with traditional heroic characteristics, but also came to have highly negative connotations of destructiveness, racism and boorishness. It is likely that the poem was either a commentary on the inevitable hubris awaiting a domineering America, or else the death of the idealised American hero in Europe - even greater proof of Plath's acute awareness of, and interest in postwar global politics as a teenager. For more information on the slogan and its history, see *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (2013), p.523

[243]Plath may also have been thinking about the apocalyptic poem 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves' by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which shares a great deal of the tonal 'colouring' of this poem. See Hopkins, "32 Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves." *Poems Of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 1918, p. 52.

doom-laden symbolism of Ragnarök at a pivotal point in her development (as a poet and a young person), to express herself. From this perspective, even the blatantly Red Riding Hood-esque 'wolf at the (cottage) door' in the fifth stanza could be said to share territory with Fenrir, the giant wolf destined to swallow Oðin at Ragnarök.[244]

This brings us to Hughes's first demarcation of where Plath's poetry 'began' - the year 1956, which was the year the couple met and married. Despite the somewhat regrettable, proprietorial implications behind this decision, it must be admitted that a great deal of the poetry in this section of the book shows a significant change in quality from the type of work Plath was producing during the Smith years. The colour, physicality of phrasing and richness of image remain intact in the poems, but, while there is still a somewhat excessive approach to imagery and linguistic effect, and a tendency to imitation of established works (particularly alliterative phrasing, which was most likely an offshoot of her studies in Medieval literature), there is a definite paring-down of imagery, and far greater attention to following and developing more definite lines of conceit. While it would be unwise to give Hughes all the credit for such a change, on a practical level it is hardly surprising that Plath benefited from another, more developed poet's critical eye, whether through any active editing he did, or simply awareness of his approach to writing compared to hers. This, along with the fact that theirs was the most developed relationship she had had to date, and was the only one which had writing as a primary foundation, would account for some of the more significant maturations in Plath's writing after they met.

In terms of her ongoing awareness and use of Old Norse motifs, it is also important to remember that Hughes himself was not only well-read in Norse mythology, but (unsurprisingly for a poet attuned to and inspired by the grim realism of existence and life-death cycles) he was highly invested in what he saw as the link between Old Norse and the deeper-rooted, more visceral part of British literary heritage.[245] In his review of Turville-Peter's *Myth and Religion of the North*, published in *The Listener* only three years after Plath's death, he referenced Morris and Yeats's debt to the canon, commented that there were not enough English translations of the myths and tales for adult readers, and expressed the wish for an accompanying collection of these alongside the featured book.[246]It would be very unusual if such enthusiasm had not been communicated to Plath during their marriage, considering that it was Hughes who introduced her to the folkloric writings of Graves; it is even possible that she introduced him to Weston. Whatever ways they pooled their knowledge, Hughes's interest would have augmented Plath's pre-existing hoard of Wagnerian material. Their shared life, and tendencies to mythologise or impose an occult meaning upon major

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[244]Plath, 'Temper of Time', *The Collected Poems*, p. 336.

[245] "...this particular mythology is much deeper in us, and truer to us, than the Greek-Roman pantheons that came in with Christianity, and again with the Renaissance, severing us with the completeness of a political interdict from these other deities of our instinct and ancestral memory." Hughes, 'Asgard for Addicts,' *Winter Pollen*, pp. 40-1.

[246]Hughes, 'Asgard for Addicts,' *Winter Pollen*, pp. 40-1.

events, would have made it likely that some Old Norse material would have featured heavily in their working consciousnesses.

One particular keynote piece which was inspired by Hughes' presence, but which he had no part in editing, was *Pursuit*, one of the most significant poems written during the period when they first met, and at a time when the mythic shape Plath imposed upon him was already being utilised in upon her previous love, Richard Sassoon (for context, see previous section).[247] Regardless of the extent to which either man occupied her mind, it is Plath's net representation of desire and the hero figure, inspired by Wagnerian motifs, which make it a significant poetic reception of Old Norse mythology. For anyone who approaches the poem with more general biographical or literary knowledge, *Pursuit* is simply an extended hunting metaphor with the male persona in the shape of a supernaturally-tinted panther and Plath as his terrified, yet mesmerised quarry; it has strong undertones (most likely conscious) of Rilke, Dante's dream mountainside with its allegorical predators of sin, Grimm's tales of imprisoned princesses and Blake's fiery *Tyger.* However, to any reader with a more detailed knowledge of Plath's investment in the Siegfried and Brünnhilde coupling - and the subsequent importance of linking fire, sex, destruction, death and rebirth in her inner mythos - certain aspects of the poem gain a brand new significance. Plath's fantasy hunter, rather than being linked to darkness or shade like Blake's 'forests of the night', instead 'prowls more lordly than the sun;' a simile which calls to mind the valkyrie's greeting of the sun and Siegfried, and also the anthropological and folkloric links (drawn explicitly by Jessie Weston and implicitly by Rackham,) between that hero and sun deities like Baldr and Freyr. The poem is worth quoting at length, as so many points in it align with previous writing, and with Wagner:

> There is a panther stalks me down:
> One day I'll have my death of him;
> His greed has set the woods aflame,
> He prowls more lordly than the sun...
> From gaunt hemlock, rooks croak havoc:
> The hunt is on, and sprung the trap.
> Flayed by thorns I trek the rocks,
> Haggard through the hot white noon.
> Along red network of his veins
> What fires run, what craving wakes?
>
> Insatiate, he ransacks the land
> Condemned by our ancestral fault...
>
> ...His kisses parch, each paw's a briar,
> Doom consummates that appetite.

[247]See also Clark, Red Comet, p. 426.

In the wake of this fierce cat,
Kindled like torches for his joy,
Charred and ravened women lie,
Become his starving body's bait...

...He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice.
His voice waylays me, spells a trance,
The gutted forest falls to ash;
Appalled by secret want, I rush
From such assault of radiance...[248]

The latter phrase 'assault of radiance' is also evocative of sun imagery, rather than a hellish type of blaze, further crystallizing the poem's oxymoronic tonal blend of positivity and violence.

Used in isolation, and in the context of more recent poetry, such imagery might be taken for a reflection of Amy Lowell's patriarchal sun tiger, who preys upon the highly evocative white mares beating their hooves against a glass heaven (or ceiling) in 'Night Clouds' - a poem which Plath knew well - but other aspects of this predator also seem to point, again, to a Sigurðr/Siegfried metaphor.[249] 'One day, I'll have my death of him', the persona grimly predicts, following her prophecy with a statement highly reminiscent of the ongoing motif of familial conflict made concrete in *Völsunga Saga* and *The Ring:* "Insatiate, he racks the land/Condemned by our ancestral fault". Moreover, as with the predestination of the couple's fatal attraction, the suggestion of destiny arises again with the phrase 'Doom consummates that appetite'. As demonstrated by her journal and letters, this poem is a key sign that Plath was already projecting the volatility of the legend's consummation and death cycle onto her own romantic relationships. Such phrasing is highly suggestive of the extent to which she already identified with the figure of the valkyrie, whose fear of entrapment in a mortal marriage is so closely aligned with Plath's own insecurities about compromising her freedom and artistic potential. 'Appalled by secret want, I rush' calls to mind the operatic voice of Brünnhilde, desirous of passion and a strong partner, yet initially fleeing the hero's embrace out of shame and fear. It is also telling that the tone of sexual excitement in the poem seems to be a direct result *of* the sense of threat, rather than simply an effect which occurs in spite of it; this is representative, both of the fantasy dynamic of rape in Plath's immediate circle, and also of Wagner's own, palpably erotic treatment of sexual and physical surrender.

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[248]Plath, 'Pursuit,' *Collected Poems*, pp. 22-3, ll. 1-44.

[249]'Night Clouds' was one of the poems Plath selected for her self-made 'Anthology of American Poetry', which she compiled as a class project for Wilbury Crockett. Its celestial horses, a clear metaphor for free-thinking women, would not only have echoed Plath's own love of horse symbolism, but her developing views on the unspoken restrictions in so-called 'free' American society.

Once the significance of these doom-laden lines has registered in the reader's consciousness, other scenic elements also develop a new significance. One of these is the ongoing chain of fire imagery, which, along with those of hunting and devouring, dictates a great deal of the poem's aesthetic: 'charred' women lie in the wake of the panther, 'kindled like torches for his joy,' his gaze 'burns and brands,' and his 'ardor...lights the trees' so that the forest 'falls to ash.' This is not simply a matter of blazing passion, however; the panther eats the persona's heart, which she has thrown behind her, but still 'compels a total sacrifice.' This phrase allows us to read further into the fiery imagery, and, recalling similar phrases from Plath's earlier sexual fantasies of sacrifice through surrender on the rock, it does not seem too far a step to interpret them as allusions (unconscious or deliberate) to the double appearance of fire within the valkyrie's story. There is Brynhildr/Brünnhilde's sleep within the ring of flames, and all their connotations of unfulfilled desire, from which she is rescued/awakened and, as a result, happily surrenders to mortal love, followed by the (in Wagner, philosophical, and eventually literal) fiery sacrifice which awaits as a result of this surrender. The other element which takes on new layer of meaning is the poem's landscape - a liminal one full of thorns and rocks under a blazing 'white noon' (not dissimilar to that of the disquieting muses), through which the persona struggles, ending in a 'tower of fears', in which she takes refuge from her pursuer. The panther, for whom 'each paw's a briar', in its own way becomes one with the obstacles in this hostile landscape, in its strange mixed role of antagonist-cum-romantic hero. As we know from her reading, Plath would have been aware of the links between Sleeping Beauty and the valkyrie; in the poem, the fairytale element of the thorns, as well as referencing the fairy tale barrier, are perhaps an evocation of either the dragon-haunted moorland of Gnita Heath from Old Norse tradition (*Gnitaheiði*) or, more probably, considering the previous links to rocks and sexual awakening, the wild mountain landscape in which the valkyrie lies.

Similarly, the tower metaphor has undertones both of the fairy tale turret and the tower in *Völsunga saga*, in which Sigurðr spies Brynhildr (for the second time) as she looks out of her window, and to which he climbs and pledges himself to her with the fatal gold ring.[250] It is her use of the tower metaphor which provides one of the most suggestive pieces of evidence of Plath's further reading and influence from her further Old Norse studies; Weston meticulously explains the alternate side to Brynhildr as a high born court lady, and describes the second meeting between the lovers in her tower *Völsunga saga* - a part of the tale which Wagner completely omitted in his work. Weston even points out the puzzling disparity between these two initial meetings, and how neither is ever brought up in reference to the other.[251]

The most important aspects of the poem (in the context of the present study) are the tension between pursuer and quarry, and its interlocking motifs of desire, conflagration, pursuit,

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[250]It is perhaps relevant that, at the time of writing this poem, Plath was hoping to meet Hughes a second time.
[251]Weston, *Legends of the Wagner Drama*, p. 25.

predestination, fear and passionate consummation. These play very much into the relationship between the Old Norse figure of the valkyrie, and the only mortal with sufficient superhuman qualities to match hers, who is destined to give her what she craves even though the results will eventually, and inevitably, be tragic. Overall, while the poem seems to have been emotionally influenced mainly by Wagner's treatment of Old Norse texts and motifs, as opposed to by primary sources and translations, it is nevertheless (much like C.S. Lewis's earlier raptures over the Rackham book) an honest representation of the ongoing emotive power of the Old Norse pantheon upon artistically-inclined and sensitive minds. There is, of course, a terrible irony in the entirety of this particular conceit. Plath's creation of the superman-cum-predator persona is one that places her in the submissive role, but, inspired by the valkyrie's story, is clearly also a part of the inner mythos framing her as the superlative, desired mate - a case of selective submission for the purpose of self-elevation. The fact that she was already framing her impending romance as violent, and at the cost of her future own destruction and burning, is a highly disturbing sign of the way in which she absorbed and processed the mythology.

Reading Plath's responses to Wagner opens up a richer cache of interpretation which may be applied to other sun-themed imagery in her poems, especially ones written during that same period of her life. A good example is 'Two Sisters of Persephone', in which two female figures are juxtaposed, one virginal, 'rat-shrewd' of gaze and obsessed with mathematics, who dies 'worm-husbanded, but no woman', and the other sexy and 'bronzed as earth', who becomes 'sun's bride' and proudly gives birth to a king.[252] Here, we find a reiteration of her developing preoccupation with a pagan-inspired aesthetic in relation to Hughes - described in terms of fertility, nature and submission - which was inspired by the strong, passionate figure of the valkyrie and, in keeping with her fetishisation of the sun, devalued cooler, more man-made beauties and rationalities. This fantasy poetic mindscape was one in which she could speak with the same intensity of feeling allowed by the privacy of her journals, and by turns embody or create a persona who was powerful, righteously lustful, attractive and extraordinary. This poetic dynamic meant that her natural insecurity around other women had a ready-made salve in writing, in that she could always portray herself as superior, and other rivals as sneaking witches or creeping creatures.[253] Her insecurity about impending abandonment and betrayal could also take on a mythic sheen under this shape - it was predestined and was always down to something outside her control. This duality of female personae found in 'The Two Sisters of Persephone' would appear even more obviously in her later mythos, in poems like 'The Rival' and 'Lesbos.'

While poems like 'Pursuit' can mainly be attributed to Wagner's adaptation of the mythological and legendary material, however, Plath wrote other poems later in 1956, which indicate that its

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[252]Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 31-2.

[253]See Plath, 'Medusa' and 'Lesbos', *Collected Poems*, pp. 224-30.

creator had actual Eddic material in mind as well, whether as a result of the summative knowledge of such material afforded by Weston, or any subsequent reading into Old Norse literature. 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower' builds even more obviously upon the motif of doomed lovers than 'Pursuit,' but its main conceit is concerned with the stage after the chase, revolving around the clash between the desire for physical consummation in the heat of the moment and the unrealistic intent of eternal vows. Like the previous poem, there is a recurring theme of fire (the poem ends with a joint conflagration very much in keeping with the Wagnerian theme), but the image of most interest in the Eddic sense, though small, occurs in the fourth stanza, when the speaker states that the couple would in theory 'rivet sinews in rock' despite giving into their burning desires too quickly.[254] One of the first allusions which comes to mind is that of the Norse god Loki, bound to a rock with ropes made from the guts of his own offspring, and awaiting an eternity for the eventual fire and destruction of Ragnarök. Considering the proximity of 'Pursuit' to this piece in the collection, and the tendency of Plath's thoughts towards the wider Old Norse canon as suggested by that poem, it is highly possible that the allusion was to Loki.

While 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower,' as it stands alone, provides a fleeting Eddic reference at best, the poem 'Crystal Gazer' provides far more food for thought on this subject, and by its presence strengthens the possibility that Plath's thoughts tended to stray in an Old Norse direction during this period. 'Crystal Gazer' relates a moment in the life of an ancient fortune teller, who suffers from eternal foresight after seeking to know too much, and whom two lovers arrive to consult about their future. In typical Plathian fashion, this persona is a crone who, in keeping with her association of valkyries with witches and carlin figures, incorporates a 'cloud' of mythical and folkloric allusions to female power, fate, witchcraft and wisdom:

> Gerd sits spindle—shaped in her dark tent,
> Lean face gone tawn with seasons,
> Skin worn down to the knucklebones
> At her tough trade; without time's taint
> The burnished ball hangs fire in her hands, a lens
> Fusing time's three horizons...[255]

The heavily alliterative style of the poem, with its many possessives and kenning-like phrases ('Church curse', 'time's taint') is as indicative of Anglo Saxon influence as Old Norse, and most likely influenced by her studies in medieval literature, and the slew of Germanic alliterative patterns which appear in her work in 1956 in relation to Hughes. The speaker seems to mock 'beggar Gerd' on the surface, but their wry, tongue-in-cheek tone, reminiscent of the narrative voice in other poems such as 'Spinster,' also echoes representations of unattractive, rapacious or 'problematic' women as seen through the lens of the male gaze. an ironic attempt to 'own' and therefore

[254]Plath, 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower', *Collected Poems*, p. 45.
[255]Plath, 'Crystal Gazer', *Collected Poems*, p. 54.

empower the image of spinsterhood, like rappers with the 'n' word, it seems more pertinent (in view of Plath's aforementioned values and ambitions) to read Gerd as a reflection of very real, bitter fears concerning how others might perceive her if she 'failed' to build a successful future.

On one level, the poem as a whole is very likely inspired in part by the occult experiments with a ouija board undertaken by Plath and Hughes; Gerd easily fits folkloric stereotypes of nosey females who seek to know too much, and are now living unhappily with the consequences. As with the panther and his prey in *Pursuit*, however, there is more to this crone than is evident on first reading, and that extra close level of interpretation is only accessible to readers who are familiar with the Old Norse pantheon. The name 'Gerd' itself, which is an anglicisation of the name 'Gerðr,' also has two possible roots , and is perhaps a product of both. On the one hand, there is Wagner's 'Erda,' the earth goddess-cum-völva, and the other possible inspiration is Gerðr: the giantess desired and eventually won by the god Freyr in Norse mythology. [256] Here, Plath could once again have gained some inspiration for the figure through her study of Weston, who, as mentioned, drew symbolic and folkloric parallels between Siegfried/Sigurðr and Freyr/Baldr. As Weston does not include much detail from the Eddic stories, concentrating instead on the wider earth-sun and barrier-leaping symbolism of which they are one of many representatives, it is very likely that Plath read further: the Old Norse tale of Gerðr and Freyr as figures in their own right - especially the version of the story told in Snorri's Edda - certainly seems to echo in Plath's poem, in terms of the punishment suffered by the Gerd persona. Snorri gives the story of Gerðr and Freyr the Christian whitewash, as he did with the less traditionally feminine aspects of the valkyrie, and so does not include the horrific threats of curses and troll-rape which are used to force Gerðr's consent in the earlier mythological poem *Skírnismál,* in *The Poetic Edda*. The crucial tension in Snorri's version stems, instead, from the idea that Freyr's acute longing for Gerðr is his punishment for sitting in the high seat of Oðin, and seeking more knowledge than was his right - a message which Jessie Weston reinforces.[257] Plath's Gerd suffers the punishment of second sight for much the same kind of reason, with the amendment that she was trying to predict the future of her relationship, rather than simply seeking knowledge of the world for its own sake:

> Then, a free—gadding hoyden, Gerd had craved
> To govern more sight than given to a woman
> By wits alone: to foresee her lover's faith
> And their future lot, she braved
> Church curse to ken that crooked oath
> Whereby one hires a demon.

Although the demon reference is clearly with more general witch stereotypes in mind, or the experience of the ouija board, this closeness to the overreaching of Snorri's Freyr (albeit set in the

[256]See *Skírnismál*, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 376-85.
[257]Snorri Sturluson*, The Prose Edda*, p. 31.

context of a Christian blasphemy), considered alongside the highly specific name of the persona, suggests that Plath had read the Old Norse story in some form, whether it was Snorri's, or a modern author's adaptation of his version of the tale.

There is also a good chance that Plath had awareness of more than just Snorri's version of events; tonally, certain aspects of the narrative bear a certain resemblance to the story of Gerðr in Skírnismál from Sæmundr Edda. One possible source which may have contributed to this stylistic resemblance is Dorothy Hosford's Thunder of the Gods - a thorough retelling of the Asgardian myths which had already been published in America in 1952. *Thunder of the Gods* was sufficiently ubiquitous in educational institutions that it 'profoundly changed' Christopher Golden (who first discovered it in his school library and claims to have read it fifteen times, providing him with the inspiration for his second 'Hellboy' novel), and also Joanne Harris, who borrowed it 'multiple times' from her local library; there is a very reasonable chance that Plath encountered it during her lifetime as well.[258] For a retelling aimed at the young, the book's origins are extremely scholarly: Hosford gave credit to Bellows' translation of *The Poetic Edda*, Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur's translation of Snorri's *Prose Edda*, and *Norse Mythology* by Peter Andreas Much, a revision of Magnus Olsen's work, which had been translated in turn by Hustvedt for the American-Scandinavian foundation in 1927. Hosford's retelling of 'The Winning of Gerd' is closest to Sæmundr Edda in its narrative pattern, and includes a heavily bowdlerised adaptation of some of the original verses from *Skírnismál*, detailing the punishment that Skirnir threatens the giantess will suffer if she refuses Freyr:

> You shall go where never again
> The sons of men will see you,
> You shall sit alone on the eagle's hill
> And gaze on the gates of Hela.
>
> Changed your shape and fearful to see,
> My doom will be upon you,
> My doom of heavy heart and double sorrow,
> Grief shall you get instead of gladness.[259]

The original threat of sexual assault in Skírnir's curse from *Skírnismál* is missing, as it was in Snorri's version, but the threats of isolation and rejection are still very much present, along with the horrific overtones of coercion and violence. The effects of these upon the reader are helped, rather

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[258] See J. Whitbrook, 'A Classic Hellboy Novel is Becoming a Comic' (18th August, 2021), https://gizmodo.com/a-classic-hellboy-novel-is-becoming-a-comic-1847510974 (accessed 24th September, 2021) and J. Harris, 'The Gospel of Loki' (2025) https://www.joanne-harris.co.uk/books/the-gospel-of-loki/ (accessed 4th October, 2022).

[259] Hosford, *Thunder of the Gods*, p. 69-70.

than hindered, by Hosford's unconvincing attempt to avoid a negative ending: 'A change came over the maiden...the spell of the runes and the power of Skirnir's wand moved her heart.'[260] In short, whether or not Hosford meant them to, the original Eddic themes of male control, shaming and punishment of independent desire and/or defiance in women remain in her version of the story.

What is even more interesting is that, coincidentally, Plath's poem seems to play upon some of the same themes. While Plath's Gerd can be read as a more universal metaphor for the despair or cynicism that comes with knowing the ultimate end of mortal love, and the inherent solitude of existence, one might also note certain similarities between the poetic narrative of Crystal Gazer and the coercion dynamic found in Sæmundr Edda; the gloomy, fatalistic climax, when with a 'flash like doomcrack' Gerd's sight changes, rendering her mind 'plague-pitted as the moon,' has a lot in common tonally with the ugly threats directed at Gerðr in Skírnismál. Similarly, while the Gerd in Crystal Gazer arguably also fits a more general fairy tale stereotype, in which unattractive qualities directly correlate with a character's trespasses, the close correlation between the state of Gerd after her attempt at higher knowledge and the highly specific threats for Gerðr's refusal to capitulate in Skírnismál (low status, sexual frustration, isolation and mockery) make it reasonable to suppose that some version of the Sæmundr Edda plot might have played an additional part in Plath's creative process alongside that of Snorri's retelling. Such a reading would allow us to interpret Gerd's depressing solitude and ugliness (which is heavily juxtaposed with the figures of the lovers) as a more direct part of her punishment for overstepping masculine and godly boundaries, much as Gerðr from the Old Norse tale would have received if she had continued to resist the will of Freyr.

We will never know exactly which versions were in Plath's mind at that time, or the extent to which she was aware of them while she composed, but it is clear that Crystal Gazer has decidedly Norse roots. The amalgamation of themes in it - overreaching boundaries, knowledge, jealousy, prophecy, wasted youth and punishment by a male deity for female insubordination - would have liaised well with the personal and poetic mythos she was already building around the figure of the valkyrie. The idea of the older, lonely woman looking on, frustrated, at new lovers, and of the overall feeling that knowledge is desirable but dangerous, is very much in sync not only with the doom-laden Ring plot, but of Plath's own valkyrie-like anxieties over marriage, and whether giving up her 'power' would be worse than being alone or childless (a state tantamount to failure in her own eyes).[261] It is also very much in line with the (not wholly unfounded) cynicism and insecurity Plath showed in considering how her male contemporaries viewed women. This is, in itself, evidence that the Old Norse pantheon, and perhaps not just Wagner's reception of it, held more importance in her imaginative landscape than has been previously acknowledged; the fact that *Crystal Gazer* was later

[260]Hosford, *Thunder of the Gods*, p. 70-1.
[261]"If I could not have children...I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body...My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life..."Plath, *Journals,* p. 500.

published in a small, limited edition of selected works, edited by Hughes, has clouded its significance somewhat as a period-specific marker for her earlier manipulation of Norse symbolism. Furthermore, while it is unwise to draw too many purely biographical parallels, and oversimplify our reading of the poetry by doing so, it is still noteworthy that the mythic content, both of the tale and of the poem, are highly reflective of some of the concerns expressed in her journals around this time, regarding life prospects, choices and the clear double standards of freedom according to one's gender. One metaphor in the poem about Gerd's frustrated prospects as flowers - 'each bud/ shrivelling to cinders at its source' - echoes both the Bell Jar and an entry in her journals comparing her life to a fig tree, on which she can only follow one branch, and which she helplessly watches wither, trapped by her inability to make one decision and lose all others.[262]

The prophesying crone's 'spindle-shanked' appearance is perhaps a nod to Eliot's railway cat, but also suggestive of both Plath's preoccupation with Wagner, and her study of Jessie Weston, in its alignment of prophecy and hags with the craft of spinning. The opening of *Götterdämmerung*, and the foreshadowing of its fiery, suicide finale, features a scene (not unlike the song of Shakespeare's witches) in which the three Norns spin the threads of fate, and grimly predict the world's doom.[263] This grim, eldritch scene takes place on the mountain, in the shadow of the valkyrie's cave, where the couple have just consummated their love; it also comes directly before the tender leave-taking of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, during which it is indicated that she has given her knowledge to him, and they pledge their everlasting bond. The juxtaposition of these scenes naturally instills a sense of dramatic tension and irony in the words spoken by the couple, setting a dark tonality for the opera's progression and their relationship. Weston comments in some detail on the Norns too: as mentioned, she associates them mistakenly with spinning, referencing Simrock's linking of them to Shakespeare's weird sisters, and also stating that they are the root of certain triadic groupings of saints. She also relates the story of Norna Gest (although she calls it a saga, not a *þáttr*), ensuring that Plath associates the figures with the fairy godmother trope as well as the sleeping beauty story. This puts the poem 'The Disquieting Muses' (for an analysis of which, see 'Early Life and Reading,' pp.8-10) in a new and more definite light, as, in the context of Plath's self-framing as the valkyrie figure, there are more solid grounds for our interpreting the sinister figures of the female muse-godmothers as norns, watching over her development. Considering her emotional preoccupation with the Wagner story, and her study of the links between valkyries and witch/wisdom figures (see 'Valkyrie meets Autobiography,' p60) it is perhaps no wonder that

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[262]"I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor... and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.' Plath, *The Bell Jar*, pp. 32-3.

[263]See Wagner, *The Ring*, pp. 280-4.

Plath's anxieties about her future, and how she fitted into the world around her, were often expressed through the poetic medium of prophecy, crone figures and spinning. As she was forever predicting ways in which she could go wrong in life, it is very possible that this ongoing narrative of being 'driven' by outer forces provided a concrete narrative which imposed a sense of control over uncertainty, lessening her fear of shame in the hypothetical event of future failure or betrayal.

Another developmental phase follows in Plath's writing between approximately 1957 and 1959, which (considering the symbiotic relationship between her writing and life so far) seems to reflect her attainment of the married life she had been seeking; the tone is generally cooler, less passionate, as if the heat of fantasy has been tempered by other concerns. One can detect a more experimental quality in these poems, and a greater sense of the abstract (this is the burgeoning poet, married to a poet and undertaking exercises for self-improvement) but nevertheless, certain Nordic and Germanic images persist from the earlier fantasy landscape. These, combined with the more complex tonalities, reveal some development - both emotional and creative - in her associations with Old Norse mythology, not least her more open writing about her father and his death. In 'Full Fathom Five (1998),' the father takes on the appearance of a vast, godly figure, associated with the cold distance of the sea (tying in, again, to the lorelei image) and nordic landscapes:

> The old myth of origins,
> Unimaginable. You float near
> As keeled ice-mountains
>
> Of the north, to be steered clear
> Of, not fathomed. All obscurity
> Starts with a danger...[264]

This figure is rendered Odinic by the words 'I walk dry on your kingdom's border/ Exiled to no good...', an echo of the banishment of the valkyrie; the desire for suicide, previously associated with burning and sexual desire for a 'mate,' is transferred in this poem to the narrative persona's desire to rejoin her father, and to breathe water instead of air.[265] An example of a more analytical poem on mythology is 'The Times Are Tidy' (1958); this short piece comments wryly on the disenfranchisement of key tropes resembling those of the Siegfried legend, during peaceful times which do not require fantasy conflict or magic: 'Unlucky the hero born/ In this province of the stuck record...There's no career in the venture/Of riding against the lizard,/ Himself withered.../To leaf-size, from lack of action...The last crone got burnt up/More than eight decades back/ With the love-hot herb...'[266] There is also another interesting portrayal of older, Norn-like women in 'The

[264]Plath, 'Full Fathom Five', *Collected Poems*, p. 92.
[265]Plath, 'Full Fathom Five', *Collected Poems*, p. 93.
[266]Plath, 'The Times are Tidy', *Collected poems*, p. 107

Net-Menders', who 'weave words' into their nets: 'Nobody is born or dies without their knowing it.'[267]

It is not until the long poem 'Poem for a Birthday' (1959) - the result of a groundbreaking creative period at Yaddo - that death, fire, and the idea of purification and rebirth through burning, returns to Plath's work. In this instance, however, these mythic, cyclic patterns are not generally employed in a romantic sense, but have separated and matured into an extended metaphor of the poet's own creative development (although her writing is inevitably aligned to some extent with selfhood and love, as ever). In and amongst the different sub-sections of the long poem, content suggestive of her early investment in Old Norse imagery may be found. In 'Who,' for instance, the persona lies in a state of death-cum-storage like a vegetable, and comments upon other inhabitants of this realm of waiting, saying 'These halls are full of women who think they are birds...' - a reference which one cannot help but associate with swan maidens, considering that the origin of her fixation with rebirth lies with the valkyrie.[268] Although 'Maenad' has a Greek title, the narrative of 'eating wisdom' under their father's bean tree echoes the valkyrie's pride over her supernatural powers of wisdom, and the lament 'The old man shrank to a doll./ O I am too big to go backward...' is also reminiscent of the Wagnerian valkyrie's self-distancing from, and mourning her father-daughter relationship with Odin.[269] The line 'When it thundered I hid under a flat stone' also aligns clearly with the evocation of the childhood terror of Thor in 'The Disquieting Muses.'

'Witch burning' is perhaps the closest poem to her earlier works on fire and destruction, but with an added note of positivity and strength, aligning the persona's trial through fire with a necessary rite of passage rather than submission: '...We grow./It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth./ Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand: I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.'[270]The final stanza in particular recalls a great many Wagnerian themes; a sense of purification and light, combined with the return of a sense of divinity and higher knowledge (just as Brunnhilde returned to her power after Siegfried's death), the shame of having stooped to mortal level in the first place, and the association of sensuality with flame:

> Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days
> I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.
> My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.
> I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.[271]

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[267]Plath, 'The Net Menders', p. 121.
[268]Plath, 'Poem For A Birthday, *Collected Poems*, p. 131.
[269]Plath, 'Poem For A Birthday', *Collected Poems*, p. 133.
[270]Plath, 'Poem For A Birthday', *Collected Poems*, p. 135.
[271]Plath, 'Poem For A Birthday', *Collected Poems*, p. 136.

Two poems in the following year display two very different framings of previous Norse themes. 'Love Letter' is a more explicit return to the mythical lovers' meeting touched upon in 'Pursuit', but this time with the gentler language of an awakening rather than a hunt. The poem begins with the narrative persona asleep in the ground, then describes their thawing, 'budding' and ascension 'from stone to cloud'; they transform in shape from a snakelike entity to 'a sort of god' and become 'pure as a pane of ice' through the coming of the lover's light source ('I wasn't fooled. I knew you at once.')[272] Though more level in tone, this is a clear return to the paradigm of the valkyrie's predestined awakening on the rock, and to the associated mythic trope of the sun thawing the ground.

The more violent poem 'The Hanging Man' harks back to Plath's electric shock treatment:

> By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me
> I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet...
>
> A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree
> If he were I, he would do what I did.[273]

Examined in conjunction with her journal entry that coupled her first meeting of Hughes with her attempting to capture her memories of the shock treatment (see 'Valkyrie meets Autobiography, p?), and considering the extent to which she seems to have identified herself, Hughes and her father with the trio of valkyrie, hero and father god (with the latter two often becoming joined in her consciousness in the later poems), it is very easy to read this poem as an extension of the earlier mythical associations with sacrifice. Although readers who are aware of Plath's enthusiasm for the occult may read the poem's title primarily as a reference to the tarot card figure (which no doubt played a part, as the card can symbolise sacrifice), reading the poem in light of these stanzas about Odin in the Eddic poem *Hávamál* lends a deeper resonance, and sense of continuity with her earlier poems.[274] The trope of a single eye, in conjunction with disillusionment, and conflicted or negative feelings, also occurs often enough in the later writing years that one may assume she was still using Odin as one of her signifiers for the tyrannical father muse. The first stanza of 'Widow' (1961) includes the phrase 'putting her [the persona's] heart out like an only eye.'[275] Similarly, 'Little Fugue' (1962) makes references to an odinic father, with 'a blue eye,' whose voice is 'a yew hedge of orders,/ Gothic and barbarous, pure German.'[276] The recurring image of yew (a druidic tree, associated with death) in conjunction with the father is likely a development from her reading

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[272]Plath, 'Love Letter', *Collected Poems*, p. 147.
[273]Plath, 'The Hanging Man', *Collected Poems*, pp. 141-2
[274]*Hávamál, The Poetic Edda* Vol. 3, strophe 138-9, p. 30.
[275]Plath, 'Widow', *Collected Poems*, p. l64.
[276]Plath, 'Little Fugue', *Collected Poems*, p. 188.

of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and is one of many examples in which he blends with the mythic figure of the hero/lover, united by the themes of male tyranny and the death drive.

The poems of 1962-3, which mark her final, most famous period of writing - and in which betrayal and marital separation spurred on a new, defiant sense of artistic independence - return more resolutely to the concurrent themes of rebirth, fire and sacrifice. As Ann Stevenson notes, the sun rising is a central theme, and, structurally, a consistent point of arrival, within the *Ariel* collection; this in itself may be interpreted as the earlier, Wagnerian-inspired fantasies coming full-circle.[277] At a poetic level, this creates a firm sense of continuity with poems like 'Pursuit,' despite the maturation of Plath's poetic voice and the comparative sparseness of expression, which allow for more subtly blended mythical symbolism. One may read certain poems as particularly cohesive with the life-death-rebirth cycle (both Wagnerian and more generally folkloric), and with her ongoing feelings of empowerment in adopting a valkyrie-like persona, although in this final period (much as with the opera) the theme of vengeance overtakes passion, reflecting Plath's own disillusionment with her marriage, and her realignment of selfhood and values in the wake of its collapse. One may also read this renaissance of earlier Norse symbolism, tinged with a new cynicism and anger, as the poet's developing a sense of closure; a response of sorts to her first fantasy landscapes of passion and awakening, as well as to the earlier fear of abandonment or tragedy which aligned with that fantasy.

'Burning the Letters' (1962), as a more than usually biographical poem, has often been underestimated in terms of its mythic quality; Lynda K. Bundtzen, for instance, focuses on the poem's fox hunting symbolism, in relation to Hughes own shamanic 'Thought Fox,' reading it as a riposte to her husband's grandiosity in writing.[278] Read in the light of her previous preoccupations, however, the screaming fox becomes a signifier for the joyously violent quality of the fire itself. This chain of imagery, in conjunction with the persona's long to break the 'Arctic' atmosphere which keeps her hooked like a 'dumb fish,' waiting for more, suggests a return to the violence of the Old Norse mythic suicide, and the vengeance and reclaiming of power it allows:

> My veins glow like trees.
> The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like -
> A red burst and a cry
> That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop
> ...but goes on
> Dyeing the air,
> Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water

[277] A. Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London, 1989), p. 68.
[278] See L. K. Bundtzen, 'Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's "Burning the Letters"', *Contemporary Literature* 39, no. 3 (1998), pp. 434–51.

What immortality is. That it is immortal.[279]

It is difficult not to see, in this vengeful persona, a later version of a valkyrie figure, exhilarated by the fire's 'immortal' quality, using it to strengthen and set herself free (especially when we consider the poem was very clearly triggered by Hughes's recent adultery.) In light of the importance of Wagner in her early fantasies, the main conceit of 'Daddy' (1962) - a resentful female persona, recounting her unhealthy worship of her father, and calling out his machinations upon her sensibilities - also takes on a whole new significance. Within its cloud of Germanic allusions, the father becomes a Nazi tyrant, and the source of all submissive and unhealthy desires: 'The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna/ Are not very pure or true... Every woman adores a Fascist, /The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you.' Suicide becomes an attempt to get 'back, back, back' to the godlike father (whom the 'vampire' husband imitates), and a reference is made to his 'Aryan eye, bright blue'; the singular case seems significant, and is again most probably an Odinic allusion, negatively recalling the supernatural exchange of Brünnhilde, from Odin to Siegfried, now symbols of oppression and abuse.[280] The commanding voice is still valkyrie-like in its anger, but now the old Norse/Germanic mythos has become symbolic of forced ideals, and, as with 'The Disquieting muses', of old resentment over parental pressures. Her appropriation of Jewish imagery, while unsavoury, is perhaps partly symptomatic of Plath's feeling shame about the right-wing quality of her earlier 'superman' (or ubermensch) mythos, and is an attempt to distance herself more decidedly as a victim of that paradigm.

Ring images also present themselves in quick succession in the last few months of her life's writing, which particularly resonate, both in the mythic context and also in the 'Daddy' context of decrying Wagnerian ideals. 'Lady Lazarus' (1962) mentions a wedding ring left behind in the ashes of the dead, soon-to-be-risen persona (see below), and the adjacent poem 'The Couriers,' in detailing an inventory of objects, mentions: 'a ring of gold with the sun in it? Lies. Lies and a grief.'[281] The poem 'Paralytic,' written in January 1963 (just before she took her own life), describes a persona in a Brünnhilde-esque state halfway between sleep and consciousness. The penultimate stanza echoes the valkyrie's gesture of taking off the cursed ring and flinging it away, right before throwing herself into the flames: '...all/ Wants, desire/ Falling from me like rings.' This latter beatific release is, moreover, one of a further cluster of imagery, upholding one particular conceit that persisted in spite of all later complexities and cynicisms: that of a fiery suicide and rebirth. The keynote poem, 'Ariel' (1962), ends with highly evocative imagery of riding, weaponry and a red sun:

White
Godiva, I unpeel...

[279]Plath, 'Burning the Letters', *Collected Poems*, pp. 204-5.
[280]Plath, 'Daddy', *Collected Poems*, pp. 222-4.
[281]Plath, 'Lady Lazarus' and 'The Couriers', *Collected Poems*, pp. 246-7

...And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.[282]

In light of Jessie Weston's commentary on the parallels between valkyries and celtic/carlin symbolism, it is reasonable to read the cauldron as a direct reference to the more general spectrum of magical powers associated with Brünnhilde. It is, however, 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), arguably one of Plath's most famous poems, which is perhaps most suggestive of the ongoing importance of the valkyrie to Plath as a signifier of strength, ownership and vengeance.[283] In the poem, the persona describes her ritualised death and rebirth as a form of 'theatrical' entertainment ('Dying/Is an art, like everything else; I do it exceptionally well.')[284] The overall tone is one of scorn for the 'peanut-crunching crowd,' (a nod to opera as well as circuses) and for the addressed hegemony who, it is implied, are responsible for her suffering; this hegemony are, again, Germanically framed, and a great deal of imagery is crafted in the consciousness of Holocaust.[285] The last lines provide the most virulent image of the valkyrie, and the most obvious call for revenge:

I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there...

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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[282]Plath, 'Ariel', Collected Poems, p. 240.
[283]NB. It is important to recap the earlier reference to Lazarus in her letters home about Ted Hughes, in which she mixes a thread of biblical imagery into her Wagnerian dreams; she compares her earlier depression and suicide attempt with Lazarus's journey to the 'other side,' which makes her more appreciative of her experiences being fully alive with her new love. [See 'Valkyrie meets Autobiography'].
[284]Plath, Collected Poems pp. 245-6.
[285]This is, itself, a mixed reference in the context of Plath's own past usage of the word to mean hard sex and sacrifice. See previous section: 'Valkyrie Meets Autobiography.'

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.[286]

This final stanza, in its tonality of sheer rage and gleeful vengeance, is far from a random image: in the Rackham illustrations of *The Ring*, Brünnhilde is portrayed with red hair. Just as 'Pursuit,' evoked Rackham's first images of the mountain awakening, and the languorous submission to the hero bathed in sunlight, this poem - which one might say is the corresponding 'frame' of the collection - now evokes his drawing of the finale: in it, the mounted valkyrie raises her arms, soaring on a wave of flame, her red hair blazing and almost indistinguishable from the fire itself. With this warning, the death and rebirth cycle has rotated fully; Plath's valkyrie has been separated from her submissive partnership, and, what is more, has been weaponized against the very culture which developed and made her famous.

Conclusion

As I have shown, although the valkyrie was only a part (albeit an important one) of Plath's inner mythology, her collected writing indicates that it played a key role in both her poetic voice and her creative identity, and that her upbringing as a child of German heritage played a large role in this early idealisation of the figure. She seems to have identified, especially, with the particular balance of independent power and romantic submission displayed in the Wagnerian iteration of the valkyrie, and in the symbolism of sunlight, fire, sacrifice and death.

Plath's biographical death remains, as ever, the elephant in the room of nonsubjective analysis, and a source of morbid fascination for many readers. In light of the findings in this chapter, I imagine some would find it tempting to 'resolve' the matter by concluding that the Wagnerian adaptation of Brynhildr was the 'inspiration' and reason for Plath's suicide. That is not my intention here, as I believe this would be reductionist and disrespectful in the extreme; suicide is not a conundrum to be solved, and we should not try to make 'sense' of it. Aside from the irrelevance of addressing this question as part of a literary receptions analysis, no-one will ever fully know Plath's state of mind at the time, her thoughts or what influences she might have been under on the morning of her suicide in 1963.

[286]Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Collected Poems,* pp. 246-7.

There is, however, one conclusion which seems worth making: Plath's early investment in figures like Wagner's Brünhilde, and her consistent depictions of poetic death, burning and rebirth, would indicate that her reading in part caused her to associate the act of suicide with reclamation of one's power and dignity, much in the same way that (sources indicate) Brynhildr's suicide was interpreted in an Old Norse context.[287] This could certainly have contributed, in some way, to her final decision, but more importantly, from a poetic point of view, also clearly formed a much-needed mythic pattern that unlocked her later, powerful voice and allowed her to feel strong in her suffering. The story of the valkyrie allowed for cathartic writing about betrayal and claiming independence, but perhaps also, due to its familiarity in her personal mythos, afforded some sense of psychological closure. This ending, after all, was one she knew well, and, as I have explored, had even anticipated in her letters to family about Hughes.

Within the receptions arc I have charted over the course of the 20th century, Plath's particular usage of and identification with Old Norse mythology is easily the most controversial from a millennial perspective. Thanks to voices like Robin Morgan, and the blogs and social media in which Plath features (there is even a rather lovely Twitter account dedicated to the titillating references to food and cooking in her personal writing), she is so often aligned with second wave feminism, which in reality she died too early to engage with.[288] So many excerpts from her writing about female frustration and anxiety are still reposted on a daily basis, as they are so clearly relevant. The reality, however, is that much of Plath's thinking and behaviour cannot be classed as feminist, conforming as it does to so many misogynist values. Her independence of mind and her awareness of the unfairness of gender expectations did not 'win' against, but, instead, existed alongside and clashed with her desire to conform to patriarchal expectations. For the greater portion of her life, she entertained fantasies of sexual assault at the hands of a 'giant,' and her own goals and sense of identity were so firmly shaped by finding a being to fit this fantasy, that her independence of mind and potential were undeniably compromised. She also wrote a great deal of disparaging and cruel content about women who displeased her, or who did not fulfil the ideal feminine criteria she was trying to attain, thus highlighting her sense of own superiority and insecurity. The closest approximation to what one might call 'radical' feminist writing is the poetry written after her

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[287]Plath's earlier suicide attempt was also seemingly a way to take control of her own image, at a time when she felt she was failing and dreaded what she saw as a ruining of her star student image. See Plath, Letter to Edward Cohen, 28th December 1953, *Letters* Vol.I, pp. 654-8.

[288]Robin Morgan's poem 'Arraignment' was published in 1972 (nearly a decade after Plath's suicide) and addressed not only the poet's marriage (suggested by her final letters to be abusive) but also Hughes's control of her publications after death. It not only 'accuses' Hughes of Plath's 'murder,' but also blames other contemporary male poets like Robert Lowell and Al Alvarez, whom Morgan suggests added to her negative portrayal in the media. See Morgan, 'Arraignment', *Monster* (New York, 1972), pp. 76-9, and L. Ryan, 'The Feminist Poetry Movement; Arraignment' (11th December, 2021), https://sites.williams.edu/engl113-f18/ryan/arraignment/ (last accessed 3rd March, 2025). For context on Morgan's other radical feminist campaign work, see also B. Kreydatus, 'Confronting the "Bra-Burners": Teaching Radical Feminism with a Case Study', *The History Teacher* 41, no. 4 (2008), pp. 489–504.

separation - so cathartically angry and violent to so many fans - which was not simply revenge writing, but also acknowledged the falseness of the domestic and romantic ideals she had been sold.

For the people who wish to make a saint or feminist icon of her, this is no doubt a disappointing strand of research and a hard pill to swallow. I would argue, however, that acknowledging this complexity of personality, and the sense of discomfort in reading her work, is crucial for scholarship. Not only does seeing the whole make her far more interesting, both as a woman and as an artist, but the more disturbing fantasies she displays in her writing are a key reminder of the social tendency (even now) to expect women to be role models. Plath is an apt reminder that not all fantasies by women are inherently feminist or admirable, that women were (and still are) drawn by the more chauvinist and damaging ways in which Old Norse mythology has been reproduced, and that, in a receptions context, this in no way detracts from their scholarly importance. In short, every aspect of Plath's writing, character and desires are of value in offering a true, diverse perspective of women's experiences in her context, and also in the diverse nature of receptions. In the context of this thesis as a whole, Plath represents what one might call a crucial 'mid-stage' in British and American women's empowerment-seeking through adaptation of Old Norse themes. Rather than retelling material or writing a fantasy romance novel, she used a powerful Old Norse figure and story pattern to process her feelings in a very individualist and creative manner. She also used that figure, not only for poetic vengeance, but to respond to some of the inconsistencies in the world around her.

Chapter 2. Gendered Mythologies: the Old Norse Apocalypse and the Empowerment of Mixed Symbolism in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*

Intro

During Sylvia Plath's Cambridge years, she unknowingly brushed shoulders with another future celebrity author: A.S. Byatt, who had experienced her own family trauma, along with the damaging effects of perfectionism, and who would also take inspiration from the Old Norse pantheon in writing about women and their experiences in a world that . A born bluestocking and intellectual magpie, whose work consistently demonstrates her passion for collecting knowledge and curios for their own sake, Antonia Byatt (née Drabble) was brought up in a family who, much like the Plaths, set great store by cleverness in children. Five year-old Antonia was told 'of course you will go to Cambridge' (where she achieved a first-class degree), and suffered from acute social anxiety: "I had a strong sense of not knowing how to behave socially, handed down from my mother's anxiety about having got herself right out of her class. I always knew I had on the wrong clothes."[289] According to Byatt, her mother Kathleen was "nervous and neurotic, always screaming. Later in life she would be sick crossing the coal fields, it was so dirty and horrible to her."[290] A great part of Kathleen's anger was, apparently, down to her frustration at having to give up teaching to become a mother, after her own brilliant trajectory as a working class girl who got into Cambridge. It is hardly surprising, then, that the theme of intelligence and fear of entrapment in women would find its way into Byatt's works. In the ongoing 'study of the developing artist' which, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly observes, formed the main trajectory of Byatt's works, among the most memorable of those works were the ones which made use of powerful Old Norse symbolism as both vehicle and catalyst for the exploration of female thoughts and fears. Both, in their own way, subsequently demonstrated the empowerment in thinking and in taking ownership of well-trodden mythic territory in a different way.[291]

In the following two chapters, I shall chronologically analyse two separate works by A.S. Byatt which have drawn upon Old Norse mythology: *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (2011). I have afforded each book a separate chapter partly due to the time

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[289]M. Stout, 'What Possessed A.S. Byatt?' *The New York Times* (May 26th, 1991), https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-possessed.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=possession%20byatt%20showing%20off&st=cse (accessed 16th January, 2025).
[290]Stout, 'What Possessed A.S. Byatt?'
[291]K. C. Kelly, *A.S. Byatt* (New York, 1996), p. 79.

difference in publication, but mainly because of their differences in approach to the mythology itself.[292] The first work inclines more to general symbolism and emotional association with Old Norse (or what C.S. Lewis called 'Northerness') in establishing the academic worlds within which certain characters reside, whereas the second is more directly focused on the Old Norse pantheon and stories, and is far more autobiographical in nature.[293] Despite their separation, however, these works should ultimately be considered in tandem, as both are seemingly written in response to the overarching public notion (as discussed in my introduction) of Old Norse mythology and symbolism as part of an ongoing counter culture, which in turn becomes a powerful draw for anyone with individual, intellectual and romantic tendencies. Byatt's earlier novel, *Possession*, showcases two different approaches to using Old Norse mythological symbolism in an academic setting. The first is as a sterile signifier of patriarchal attitudes, and of aggrandisement for its own sake. Here, Byatt particularly highlights the special draw of Old Norse Mythology for older, acquisitive academic men; this is done in a way which seems to subtly recall (though it is never mentioned outright) the problematic turn-of-the-century obsession with vikings.
The second is as a key ingredient in storytelling, and in lively conjunction with other mythological symbolism historically (and stereotypically) associated with 'women's interests.' These uses ultimately showcase the reality, and importance of, mixed symbolism within cultures, of valuing hunger for knowledge over self-image, and of the empowerment gained by moving beyond binarization of both gender and mythology in the quest for knowledge.

Byatt as a Female Author

Ironically, of course, Byatt had no way of knowing just how much she and Sylvia Plath had in common regarding the effects of parenting on their work ethic - she only ever witnessed the young American woman's carefully-contrived veneer. When speaking of her university career, Byatt stated in no uncertain terms that, while she recognised the calibre of Plath's poetry, she was distinctly unimpressed by what she saw of the poet herself during that period, claiming that her appearance belied her true depth:

When I knew her it was during her most writing-for-*Mademoiselle*-ish days, and she had bobby socks and totally artificial bright red lips and totally artificial bright blond hair, and I remember her as a made-up creature with no central reality to her at all, always uttering advice like a women's magazine advice column. She wrote beautiful words, but there wasn't anybody inside there. I'm sure [Ted Hughes] behaved very badly, but I regard it as automatic that anyone married to Sylvia Plath would have to find someone else in the end, because I don't think she was a complete person -- you can see that in the letters home. She is a major

[292]N.B. I have also separated these chapters for the sake of easier reading, as the amount of material on both put together would have proven extremely difficult to sustain as one chapter.
[293]See C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York, 1985), pp. 106-114.

poet . . . don't get me wrong, but I didn't know she could write like she could write. She didn't show any sign of that at Cambridge. She just seemed silly.[294]

Such remarks both date and betray themselves, in that they contain more than a hint of anti-americanism and anti-consumerism (and perhaps even some internalised misogyny.) They are heavily suggestive of the pressures Byatt herself felt growing up in shabby, postwar Britain, where intellect in women was often equated with seriousness of demeanour, and over-attention to fashion could detract from one's reputation as a 'clever girl'. For Byatt, Plath clearly represented the kind of debilitating consumerism and vulgar glamour which objectified and belittled women, making matter detract from mind. Her above remarks on inner truth versus outer show are of great importance in aiding our understanding of Byatt's priorities as a writer; namely, her interiority of focus without egocentrism, her realism and her aim of portraying the true complexity of existence, rather than presenting an idealised or wistful picture of a desired paradigm. Her unabashed drive to observe and explore her interests, without agenda or reference to others' expectations, or to what it might do to her image, is a height of female empowerment that Plath, despite being more frequently quoted by feminists, ironically could never reach. It would be these opposing approaches to writerly selfhood, and to describing the female experience, which would eventually dictate Plath and Byatt's differences both in reading, and working with Old Norse material.

Byatt's take on gender and women's empowerment was, itself, interesting and highly subjective. On the one hand, she was a staunch campaigner for gender equality, claiming, for instance, that having a writing prize specifically for women was 'sexist': "You couldn't found a prize for male writers. The Orange prize assumes there is a feminine subject matter – which I don't believe in. It's honourable to believe that – there are fine critics and writers who do – but I don't."[295] However, she expressed great dissatisfaction with second wave, or radical feminism for its frequent fixation upon and subsequent polarisation of all things female, which she claimed constructed another form of false bias. Her rather idealist stance was to wish to remove gender from the equation entirely, in writing and linguistically, and to focus instead on communication in its purest sense:

"I've played with trying to understand what the word ['gender'] means, but use either "sex" or "men and women" instead, partly because the word 'gendered' has caused a great many of my friends to write work that is bordering on not saying anything. I have always had a romantic idea that the writer or the artist was, as Coleridge and Virginia Woolf said, androgynous. The whole of *The Virgin in the Garden* quartet is about the desirability of an androgynous mind. I

[294]Stout, 'What Possessed A.S. Byatt?'

[295]C. Davies and C. Higgins, 'AS Byatt Says Women Who Write Intellectual Books Seen As Unnatural', in *The Guardian* (20th August, 2010), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/aug/20/as-byatt-intellectual-women-strange#:~:text=AS%20Byatt%20says%20women%20who%20write%20intellectual%20books%20seen%20as%20unnatural,-This%20article%20is&text=Women%20who%20write%20smart%2C%20demanding,the%20Edinburgh%20international%20book%20festival (accessed 5th February, 2025).

am too old for the women's movement in America or this country. I was fighting battles for the freedom of women, all by myself as I saw it, in the Fifties. I was partly amazed by the organised fight and partly appalled, because freedoms it had been hard for us to win--to be taken seriously by men as equal people to talk to--were suddenly thrown away by the idea that women should band together and talk to each other about each other, about women, and have Women's Studies in women's buildings. I learnt never to write a list of my favourite painters or writers without women in, but equally I would never write one without men in. I don't think you can live in the world if the battle between the sexes is more important than communication between the sexes. It never was, to me--I like men. My father was one of the most important presences in my life and he was rational and sane and liked women. What Hélène Cixous does is fine for Cixous but it doesn't get me very far. You can't play the kind of games that she and Lacan play in a language like English which isn't gendered in its ordinary nouns. The moon in French is female, in German masculine, in English neuter. We think about things as things, because we have a neuter. The interesting thing about French is that it is a language with only one source, which is Romance. I love the "mongrelness" of English."[296]

On the one hand, statements like the above are far easier to make in summary than execute, and are somewhat reflective of privilege, in their reductiveness of the global situation; like it or not, despite its more polarising iterations, second wave feminism was undeniably instrumental in enabling the ongoing discussion about gender perceptions, and triggering societal change.[297] Some of Byatt's comments and writing about feminists as a group display some unpleasant stereotyping: her character depiction of the bisexual and radical feminist Leonora Stern is certainly problematic on many levels for its alignment of feminism and queerness with vulgarity and sexual aggression (see below). In an interview with PNR, she uttered the unfortunate sentence "I really don't want, myself, to be ghettoized by modern feminists into writing about women's problems..."[298]

It seems that some of these prejudices were founded on real, unpleasant interchanges with certain types of radical feminists, whose overriding sense of agenda had overtaken their appreciation of individuality and intellectuality for its own sake, and as its own form of activism.[299] This was the same kind of public response which, as I have mentioned, made a martyr of Sylvia Plath and a monster of Ted Hughes, ignoring the human complexities inherent in their situation. Byatt has described experiences of criticism from female readers who were dissatisfied with her complex portrayals of women, wanting her to create more simplistic figureheads whom they could

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[296]J. Friel & J. Newman, 'A.S. Byatt', in S. Monteith, J. Newman, & P. Wheeler (eds), *Contemporary British & Irish Fiction : An Introduction through Interviews*. (London, 2004), pp. 36-53.

[297] For a useful summary of the benefits and limitations of second-wave feminism, see M. Walters, 'Second-wave feminism: the late 20th century', in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 97-116.

[298]N. Tredell, 'A.S. Byatt in Conversation', in *PN Review* 77 (London, January - February 1991), https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=4354 (accessed 19th April, 2025).

[299]To give further context on her views, Byatt went on to make the following statement in this interview: "I suppose I also think, when I really consider it, that the feminist movement, whatever its virtues, has not produced any satisfactory answer to what I see as the major biological/intellectual problem of women. Unless you choose doctrinaire lesbianism, which happens not to interest me either biologically or theoretically - people may if they wish, but it's not my line - this problem is what to do with the fact that you're a childbearing animal and that, whatever the feminists say, the nurturing of small children is a female thing." While, again, unfortunate in its generalisation of feminist and female views on family life, and its clumsy use of 'choice' in relation to queerness, this reveals that what she thought was missing from the feminist movement (rightly or wrongly) was the focus on women's thoughts and intellects, rather than their bodies.

straightforwardly admire, and who would contribute definitively to the movement from a political perspective.[300] Her answering maxim, that 'literature goes where politics cannot' in portraying the truth of a woman's existence, was ahead of its time, and, although her expression of this sentiment shows its own bias in execution, it seems fair to conclude that what she ultimately shows prejudice against is artifice and self-centredness, in both the artistic and biographical sense.[301] While she vastly underestimated Plath's interior landscape (albeit before reading her posthumously), her observations on that writer's 'lack of self' are nevertheless accurate in the sense that, for most of her life, Plath was in almost constant construction of a self (both personal and writerly) according to other people's standards.

The fact that, despite their said differences, both Plath and Byatt both took major inspiration from the Norse canon is highly revealing of the power that pantheon still held in the collective public imagination. By the time both women were in their twenties, the perceived mental space of Old Norse culture as a haven for romantic intellectualism and nationalist pride had been displaced, but the potency of its fantasy figures and landscapes still lingered in the realm of children's and popular literature, and would eventually have its renaissance both in pop culture, not least the axe-wielding bearded figure of the 'viking.'[302] It is all the more interesting, then, that neither Plath nor Byatt wrote about vikings or adventure plots, but about the more legendary and mythological material, and, whether consciously or not, the cerebral forms such materials take in the receiver. It is also doubly interesting that, in spite of their vastly different outlooks on how they viewed and wished to enact gender, they both used this Norse material in ways that addressed inherent imbalance, and created empowering narratives for women. Their different 'brands' of expression, and their growth and experiences as talented girls, are displayed to great effect in their choices of focus. Both used the material highly subjectively but unlike Plath, who was (both personally and artistically) self-centred, Byatt's subjectivism operates on a far more complex basis.

As I have argued (see previous chapter), while most of Plath's works show some involvement with fairy tales, myths and folklore, and there are strong, recognisable threads of Old Norse in her writing, these are rarely examined poetically for their own sake, but are most often utilised in the construction of Plath's writerly persona; the myth of herself which she felt impelled to construct in order to feel fulfilment and strength. Byatt's writing, on the other hand, actively and self-consciously details the more symbiotic process of a person's self-development in relation to the medium of Old Norse mythology and stories, and the simultaneous construction of and

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[300]'I had a lot of letters from women saying "You really shouldn't have done this. Sexual harassment is a very serious matter. You should have made it perfectly clear that he was bad and she was good." Well, I'm not in the business of Bible thumping. The lives of women are very complicated.' See L. Miller, 'A.S. Byatt' in *Salon* (17th June 1996), https://www.salon.com/1996/06/17/interview_10/ (accessed 19th April, 2025).

[301]L. Miller, 'A.S. Byatt'.

[302]See, for example, L. Lönnroth, 'The Vikings in History and Legend' in Peter Sawyer (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 247-9, and Pluskowski & Trafford, 'Antichrist superstars', pp. 57-73.

sublimation of the self within the greater body of things, as represented by Old Norse creation stories. Although Byatt's work does have a sense of the autobiographical, taking material from her experiences and reading, they are rarely indicative of the authorial 'I.' Instead of making herself the absolute central focus of the mythological patterning, she deliberately sets out to situate mythology and stories themselves at centre-stage, as the wider entity in which we can see a reflection of our own world, and which exists through the contribution and imaginative accord of whole generations and communities.[303] and to establish mythology as symbiotic - a multidimensional body or entity through which our own selfhood is created, and onto which we map our own experiences, altering it in turn. While her definitions of 'completeness,' and the automatic association of honesty with intellectualism and artifice with falsehood, are in themselves problematic, Byatt's overall emphasis on academic writing and intertextuality, along with her own particular manner of introspection and deconstruction, is important in interpreting both her particular reception of Old Norse mythology and her depiction of how others respond to and reshape it.

'Perhaps the most important thing to say about my books is that they try to be about the life of the mind as well as of society and the relations between people. I admire - am excited by - intellectual curiosity of any kind (scientific, linguistic, psychological) and also by literature as a complicated, huge, interrelating pattern. I also like recording small observed facts and feelings. I see writing and thinking as a passionate activity, like any other.'[304]

Her attention to 'central reality' in her scathing remarks about Plath betrays an active interest in dissolving artifice, and suggests the assumption of an objective truth in interiority which should not be compromised. One might, in fact, read Byatt as a natural evolution of the Plathian model of self-reflective, mythological female empowerment: while she certainly uses the mythology as a tool in characterisation, and to analyse her own ideas, sensations and fears, she does so with a far more outward-looking, exploratory and analytical mindset, holding the mythological mirror up to the world (albeit a parallel fictional universe representative of her experiences) rather than focusing primarily on illustrating and mythologising her own inner landscape. Most importantly, in my opinion, Byatt also shows great awareness of and interest in the cultural and psychological impact of Old Norse mythology upon its various readerships. Her writing demonstrates its ongoing versatility as a floating signifier (as my introduction mentions) which her characters and figures use in a great variety of ways, whether to make make sense of their world, to fulfil their self-images and fantasies, or to shape their own work.

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[303]In the sense that she is exploring the expansion of a known imaginary world, Byatt is a working example of what Rebecca Merkelbach in particular discusses in her works on Old Norse storyworlds. See R. Merkelbach, *Story, World and Character in the Late Íslendingasögur : Rogue Sagas* (Cambridge, 2024) and R. Merkelbach (ed.), *Storyworlds and Worldbuilding in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature* (Turnhout, 2025).

[304]A.S. Byatt, *Contemporary Authors* (London, 1991), p.37.

Considered chronologically and in parallel, *Possession* and *Ragnarok* represent a very interesting evolutionary arc in Byatt's writing on Old Norse, which works on two particular levels. The first is framing: in *Possession*, Old Norse is just one of the legendary source banks which influences the novel's intermeshing themes and stories, but later in *Ragnarok* (a work commissioned for the Canongate series on myth), the pantheon itself becomes the central focus. Through these diverse depictions of responses to the mythology and stories at second-hand, further crucial questions are also raised about the relationship between mythology, gender and receptions. There is also a clear thematic evolution between *Possession* and *Ragnarok* in terms of the way mythology is framed according to its potentiality for augmenting more gendered aspects of identity and fantasy. While the earlier novel aligns the pantheon with a more chauvinist tradition of romantic and nationalist cultural appropriation, the later novel is more invested in exploring the theme of Old Norse mythology for its own sake, and in relating it more directly to the intellectual female experience.

In terms of writing about women specifically, Byatt also resists two classic, and very similar traps in both these novels: one is the narrative sump of the alternative female hegemony or (as Julie Kristeva terms it) 'counterpower,' which privileges the female sex, thus creating its own oppression and intolerance of difference.[305] The second is that Byatt does not group her female characters, or insist on their getting along - a feature which makes them extremely realistic; as Judith Butler observes, "the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of woman has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections..."[306] Both these approaches would belie women' s true complexity as people, and Byatt's writing is, if sometimes problematic regarding certain feminist stereotypes, based far more in human desires and fears than idealism - in this sense, she shares a great deal with the discomfiting voice of Angela Carter.[307] In the following narratives, women are often shown encountering some form of conflict, if only in terms of personality or unease around one another's' differences, and so are never a group per se, even though they all share the common problem of patriarchal oppression, and even though in some cases more women than men represent a certain theme.

'Sugar' and the beginnings of engagement with Old Norse mythology

Before continuing this chapter about *Possession*, I must again include a note on childhood reading. Much like Sylvia Plath with Wagner's libretti, Byatt had her own, well-documented childhood experience with a certain book that was to inspire her in years to come, and which would play a key

[305]J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time', trans. A. Jardine and H. Blake, in *Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 1 (1981), p. 28.
[306]J. Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London, 1990), pp. 43-6.
[307]See S. Akdogan, 'Undecidability as a Feminist Strategy in Angela Carter's the Passion of New Eve and Fay Weldon's Praxis', in *Women's Studies* (London, 2021).

role in both the texts I am about to analyse. 'Sugar' (*Sugar & Other Stories*, 1987) contains the earliest references to Byatt's childhood engagements with Old Norse mythology, which, like Plath, haunted her imagination from a very early age. Her keynote experiences of it have a predictably dated quality that is very similar to Plath's (and many other wartime children), in that the cultural *métier* from which she derived her first sources was Romantic and nationalist - one in which ancestral alignment with Old Norse figures was sought after and fêted. Ironically, she had the advantage of experiencing the works of both Wagner, the opera giant, and Wägner, a German scholar of Medieval and Greek poetry; the latter was her very earliest gateway in childhood, through his book *Asgard and the Gods*, and the operatic side only came in later. Byatt's discussion of and associations with Old Norse mythology, while very clearly symbiotic and mainly derived from this book, can be analysed as two, slightly separate 'strands'

The first 'strand' which Byatt refers to in 'Sugar', and the most relevant to *Possession*, is her association of the major Norse gods with her own paternal family story, with the dark stuffiness of Victorian and post-Victorian society, with the war generation and (to some extent) with a climate of political unease. She explores this parcel of ideas in retrospect, and in response to the overseeing convalescence of her father in Amsterdam, where she began to put certain artistic and familial associations together:

[My father] had often said before...that a man's children are his true and only immortality. As a girl I had been made uncomfortable by that idea. I craved separation. "Each man is an island " was my version of a delightful if melancholy truth. I was like Auden's version of Properso's rejecting brother, Antonio, "By choice, myself alone". But during those extreme weeks in Amsterdam I thought about origins. I thought about my grandfather. I thought also about certain myths of origin which I had pieced together in childhood, to explain things that were important, my sense of northernness, my fear of art, the promised end. By a series of elaborate coincidences two of these had become inextricably involved in what was happening. The first was the Norse Ragnarök, and the second was Vincent Van Gogh. We went to see the *Götterdämmerung,* in Covent Garden, on the last night of my father's doomed Rhine-journey. I had a bad cough, which embarrassed me. Now whenever I cough I see Gunter and Gutrune like proto-Nazis in their heavy palace beside the broad and glittering artificial water, and think as I thought then, as I always think, when I think of the 1930s, of my father in those first years of my life knowing and fearing what was coming, appalled by appeasement, volunteering for the RAF. When I was clearing his things I found a copy of the "Speech Delivered in the Reichstag, April 28th 1939, by Adolf Hitler, Führer and Chancellor". It was stored in a box of family photographs, the only thing in there that was not a photograph, as though it was an intimate part of our family history. At the time, because I was thinking about islands, I remember very clearly thinking about the similarities and dissimilarities between Prospero and Wotan. I thought, in the red dark, that the nineteenth-century Allfather, compared to the Renaissance rough magician, was enclosed in Victorian family claustrophobia, was essentially, by extension, a social being, though both had broken rods.

When Fricka berated Wodan, I thought with pleasure of my father, proceeding slowly and freely along the great river.[308]

It is very interesting that Byatt, like Plath, experienced Wagner while ill with a cold, and carried the associations of Wagner's work and the mythology (specifically Wotan/Odin) with certain memories of her father and his family - particularly the ways in which both girls seem to have positively associated their fathers with Wotan. Unlike Plath (who first idolised and then developed cynicism later on) Byatt's impressions seem to have remained more consistently mixed, which one may probably attribute to the fact that she did not lose her father at a young age, and so had the opportunity to develop a wider opinion of both parents based on experience. This was, however, not the first time she had associated the Norse gods with family, as the subsequent passage about *Asgard and the Gods* reveals. The extent to which Byatt has described this reading experience, first here, then semi-autobiographically through the eyes of the child persona in *Ragnarok*, reveals just how fundamental this book was in Byatt's development as a writer and thinker:

My favourite book, the book which set my imagination working as a small child in Pontefract in the early years of the war, was *Asgard and the Gods. Tales and Traditions of our Northern Ancestors.* 1880. It was illustrated with steel engravings, of Wodan's Wild Hunt, of Odin tied between two fires, his face threatening and beautiful, of Ragnarok the Last Battle, with Surtur with his flaming head, come out of Muspelheim, the gaping Fenris Wolf about to destroy Odin himself, Thor thrusting his shield-arm into the maw of the risen sea-serpent Jörmungandr. I remember the shock of reading about the Last Battle, in which all the heroes, all the gods, were destroyed forever. It had not until then occurred to me that a story could end like that. Though I had suspected that real life might, my expectations were gloomy. I found it exciting...I remember sitting in church, listening to the story of Joseph and his coat of many colours and thinking that this story was no different from the stories in Asgard and less moving than they were. I remember going on to think that Ragnarök seemed "truer" than the Resurrection. After Ragnarök, a very tentative, new, vegetable world began a new cycle, washed clean of blood and fire and gold. I may, I see now, reading the book as I still do, have been influenced in these childish steps in literary theory and the Higher Criticism by the tone of the authors of Asgard, who rationalize Baldr and Hodur into summer and winter, who turn giants into mountain ranges and Odin's wrath to wild weather, and who talk about the superior truths illustrated by the beautiful Christian stories. They are not Frazer, equating all the gods gleefully with trees, but they set you on course for him. I identified Our Northern Ancestors in my mind with my father's family, wild, extravagant, stony, large and frightening. They were something of which I was part. They were serious gods, as the Greeks, with their love-affairs and capriciousness, were not.[309]

Although the above is far more obviously linked to the shaping of *Ragnarok* and a fascination with reading against expectations of a happy ending (regarding which point, see the following chapter on *Ragnarok*), the remarks upon tonality - particularly the patronising tones of the writer wishing

[308]A.S. Byatt, 'Sugar' in *Sugar and other stories*, (London, 1987), pp. 232-33. The underlining is mine.
[309]Byatt, 'Sugar', pp. 233-4.

to push a Christian agenda - were to become very important in Byatt's depiction of Old Norse symbolism in *Possession*, particularly by dint of its association with older male characters.

Old Norse receptions and gender in *Possession*

A highly introspective story about research and receptions, *Possession* has more than two layers of narrative; firstly, it is a story about two fictional academics, Roland Michell and Maud Bailey, who are researching the unseen love story of two other fictional, historic writers within their story universe: Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. As it is an interwoven narrative rather than a straightforward *mise en abyme*, we have the sense of being one place apart from both sets of figures - the academics and the poets - which, on one level, renders them characters, and allows us to respond to them in a more traditional, emotive manner. There is also, however, a metanarrative: these characters' names form various conglomerates of literary symbolism, raising them above the one dimensional 'pretend person' and encouraging readers to respond to them as we might a medieval allegory. This metanarrative of intertextuality presents wider observations on the interlacing of literature, mythology, symbolism and society in the human consciousness.

Names are of utmost importance in this intertextual construction. Roland's name is a clear reference to the hero of *Le Chanson de Roland*, and as such is suggestive of his overarching quest for knowledge, his interior struggle to achieve both academic self-assurance and familiarity with the reclusive, aristocratic Maud, and the modesty and purity of intent which ultimately win him her love. Maud Bailey and Christabel LaMotte have names with multiple resonances: on a literary level, Maud's name is a playful reference to Tennyson's poem *Maud*, especially to the well-known line of entreaty: 'Come into the Garden, Maud', with all its sensual suggestions of shy reflection, fecundity and bowers.[310] Christabel's name evokes Coleridge's unfinished poem of the same name - a reflection of the mystique, independence, truthfulness and otherworldly air of Byatt's fictional poet, who (it is suggested) may also have bisexual leanings. In addition, both these central female characters are named after the parts of a medieval castle designed to enclose, protect and distance - the bailey (outer wall) and the *motte* (mound/hillock). This implicit coupling of their names is symbolic not only of their genetic link and of their genders - enclosure, protection and shelter being concepts traditionally associated with the feminine - but also the mirroring which occurs in their separate plotlines: their French ancestry, their academic specialisms (fairy tales and the unveiling of the serpent woman Melusine) and their intratextual identification with the literary

[310]Byatt has already made a wry exploration of Tennyson and his poetic context in relation to the visualisation versus the realities of romance and relationships for men and women separately. See Byatt, 'The Conjugal Angel' in *Angels and Insects* (London, 1992).

archetype of the medieval lady in her bower, as well as the trauma they undergo at the hands of men who disrupt both the social boundaries of their privacy and the physical ones of their bodies.

Christabel's surname derives extra literary and cultural significance from its association with Friedrich de La Motte Fouqué, who not only wrote *Undine* (a novel based heavily on the Melusine legend) and chivalric works, but was also a main source of inspiration for Wagner's Ring cycle. De la Motte Fouqué drew heavily upon both *Völsunga saga* and *Nibelungenlied* in *Sigurd der Schlangentödter* (1808), the first modern German dramatization of the Sigurd legend, and its sequels *Sigurds Rache* (1809) and *Aslaugas Ritter* (1810).[311] This name's particular blend of literary associations - fairytale, romantic fiction and Old Norse receptions - will become a part of the crucial symbolism of the Victorian poets' affair, representing an important joining of two types of literary tradition, and (in conjunction with Roland and Maud's specialisms, both of which are equally important in their resulting joint study of the poets) a brighter outlook for the future of scholarly teamwork and gendered freedom within literary studies. The most obviously striking fictional name and figure from an Old Norse specialist's perspective, however, is undoubtedly Randolf Ash, the poet whose name is reflective both of his mythological interests and, his position as a major, male poet with an extensive archival footprint within the research microcosm of the novel. As Gillian M. E. Alban suggests, Ash's name and preoccupations seem suggestive of the universality of the tree of life symbol within global mythologies, and as such do not simply represent one mythology or doctrine; while I would argue that Old Norse *is* meant to be the predominant overtone for other reasons (as I shall show), I believe this is indeed an appropriate reflection of the novel's wider preoccupation with the interlinkedness of stories, and of Ash's position as core figure around which the universe of the novel ostensibly revolves.[312]

Old Norse mythological references in *Possession* act mainly as signifiers of key themes within the novel, but also nod to the idea of an underlying body of work that can only be gleaned from fragments of information, which makes a great deal of sense if we consider that this, itself, is a novel about receptions, and the process by which we read and form opinions. As Heather O'Donoghue correctly points out, the positioning of Old Norse references in the plot are always at a distance - they are at one remove from Roland and Maud, for whom they add 'historical colour' to a body of research, and thus at two removes from the reader, for whom they represent a fictional body of work which is suggested to be heavily influenced by Old Norse.[313] Here, though less obviously signposted than in *Ragnarok* (see below), we see an earlier example of the active demands Byatt's

[311]These three works were published together under the heading *Der Held des Nordens* ('The Hero of the North') in 1810. Regarding the author's ongoing importance, it is also worth mentioning that *Undine* inspired the literary grandfather of fantasy and C.S. Lewis's 'master,' George MacDonald, who claimed it was 'the most beautiful' of fairy tales. See G. MacDonald, 'Preface', *The Light Princess and other Fairy Tales* (London, 1893), p. 3.
[312]G. M. E. Alban, *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A. S. Byatt's Possession and in Mythology* (Lanham, 2003), pp. 251–62.
[313]O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, pp. 138-9.

writing makes on readers, forcing them into the position not only of receiving stories and material, but also of receiving them imperfectly, causing them to ape and relive the process by which academics form conclusions about a limited amount of content. In this sense, as well as enacting the various ways in which one may read a text (as Coyne Kelly rightly observes), Byatt is also forcing readers to participate in the same enactment, making the novel a thoroughly interactive intellectual experience.[314]

As references to another's interests, the Old Norse details rarely reveal many finer points of the mythologies themselves, except for the odd plot detail from an individual story, a symbol (like the ash tree) or a mention of a mythological figure, which readers of the novel, like the fictional researchers themselves, are offered to digest, and to pursue or not as they please for interest's sake. Ash's explanation of the symbolism behind his own name in a letter to a very young female admirer is one such instance of an informative nugget, hinting at the wider mythological pantheon which has formed a major part of his interests and philosophies. Tonally, his gently pompous explanation rather resembles that of Jakob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, and, indeed, Wägner's *Asgard and the Gods*:

> I cannot draw so well as you, but I think gifts should be reciprocated, so here is a lopsided version of my namesake, the mighty Ash. It is a common and magical tree—not as the mountain ash is magical, but because our Norse forefathers once believed it held the world together, rooted in the underworld and touching Heaven. It is good for spearhafts and possible for climbing. Its buds, as Lord Tennyson observed, are black.[315]

This, she seems to indicate, is how academic men of a certain generation automatically speak to women and children, and where their mythic interests lie; their preoccupation with the notion of fathers, sports, hunting, war, climbing, all speaks to the forging of a hyper-masculine notion of ancestry which, rather ironically, never quite sits comfortably with their current, rather stuffy selves.

Aside from depicting the process of research, Byatt also seems to be using the fictional Victorian poet's preoccupation with Old Norse as a signifier for other, gender-based tensions within research and mythological receptions, not all of which are in themselves purely historical. The clear preoccupation of the poet with assigning a warlike, Nordic heritage to Britain, along with the themes of weaponry and the Christian heaven in relation to a plant of pagan importance, is, firstly, a clear nod towards the masculine-centric, quasi-scientific nature of Victorian receptions in Old Norse, and the nationalist direction which they took especially at the turn of the century, when the majority of British writers with nordic interests were invested in self-identifying as the descendents

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[314]Coyne Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, pp. 90-1.
[315]Byatt, *Possession*, p106. (NB. spelling is according to source.)

of 'vikings.'[316] Put in the words of a major literary figure (albeit fictional), such patriotic and martial preoccupations are suggestive of the ways in which Old Norse mythology was - and still is - used to highly political, and sometimes damaging ends, and the extent to which other areas of academic interest might be ignored in mainstream media or among certain hegemonies for the reason that they do not serve a popular aesthetic or agenda.[317] As well as a nod to the Old Norse literary tradition of wisdom competitions between gods and other beings - and most notably Odin's obsessive quest to dominate in this area - it is also one of many references to the Victorian obsession with taxonomy as a means of understanding (one might say 'possession') of the things described, and their attempts to use such information in pursuit of some higher truth.[318] Although there is a general consensus that the figure of Ash represents Robert Browning first and foremost, I think it no coincidence that in correspondences like the above his tone is also highly reminiscent of magpie lore collectors like William Morris and Walter Scott (both avid Norse enthusiasts), and of naturalists like Charles Darwin. Ultimately, what is being referenced is the grandiose, masculine coterie stereotype which defined the period's cultural footprint, and which represents the general public enthusiasm about Old Norse in relation to matters of nationality and adventure.[319] As such, Ash becomes a kind of literary everyman, and so, within the context of the novel as a story about stories and receptions, is representative of the populist formation of literature and scholarship itself - a kind of literary giant, whose fame affords him a retrospective, almost mythological sheen in the eyes of other characters.

Multilayered historical allusions such as these not only display Byatt's in-depth knowledge of Victorian literature, but are also highly enriching on an interactive level: they do not detract from the work for readers with less knowledge, but for more academic readers offer an extra layer of intertextual awareness, setting off a chain reaction of synaptic links with other, real works of literature which exist in our parallel universe, making the book an almost three-dimensional experience. The more we have read, the more we as readers stand to gain from the experience, and to feel like we are active participants in parallel literary universes, aware of numerous interlocking receptions and mirroring canons, and of alternative realities which exist by dint of receptions alone, but feel 'real' because they reflect familiar interior landscapes we have already encountered. The oft-mentioned poem 'Ragnarôk,' the magnum opus for which Ash is most famous within the world of the novel, is a similarly Byattian literary easter egg; although referenced as a supposedly

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[316]For a fuller, more comprehensive analysis of Victorian receptions of Old Norse, see Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*.

[317]See, for instance, Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*.

[318] *Alvíssmal, Vafþrúðnismál,* and *Grímnismál* are all examples of dialogic Eddic poems in which cosmological events and information are ritualistically and competitively recited, in order to establish dominance. All three can be compared in Pettit (trans.), *The Poetic Edda: Dual Language Edition*.

[319]For further discussion of Ash's resemblance to Browning, see C. Burgass, *A. S. Byatt's Possession: A Reader's Guide* (New York, 2002), A. Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory and the Contemporary Novel* (New York, 2011), p. 133, and R. Todd, *A. S. Byatt* (Plymouth, 1997), pp. 24–9.

major work amongst other classics, much like its creator the work itself does not actually exist. We are only ever given an 'excerpt,' written by Byatt:

> Three Ases wandered out from Ida plain
> Where the Gods met in council, with clear brows
> And joyous voices, knowing then no weight
> Of sin, or the world's wryness. All was gleam
> Of sun and moon well-wrought, and golden trees
> With golden apples inside golden walls.
> They stepped into the middle-garden, made
> For men not made, drowsed in the lap of Time.
> Round their divine bright faces, ceaselessly
> Rushed the new air. Beneath their lovely feet
> Rose the new grass, and leeks, untouched, uncropped
> Green with the living Sap of that first Spring. [320]

The references to the 'three Ases' and to the leeks, are references to parallel creation-themed events in *Vǫluspá*.[321] Any reader familiar with Victorian poetry, especially with Old Norse receptions pre-1900, would also recognise that this excerpt is a highly accomplished imitation of the Nordic-inspired works of Arnold, Morris and Tennyson, and so can also piece together the unspoken implications of what the rest of the non-existent poem might have been like - a long epic based on the material of the Eddas.[322] This excerpt, then, presents a highly complex integration of several layers of receptions: it is poetry ascribed to a character associated with the world of poetic receptions, based upon both an original Old Norse text and Victorian receptions of Old Norse, and framed within a dual-layer work *about* creative and academic receptions of mythology. As a 'fragment,' it is also symbolic of the kind of information which researchers see in part, or by suggestion, rather than in full, and so by necessity must interpret according to information they have already received, some of which will be tainted by their own inevitable bias. In terms of a commentary on receptions, one may also make a highly ironic reading of it in terms of the blinding effect a well-known writer's reputation can have within the literary world. 'Ragnarôk' (Roland Ash's spelling of the word) is a 'poem' which characters within the novel make a great deal of fuss about as a major, canonic masterpiece, and which is referenced in parallel with real canonic works of literature (without mention of authors), to the extent that one could easily be fooled it *is* real at first, but it proves to be a hollow facade - a myth of a mythological poem - if the reader attempts to research it.[323] As such, it is a literary illusion (or delusion) of grandeur which readers are never

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[320]Byatt, *Possession*, p260.
[321]See *Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 7-24.
[322] See M. Arnold, 'Balder Dead', in *Poems* (London, 1877), pp. 136-89.
[323]I am embarrassed to admit that I am one of those readers who did, in fact, attempt to research 'Ragnarôk,' fooled by Byatt's smokescreen of real literary references and the lack of authors' names in the list of Blackadder's influences. This, in itself, is not only a sign of her successful blurring of boundaries between the mirror world of the novel and this one,

actually permitted to read, and thus can only form an idea of what it may be like according to secondary references and (in some cases) previous knowledge of Old Norse material and receptions.

Byatt's depiction of Ash's and others' interactions with Old Norse is revealing on both historical and socio-political levels. As Heather O'Donoghue rightly observes,

(Byatt) explains exactly why contemporary audiences would have found a full-blown reworking of mythic themes uncomfortable. Ash's poem 'Ragnarok' was controversial: 'some saw [it] as the Christianizing of Norse myth and some trounced [it] as atheistic and diabolically despairing'. Ash himself is presented as recognizing, and developing, the parallels between Norse myth and Christian tradition. He defends the poem against the charge of having caused Christabel LaMotte - who is to become Ash's lover - to defy her Christian faith...[324]

Ash's embarrassed, yet passionate early ramblings to Christabel, about how the figures and ideas in his poem 'Ragnarôk' can be incorporated into a Christian worldview, are a very accurate reflection of how desperately many male authors have tried to make their translations of the Old Norse canon compatible with contemporary and Christian ethics, and to convince both themselves and their audiences that the 'originals' were intended in the same vein.[325] Many other Old Norse references and allusions of this type within the novel are, if not completely negative, a nod to masculine acquisitiveness and privilege. Ash's pompous self-association with the mythical tree - and, as such, his unhesitating placement of his artistic self at the centre of the literary cosmos - is part of a very pointed set of behaviours by male characters, designed to draw attention to gender disparities within Byatt's fictional research setting. The very centrality of Ash as a researched figure, the subsequent importance of his Nordic content to male researchers (as opposed to the very feminist enthusiasm shown by female academics in the novel for the Melusine legend), and certain researchers' methods of engagement with Ash's works are all references to the power divide in the academic world, and the literary one. All established researchers involved with Ash are male, and the two major forebears of Roland share their subject's active approach to research and the Norse mythology which inspired the poet. The showy, media-hungry academic, Mortimer Cropper, makes a highly performative study of Ash:

Later he had followed Ash to Amsterdam and the Hague, and had walked in Ash's tracks in Iceland, contemplating geysers, seething circles of hot mud and those two poems inspired by Icelandic literature,

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but may also be read as a point about the way a reading public handles information. The public establishment of literary fame or quality may, in itself, be seen as a reception process based on trust and bias, and can encourage an 'Emperor's-New-Clothes' mode of thinking, in which impressive-sounding hearsay and titles may pass as 'real' without close inspection.

[324]O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, p138-9.

[325]For a comprehensive survey specifically of earlier British attempts to reframe Old Norse material according to Christian ethics, see O'Donoghue, 'Paganism and Christianism: The Victorians and their Successors', *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, pp. 148-99.

Ragnarok, the epic of Victorian doubt and despair, and the sequence of poems, Ask to Embla, the mysterious love lyrics, published in 1872 but certainly written much earlier, possibly even during his courtship of Ellen Best...[326]

This is an aped version of the immersive, acquisitive and more gently ego-centric approach of Ash himself, who travels and studies specimens and landscapes mainly in order to augment his writing practice and knowledge, whereas Cropper's approach is mainly designed for self-promotion, and is based on the misconception that one can, by standing in the same places as a writer, imbibe the same impressions they received and so better 'understand' or 'be one' with them - a form of enactive receptions which, up to and including today, has caused all manner of delusional fan bases and theories, especially for fans of so-called 'Viking' culture. The reference to Iceland as a landscape for such purposes is a very deliberate reflection of the ways in which so many male writers from the Victorian period to the turn of the century (George Dasent, William Morris, Sabine Baring-Gould and W.H. Auden among them) have aspired to some form of inspirational literary osmosis via physical interactions with Icelandic landscapes. On an even more explicit note, Fergus Wolff, Maud's arrogant ex and rival Ash scholar to Roland, is an ever-present menace within the academic circles in which they move. Described as 'a devourer' by Maud, whom he wished to possess, his name is tellingly close to 'Fenris Wolf,' and he may be interpreted as symbolic of the predatory, overbearing nature of a certain type of traditionalist academic male, and of chauvinist movements linked to Old Norse symbolism.

Byatt never being one for thematic over-simplification, there is also another, subtler layer to this depiction of Old Norse receptions. Professor Blackadder, the still-acquisitive, but more sympathetic and emotionally honest counterpart to Cropper, is a reflection of Ash's humbler side, and allows for discussion of what the 'Viking' aesthetic has lent literature in a more positive sense. Blackadder is depicted as an academic suspended between the proverbial masculine rock and hard place, educated according to the kind of post structuralist overthinking which discourages emotional involvement with a text, but brought up to love literature based on the far more florid, romantic literary ideals of the older generation:

Blackadder was fifty-four and had come to editing Ash out of pique. He was the son and grandson of Scottish schoolmasters. His grandfather recited poetry on firelight evenings: Marmion, Childe Harold, Ragnarôk. His father sent him to Downing College in Cambridge to study under F. R. Leavis.[327]

Amusingly, F. R. Leavis - who tellingly hated Browning, Ash's closest living model - is referred to in the novel as his real self, but as such is also a reception of Leavis by Byatt, who disliked his style of teaching - another key example of Byatt's drawing attention to the blurred boundary between the

[326]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 120.
[327]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 32.

world of stories, receptions and reality.[328] Judging by her meticulous attention to detail, Blackadder's 'Scottish schoolmaster' ancestors are very probably a reference to Scottish authors such as Walter Scott, George MacDonald and George Mackay Brown who, by dint of geography and/or historical awareness, have particularly identified and enriched their work with nordic culture and stories, to the extent that their works would arguably have suffered without them. Thus, as demonstrated through the models of Blackadder and Ash, Old Norse mythological receptions are not simply represented by Byatt as negative; while they inspire high, idealistic emotions that encourage pomposity, and as such do not always have desirable effects in an audience, such emotive responses can also be seen as desirable in comparison to overly dry scholarship that shames the emotional response, as demonstrated by Byatt's response to Leavis (as reflected by the character of Blackadder).[329]

Byatt's aforementioned squeamishness about gender politics, and their isolating effects, also reveals itself in *Possession* through the more polemical female character of Leonora Stern. Leonora is a gay American academic, a woman of colour, an ultra-political feminist (complete with a hail of jargon), and an aggressively sexual being whose academic writing on Melusine shows a certain fixation with female anatomy. While Leonora is not a full-blown caricature, and is shown to be capable of sensitivity and kindness (it is indicated, for instance, that she will provide a new, healthy love interest for Professor Blackadder, whose life is undeniably passionless and in need of nourishment) she is nevertheless shown to have had multiple, unsuitable partners whom she derides in retrospect. Furthermore, while criticising men for their crass and assuming behaviour, Leonora self-objectifies and self-imposes in an overtly sexual manner ; in one of the novel's more upsetting scenes, she practically assaults the shyer Maud Bailey in her pursuit of intimacy. Leonora also dresses flamboyantly in warm colours designed to exoticise her mixed race appearance, which is not simply an act of feminism, but reads as part of her predatory lure and self-tokenising; this creates a portrait (albeit not entirely unsympathetic) of some of the less attractive after-effects of misogyny upon assertive female characters. By contrast, Byatt's academic and fairy tale-reflective heroine, Maud, challenges both traditionalist and feminist stereotyping. Coolly beautiful and deliberately unfashionable, Maud covers her long blonde hair with a turban to avoid abuse from the so-called

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[328]'Leavis was... a kind of blockage to everybody who wanted to do what I wanted to do...I went to two of his seminars, which, you know, is a story I have told in *Possession*—I decided I wasn't going to go to any more because either I would get like the other people who worshipped him...but somehow didn't make anything, or I would just get angrier and angrier with what I saw as his manipulation of his students into admiring him...He did do things which I do think were rather vulgar, like throwing other people's books in the rubbish bin at the beginning of his lecture...Also, I have never wanted to belong to anything ever and he was a movement... I don't like people who ask you to follow or believe. I like people who ask you to think independently.' See P. Hensher, 'A.S. Byatt, The Art of Fiction No. 168', *The Paris Review* 159 (2001), https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/481/the-art-of-fiction-no-168-a-s-byatt] (accessed 20th April, 2025).

[329]It seems that Leavis's approach had a negative impact upon several female scholars and writers; Angela Carter would also scornfully refer to his 'eat up your broccoli' approach. See 'A Splinter in the Mind' in *Unicorn: The Poetry of Angela Carter*, (London, 2015), p. 52.

Feminist audiences who judge her appearance as a betrayal, and catcalled her when she wore it loose at lectures. It is also no wonder that the inherent attractiveness of the characters of Maud and her love interest, Roland, lies in their awkward, shy brand of truthfulness, and that, by contrast, the glossy, outspoken, outwardly brilliant characters of Leonora and Fergus Wolff are portrayed as shallow and off-putting in their displays of intellectual sparring and overbearing, predatory sexuality.[330] Much like Byatt's acerbic words about Sylvia Plath (see above), such descriptions speak of a deep-seated and extremely English postwar prejudice against self-aggrandisement and outer display.

While the binary between Maud and Leonora is, unfortunately, an undeniable result of Byatt's particular prejudices against certain types, this is still not the whole story. Although such character portraits show no evident connection to the underlying bank of Old Norse symbolism, they are nevertheless part of a subjective framing which works alongside the nordic theme as a commentary upon how gendered assumptions may play a role in receptions and study choices. Just as Ash and Cropper's macho-nordic preoccupations are shown in a wry fashion to be a product of gender construction and romanticism, uber-feminists like Leonora are shown to be preoccupied by the feminine, fleshly and romantic subjects which are, by implication, open to them in a way that so-called 'Vikings' are not, and in which the male academics show no interest, precisely (it is implied) because of their more feminine subjects. All female scholarly characters in *Possession* either choose to set themselves apart or are shown to be repugnant in some way to their male colleagues, and most are not identified with any figures from Old Norse mythology, but with Melusine - the monstrous, serpentine female from the Romance tradition. Melusine folklore is, tellingly, situated within the fairy tale genre, itself a long-established sanctuary for satirical, storytelling women seeking to free themselves from patriarchal strictures, and slurred as 'women's lit' i.e infantile by figures such as the brothers Grimm.[331]

Thus, an extremely obvious thematic contrast is being established between perceptions of 'soft' southern Europe, the territory of women, and 'hard' northern Europe, the territory of men. The one case of a female character who is more closely associated with Old Norse mythology is, perhaps unsurprisingly, one very much in keeping with Old Norse depictions of the monstrous, liminal and frustrated, who only serves to bolster the turn-of-the-century association of Old Norse receptions with all things masculine. Beatrice, the mature female scholar who wanted to study Old Norse mythology and Ash, but has been constantly held back and pressured to study his wife's journals by her supervising professor, becomes a kind of 'ocean Fafnir': a disenfranchised creature ostracised and rejected by the older academic band of 'warriors' and then the later generation of feminists,

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[330]Coyne Kelly, *A.S. Byatt*, p. 88.

[331]See, for instance, M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde : On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London, 1994), and M. Ashley, 'The First Fairytales Were Feminist Critiques Of Patriarchy. We Need To Revive Their Legacy', *The Guardian* (11th November, 2019).

until, much like the legendary dragon, she is reduced to greedily sitting on the specific information within her control like a spoil heap.[332] Images such as this are, furthermore, replicas of similar links drawn between age, femininity and monstrosity within actual Old Norse literature; older, magical women who threatened male leadership and were either sexually ambivalent or threatening play a very prominent role in medieval Icelandic literature.[333] Ash's implied dislike of female occult and magical figures, as depicted by snippets of the fictional poem 'Mummy Possest,' is similarly representative of the chauvinistic bent of British Old Norse receptions as far as the mid 20th century, which frequently misrepresented certain uncanny female figures as more simplistic witchlike or lunatic caricatures.[334]

Thus, in this context, Old Norse is culturally positioned as a serious 'boys' subject,' and the milieu of Old Norse receptions as overtly masculine, with both women and feminist studies deliberately excluded from its circle. Through these various allusions to Old Norse mythology, literature and symbolism, therefore, an overt literary and gender binary is clearly being drawn, along with a very obvious double standard: in the academic world of the novel (at least, the older generation), men like Ash and Cropper are rewarded by behaving in an intrepid and outgoing manner, and are taken seriously for self-identification with their subject, while women must strive above all else not to perform their subjects, for fear of ridicule or abuse, and are shown to succeed only in so-called 'feminine' fields which are not central enough to be included in mainstream academia. Roland, tellingly, is the one destined to succeed better than any of his superiors in his research on Ash, precisely because he ventures beyond this gender binary to share information and collaborate with Maud, whose area is not of particular interest to any older male academics until the link between LaMotte and Ash becomes clear.[335] In this context, and even in its more benign forms, the subject

[332]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 126.

[333]See Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Monstrous Women,' *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power* (London, 2013), and M. Roby, 'Menopausal Marvels: Elderly Female Sexuality in the *Fróðárundur* of *Eyrbyggja saga*', in *Saga Book* 44 (London, 2020).

[334]Walter Scott's character of the wandering Norna from *The Pirate* (1822) is an excellent example of the lunatic prophetess. An even more comedic example is the introduction to an anonymous English translation of Mallarmé's *Vǫluspá*in *The Knickerbocker,* which presents a sensationalist figure of gothic horror: "At the entrance of one of those interminable pine forests, so common to Scandinavia, with the mysterious ravens hovering above her head, and surrounded by crowds of howling wolves, the prophetess is seated on her tripod, and seeks from the palpitating hearts of her victims the responses of the god. Entranced by the celestial presence, her whole countenance changes its appearance. Her fearful gaze wanders anxiously around, surveying the images she has invoked, as she commences her wild chant of chaos, the birth of the frost giants, and the combats of the gods. Ever and anon an imperative voice is heard demanding: 'Is the vision yet complete?' when the prophetess apparently revives, and sings of the origin of death, the abodes of the condemned, the final struggle of evil spirits, and the destruction of the world..." See *The Knickerbocker* 30*,* pp. 295-296.

[335]The wider reading we may glean from Byatt on research itself, interestingly, is less obviously gendered, and far more to do with Byatt's clear opinion of the relationships between interiority, exteriority, knowledge, honesty, substance and our own self-creation. Mortimer Cropper, Leonora Stern and Fergus Wolff (aptly named because he seeks to 'devour' both professional opportunities and girls) are all, to varying degrees, portrayed as scholars whose focus is on the self-image (or exteriority) they construct from the knowledge they gain, and therefore come across as distasteful and shallow. Roland and Maud, who pursue knowledge for its own sake and are naturally self-effacing, retain their integrity

of Old Norse becomes a cultural signifier of a much more sinister underbelly of gender prejudice and corruption, and is symbolic of a societal and academic state which must evolve for the good of all concerned.

Possession and the Creation myth of *Vǫluspá*

For the most part, Byatt's incorporations of Old Norse mythological references in *Possession* are mostly concerned with receptions and of public perceptions of Old Norse, rather than with the Old Norse canon itself. In this sense, she represents a great deal of historical truth about how Old Norse material has long been associated with masculinity, how such receptions might, and do persist even today, and how literary receptions will always be reflective of both general, socio-political and personal interiorities. On a metatextual level, it is a reception of a reception, in that Byatt is utilising knowledge about a certain tendency within Victorian and early 20th century receptions to reflect certain received impressions of academia, which are themselves exaggerated. For the most part, although a highly sophisticated work challenging our perceptions on readerships and what reading means, *Possession* is still an outer or bird's eye view of how receptions work within a certain, set fictional context. The Norse mythology itself is not the sole symbolic focus, and generally features insofar as it serves Byatt in writing a story about artists and researchers. This is, however (and typically of Byatt's complexity of style), not the whole story; while the most obvious nod to intertextuality and metatextuality as a whole is Byatt's use of heavily allusive names, there is another, subtler way in which one particular Old Norse mythological formula is incorporated into the fabric of the plot, and which foreshadows the far more interior and experimental qualities of her later work. The mystical creation, conflict, death and rebirth cycle of Ragnarök, as it appears in *Vǫluspá*, also becomes the structure upon which large parts of the narrative are framed. It is in this way that Byatt demonstrates another, more fruitful and interesting way of studying Old Norse mythology that is far more empowering than squirreling or sexist gate-keeping: not by objects or set entities, but through a mixture of interlocking symbolisms, shared worlds and processes.

From the moment of finding out about Ash's relationship with Christabel, both the researchers within the novel and the external reader realise that they are a doomed pair. For one thing, on a practical level, how could their story be hidden to the extent that it needs specialist research to draw it out, unless the relationship itself was doomed and needed obscuring? Such knowledge, however, also works at a far deeper, instinctive level: the formulae shining through as obviously as DNA from the moment their exchange of letters begins are, themselves, the very stuff of mythology - old,

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through interiority, as, to some extent, does Blackadder, who confesses to Maud that his mother's enjoyment of Ash's works was his inspiration to study him, drawing a parallel between her ego-free approach and the end 'point' of scholarship; the part of literature which remains 'alive' after intense scholarly analysis has stripped the experienced reader of more instinctive and (in the purest sense of the word) amateur enthusiasm.

inevitable and predictable to the letter. The formula of the doomed lovers is most obvious, but also eternally present is the idea, central to Old Norse mythology, and linked to that pantheon by dint of Ash's name and Nordic preoccupations, that creation (in this case, the cosmos of shared love and thoughts created by the couple) develops under circumstances which are flawed, and therefore exists on a constant, dying fall. The love plot between Ash and Christabel is forecast by the apocalyptic suggestions inherent within the title of his magnum opus, 'Ragnarôk,' and subsequently the pair's relationship proceeds to echo the cycle. Christabel herself likens their love to an inevitable epoch, which, much as Ragnarök to the Æsir, forms the centrifugal point of her existence towards which and from which everything tends: "This is where I have always been coming to. Since my time began. And when I go away from here, this will be the midpoint, to which everything ran, before, and *from* which everything will run."[336] Their affair will begin turbulently, grow, die and live on second-hand, not only through their genetic legacy - one which makes Maud directly related to the pair in a physical cycle of fulfilment - but also through the subsequent, successful love of Roland and Maud which blossoms as a result of working together, and which is therefore the spiritual 'rebirth' or legacy of the failed lovers, much as Baldr, are the legacy of the doomed first generation of Aesir in *Vǫluspá*.

Throughout the plot, many other key moments in the journey of the Victorian couple also echo moments in the Old Norse creation myth, specifically as it is shaped and communicated within the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*. Although she is never fully aligned with the mummified seeress figure whom Ash associates with hobbyist psychics, but who is still a nod to the *völva*, Christabel's independence, unusual, unearthly qualities and preoccupation with monstrous women aligns her with the other disruptive forces in Old Norse mythology. Just like the three giantesses who appear at the beginning of the Æsir's enforced civilisation, and whose arrival seems to disrupt their creation, heralding more troubling times, Christabel disrupts the self-consciously Odinic, paternalistic and secure construction of Ash's world.[337] It is with Christabel that Ash evokes the parallels he has found between Christian and Old Norse religion, and the universality of mythic shapes. It is a combination of Christabel and Eddic material which inspires his own creation poem on the stick figures Ask (the poet never escapes the centrality of his own presence at the core of the myth) and Embla, meaning that a parallel is drawn between their story and the Old Norse story of creation specifically. One particular poetic excerpt reflects many core elements both at the centre of *Vǫluspá*, and of the couple's relationship and interests; the making of a cosmos (or world of the lovers), the pool or well which may be associated with both the Norns and Melusine's true form, the tree (or creator) from which all life and creation stems, and the naming of things to solidify their existence and 'own' them (much as with the novel's passages on nature and taxonomy):

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[336]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 309.

[337] See Larrington, *Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda*, p.9, strophe 8.

We two remake our world by naming it
Together, knowing what words mean for us
And for the others for whom current coin
Is cold speech—but we say, the tree, the pool,
And see the fire in air, the sun, our sun,
Anybody's sun, the world's sun, but here, now
Particularly our sun. . .[338]

The power of naming as depicted in an Old Norse mythological context here is implicitly linked with the urge displayed by the couple to name and classify, as well as to the sublime, wild nature of the Yorkshire coast setting to which they escape in order to physically claim one another. Every scene is redolent (partly through the tendencies of their own thinking) with nordic heritage and philosophy:

He remembered most, when it was over, when time had run out, a day they had spent in a place called the Boggle Hole, where they had gone because they liked the word. She had taken delight in the uncompromising Northern words, which they had collected like stones, or spiny sea-creatures. Ugglebarnby. Jugger Howe. Howl Moor. She had made notes in her little notebooks of the female names of the Meres or standing stones they met on the moors. Fat Betty, the Nan Stone, Slavering Ciss...They had come across summer meadows and down narrow lanes between tall hedges thick with dog-roses, intricately entwined with creamy honeysuckle, a tapestry from Paradise Garden, she said, and smelling so airily sweet, it put you in mind of Swedenborg's courts of heaven where the flowers had a language, and colours and scents were correspondent forms of speech. They came down the lane from the Mill, into the closed cove, and the smell changed to the sharpness of salt, a fresh wind off the northern sea full of brine and turning fish-forms and floating weeds, running away to the northern ice.[339]

Much like young Jane Eyre's rhapsodising over escapist nordic fantasies as she hides in a window seat, such passages read like a love letter to the Victorian ideal of 'North' as the hub of adventure, empowerment, escape and liminal enchantment; they often mingle Linnaean and folkloric naming conventions, uniting the supernatural and scientific as an escape from the humdrum and conventional.[340] This passage is an apt reflection of Hans Blumenberg's observations on the power of naming as a bridge between mythology and science: '[A]ll trust in the world begins with names, in connection with which stories can be told...What science repeats has already been suggested by myth: the success, achieved once and for all, of acquaintance with everything on all sides. Myth

[338]Byatt, Possession, p. 127.
[339]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 311. The pleasure of being in Old Norse territory is very deliberately crafted by Byatt's use of place names here. Place names ending in '-by' are nearly always of Old Norse origin, deriving from *bær* and 'Howe' is derived from the Old Norse *haugr*.
[340]C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London, 1948), pp. 3-5.

itself tells the story of the origin of the first names...'[341] Such passages may also be read as the author's own partiality to the 'northerness' of Northern England, and as a throwback to the long-established, escapist fantasy position it has held in UK storytelling. This is also, importantly, the place to which Roland and Maud escape from bothersome society, as their poetic subjects did, and begin their own self-discovery - as such, it signifies the same kind of empowerment embodied by the world of solo travellers and small expeditions. Through the eyes of Roland and Maud, Byatt paints a careful portrait of the tall, blonde innkeepers, and the hefty plates of seafood; this references the fact that East Yorkshire has a strong medieval Scandinavian heritage, and generates the idea of a territory stuck in an historic past, or, rather, one which inspires tourist fantasies of the past.

Through Mortimer Cropper's idealistic narrative, Ash's penchant for naming is again likened to that of Odin, whose quest for knowledge is in itself a keystone trope within the pantheon:

> Randolph spent long hours poring over rockpools, deep and shallow, on the north side of the Brigg. He could be seen stirring the phosphorescent matter in them with his ashplant, and diligently collecting it in buckets, taking it home to study such microscopic animalcules as Noctilucae and Naked-eye Medusae "which are indistinguishable to the naked eye from foam bubbles" but on inspection turned out to be "globular masses of animated jelly with mobile tails."[342]

Aside from aligning his figure with the machismo miasma which Byatt stirs up around the world of Old Norse receptions and research (Cropper making the subject of his research a patriarchal god is itself a sharp reference to male bonding and systems of acclaim), this passage also serves to align Ash with the centre of the creative, disruptive masculine imposition of order which, it is implied in *Vǫluspá*, ensures the destructive chain of events leading to Ragnarok.

Once the couple have undergone the inevitable trauma of separation, then of mistrust and anger (as Ash realises Christabel has concealed a pregnancy from him) Ash meets, in a bucolic paradise of all things pastoral, his own child. Much like Baldr in the new Midgard, she dwells in bliss - the one survivor of their apocalyptic and creative love - and he crowns her with wildflowers and leaves without enlightening or claiming, knowing his part in the story has no place in this new, uncorrupted world she inhabits, and, for once, he has no right to exert control through self-identification or naming names. At the close of the novel's research plotline, the love scene between Roland and Maud is redolent with symbolism, reminiscent of the essential link between sex (or vitality), death and rebirth, which, although a universal mythic formula and extremely biblical, has also come to be crucially associated with the myth of Yggdrasil and Ragnarök through

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[341]See H. Blumenberg, 'The Name Breaks into the Chaos of the Unnamed', *Work On Myth*, trans. by R. M. Wallace (Massachusetts, 1985), pp. 34-58.
[342]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 274.

the anchorage of the Victorian love plot in Old Norse mythology. Byatt's reference to a 'whole world' still imbued with the 'lively, fresh' smell of 'death and destruction' can, again, to be linked to the vision of an earthly paradise in the final stanzas of *Vǫluspá*:

> In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful.[343]

Despite her clear leaning towards Old Norse references, however, Byatt takes care to remind us throughout the novel of the universality of tropes such as trees, fruit and serpents, particularly when linked to themes of love and knowledge. One may read the scent of 'bitten' apples as the apples of longevity guarded by Iðunn, but the overlap between that story and the more Biblical imagery of the apples of knowledge, which herald experience and death, is also extremely clear. Much as the character of Ash tries to unite the Biblical and the Nordic, such images behave like mythical palimpsests on the part of the author, there to remind us of the rich web of multiple references contained in any one literary formula or symbol, and the futility of seizing upon one as 'correct.' The above echo of the apocalyptic cycle and symbolism, which forms the structure of *Vǫluspá* within the structure of her own plotlines and the lives of her main characters, is the closest Byatt comes within *Possession* to casting mythology itself as the starring role and foundation, over which the lives of characters themselves take on the shape and patina of the formulae and symbolism. As yet, the balance still leans more towards mythology as the secondary role rather than the primary, used as a reference point by which all else is understood and as a creative and academic source of inspiration. What is also crucial at this point, however, is Byatt's demonstration of Old Norse mythology's existence within the wider ocean of stories and symbolism, and her use of it to show readers how human consciousness and intellect works. As I shall go on to discuss, the above ideas are what form the nearest parallel (and the precursor) to *Ragnarok*'s later centralisation of mythology itself as the shaping force, and Byatt's more active demonstration of intertextual thinking within the later work.

Otherwise, in Byatt's choice of Old Norse mythology as the work's *Id*, one may also read the novel *in toto* as a wider point about types of receptions, and what they have historically and sociologically represented for the British public. Far from the classicised, romantic-but-sexless and socially-sanctioned, public love portrayed between Ash and his wife in 'source material' (set down for posterity by Mortimer Cropper with a focus on the Italianate), by contrast the private communications between Ash and Christabel, their shared nordic and folk-based mythological and fantasy enthusiasms, and their visit to the North coast with its bewilderingly rich flora and fauna,

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[343]Byatt, *Possession*, p. 551.

all represents a meeting of more physical, raw and 'natural' passions, the independent, the adventurous, the animal and the strange; all qualities which, as mentioned, have long been associated with all things 'Viking.' It also draws an essential parallel between the fantastic, the honest and the intimate - as Byatt draws it, the public face of Old Norse may be chauvinist and dry, but its interior self is here tied with far more fascinating and seductive themes: feminine independence, folklore, faerie, nature, magic, love-making and creation. True to the associations with De la Motte Fouqué stirred by Christabel's surname, both the poets' relationship and the collaboration-cum-romance between Roland and Maud also come to represent the fertility of Old Norse receptions when combined with other genres like romance, folk and fairy tale, reiterating the value of cross-pollination in both the gendered (i.e. genres generally thought of as 'male' or 'female') and purely literary senses.

Thus, Byatt also incorporates Old Norse into her wider, more idealistic discourse about interiority and integrity, demonstrating how any popular subject used as a conduit for exterior display (such as Cropper's) or with a gendered bias may become vulgar, or take on the more unpleasant qualities of the user, and by the same token how it deepens its potentiality within the context of unbiased knowledge seeking and honest desire. At this stage, therefore, while we may say that Byatt's use of Old Norse has both widely sociological and metatextual leanings, here it is mainly of service in telling a very particular, and more distanced story with regards to Byatt's view of a certain type of society. The highly self-conscious, theoretical and even more experimental use of the pantheon in *Ragnarok* is not yet present, but *Possession* and its preoccupation with gendered mythology, creation-death-rebirth cycles, trees, pools and women of knowledge, most certainly provided the thematic backgrounds which later feature. This first of the two Old Norse-related novels comments upon the social and academic inequality experienced in daily life, while pointing towards the equality Byatt would like to see.

Another crucial point to end with here is that, in the evolution of Byatt's Norse-related works - and thanks to her reading it academically from the beginning - Old Norse mythology has always been established as something more than a flat narrative. It is not simply literature but a space - a fragmentary and mixed body of symbols, emotive associations and literary material which may be used in any number of ways, and which people invest in as a form of identity and empowerment, often in relation to gender ideals or scholarship. In the first novel, readers experience it as a space which, uninterrupted, comes to be associated with the ideals of toxic and outdated masculinity, but which, when enriched through mingling with other literary and folkloric material, retains vitality and relevance to ongoing generations. In *Ragnarok*, however (and as I shall explore in my next chapter) that depiction of an Old Norse space evolves to become one shaped specifically by, and designed to empower, women.

Chapter 3. War, Worldbuilding and Reading Women in A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok*

Introduction

Although not strictly a contradiction of the populist masculine representation of Victorian and turn-of-the-century cultural receptions of Old Norse in *Possession*, Byatt's next and more overtly Old Norse-themed novel, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*, is nevertheless a simultaneous challenge to and evolution of this cultural paradigm.[344] This later novel absconds from Byatt's previous focus on the use of Old Norse mythology as a masculine alternative cultural signifier (which she indicates needs challenging), and focuses instead on the pantheon as a signifier of alternative storytelling, cerebral self-empowerment and agency for women. Although it is also centred around the core themes of mythology, literature and reading, and how gender may affect receptions of these, this work illustrates a child's perspective, and is far more focused on representing the actual process of adding to the greater web of mythology, or the 'storyworld,' through personalized, imaginative retellings.

While *Ragnarok* may be read as a commentary on female experiences during the Second World War, communicated through the conduit of Old Norse mythology (a reading which Charlotte Beyer has already undertaken to great effect) I shall now invert the focus somewhat, and analyse it as a work about Old Norse mythology, and women's understanding of this mythology in relation to their own experiences, communicated through the conduit of a World War Two setting.[345] It also showcases a female character undertaking the self-empowering act of reading, in order to better understand or cope with difficult life circumstances. Set in the English countryside during the evacuation period, *Ragnarok* relates the story of a young girl evacuee (named 'The Thin Child' and heavily based on Byatt herself) from her early days in the country to her eventual return home. Rather than a novel about the girl's life, the narrative is centred around her reading and reimagination of Old Norse mythology from the book *Asgard and the Gods* by Wilhelm Wägner, and the ways in which she uses it to gain knowledge (her form of power), explore her own situation and confront her fears.[346] This means that the novel is not so much one of action and linear plots, but a fragmentary one detailing thought processes and stories in relation to life experiences.

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[344]A.S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (Edinburgh, 2011).
[345]C. Beyer, '"Life Was a State in Which a War Was On": A.S. Byatt's Portrayal of War and Norse Mythology in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*', *War, Myths, and Fairy Tales*, (Singapore, 2017), pp. 195–218.
[346]See W. Wägner. *Asgard and the Gods* (London, 1917).

As discussed in my previous chapter, the key inspiration for this work is first explained in detail in Byatt's short story 'Sugar.' The complexity of her engagement with the mythology is intriguing: while on the one hand *Possession* takes the greater part of its Old Norse symbolism from the associations Byatt formed between the Old Norse gods and her own paternal family (along with the Victorian aesthetic with which she identified both), the foundational thinking behind Ragnarok is a reflection of the author's own personal, and much more vivid experience with the Norse pantheon through reading *Asgard and the Gods*, which was her mother's book, and itself appears in the story. Therefore, while some of the paternal associations are continued in the portrayal of the Asgardians, in *Ragnarok* it is the author's mother who becomes associated with possession of the book itself, and thus with all the ensuing effects of the reading experience:

> The book was, however, not my father's, but my mother's, bought as a crib for the Ancient Icelandic and Old Norse which formed an obligatory part of her degree course. I can't remember if she gave it to me, or if I found it. I do remember that she fed the hunger for reading, there was always a book and another book and another. She never underestimated what we could take. She was not kind to her children as social beings, she screamed at invited friends, she felt and communicated extremes of nervous terror. But to readers she was generous and resourceful. I knew she had been the kind of child I was, speechless and a reader. I knew.[347]

Although Ragnarok is hugely complex as a work, it is this statement which best encapsulates what the book is about: the empowering potential of Old Norse mythology as an alternative space for academic women, especially for those who do not fit into traditional socio-cultural paradigms. It is also a book very much concerned with (and enacts) mythical receptions, showcasing the ways in which women and girls under stress may use the reception and personal extension of a mythical story world to understand and shape their own formative experiences. Reading 'Sugar' also means we may add another interesting layer of paratextual interpretation to *Ragnarok*: through it, Byatt has made reading, the domain of the mother, an action through which more static Old Norse mythological symbolism, typically associated with the patriarchal or masculine, may be transferred and tested for its net relevance to everyone.

As (typically of Byatt) this work is very much concerned with interlocking elements to make a whole, all the various features and sections of the book are more symbiotically entangled than most; it is, therefore, difficult to consider any one separately from the others, or to know exactly where to begin with my analysis. I have therefore compromised by dividing the following chapter into thematic sections as best I can, with the proviso that certain observations made in one place will (and should) become intersectional considerations.

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[347] Byatt, 'Sugar', p. 234.

General Approach and Aesthetic

In *Ragnarok*, Byatt's narrative moves away from the Victorian milieu of Old Norse mythology, towards the actual realms of the gods and monsters themselves; it takes much of its inspiration from Eddic sources, which are more concerned with powerful, female figures. As with *Possession*, the sequence of events in the poem *Vǫluspá* also provides one of the key frameworks upon which the plot hangs, in that the series of observations and descriptions through the child's eyes are structured according to those events in order. Byatt's retelling also aligns with and builds upon her observations in 'Sugar' in more complex ways, in that she also explores the representation of textuality and women's reading within the subject area of Old Norse mythology, and how it may be used to make sense of the world, rather than separating it out as a signifier of toxic masculinity (although the Victorian heritage plays its own part in some of the ways she presents the material). Using a real text - Wägner's *Asgard and the Gods: The Tales and Traditions of Our Northern Ancestors*- as the mechanism through which her child persona is introduced to the myths (as the writer herself was), she reflects the importance of Old Norse mythology and medieval studies as a powerful arena for flourishing female scholarship in the early twentieth century. This approach more accurately represents the reality of complex, sometimes conflicting sources of the Old Norse canon, preventing oversimplification of the figures and plots, and avoiding the former gloss of idealism that many receptions texts afforded vikings.

While the Old Norse references in *Possession* were more nebulous, used in aid of emphasising an existing lack of gender equality, or else in modelling how equality *could* work in a relationship based on mutual interests, *Ragnarok* is a far more intricate and pointed narrative construction. Not only is the mythology itself centre-stage for its own sake, but in it the status quo regarding gender is far more actively explored and altered, by dint of it being retold from the point of view of a female child, narrating and challenging what to her are familiar experiences of being surrounded by women. The female child persona who reads the mythological material, and whose thoughts thus provide the mythological narrative for readers of the book (a delightful and pertinent construction in its own right, in terms of representing what happens during human interactions with any kind of media), puts female figures in a decided position of power. While this persona does not change the balance of the cosmos in any fundamental sense, all the main protagonists and figures of note on which her narrative focus rests are women or, in the case of Loki, queer-adjacent.

The result overall is a fem-centric mythology within the already topsy turvy gender paradigm of wartime Britain, and one in which our sympathies are encouraged toward the disruptive, feminine or monstrous. Thus, the novel evolves beyond simply showcasing the stereotyping of 'male' and 'female' mythological material, as in *Possession*, and instead actively explores how women may gain a greater sense of freedom from adopting a supposedly 'male' canon. Byatt uses the Thin Child's

hunger for the mythology to show how the violent, powerful material in the Old Norse canon may be as relevant (if not more so) to women as it is to men, particularly those seeking a way to express the inherent problems with the domestic and bucolic themes that have been historically associated with women, and utilized to control feminine ideals.[348] It is partly through this act of reappropriating and reframing the very mythological territory which has been so firmly identified with men (and which was more directly identified with toxic masculinity in *Possession*), and in crafting a multi-dimensional narrative instead of retelling - thus changing the status quo of early twentieth century 'storybook' culture - that this novel becomes an exploration of female empowerment. Much like *Possession*, Byatt executes her ideas on two narrative levels within a fragmented mise-en abyme; this time, however, the boundary is between worlds rather than times, and is far more complex because it concerns crossing between reality (the world of one specific reader) and the storyworld, or mythological cosmos of Old Norse (which is shown to be the property of multiple minds, now received and processed by that one reader). The core narrative which penetrates throughout is the mythological retelling, but one that is itself a super-alternative within the alternative framework of Old Norse. This retelling is shown, very realistically, to be shaped partly by textual reception, and partly by the reader persona's own mind-world.

The framing narrative, which concerns the child reading the book *Asgard and the Gods* in wartime (from which, it is indicated, she begins to retell the stories in her own head), also details the lives and struggles of women within the framing narrative of wartime England, highlighting the importance of mythology and stories to a woman's sense of freedom - a freedom which is at its strongest in the displaced setting of evacuation. As a whole, these two 'halves' of the novel turn what could be a simple mythological retelling into an exploration of the difference between women's experiences and how a patriarchal environment has constructed what women's experiences should look like; it also highlights their different concepts of war and peace, ultimately destabilizing the patriarchal concept of peace as the absence of conflict. Though a certain amount of its impact is due to *Ragnarok*'s more retrospective angling (in that it recreates a time in which gender conceptions were more binarized than in the period represented in *Possession*, and so the underlying sense of contextual repression is naturally stronger) the novel is nevertheless a far more direct commentary on the vibrancy and greater potential of women freed from the male gaze, and how they are often damaged or compromised by patriarchal expectations and dreams.Furthermore, instead of idealising or indulging in any pro-feminist portraiture, Byatt takes a markedly unsentimental approach to the female figures and creatures within the novel, affording them not only agency in the positive aspects of creation and reception but also in destruction and disillusionment. In these ways, she refashions and reframes Norse mythology as a signifier for the

[348]In the Old Norse canon, of course, the literary relationship between queerness, power, gender and 'perversion' is extremely close-knit, making this mythological pantheon all the more relevant for a commentary on female power. For a more concise exploration of these interlocking themes, see, for instance, Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (Santa Barbara, 2017).

world of women, serving to remind us not only of the historical importance of the material to women authors specifically (many of whom wrote for, or were read medieval literature in the nursery), but also of the plasticity and all-encompassing nature of mythology itself, and our symbiotic relationship with it as readers.[349] Thus, Byatt effectively recentres the pantheon away from a patriarchal power dynamic, and destabilises some of the chauvinist tropes intrinsic both to Old Norse source texts and to many later receptions, such as the control and centrality of the male gods, and their relevance to boys and men looking for heroic models.

In addition to her choice of material, one of the key ways in which Byatt differs from nearly all retellings before hers is her departure from the genre of children's and young adult literature. While a great many adult novels were written using saga material in the Victorian and early twentieth century periods, up until the past decade (which has seen the most recent rise in Viking pop culture for adults, based on the television show *Vikings*) children's and young adult fiction has been the genre in which most Old Norse mythological content was closely reproduced or adapted in English; even then, unsurprisingly, the most accurate reproductions have generally been retellings in story collections.[350] Byatt's *Ragnarok* and the usual retelling model also differ greatly in structuring and choices of material; the previous, and best-known later retellings by Lancelyn Green and Crossley-Holland respectively have lifted a great deal of their main framework and content from both Eddas, but have relied primarily upon Snorri's Prose Edda as scaffolding, beginning with Ymir, and for the most part focusing on the individual exploits of the Æsir.[351] Similarly, while far more carnivalesque in approach, Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* is mostly based upon the same framework of individual tales, with a preponderance of content on male Æsir, dwarfs and giants, and, moreover, addresses readers in a highly indulgent and conversational fashion, as though relating a fun yarn to little children.[352]

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[349]See Richmond-Bourgeois, *Chivalric Stories as Children's Literature*, and C. Larrington, 'The Myths of the North in Children's Books', in C. Larrington & D. Purkiss (eds), *Magical Tales: Myth, Legend, and Enchantment in Children's Books* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 22-35. Paul Robichaud also reveals something of the importance of turn-of-the-century anthologies of medieval stories to girls in a nursery setting, when he mentions that the poet David Jones used to 'pay his older sister a penny' to read to him from Arthurian legend. See P. Robichaud, *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages and Modernism*, (Washington, D.C, 2007), p.17.

[350]See, for instance, D. Clark, Children's Literature and Old Norse Medievalism (London, 2024) and Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*. There have been odd exceptions such as Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (London, 2001), and Nancy M. Brown's *Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths* (London, 2012). I do not include the genre of Viking-themed erotic fantasy, which, although very interesting and endlessly amusing in its own right, is too large in volume to be considered here, and often too extremely tenuously linked to history or mythology to be meaningful to this study.

[351]See R. Lancelyn Green, *Myths of the Norsemen* (London, 1960), and K. Crossley-Holland, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths* (London, 1980), *Norse Myths: Tales of Odin, Thor and Loki* (London, 2017), and *Norse Tales: Stories from Across the Rainbow Bridge* (London, 2020), republished in 2021 as *Across the Rainbow Bridge: Stories of Norse Gods and Humans.* Crossley-Holland's publications on Old Norse mythology have been particularly numerous, but tend to follow the same pattern of slight variations on the same adaptations. In retellings, the Eddic poems are read as tales, but undergo a great deal of bowdlerisation, especially in representing physical and sexual violence.

[352]N. Gaiman, *Norse Mythology* (London, 2018).

Byatt's use of Old Norse content in *Ragnarok* is, by contrast, highly selective, and not obviously 'child-friendly,' although ironically her child persona's perspective reads far more realistically to most adults who loved to read as children. While to some extent she separates certain mythological tales into separate parts of her narrative, she does not attempt a linear retelling of tales under separate headings for their own sake, and also includes elements of folklore and academic commentary within the whole, couching the more linear narrative in a bed of context. Part of this structural approach is explained by a note in her appendix, which speaks of myths not simply as literature but as 'cavernous spaces', seeming to refer not only to an aesthetic but also to the idea that myths are clouds of information that live in the mind, and not discrete entities.[353] Byatt also attributes this decision in part to Heather O'Donoghue's comment that, while we tend to define or visualise myths as stories officially, many of them are not narratives at all.[354] It is clear, however, that a great many of these ideas would have originated in her text of inspiration itself: Wägner's *Asgard and the Gods* is not a storybook, nor is it chronological, but a large, sprawling manual of mythological figures, stories and folkloric and religious beliefs about the Old Norse pantheon, examining it in cosmological, anthropological and academic terms, and with comparative remarks about Christianity and other religions. Byatt's deviation from typical storybook layout may be read both as an acknowledgement that such structuring is a misrepresentation of the true complexity of mythology (as depicted by Wägner, albeit stylistically dated), and as a subtle criticism of the ways in which publishing culture has simplified or misrepresented its complexity. By the same token, some of her treatment of the mythology from an alternative, and female perspective (which I shall discuss later in this chapter) may also be read as a reaction against Wägner's pompous, and very Christian-centric contextualisation of the myths.

Byatt's most obvious deviation from other retellings, content-wise, is that stories like *Þrymskviða* (in the Poetic Edda) and *Gylfaginning* (in the Prose Edda), in which the heroic exploits of Thor against the giants take centre stage, are avoided completely. Similarly, the extensive material in *Skáldskaparmál*, such as Odin's retrieval of the mead of poetry, is left out. While such ubiquitous mythemes as theft, cunning and contests with giants are no less a part of the cloud of mythology, such omissions make more sense when we realise Byatt's alternativist thematic preoccupations. She is seemingly avoiding any part of the mythology where the content may be simplified into cut-and-dried tales of quests, male camaraderie, heroism or conquest; in other words, the parts of the mythology which have been most heavily retold according to patriarchal standards, and in ways which exclude the apocalyptic leanings of the mythic material as a whole, and simplify the

[353]In the sense that she is exploring the expansion of a known imaginary world, Byatt is a working example of what Rebecca Merkelbach in particular discusses in her works on Old Norse storyworlds. See Merkelbach, *Story, World and Character in the Late Íslendingasögur : Rogue Sagas* (Cambridge, 2024) and *Storyworlds and Worldbuilding in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, R. Merkelbach (ed.), (Turnhout, 2025).
[354]See H. O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, p. 157.

complexity of the gender balance within the Old Norse cosmos.[355] Such retellings cannot truly represent the full shape of the nine worlds and their interlocking qualities as a whole cosmos, or the very particular timeframe in which Old Norse mythology exists - a peculiar, suspended timeframe with the end of the world is both immanent and, for readers, an event which also feels retrospective. For the child persona, living in a constant state of war, and in awareness of the ever-present possibility of defeat and invasion, this state of suspension is best reflected by the Old Norse cosmos and (it is indicated) this representation of her situation is an aid in coming to terms with her feelings. Byatt reflects this sense of suspension by narrating the myths in a kind of 'present-past': past in that she does formally use past tense, but present in the sense that they are narrated concurrently with the child's own thought processes, and so feel more immediate.

Byatt's retelling, furthermore, is seemingly built with a far darker aesthetic in mind; her tonality is more in keeping with the grandeur and dark opulence of Wagner, while a world away from his take on female figures. Much like Freud's theory of the Uncanny, which pinpoints recognition of the familiar as a crucial part of establishing fear, Neil Price neatly encapsulates the fear and fascination Vikings inspired in societies within their own timeframe through the 'dark mirror' analogy:[356]

> [I]t is not often now we speak of a Pre-Christian Viking 'religion' at all - it was far more than that: a total view of the world, a complete, and very different, understanding of the nature of reality itself [...] *That* was what the Vikings' victims were afraid of, and it is also what we are starting to really get to grips with. But there is something more. I think that fear of the Vikings not only arose because they were so different, but because in that difference lay some horribly unnerving kind of familiarity. The Anglo-Saxons, for example, knew that this Viking world-view was not so far removed from what theirs had been not so long before, and maybe, under the surface, still was - and I think that realization frightened them. The Vikings were not only conventionally terrifying, they were also a dark mirror held up to the image of what English needed to believe themselves to be. The same probably applied to the Franks and the other Continental peoples.[357]

Holding up this 'dark mirror' persists today, although, in absence of real, contextual familiarity with the violence and uncertainty of the Viking Age, perceptions of it have changed greatly. Now, as I have explained in my introduction, it is far more common to celebrate and even fetishize the power and violence popularly associated with Vikings and Old Norse mythology as thrillingly primal.

Byatt's *Ragnarok* is, at base, not dissimilar: while the narrative cannot be said to idealise the pantheon in any basic sense, nevertheless much of it was obviously written in enjoyment of the

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[355]Tellingly, Crossley Holland's latest books for children are a short series about Thor, and the larger compendium, *Tales of Odin, Thor and Loki*, which is taken from earlier published material (see note 349).
[356]See S. Freud, *The Uncanny* (London, 1919).
[357]Price, 'Mind and Magic' in *The Viking Way*, p. 331.

extremely grim, yet vivid tonal quality of Norse imagination and worldbuilding, the sensuality and power of which are made to stand in stark contrast to how the Christian pantheon is traditionally narrated, especially to children, and most especially to girls. Nor is this aesthetic one which remains in the mythological retelling alone; as I shall show, and very typically of her multifaceted literary constructions, Byatt also clearly associates these darker, more violent tonal leanings with the way the reader character in the framing narrative thinks and desires to view the stories. Thus, Byatt illuminates the 'real' complexity of human experience in contrast to the traditionalist social frameworks of her childhood, with the implication that such frameworks still oppress women in particular, and that violent and depressing themes can be liberating. Overall, across both narratives, she uses her dark mythological mirror to subvert the subverted, throwing illumination upon two thematic entities which have been oppressed and exploited in both conservative and alternative movements led mainly by men, and which have been linked together in feminist movements - women and nature.[358] The thematic constants within this text, which overlap like a venn diagram without any taking precedence and which all benefit from the dark mirror of the pagan mythology, are the overall cyclic pattern and dying fall of Norse creation, the interlocking themes of nature, gender, desire and curiosity. The most notable uniting factor is the sense of darkness and of realism which supersedes the mythic background; an overwhelmingly dark, brooding and serious tonality which is distinct from all previous retellings, but which feels eminently compatible with what Byatt, in her epilogic essay 'Thought on Myths,' calls the 'cavernous spaces' of mythology.[359]

Narrative Structures: Reading Women and Rhizomatic Myth

The framing narrative of *Ragnarok* is not a simple mise-en-abyme, so much as a strange hybrid of this and metafiction; a genre which seeks in some way to break the fourth wall between traditional suspension of disbelief and awareness of the writerly construction taking place.[360] Byatt's type of metafiction is also unusual because it goes beyond the more usual forms of directly addressing the reader, or self-consciously discussing the art of characterisation or plot as a wink to readers. Instead, readers are permitted a bird's eye view into the workings of mythology through another's reading, while all along the process and acts of construction are not all directly discussed so much as implied. Switching focus between mythology and the reader persona - which happens irregularly

[358]The alignment of feminist activism with environmental activism was a common one in the late 20th century; this was sometimes a mixed blessing, as the language of motherhood and nature sometimes encouraged essentialist categorisation of gender. For a more detailed discussion of this arena, see, B. Berila, *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice : Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004) and S. MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth : Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care*. (Vancouver, 2006).

[359]A.S. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 157-171.

[360]For a comprehensive summary of the ways in which metafiction has been used, see Y. Schlick, *Metafiction* (London, 2022).

between chapters, sections, sometimes even within the same few sentences - the narrative is a highly intricate examination of how the worlds of the imagination and reading are seen to play out in and shape the world of Old Norse gods and monsters:

> Odin was the god of the Wild Hunt. Or of the Raging Host. They rode out through the skies, horses and hounds, hunters and spectral armed men. They never tired and never halted; the horns howled on the wind, the hooves beat...Odin's horse, Sleipnir, had eight legs: his gallop was thundering. At night, in her blacked-out bedroom, the Thin Child heard sounds in the sky, a distant whine, a churning of propellers, thunder hanging overhead and then going past. She had seen and heard the crash and conflagration when the airfield near her grandparents' home was bombed. She had cowered in an understairs cupboard as men were taught to cower, flat on the ground, when the Hunt passed by...Airmen were the Wild Hunt. They were dangerous.[361]

This high level of permeability between so-called 'real' and 'not real' phenomena in mythological constructions is an apt commentary on how, to put it in Byattian terms, narrative is a 'structuring element' through which we may understand and even take a form of ownership over our own realities.[362] Metafiction here proves a particularly relevant genre, as its self-conscious exploration of construction provides 'a model for thinking about the construction of reality more generally,' and, as Lena Steveker describes it, Byatt succeeds in 'reconciling the realist tradition with metafictional self-reflexivity, intertextual games and generic instability.'[363] The abrupt, oscillatory focus, switching from child to myth and back again through the conduit of the page, shows the direct, highly symbiotic link between the reader and the mythological cosmos, and how each ultimately shapes the other; true to the nature of myth and folklore, this is depicted as an ongoing process and suggestive of the wider whole - a vast network of mythic content and differing minds. Through the protagonist of the framing narrative, we are also introduced to a real academic source through which the mythology is presented (and which, by its very nature, encompasses and suggests other sources), shown how the material is communicated and processed, and how it continues to develop in this individual's imagination, demonstrating the multidimensional, ultimately organic quality of mythic bodies, which, unlike the hermeneutic world of the individual novel, grow in all directions from a variety of readerships and sources. As the fictional 'real world' which Byatt depicts outside the mythological one is, clearly, a play on the author's past (highlighted by the dedication to her mother 'who gave me *Asgard and the Gods*'), the strange cross-genre nature of *Ragnarok* - somewhere between mythical retelling, child's tale, novella and *bildungsroman* - becomes a challenge to the categorisation of fiction, mythology and non-fiction, and shows to some extent the limitations and losses involved in the very categorisation of genre.

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[361]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 40-1.

[362]See A.S. Byatt and Ignês Sodré, *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers,* R. Swift (ed.) (London, 1995).

[363]See Schlick's introduction in the book *Metafiction*, and L. Steveker, *Identity and Cultural Memory in the Fiction of A.S. Byatt* (London, 2015), p. 114.

The closest theoretical parallel to this highly interactive view of Old Norse mythology, and the experience of reading it, is (suitably considering her francophile interests) French and postmodernist; that of Deleuze and Guattari's work on the concept of rhizomes (e.g. multidirectional, interconnected organisms like potatoes, which can sprout in any direction) as a way to frame various systems and works:

> A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes...Even some animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all of their functions of shelter, supply, movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed. Animal and plant, couchgrass is crabgrass...any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order. The linguistic tree on the Chomsky model still begins at a point S and proceeds by dichotomy. On the contrary, not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status...A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogeneous linguistic community...[364]

This rhizomatic analogy can never be a perfect one for the actual contents of the book, considering Byatt's deep attachment to all-encompassing symbols - in fact, it is particularly ironic as a framing device when we consider the centrality of the world's tree (a symbol from which Deleuze and Guattari actively seek to deviate) to both worlds in the novel.[365] What the above concept does encapsulate rather beautifully, however, is the construction of the novel itself, and the point being made about the process of mythology. The way in which Byatt crafts her retelling to represent the

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[364]G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, 'Introduction : Rhizome', *A Thousand Plateaux*, B. Massumi (trans.) (Minnesota, 1987), pp. 6-7.

[365] "A first type of book is the root-book. The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree... The book imitates the world, as art imitates nature: by procedures specific to it that accomplish what nature cannot or can no longer do. The law of the book is the law of reflection, the One that becomes two. How could the law of the book reside in nature, when it is what presides over the very division between world and book, nature and art? One becomes two: whenever we encounter this formula, even stated strategically by Mao or understood in the most "dialectical" way possible, what we have before us is the most classical and well reflected, oldest, and weariest kind of thought. Nature doesn't work that way: in nature, roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one. Thought lags behind nature..." Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*, p. 5.

interlocking entities of book, mythology, individual, readership and nature, all interconnected in ways which defy over-simplification of any one entity, or the imposition of one 'root' story, thing or state of being, is inherently rhizomatic:

> ...contrary to a deeply rooted belief, the book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an a parallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterri-torialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world (if it is capable, if it can).[366]

Although she never identified it as such, Byatt has created a kind of rhizomatic metafiction. Through this construction, she has recreated one 'cell' of the wider body of what mythology is, and shown its working as a dynamic process rather than merely reproducing it as a product. Furthermore, *Ragnarok* is not just a general exploration of the nature of mythic bodies in this wider conceptual sense, but is also a pointed and very personalised depiction of why and how mythology can become important, and how it may be used as a tool for taking ownership of one's own vision and ideas. It is, perhaps, better described as 'rhizomatic metafictional autobiography.'

While not strictly a feminist in any political sense, Byatt's approach to writing women nevertheless acknowledges a great many of the problems they face as opposed to men; typically of Byatt, however, her prose does not seek simply to observe and expose, but to encourage alternative thinking. Her rhizomatic use of interlocking narratives is regularly employed in a double-sided manner, at once capturing the situation of women' s experience of a restrictive world structure, whilst also presenting set stories as an alternative kind of agency as a toolkit to escape such structures. In *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*, the protagonist Gilian relates coverage of an Ethiopian famine to the djinn, in which an old woman, her body box-like within the frame of the television, says 'It is because I am a woman, I cannot get out of here."[367] As Elizabeth Wanning Harries observes

> Though Gillian tells the djinn she doesn't know why she has told this story, it clearly has to do with the biological, social, and narrative structures that enclose women and that she has been thinking about throughout. The formal, embodied framing of the woman on the television screen makes the viewer's sense of her desperation more powerful - and eloquently suggests her gendered imprisonment.. And yet. And yet. In Byatt's story, Gillian Perhold has moved beyond that "imprisonment,"...Through the djinn's magical intervention she is even able to escape the confines

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[366]Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaux*, p. 11. It is rather a wonderful irony that Byatt created a work that was simultaneously tree-centric and rhizomatic - a concept which deliberately seeks to debunk the linearity and centralisation of the tree shape as a symbol or system. Whether or not Byatt was aware of this, and delighted in the complexity of her own construction, or remained unaware, is more than this thesis can answer, but the thought is nevertheless very interesting.

[367]A.S. Byatt, *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (London, 1994), p. 243.

> of her aging body...In "The Djinn" the many secondary, framed stories show the constraints of old stories and the dangers of repeating their scripts. Because Gillian Perholt knows that the traditional three wishes are a trap, she is able to make what she calls "intelligent" ones.[368]

In Ragnarok, through reliving the specific experience of a young girl persona's reading of the myths in a certain source text (set during what was already an unusual historical period of combined restriction and freedom for women) readers are encouraged to experience the rhizomatic process of reading mythology in the light of a girl's experiences of restrictions and fears, while also aligning the Old Norse world itself, and its nihilistic 'non-ending,' with the sense of liberty and realism that was particularly craved by female intellectuals and academic-minded girls. This idea is prevented from becoming feminist in an exclusionary sense, because the more obviously masculine sides of the myth become just another part of the girl's reading; it is made clear that she is following her own interests at all times, and her focus on certain female characters and plots is due to especial fascination or sympathy, not simply down to an enforced binary in which masculine figures are irrelevant, or she decides to dislike them. It is noted, for instance, that Thor, Odin and Baldur are 'set shapes' who prove less fascinating than the changeable Loki, but they are still very much included in the story, and contribute to forming her understanding of her wartime world.[369] Displaying the spontaneous, rhizomatic quality of a myth in transit is also a way of both drawing attention to and preventing any preconception of Norse mythology 'belonging' to any one group or gender, because (as Byatt indicates) it is so clearly a product of whomever picks it up and shapes it. She has, in fact, gone to particular lengths to communicate this - in the very short foreword, 'A Note on Names', she states "This story has been made from many stories in many languages - Icelandic, German and others. The names of the persons in the myth vary from telling to telling...I feel happier using various spellings, rather than trying to achieve an artificial consistency. Myths change in the mind depending on the telling - there is no overall correct version."

Like those in *Possession*, the two human female characters in the framing narrative of *Ragnarok* are not depicted as privileged or necessarily superior. They are a girl known as 'the Thin Child' and her mother, who have been evacuated to the country during the outbreak of war. Both are shown to have their differences and discomforts in co-existence with one another, but in this case they do not have the struggle of existing in parallel with men. The two are depicted as mentally thriving in the country setting, and, each in their own way, inspired and enthused by the nature around them. In the absence of men, this world of women will become representative of the storyworld the Thin Child mentally inhabits, and indicative of how one's environment affects one's inner narrative. Importantly, neither the child nor her mother are depicted as traditionally attractive or feminine

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[368]E. Wanning Harries, 'Myth, Fairy Tale and Narrative in AS Byatt's fiction', in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (Detroit, 2008), p. 84.
[369]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 45.

figures, and so are purely feminist in the sense that they fit neither an idealised political agenda nor a conformist one in which the woman is in danger of becoming everything to everyone.

The Thin Child becomes**,** by her very title (i.e. not 'the Thin Girl') an everyman persona, and the brief description of her ('thin as an eft') is, as well as nordic, somewhat androgynous, making a firm point about gender and character expectations at the beginnings of stories about children in particular. Just as she is not outwardly defined by her gender, looking neither like early twentieth-century models of a traditional girl nor an 'anti-girl' (one might mention, for instance, Pippi Longstocking, or the Enid Blyton dichotomy of tomboy George versus motherly Anne), Byatt's child is shown to be driven primarily by logic and curiosity, which are presented as integral parts of her emotional landscape rather than separated *from* emotion. She is not driven by forming her own image in a cosmetic sense, by attraction to other figures - tellingly, her only real attraction is to the character of Loki, who represents security in uncertainty (on which more below) - or by living up to the expectations others impinge upon her. Although sympathetic, much like the proverbial fairytale child persona she is neither completely lovable nor unlikeable; she simply acts and thinks in ways that make sense to her. Her main formation of identity lies in two directions: one is her identifying with stories which, she knows, would be widely disapproved of in a 'good' girl, and her resulting feelings of guilt which, nevertheless, are insufficient to stop her. The other aspect of this development is intellectual - her attempts to reconcile all her various, conflicting realisations within the medium of the stories, to try and make sense of them all at once. One major example is the idea that adults, despite being the trusted authority, are afraid, unstable and often ineffectual providers: 'She dreamed what she did not know, that her parents were afraid and uncertain...It hurt her, unlike most knowledge, which was strength and pleasure.'[370] In this sense, although far less pointedly rebellious, the Thin Child somewhat resembles the character of Terry Pratchett's trainee witch, Tiffany Aching, whose uniqueness lies in her ability to examine information unsentimentally, and explore the self-contradictions inherent in the world around her.[371]

There is evidence this is an autobiographical portrait of Byatt based on her own sense of oddness at school, and, with that underlying sense of the author's own discomfort, readers are also reminded of the pressures of categorisation and types upon girls as subjects, as well as the limitations of their own training.[372] One of the most important aspects of the Thin Child's character is her extreme

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[370]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 82.

[371]See T. Pratchett, *The Wee Free Men* (New York, 2003).

[372]'Byatt describes herself as "a classic tiny shrimp of a girl, when the others were on their way to being women. I was always top of the class, and they didn't like it." She was asthmatic and hid in cupboards to avoid gym.' See M. Stout, 'What Possessed A.S. Byatt?', *New York Times* (1991), https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/13/specials/byatt-possessed.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=possession%20byatt%20showing%20off&st=cse#:~:text=In%20it%2C%20a%20mismatched%20pair,foils%20their%20dangerous%20American%20colleagues (accessed 16th January, 2025).

awareness of the disjunct between what she thinks and feels, and what others expect her to. The biggest expression of this is her awareness that 'goodness' in abstract is desirable, and is officially represented by the Christian testament, but that her mind is most 'alive', and therefore *feels* best, in the amoral space of Old Norse mythology. While never stated outright that this is to do with gender, the novel's primary focus on women and liminal female figures - particularly the adjacent portrait of her awkward, academic mother - indicates that such revelations are not only a point about truth and childhood pressures, but more specifically the additional emotional pressure of being classed as female. What is most interesting is that the main way in which such ideas manifest themselves is in the child's clear love and affinity with Old Norse mythology, which imbues her mind with a vitality that other stories do not:

> She thought long and hard, as she walked, about the meaning of belief. She did not believe the stories in *Asgard and the Gods*. But they were coiled like smoke in her skull, humming like dark bees in a hive. She read the Greek stories at school, and said to herself that there had once been people who brought 'belief' to these capricious and troublesome gods and goddesses, but she herself read them as she read fairy stories. Puss in Boots, Baba Yaga, brownies, pucks and fairies, foolish and dangerous, nymphs, dryads, hydras and the white winged horse, Pegasus, all these offered the pleasure to the mind that the unreal offers when it is briefly more real than the visible world can ever be. But they didn't live in her, and she didn't live in them.[373]

The fact that the child is not invested in Greek mythology is an important reflection of its history of elitism as the territory of upper class men, and its being grouped and dismissed in the child's brain with fairy tales - a genre long associated with the nursery and women in the popular imagination - is a highly ironic image. The vitality the Asgardian pantheon inspires, on the other hand, is symbolic of the importance of Old Norse (as mentioned in my introduction) to female and middle class education in the early 20th century; this is clearly a commentary upon the need within women for an aesthetic or territory which is not confined, and which inspires strong, emotional and spontaneous responses in their own right.

The child's passion for, and her intensely investigative and physical interaction with the tales is what forms the structure of the narrative, rather than a two-dimensional or functional retelling. By contrast, and in a more marked manner than *Possession*, the structure of the myth in her head echoes and references *Vǫluspá*at regular intervals, utilising its structure to create the novel's sense of continuity, and seeming to drive events in the girl's life; whereas events mentioned according to the poem generally come in order, according to the slow arc, built tension and dying fall of Old Norse creation, the girl's story is more like a series of impressions based on this arc, emphasising the interchangeability of subject and object, mythology and teller. Mythology is not something she sits back and receives, but explores through meditation triggered by her rambles, and her reception of

[373]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 31.

the stories is significant in terms of what pre-existing notions the darker elements force her to address. Her freedom from having to like or take moral lessons from the figures (whom, it is made clear, are *not* characters) in the stories, her overriding interest in visual, logical and contextual detail, her fascination with the amoral, violent nature of the narratives, which she visualises and embroiders, rather than shying away from mentally, are all signifiers of the ways in which she is *not* supposed to think. One vision which consumes her is *Ragnarök* itself, which she associates with everything fascinating about her countryside world of the imagination:

> The Thin Child stored this picture of the end of things, like a thin oval sliver of black basalt or slate, which was perpetually polished in her brain...But on the other side of the closed gate was the bright black world into which she had walked in the time of her evacuation. The World-Ash and the rainbow bridge, seeming everlasting, destroyed in a twinkling of an eye...under a black, undifferentiated sky, at the end of things.[374]

The Thin Child's feeling of freedom in picturing destruction and the end of things, versus the more established vision of peacetime, encapsulates a disjunct central to *Ragnarok*'s very particular type of feminism. It recognises the notion of peace as a confining concept which, as it is historically modelled upon the uninterrupted living standards of patriarchal systems, carries more subjugative implications for women. Similarly, this narrative draw towards the apocalypse is a strong statement about the artificiality of preserving the future for the nebulous figurehead of 'tomorrow's child,' and of the ideas of future fertility and reproductivity forced upon girls. While pertaining primarily to Queer politics and sociology, Lee Edelman's discussion of the 'death drive' provides an apt explanation of the kind of point Byatt's prose is making, and the dynamic it is challenging by centering on endings:

> For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention...This conservatism of the ego compels the subject, whether liberal or conservative politically, to endorse as the meaning of politics itself the reproductive futurism that perpetuates as reality a fantasy frame intended to secure the survival of the social in the Imaginary form of the Child...[375]

With regard to *Ragnarok*, the notion of the death drive is extremely relevant, as it imbues the entire narrative. War itself is an atmosphere - a held breath before probable destruction, right up until peace is proven - and this is ultimately the atmosphere in which Norse mythology swells in

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[374]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 147-154.

[375]L. Edelman, 'The Future is Kid Stuff' in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C, 2004), pp. 2-18.

relevance. The girl child is shown to adjust herself to, and even become resigned to, a future which is not inherently predictable or happy, the irony being that so-called peace will make her uncomfortable and claustrophobic because of its very rigidity (see below). Byatt very cleverly uses this state of mind to draw attention to the flimsy notion of peace for a working to middle class woman: the fact that a child - one of the groups with whom 'peacetime' is so often linked, and who are so often utilised as a symbol of future prosperity - may find an odd attraction to annihilation is a stark and very bold signifier of the pressures inherent in the postwar demographic for women, or indeed anyone of alternativist tendencies.

As well as providing a refreshing stance on conceptualising mythology (a self-conscious space and process, rather than a hermeneutically-presented set of tales, and a seeking of an ending rather than closure) such ideas also become a form of private rebellion against the restrictions the Thin Child will ultimately have to encounter as a woman in the mid-to-late-twentieth century. Ultimately, in keeping with Byatt's ideals of gender, the Thin Child is an intellectual anti-role model whose very existence is about defying boxing or expectations, but who is not an assertive, antisocial or political rebel. She is, in short, a representation of the later generations of female intellectuals like Byatt, and her involvement with Old Norse (as with other turn-of-the-century girls learning from collections of medieval tales) is symbolic of how such material can be used creatively by women to self-liberate and take ownership of their experiences.[376]

Just as the child is a representation of Byatt's own experiences, the mother figure also seems to be a thinly-veiled portrait of Byatt's own mother, and is very much in keeping with the book's aesthetic of natural realism. Far from being a gentle, or generous figure, associated with the idealised bounties of nature, she is awkward, easily embarrassed and undemonstrative: as a scholar and teacher, she is "more real, and kinder, when it [is] a question of grouped letters on the page."[377]Her lack of traditionally 'motherly' behaviour, while also a general commentary on the inaccuracy of 'natural' stereotypes, is also a sign that she has been removed from her sphere of comfort. Everything outside of her world of the mind - including her child - to some extent represents the opposite of where she really feels *at* home, and the societal pressures which have forced her to conform, albeit badly, to domesticity. The fact that she is thriving in the countryside without her husband is expressed by her preoccupation with learning, words and reading in conjunction with her work as a teacher - an occupation which she is only able to do in wartime, and which she will be forced to give up as soon as her husband returns. It is also evident that such an occupation has itself been a step-down from a higher academic past: the mention of her usage of *Asgard and the gods* for Old Icelandic crib sheets is the signifier of that world of the intellect, where she, like the Thin Child, comes alive. This connection is made all the more significant by the fact that her own

[376]See Richmond Bourgeois, *Chivalric Stories as Children's Literature,* and Robichaud, *Making the Past Present*, p. 17.
[377]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 4.

daughter is now reading, and highly enriched by the same book, and that it is her more directly responsible for shaping her than her mother in person.

The mother is also suggested to be more vibrant in other, less gender-weighted locations than the home: the presence of more extroverted female friends (whose eccentric behaviour sometimes embarrasses her,) are another sphere of reference to a world where men's absence allows for freedom of movement and expression. Such women also, albeit briefly, represent the escapist nature of medieval receptions and fantasies: the 'dashing' Marian in her hat and breeches, who plays make believe games about Robin Hood with the child, is taking possession of a crucial British metanarrative, with both masculine and queer associations.[378] Awareness of Marian's presence introduces a slight suggestion of queerness in the mother's life too, but, even more importantly, the carnivalesque element of medievalism she represents becomes a game which signifies women's liberation through medieval stories. Such clothes and games are reminiscent of story compilations and the nursery, which, as I have mentioned, provided the bedrock of interest for so many budding female academics and writers at the turn of the century. The affection shown by the mother's male students, who give her unsuitable animals as presents, is also a sign that she is admired, and is perhaps even the object of adolescent crushes. The fact that these 'gifts' are released, or escape and die in gruesome circumstances, only adds to the realism of this narrative, as it shows the mother loves nature on her (and its) own terms, rather than from a nurturing perspective.[379]

These two female figures are, in short, both vital and discomfiting, much as the natural world that surrounds them; both are suitably Byattian signifiers for feminism, in that they are not simplistic figureheads, and therefore - with men *in absentia* - are liberated to be exactly as they are, and for no other purposes than for their own interest and pleasure. What ultimately unites them is their mindscapes of education and learning, and Old Norse mythology in academic texts specifically becomes the key entity which unites them as mother and daughter - the joint signifier of their individualism and intellectual vitality, and their subsequent troubles in fitting gendered societal expectations. It is an ingenious double irony that, just as the mother cannot play the role of mother as traditionally conceived, and the child cannot really force herself to believe in the models society presents her, still, by exposing her daughter to her own intellectual passions, the mother is influencing and nourishing her child in a different sense. Their knowledge exchange (however passive) is also highly symbolic of the flourishing female readerships of that cataclysmic interwar period which would eventually come to change the face of education, and which especially used Old Norse as an intellectual territory they could make their own.

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[378]See J. Stephens and R. McCallum, 'The Boys in the Greenwood: Stories of Robin Hood', *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture* (Abingdon, 1998), pp. 165–99.
[379]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 151.

Reading Nature into Mythology, and Mythology into Nature

Just as Byatt wrote about the more chauvinist nuances of 'Viking' receptions in *Possession*, and used Eddic structure to depict a relationship involving an independent and subsequently fascinating woman, the association of Old Norse with nature and women reading in *Ragnarok* communicates a different way of harnessing the empowering associations of Old Norse - one might call it a more subtle variety of ecofeminism. As with most of Byatt's extended metaphorical constructions, this stance does not present itself in any one way, especially as it is so intricately interlaced as a construct with the themes of readership and receptions. Although Byatt's approach is reminiscent of the second wave approach to ecofeminism, in which women and nature are linked as entities that suffer in similar ways from patriarchal control, the construct is by no means simple, and the more obvious use of such themes only occurs towards the close of the novel (see below).[380] Tellingly, Byatt also does not particularly associate nature with womanhood in a nurturing or moral sense. Instead, she uses nature as a thematic conduit, linking Old Norse mythology with the theme of women reading, thinking and existing in a rural environment. Both the women and the mythology remain representative, not only of freedom and alternative power, but of the highly damaging tendency to associate either with limiting philosophies or expectations which take away from the realities of existence.

Instead of being defined by homogenised ideals of nurturing, women and nature are instead linked by the theme of Old Norse mythology itself. The novel's twin narrative worlds, which teem with untamed wildlife, exploration, realism and highly empowered, curious female figures, are the indirect signifiers of the contextual male oppression and environmental damage. In neither world are men unproblematic, but rather they are distanced in ways which allow the female characters and the natural world around them to thrive in their own way. In the 'real' world of the war, the men are away and absent. In the Old Norse world of the child's mind, being a reader's world formed of impressions, the scenario is a little more complex. Rather than men being absent per se, we are reminded of their dominance at second hand through the controlling Æsir hegemony, who impose order violently and whom the girl is already beginning to pair with the chauvinistic tendencies of their earthly worshippers:

> The words men used to describe the gods were the words they used for fetters or bonds, things which held the world together, within bounds, preventing the breakout of chaos and disorder.[381]

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[380]For a more thorough exploration of the gendered constructions around aggression and pacifism, see, for instance, J. Goldstein, 'Heroes: The Making of Militarized Masculinity', *War and Gender,* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 251-331.

[381]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p.119

However, a combination of the decisive actions and disruptions caused by female characters in the mythology, and the child's further mental 'editing' caused by experience, allows for there to be room for conflict and alternatives within this hegemony.

Retellings alone cannot truly represent the full shape of the nine worlds and their interlocking qualities as a whole cosmos, or the very particular timeframe in which Old Norse mythology exists - a peculiar, suspended timeframe with the end of the world is both immanent and, for readers, an event which also feels retrospective. For the child persona, living in a constant state of war, and in awareness of the ever-present possibility of defeat and invasion, this state of suspension is best reflected by the Old Norse cosmos, and that cosmos itself becomes symbiotic with hers. From the moment the reader follows the Thin Child on her mental journey into the stories, Byatt very quickly establishes the importance of holistic world-building over individual characters, and of the habitats and backdrops of this world as characters in their own right. Byatt does not simply use the child as a springboard, allowing an alternative narrative to take over as she begins to dream or think (as with so many narratives); we as readers, it is implied, never leave her experience behind, but simply enter her deeper consciousness - the Old Norse world as she imagines it. First and foremost, the child's re-imagining (which, it is made clear, is also Byatt's) of the story of the Old Norse cosmos opens, not with the void of Ginnungagap, or with the creation of the world through the body of the giant Ymir (although these will also feature later), but rather with the centre or constant within Creation - the world's tree Yggdrasil, from which all the worlds spring. Sources do not describe an origin or growth period for the tree, only speak of its being sympathetically affected by cosmic events, shaken and burnt (whether completely we are never told) in the onset of Ragnarök; it is perhaps the greatest mythological constant of the pantheon, and one might interpret it as representing the paradoxically eternal, yet fluctuating, shape of creation itself. Byatt introduces the tree with a distinct intertextual nod to The Gospel of John:[382]

> In the beginning was the tree. The stone ball rushed through emptiness...Any point on a ball is the centre and the tree was at the centre. It held the world together, in the air, in the earth, in the dark, in the mind. It was a huge creature. It pushed root needles into thick mulch. After the blind tips came threads and ropes and cables, which probed and gripped and searched. Its three roots reached under meadows and mountains, under Midgard, middle earth, out to Jotunheim, home of the ice-giants, down in the dark to the vapours of Hel.[383]

On a textual level, such descriptions retain the centrality of the tree, and further develop its anthropomorphic and sympathetic qualities as first established in the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*. In that poem, the tree is not only presented as the mythological centre upon which the fate of all the

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[382]'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' John, 1:1, *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York, 1999).
[383]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 13.

nordic cosmos hangs, but it provides the thematic core of the poem itself. Yggdrasil is one of the first entities mentioned, and its presence and anthropomorphically-drawn responses to cataclysmic events remain an ongoing thematic thread, while other gods are referenced only fleetingly - Thor (for example) is only mentioned twice. The order in which Byatt mentions the tree and the giant Ymir is also reminiscent of the narrative of *Vǫluspá*, as compared to the creation story told by Snorri. In the Eddic poem, the base creation of the world from Ymir's body as narrated in *Gylfaginning* is left out (although, as Ursula Dronke remarks, this was likely due to contextual assumption of collective knowledge of Ymir), and the Norse gods are simply depicted binding creation temporarily according to their own purposes, all the while setting themselves up to be destroyed by the inevitable ends of their own machinations.[384] Similarly in *Ragnarok*, although the story of Ymir is more of an afterthought, referred to in retrospect once the ecosystem of the World's Ash has been vividly established. Our first focal point from the mythology, the first being of central importance to the cosmos, is Yggdrasil, and throughout the novel references to it continue right up until the last battle.Just as it provided a core for *Vǫluspá,* Byatt now makes it the extended metaphor and emotive construction around which the novel itself is built, to the extent that a fledgling ash tree - representative of the Thin Child's pantheon, which has flourished during the war - will be symbolically felled at the end of the story, representing a figurative 'end of the world' in the child's eyes.

To establish its sense of centrality, an extended, ekphrastic description follows, in which Byatt combines detail about mythical animals from Old Norse sources with far more realistic biological and zoological detail, paradoxically rendering the tree not only mythical and grand but more realistic in the eye of a modern reader. It is obvious from the alliterative and assonantal patterning in such passages (underlined), which only serves to intensify the vitality of the images she describes, that Byatt has not only read Eddic poetry but has absorbed the poetics, and imitated them accordingly in her own work to reflect the mythological sources:

The tree ate and was eaten, fed and was fed on. Its vast underearth mesh and highway of roots was infested and swathed by threads of fungus...There were worms, fat as fingers, fine as hairs, pushing blunt snouts through the mulch....Beetles were busy in the bark, gnashing and piercing, breeding and feeding...Pools formed in the pits where the branches forked; moss sprouted; bright tree frogs swam in the pools, laid delicate eggs and gulped in jerking and spiralling wormlings...Birds sang at the twigs' ends and built nests of all kinds - clay cup, hairy bag, soft hay-lined bowl, hidden in holes in the bark. All over its surface the tree was scraped and scavenged, bored and gnawed, minced and mashed.

Tales were told of other creatures in the society amongst the spreading branches. At their crown, it seemed, stood an eagle, singing indifferently of past, present and what was to come. Its name was Hraesvelgr, 'flesh-swallower;' when its wings beat, winds blew, tempests howled. Between the eyes of the huge bird stood

[384]Dronke, 'Introduction' to *Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda, Vol. II*, p. 34.

a fine falcon, Vedrfölnir. The great branches were pasture for grazing creatures, four stags, Daínn, Dvalinn, Dúneyrr and Duraþrór, and a goat, Heidrún, whose udder was filled with honey-mead. A busy black squirrel, 'drill-tooth', Ratatöskr, scurried busily from summit to root and back, carrying malicious messages from the bird on the crown to the watchful black dragon, curled around the roots, Nidhøggr, entwined with a brood of coiling worms. Nidhøggr gnawed the roots, which renewed themselves.[385]

Such a tumbling mass of imagery and names has manifold effects; in *Possession*, they aided in establishing an alternative, wondrous, and Nordic-related natural environment in which Ash and Christabel's similarly alternative love, triggered by their similar joint passions for nature and mythology, might flourish. In more mythical scene-settings like these, these breathless lists not only evoke the eagerness of a child's imagination (note, for instance, how the clumsy repetition of 'busy' and 'busily' might be read as deliberate in this context), but the detail, which in tonality comes extremely close to poetic nonfiction, encourages the reader to situate their reception of the Old Norse pantheon within a recognised, albeit enlarged and mystical, natural environment, particularly as Byatt ensures the mythical material is nested in a foundation of the 'real.' Her decision to separate the descriptions of real-life organisms from so-called 'tales' about 'other' animals like Ratatöskr, Hraesvelgr and Nidhøggr (the author's spellings), almost as though the latter group were an afterthought, establishes their mythic distance from more everyday creatures, yet their being mentioned within the same space also ensures their ongoing association with 'real' nature, as the Thin Child encounters it. By the same token, the descriptions of 'real' animals are also subsequently imbued with mythic qualities, even while couched in the more naturalistic description of Yggdrasil as an ecosystem. In this way, all the organisms mentioned are positioned somewhere on a continuum between real and hearsay, with each 'side' lending a mythical or realistic tint to the other.

This nature-centric and highly visual approach vastly differs from the type of retelling executed before by authors like Roger Lancelyn Green or Kevin Crossley Holland, in that it renders gods like Thor, and even Odin, almost completely unimportant in the grand scheme of creation itself. Ultimately, by taking an ecological world view as her starting point, Byatt suggests to readers that the patriarchal society of the gods is not the absolute centre of the cosmos they inhabit; her establishing that the balance of life and death is a process of which they are only a part, and not masters, is a deliberately empowering stance. Although by no means an accurate canonical representation of the contents of mythological texts themselves, in which cosmic centralisation and tyranny of the Æsir (as Lukas Rösli and Nicolas Meylan rightly point out) is a consistent feature of

[385]Byatt, Ragnarok, pp. 14-15. (My underlining).

the Old Norse world view intertextually, this approach in itself an interesting reflection, not only on responses to the mythology, but also on the patriarchalism of Old Norse authorship itself. [386]

From a textual perspective, Byatt's placing primary focus on the names and positioning of natural entities before we even meet the gods, means that the work is automatically distanced from more traditional collections of children's stories; what we encounter instead is a series of mythic names and entities laid out more in the manner of a compendium or map, albeit with a more dramatic literary tonality. Considering that the book itself is all about re-enacting the process of receptions and the reader's experience, such a tonality is in keeping with the academic source text of *Asgard and the Gods*, from which the child persona is gleaning her information within the timespace of the narrative. Intertextually, it also calls to mind other, similar academic works, like Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, which, although imbued with their own inevitable agendas, have a layout designed mainly to inform and offer general material for digestion, rather than one linear mythological narrative. The taxonomic style is demonstrative of the ways in which readers - particularly readers of academic texts - receive and shape mythic material in their own imaginations, and of how the style of a source contains its own inherent shaping power on the material it transmits.

Character-wise, the taxonomic list approach is also a way of demonstrating the girl child's extremely rational, intellectual mindset: she seeks, not simply to escape the dull strictures imposed upon her by contextual norms, but also to incorporate the mythic information - where her mind is most 'alive' - into her own reality. This is, in itself, an empowering statement, refuting countless, long-held common assumptions (almost mythologies in their own right) about the ways in which young girls' minds are 'meant' to work. Even though this novel is talking about the context of wartime children, few women even today will fail to recognise the weight of assumption it communicates and challenges. To add further complexity, the narrative style is not only suggestive of the child persona's present, but also the present in which the book itself is being written: the closest comparative form of media to such passages as the above is, in fact, television documentary - a genre which nowadays relies on a certain emotive tilt for audience engagement, despite its nonfictional agenda. While it is a fair assumption that very few readers of Old Norse stories may easily envision a cosmic tree which connects worlds (especially considering the varying and sometimes self-contradictory layers of narrative by which the cosmos is mapped), most will have seen, for instance, nature programmes about forest habitats, affording technicolour views of the types of wildlife Byatt is describing, complete with carefully crafted voiceovers. It is not difficult to envision this text as a documentary narrated by David Attenborough.

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[386]See R. Cole, 'Æsirism: The Impossibility of Ideological Neutrality in *Snorra Edda*', in *Old Norse Myths as Political Ideologies* , pp. 27-48.

Outside the narrative of the Norse mythological cosmos, itself a world in the girl's mind, the world of her reality comes to interact with - not simply resemble - the world of the mythology she is imbibing, and in extremely intricate ways. On one level, the consistent grafting of Old Norse mythology, biblical or Christian literary references (such as the above reference to John's Gospel), and allusions to other literature form a kind of intertextual Yggdrasil of meaning which occupies the child's head, causing her to make constant comparisons between works, and between her own life and literature. Readers witness her process of receiving teaching from different quarters and (particularly as a girl, it is implied) struggling to find a way to amalgamate them into one pattern of wisdom which resembles her experience, so that she may define her own identity and try to decide whether or not her own beliefs are objectively 'bad.' The disjunct between her real feelings and what she understands she ought to feel is shown to distress her:

> She was a logical child, as children go. She did not understand how such a nice, kind, good God as the one they prayed to, could condemn the whole earth for sinfulness and flood it, or condemn his only son to a disgusting death on behalf of everyone. This death did not seem to have done much good. There was a war on. Possibly there would always be a war on. The fighters on the other side were bad and not saved, or possibly were human and hurt. The Thin Child thought that these stories...(were) human make-ups, like the life of the giants in the Riesengebirge. Neither aspect made her want to write, or fed her imagination. They numbed it. She tried to think she might be wicked for thinking these things. She might be like Ignorance, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, who fell into the pit at the gate of heaven. She tried to feel wicked.[387]

In contrast to such contemplations and responses, which are more passive and anxious, Old Norse mythology is vital, and inspires. She experiences a pleasing shiver of 'fear and excitement' when reading about Odin, whom she considers 'sinister and dangerous' and, unlike the God she is forced to worship, all the more real for being crooked and avaricious. References to the Nordic creation myths and worldbuilding are also directly woven into passages depicting the child's rambles in nature (see below); in making her 'myth of meadows' as she walks to school, listing the various organisms, she reflects the vivacity and emotional intensity of her connection with the stories, and their compatibility with her innate realism.

All of this suggests a symbiotic relationship between the reception and creation of myth, between reading, living and creating, and between a person's shaping of myth and myth's shaping of a person. Particularly important is the manner in which the child is shown to interact with and analyse these in comparison with her Old Norse 'mind world.' Her associations between nature and Norse mythology form (to her) a belief system of sorts that reflects her experience of the world and the workings of her own mind. This system is shown to be formed as a direct alternative to

[387]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 11-12.

patriarchal Christian teachings and models, with which her intellectual independence and innate realism cannot really reconcile when she is forced to engage:

> There were pictures and songs of gentle Jesus meek and mild. In one of them he preached in a clearing to a congregation of attentive cuddly animals, rabbits, a fawn, a squirrel, a magpie...The Thin Child tried to respond to the picture and failed. They were taught to say prayers. The Thin Child had an intuition of wickedness as she felt what she spoke sucked into a cotton wool cloud of nothingness...her mind veered away, to where it was alive.[388]

It is immediately on this line that the chapter ends, and that Byatt introduces her next chapter - the first segment of the narrative set in the Norse world - with the line referencing John's Gospel: 'In the beginning was the tree.' In this way, despite one being more inherently 'real' than the other, Nature and Old Norse mythology are set up as two, complementary facets in the child's alternative and realist brain, symbolic of what the contrast between what children are told to believe about the world and what they can observe from experience. Above all, in both the mythic and framing passages, the overwhelming impression is not only of colour but of combined violence and beauty - a quality inherent within both Old Norse mythology and Nature.

It is important to note here that a differentiation is made not only between the stories and the natural world around the Thin Child, but also between the book itself, which does not always reflect the alternative worldview in which the child secretly invests, and the way the child chooses, knowingly and self-consciously, to interpret the material. The above excerpt revisits Byatt's mistrust of the rather patronising, Christian undertones of *Asgard and the Gods*, which she mentions in 'Sugar,' but in this instance they are simplified, in that they are associated with the vicar rather than the book itself. However, other references are also made in *Ragnarok* to the author's mixed scholarly agenda, and to the child's awareness that the book is, itself, someone else's impression and selective retelling of the material, with which she can be equally selective. For instance, while she is shown to dislike any comparisons to Biblical narrative (such as the similarities between the giant Bergelmir and Noah, who both survive the flooding of their worlds), she does appreciate the author's mentioning that the narrative of rebirth *Ragnarök* is likely to be a Christian 'contamination.'[389]

Another empowering use of nature within the twin worlds is that Byatt frequently and obviously associates female figures with more grotesque, unpleasant, frightening and chaotic aspects of nature, which patriarchal idealism does not tend to associate with womanhood. One particularly long section of the story concerns Frigg's travels across creation, extracting promises from all living things not to harm Baldur. In the Thin Child's mind, most of the creatures she visualises Frigg

[388]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 11-12.
[389]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 147.

speaking to are frightening, strange or even nebulous, like jellyfish, corals and diseases (which we are reminded that Snorri also references, adding to the sense of receptions within receptions).[390] Byatt's direct comparison between these organisms and the picture of Jesus with his woodland audience suggests that, while these are not the kind of animals children are expected to enjoy visualising, they are symbolic of the far more sinister and complex interests of real children. Furthermore, as an intelligent person, the Thin Child's need to imagine is strongly linked to her need to process information, and she sometimes forces herself to visualise life forms she instinctively dislikes - her imagination becomes 'tremulous' around snakes, for example. This is a show of power in itself, as it goes against popular female stereotypes of squeamishness or being overcome by one's emotions. Moreover, Frigg's utter determination, calm and commandeering presence as a mother figure amongst all these horrors is, in this light, doubly fascinating; the detailed account of her efforts to tame every species seems to reflect the child persona's admiring view of her own nature-loving, academic mother, whom this country setting has allowed to take on a new authority, and who is keen on taxonomic study.

Furthermore, the Thin Child's own explorations occasionally take on a sinister tilt, as natural abundance encourages her to dissect and kills flowers for the pleasurable frisson of forbidden knowledge it affords:

> Maybe most of all she loved the wild poppies, which made the green bank scarlet as blood. She liked to pick a bud that was fat and ready to open, green-lipped and hairy. Then, with her fingers, she would prise the petal case apart...She knew in her heart she should not do this. She was cutting a life short...But there were always more, so many more. It was all one thing, the field, the hedge, the ash tree...[391]

The obvious Freudian undertones of near-puberty and the pudenda, created by such descriptions of 'hairy' lips, concealed blood and use of the fingers, are an eloquent remark on the disjunct between the realities of women's flesh and idealised beauty, and also call to mind the frequency with which flowers have been associated with women's bodies in far more insipid and confining ways within the literary canon (for example, Robert Herrick's 'Gather ye rosebuds' and, again, Tennyson's 'Maud'). Here, the association of senseless killing with female masturbation - during which the enacter is reported to feel combined guilt and fascination - is, in itself, reminiscent of the ways in which women have historically been shamed not only for exploring their own bodies, but for acting upon curiosity for its own sake. Here, we see an alignment of nature with a more general sense of greed, and of discovery without an ultimate moral end: as well as referencing the more corporeal sense of womanly discovery, this also deflects from the spiritual, self-improving mould of the *bildungsroman* - a narrative type almost synonymous with the majority of Victorian and earlier

[390]Byatt, Ragnarok, p. 83.
[391]Byatt, Ragnarok, p. 36.

twentieth century children's classics which the Thin Child's (i.e. Byatt's) generation would have read. In the child's discomfort with the church, the sexual undertones of the flowers, and her scientific, sometimes wilful damage of them (despite her clear love of nature), we see all the marks of resistance against adult and gendered systems put in place to discipline and chastise for the sake of control.

Although not a nordic image in itself, this heavy flower symbolism is one example of plant and animal images becoming part of Byatt's wider metaphorical association of the female body with nature, discovery and uninhibited curiosity, which then in turn becomes linked to the child's enthusiasm for Old Norse mythology - another adjacent, sinister, yet oddly comforting source of liberty and unsentimentality. It is also very interesting that the core themes of territory-marking and knowing in Old Norse are reflected in the world of the framing narrative. Just as the Æsir map out, name and tyrannise over the new world at the beginning of *Vǫluspá*, and the majority of the Poetic Edda is based on Odin's seeking of knowledge and names, so the Thin Child finds herself doing on her nature rambles, partially modelling her own mother's enthusiasms and the previously-mentioned ecosystem of Yggdrasil:

> She liked seeing, and learning, and naming things. Daisies. Day's eyes, she learned with a frisson of pleasure...Dandelion, dent-de-lion, lionstooth, her mother told her. Her mother liked words. There were vetches and lady's bedstraw, forgetmenots and speedwells, foxgloves, viper's bugloss, cow parsley, deadly nightshade...She gathered great bunches of wild flowers, cowslips full of honey, scabious in blue cushions, dog-roses, and took them home, where they did not live long, which did not concern her, for there were always more springing up in their place...[392]

Her Odinic greed to open, acquire and know more becomes reflected in the mythological retelling, as readers experience it through her mindscape, and the many lists of names and species also become associated with this hunger to gather information for its own sake. Ironically, one of the Thin Child's closest acquisitive mythological parallels in the story world she constructs is the serpent Jörmungandr, whose story is seemingly a construction based on a combination of known mythological material and textual lacunae and whose greed and curiosity also work as one (see below).

Thus, by overlapping the Thin Child's experience of nature exploration with her close reading of Old Norse mythology (along with adjacent references to other texts), Byatt ensures that both nature and the myths themselves become, in turn, associated with the intellectual, unsentimental and vital individualism of both women in the framing narrative. Not only do nature, women and mythology become analogous spheres linked by the act of reading, but we as readers are initiated into the girl's own, private act of self-empowerment through observing, reading and learning: an

[392]Byatt, Ragnarok, p. 35.

act that is arguably far more powerful than the author's making statements about unfairness, or the girl's rebelling by enacting a male stereotypes, and reinforcing gender binaries.

A Mythology of the Feminine, Trolldom and Queer

Within the mythology itself, Byatt's overall priority is the plotlines and characters from the Eddas which deal specifically with the cyclic nature of the Old Norse creation myth, and the impending doom of the gods, which (as mentioned) is central to the Thin Child's development in the story. Furthermore, in this examination of readership and retelling, there is no such thing as an unmoving or unmoved entity. Just as Old Norse mythology becomes the territory in which clever, rational, misfit women can come to know their own minds in the framing narrative, the retelling of the mythology itself is also shown to be affected by the particular female conduits through which it runs. In the mythological retellings, which (it is implied) we are seeing from the child's perspective in her world of women, most of the major players in the mythology she processes are accordingly shown to be female.

Although the female figures in the Eddas are far from exempt from misogynist colouring, the supernatural origins of such figures means they often demonstrate assertive, powerful and sexually expressive behaviour, and are less obviously categorised as good or evil. Byatt takes her tone from such complexity and exaggerates it: her female figures of import are shown to manipulate creation even more than the male gods, and, unlike their literary ancestors from Eddic sources, most of their behaviour is shown to be driven by preoccupations other than beauty, marriage or treasure. On a literary level, the centrality, power and disruptiveness of female figures is, again, especially reflective of the gender balance shown in *Vǫluspá*, in which mythological females are generally shown to be the most effective practitioners of magic, and are presented as disruptive or transformative forces which the hegemony of the gods must attempt to control, often violently.[393] In addition, one may also read such female figures as a more evolved commentary on the misogynist sources and receptions of Old Norse mythology which she began to interrogate in *Possession*. Christabel was a signifier of an imposing and attractive, yet genteel alternative to traditional Victorian wifehood, and specifically of a future generation of independent, academic women like Maud. In *Ragnarok*, the mythological figures are far more obvious, developed signifiers of a far wider alternative - one

[393]See T. Gunnell, 'The Belief Contexts and Performance of *Vǫluspá*: Considerations Regarding the Nordic Judgement Day' (from a lecture at Durham: 13th Dec, 2010), and '*Vǫluspá* in Performance', in *The Nordic Apocalypse: Approaches to Vǫluspá and Nordic Days of Judgement* (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 63-78.

which is simultaneously frightening and intriguing precisely because of its otherness and, often, its lack of traditional femininity.

Byatt, being an academic writer, generally does not elevate the female figures of mythology to any exaggerated status beyond the hierarchies they inhabit textually (e.g. Frigg does not rule Asgard), but the amount of coverage she gives certain female figures, and the ways in which she interprets gender in at least one case, speaks volumes in itself about the gender paradigms she is challenging. In this visualisation of the Old Norse world, for instance, the character of Frigg is more active and gets more coverage overall than Thor or Odin - the only figure with more exposure and development is Loki. One inference which may be read into this is that we are witnessing such figures through the lens of the Thin Child, who lives in a wartime evacuee's world of older women, familial concerns and wildlife. As a reader, she is shown mapping her own existential experience onto the narrative, focusing on female figures as the familiar entities; tellingly, she does this despite the patriarchal world of war on the outskirts of her consciousness, and also despite the obvious and very strong male presences in the texts she reads. This, in itself, seems to make a point about how far mythological shaping is dependent on experience. One may also read it as an early form of resistance against that sense of remote, patriarchal dominance, which she will eventually see (and perhaps already instinctively knows) as something which will interrupt the freedom she is currently experiencing. From a receptions perspective, it also implicitly suggests that Norse mythological retelling is infinitely more compelling when the creative power of the female and queer aspects of the pantheon are highlighted, as in the Eddic source texts, rather than brushed over. Furthermore, rather than centering her narrative around the Æsir as individuals (with the exception of Frigg), Byatt also turns her attention to the more overtly enigmatic, dark, queer and monstrous aspects of the pantheon, which are far less easily sanitised than the Æsir, and which are either separate from or antagonistic towards that hegemony. Her focus on such figures presents an interesting dynamic: not only has the child chosen to focus on Old Norse mythology - in itself a long-established cultural alternative suggestive of power and violence - but she has also gained inspiration from, and chosen to mentally relive an aspect of the pantheon that has been framed as problematic by both Old Norse writers and earlier modern retellings; the alternative within the alternative.

The draw of some female characters in *Ragnarok* lies simply in their authority, others in their strength, and some in their powerful emotions. Certain females also became synonymous with chaotic forces, which reveal patriarchal control for what it is - a state of affairs which has no basis in morals, is entirely to do with power struggles and which does not reflect the complexity of creation as it is. The majority, however, are obvious antidotes to portrayals of passive, 'sideline' or token women, and remind us by their very presence that creation is not a masculine construct. The first otherworldly figures whom Byatt mentions within the girl's mind world of the Old Norse cosmos are the Norns at the well, and their centrality to the destiny of that cosmos is thus established

strongly from the beginning. As the shapers of fate, they are far more instrumental than any of the Æsir, who can only wait, watch and take micro-actions; while they do not do or say anything, their very silence and enigmatic quality (for example, Byatt does not describe them as being old in appearance) highlights their unquestionable power. Although she does not ignore Snorri's male parthenogenesis origins story of Ymir in *Gylfaginning*, which establishes the misogynist tone of the medieval pantheon, she relates this tale only after establishing the tree and the Nornir, at the centre of creation, and thus recentring the power focus.

One important aspect of this female empowerment narrative is that emotions are neither avoided, nor put at centre stage; along with attainment of knowledge and objects, they simply become a part of existence for the mythical figures, as much as for the Thin Child and her mother. The story of Frigg's mission to protect Baldur, for example, is driven by her fear for his safety, and her resulting, obsessive determination to neutralise every potential threat. Here, motherhood is shown in the light of single-mindedness and struggle - a form of amoral, deluded passion, almost - rather than a blessed state in its own right. Her arc as a character, from fear, authoritative action and hubris, to grief, desperation and ultimate acceptance, is afforded a larger section of the child's narrative than accounts of Odin's overweening curiosity, and her retelling in the child's mind is far consciously shaped by her own efforts to visualise it. Byatt uses this opportunity to display the extent to which other retellings and illustrations can influence how a myth develops in one's consciousness (much as Rackham's drawings influenced Sylvia Plath), but also how common mixed mythological details are in retelling, and how (to certain receivers) they can become impediments or questions in the workings of their own worldbuilding:

The goddess Frigg set out to make every thing on the earth, in the air, in the ocean, swear not to harm Baldur...The Thin Child tried to imagine this oath-swearing. Frigg was pictured in the ur-book, tall, stately, imperious, crowned, with very long pale hair... She wore a tight chain-mail shirt, a seemly skirt and incongruous Grecian thonged sandals. Did she set out in her chariot, or was she on foot? The Thin Child had a literal, visual imagination, that was how she was. She saw the goddess in the chariot, rushing through the sky, calling out to the clouds, which were Ymir's brains...But the Thin Child also saw the goddess walking...The goddess rushed down to the roots of the mountains, the dark underground caverns where dragons and great worms gnawed the roots of the World-Ash...She spoke to the boiling pits of red lava and the flowing steaming pumice. To sapphires, diamonds, opals, emeralds, rubies. The Thin Child, in an ecstasy of imagination, hear all these inanimate things whisper and grate and rustle, and promise. Everything was part of *one* world, and it would not hurt Baldur the Beautiful.[394]

Very importantly, this story is shown to help the Thin Child process a difficult truth in her own life. The narrative about Frigg comes immediately after the description of the child's own terrible realisation that her parents are ultimately 'helpless' and frightened, and cannot fully protect her

[394] Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp.83-85

from the threat of invasion. The goddess's desperate attempts provide not only a fascinating theatre of the mind, but an opportunity for her to play out her own sense of approaching doom in the face of all odds, and come to terms with it, in the much same way as she stores the blackness of post-*Ragnarök* in her head. In Frigg's quest to identify and seek out everything in creation, and thus fight the onset of *Ragnarök*, she also reflects some of the single-minded, selfish qualities of the Thin Child's own mother, and her obsession with retaining control over her own interests in the face of other unstoppable forces.

The only truly passive females in the pantheon are Baldur's wife Nanna, who dies of grief at the sight of his body - an intrinsic and necessary part of the funeral narrative - and Loki's wife Sigyn, neither of whom are given more than a few sentences in the text. Even in such cases, however, Byatt treats Sigyn and Nanna precisely; while she does not attempt to flesh them out beyond the bare minimum, she also uses them to showcase a quiet (one might even say 'English') sense of endurance. Although Sigyn is a model of submissive wifehood, she is not shown to react in any dramatic way to her sons' gruesome fates or her husband's binding, but instead quietly and patiently continues to protect his eyes from the serpent's venom. Nanna, similarly, does not scream or sob hysterically at Baldur's death, but simply gives one sigh before falling dead herself. Some might also find it unusual in such a narrative that Freya, the powerful and sensual goddess of witches (now put on a pedestal more than ever in popular culture, and on 'Witch Tok'), receives practically no attention - certainly even less than the wives, when one might expect her to be a star in a female-empowered mythology. Two major considerations, however, make this a far more logical choice than it appears. One is that Freya's appeal in the stories about her is primarily of a sexual nature: although narratives show her to be independent and somewhat bombastic in personality - and her wider cultural following in the magical and ritualistic sense is greatly interesting - Norse mythology (and resulting story collections) tends to cast her as a desired, objectified figure associated with marriage, power by exchange and sexual passion.[395] Giants and other rivals of the gods frequently wish to possess, making her more a product of patriarchal standards than feminist role model in any modern sense.

For the purposes of a novel in which a misfit child protagonist is the shaper, the figure of Freya cannot offer a great deal. She is essentially a female version of Thor or Baldur, in that she is populist and beautiful without complication. Secondly, Freya is not obviously involved in any events which actively contribute to the mythic sequence of cause-and-effect which leads to Ragnarok: aside from her place in the cosmos as a receiver of slain warriors, plotlines involving her are hermeneutic, and, like Thor's adventures among the giants, are of more folkloric bent. By contrast, Sigyn, Nanna and Frigg all feature by name in the Baldur plot, and, by extension, the story of Loki's disruptive

[395] See B. Bandlien, 'Divine Love and Heroic Consent', *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, vol. 6 (Turnhout, 2005), pp. 19–41.

behaviour leading to his binding, and therefore can be seen to fit into the sequence of the world ending, and the death drive. These are also models of womanhood which, arguably, are more in keeping with the world of wartime Britain; an important reminder of the ways in which immediate contextual familiarity and personal circumstance, not simply escapism and alternativism, play into worldbuilding.

The beings for whom Byatt expresses the most enthusiasm by far, and whom she depicts as most fascinating are, tellingly, the 'other' side of creation, such as giants, trolls and other liminal or monstrous figures from whom the Æsir are under threat, or distanced. Most of them are female, and all in some way feature in the aforementioned mythic sequence of Ragnarök, whether actively or in association with the theme of fate and doom. Byatt's invention of detail is at its most creative when it comes to these beings, and, while some aspects of them are sexualised, the overall impression is not so much of fetishisation but empowerment. Moreover, as with the Æsir, all these figures are morally ambiguous within creation, with no agenda other than their own free existence. Such an approach deviates a great deal from Romantic and turn-of-the-century saga enthusiasms, which would have populated a wartime child's imagination (indeed, Byatt herself would have been familiar with this canon), and in which a metanarrative persisted of 'good' women as fair and pretty, and 'bad' (or complex) women as crones or darker beauties.[396] Byatt's departure from the genre of children's retelling means that the more darkly intoxicating sense of power and violence associated with some figures is not only afforded space, but can be relished in a way that is millenial, making the Thin Child ahead of her time in her persuasions. Through her, one senses the author's own attraction to their otherness: for instance, Loki's giantess consort, Angrboða, is very explicitly described as the exciting sexual alternative to his life in Asgard with Sigyn:

> The iron wood was outside the walls of Asgard, outside the meadow of Midgard, a dark place, a devilish place, inhabited by things that were part-beast and part-human, or even part-god or part-demon. The old one in the poem is Angurboda, Angrboða, bringer of anguish, a giant with a fierce face, a pelt of wolf-hair, clawed hands and feet, and sharp teeth. Loki played with her, rippling like a flame over and in her body, pleasuring her against her will, clutching and clasping and escaping, invading and ungraspable. They spoke to each other in snarls and hissings. Sigyn would not have known this ferocious Loki or recognised his triumphant howl as his seed went in.[397]

Although the suggestion of assault ('against her will') may not seem an appropriate fit with some of Byatt's other feminist displays of power in this novel, I would argue that such a power balance is also in keeping with her keenness to portray the Old Norse pantheon through a starker and darker lens, ensuring we do not read the gods as morally superior. In the Poetic and Prose Eddas, giantess consorts are often sought after as consorts and wives by male Æsir, and are shown to be subject to

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[396]See, for instance, Rider Haggard's *Eric Brighteyes* (1891), and Walter Scott's *The Pirate* (1821).
[397]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 45-6.

the male gods' pleasure, no matter how strong or intellectually adept they might be.[398] Furthermore, such male gods are morally ambiguous at best - they simply have the advantages of birthright and race. Just as Ymir's dismemberment becomes an explicit foreshadowing, this assault scene at Loki's hands may also be read as a foreshadowing of how its resulting offspring what will ultimately help to shape the violence of the final battle - violence, Byatt seems to suggest, inherently begets violence. The most impactful element here, however, is that of combined repellant and sexually fascinating qualities of the paranormal female, and her association with the 'iron wood' which is, as with all dark story forests of its kind, representative of a liminal power that is the opposite of civilised control.

This animalistic tussling is, in itself, a net alternative to traditional, mannerly or soft courtship, as promoted by the earlier fantasy medievalism of Morris; it becomes a mirror held up to more deviant desires on the part of readerships, challenging our ability to own them. Fantasies of violent sex, as Byatt was aware, have long been a great part of the fantasy long associated with so-called 'vikings,' Here, the submissive feminine of that equation is itself somewhat inverted, and becomes the more violent partner (albeit one ultimately overcome) in the pairing of monster and queer god. This scene is also, in some ways, very close to Old Norse literature (especially *fornaldarsögur*), in which there is a recurring formula of a conflict between a male hero and a female troll (whether for knowledge or sexual favours).[399] In such narratives, the hero must often seduce and/or conquer her as one of his obstacles before he attains his end goal, and the desire for such women is taboo - acceptable only as an impediment to sanctioned ones, and representative of the thin line between sexual fascination and repugnance. Reading the scene in the light of this particular trope, it is uncertain where the 'real' resistance begins and ends, or whether the giantess is herself resisting as part of a courtship ritual. In Byatt's narrative, however, this trope is also inverted: she suggests that Loki - the very personification of chaos, who chafes most against the boundaries of his fellow gods - seeks Angrboða not simply out of curiosity, but as the preferred alternative to his dutiful Asgardian wife, Sigyn. However, she is not a troll but a giantess: the physical portrayal of giantesses is by no means consistently ugly in Old Norse texts, as is indicated by male gods often desiring them.

This portrait of Angrboða in fact signifies a far more consistent, long-running (and ongoing) cultural fascination with hair on a woman's body, and what that entails sexually. Interestingly, Angrboða herself features very little (and mostly only by implication) in Eddic texts, and never as a sexual aggressor; she is mostly a name - a figurehead representative of outer opposition to the hegemony of the Æsir - or referenced as the mother of wolves and ogres. This means she is never

[398]Bandlien, 'Divine Love and Heroic Consent', pp. 19-41.
[399]See M. Roby, 'The Licit Love Visit: Masculine Sexual Maturation and the "Temporary Troll Lover" Trope' in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, vol. 4 (Martlesham, 2020), pp. 37–58.

physically described.[400] Byatt introduces her specifically by quoting strophe 39 in *Vǫluspá*, which refers to an old woman giving birth to wolves in Ironwood; the pelt and claws, along with the 'fierce face,' are the author's own invention, drawing upon that poetic context, and thus elevating her from crone to full-blown beast.[401] This interpretation of Angrboða is very much in keeping with twentieth century and millennial literary fantasy, in which sexual activity involving beasts and female monsters is all too common; Byatt, being of the wartime generation, would have grown up with the idea of hair as a *fin de siècle* signifier of raw sexuality.[402] Angela Carter (who was of the same generation as Byatt, and who also received inspiration from her evacuation to the country,) also wrote sexual fantasy stories about wolves, beasts and humans (albeit in fairytale contexts,) and the trope of the hirsute woman and the female lycanthrope continues with a great deal of modern fantasy and film.[403] Through her own enhanced portrait of Angrboða's hairiness, and the highly evocative and erotic language she uses in describing their coupling, Byatt is consciously drawing upon this cultural mindset of female empowerment through raw, bestial sex, and, moreover, is seemingly seeking to arouse readers in spite of themselves to make a point about the disjunct between what is conventionally and instinctually attractive. The suggestion that this scene is, in some way, present in or adjacent to the Thin Child's storyworld, hints at her own imminent awakening, and is symbolic of the greater sexual freedom and fantasies her generation will develop.

Similarly, the giantess Hyrokkin, who is called on by the Æsir to move Baldur's funeral boat when no-one else can, leaves a grotesque, but also very powerful impression. Her very strength and heaviness, considering the previous portrayal of Angrboða, may be read as erotic in their lack of self-consciousness:

> She came, not on the wings of the storm, but riding a monstrous wolf. Her reins were living vipers...Amid the howling and hissing, the big woman trod heavily and easily. She wore a wolfskin, like Tyr the hunter, the dead head lolling over her fat face. She smiled without mirth, and put one hand on the poop of the black ship and shoved, and it began to career towards the sea, so fast that flames burst from the rollers. She laughed, and her laughter enraged Thor, who had not been able with all his strength to move the ship. He raised his hammer to smash her head, and she put up a

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[400]Angrboða is mentioned by name in Gylfaginning in Snorri's Edda, and in *Hyndluljóð*; she is also mentioned by implication in *Vǫluspá* strophe 39 ('old woman'), and in the penultimate strophe of *Baldrs draumar* ('mother of three ogres'). See Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda,* p. 26, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 17 and p. 157, and *The Poetic Edda: Dual Language Edition*, p. 819.

[401]See *The Poetic Edda*, p. 17.

[402]See F. Gaillard and C. Windish, 'Naked, but Hairy: Women and Misogyny in Fin de Siècle Representations', *South Central Review* (2012), pp. 163–76.

[403]A. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London, 2023), B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine : Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (Abingdon, 1993), and H. Priest (ed.) *She-Wolf : A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (Manchester, 2016).

> heavy fist to defend herself, and the gathered gods begged for peace, for quiet for the burning…Hyrokkin rode away, despite Thor's desire to put an end to her.[404]

Thor's furious reaction to Hyrokkin is not only indicative of the disruptive effect she has on the formal gathering just by being herself, but is also (much like the female trolls of legendary sagas) perhaps suggestive of a reaction against some subconscious fascination with a taboo female. She is also, more obviously than Angrboða, a figure used by Byatt to make a derisive point about the empty show of hegemonic aggression, and a more serious one about the genderlessness (and attractiveness) of power and self-assurance. As a power display, Hyrokkin's mirthless smile and laughter also works in conjunction with the 'unsmiling' countenance of the severe goddess Hel, (who, incidentally, also has the teeth of a wolf), as both are in direct contradiction of the (sadly still ongoing) prejudice that women should smile.[405] Hel's power also lies in her calmness - her lack of outward expression or display - and her freedom from definition as conventionally attractive or ugly. Her colouring, compared to both the night sky and bruises, which renders her somewhere indefinite between 'beautiful' and 'hideous.' All these giantesses become symbols of an alternative brand of female empowerment: each has a wolfish association, and each is a response to conventional standards of femininity and decorous behaviour. In both the Thin Child's Christian world, and the Old Norse storyworld in her head, these powerful, frightening and strange female beings become representatives of the 'alive' mindset, precisely because they do not fit either pantheon's standard of 'goodness,' but inspire genuine responses.

The most untamed creature of all, however, is a more original and controversial construction on the author's part. In one of the book's more creative sections, the Byatt also narrates the growing of Jörmungandr, which is an unusual departure, in that it is the only section about a mythological figure that does not take its main content directly from a source text, and also one of the few which is not shown to be imagined directly by the child (although we can assume it is her mind creating it, as she does the rest of this version of the cosmos.) For her material, Byatt compiles the three lines about the serpent in *Gylfaginning* 34, the story of Thor's fishing trip and Ragnarok, and fills in the lacunae between these to make a long, poetic prose narrative. The narrative relates the world serpent's origins up until it encounters Thor's hook, and lays the foundations for its killing of the thunder god at *Ragnarök*. Importantly, this version of Jörmungandr is not a vague entity as it is in the mythology, but female, curious and greedy - a being for whom the acquisition of knowledge and prey are situated within the same pleasure domain. In a clear metaphor for commercial fishing

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[404]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 99-102.

[405]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 46. On the ongoing micro-aggression of telling women to smile, see, for instance, M. Schwantes, 'A New Study Reveals That Telling Women to Smile More is Bad for their Health', https://www.inc.com/marcel-schwantes/a-new-study-reveals-that-telling-women-they-need-to-smile-more-is-bad-for-business-heres-why.html (accessed 9th April 2025).

and human pollution, the more pleasure this 'sensuous beast' has in eating, the more she kills, the bigger she grows and the greater the damage she causes to her environment:

> She was always hungry, and always killed more than she needed, out of curiosity, out of love, out of insatiable busyness. She grew therefore...She surged round the world, from icy pole to icy pole, or through the hot oceans under the burning sun. She swam under ice shelves, in aquamarine tunnels and spyholes, fastening her fangs on the wings of a diving albatross, spitting out the matted fur of a plump seal pup...She lay in the mud, staring up, and watched the shapes of humans, pouring poison over the surface so that the fish gasped, stiffened and floated upwards. She made lazy movements and swallowed, fat fish and poison together...She spat her venom into the eyes of porpoises and monk seals, blinding them, swallowing them, spitting out undigested stuff which sank slowly and swayed in the currents...She was as long as an estuary, as a road across moorland. She needed more food. She sucked in krill, like the great whales, she swallowed schools of fleeting herrings...She crawled across beds of coral, rosy, green and gold, crushing the creatures, leaving in her wake a surface blanched, chalky, ghostly.[406]

This earlier chapter of the snake's life is one of the most emotionally complex in the book, in terms of how it engages with female power and the responses it evokes. On the one hand, it may be read in a very positive light. A narrative about a female creature causing damage and satisfying her own whims - not because she is nasty or has vengeful purpose (although this changes later), but simply by dint of amorality, curiosity, instinct - is in many ways an exhilarating, highly cathartic read. The sheer power, appetite and liberation which the exiled snake embodies is not only highly sensual, but highly refreshing, especially as she is not being portrayed as inherently 'bad.' When one considers older archetypal female monster figures in canonical mythic and fantasy literature (Grendel's mother, Tolkien's Shelob and Lewis's White Witch being key examples), there is a tendency towards brooding or malevolence in their killing, which comes from grievance at the hegemonic forces who thwart or reject them. In contrast, while Jörmungandr begins as an outcast, and is 'angry' at being flung from her home realm, it is never indicated that her choice to move into the sea, or her hunting habits are anything but spontaneous. Her violent hunting games with her father Loki, and his encouragement of her desires for their own sake ('I see you thrive, daughter, you prosper...'), are similarly spontaneous, and there is no indication, in his enabling of her violent play, that she is being raised as a pawn. These two liminal beings are simply natural allies in their joint thirst for knowledge and pleasure, and the mythic narrative plays out as something inevitable, not planned.

By the same token, one cannot read this narrative as fully positive either. Born in the forest, Jörmungandr is not naturally an ocean creature, and is instead an adaptor *par excellence*, growing to fit the territory until she commands it entirely. In this sense the snake herself becomes a kind of

[406]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 60-72.

viking figure - an opportunist skilled in acclimatising to foreign environments, a bringer of terror, and a cause of cataclysmic change on a global scale. As a colonialist creature, the serpent's given gender within the novel may be an ironic nod to more traditional biblical and phallic associations made with serpents, to the established misogyny of Old Norse creation, and also to the masculinity of meanings around the Old Norse root word *gandr*, which can mean staff or penis.[407] By establishing this particular feminine entity as foreign, colonialist and acquisitive presence, Byatt denies the cliché that womanhood and nature automatically sit together in some conceptual sisterhood. The serpent is, in many ways, a mirror to the complexity of the Thin Child's 'explorer' persona: by turns thoughtful, sensitive, clever, docile, curious, careless, furtive, guilty, greedy and destructive, and therefore never straightforward. The parallel between their characters could also be read synchronically with the child's 'tremulous' visualising of the snakes in retelling of Frigg's journey; the world's serpent may be a signifier of the child's natural fascination with something she fears, and, as with Frigg, her urge to visualise in order to process. This fear is also, perhaps, indicative not only of her fear of snakes, but of some underlying awareness of her own capacity for slyness, destruction and greed; an awareness which sits at odds with the role she is expected to play, and which has already been suggested by her guilt over her own inability to fully invest in Christian narratives. The juxtaposition of her anxiety and the snake's lack of self-awareness in following her desires seem a further extension on this theme.

Furthermore, this rather vicious, yet compelling portrait of a mythological life form - one who, much like Byatt's version of the gods, clearly exists in proximity to humans, but is never shown to interact with them - may be read as a deconstruction of the ways in which Norse Mythology has, itself, been (and continues to be) culturally idealised. As Jón Karl Helgason observes, the undertone of alluring and gratuitous violence associated with Vikings and Old Norse mythology has too often been deliberately aligned with vitality, overriding passion or what is 'real' or 'natural' in order to justify its being enacted or enjoyed in popular culture.[408] Here, a creature of Norse mythology (and, moreover, a female) is shown actively harming nature, with no particular gain to anyone. By the same token, this creature is not villainised either, as, in keeping with the reading of Ragnarok as inevitable and ever-present, such destructiveness is all a part of the fate by which the world's serpent was bound at birth. Just as Byatt describes the Æsir as 'brave but tarnished,' not a 'forlorn, gallant hope', this extension of Jörmungandr's role from vast, vague monster to wilfully destructive and morally ambiguous creature - a casualty of the already- flawed system of the Æsir - is symbolic of a chaotic, isolating world, rather than one fully removed or superior.

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[407]For more information on staffs, see Price, *The Viking Way* , pp. 132-5.

[408]See Helgason, 'Odin: From Wagner to Viking Metal' and 'Leif: When Civilization was less Civilized', in *Echoes of Valhalla*, pp.133-183.

The only way in which she, as a female being, is afforded any form of moral high ground or motive is in the way she is shown to be mistreated by the Æsir. It is Odin who throws her down into the sea, and Thor - the ultimate 'He-Man' - who first introduces her to pain, causing her natural hunger and prey drive to become tainted by bitterness, and triggering her later 'villain arc.' However, Byatt does not imbue her with the kind of tragic or complex quality we might associate with an injured female villain, as this story is not simply about her but the system in which she is a mechanism. Already destructive, she only becomes more intentionally so after her experience on Thor's hook, and knows a more intense anger. As with the sea's prison representing the boundaries imposed upon a powerful woman, her pain also becomes a thinly veiled metaphor for assault at the hands of a resentful or competitive male:

> Attached to the line...was a face as fierce as her own...Nothing had hurt the snake like this. She threshed the sea surface and snorted...The god, bursting with fury, took his short-handled hammer and hurled it at her head. It struck a blow. Her thick dark blood swirled in the seawater. Then the hammer fell on and down into the dark...The snake rubbed against the rocks, trying to tear out the hook and the trailing line...[She] was angrier after this meeting. She killed more wantonly, she stove in boat planks, she uprooted sea forests for the pleasure of her rage.[409]

The snake's trauma, which leads her to 'massacre' the created underwater ecosystem of the sea tree, Randrassil, is the turning point in her rise to *Ragnarök*. By contrast, the one sustained (yet short) plot arc about Thor is his rivalry with her, and it is not he, but she who is the central focus; Thor's antagonism merely provides a partial impetus for her growing rage and development into a full-blown nightmare. While the serpent's transformation from curiosity to blind destruction is rather Shakespearean (and almost human), we witness no such development in Thor. Aside from calling the lightning to ignite Baldur's pyre, the only major actions in which he indulges are violent ones, spurred on by jealousy or the desire for retaliation. He represents, *par excellence*, the violent underbelly of patriarchal and right wing appropriations of Norse mythology.

True to Byatt's intricacy of feminist construction, however, it does not suffice to consign Jörmungandr's behaviour to one cause-and-effect, even though it marks the beginning of a souring period. Her main discomfort towards the end of her narrative is her own size. A creature born and thriving against the will of the powers that be, living freely at first by her own instincts and appetites in an environment which seems made for her, she finally grows so vast that the ocean becomes more prison than haven. Once she accidentally bites her own tail, she realises that she can no longer move unencumbered, and winds up (quite literally) surrounding the earth, unable to go any further. Her own power in this restrictive environment has unexpectedly become her trap, and it does not take a great deal of imagination to read her as a metaphor for female experience and rage:

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[409]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 73-5.

released into a world which initially seems to feed and encourage, but which is ultimately not designed to fully satisfy one's natural appetites and potential, and where there are invisible barriers preventing too much accumulation of power. Thus, in an extremely clever twist, Byatt has incorporated a metaphorical representation of the mythical containment of female power into one of environmental catastrophe: both sides represent a highly damaging state of affairs caused by unnatural retention of a corrupt system. Much like the event of *Ragnarök* itself, it is indicated, both female containment and environmental catastrophe are inherent in the framework created by those in power, with no option but to play out a slow downfall within those unnatural limits. Furthermore, true to Byatt's realism, the female signifier is not a superior being or identifiable as part of an idealised environment, but one whose requirements are not being met.

In the cosmic sense, then, Jörmungandr is something of a singularity in this mythological retelling, as she is the only being whose gender has specifically been changed. She is not, as the Norns are (in the context of Byatt's novel) symbolic of the 'grand femininity' of creation, which is suggested to exist before and in spite of the gods, and which represents an alternative, more natural world order centred around Yggdrasil. Nor is she a female figure like Frigg, centred within the patriarchy of the Æsir, whose role is enlarged to make a point about the obscuring of women's narratives within the confines of that endangered status quo. Instead, the importance of the serpent's role is from a disruptive standpoint; she represents a strange form of justice, not from the viewpoint that she is a wholly good or evil example of conduct, but because she is a strong party injured by a more corrupt, and mostly stronger one. Her dominant role at Ragnarok, while perhaps satisfying to female readers, remains part of a far wider anti-establishment movement. This movement is not, in itself, strictly female, but is nonetheless gendered in that it is formed of the anti-patriarchy outside Asgard - the monstrous feminine, the queer, the chaotic and the deviant all become agents of the death drive, the urge away from control and order, the portion of creation that Byatt has established as *Id* to the Æsirs' *Ego*. Through their role Ragnarok, both Fenris Ulf and Jörmungandr, whose erotically-charged and monstrous conception has already been dwelt upon in lurid detail, are established not only as the instruments of fate, but also as the products of the erotic and taboo.

Meanwhile their father Loki, the queer, rebellious instrument of chaos and curiosity without ulterior motive, and the head of this movement, becomes the figurehead the Thin Child comes closest to 'making an exception for' and caring about as a character.[410] He is not so much an alternative father figure to fill the obvious gap of male authority in her life (which would be an obvious narrative technique,) but rather an anti-patriarch, who, based on his queer and disruptive role in mythology, is exaggerated and extended upon by Byatt to illuminate an absence of everything patriarchy stands for, including enforced structures and the assignation of value to

[410]Byatt, *Ragnarok,* p. 45.

'productive' or 'worthy' things. In her portrait, he is also a scholar, opposed to conquest and invested in studying small things as they are in order to understand them better:

> The demigod squatted down beside (Jörmungandr) and made a line of wet pebbles and translucent rainbow shells. He said he had a project to map the shoreline. Not in great regular half-moons as gods and men might draw this bay, to make a haven for dragon ships. But small, stone by stone, rivulet by rivulet...A map for sand-fleas and sand-eels, for everything hangs together, and the world may be destroyed by too much attention, or too little care, towards a sand-eel, for example. 'Therefore,' said Loki the mocker, to the snake his daughter, 'we need to know everything, or at least as much as we can. The gods have secret runes to help in the hunt, or give victory in battle. They hammer, they slash. They do not study. I study. I know.'[411]

Loki's alignment of 'gods and men' is very interesting, in that mythology normally separates gods from humans; this binary is one of agenda, and is also gender and sexuality-related, as it separates according to those who construct solely according to profit or control (implicitly the mainstream and masculine), and those who observe the fullness of creation for what it is (the alternative, feminine and queer.)

During his existence among the Asgardians, Loki seeks out shapelessness, unpredictability and momentary fulfilment, and changes loyalty from perpetrator to problem solver. As the one who first predicts disaster, but ultimately seeks to understand and observe rather than shape or use, he is the ultimate signifier of the death drive - the impending doom of all things, regardless of attempts to build and safeguard - upon which this creation is built, and which the other mainstream inhabitants and creators do not at first accept. Their attempts to avoid it, of course, will also furnish a part of this inevitable downfall, in that their determination to protect themselves only prods Loki's instinct to find the proverbial chink in their armour, via the mistletoe spear. He betrays Baldur, as Byatt explains it, because he was 'bent on mischief. For its own sake, and because he alone knew how to stop the singing' [pp. 94-95]. With the scene already having been set for Baldur's imminent death through prophetic dreams, Byatt's portrayal of Frigg's domineering quest and the subsequent dissolving of her plans is communicated almost as a form of hubris, in which Loki's chaos-seeking comes across as inevitable, almost necessary, because (as the Thin Child knows all too well) 'the shape of the story means that (Baldur) must be harmed' [p.89]. While the myth follows the same patterns laid out across several Eddic texts, Byatt's pointed conglomeration of these plots adds a further sense of coherence and of cause-and-effect, framing the gods as naive in their struggle to overcome destiny, and Loki as the necessary anti-establishment tool.

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[411]Byatt, *Ragnarok,* pp. 62-3. This and another scene in which Loki looks for patterns in running water are, incidentally, subtle references (which only certain readers would get) to James Gleick's work on chaos; this thoroughly aligns Loki with new academia and experimental thinking. See James Gleick, *Chaos : Making a New Science* (New York, 2011).

His sexual encounter with Angrboða is written as an act of defiance against his 'traditional' family in Asgard, but, rather than as an angry or planned act, as a spontaneous one of pleasure and wish-fulfilment. The children born of this encounter will, similarly, represent everything that goes against the establishment, and are in a sense anti-children, much like Edelman's model of the anti-future.[412] When Ragnarok comes, Loki - the necessary catalyst of destruction against futile control - leads the charge, not simply as vengeance, but rather as the signifier of an imperfect creation imploding, losing the fruitless battle with chaos and ending as violently as it began. Byatt makes sure to mention (correctly) that there are no altars to Loki, and indicates that the child enjoys reading about him precisely for what he destabilises, as it is the same type of ritualistic custom in which she cannot feel comfortable. As a queer, non-hegemonic, non-patriarchal figure, he represents everything the child will be drawn towards, in her mental distancing from a mainstream view of contentment and peace. His greedy, self-seeking callousness also reflects the natural world - itself cruel and spontaneous - that she has come to associate with her own freedom.

Although his desire to observe has a controlling factor, in that knowledge is both power and pre-warning against any disaster that may arise, Byatt separates it from the 'sinister and dangerous' Odin's more combative quest for knowledge, in which people drawn into his riddle games are killed in punishment for wrong answers.[413] While there is an element of truth in this portrait of Odin's acquisitiveness, this assignment of academic outlook to Loki is nevertheless a considerable manipulation on Byatt's part. By Old Norse standards, Odin is 'the' knowledge god, and knowledge for knowledge's sake is a highly Odinic concept, not Loki's domain. One of the foundational poetic constructions in the Eddic canon is a dialogic exchange between Odin and other beings in a bid to outdo one another's knowledge of lore; although knowledge *is* power in such situations, the power is nevertheless in the holding, and not in making the knowledge work for gain. By contrast, the only work which includes the voice of Loki is a flyting, *Lokasenna*, in which he engages in a battle of vicious taunts against his fellow gods - an event which is chronologically placed after the killing of Baldur and indicated to lead to his binding before Ragnarok.[414] Furthermore, while Odin is a patriarchal god of the establishment - representative of centralisation and aristocratic artistry - he has his complexities, and is even accused (by Loki) of shapeshifting into a woman for the purpose of magical activity, and thus engaging in queer behaviour.[415] Although never as prolific as Loki in enacting queerness, Odin hovers in that liminal space within a magical context.

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[412]See Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, pp. 1-31.
[413]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 38.
[414]See *Lokasenna*, *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 329-73. Larrington's translation, 'Loki's Quarrel,' is also worth reading, and can be found in her version of *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 80-92.
[415]For a more in-depth exploration of the comedic potential behind the queer slurs in this poem, see C. Batten, 'Args Aðal; Queer Carnival and Divine Deviance in Lokasenna and Þrymskviða', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* vol. 19, (2023), pp. 9–40.

Byatt, however, portrays Odin far more simplistically, and instead couples the propensity to chaos and to knowledge-seeking in the sole figure of Loki, enobling him while re-establishing his presence as an anti-hero. In the chapter which relates his capture and binding, there is a very deliberate framing of events as the establishment repressing the individual, the non-conformist: as she notes, the word for gods is also the word for bonds'.[416] The taunting, cheap jibes of *Lokasenna* are omitted entirely, and the scene for Loki's capture is preceded by another long passage in which Byatt again describes his all-encompassing hunger to study chaos for its own sake, and to 'learn from it' in order to 'delight' himself with provoking more.[417] Although she takes care to remind readers that he is neither 'kind nor gentle,' and thus avoids making him a martyr, the binary between patriarchal order and the rebellion of combined pleasure and scholarly neutrality is nevertheless made very clear. What is also clear is Loki's mirroring of the mindset of the Thin Child herself: he becomes a champion for her, as she discovers both the true savagery and beauty of the natural world and her own feelings of attraction to that savagery as a consistent truth.

Conclusion: The End of the World

Sadly, *Ragnarok* in all its cathartic grandeur cannot compare to the horror of the 'real' ending, for which the Old Norse tale acts as foil and its own forewarning. In a claustrophobic epilogue which inspires a shudder of horror, both mother and child are forced by the war's ending to move back to the city, where they suffer horribly, not least because the father of the family is determined to live out his own kind of medieval fantasy:

> Home was a large grey house with a precipitous garden in the steel city, which had its own atmosphere which could be perceived as a wall of opaque sulphurous cloud...There was something of Bunyan's allegory about the places to which they returned...There was a small flat lawn...an archetypal arch, covered with archetypal roses, red, white, sugar-pink...The roses had run wild in the war. They spread in thorny thickets like those in fairy tales. The Thin Child's father, singing as he worked, curbed and trained them, fastened them to the rustic poles...He ordered stones from the countryside...He began to set the plunging garden in order...[418]

This city rose garden of the father's, so reminiscent of William Morris's aesthetic ideals, is symbolic of both the more genteel, Victorian brand of medievalism, and of the patriarchal restrictions upon women which returned after the war. There is also something inherently and tragically Blakeian about the father's attempts to build a suburban bower amidst the soot, and the subsequent enclosure of the Thin Child, whose asthma means she struggles to breathe. In such surroundings,

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[416]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 119.
[417]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 113-14.
[418] Byatt, *Ragnarok*, pp. 148-50.

her identification with both the brutal world of Norse mythology and the savagery of nature, once a necessity and means of escape, is now alien and unsuitable. She is now forced to live and to enjoy a masculine mythical paradise that is incompatible with her own; already learning the pressures of womanhood, she is shown genuinely trying to self-discipline, and to enjoy it all in order to please her father, who of course expects her desires to align with his ('...The Thin Child loved her father, and loved the garden, and wheezed...She must learn to live in dailiness, she told herself, in a house, in a garden, at home, where there was butter again, and cream, and honey, good to taste. She must savour peace-time.')[419]

Before, she associated the mistletoe that killed Baldur with the asthma in her own lungs: this anticlimactic homecoming from the mythical environment of wolves, snakes, giants and trees in which she is 'alive' to the one in which she must endure existence, will become her real Ragnarök. She is our reminder that 'peace' does not necessarily mean the absence of conflict, and that war itself is often dictated by gendered ideals.[420] Ultimately, as with so many female war stories, war for the child and her mother meant an escape from the stuffiness of suburbia, the male gaze, and the ugliness of industrial cityscapes. [421] Peace now 'menaces her with boredom.'[422] On the other hand, reading, it is implied, is and always will be the key to her freedom and mental empowerment in the face of her father's destructive home-making. This uneasy resignation to suburbia, and the child's subsequent comfort in the image of mythic annihilation, is the dark mirror to the traditional fairy story or junior adventure book's 'happy ending' after peril: unlike fantasy child characters, she is imprisoned but left open-ended.[423] Similarly, the nourishing bond of readership between daughter and mother, which had Old Norse as its key ingredient, and is a substitute for the coddling of traditional motherhood, will (it is indicated) equip the child far better than anything else could for her survival in suburbia. The fact that the mother herself cannot cope at all is a reflection of the different levels of liberation which separate them, and a very accurate reflection of the intergenerational postwar tension which created resentment between so many mothers and

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[419]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 150.

[420]For a historical overview of the disparities between genders in postwar England, see A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars,* (Abingdon, 1992).

[421]NB. There is a whole subgenre within Children's literature from the mid twentieth century onwards, which revolves around the plot of evacuated or holidaying children experiencing self-discovery and freedom beyond the city. C.S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London, 1950), Alan Garner's Norse-inspired *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (London, 1960) and Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (London, 1973), Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mister Tom* (London, 1981) are all key examples.

[422]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 37.

[423]It says a great deal about both Byatt's realism and her desire to write empowered, complex women that she is generally uncomfortable with giving her female protagonists concrete endings. As Wann Harries observes, for example, the very abstract ending of "The Djinn" is symbolic of Gillian Perholt finding peace in acceptance of both permanence and change (Wann Harries, p. 85) and similarly *Possession* does not end with Roland and Maud marrying, but with the exciting possibility that they may build a life together.

daughters.[424]This type of medieval reception, and the domain of the father, are in power for now, but the seeds have been sown: the child's own dark, feminised and violent version of Old Norse has taken root, and is a sign of the new generation of liberated women among whom she will soon be counted.

Before all that can happen, however, one last bastion of the old world must still fall, however; the ash tree in the garden. The symbolism of female suppression at this point is so heavy that it is painful to read, and arguably has even more impact than the mythical burning of creation:

> The Thin Child's father said it must come down. It was a wild tree, out of place in an urban garden. The child loved the tree, and loved her father, who had been restored to her against all her grim expectations. She watched him take an axe to the tree, singing as he hacked...A gate closed in her head...But on the other side of the closed gate was the bright black world into which she had walked in the time of her evacuation.[425]

The ash has become the signifier of everything powerful and strange the child has become, or wants to envision, in her absence from her father. It is no wonder that, once it is felled, she finds herself setting up a minor barrier against her longing for the blackness, which has become the safe space inside her head; the word 'gate' indicates that the space remains accessible, should she need to enter. Like Edelman's death drive, it represents her longing to dispense with the symbols which, as female, take her prisoner, and is a kind of rebellion against the 'thingness' of peace.[426] Ragnarok in mythic form - even with all its inevitability, and set structure on a dying fall - represents a freedom from such endings, and from enforced happiness based on constructed ideals beyond the necessities of staying alive.

In *Ragnarok*, therefore, the story of the end of the world becomes a form of empowerment against both empty realism and traditional retelling strictures, in that it is shown to be an ancient form 'clothed with flesh and blood' by a specific person's needs, and which, due to its existence in deep consciousness making it a 'real' part of humanity, may be used an an alternative form of realistic structuring.[427] True to Byatt's beliefs, there has been no attempt to feminise Old Norse - her girl persona is not a victim, nor is she a star. Through her eyes, the material has simply been rendered of particular relevance to female readers in this iteration, and shown to be a force for general empowerment. It says it all that Byatt does not have the little girl identify with a female goddess like Freya, but with Loki the queer figurehead. It also speaks volumes that her eagerness for Old Norse

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[424]See L. Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters', *Feminist Lives: Women, Feelings, and the Self in Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 151-86.
[425]Byatt, *Ragnarok*, p. 153-4.
[426]I use the term 'thingness' in the sense developed by Bill Brown in relation to object culture. See B. Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, (Chicago, 2003).
[427]A.S. Byatt, 'Imagining Characters' p42 and Elizabeth Wanning Harries, 'Ancient Forms: Myth, Narrative and Fairy Tale in A.S. Byatt's fiction', p. 75.

mythology comes, not from a desire to become like any of the gods, but, like so many 20th century imbibers, out of desire for a sense of realism and appropriate 'grittiness' that the status quo will not offer (see introduction pp.2-4). In her eyes, the interconnectedness of myth, tales, texts and reality make a kind of logic out of 'the messy detail of the real.'[428] As a work, it is extremely symbolic of what is now happening in postmodernist, feminist and poststructuralist studies of mythology and literature, and of the new sense of power and ownership in women's writing on Old Norse.

The construction of the mythology-cum-biography is perhaps the most important of all in both mythological and literary terms: it deliberately displays one instance of the use of Old Norse as a floating signifier, reclaiming it from a tradition which previously assumed its relevance mainly to men, and making nonsense of the idea that there is any one 'true' myth or narrator, which is an enacted example of such material as process over product. In this construction, which itself concerns a narrative of deconstruction in process, Old Norse mythology is shown to belong to no one group, but to be available and relevant to anyone who wishes to harness its sense of power and alternativism. Such a framing is also in keeping with Byatt's long-held interest in the importance of narrative as a pre-ordained 'grammar' which both structures and allows active reframing on the part of the artist.[429]

There is one last, imminent historical irony at the fringes of this uneasy peacetime where we leave the Thin Child, and one which Byatt the historian (and autobiographer) cannot have failed to include in her mental construction, even if she does not mention it outright: the turbulent period of socio-political change which that child's generation was about to experience. London in the 60s was a time of confusing upheaval for women especially, and the future of suburbia for many suburban women, far from idyllic, took on a bleak and frightening aspect. The literature of the 60s-90s is ample proof of this reality, reflective of the high tension between the old, mythical state of motherhood, wifehood, conformity, and the other myth of female freedom.[430] In this environment, the fantastical became in its own way a rebellion against realism; much like Byatt's retrospective use of Old Norse, Angela Carter's fairy tale reversal of the illusion of forest to the illusion of fireside, represents the same, unsettling outlook: that, for an intellectual and honest woman with any sense of appetite, fitting in is not possible, and 'peace' often means resigning oneself to defeat.[431] As Rosemary Hill illustrates in 'Angry Young Men and Disgusting Girls' (a term which aligns extremely strongly with Byatt's use of giantesses):

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[428]Wanning Harries, 'Ancient Forms', p. 85.

[429]Byatt, 'Introduction' in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (New York, 2012).

[430]From the many, excellent sources discussing women's experiences in the nineteen sixties up to the nineties (too numerous to list here), one very pertinent example concerning the adult struggles of artistic women like Byatt is 'Talking to Women' by Nell Dunn (Silver Press, 2018) and the essay 'Angry Young Men and Disgusting Girls' by Rosemary Hill, which is included in A. Carter, *Unicorn*: *The Poetry of Angela Carter,* R. Hill (ed.) (London, 2015).

[431]'In Carter's looking-glass world all is reversed. The firelit circle is the illusion, the reality is darkness and the pathless forest.' Carter, *Unicorn*, p. 97.

The 1980s saw Carter's uneven critical fortunes revive...it was a decade when monstrous females stalked the land. Diana was the fairy-tale princess going wrong, rampaging over convention, sulking, crying, wreaking havoc and generating mythology on a scale nobody but Carter herself perhaps could have previously imagined. At the same time there was the anti-type, 'the visceral anti-Thatcherism' of those years, a violent loathing which Carter shared. It went far beyond politics and turned Britain's first female prime minister into a goggle-eyed spitting image of the wicked witch. Fictional females grew similarly large and strange. In 1983, year of the Tories' landslide victory, on the eve of the miners' strike, Fay Weldon published *Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, with its huge and ugly heroine.[432]

Such stories, it is indicated, will become the Thin Child's (and became Byatt's) mental defence and stabiliser in the tumultuous half-century to come, which expanded, diversified and enriched women' s experiences across the board, but also (especially for Byatt's generation) enforced self-contradictions within, and painfully tested their sense of identity even further. Sylvia Plath died slightly too early to see the end stages of this period of change, and was, to a great extent, a victim of the worst period of this cultural tension. Byatt, who saw all of it play out in full, lived to tell the tale, and to write her own Old Norse storyworld in retrospect as a further act of empowerment for women; both those of her generation who had undergone the fight for recognition, and those of future generations. In doing so, she helped to change the paradigm of Old Norse receptions forever, and to pave the way for other women authors to address their own concerns about the world around them.

[432]Hill, 'Angry Young Men and Disgusting Girls,' pp. 102-3.

Chapter 4: A Pre-Millennial *Vǫlva*: Empowerment, Reframing and Poetic Translation in Kathleen Jamie's 'Voluspa.'

Before the millennial rise in Old Norse feminist fantasy works by women, and in between the publication of A.S. Byatt's two books *Possession* and *Ragnarok*, another work was released which did not reach a large audience: Kathleen Jamie's translation of the Eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, which was anglicised to 'Voluspa' (with the stress falling on the second syllable.) Broadcast as a one-off programme on BBC Radio 4 in the first week of January 1999, the performance consisted of a short introduction by the poet herself, followed by her reading of the work, with the whole programme lasting approximately thirty minutes in total. Jamie's reading was superimposed onto a multilayered soundscape produced by Tim Dee, consisting of various acoustic and electronic instruments, voices and effects, which in itself provides a kind of metatext, and substitute performance space.[433] The work is a poetic translation: while the majority of the text is recognisable as a version of the *Codex Regius* text of *Vǫluspá*, some of the language has been flexibly interpreted by the poet (in part based on the very particular translations she has read and identified with) to convey the themes of female power and societal exclusion more strongly, and thus to make a powerful statement that expressed her own feelings, and also spoke to her time.[434]

Before Jamie's radio performance, *Vǫluspá* as a primary source had not received a great deal of attention from non-specialist audiences in Britain, except through the translation of W. H. Auden. Most of the previous translations and creative adaptations published had been by male authors writing more specifically for literary and academic audiences, the majority of whom were expected to have some experience of medieval literature.[435] It not being a canonical work of English literature like *Beowulf*, most of the British public who heard Jamie's broadcast would not yet have encountered *Vǫluspá*, and so, very appropriately, were introduced to it aurally - the way in which, as Terry Gunnell has argued in no uncertain terms, it was meant to be received by medieval audiences.[436] In this case, the poet's use of modern technology allowed for a far greater scope of

[433]For a full transcript of the poem, see Appendix. As I understand it, the whole of the poet's introduction and poem were pre-recorded, not a live performance.

[434]When commenting on the medieval text of *Vǫluspá* in this chapter, it should be assumed that I am referring to the Codex Regius version, which was the text of focus for all the translators mentioned in this chapter. An excellent side-by-side translation of this work complete with notes may be found in Ursula Dronke, *The Poetic Edda.* Vol. 2, *Mythological Poems*.

[435]The main creative exception to the masculine majority was the translation written in balladic metre by Jacqueline Simpson in *The Northmen Talk* (London, 1965). I do not, of course, count the few, key academic translations of the poem which took place before Jamie's work (two of which were by Ursula Dronke and Patricia Terry,) abridged versions of the poem with notes, or prose retellings. For more information on earlier British receptions of *Vǫluspá*, see O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, pp. 104-47.

[436]See Terry Gunnell's introduction to *Old Norse Poetry in Performance*, (Abingdon, 2022), pp. 1-16, and *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia*, pp. 182-187. See also Gunnell's thoughts, as paraphrased in J. M. Foley's *World of Oralities: Text, Tradition and Contemporary Oral Theory* (York, 2020), pp. 139-140: "The Performance Studies approach

effects, performative technique and outreach, and its presentation elevated it to a multidimensional artwork - the only mainstream representation of the poem that had ever been undertaken for a British audience specifically.[437] Despite her innovative approach, however, this work did not leave as lasting an impression as it could have done (except among a select audience), mainly for the reason that Jamie published no corresponding text of the poem, and the performance came before the real advent of digital media. Furthermore, unlike her closest performance counterpart in Old English, Benjamin Bagby (the greater part of whose work focuses on the performance of medieval poetry for the purpose of public engagement) Jamie herself has shown no interest in resurrecting it, or taking it further - it was a true one-off.[438]

Despite its more direct focus on actually representing a primary text, rather than retelling stories, or investigating the importance of secondary sources, Jamie's 'Voluspá' falls somewhere between the works of A. S. Byatt and Joanne Harris in approach. On the one hand, it shows a similar investment to Byatt's in the relationship between women's voices and Old Norse mythology: namely, its relevance as a descriptive tool for women's experiences, the different ways in which women might view the mythology to men, and how well the pantheon aligns with themes of nature and ecological uncertainty, both of which - as I mentioned in my last chapter - have been popularly aligned with feminism. Jamie, however, is writing from a less academic standpoint than Byatt, who generally observes and implies rather than stating her case; instead, she engages more generally with the narrative persona on an instinctive and emotional level, and based on that persona's relevance to her own, wider interests. Most importantly, her work shares the concerns of both writers in the sense that she is deliberately setting out to show the general, ongoing relevance of Old Norse mythology in the new millennium, and the relevance of certain female figures of power within the pantheon to women experiencing the limitations of a conservative society.

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reminds us that before they came to be recorded, these texts, like dramas, were originally conceived, performed, and received in the form of sound (rather than writing), and that for their audiences they were associated with a range of senses and memories, and existed as part of a process in time and space, like everything that we hear and touch in our own lives. The approach suggests that with a little application of knowledge gained from personal experience, these poems (like other archaeological objects) can be brought back to life, and indeed, that they should be analyzed by researchers in the context of the live performances with which they were originally associated (rather than merely as a form of written literature)." For other reading on the orality of the poem, see e.g. Dronke, 'The Grand Architecture of Vǫluspá,' *The Poetic Edda Vol.II*, p25-29, B. McMahon, 'Remembrance of Things to Come,' *Medium Ævum* (2020), 89, no. 1 (2020), p. 138-55, J. Quinn, 'Vǫluspá and the composition of Eddic verse' (Spoleto, 1990), pp. 303–20, J. Harris, 'The Performance of Old Norse Eddic Poetry: A Retrospective', in K. Reichl (ed.) *The Oral Epic: Performance and Music* (2000), pp. 225-32, S. Mitchell, *Old Norse Folklore: Tradition, Innovation and Performance in Medieval Scandinavia* (New York, 2023) and Gísli Sigurðsson, '*Vǫluspá* As The Product Of An Oral Tradition: What Does That Entail?' in *The Nordic Apocalypse,* pp. 63-63 and pp. 45-62.

[437]Beautiful though it is, I do not count the track on Sequentia's album *Edda: Myths from Medieval Iceland* (1996), as a.) it is not a translation, b.) it is not uniquely British and c.) I would argue that the group's outlook is more niche than mainstream.

[438]I, for instance, discovered it purely by accident during a Google search for Old Norse-inspired radio programmes, and only later discovered that a senior colleague remembered the original broadcast from 1999.

Although, chronologically, it is an earlier work than Byatt's *Ragnarok*, I mention it here due to its positioning at the later developmental stage of the empowerment receptions arc represented by this thesis. Jamie's translation was ahead of its time, not only because it foreshadowed later experimentations in performance, but also because it is an Old Norse receptions work which approaches female empowerment from a more definitively feminist position and, moreover, from the far more diverse perspective of the third wave generation.[439] Written in partial response to the author's own experience of sexism, it has been used by the poet to address the deficiency of narratives afforded female figures, and as such is a more direct attempt to form an alternative, more 'appropriate' narrative that would be relevant for Jamie's audience and her own interests.

The decisions she made in composition are by no means an accurate representation of what academics now believe about the poem's development (by no means a united front), and some of those decisions are due to dated, sometimes unusual sources (as we shall see). However, as the work itself is not meant to be an academic text, there is little to be gained from worrying about 'accuracy.' What matters most in the context of this thesis is what we can learn about Jamie's experiences during the writing period from her response to the narrative voice of the vǫlva. The clear limitations in female representation and voices, the resulting frustration which caused Jamie to harness that narrative voice, and the ongoing relevance and power of that medieval voice to modern readers.

For a variety of reasons, I am unable to take the exact same approach I did with Plath and Byatt in previous chapters, and analyse Jamie's works in concordance with biographical material, not least because she is a living author, and so my previous reliance on a surfeit of posthumous material and memoirs is simply not possible here. Furthermore, I am aware that Jamie herself is an extremely private individual; not only does this limit the amount of biographical material currently available on her, but there are also moral considerations which oblige me to refrain from using too much personal detail. Instead, I shall use the limited information I have on the context in which Jamie developed as a poet, and concentrate my attention on this lesser known, and very important work in the context of gender politics. During the course of this chapter, I shall begin by outlining Jamie's reasons (stated or implied) for writing and performing *Vǫluspá*, and discussing her two main sources, the poet W.H. Auden and the Icelandic scholar Herman Pálsson, analysing the different effects these had on her work. I shall then proceed to an analysis of the poem in the light of her agenda and those influences, demonstrating how she adapted the work to the theme of female empowerment and made it her own, and why this work is important to ongoing medievalism and reception studies.

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[439]Third wave feminism is difficult to define; it began in the early 1990s (often with women born in the 70s-80s), and was more subtle than second wave in that it was concerned, not simply with equality, but also with intersectionality, the continuum of sexuality, and questioning of previously-accepted boundaries. For a general summary, see E. Evans. *The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US* (London, 2015).

Jamie's introduction of the *Vǫlva*

Vǫluspá is an extremely dense and mysterious work, even by Eddic standards. Spoken by a *vǫlva* - a seeress - whose status hovers somewhere between the living, the dead and the paranormal, the poem is highly ritualistic, recounting the origins of the cosmos, and ending with a vision of future cataclysmic events, including the fiery chaos of *Ragnarǫk* and the rebirth of the second world. Although the narrative voice is the conduit for one of the richest sources of Norse mythology and lore ever known, the identity of the narrative persona herself remains unknown. Scholarly speculation as to how one should perceive or read this persona continues today: as Larrington, Quinn and Abram point out, she has undeniable links with giants, but as Gísli Sigurðsson cautions, her 'sitting out' indicates that she is a human practitioner of *seiðr*.[440] One potential way to interpret the work as a whole is to divide certain sections according to purpose; the first half of the poem, concerning the persona's 'memories,' could be interpreted as the speaker entering a performance space of ritual time, and roleplaying an older, spiritual presence for ceremonial purposes.[441] One may also consider intertextual reflections of her words as a clue of how medieval audiences would have perceived her; the poem *Baldrs draumar*, for example, is features a seeress whose words are often a close imitation of the content of *Vǫluspá*, and who is represented as being a figure raised from the dead by Odin. Whatever the reality of how she was perceived in the medieval period, however, the R text allows room in modern interpretation for doubt, speculation and mixed impressions as to exactly who or what the narrative persona is, and what she does.

While recent scholarship is more inclined to study from a literary critical and textual perspective, looking at the poem's cultural impact, its various edits, and the intertextual relationship it has with other sources in the canon, a great deal of 20th century scholarship has been preoccupied with the identity of the vǫlva herself. The narrative voice fluctuates between first and third person, seemingly to create a sense of mystic detachment or out-of-body experience in the voice of the prophetess. As a result, there is ongoing debate over whether the narrative was meant to indicate more than one voice in performance, and whether or not two particular supernatural female figures mentioned in the poem - Heiðr and Gullveig - are meant to be the narrator referencing herself.[442] Gullveig is a being whom the Aesir 'stuck' with spears and then burn (strophe 22); she is often

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[440]See C. Abram, 'Remembering and Dismembering' in *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature*, (Charlottesville, 2019), p. 55, C. Larrington and J. Quinn, 'I Remember Giants': Mythological Remembering through *Vǫluspá*,' in *Myth, Magic and Memory in Early Scandinavian Culture: studies in honour of Stephen A. Mitchell* (Turnhout, 2021), pp. 47-62, Sigurðsson, '*Vǫluspá* as the Product of an Oral Tradition: What does it Entail?' in *The Nordic Apocalypse,* pp. 45–62.

[441]See V. Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas' in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 94-130.

[442]For a concise summary of some of these debates, see J. McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', *Essays on Eddic Poetry*, D. Kick and J. Shafer (eds), (Toronto, 2014), pp. 34–58.

believed to be symbolic of the advent of gold, or of the greed and corruption which surround it.[443] Heiðr is a being described shortly after Gullveig (and some believe the two to be synonymous) who is a magical practitioner, going around homesteads to ply her trade, and dubbed 'the favourite of a wicked woman' (strophe 23).[444] Such excerpts are very probably suggestive of the historical context of such works, in which the changing attitudes to power around conversion meant a great deal of cross-pollination between biblical and mythological sources. According to Henning Kure, the strophes about Heiðr could be a byproduct of Christian scribalship, an interpolation made when an older oral version was recorded, which would explain why, regardless of whether or not a medieval audience would have interpreted these two as aspects of the same figure, the image conjured naturally does not match the more dignified and distanced self-image projected by the narrative persona in the opening lines, representative of an older narrative tradition.[445]

Actively identifying the narrative persona as Heiðr is a very definitive reading; the powers which the poem attributes to Heiðr are distinctly suggestive of active craft and manipulation of reality. These powers are spoken of in a way which suggests respect, but also great potential for evil. By contrast, the magic which the narrator is clearly meant to be practising within this poem is *seiðr* - the specific art of foresight, which is more passive (albeit still considered highly taboo for men.)[446] If interpreted as Heiðr, the narrative persona not only loses the greater part of her mystic anonymity (the feature which makes her so extraordinarily compelling as a speaker), but is also implied to actively participate in a form of magical practice with negative connotations of manipulation, which contradicts the dignified tonality of the poem, and also the position of respect the speaker is implied to hold. Her demand for a hearing, for instance, suggests she is speaking within a hall setting, and so holds a certain position of authority that could only come from general respect - not the reputation of a practitioner of black arts.

Jamie's radio introduction about the poem and its narrative persona is very explicit in terms of her reasons (spoken and unspoken) for writing *Vǫluspá*, and so is worth quoting in full:

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[443]See, for instance, Larrington's translation of *Vǫluspá,* 'The Seeress's Prophecy.' *The Poetic Edda,* p. 6. Henning Kure challenges this interpretation, preferring the word 'supported,' which could imply her reception was not entirely negative on all fronts, at least initially. See H. Kure, '*Vǫluspá* in a Holistic Reading' in *RMN Newsletter* 17, p. 13.
[444]H. Kure, '*Vǫluspá* in a Holistic Reading', p. 6. Although in the singular case, this 'evil woman' clearly represents a type of group rather than one figure.
[445]H. Kure et al. "Wading Heavy Currents: Snorri's Use of Vǫluspá 39." in *The Nordic Apocalypse*, pp. 79–91
[446]"Oðinn knew, and practised himself, the art which is accompanied by greatest power, called seiðr ('black magic'), and from it he could predict the fates of men and things that had not yet happened, and also cause men death or disaster or disease, and also take wit or strength from some and give it to others. But this magic, when it is practised, is accompanied by such great perversion that it was not considered without shame for a man to perform it, and the skill was taught to the goddesses." See Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, in *Heimskringla*, A. Finlay and A. Faulkes (eds), (London, 2011), p. 11.

This poem recounts the beginning of the earth, the creation of the earth and its...er... pollution if you like, by greed, and avarice and war, and its eventual destruction, and then the rebirth again. And it's spoken by a woman, which is unusual, and a woman who speaks with tremendous authority. She was a seer - a seeress - and it seems that this poem was spoken while she was in a shamanic...a shamanic trance. She speaks at the end of sinking, and you can imagine this is her coming back to herself, out of the shamanic trance, but she sustains this, this poem marvellously well. Bearing in mind this is the last millennium when they were even more anxious, possibly, than we are now - the premillennial tension was markéd - and she was talking about the beginning of the world and the construction of the world at a time when her own culture, the Icelandic culture, was in the throes of change, Christianity was approaching and people like her, as seeresses and representatives of an older culture, would feel themselves to be under stress, as well. So for all these reasons I felt this was a poem certainly worth revisiting this millennium, and I also felt quite close to this woman. This is a poem in Old Norse, and...and I'm working from literal translations by Professor Hermann Pálsson of Edinburgh University. It's very familiar to people who are interested in Old Norse culture and Icelandic poetry, in fact Auden translated this piece many years ago, and he kept to the extraordinarily tight pattern of alliteration that is in the original, it's a masterpiece of succinctness...I've tried to open it out for a modern audience and show the parallels with that culture and perhaps our own, and the tensions that were happening in that culture at the time, and the tensions that we are feeling around this millennium. And I specially wanted to point out the fact that this was spoken by...this was spoken by a female voice. Scholars to date have obviously assumed that it is a poem, therefore it was written by a man, and only [*laughs*] you know very recently have they thought 'actually she says she's a woman, she speaks like a woman, good lord perhaps she was a woman' [*laughs*].[447]

Overall, the most important points to draw from her introduction are as follows: Jamie believed that the poem was taken from the words of a female seer in a shamanic trance. She was particularly inspired to work on and present the poem because she 'felt close' to the imagined narrator, and because she felt it worth drawing a parallel between the apocalypse-related fears of the last new millenium and our own. She was also driven to oralize and personalize that voice in the face of what she assumed to be scholarly tendencies to distance, depersonalise and defeminise; in fact, the assumption that scholars *would* criticize seems to have provided an important foundation for her piece, as it lends the poem a markedly definite and defensive tone that emphasises its persona's assertiveness.[448] All of the above is important for understanding how and why her work is presented: to emphasize the importance of a female voice in the medieval period, to create a sense of kinship and closeness between her audience and the medieval narrative voice, and, in doing both these things, to address ongoing social issues of chauvinism and exclusionism.

Jamie's suggestion that academics as a group would be against the idea of a woman composer is, ironically, an assumption that is not wholly reflective of Old Norse scholarship itself. While that

[447]Credit for any audio quotations goes to the BBC archives. I have written this transcript of the recording by ear and repetitions have been left in to fully represent the original speech as it was broadcast. Any underlinings which occur in excerpts from this text are my own throughout.

[448]See note 21.

world in the late 20th century was certainly not devoid of chauvinism, her shamanic and intensely personal interpretation of the *vǫlva* shows the same focus as previous generations of scholars like Turville-Petre, Nordal and Pálsson, who sought to identify a composer.[449] Instead, the clear underlying note of anger in her remarks seems to be directed at the very particular male hegemony within Scottish academic and creative circles. As Robert Crawford observes, during the greater part of the twentieth century the Scottish poetry scene had been even more notoriously male-heavy than average. This was due to a combination of its small size and (in the bid to disassociate itself with England) the importance it afforded national figures like 'Rabbie' Burns and Hugh MacDiarmid, who were famously chauvinist.[450] Jamie, along with other emerging Scottish female artists like Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay and Carol Ann Duffy, had to work extremely hard to establish herself against this hegemony, and would later mention her struggles with gender prejudice and gatekeeping among male peers. The term 'women poets' was still very much in use. Amidst this struggle for acceptance, Jamie also felt the implicit pressure to subsume her own, individual voice, and to imitate those who would have excluded her - a pressure that shaped her work in the adverse direction:

> When I was being told in this loud but subliminal way 'You must read MacDiarmid and take those ideas on and espouse his ideas,' I was told there was this poem that I had to read; it was called *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle.* Drunk? Men? Thistle? What? This is what we'd been striving to get away from for umpteen years. This is the smoky darkness of those pubs that you weren't allowed into because you were a woman. Yes? No. No, not for me.[451]

An interesting irony is that MacDiarmid's famous poem also focuses on the Norse mythology contained in Eddic texts, with the drunk man viewing the thistle from below as the world's ash, *Yggdrasil*; whether Jamie knew this, or was displeased with the appropriation of that content into macho pub culture, is uncertain.[452] It is also important to mention that Jamie was disinterested, even defensive of the idea that anyone might think she was trying to undertake an academic

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[449]Pálsson supports the theory of a real female speaker having composed or inspired the poem's text (see below). Gabriel Turville-Petre and Sigurður Nordal both clearly invest in the idea of a composer, rather than a tradition of many adaptors. Nordal especially has an impassioned argument for the historic figure Völu-Steinn as a composer, and his narration of the imagined process of inspiration (through landscape and scripture) and composition, is very compelling, and proof that scholarship is by no means impersonal. See Sigurður Nordal and B. S. Benedikz. 'The Author of *Vǫluspá*', *Saga-Book* 20 (London, 1978), pp. 114–30, and G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London,1964). Of course, the onus is now on studying the texts and the narrative persona as constructions and conglomerations in their own right, rather than trying to identify any one composer or agenda (an idea now obsolete).

[450]R. Crawford, 'Kathleen's Scots', in Rachel Falconer (ed.), *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her work* (Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 33-41.

[451]R. Crawford, *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314–2014* (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 33-41.

[452]For more information on MacDiarmid's use of Old Norse mythology, see O'Donoghue, 'Paganism and Christianism: The Victorians and Their Successors', *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth*, pp. 148-199.

translation of the poem; her remarks on scholarship suggest the intention to go against academic convention (a decisive act in itself), and it seems that she wanted simply to write a work which spoke of her feelings and the feelings of others like her.[453] Regardless, considering her reaction to the writing culture around her, it is only natural that it would have been of great interest to her to focus on a medieval poem which, according to some academic debates (and especially according to Pálsson, the key contributor to Jamie's work) had been composed by a woman.

At the time of writing 'Vǫluspá,' Jamie was already well-placed to be interested in the subject matter, and in the mysterious narrator. As her introduction indicates, the nineties was already a time of huge political tension, systemic and cultural upheaval, and pre-millennial fear - a time to seek historic reflection, if only as a touchstone, for perspective. For women, it was a strange interim period: second wave feminism had itself become historic, and a new wave of surface-level 'girl power' in pop culture (made a mainstream term by the Spice Girls) had suggested a new world of possibilities, although in reality much of the same systemic gender restrictions endured, and the wider shockwaves of the 'Me Too' movement would not be felt by the majority until 2017.[454] Within this context, Jamie has been an artist who represents intersectionality, writing about beyond the essentialism of media and perceived borders; her work *Among Muslims: Meetings at the Frontiers of Pakistan* was published a year after 9/11, amid the backwash of global anti-islamic sentiment.[455] Her works cover a wide range of topics, often within the same space: among the most common are gender, patriotism, archaeology, human impact on the wilderness, and the symbiosis between the natural world, the body and human rituals.

Perceptions of feminine identity, prejudice, magic and wisdom in particular have bled into Jamie's portrayal of the natural world and of her own country's history, but, crucially, she does not idealise or fetishize such women, often using them to challenge sentimentalism. In 'Arraheids,' flint weaponry becomes the tongues of Scottish grandmothers, 'sherp' and 'chert,' aggressively

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[453]At the beginning of this study, I began an email exchange with Kathleen Jamie through her agent, in the hopes of having a longer discussion, but this did not continue beyond my first reply to her one message, which read: 'Thank you for your query. I am sorry to say I can't really help. The programme was many years ago, maybe 20 years, long before the days of podcasts. Both the written script and the recording are lost. I can't even remember how I discovered Vǫluspá. It certainly wasn't from a place of expertise. I think my retelling would horrify scholars. I don't really have a personal discovery and have never followed it up. Sorry this is a dead end for you. Good luck with your project. Best wishes, Kathleen' (01/10/2021). My impression was that she was unenthusiastic about the idea of anyone analysing it. I suspect this was partly due to misunderstanding the nature of my interest in the work - after all, I was asking about her sources - and also a very understandable desire not to dissect her own, personal work with a stranger, which (as I know from my own limited experience) can be uncomfortable, and, worse, with an academic. Either way, my writing of this chapter has been tinged with its own discomfort, as I feel like an intruder. I can only hope that, if she ever reads any version of this chapter, she will understand why I in turn sought to know more, and not disapprove too highly of the steps I have taken to bring her work to attention.

[454]See A. Haridasani Gupta and J. Harlan, 'How the Spice Girls' Manufactured Girl Power Became Real, in *The New York Times* (April 28th, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/by/alisha-haridasani-gupta (accessed April 2nd, 2025.)

[455]K. Jamie, *Among Muslims: Meetings at the Frontiers of Pakistan*, (London, 2002).

challenging the casual seeker of national nostalgia in a manner which also captures the disjunct between generations in self-assertiveness: 'whae dae ye think ye are?'[456] One other strong example is the poem 'Meadowsweet,' depicting the burial of a 'difficult' woman whose dour community bury her with a 'drab psalm', but whose pagan, almost magical imprint is embodied in the herbs that grow from her grave; the poem ends with the promise that she will eventually rise to blast them with 'dirt, and spit, and poetry' (*Jizzen*, 1999).[457] It does not seem too much to assume that the *vǫlva*, with her wider associations with death, burial and resurrection, also features in Jamie's mindscape of these difficult, abused and wondrous female presences. While this chapter will not really discuss Jamie or her poem in an ecocritical sense, it is important to note that this preoccupation is heavily related to third wave feminism, in that it is representative of the intersectionality of the period.[458] The *vǫlva*, and her narrative of a doomed world, very naturally plays into Jamie's awareness of the disregarded voices of women and nature, much like it did with Byatt.

Ultimately, Jamie is an artist intimately concerned with the lives, folklore and wisdom of women from an historical perspective, and her awareness of stereotyping, on both a gendered and national basis, provides one of the prime fulcrums around which her poetic wheel is spun. Furthermore, her apparent aim (as implied in her radio introduction) of drawing a parallel between existential unrest in the mediaeval period and the present day is very much in keeping with her enthusiasm for visiting historical sites, and meditating on their previous occupants. As with her (not unfair) association between scholarship and gender bias, it also seems to be a partial response to elitism of another kind; namely, the long-held assumption by certain groups of late twentieth century scholars (often male and high-ranking) that 'proper' understanding of and responses to the middle ages, and indeed literature in general, may only be found in academic spheres, with those truly 'qualified' to comment.[459] Overall, both her desire to promote the idea of a female composer, and her urge to demystify a work that might otherwise be considered old and unobtainable, are both a

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[456] K. Jamie, 'Arraheids,' in *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead*, (London, 2002).

[457] L. Severin. "A Scottish Ecopoetics: Feminism and Environmentalism in the Works of Kathleen Jamie and Valerie Gillies." *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (2011), pp. 98–110.

[458] For more specifically ecological readings of *Vǫluspá*, and of other Old Norse texts, see Abram, *Evergreen Ash,* (2019).

[459] Although this attitude does not arise from an exclusively male pool, a great many of such commentators were male, and in their prime before both scholarship and the academic landscape became more diversified. Derek Pearsall, for instance, mentions C.S. Lewis's tendency to make vague, pompous evaluations of the relative 'excellence' of medieval literature, as though he alone held the keys to some inner sanctum of knowledge, and A.S. Byatt remarked unfavourably upon the atmosphere of supercilious grandeur in F.R. Leavis's lectures, during which he would make a point of throwing unfavoured books in a wastepaper basket. This type of self-aggrandisement in academic spheres also overlapped a great deal with sneering at mainstream consumption of medieval material and receptions: even as Umberto Eco addresses the reasonableness and long history of reconstruction in 'Dreaming the Middle Ages,' he still cannot resist derisive remarks about 'pseudo-medieval pulp,' and binarises enthusiasms for neomedievalism and 'responsible' philological study. Jamie would have been all too aware of figures like these in her own youth. See U. Eco, 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages' in *Travels Through Hyperreality* (London, 1987), pp. 61-72, and D. Pearsall, 'Medieval Literature and Historical Enquiry,' *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 4 (2004), pp. 31–42.

part of the same general reaction against snobbery, exclusivity, and devaluation of the feminine or relatable. As a woman and artist during that period, her very unwillingness to fit in, along with her fascination with the historical and folkloric, meant she was in a very pertinent position from which to emphasise the themes in *Vǫluspá*which relate to female power and liminality.

Two Important Contributing Sources

In her introduction, Jamie mentions two translations of *Vǫluspá* that affected her interpretation and earlier noted treatment of the poem: one of these inspired her to take a different approach, and one aligned extremely well with her own thematic preoccupations, providing the main inspiration for her own language choices. Both works are of their time, in that they seek to clarify who the persona was, and give a more concrete sense of a character.

W.H. Auden's 'Song of the Sibyl'

The Auden translation to which Jamie refers in her introduction is 'The Song of the Sibyl' - one work in a collection of Eddic translations entitled *The Elder Edda* by W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor. Although marketed as a poetry book, the volume toes a very thin line between more mainstream and academic consumption, and is worth briefly analysing purely on the basis that it seems to have inspired Jamie somewhat, but also triggered her to take a different approach. Jamie's instinctive defensiveness against a poetic tradition that was 'not for her' can be detected in her comments on W.H. Auden's poem being 'a masterpiece of succinctness;' the fact that she compliments this poetic attribute, and yet follows her remark with her stated intention to 'open [the poem] out for a modern audience' rather indicates stylistic disagreement, and that she felt Auden's version to be too tightly crafted for the majority of readers. Such an indication is, in this case, well-founded; typically of Auden's works, his presentation and framing in this volume places greater than average onus on readers to actively engage, and to take responsibility for their own understanding of the poems - a very difficult task when one considers that *Vǫluspá* is already a dense and allusive work.[460] Although the detailed introduction by Peter Salus (which one must presume Auden had to approve) does provide some key mythological context for beginners, it focuses equally, if not more so, on poetic structure and features such as the use of inquisitorial patterns for mnemonic purposes in *The Poetic Edda*. Academically, it is the introduction of a

[460] I deliberately refer to the poem as Auden's work, based on Taylor's claim that Auden was mainly responsible for the published content: "My deepest debt, of course, is to Auden himself. No collaboration could have been easier. He knew the material so well that he rarely had to check obscure points with me. He went to the Icelandic itself. I gave him my translations in the best poetic line I could manage, and he turned that verbal and metrical disarray into poetic garb. The product is his. I am glad to have had a role in providing a raw material." W. H. Auden & P. B. Taylor, *The Elder Edda : A Selection* (London, 1973), p. 5.

wordsmith and linguist: more thorough than most previous English works in its attention to metre, highlighting the difference between skaldic and Eddic metres, the differences between types of Eddic metres, the lineation and caesurae, and placement of alliteration in the poems. By contrast, information on the manuscript history, religious practice of *seiðr* or the cultural impact of the narrative persona is very lacking.

This approach extends to the poems. As Tom Shippey ruefully remarks in his TLS review of the book, Auden's translations include no individual introductions to the separate poems within the work - only brief glosses of names and references, which are listed in separate sections following the main text.[461] Any beginner wishing to untangle more obscure allusions must first turn to the back pages, or, in the cases where a reference is not explained, go back to the introduction, and try to pair the author's descriptions of a god or key myth (which are themselves limited compared to the scope of the poetic content) to the verse at hand. Auden's approach to translating the Eddic poems themselves is terse, and primarily focused on poetics over more basic meaning; his translations are mainly tightly-worded, crafted in imitation of the original metres of the Old Norse texts themselves. While this ensures a sparse and musical tonality, and that the poems are far more suitable for reading aloud than previous works in English, it also means that other stylistic aspects suffer.[462] Such issues are especially evident in more complex works like 'The Song of the Sybil.' Here, Auden's efforts to recreate the alliterative patterning of f*ornyrðislag* metre prevented him from adding any longer phrasing or clarifying words that would help amateur readers find a foothold. As a result, some of the wording is clumsy and difficult to enunciate, and is subsequently far less evocative in general of the mystical content: the primaeval void is 'a grinning gap and grass nowhere' (l.30) and the description of the dew-laden *Yggdrasil* becomes a tongue-twister: 'sparkling showers are shed on its leaves.'[463]Auden's use of rather middle class anglicisms is a part of his technique for retaining tightness, and, as George Johnston commented in his early 1970s review, spoiled the tonality of the poem:

'I think the tone of the translation is not right. What worked so well in the *Hávamál* does not work here. The title has been translated as *The Song of the Sybil*, but the poem is a vision; the word *spá* means prophecy and to translate it as 'song' implies a keying-down of the whole poem. Undoubtedly intended, but I don't agree. For instance, 'Sun turned from the south, Sister of Moon, / Her right arm rested on the rim of Heaven; / She had no inkling where her hall was, / Nor Moon a notion of what might be had.' This is an

[461]See T. Shippey's full review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25th February 1982. Shippey states his wish for a full volume of the Eddic poems complete with commentaries, and in doing so replies to previous retorts from Oxford scholars about Ursula Dronke's work, stating that hers is too extensive to be commercially viable. Strangely, he does not mention Olive Bray's full, far more reader-friendly translation of the *Poetic Edda* from 1908, beautifully illustrated by Collingwood, or Lee M. Hollander's from 1962. It is possible, of course, that he wishes specifically for Auden's commentary.

[462]For further information on earlier, more dubious British translations of Old Norse poetry, see O'Donoghue, *English Poetry and Old Norse Myth.*

[463]All citations from 'Song of the Sybil,' are taken from Auden and Taylor, *The Elder Edda*, pp. 145-9.

attractive translation except for the words 'inkling' and 'notion'. They translate something from the Norse, but to my ear they are from the wrong vocabulary and set a tone of familiarity that is out of keeping with the dignity of the poem.'[464]

As Carolyne Larrington points out, this rigidity of expression was not uncommon among early to mid twentieth century translators, such as Vigfusson and Powell and Lee M. Hollander, who often fell prey to strange lexicons or off-putting archaisms.[465] Due to his lack of flexibility in alliterative patterning, there are also some outright errors in Auden's translation. A good example is one of the lines heralding the recitation of dwarf names: the first two lines of strophe 16 read 'I must tell of the dwarves in Dwalin's host; / Like lions they were in Lokar's time...'; the word 'lions' is a complete invention.[466]

The explanation given in Salus's introduction for Auden's retention of the dense nature of the Eddic poems, and the lack of glosses, is that medieval audiences would have recognised allusions without prompting, and that there would have been no room for variation in delivery, as the skald would have been expected to provide 'old, true stories' rather than 'made up' ones - in other words, any other approach would be an inauthentic experience.[467] Such statements are problematic on two levels: firstly, and very simply, the latter statement about variation is unfounded, and so is an assumption rather than a fact. Although manuscripts show intertextual imitation of various works, and a lot of repetition occurs, we have very little information on how such works were actually delivered to an audience. One must assume (as with pre-Christian religions) a variety of interpretation and presentation across different areas and contexts. Secondly, the fact that the average twentieth-century English audience lacked the necessary cultural foreknowledge to experience the true, emotive impact of the poem's allusions without assistance, and that this was apparently not a major factor in the authors' decision-making, is, itself, very telling as to whose experience mattered.

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[464]G. Johnston, 'A Classic Translation', *Poetry* (1971), pp. 342-4.

[465]C. Larrington, 'Translating and Retranslating the Poetic Edda' in *Translating Early Medieval Poetry: Transformation, Reception, Interpretation*. Medievalism. (Martlesham, 2017), pp. 165-182.

[466]Auden and Taylor, *The Elder Edda*, p. 146. By contrast, Carolyne Larrington's far more literal rendition reads: 'Time it is to tally up the dwarves in Dvalin's troop, / for the children of men, to trace them back to Lofar...' (See Larrington's translation of *The Poetic Edda*, p. 5, strophe 14, lines 1-2.)

[467]'One must remember...that the intended audience of the poetry was familiar with the poet's material. No traditional performer would dream of trying to be 'original' in selecting material. His audience expected the old 'true' stories, and not 'made-up' ones, but awaited the skáld's personal inventions in dialogue. The mythological allusions which to the modern reader seem obscure and remote, must have been suggestive to the audience and readers of the thirteenth century. So the poetic performance could afford to be economical. It suggested rather than describe the details of incidents. Performance of traditional poems did not depend on dramatic suspense, since the audience was expected to know the outcome of the story anyway...' See P. Salus's introduction to Auden and Taylor, *The Elder Edda: A Selection*, p. 16. This explanation also appears on p. 181 of W. H. Auden and P. B. Taylor, *Norse Poems* (London, 1981), an expansion of the previous work.

Although the aim seems to have been to represent the sound effects suggested by the medieval texts - and therefore its implied oral setting - no part of the book shows interest in recreating the *emotional* experience of a medieval audience, which would only have been partly down to technicalities. Any performance in the medieval period would follow the emotive rules of any performance today, in that it would have been directly affected by the symbiotic relationship between so-called authenticity of sound and cultural contexts which alter perceptions of sound. Such considerations lie within the boundaries of what Stephen Mitchell would call the 'ethnography of performance' - the cognitive and emotive elements which by necessity affect reception of any poem within a certain context.[468] As reception studies teach us, due to the very length of the so-called Medieval period, there is no such thing as a 'quintessential medieval work.' Much late twentieth century and early millennial scholarship (Paul Zumthor's *mouvance* and Carol Clover's work on 'threads' within medieval editorship being key examples) demonstrates that malleability is arguably one of the few certainties on which we may depend upon in medieval literature, as the same works have undergone various changes across hundreds of years within that same period, recontextualised to suit different audiences and agendas.[469] Following this argument, imitating a 'medieval' delivery is therefore best achieved by engaging with a text creatively, adapting it to one's own context and time, with the aim that an audience may emotionally engage without too much effort, rather than adhering to notions of rigidity that cannot be proven.[470]

Overall, Auden's translation suffers because, in neglecting the comprehensive aspect of a poetic exchange for non-specialist readers, it also dismisses their emotional experience, and it prioritises product over the consideration of process. The lack of notes and/or compromise in phrasing can not only make a reading public feel alienated (as Larrington has very candidly acknowledged in relation to her own earlier work on *The Poetic Edda*), but also disrupts the sense of concord between the poet and the intended audience, which, arguably, is the most crucial aspect of any representation of oral poetry (even if only captured on a page).[471] The fact that this unemotional approach has been taken by Auden for recreating (and thus cementing) an assumed technical 'authenticity' of experience, when there is no recorded proof of any one set tradition or rule in delivery, is a highly assuming stance to take. It is also strange that, as a poet who wrote works specifically for radio and stage, and who was recorded reading his own poetry for commercial purposes, Auden apparently never recorded his Eddic translations.[472] One might argue that, if his priority were to display the quality of Old Norse metre and sound patterning, a recording would

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[468]S. Mitchell, "Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn." *Oral Tradition* 16, no. 1 (2002), pp. 168-202.

[469]See Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, and Clover, '"The Same Thing—Sort Of"'.

[470]See also S. Breeze, *Performance in Beowulf and Other Old English Poems,* (Martlesham, 2022), p. 7.

[471]See Larrington, 'Translating and Retranslating the Poetic Edda,' p. 172.

[472]At least, I have never found any evidence that he did so, which, considering his well-documented collaborations with the BBC in other circumstances, suggests no lasting material.

have orally reproduced the musicality of the language in a way that showcased these qualities more obviously, and would have afforded a better opportunity for public appreciation.

While balancing stylistic imitation and greater accessibility is an inevitable problem of translation, and loss will always occur on one side or another, the choices made in Auden and Taylor's work communicate a great deal about social priorities, and show a certain elitism. Overall, it is clearly Auden's particular interests which provide the main impetus for his translation, and not the desire to make the poems more accessible; while any readers may theoretically choose to engage with the dry prose of the introduction, and the gaps in definition, it is up to them to do their homework and read outside the text. Although perhaps not deliberately assuming, such an approach inevitably becomes tinged by elitism, in that a university educated audience is at an advantage in reading it; at the time of the book's publication, such an audience were in the minority, and mostly comprised people from more secure socio-economic backgrounds. Along with elitism comes the implicit weight of gender: throughout the book, the tone of the established male shines through, secure in the knowledge that he may focus solely on his work's artistic merit, and does not have to justify the choice of approach to a mainstream audience beyond assuring them that his way is the correct way. It is both telling and ironic that Jamie, whose creative approach (by the definition above) is arguably more 'medieval' than Auden's, should feel the need to give credit to Auden even as she implicitly rejects his style, and to explain her own approach so carefully.

Interestingly, one major edit that Auden did make, which was rather inconsistent with the introductory remarks on rigidity (and which would also contribute somewhat to the structure of Jamie's poem) was in the order of stanzas in 'Song of the Sibyl.' These structural alterations were made, as the introductory notes explain, to 'add sense' to the material for the benefit of audiences unfamiliar with the poem:

> Especially in the cases of 'Words of the High One' and 'The Song of the Sybil', we have silently rearranged some of the verses and altered, here and there, the order of the strophes - but only when it seemed to us to add to the sense of the poem...In 'The Song of the Sybil', we have followed a suggestion of Sophus Bugge and rearranged the strophes so that our 1-4 are 22, 29, 28, 27 in the original. Further we have inserted into our strophe 33 the fragment of the manuscript's 37; transferred 41 to follow 56; added a line to 15; and omitted the manuscript's 49, 54 and 58, which are repetitions of 44. Finally, whereas in the original the Sybil speaks now in the first person, now in the third, we have made her speak in the first person throughout.[473]

[473]Incidentally, the structural approach which Auden took from Bugge is also likely to have inspired Henry Morley's earlier version of the poem, which appears in *English Writers: An Attempt Towards a History of English Literature*, vol. 2 (London, 1988), p. 337.

In *Vǫluspá*, the narrative persona's opening lines are 'Hlióðs bið ek allar/[helgar] kindir' ('A hearing I ask from all holy kindred').[474] She does not declare her identity beyond her upbringing by giants, and the fact that she has seen nine worlds beneath the ground; in fact, her very lack of self-introduction is what truly communicates the speaker's authority and standing within the cosmic theatre of the poem, as her call for a hearing implies her assumption that others will, and should, listen. As mentioned, the nature of her identity is left deliberately vague throughout, heightening her mysterious nature and lending additional weight to her presence; it is never certain whether she is meant to be a living woman, a seer risen from the dead or a combination of a spirit speaking through a living woman. The poem's dreamlike, disjointed structural quality is also owed in great part to this mystery, as there are several swift changes in subject and perspective between strophes, particularly the narrator's changing use of first and third person (apparently to refer to herself).[475] The combination of these factors helps to ensure that the speaker's presence throughout is felt ever-looming by readers; powerful, mystical, and potentially dangerous.

As a result of Auden's structural edits, however, the first lines of his translation of the poem (taken out of context from nearly the middle of the medieval poem) read as follows:

Heidi men call me when their homes I visit,
A far seeing vǫlva, wise in talismans.
Caster of spells, cunning in magic.
To wicked women welcome always.

Arm rings and necklaces, Odhinn you gave me
To learn my lore, to learn my magic:
Wider and wider through all worlds I see.

Outside I sat by myself when you came,
Terror of the gods, and gazed in my eyes.
What do you ask of me? Why tempt me?
Odhinn, I know where your eye is concealed,
Hidden away in the well of Mimir:
Mimir each morning his mead drinks
From Valfather's pledge. Well would you know more?

Of Heimdal too and his horn I know.

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[474]Old Norse text taken from *Vǫluspá, The Poetic Edda*, strophe 1, p. 7. The translation of this excerpt is mine, as I do not agree with the use of 'seed' (Dronke) or 'tribes' (Larrington).

[475]For a more thorough exploration of the implications behind these pronouns, see Dronke, 'The Grand Architecture of *Vǫluspá*,' *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 28-29.

Hidden under the holy tree
Down on it pours a precious stream from Valfather's pledge
Well would you know more?

Silence I ask of the sacred folk...[476]

In contrast to his lack of detailed extratextual explanation about the narrative persona, the order of Auden's verses presents her in a very specific manner, assuming far more certainty than the poem itself contains. This assumption that the poem would benefit from having a more concrete narrative persona, as evidenced by Auden's influence from Bugge, is one very much of its time, but it is problematic in terms of capturing exactly what makes the Old Norse work itself so striking. Firstly, compared to the medieval texts, in which her introduction speaks for itself, this forced self-introduction blunts the seer's powerful presence, aligning her more with the genre of the modern novel, or ballads. Beginning with 'Heidi' (and the simplification of perspective first person narrative throughout) reduces her to a mere character. Furthermore, the impetus of the vision itself, with its delineated sections, is compromised, as the medieval strophes in which the narrator seemingly speaks from her own perspective act as structural markers for different parts of her proclamation. Her bid for silence at the opening sets the scene of an exchange, framing the poem itself as ritualistic, and her relation of her sitting out and interacting with Odin comes at a pivotal moment around the middle of the poem, when she is about to transfer from relating the past to relating the future of *Ragnarök*, thus indicating an active shift from memory to prophecy.[477]

Secondly, the very naming of her in this manner is not only highly unfortunate (as modern readers would naturally imagine 'Heidi' as the Johanna Spyri character) but a considerable simplification: in the medieval text, *Heiðr* (rather than Heidi) is introduced in third person, not first, and this immediately after a stanza about Gullveig, another supernatural female figure. Both these figures may, or may not be, associated or synonymous with the narrative persona, but the main point for modern readers is that none of their identities are absolutely certain, and so placing this somewhat strange verse at the opening is a very odd choice for representing the quality of the medieval poem as a whole.[478] Similarly, the description of *Heiðr*'s suspect talents is, in fact, a very poor translation of the parallel *Codex Regius* strophe (23), which, although it suggests that her talents may be sinister when employed in certain ways, do not include the word 'talismans' or 'spells'; both of these are simplifications by Auden for *gandr* (a type of sorcery, wand or staff) and *seiðr* (seeing/prophecy magic) respectively. Although the word 'magic' has been used by other translators in this verse, and is not incorrect, it would still be read in a very different way by a modern audience;

[476]Auden and Taylor, 'Song of the Sybil,' *The Elder Edda*, ll.1-19, p. 144.
[477]Dronke, 'The Grand Architecture of *Vǫluspá*,' *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 28-30.
[478]For a more thorough scholarly exploration of the many possibilities around these names, see (for instance) McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', pp. 34-58.

many, helped by words like 'spells' and 'talismans,' would probably have pictured her as a fantasy sorceress or fairy tale witch.[479] The net result is that she is simplified by association, and what should be a fascinating enigma is blunted.

Auden's approach, therefore, is one which is not only ironically modern in its assumption of shape and sense (belying his words on rigidity), but also completely simplifies the way audiences would experience and understand the poem and its speaker. Although it is understandable why he might instinctively have made such decisions for uninitiated readers, structural editing and interpretations of this kind are always more misguided than enlightening. Much like Salus's noted assumption about poetic variation, such readings assume an 'original' version or superior way of editing the source based purely on personal judgement, when we cannot, and should not, assume anything other than what a given source offers at face value. Not only is this inconsistent with the introductory remarks by Salus, but the editing of the structure also prevents readers from experiencing the poem as it appears within Old Norse poetic source texts, which remain the only records we have of how the poem was memorised.[480] Why, one might ask, if Auden really wished to preserve a sense of the medieval work, did he not simply leave the poem's general order as suggested by the major texts in the *Codex Regius* and *Hauksbók*, which suggest a strong sense of continuity in their general structures?[481]

Despite the fact that Auden has noted his changes carefully, it seems a large assumption that most readers would try to piece together a sense of the older version from his directions, especially when most people would not have known enough about the material to realise the stylistic significance of the changes he has made. This publication came pre-Internet, and several decades before the millennial onslaught of fantasy 'Viking' content in popular film and television, for which more literary source material was consciously adapted to seek a sense of historic authenticity; under these circumstances, most inexperienced audiences would probably have read Auden's translations and left it at that, thus taking away the impressions imposed by his stylistic choices. Overall, what Auden leaves readers with is a poem which, stylistically, is rigid, over-anglicised and tonally prim, but which (however ill-advisedly) clearly tries to create a more concrete sense of a character behind

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[479]Larrington, for example, uses the term 'spirit-magic' for *ganda*, but leaves *seiðr* untranslated.

[480]The main exception, of course, is Snorri Sturluson, who used poetic excerpts out of context (including many passages of both versions of *Vǫluspá* from the *Codex Regius* and from *Hauksbók*) when illustrating his lore within the *Prose Edda*. However, even Snorri shows a great deal of coherence with poetic texts in terms of line order within excerpts, suggesting that he mainly knew the orders as we see them in the extant poetic texts. See Dronke, 'The Texts of *Vǫluspá* and their relationship', *The Poetic Edda*, pp. 62-4.

[481]One may compare Auden's approach with that of Patricia Terry from 1969. Unfortunately, on the one hand, Terry also cut what she deemed 'unnecessary' material (such as the Garmr refrains, and the stanzas reciting dwarf names) to suit a modern-day audience, thus compromising the poem's full effect. She did not, however, interfere with the order of material in such a disruptive manner as Auden, leaving the opening as it was, and retaining the mystic presence of the speaker. See Patricia Terry, *Poems of the Elder Edda* (Philadelphia, 1969).

the narrative persona, with which readers could approach the poem from a more modern perspective.

It was in part thanks to Auden that this more modern sense of a witch or sorceress, and this developed sense of a main character, would also shine through Jamie's translation. What makes Jamie's approach empowering compared to Auden's (as we shall see) is the fact that she is working with an already-powerful female narrator from the perspective of having felt excluded by male-dominated academic and literary circles. She is a writer who not only understands the importance of an emotionally accessible translation, but is also in a unique position to align emotionally with the traditionally caustic, challenging tones of an Old Norse *vǫlva* figure - a tonal quality of which Auden shows little to no awareness.[482] In light of the above, and of Jamie's own professed experiences on the poetry scene, her expressed desire to 'open up' *Vǫluspá*takes on an even deeper significance, and could be read as a simultaneous compliment and rebuke. Her very particular, free verse approach, and her decision to make the work multidimensional through performance, could have been in part a reaction to Auden's rarefied undertones, combined with her more general reaction to elitism and chauvinism within the scholarly and artistic community. Her influence from Hermann Pálsson, whose translations she worked from (see her introduction above) , was to be far more definitive and positive.

Hermann Pálsson's *Vǫluspá*

Icelandic scholar Hermann Pálsson's translation of *Vǫluspá* in 1996 is a very different work to Auden's. It is not really a 'literal' translation, as Jamie claims, but a version of the Old Norse in numbered strophes, followed by a line-by-line prose translation as endnotes. Unlike 'Song of the Sibyl,' held hostage by form, Pálsson's focus was not upon producing a parallel poem in English, but in glossing the language and decoding the symbolism where possible, while providing context on the literature and mythology around the poem. Considering Jamie's her desire of 'opening up' the poem, and the particular weak points of Auden's work (as discussed above), it is unsurprising that, of the two sources she mentions, Pálsson's work had the more positive influence upon hers, and that she chose to work specifically from it.[483] Its English prose format meant she could work free from structural constraints, but could also retain awareness of the Old Norse metre as a guide in pacing.

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[482]See McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', p. 39.

[483]Admittedly, this influence might be partially explained by Palsson's proximity to Jamie, as he was in Edinburgh for many years, and overlapped with Jamie's time teaching there. However, the parallel between his theories and her introductory statement of intent are proof that the parallels between their approaches are more than a matter of nearness and convenience, and that she was invested in his theories.

By scholarly standards, it must be admitted that Palsson's translation is already unusual and rather prescriptive in its own way, meaning that Jamie would not have received a perfect grounding in the work from this source by any means. In this case, however, its particular focus was extremely well-placed to align with her desire to give more importance to women's voices, and the effect upon the overall theatricality of her work was to be striking. As I have mentioned, Pálsson not only gave credence to the 'solo composer' theory supported by Nordal and others, but, instead of attaching it to a masculine or specific historical figure, he argued that the 'original' composer of the poem was specifically a Sami (or Sami-fostered) seeress, thus directly championing and evoking a minority female figure behind the anonymous narrative voice. His introduction to the poem paints an extremely clear picture of his vision of this female composer, developing her extratextual identity to correspond with the narrative persona's words:

> It has often been assumed that *Vǫluspá* was composed by a poet pretending to be a prophetess (see e.g. Sigurður Nordal but it seems more likely that the poem was created by a poetess who was herself a practising Sibyl; her great artistic achievement was to describe her own ecstatic visions of alien worlds and to evoke the hidden mysteries of the past and the untold secrets of the future. In the course of the poem she becomes an integral part of her own vision; the narrative is imbued with her extraordinary psychic, ecstatic and verbal powers...*Vǫluspá* is narrated by a woman who never falters in her mastery of its vast, arcane subject: the ultimate fates of mortal gods and men. She is the earliest female voice in Old Norse known to us. As the poem is partly about the Sibyl herself, we must pay special attention to its autobiographical passages, and it should also prove helpful to read *Vǫluspá* in the light of other references to Sibyls and sorceresses in early Icelandic literature.[484]

Just as he argues for a female composer, similarly Pálsson's reading of *Vǫluspá* is extremely focused on the themes of magic, gender and liminality. His explanation of the term *vǫlva* is particularly interesting, in light of other definitions. The Cleasby Vigfusson dictionary, for example, states that *vǫlva* is synonymous with *seiðkona* and *spákona*, and that such terms may be translated as 'prophetess,' 'Sibyl', or 'wise woman.'[485] In defining the art of *seiðr*, Neil Price translates the word *vǫlva* as 'staff-bearer', *seiðkona* as 'seiðr-woman,' *spákona* as 'prophecy-woman' and *spákerling* as 'old prophecy-woman'[486] These are very specific terms, and, while magic-adjacent, have far more complex connotations than 'witch.' In his substantial introduction to the poem, and its speaker, however, Pálsson talks a great deal about 'witchcraft.' His definition includes the definitions 'sorceress' and 'witch' and, although he refers to *útiseta* and its human context, he also makes a point of linking the word to Latin cognates which reference the female body:

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[484] Hermann Pálsson, *Vǫluspá: The Sibyl's Prophecy* (Madison, 1996), p. 14-15.
[485] *The Cleasby-Vigfusson Old Norse to English Dictionary* (2nd.Ed., 1975), p.721-2.
[486] Price, *The Viking Way*, pp. 63-3 and p. 125.

The term *vǫlva*, 'a Sibyl, prophetess, sorceress, witch,' derives from the noun *völr* 'a staff, wand'. The basic meaning of the root is something 'cylindrical, round'; related to this notion is the act of 'turning, rotating' as in the Latin verb *volvo* 'I roll, turn about'. As the Norse terms we are dealing with have magical associations, it is worth noting that ON *völsi,* a derivative of *völr,* meant 'a phallus', whereas Latin *vǫlva, vulva* denoted 'the womb, the matrix of women and she-animals'. The Sibyl belonged to a primitive culture where sex and witchcraft could be inextricably bound together.[487]

This reading is a very definite step in influencing less experienced readers as to what the poem is about, and, while (as previously mentioned) it has been demonstrated in no uncertain terms that magic, sex and gender are certainly linked in Old Norse literature, this particular gloss of the word encourages over-simplification of such themes. The above draws more attention to the notion of the speaker's body and physicality than the poem itself defines, when her real importance lies in the authority of her voice, and the wisdom and visions she is privileged to communicate.

Again stating inspiration from Sophus Bugge, Pálsson presents the argument that the narrative persona is Heiðr, whose name he translates (inaccurately) as 'bright'.[488] He analyses a great deal of the subject matter within the poem by drawing links between what he calls the 'autobiographical passages' of the unseen *vǫlva* speaker and other varied references to magical and prophesying figures in medieval Icelandic literature, such as *Þorbjörg lítilvǫlva*. While a great deal of the information he shares provides a very useful and relevant grounding in Old Norse literature, figures and culture, and particularly female figures of all kinds (making this a far better introduction than Salus's of Auden) it still focuses primarily on deciphering how the speaker might be identified as a 'person' in a literary and historical context, rather than interpreting her primarily from a literary critical and functional perspective, as one of many narrative devices which communicate something of contextual mindsets. It is no wonder that Jamie, while reading this translation, developed such a strong impression of and attachment to the narrative persona as a misunderstood historical individual (particularly regarding Pálsson's rejection of the idea that a poet - presumably a man - ever 'pretended' to write her,) and that she used this concept as the strongest premise for her writing, and her introductory remarks (see above).

One other key factor in the poem's translation is that Pálsson states there are two possible meanings for *iötnar/jǫtnar*, one 'giants' (like Ymir's kin) and the other 'Sami wizard/witch/warlock;' although he does not exactly refute the former, he goes on to give his reading of the poem mostly according to the latter definition.[489] It is important to note that this reading is extremely

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[487]Price, *The Viking Way*, p. 15-16.

[488]Pálsson, *Vǫluspá*, p. 17. For an analysis of the word, see McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', p. 42.

[489]See Pálsson, *Vǫluspá*, pp. 25-6. He claims that '*iötnar/jǫtnar*' is based (as he explains) very loosely on the low German cognate *eteninne* ('witch, or sorceress') and that the word is used ambivalently in the poem, with both connotations possible.

unorthodox.[490] Larrington, whose translation is widely accepted to be the most accurate to date, translates *iötnar* as 'giants' and the nine *íviðiur* (strophe 2) as 'giant women.'[491] Dronke also chooses 'giants' without elaboration on what that word signifies, other than that she differentiates between that race and humans, and translates *íviðiur* as 'wood ogresses' - a species whose potential literary and mythological parallels she explores, but upon whom she also does not attempt to impose a human reading.[492] Pálsson, however, provides lengthy (and, to a beginner's eye, very convincing) geographical, literary and historical arguments behind this reading of *iötnar/jǫtnar* as pertaining to a liminal, powerful form of humanity.

In explaining the speaker's upbringing, Pálsson draws upon the potential parallels of the female guardian spirits in *Vafþruðnismál* also said to be raised by *iötnar*, suggesting that their ability to hover over the sea was a sign they were probably sorceresses raised by wizards rather than generic supernatural beings. In order to attempt to reconstruct a more detailed biography for his 'composer,' Pálsson also refers to several instances in Icelandic literature when Sami wizards and prophetesses foster children and pass on their knowledge, concluding that the 'composer' was probably Northern Norwegian fostered and trained in 'witchcraft' in Samiland or Finnmark.[493] While he does not impose a more human identity upon the three female 'trolls' (*þurs*) who come out of *Iötunheimr* in strophe 8, he does not neglect to mention the literary parallel of magical Sami figures within Old Norse narratives, who inevitably are reported to trigger destruction and chaos in the societies they infiltrate, or to draw others away from civilisation.[494] One classic example of these figures is Snæfríðr, who features in both *Ágrip* (*Heimskringla*) and *Haralds þáttr hárfagra* (*Flateyarbók*), and is analysed in an overview of similarly disruptive Sami figures by Pálsson.[495]

In Pálsson's defence, the terminology of races and species in Eddic translation is difficult to analyse at the best of times, not least because of the probability that the poetic versions we have are literary conglomerates spanning several periods, contexts and views, rather than 'complete' works as dictated by modern standards. For an experienced Old Norse readership, the blurred thematic lines between giants, Sami and witchcraft is an accepted conundrum, and there are indeed grounds for interpreting certain figures and ritualistic implications within the poem as Sami-related. Although he disagrees with Pálsson's definitive reading, John McKinnell discusses potential expectations

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[490]For a thorough exploration of this term, see Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, *Jǫtnar in War and Peace : The Jǫtnar in Old Norse Mythology : Their Nature and Function* (Reykjavík, 2018).
[491]See Larrington (trans.),*The Poetic Edda,* p.4.
[492]*Vǫluspá*, *The Poetic Edda*, p. 7, pp. 31-9 and p. 110.
[493]Pálsson, *Vǫluspá*, p. 24. Confusingly, in his notes for strophe 22, he interprets the word 'wicked' (which refers to the people who request Heiðr's services) as referring to Sami people specifically, and a sign that the speaker herself feels negatively towards her clientele, citing Gunnhildr in *Heimskringla* (who has her Sami wizard guardians killed by Norwegians) as a literary parallel (see p. 17 of the same volume).
[494]Pálsson, *Vǫluspá*, pp. 24-6.
[495]See Hermann Pálsson, 'The Sami People in Old Norse Literature', *Nordlit 3, no. 1,* (1999), pp. 29-53.

regarding völur figures and Sami connections in Old Norse literary contexts.[496] Else Mundal also expands on the links between *jǫtnar* and *Sami*, pointing out the many parallels in the depictions of these races and of the *dvergr* within the Old Norse literary corpus, and demonstrating that such depictions are not consistently positive or negative, or even indicative of a fixed power balance.[497] There are also obvious grounds for reading the poem, especially its female figures and remarks on their power, in the negative context of Old Norse Christian literary stereotyping and perceived racial liminality. As Nicolas Meylan has demonstrated, the many magical tropes employed in *konungasögur* paint a flattering picture of ideal manhood and kingship; in these texts, specific magical or racial qualities in an undesirable individual are rarely described in detail, as the main focus is on establishing the status quo that such beings do *not* fit, with the result that there are numerous examples of Sami people, otherworldly beings, magical practitioners, pagan worshippers and women grouped together under the same banner.[498] Overall, however, most academics would agree that the *vǫlva* is probably not meant to be read as a Sami woman (insofar as anyone can claim she 'has' any one 'identity'), and that interpreting giants as 'Sami witch/wizard' in an Eddic context is extremely misleading, particularly to readers without specialist knowledge of the Old Norse pantheon.

Furthermore, to twentieth-century audiences unaware of the context of such vocabulary in Old Norse, the word 'witch' brings to mind two stereotypes. The first kind is the figurehead of fairy tales and Shakespearean villains: a crone or seductress, generally evil or selfish, framed by a setting of high church inquisitions and village rumours, and (although the word 'witch' itself is ancient) the product of later, more central european contexts of religious and political upheaval.[499] The second, offshoot stereotype is the figure (itself part fiction and a product of feminist retellings) of the misunderstood, liminal woman, following her own calling (sometimes benign, sometimes not so much) in spite of contrasting societal expectations, who draws upon certain powers to aid her endeavours. The latter can be majorly attributed to the ongoing boom in witch-related content that gained momentum in the 80s, itself representative of a key nodal point where burgeoning fantasy genres met a growing feminist literary consciousness, which inspired works too numerous to list.[500]

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[496]See McKinnell, 'On Heiðr and Gullveig', p. 42. McKinnell's descriptor, unfortunately, is 'Lappish,' which is now considered politically incorrect.

[497]See E. Mundal, 'The perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse sources', *Shamanism and Northern Ecology*, J. Pentikäinen (ed.), (Berlin, 1996), pp. 97-116, and 'Coexistence of Saami and Norse culture — Reflected in and Interpreted by Old Norse Myths' (presented at The International Saga Conference, Sydney, 2000), http://sagaconference.org/SC11/SC11_Mundal.pdf (accessed 3rd January, 2025).

[498]N. Meylan, 'Magic, Discourse of Invective', *Magic and Kinship in Medieval Iceland* (Turnhout, 2014). See also Cole, 'Æsirism: The Impossibility of Ideological Neutrality in Snorra Edda', pp. 27-48.

[499]See the entirety of R. Hutton, *The Witch* (Yale University Press, 2018), which meticulously charts the long history of the public fear of witches.

[500]Key examples of this late twentieth-century 'witch boom' include non-fiction works like Erica Jong's feminist compendium *Witches* (New York, 1981), as well as novels like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (New York, 1982) (now highly controversial by association with the author's crimes of child sex abuse), John Updike's *The*

Considering that both Pálsson and Jamie released their work in the 90s, most amateur readers would probably have associated their version of the vǫlva with both these stereotypes.

In conclusion, much like Auden's heavy-handed restructuring and magical language choices, Pálsson's insistence on a Sami reading, and his stated certainty over the composer's identity, dramatically alter how the medieval text would be received. Beginners who read Pálsson as their introduction could conceivably begin to see the narrative voice as historical, not literary, and furthermore (as a figure whose words, he claims, have been 'wrongly' attributed to poets) a signifier of a suppressed or misunderstood female type that was already well-established in public consciousness. His explanation of the poetic context and landscape also illustrates a very specific social and racial dichotomy, in which the narrative persona herself, though clearly courted and respected for her skills, is aligned in some way with mistrusted outcasts. Jamie, with her sensitivity to racism, sexism and elitism, clearly found this reading extremely validating in the face of her own experiences.

Jamie's Translation and Re-oralization

This heightened impression of a wise, liminal and subtly intimidating witch would retain weight, and become exaggerated in Kathleen Jamie's interpretation of *Vǫluspá*. It is already clear that she was drawn towards the poem, not only because of her wider interests in women's voices, folklore and mythology, but because it afforded her the opportunity to write the powerful, female voice she wished to hear and embody. As mentioned, this was an approach which was to work in synchronisation, with both the cultural preoccupation with witch figures and stories, but also, on a more personal level, with her own, and Scottish female contemporaries' efforts to bring unspoken, ignored or belittled female voices into the foreground.[501] Her stated intention to 'open it out' for general readers works in conjunction with her keenness to invest in, and communicate, the composer-cum-seeress theory, implying that her desire for clarity was closely related to a wider desire for equality, not simply in gender but also in the perceived importance of types of readership.

Jamie's mixed reactions to Auden, and her support of Pálsson's stance on a female composer, both seem reflective of her own reported experiences, and subsequently her translation presents a highly interesting balance of effects. Although it took her work another step away from the poem in the academic sense, her approach was to prove enlightening in a very different and valuable manner. While her particular take on the poem does not always represent what we have left of the medieval

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Witches of Eastwick (New York, 1984), Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* (New York, 1995) and Rachel Jordan's *The Raging Quiet* (New York, 1999).

[501]See, for example, L. Lochhead *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (Edinburgh, 1987) and C. A. Duffy, *The World's Wife* (London, 1999).

texts, her individualistic and highly personalised approach to the work as a whole also represents aspects of the medieval poem which are much more difficult to glean from manuscripts alone, and in ways which previous page translators had never done. In the following section, I will explore how Jamie's *Vǫluspá*interprets the combination of medieval and modern source material she mentions, how she made the poem her own, empowering piece for its own context, and how it continues to have importance in a receptions and performance studies context. I will divide my analysis in two halves, beginning with the translation - which, for the purposes of this thesis, I have transcribed myself (see Appendix 1) - and following with the performative and technological aspects of the work's setting.

The Translation

Jamie's translation itself is both accessible and extremely interesting. Although adhering relatively closely to the order and content of the medieval poem (see below for the main exception), Jamie's poem is a prose poem, alliterative but with free-flowing long lines, and structured more like a story than a formal work.[502] In this sense, she has stayed quite close to Pálsson's more direct style of prose translation, even though the two cannot strictly be compared as works of art. Her plain, loose style of language is very different from the clipped, restrictive quality of Auden's English, and, while far from a perfect representation, is far more suitable for conveying the sense and timbre of the original language. Her strong use of Scots dialect, often regarding names and places, is especially appropriate in terms of its linguistic relationship with Old Norse; for example, the god Baldur, who is *Óðins barni* (strophe 32), becomes 'Odin's bairn.' Structurally, her use of prose poetry allows a great deal more fluidity and variety of textures than adherence to a metre would have achieved.

This all helps to add a certain sense of continuity with the medieval work, but also becomes Jamie's way of taking ownership of the persona's voice, lending it her sense of nationality along with the accent. Along with the core content, she has made several small additions to give the poem her own particular style, and to ornament it in ways that make sense to her emotional response. It is not my intention here to analyse every deliberate deviation from medieval order and content (which Jamie knew from Pálsson's text), as that would make another whole analytical piece in itself; instead, I will focus on the aspects of it which pertain specifically to her emotive and empowering interpretation of the female persona, and to the ways in which her work centralises women. While dwelling on this particular area of interest, however, I will also aim to demonstrate what makes Jamie's version particularly important to Old Norse reception studies as a whole.

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[502]I must note here that the commentary on line length is entirely based on my own judgement in transcription, according to the nuances in the author's voice and pauses. Her style of reading was that of a professional storyteller. I will comment more on this process and its import later.

To begin, I should note that the *vǫlva* figure of the Old Norse poem is not, herself, an entirely neutral presence; in fact, one could interpret her as antagonistic towards Odin and the Aesir. The representative of the 'other' in the cosmos, to whom the hegemony of gods must occasionally turn to receive information beyond their perception, her tone often comes across as decidedly caustic during her prophecy. Therefore, by building on the persona of the vǫlva to make her own work, Jamie is by no means making a cataclysmic change to the tonality of the material. What is noteworthy, however, is the way in which she has simplified and concretised other, more vague aspects of that voice and the world of the poem to make it tell a very definite story, which goes far beyond what the medieval material suggests, and is more attuned to contemporary issues and interests. The introduction Jamie gives before her reading (see p4 and appendix) is a paratext which affects how it will be received; it ensures that late contemporary audiences - particularly women - are primed to receive the poem itself with some form of sympathetic feeling towards the speaker, as they have been told that the fears she will express are similar to our own today, and that the voice they will hear is representative of a suppressed female figure. Jamie's structural editing of the translation very much fulfils this expectation, in that it imposes a far greater sense of personhood on the unknown speaker herself, solidifying and simplifying her identity.

Presumably taking her cue from Auden, Jamie introduces the *vǫlva* with adaptations of stanzas 28-30, which relate to the figure Heiðr, and changing the address from third person to a lyrical, first person accusative ('me' rather than 'her'). Although this approach is not in keeping with the mysticism of the medieval text, and was highly incompatible with Auden's very restrained style, much like the language style it makes Jamie's more fluid, wordy introduction even more pointed and powerful in its own way:

Piano clash

musical, repetitive chanting which continues for a few bars alone, then with skin drum beats under the poet's voice

Bright, they call me, Heidar, and bright I remain, a favourite with the wicked, the bright-eyed seer. I charm magic wands, I journey between homesteads, I journey among nine worlds beneath this earth. Bright, they call me, a skilled witch.

Do you want more? (echo effect begins up until the next repetition of this refrain)

Three times they burned her. She was born again. Three times they burned her, yet she is still alive.

Do you want more?

I remember the beginning of the ages. I, the darling of my people, the northern sorcerers. I see far into the future, throughout every world.

So listen up, you rabble and mighty alike, as I tell the lore, the tales of the ancients, as I do the bidding of Odin himself, terror of the old gods, father of victory and the slain. Hear now the stories of the earliest times. Odin insists I tell it well, and I will.[503]

This early self-introduction, which causes listeners to visualise a human character, is in keeping with Jamie's more personal response to the *vǫlva* herself as an individual and composer rather than a mouthpiece or device. In the medieval text, her power is established simply by the call to listen, and by the sense of a hall space in which an audience themselves are already waiting for the pronouncement.[504] Instead, 'Heidar' is the sole focus for those opening moments, and while there is still a sense of performance, it is not about the space but about the person, and there is a hiatus in the poem's sense of purpose as a result. Admittedly, some of the momentum lost at the opening is re-established by Jamie's use repeated refrain of 'do you want more?', which is a simplified, powerful translation of the more wordy Old Norse refrain 'Vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?'[505] Where the Old Norse text features this refrain nine times, Jamie repeats it - including variations on the same phrase - fifteen times. This, perhaps more than any other aspect of the poem, serves to establish the poem's sense of ritual exchange, and the intrinsic role of the implied audience in building a sense of tense expectation as the prophecy unfolds, so that the audience hangs onto her every word.

It is also interesting, from both an academic and feminist point of view, that Jamie initially adopts the stance of the narrator being under orders from Odin to tell what he already knows. The implications behind the power balance within the medieval text are quite complex; Odin has requested the speaker to share her visions, and thus seemingly has some hold over her, but at certain points in the poem, her manner could be read as superior, as well as antagonistic, to Odin. Many readers of the medieval text assume that she is informing the god of future events, and therefore holds dominance in knowledge. This is an understandable assumption: if we interpret her according to the trope of the summoned dead seeress, as in *Baldrs draumar* - the text of which, admittedly, has a great deal in common with *Vǫluspá*- then it is implied that she does, indeed, know more than the god.[506] As Gísli Sigurðsson points out, however, the elements of the poem pertaining to *seiðr* and *utiseta* (the human practice of sitting outside to obtain visions) tell a slightly different story, in that practitioners were meant to obtain their visions by the grace of Odin, indicating that it is he who 'grants' the information.[507] At this opening point, Jamie's narrator remains more

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[503]As there is no existing textual version of the poem or radio script, the delineations in this and all following quotations from Jamie's 'Voluspá' are my own, based on both my knowledge of the original Eddic structure and on the natural pauses I registered in the poet's reading voice. I have included references to sound effects in every quotation as they appear in the recording; these will be discussed separately where appropriate, but are so integral a part of the work, and the ways in which the whole piece is received, that it is necessary to include them here as well.

[504]Dronke, '*Vǫluspá:* Commentary', in *The Poetic Edda,* Vol. 2, p. 105.

[505]Dronke, '*Vǫluspá:* Commentary', in *The Poetic Edda,* Vol. 2, p. 14.

[506]*Baldrs Draumar*, *The Poetic Edda* Vol. 2, pp. 154-7.

[507]See Sigurðsson, '*Vǫluspá* As The Product Of An Oral Tradition: What Does That Entail?' pp. 45-63.

outwardly respectful, but this perspective is shown to change quite dramatically. In the below section from the middle of the poem, which details the *vǫlva* sitting out and communing with the god, the power balance is indicated to lie more with her:

> I sat outside alone in the spirit-laden night when Odin came - looked me in the eye, his one good eye. What do you want? Why try me Odin, father of the slain? Why challenge me, I who know everything? I know you pledged that other eye at Mimir's well, for a mouthful of wisdom. I see the river splash mud over that eye, and Mimir drinking every morning from his glorious, mead-sweet well. Do you understand, thou terror of the gods? Why look me in the eye and read me, I who see far, wide through every world, nine worlds beneath this earth?

The words 'I know everything' are taken from Pálsson, and so we may attribute the more definite power balance to his example, but nevertheless the decidedly derisive undertone is Jamie's alone. Despite his continuing power to make requests, this section marks the diminishment of the god's mystic power - Odin is more in the position of the employer, with his show of might lying more explicitly in the riches he gives in return for prophecy. Jamie's version, therefore, reads the balance of power very much in the narrator's favour, and imbues the dialogue with a far more pointed mockery at Odin's expense, and far more emphasis on her own superior powers of vision. Even though the god is, himself, clearly powerful, he is portrayed far more as a nuisance - a part of a system she serves only grudgingly. When she asks him why he is testing her, there is an element of combativeness and self-assertion, but also discomfort, as if the narrator does not find her working relationship with the god easy - this is an additional layer to the more mystic sense of rhetorical formula in the medieval text, in which questions are more a vehicle. In this sense, Jamie's reading is a more explicit take on the suggestions of a clash in the medieval text, and, true to its time, is very much written in the context of explicitly challenging a patriarchal power. One feels that she is using Odin as a representative of any and all men who try to patronise and exclude women, which renders her chastising and teasing all the more powerful and enjoyable to hear.

By following the example of Pálsson's translation of '*völu[vǫlva]*' as 'witch' as opposed to the less loaded term of 'seer' or 'prophetess,' the poem sets a very definite, modern theme of persecution against magical females which is far more explicit than the scraps of magical inference within the manuscript text, and very reminiscent of the later middle ages. Again, this is unsurprising when we consider that Jamie is working from the belief that the poem reflects societal anxieties about conversion. The word 'witch' is present from the outset, meaning that the audience are bound to interpret her in the more modern sense of magical practitioner, and that many will also think of her in association with fantasy and feminist writing (see above). Moreover, the pronouns are all first person, and the repetitive balance of the phrase 'Bright they call me, and bright I remain' immediately establishes that the presence is one who endures, despite implied challenges.

As with Auden, the use of first person persists throughout (in Jamie's voice), and the prioritisation and reordering of these opening lines pertaining to 'Heidr' greatly simplifies how the narrative persona is interpreted overall. The primary impression given in these opening lines is of a very distinct personality, someone with a high position in their own circle, and an uncanny presence who inspires a certain awe. However, Jamie's narrator's self-introduction, with its combined detail from various parts of the poem, seems to suggest that she is not necessarily a recognisable or welcome presence within the implied audience (i.e. those 'present' to hear her); in the Old Norse text, the speaker defines her own importance by not introducing herself, which is indicative of the high position she holds, and of the fact that her audience is meant to know her, thus her poetic role is dictated by what she will present and how.[508] Here, the narrative persona's early mention of her name, and description of her own talents, invokes a more modern, autobiographical tone, like that of a novel or romantic ballad (the particular phrasing means that both Herman Melville's opening line of 'Call me Ishmael' in *Moby-Dick*, and Marlene Dietrich singing 'They Call me Naughty Lola' spring to mind).

As these particular stanzas speak of Heidar in the third person, according to the hearsay of others ('they call me' and not 'I am'), she presents herself more as a notorious, rather subversive figure rather than one of command and universal respect. All of this means that the persona is more actively established as an ordinary fantasy character (albeit an intriguing one), rather than an omnipresent voice, and is from the beginning defined by her deviance and her magical craft, rather than her clairvoyance. The tone of the narrator, as Jamie writes her, is also uniquely tongue-in-cheek: unlike the courtly register of the Old Norse introductory stanza, the group she addresses are not *helgar kindir* ('holy kindred') but 'you rabble and mighty alike.' This comes across as wry and teasing, suggestive of a power dynamic being questioned or dismantled, and making the point that the prophecy is intended to be relevant to everyone, regardless of their position of power. Similarly, the line 'a favourite with the wicked,' in conjunction with this restructuring of material, now reads in a way that implies a likely antagonistic response from the male hegemonies of this narrative world, who judge the 'wicked' ('they'). Her words may also be read as a nod to those who formed the elite circles pressuring her to work in a certain way, and whom she clearly thought (probably fairly) would have judged her interpretation of this figure as unacademic or too feminine.

All of the above communicates the power of the narrative persona in a very different manner to the Old Norse text, in that it is implied she is deliberately taking centre stage as a woman of power, and that her identity is important to the poem's reception. This assertive, very personal opening is, in a way, a response to her own instinct (based on experience) that the possibility of a woman composer will be suppressed. It is also likely that, to a non-specialist audience, the term 'witch,' and the early

[508]See Dronke, *Vǫluspá,* 'Commentary', p. 105.

focus and repeated emphasis throughout upon the burning of Gullveig, would have sparked other, more modern, central European connotations in Jamie's radio audiences than might have been intended by Pálsson for his readers - an example of the problematic and less easily-controlled aspects of adaptations. In Jamie's case, such connotations were perhaps an added enrichment that nodded towards her Scots heritage, and the aforementioned female folkloric stereotypes which she utilised as figureheads in her poetry. With the violent history of witchcraft in Scotland, and its many narratives of women wrongfully killed by Christian authorities, it seems understandable that Jamie might have wanted to link the female figures of her own history with the witchlike figure of the seeress as presented by Pálsson, and marry the two for the common purpose of evoking the flaws inherent within a system which demonises women and female power. Her mocking tonality is, itself, suggestive of anger - a suggestion further augmented by her repeated phrase 'the holy of holies' to describe the gods, which lends them a meddling and sanctimonious overtone reminiscent of extreme Christianity.

Furthermore, Jamie rearranges and makes a core motif from one very specific part of the poetic content that Auden does not, namely the burning of Gullveig. The phrase 'three times they burned her' is taken completely out of context (strophe 21 in the *Codex Regius*), and is placed in such a way that the narrator and Gullveig (whose name is not mentioned until later in the poem) seem to be the same figure.[509] This is a deliberate deviation from Pálsson's views on the identity of Gullveig, and also ensures that uninitiated audiences view the narrative persona specifically as a burned witch who has either come back from the dead or used her powers to survive the flames.[510] This places her, again, very firmly in the context of oppressed historical and fantasy women (particularly in the context of the violent Scottish history of witchcraft) and in a way which establishes the persona as a rebellious figurehead. As a result, when the poem returns to Gullveig's burning, that event does not appear as a violent one-off; instead, the burning of, and other violence against women is reinforced as a major thematic thread of the poem, providing a frame of victimisation which was not present in the Old Norse. Even though the name of Gullveig has the potential to change the audience's perspective on whether she and the narrator are meant to be the same person, the reinforcement of the opening lines mean that the burning is still consciously associated with the narrator herself, and is thus suggestive of her own experience of oppression as a witch.

Pálsson's commentary regarding his translation of *iötnar* also affects Jamie's adaptations of the poem's magical and mythological content very distinctly, enhancing the witch identity that she has built for her narrative persona. While neither the vǫlva narrator not Heiðr are ever afforded kinship with a certain people, she introduces herself as 'the darling of my people, the northern sorcerers.'

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[509]This effect is aided by the technical effect of another voice echoing the poet on those lines during the reading. See next section for details.

[510]See Pálsson, *Vǫluspá*, p. 17 and E. Mundal, 'Austr sat in aldna... Giantesses and Female Powers in *Vǫluspá*', in *Mythological Women: Studies in Memory of Lotte Motz*, (Vienna, 2002), pp. 191-3.

One may read this as a bolstering of Jamie's Scottish identity, but also as a way to set an implied dynamic of 'us' versus 'you,' enhancing her aura of liminality and her distance from the mainstream or hegemonic - a stance that aligned well with both persona and her own story. After her introduction, she begins the memory section of the poem:

> I remember the furthest remotes of time, when warlocks raised me, giants in wisdom, the northern shaman. Nine witches, I recall, who taught me, weird(/wyrd) women, nine, and nine other worlds beneath this world...

Here, the magical concepts have completely and very obviously replaced the more nebulous one of 'jötuns', and the word 'giants', generally used as a noun in translation, is cleverly shaped to become a metaphorical signifier, indicative of greatness in skill rather than a difference in race, and the nine 'giantesses' or 'wood ogresses' (Dronke) have simply become 'witches.' While a clear nod to the two possible meanings described by Pálsson, there is no longer any vagueness as to whom audiences are meant to picture. The only giant being in the poem who escapes humanisation is Ymir, who is described as 'that meltwater giant, father of sorcerers.' Similarly, in what is the equivalent of the eighth stanza in *Codex Regius*, the word 'giants' merely becomes a vague addendum to 'sorcerers':

> Nothing worried them, in this life of plenty [a distant horn sounds] until, unbidden, from out of sinister Ychtenheimr, the northern land of sorcerers and giants, there arrived among them witches, three unchancy dames. [extended horn notes] How to respond to this disaster?

Here, the word is more a way to encapsulate the fabled quality of northern territory than to describe the women who come out of it. The translation of the word *þurs* ('troll' in Pálsson's translation) as 'witches' and 'unchancy (unlucky or threatening) dames,' while relevant in terms of the etymological and conceptual links between 'troll' and 'magic,' and tonally accurate in that 'troll' is most often a negative term heralding magical damage or threat, removes the inhuman overtones which the original flexibility of the word would have allowed for medieval readers.[511] Furthermore, the sense of menace to the Aesir from these women, which is only implied in the poem by the ensuing creation dwarfs (which feels like a response to that event), is emphatically evoked here by the word 'sinister,' as well as 'unchancy', and by the poet's naming the event as a 'disaster.' While there is an inherent misogyny in Old Norse literature, which helps to exacerbate interracial tension in the Old Norse cosmos - and which plays a strong role in this poem - this particular rewriting of it simplifies the issue somewhat further, bringing the issue of cosmic tension back, far more generally, to women and magic. In the context of Jamie's introductory remarks, and others she has made about the poetry world and its male leaders, this particular showcasing of tension is easy to read as a reflection of the ongoing misogyny and inequality in her own time.

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[511]For a detailed exploration of the many possible definitions of 'troll' in the sense of being, type and practice, and as noun, prefix and verb, see Ármann Jakobsson, *The Troll Inside You* (Santa Barbara, 2017).

Lastly, although Jamie gives most of her attention to enhancing the speaker's role, and the disruptive feminine aspects of creation, she also makes noticeable attempts to bring other female figures and experiences into sharper focus in other ways. In the part of *Vǫluspá* which discusses the people punished in the afterlife, the text mentions 'þannz annars glepr eyrarúno' ('the seducer of another man's close-trusted wife').[512] Jamie alters the perspective, so that the line reads 'a man who ruined a girl already betrothed:' now, the woman in the equation has the wrong done to her directly, not as another man's possession, and her youth is also emphasised so that she becomes more clearly a victim of sexual exploitation. Frigg's status as a mother is also emphasised, and, while the killing of her son is narrated in past tense, her weeping (as opposed to the medieval poem) is in the present tense, as if she is weeping still (and as if her grief is the thing of most importance against Odin's revenge play. The image of Frigg's tears is also repeated twice at the scene of the last battle (the medieval poem only mentions her grief once), and the theme of motherly grief is extended with her mention of the dying Thor being the 'son of mother earth':

> Then Odin, her beloved Odin, father of victory, father of the slain, the one-eyed, the poet, Odin pits himself against the wolf, Fenris...And Frigg again will weep a mother's tears, as her son Freyr, still calling for his favoured sword, falls to Surtr's blade (lone male war cry). And who would best avenge the death of Odin, but another son... The venom shocks him, Thor, the brave defender. He staggers back, he staggers nine steps back, the son of mother earth. Earth, whose people are fled, Earth, where every home now lies abandoned.

While small details, these mentions of motherhood and of the human race shifts focus from the battle itself somewhat, suggesting a sense of wider tragedy in this dynamic of violent death and vengeance, which, Jamie suggests, is a masculine dynamic, causing women and less powerful beings to suffer even more at second hand.

All these slight shifts in tonality and perspective, and her responses to the works written by Pálsson and Auden, means that Jamie's translation has moved quite a distance from the poetry sources we have. This, however, is not the point; the major point of interest is what Jamie's work has achieved with regards to its own time frame, and to receptions scholarship. Firstly, unlike Auden, Jamie has reproduced and framed the Eddic material within a more personalised and imaginative context, and practically demonstrated *mouvance* in a modern setting. By deliberately 'opening up' the work for mainstream UK audiences, and presenting a more sympathetic, less rarefied view of medieval history, she has alluded to the elitism in her own world, and has made the poem far more accessible and relevant to the public. Secondly, by adopting the stance that this is a real woman speaking, and by adopting the liminal reading of Pálsson, she has also provided a point of reference from which to express the emotional experience of a powerful woman 'on the outside,' and thus created a persona

[512] *Vǫluspá, The Poetic Edda* Vol.2, strophe 38, p. 105.

that would have spoken to the feelings and concerns of many women at the time. Her work is not simply creative, but reactive, commentative, and built on a bedrock of dissent against assumed disapproval. Engaging with scholarship too closely would have inevitably blunted the emotive power of her narrative in its own right. Powerful as it is transcribed to the page, however, it is far more powerful in its intended aural setting.

A Note on Delivery and Setting

The most obvious difference in Jamie's translation of *Vǫluspá*compared to all others (at least, up until that point in time), and the aspect that gives her work most power to affect others, is that it was read aloud (albeit recorded) rather than published. This means that its audience experienced the poem aurally, as Terry Gunnell and others in the field of performance studies claim it was originally meant to be received. The power play in this approach, for the poet and for her audience, is that she is delivering this medieval work in a way that feels intimate, not distant or 'clever,' and is not only making it her own, but, by her example, encouraging others to engage creatively, and bringing the material back into an entertainment setting. It was a very definite move against older, more traditionalist generations of readers, and the (at that time) still relatively exclusive world of universities.

Recording a poem, admittedly, imposes certain limitations in its own way: firstly, much like a manuscript, Jamie's recording represents one cell in the whole 'body' of a work's transmission, and remains as one, fixed representation of something that was most likely performed many times, and in similar ways, over an extended period. Being an experience of the moment, it is very much controlled by outside factors that direct the imagination more decisively. A text imposes some control, but still offers a space in which we may imagine the quality and tonality of voice, and multiple interpretations are possible. The audience's reception of a recorded poem, on the other hand, is far more passive, as the performer's voice (although able to create flexibility of expression) and order of content provide the only set element they can access. Listeners instead form their personal responses at second hand, as with any music or theatre piece, according to how the speaker chooses to interpret the material. The absence of a manuscript removes the flexibility of annotation or flicking through with ease, and prevents our interpreting physical factors such as materiality, scansion, metre or alineation, leaving only the rhythm and dramatic emphases which the speaker deems appropriate.

In other words, the audience has no choice but to experience Jamie's poem as a set entity, even if they may run back a recording to re-listen to certain parts again. In this sense, although still powerful, the poem may be said to lack the extra intimacy and connection afforded by a live

performance, and so, if an audience is looking to 'feel' something of the experience of a live telling, the effect is somewhat blunted via radio. As Mark Amodio explains, the interchange of energy between performer and audience, defined by instinct, context and the ability to watch, listen to and 'feel' the space, can never be fully explained or described beyond vague terms, like 'X-factor' or 'something special.'[513]As a recording cuts out this sense of a powerful exchange, which (as mentioned) is somewhat present in the Eddic poem, one might argue that Jamie's strength of voice and message has lost some of its most affecting potential through being recorded.

That being said, however, the advantages and valuable questions triggered by Jamie's approach far outweigh the disadvantages. Unlike a manuscript, reactions to hearing a voice in the moment are bound to be more emotive and instantaneous. Jamie's reading allows audiences something much closer to the lived experience of oral culture, in that it was presented in a set context, time and space, with the audience's momentary responses as an intrinsic part of the whole. While the printed word is far from devoid of emotive potential, listening rather than looking adds a dimension of emotional engagement that has the potential to cause other, far more unpredictable responses. Jamie's reoralization of the poem (to borrow Stephen Tranter's term) means that the audience are receiving not only a practical representation of orality, but also a far more intense sensory experience and that, thanks to Jamie's deliberately seeking to demystify it stylistically, they need little or no assistance to understand her version, allowing a natural reaction in the moment.[514] There is also another aspect of medieval culture with which it might be associated: instead of recreating an Old Norse performance arena (as John Miles Foley would call it) or ritualistic space, Jamie's radio reading of the poem evokes that of the more intimate reading space of the home, or the communal workspace.[515] Over radio, she becomes a voice to be projected directly into the home environment as though another person were sitting next to us, allowing listeners to envision the hybrid, more intimate aspect of oral culture mentioned by Frog, Pernille Hermann and Tranter, in

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[513]M. C. Amodio, 'Embodying the Oral Tradition: Performance and Performative Poetics in and of *Beowulf*', in *John Miles Foley's World of Oralities: Text, Tradition and Contemporary Oral Theory*, pp. 52-3. For further reading on oral literature and the intersection between performance, technology and media, see W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (Malton, 1982), H. Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and its Technologies* (New York, 2016) and U. Le Guin, 'Telling is Listening', *The Wave in the Mind* (Boston, 2004), pp. 185-205. In the latter, the author makes an attempt at visually depicting the elusive interchange of energy between performer and receiver through a diagram of two boxes, A and B, which transmit information through the medium of a tube, with the ability to swap roles or redirect the 'flow.'

[514]Stephen Tranter uses the term 'reoralize' to describe the process by which an oral narrative is reproduced in literary form, and then reintroduced to an oral setting through retelling of some kind, e.g. a folktale which becomes an academic sermon, which is then retold in its edited version. Although he is cautious with using this term to analyse medieval texts, arguing that we can never prove an oral foundation for such works, I am nevertheless sufficiently convinced by Gunnell's arguments (and others) that *Vǫluspá* was an oral poem, and so I feel I may use the term here. See S. N. Tranter, 'Monster-Episodes in *Grettis saga*: a case of Reoralization?' (delivered at The International Saga Conference, Akureyri, 1994), http://sagaconference.org/SC09/SC09_Tranter.pdf (last accessed 29th March, 2025).

[515]See J. M. Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, University of Illinois Press (Champaign, 2012), and *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, 1995).

which manuscripts could be read aloud for entertainment or teaching, and thus had a symbiotic relationship with memory and performance.[516] More than a recitation by an actual *vǫlva* or female poet, one can envision Jamie's voice reading aloud in a firelit room of people going about their evening activities, or even as an imagined persona in a manuscript reader's head, 'speaking' to them in their memory as they learn the poem.

Jamie's poem is also particularly interesting because it is not designed to re-enact medieval oral performance, or to aim for any sense of 'authenticity' which, as Steven Breeze rightly remarks, is now an extremely common concern among many re-enactors, performers and audiences.[517] Artists who aim to reproduce or reconstruct medieval works in an historical manner (Benjamin Bagby being the most obvious contemporary parallel to Jamie in the world of medieval receptions) very often create performance models which sit in the middle of a theoretical venn diagram comprised of two spheres: researchable, tangible elements such as textual layout, and some instrumentation and costume, and unknown factors such as diction, expression and tonality, which the artist must generally interpret according to instinct, and what they believe a modern audience are likely to consider 'appropriate.'[518] Although it is an inescapable fact that no performance like this will ever be a perfect representation of medieval oral culture - indeed, as mentioned, there *is* no perfect representation - the aim of such performances is to create a microcosmic space that represents as close an approximation to 'real' as possible, and to transport modern audiences to a different sense of time. It is the sense of immediacy and presence which makes her performance powerful.

Overall, although one cannot claim that Jamie 'resituates' the work, as Ammodio says of Benjamin Bagby's *Beowulf* (as that word implies a sense of travelling backwards) I would conclude that this does not greatly matter, as a re-enactment approach would probably have gone against her intention to bring the medieval closer to our own concerns.[519] Instead, Jamie's approach mostly dispenses with the question of time altogether: the use of radio deliberately situates the piece within an anachronistic framework before it has even begun, and visual representation of the performer plays no part in our experience at all. This, and the use of electronic soundtracks, are in themselves a very deliberate statement of intent. Furthermore, as Jamie's audiences cannot see her face, outfit or gestures, there is no feature, other than our prior knowledge that the translation is of an Old Norse work, which aesthetically defines the performance as medievalist. Arguably, as she

[516]See Frog, 'How the Hell do you Read This?' in *Old Norse Poetry in Performance* (Abingdon, 2022) and P. Hermann, 'Introduction: Memory in Medieval Literature' in *Mnemonic Echoing in Old Norse Sagas* (Berlin, 2022), pp. 1-20, and 'Memory, imagery and Visuality in Old Norse Literature', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 3, (July 2015), pp. 317-40.

[517]Breeze, *Performance in Beowulf*, p. 222.

[518]For a more detailed exploration of such concerns, see Breeze, 'The Lure of the Lyre: Interpretation, Re-enactment and the Corpus',in *Performance in Beowulf*, pp. 216-29.

[519]See B. Bagby, 'Beowulf, the Edda, and the Performance of Medieval Epic: Notes from the Workshop of a Reconstructed "Singer of tales" ' in E.B. Vitz, N. F. Regalado, and M. Lawrence (eds), Performing Medieval Narrative (Martlesham, 2005), pp. 181-92.

was attempting to create a female-friendly parallel between periods, rather than impose a sense of distance for the sake of medievalism, this refusal to 're-enact' prevents the poem from falling into the territory of medieval roleplay or Cosplay - a world which has its own issues with sexism (see conclusion.)

It should also be noted that the quality of the reading brings out certain aspects of the text in a way that would not be so easy onstage. Even if not as immediately striking as a face-to-face performance, Jamie's narration, with aid of the music, undeniably helps to create a sense of tension, excitement and poignancy throughout. Furthermore, in conjunction with the more pointedly female-centric focus that Jamie has given the translation, the fact that it is spoken by a woman - quietly, calmly and authoritatively - enriches the work's sense of intent, and her claiming space to ensure emotional engagement with her on air made the recitation in itself an act of empowerment. Her regional accent is also such an act; even while it evokes a sense of the Old Norse language, it also serves to frame the poem within a recognisable locality in our own time, and brings a sense of closeness and sympathy which an RP accent - one publicly associated with 'high culture' - would not allow. Additionally, unlike Bagby or Glover, Jamie's reading over radio means she has no need for dramatic projection or an epic tonality, as the pressure for volume control falls instead on technology; by turns, she speaks firmly, wryly, quickly, vehemently, slowly and dreamily, but always at a moderate, unforced volume. Her softer, more pensive delivery, while certainly not unemotional, is poised to the extent that it sounds more like that of an audiobook narrator than someone dramatically inhabiting the vision she narrates as an actress would, whereas a reader devoid of a microphone might feel obliged to deliver the poem in a more exaggerated, 'otherworldly' manner. This has mixed effects upon our reception of the poem, as, although we are far less able to consider the poem as one meant to invoke the idea of a grandiose voice and ritual spaces, on the other hand it allows for a greater subtlety of expression and understanding. Similarly, while there is some detraction from the more obvious sense of high drama presented by the violent events of Ragnarök (such as Odin being devoured), which would be enhanced by a louder, more guttural delivery than Jamie's, such interpretations instead lend a new poignancy to the vision - especially during the more tragic passages or those pertaining to mystical women. Jamie's voice is, instead, powerful for its quiet sense of melancholy.

Radio performance also allows Jamie's voice a supernatural quality and impact in a different manner, because it speaks from an invisible source, meaning that from a performative perspective we could imagine the narrative persona speaking from inside the head, underground, the air or anywhere we pleased in the moment - a different way of communicating the spiritual power and supernatural quality of the voice, but in its own way extremely effective. The situation of the audience for a radio poem also rather interestingly creates a multidimensional poetic cosmos in its own, different way to the texts; by placing the radio listener in the position of invisible audience

member - the one whom the speaker in their designated place of recital cannot see - they become the implied 'other' audience outside the boundary of the physical performance space, and so theoretically on a level with Odin himself, who is addressed as though he hovers constantly at the fringes.[520]

The only real concession made in representing a 'medieval' aesthetic of any kind is in some of Tim Dee's choices of sound effect, which assist in defining the cosmic performance space of the poem - a concept originally implied by words and literary context alone. However, even in creating a sense of the historic, Dee's approach to creating the 'base' performance space is quite different, and extra dimensions are added to the reading which could not have existed otherwise. In the opening evocation, for example, instead of just beginning with the voice of Jamie, Dee has chosen to incorporate the song 'Gula Gula' (or 'Hear the Voices of the Foremothers') by Sami artist Mari Boine, who, as a famous advocate for her culture and the natural world, has clearly been chosen to reinforce Jamie's reading of the poem, and does so extremely evocatively. The vocal line incorporates yoiking, suggestive of the *varðlokkur* used in a *seiðr* ritual to summon spirits in medieval Scandinavian narrative.[521] The song lyrics are peculiarly apt for Jamie's introduction, and her millennial focus on global and ecological tension: *Gula gula/nieida/gánda/Gula máttut dál du čurvot/manin attát eatnama duolvat/mirkkoduvvot/guoriduvvot* ('Gula brother/ Gula sister/Hear the voices of our foremothers./ Why have you defiled the earth/ poisoned/ depleted?')[522] After a few lines of the poem, this melody fades and is replaced by a more natural sound effect of a twilight bird chorus and crickets, which suggest an outdoor backdrop. Thus, when the speaker says 'So, listen up…' she sounds like she (and presumably her audience) is outdoors.

Whether or not this setting is an implicit reference to the idea of ritualistic knowledge-gain through *útiseta*, as with Gísli Sigurðsson's interpretation of the figure, the overall suggestion is that the 'present time' from which the speaker begins contains an audience sitting out of doors, and that (judging by the quality of bird call) it is evening - the time when tale-telling for entertainment would be most likely. These tranquil effects are more suggestive of a remote area, and a small, local gathering rather than an aristocratic one, almost as if the impending narrative is folkloric rather than Eddic. Considering the poet's stated agenda of making the work more 'open' or inclusive, this is undeniably a way to make the speaker's words feel more intimate, and the occasion feel more universal and timeless, while simultaneously evoking a sense of older ritual. Quite by accident, this

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[520]Dronke, '*Vǫluspá*: Commentary,' *The Poetic Edda* Vol. 2, p. 107.

[521]The story of Þorbjörg lítilvölva in the fourth chapter of *Eiríks saga rauða* is perhaps the most famous example in Old Norse literature. For an in-depth summary of the passage and the figure, see Neil Price *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia,* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 39-41.

[522] For a full translation of the song, see Mari Boine's official discography and lyrics at https://www.mariboine.no/discography/gula-gula-hor-stammodrenes-stemme-1989/ (last accessed 5th April, 2025).

means it also becomes an interesting, practical demonstration of how the reoralization processes work within a rural context.

Another excellent use of effect is Dee's manipulation of echo and two voices; an unknown, second voice is used at various points in the monologue to double Jamie's, anticipate her words or speak the odd phrase independently of her. This means that, despite the more 'ordinary' style of introduction, the audience are made more acutely aware of the narrator's supernatural quality, and the work regains some of the more enigmatic, mystic undertone of the medieval poem:

> [echo voice/double effect: Nine worlds I know. Do you want more?]
>
> *piano clash*
>
> I see the trickster Loki, the malicious mastermind, bound and captive in a cave. Thairms[523] are his fetters, twisted guts. Do you see what I mean? [echo voice: do you see what I mean?] Siggin sits by him, her husband, miserably.
>
> [second echo voice leads: Or do you want more?]
>
> [Echo voice leads in the following sentence, saying each phrase a few seconds before Jamie] Bright, they call her, the bright-eyed seer, darling of witches, the northern shaman.

These effects also recapture something of the fluctuating perspective from first to third person in the medieval text, which (in that context) creates the sensation that the speaker can either exit her own body, or else may become a vessel through whom a separate spirit voice may communicate with the audience. Whether deliberately or not, the inclusion of two voices feeds into what scholars (Ursula Dronke especially) have debated for several years, regarding the likelihood of multiple voices being used in performing Eddic poetry during the medieval period.[524] Either way, this effect communicates the uncanny nature of the persona remarkably well (I would argue even more so than the words used in her introduction), adding to her powerful impact, and leaving the audience guessing as to exactly where she is situated, and what form they should envision her taking. The soundtrack also enhances this striking impression of the speaker's power, as Jamie's voice seems to act as a creative force which the music obeys; picture after picture rises in the mind as she speaks, followed and enhanced at every turn by instruments - the same kind of worldbuilding technique as is accomplished by the narrator and instruments in Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*.[525] It does not

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[523] Scots, def. 'guts/intestines' (ON 'þarmr').

[524]Dronke, 'The Grand Architecture of Vǫluspá,' *The Poetic Edda* Vol. 2, pp. 25-30.

[525]Judy Quinn also discusses how the medieval narrator's words have a theatrical quality, seeming almost to cause the events described rather than relate them. See Quinn, 'Vǫluspá and the Composition of Eddic Verse' (presented at The International Saga Conference, Sydney 2020).

seem too great a claim to say that her voice becomes, in a way, a builder of worlds, in which the audience exists within a kind of ritual time.[526]

From a receptions point of view, listening to Jamie's 'Vǫluspá' also allows students of performance archaeology to make another, important observation, which is that the poem is by no means simple to recite, and represents a major time commitment. The reading takes just over twenty-four minutes, and that is without the dramatic pauses or need for projection that comes with a stage performance. For any hypothetical medieval performer, retaining and projecting the intensity of the poem's subject matter throughout the duration of the narrative (which comes with no obvious comic relief and is very violent), and doing so without technological enhancement, would have taken a great deal of energy, both physical and emotional. In this rendition, the music takes a great deal of the heavy work away from the poet, leaving her able to narrate and to utilise the musical interludes as a transportation device from one section to the next, without having to spend undue energy on communicating every single emotional nuance. While we have no academic sources from that period in Scandinavia to tell us whether any particular accompaniment traditions developed, Jamie's choice here nevertheless encourages further speculation as to how performers might have retained their energy, and whether or not musical instrumentation might have been a common means of support and setting a mood. As a performance scholar who has undertaken practical experiments to investigate this, I would argue that, both from an historical and practical perspective, there is no reason to suppose people did not employ instruments for enhancing a poetic recital, and that it would have been a technique that made a great deal of sense within more crowded spaces. It is even possible that certain phrases and shifts of tonality within the music could have been utilised as part of practising mnemonic technique. Regardless of the truth of this, however, the presence of music in this version at the very least serves to remind listeners of the vast amount we cannot see beyond the page, and of how putting performance into practice may allow us to gather useful data that can be used retrospectively.[527]

Finally, quite aside from the empowering tone of the piece, its being passed on via an aural medium also presents a very interesting opportunity for medieval re-enactment of a kind. With no script

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[526]See Turner, 'Liminality and Communitas' in *The Ritual Process,* pp. 94-130.

[527]In undertaking my own poetic translation and performance of *Vǫluspá*, I followed Jamie's lead and worked with an accompanist. Based on this research, I can now confirm, for instance, that a reading of *Vǫluspá* at a measured pace can take between 30 and 40 minutes, that the presence of an audience adds a great deal of potential for distraction and complication, and that retaining the energy in an unaccompanied recitation is very difficult, as pausing leaves one feeling more exposed, and the repetitive cadence patterns make the whole sound dull after a while. Even with music, every rendition left me physically and emotionally drained, albeit exhilarated. All this makes me suspect that musical accompaniment would have been a natural choice, although I would not go so far as to claim it was traditional across the board. For a review of my performance, see P. Vallely, 'Voice of Prophetess Speak to the Soul,' *Church Times*, (June 30th, 2023), https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/30-june/comment/columnists/paul-vallely-voice-of-prophetess-speaks-to-the-soul (last accessed 20th November, 2024).

being available for this study, it became necessary to listen and transcribe the best representation possible of Jamie's words on the page (no easy feat in itself, due to occasional Scots dialect words and Jamie's own personal variants on names), and to represent performance directions at the same time. This was a remarkably helpful reminder of the extent to which any future readers are reliant on a recorder's style and understanding, which are, themselves, enormously dependent on contextual factors. This, more than any other aspect, provides an enlightening glimpse into the process and variability of medieval literary editing, and of the multiplicity of interpretative layers present when we confront any piece. One might even say that there are two works by Jamie: her original, now vanished, script and her oral performance recorded for digital posterity, and, rather like *Snorra Edda* or the unseen compilers of *The Codex Regius*, one work that is 'mine' as the compiler's, even though the version I received was not my composition. The fact that I was then inspired to compose and perform my own work is a perfect example of re-oralization, and proof of the powerful impact made by hearing Jamie's voice read it.

Conclusion

Overall, although the effectiveness of Jamie's delivery might be debated stylistically, the nature of her work and approach is clearly designed to (and arguably did) add powerful impetus to her own voice and views, using the mythical voice of the *vǫlva*, and to uncover and empower that narrative figure for her listeners in the 20th century. Although the work itself is not famous, the wide reach of Radio 4 meant that many members of the public at least would have heard the poem, and learned something about the figure of the *vǫlva* herself, through Jamie's radio programme, and would have done so at a time extremely pertinent to feminist politics. Of all the poems in the Eddic canon, *Vǫluspá*is the most intriguing for its mystique and density of allusion, and yet, perhaps due to its distinctiveness of narrative voice and apocalyptic content, it has an ongoing relevance and extraordinary ability to engage audiences of any time period, particularly in the light of more recent ecological concerns. Jamie's translation was approachable, evocative, and unforced in its use of poetic language, all of which made it as successful, if not more so, than a great many academic attempts in its ability to engage and communicate. Furthermore, thanks to its anti-elitist approach and clear undertone of scorn for the powers that be, her poem was arguably far more accessible - emotionally and culturally - to mainstream (especially female) audiences at the time than any previous academic translations had been, despite (or perhaps because of) her relative lack of academic expertise in Old Norse.

For the above reasons alone, Jamie's take on 'Vǫluspá' may be classed as a work of female empowerment, which draws upon Old Norse mythology to carry out its purpose. Both the poem's ongoing relevance, and the effectiveness of Jamie's treatment of it, were reflected in a review by Sue Gaisford in the *Independent*, which described Jamie's performance as 'a suitably apocalyptic start

to the last year of our own, weary old millennium.' Gaisford's reaction also closely echoed the agenda of the poet herself who, in her introduction, expressed her clear intention to 'show the parallels with (Old Norse) culture and perhaps our own, and the tensions that were happening in that culture at the time, and the tensions that we are feeling around this millennium.'

There are, however, other empowerment 'after-effects' which the poet probably did not intend, but which should be mentioned before concluding. The first of these is that Jamie's attempt to establish a sense of commonality between the early medieval period and our own is also empowering to the academic world. Its focus is symptomatic of the wider, more self-aware and interdisciplinary movement within the field of medieval studies and receptions that (as mentioned in my introduction,) began in the late twentieth century and is continuing to develop even now, with the ongoing work of scholar-cum-artists like Benjamin Bagby, Kleio Pethainou, Daisy Black and Laura Varnam.[528] Jamie's effort may be classed alongside those of scholars who, reacting against more archaic tendencies of distancing the medieval period, have sought to challenge previously drawn boundaries between (as Carolyn Dinshaw expresses it) 'scholarly medieval studies and medievalism, labour and pleasure, past and present, object and subject, me and not-me.'[529]

Just as it had the ability to inspire the more general public, Jamie's adaptation of *Vǫluspá* is similarly valuable to Old Norse scholarship, or indeed any study of medieval poetry that involves the factors linked with orality. She has captured the sense of poetry being a process, affected by emotional and temporal factors. This poem, even when only transcribed to the page, is an excellent example of *mouvance* in modern practice, and, put together with the aural settings, becomes a representation of the process of orality; an apt reminder that the source texts themselves originated in the urge for communication, creative expression and entertainment, and are all points on a continuum. All of these factors are highly important to consider in the ongoing study of Old Norse poetry and receptions. Although it does not engage with as many layers of consciousness and metatextuality as A.S. Byatt's *Ragnarok* (see previous chapter), Jamie's translation of *Vǫluspá*may nevertheless be experienced as a useful touchstone by which to test and explore assumptions about Old Norse mythology, culture and literature. Her very personal take on the poem serves to remind academics just how far personal desires and agendas within any context not only affect receptions and representations of medieval works, but must be seen as an essential component of medieval works themselves.

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[528]See, for instance, Bagby, 'Beowulf, the Edda, and the Performance of Medieval Epic', D. Black, 'A Man Out of Time: Joseph, Time and Space in the Marian Plays of the N-Town Manuscript', in *Gender, Time and Memory* (Martlesham, 2015), pp. 147-62, K. Pethainou (ed.) *Medieval Humour : Expressions, Receptions and Functions* (Budapest, 2023), and L. Varnam, Poems for the Women of Beowulf: A 'Contemporary Medieval' Project' in *Postmedieval* 13 (2022), pp. 105-21.

[529]See C. Dinshaw, 'Are We Having Fun Yet? A Response to Prendergast and Trigg, *New Medieval Literatures* 9, (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 231-44.

Furthermore, from a performance studies perspective, this iteration alone allows the scholarly imagination to entertain other possibilities about the work's oral footprint, and to form a theoretical basis from which to investigate certain aspects of the poem in a performative context. The irony is that, by avoiding academic writing, Jamie has unintentionally contributed to academic studies in a different way, and in one that is of very great value precisely because it pertains to communication - exactly the thing she sought to bring back to the poem. Even though it is of less immediate impact than a staged piece might be in a performance archaeology studies context, both its strengths and limitations open a space for an audience to think critically about the matter of oral history and performance. Suffice to say that, within the world of creative receptions and performance archaeology, Jamie's *Vǫluspá*is a keystone British work which has not received sufficient attention. It provides ample material for discussing the ever-present question of what constitutes text and what constitutes reception, and - although clearly not intended to be a focus of academic study - is nevertheless an important step in using performance as an investigative tool in further academic study of Old Norse sources. Performance can, and does, enrich academic engagement, and this work should rightly be of interest to any scholar with interest in both literary and oral transmission in the medieval period.

Thesis Conclusion

As the previous chapters have shown, the period between 1950 and 2012 was far richer in Old Norse receptions written by women than one might expect, and not just within the boundaries of children's literature. Even though not many novels and poetic works were titled in a way that would suggest their source of inspiration, the influence of Old Norse mythology is a clear, running theme throughout all of the works I have identified. The authors I have discussed are a diverse group, separated by both generation and experience, and all of their writing reflects their different contexts and beliefs in a variety of ways**.** However, their responses as a whole present one staggering commonality in the reception and usage of Old Norse: all of them associate Old Norse literature and mythology with power in one way or another, and all have used it as a tool to comment (directly or indirectly) on their (and others') experiences of gender bias and restrictions, to express themselves honestly, and to push the boundaries of what their audiences might expect, all of which has given their voices greater power in retrospect.

Sylvia Plath used the valkyrie as a poetic persona and figurehead into which she poured her own sense of self-worth; she used it to express her feelings of desire and violent anger, and eventually to speak out against the betrayal, both of her husband and of the systems which fed her the dream of him. As the writer whose work spanned two different centuries, A.S.Byatt used all her experience of change and of storyworlds, and showcased the process of mythic receptions through a young girl's eyes, proving that Old Norse mythology is not only relevant to men and boys, but to anyone who wants to engage with it. Her unique retelling of Old Norse mythology within a frame story also demonstrates how empowerment may be found in actively exploring truth and shaping stories, and by facing one's fear of annihilation, which (she suggests) is not as bad as conscious imprisonment. At the far, more directly-spoken end of the receptions arc I have drawn, Kathleen Jamie used radio media and a very particular reading of *Vǫluspá* to powerfully reoralize and make the voice of the seeress her own, and in a way that expresses her own frustration with society at a time of rapid change. Both in her introduction, and in her interpretation of the poem, she speaks out against marginalisation, gender inequality and academic snobbery, and uses her own 'unacademic' work to demystify and include less experienced listeners (especially women) in what could be assumed to be distant, academic territory. Even though each of them has interpreted and harnessed this sense of power in different ways, this proves that the powerful associations with Old Norse mentioned in my introduction have been ongoing (even where they appeared to fade out in adult writing) as a recognised, continuing source of inspiration and self-empowerment, and that not only male creators have harnessed it before the millennium.

While these women were not necessarily all showing female empowerment in the way millennial women might have come to expect (for example, writing solely about female figures or trying to

change the paradigm of the pantheon to cancel or mock the masculine hegemonic structure) their responses to the mythology prove, once more, that Old Norse truly is a flexible floating signifier: although it comes from a masculine hegemony, it is not, as far right crusaders would have us believe, 'for' men alone, but can, and has, been used by women to feel empowered. Moreover, it has certainly not been 'feminized' in the traditionally conceived sense of softness or vulnerability: if anything, the influence of Old Norse which drove the writers makes the content break gendered expectations, rendering their writing by turns uncomfortable, sharp, dissenting, melancholy, caustic, grim, violent and occasionally terrifying, in a way which (one senses) the authors relish as part of their sense of power. As metalheads have done in the world of music, they have embraced the darker undertones of Old Norse, and their work holds no false notions of a benign good. Throughout, it is all too easy for a reader to sense their various anxieties, frustrations and, above all, their feelings of powerlessness (present or retrospective) against the systems which they must endure to varying extents, but which do not provide them with sufficient emotional and/or professional respect and recognition. Their clear desire for Old Norse mythology, as a source of power and as a communication tool, speaks volumes, and we do not have to look far to realise that this feeling was widespread.

Other women would soon harness their anger, and their desire for a better world, to the vehicle of Old Norse mythology, and would begin, not only to use it, but to challenge its masculine paradigm and historic expression. In 2010, for instance - ten years after Jamie's radio poem and one year before Byatt's *Ragnarok* - Gerður Kristný wrote the poem *Blóðhófnir* (later translated for English audiences as *Bloodhoof* by Rory McTurk). Going one step further than Jamie's adaptation of a female voice from literature, Kristný retold the story of Skírnismál, but through the eyes of the giantess Gerðr; this figure's private thoughts and feelings are never made apparent in the Eddic poem, but rather she appears only in dialogic form as an opponent who resists, then submits, meaning that she is granted a voice of her own in the work. Kristný especially highlights the horror and grief of her forced departure from home, and the detail that her arranged marriage to Freyr came under threat of rape.[530]

This poem, and Byatt's Ragnarok, preceded (some may say heralded) another phenomenal boom period in the world of Old Norse receptions, this time far more concentrated and widespread. As with the popularity of the mythology between the Romantic period and the turn of the century, there is no one cause of this phenomenon, and we may attribute it to several factors. One major factor is the growth, and all-encompassing global presence of social media, which has added a whole new dimension for neo medieval adaptation of content through cosplay, product advertising and short-burst fantasy content. There was also a resurgence in general medievalism post-9/11, partly in response to the Bush administration's unfortunate references to the Crusades, but also in terms of

[530]Gerður Kristný, *Bloodhoof*, trans. R. McTurk, (Todmorden, 2012).

the need for further nostalgia and escapism.[531]Rather than a sign of colonialist strength and fantasy, Old Norse receptions have now become a major part of pop culture. As ever, there is still a bias towards the masculine in the more mainstream fantasy diaspora; popular interests still revolve for the most part around Viking raiders and major Asgardian gods, and the media still tends to use the word 'Vikings,' although there is no doubt the output is more self-conscious and diverse.[532]The TV show 'Vikings' on HBO marked the beginning of the boom, and some might argue that it (far more so than the Marvel *Thor* films) is the main trigger; fashions, brands, metal fans and events have been noticeably affected by the popularity of the show's aesthetic, and men's alternative fashion swiftly adopted the 'Ragnar' combination of beard, shaved hairline and long locks.[533] However, greater awareness of 'toxic masculinity' within the Old Norse receptions community has encouraged many men to produce content encouraging sensitivity, even while they enjoy the rugged fantasy, and many brands and content producers capitalise on this.[534]

For women (and, indeed, for anyone who does not identify as cis-male or heterosexual), it has been an especially turbulent millennium so far. New global awareness of the threat posed by the far right and Incel communities has offered opportunities for changes in perceptions of and behaviour around gender, but the current socio-political landscape is now a bewildering mixture of binaries and extremes. Greater freedom of speech combines with the greater risk of social media backlash, and enjoyment of (greater) diversity in physical and behavioural standards still clashes with the ongoing beauty market and cyber bullying. The ever-present fear of war makes for a nervous environment, which, for some, has combined with the well-founded fear of gender and reproductive oppression under both Trump regimes.[535] Awareness of the general tension

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[531]See A.B.R. Elliott, *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-First Century*. (Martlesham, 2017).

[532]See, for instance, J. MacMahon, 'Thrills and gut-spills: why have Vikings taken over pop culture?' *The Guardian* (20th February, 2021), https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/feb/20/why-have-vikings-taken-over-pop-culture (last accessed 5th April 2025), and, for an exploration of the implications of the Marvel franchise's new comedic portrayal of Thor, see S. Rose, 'Thor: Ragnarok Review – Chris Hemsworth unleashes comedy superpowers on Emo Cate Blanchett', *The Guardian* (19th October, 2017), https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/oct/19/thor-ragnarok-review-chris-hemsworth-cate-blanchett-taika-waititi (last accessed 5th March, 2025).

[533]Beard care products have rocketed, for instance, and one brand in particular - *The Beard Struggle* - takes great delight in both assuaging and satirising the 'Viking' image through short comedy films, and calling its male clients 'vikings.' See https://uk.thebeardstruggle.com (last accessed 5th March, 2025).

[534]'Tank Tolman' is a very good example of this; an engaging individual with a wide Instagram and Tiktok following, who dresses as and role plays a fantasy Viking warrior in order to encourage followers on their 'fitness journeys' and provide light comedy. He revels in delightedly yelling 'HAMMAR!' in response to videos, and encourages a fun approach to fantasy, while also addressing the toxic masculine 'Viking' ideal by showing himself playing with his baby daughter in the gym, frolicking in the snow in costume, or providing softly-spoken pep talks in warrior character for viewers undergoing stress.

[535]See C. Lee, 'Here Are Trump's Major Moves Affecting Access to Reproductive Healthcare' in *Time Magazine*, (20th February 2025), https://time.com/7260062/trump-first-month-abortion-reproductive-rights/ (last accessed 5th March, 2025). More recently, of course, concerns have also arisen about the UK supreme court ruling about female

worldwide, new concerns over identity and an ever-greater desire to escape from or rise above the causes of stress mean that medievalism and fantasy have become more relevant than ever. A new, cross-media onslaught of Old Norse receptions by women has unsurprisingly developed as a result of the current mix of tensions and trends, and one of the inevitable figureheads is, again, the shieldmaiden, as popularly depicted by the character Lagertha in 'Vikings.' Arguably, in its own way, this figure presents a double-edged sword; on the one hand, representative of greater agency for young girls, but also, especially amid the mainstream 'vikings' craze, sometimes representative of a thin conceptual line between the idealization of women roleplaying masculine ideals to be made popular, and actual diversity in representation of women. Regardless, the figure is clearly an inspiration for many: there are a great number of fantasy novels written about shieldmaidens, which are not only restricted to Old Norse, but which overlap into several medievalist genres including the *Beowulf* universe.

Within the wider world of Norse receptions, however, and in part thanks to the diversity of texts and publications now available, other representations of nordic female power (such as seers, queens, sorceresses, shamans and trolls) have also become far more mainstream. These range from fictional and mythological portrayals of medieval women in literature, to actors and cosplayers who harness mythological and historical detail as part of their staging and costume, and musicians who specialise in a raw, dark quality of nordic sound, and who re-enact their own onstage versions of medieval ritual and magic. Key examples of performers who have embraced an association with Old Norse ritual and magic are Lindy-Fay Hella of *Wardruna*, the antler-wearing Maria Franz of *Heilung* and Faroese solo artist *Eivor*, whose single 'Trøllabundin' ('Troll bound'), in which the artist also plays a shamanic style skin drum, is known and imitated worldwide . Considering the uncertainty of the times, it is no wonder that such artistic responses, much like modern pagan and witchcraft practices (with which a great many Norse receptions overlap), are sought out by so many in society who crave a greater feeling of agency and power.

As one might expect in such a setting, a great deal of women's writing on Old Norse is now more directly concerned with power. Inevitably, there is a wide variety of approaches; some biases in representation of the mythology have not changed, but for the most part responses grow ever more interesting, and continue to provide a very eloquent dialogue with their writers' contexts. Some, such as Jane Cousins with her 'Vexatious Valkyries' series, have wished to invest more in the fantasy 'power trip' of Old Norse material, presenting it in a way that is interchangeable with popular

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biology and gender, which can only add to the need for artistic output. See S. Brocklehurst (ed.), 'UK Supreme Court rules legal definition of a woman is based on biological sex,' *BBC News* (16th April, 2025), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/cvgq9ejql39t (accessed 16th April, 2025).

commercial vampire, science and slash fiction.[536] Others, though their work clearly stems from enjoyment of the mythology, have used it to more directly discuss gender power imbalances, and other contemporary subjects. Joanne Harris is one of the most famous, and sometimes controversial, examples of these; her *Runemarks* series for young adults very directly addresses negative perceptions of alternative-minded, 'clever' girls, and the issue of bodily and religious freedom.[537] Much like Byatt (and a whole new generation of Marvel fans), she has embraced the queer figure of Loki as her ultimate anti-hero, however this Loki is a far cry from Byatt's subtly academic mischief-monger, who acts as the necessary and unpopular representative of chaos and curiosity.[538] Harris's portrait of the god is a far more obviously antagonistic, egotistical and sarcastic one: he narrates his stories in first person (keeping up a rhetorical and performative address towards the reader), clearly cares for few but himself, and his role as a nonconformist seems more an overt point about general defiance than the mythology itself. He is certainly empowering, but in a very definite manner; if it weren't for the fact that he considers himself superior to all beings, one might call him a misogynist. Furthermore, his most meaningful engagement with a human female in the second book reads as more disturbing than empowering. The teenage girl character in question, whose name is 'Jumps,' is awkward, secretly gay, and has an eating disorder. Having taken possession of Jumps's body through a computer game to escape his bonds, Loki the live-it-large god proceeds to crudely force her to stuff herself with food, to run out of an exam, to overspend on clothing, and to 'out' herself by flirting with and dating another woman in front of her bullies, all while she screams at him in helpless rage inside her own head. While most readers with any experience of such things would find such scenes highly distressing, Harris's narrative blithely implies, of course, that Jumps also likes the woman Loki sets her up with, that eating ice cream for breakfast is freeing, and that her life will magically better itself because of his interference. Considering how recently the book was published, all this feels not only disrespectful but highly short-sighted.

At the other end of the scale, however, there is a whole genre of women's writing that, while it also seeks to dissolve the patriarchal sense of dignity, pays far more attention to giving a new voice and perspective to female figures from Old Norse mythology and legend, including new explorations of mythological and historical queerness between women. Both *The Valkyrie* (2023) by Kate

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[536]See for instance J. Cousins, *What's Up, Buttercup?* (independently published on Amazon, July 2020), https://www.amazon.co.uk/Whats-Buttercup-Vexatious-Valkyries-Book-ebook/dp/B08BXDRHWF (last accessed 10th April, 2025).

[537]See J. Harris, *Runemarks* (New York, 2007) and *Runelight* (New York, 2011). For an interview about the series and Harris's view on the mythology, in which she displays some rather interesting (and occasionally extreme) views on gender perceptions, Christianity and other religions, and the 'history' of Old Norse, also see 'Interview from the Norse Mythology blog, with Dr Karl Seigfried,' <https://www.joanne-harris.co.uk/books/the-gospel-of-loki/read-the-interview-from-the-norse-mythology-blog-with-dr-karl-seigfried/> (accessed 21st April, 2025).

[538]See J. Harris, *The Gospel of Loki* (New York, 2014) and *The Testament of Loki* (New York, 2018).

Heartfield, a female-narrated spin on the Völsunga saga love triangle, and *The Witch's Heart* (by Genevieve Gornichec, a relatively comic take on the unseen life of Angrboða, contain queer love plots - a fascinating and rather pleasing development, considering the alt-right propensity to see the pantheon as 'straight-man territory.' Gornichec's *The Weaver and the Witch Queen* (2023) also provides a refreshing reframing of saga material, most notably in giving a voice and origins story to the future 'villain' Queen Gunnhild of Norway.[539] Gornichec, who regularly attends medieval re-enactment events as a trained craftsperson, related an experience which provided some very interesting insight into why she began writing on such powerful themes. I will let her anecdote speak for itself:

> "One of the guys had just cooked us an awesome lunch over the campfire, and three of us girls volunteered to clean out the cauldron afterwards (not a gender thing, just a "you cooked so we'll clean" thing). We grabbed a few dirty dishes sitting around camp while we were at it, and carted the whole lot over to a spigot across the park. We were sitting there cleaning out the dishes and cauldron, chatting and having a good time despite the chore, when these two white guys in their sixties walked by. The first one said something akin to, "Wow, so even Viking women had to do the dishes, huh?" and the other one guffawed and added something like, "I thought all Viking women were supposed to be warriors. Where's Lagertha?" and then laughed like they'd just made the funniest joke in the world. I think I might've let out one of my Customer Service Laughs (that is, a very forced one) and my friends kind of did the same. Then the guys walked on, still chuckling to themselves, leaving us sitting there feeling kind of like shit. If this were to happen today, all three of us would have had rather quick comebacks, but at the time we were all fairly new to reenactment. This was the first time I'd ever questioned my worth as a woman and noncombatant in this hobby, which is why I remember it so well...
>
> My interest in the female figures in Norse mythology started in my courses at university where we read the sagas and Eddas - there's just so much missing in this literature where women are concerned, which is frustrating. But that's also where my storytelling brain kicked in and asked, "Well, how can we fill those gaps?"...*The Weaver and the Witch Queen* is the direct result of me wanting to write about Viking Age women who were decidedly *not* combatants. There are already so many amazing novels out there about shieldmaidens, which is awesome! I want to be really clear that I have absolutely nothing against shieldmaidens and I think it's absolutely wonderful that so many women are empowered by the idea of Viking women as warriors. But women in the Viking Age were so much more than that!"[540]

While there is certainly more to be written on the current Old Norse receptions scene (and I intend to attempt it in future) the short snapshot I have provided here must suffice as an example of the current diversity within the pool of Old Norse receptions produced by women. Although the

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[539]For a more detailed exploration of Gornichec's refreshingly casual treatment of the Norse apocalypse, see Larrington, Carolyne, 'Ragna Rök,' *The Norse Myths That Shape The Way We Think,* pp. 275-6.

[540]Shared, with the artist's permission, from a private phone interview with novelist Genevieve Gornichec.

attraction to the Old Norse power dynamic still remains as strong as ever, and can now be far more openly enjoyed by everyone, it is fascinating to see how that sense of power is being directed in more imaginative ways. As well as seeking escapist fantasies, a great many women are seeking out ways in which they can use Old Norse history, stories and symbolism to communicate and explore their own realities.

What is clear, above all, is that Old Norse as an inspirational and creative source is not dying anytime soon, and, though it continues to be misappropriated by many in less desirable ways, its voice of empowerment grows far more diverse, and ever wider in outreach. The even wider importance of this diversity, and its meaning for future studies, is also clear: receptions and revisions are a necessary part of our studies as medievalists and mythologists, as they deal with the movement of the continuum, not the illusion of a set product. To return to Jón Karl Helgason, just as I opened with him, there is every possibility that the authors and compilers responsible for the sources medievalists study today were 'driven by the same compelling need for self-expression' as the so-called 'more original' receptions works they later inspired, and thus receptions works themselves may be of some assistance in analysing the medieval mindset in retrospect.[541] All the writers in this thesis demonstrate the ongoing need for power narratives, and the integrality of the process of internalising, personalising and reproducing mythology (in fact A.S. Byatt analyses the process even while demonstrating.) They are prime examples of the ongoing importance of studying the ways in which, and the reasons why Old Norse mythology continues into its afterlives, and (considering the blurred lines between source and reception themselves,) of considering whether such literature constitutes an 'afterlife' at all, but is in fact still part of a 'living' mythology. While this last question is sadly not one I can address in any amount of detail in this space, I fully intend to use this, and other studies to expand on it in future.

[541]Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla*, pp. 74-5.

Appendix: 'Voluspa' by Kathleen Jamie

[Transcribed, with descriptions of effects, by Clare Mulley, by kind permission of the BBC Radio Archives.]

Jamie: Voluspa.

Piano clash

Jamie: This poem recounts the beginning of the earth, the creation of the earth and its, er, pollution if you like, by greed, and avarice and war, and its eventual destruction, and then the rebirth again. And it's spoken by a woman, which is unusual, and a woman who speaks with tremendous authority. She was a seer - a seeress - and it seems that this poem was spoken while she was in a shamanic...a shamanic trance. She speaks at the end of sinking, and you can imagine this is her coming back to herself, out of the shamanic trance, but she sustains this, this poem marvellously well. Bearing in mind this is the last millennium when they were even more anxious, possibly, than we are now - the premillennial tension was markéd - and she was talking about the beginning of the world and the construction of the world at a time when her own culture, the Icelandic culture, was in the throes of change, Christianity was approaching and people like her, as seeresses and representatives of an older culture, would feel themselves to be under stress, as well. So for all these reasons I felt this was a poem certainly worth revisiting this millennium, and I also felt quite close to this woman. This is a poem in Old Norse, and...and I'm working from literal translations by Professor Hermann Pálsson of Edinburgh University. It's very familiar to people who are interested in Old Norse culture and Icelandic poetry, in fact Auden translated this piece many years ago, and he kept to the extraordinarily tight pattern of alliteration that is in the original, it's a masterpiece of succinctness...I've tried to open it out for a modern audience and show the parallels with that culture and perhaps our own, and the tensions that were happening in that culture at the time, and the tensions that we are feeling around this millennium. And I specially wanted to point out the fact that this was spoken by...this was spoken by a female voice. Scholars to date have obviously assumed that it is a poem, therefore it was written by a man, and only [laughs] you know very recently have they thought 'actually she says she's a woman, she speaks like a woman, good lord perhaps she was a woman [laughs].

Voluspa.

Piano clash

musical, repetitive chanting which continues for a bit alone, then with skin drum beats under the the poet's voice

Bright, they call me, Heidar, and bright I remain, a favourite with the wicked, the bright-eyed seer. I charm magic wands, I journey between homesteads, I journey among nine worlds beneath this earth. Bright, they call me, a skilled witch.

Do you want more? (echo effect begins up until the next DYWM refrain)

Three times they burned her. She was born again. Three times they burned her, yet she is still alive.

Do you want more?

I remember the beginning of the ages. I, the darling of my people, the northern sorcerers. I see far into the future, throughout every world.

forest sounds, mournful bird calls under voice

So listen up, you rabble and mighty alike, as I tell the lore, the tales of the ancients, as I do the bidding of Odin himself, terror of the old gods, father of victory and the slain. Hear now the stories of the earliest times. Odin insists I tell it well, and I will.

sinister/chaotic string sounds added to birds - sense of busyness/creation/activity - then gradually the birds fade, and the orchestral backing intensifies, thickening in texture and becoming more suspense-laden

I remember the furthest remotes of time, when warlocks raised me, giants in wisdom, the northern shaman. Nine witches, I recall, who taught me, weird(/wyrd) women, nine, and nine other worlds beneath this world. I bring to mind, from the earliest times, the glorious, measuring tree of fate, the ash, Yggdrassil. It was at the beginning of the ages, the void where Ymir lived, alone - that meltwater giant, father of sorcerers - held neither sky above, nor sea with cool waves, no sandy shore or grassy heath. There was nothingness, a yawning gap, until the sons of Bur, Odin and his brothers, raised this garden, Earth. The southern sun shone on its meadows, and they grew lush with green leeks.

Do you want more? [echo effect] **orchestra stops and there is a vague, quiet sound like faraway wind**

In the beginning of the ages, the sun accompanied the moon on his journeys. Raising her right hand, she'd brightly trace the northern horizon. She knew nothing of setting, where to find her nighttime halls. The stars kept no proper places. The moon was oblivious of how he held sway. So the ruling powers, the holy of holies, took to their thrones of destiny and sat in judgement, considering powerfully...then teased darkness from the day and named it 'Night'. They named earth 'Night's Daughter', fixed order on morning, named noon and the afternoon, prescribed a time to eat in the evening, then arranged, by the wax and wane of the moon, a people's way to count the turn of years. Then the gods, the holy of holies, assembled on Idavelli.[542] They set up shrines and temples, a carpentry of staves. **fire crackling sound effects** They built themselves a smiddy, and from its furnace the gods wrought tongs, tools, a mint for money. They played chess merrily in the courtyard with pieces cast of gold. Nothing worried them, in this life of plenty **distant horn sound** until, unbidden, from out of sinister Ychtenheimr[543], the northern land of sorcerers and giants, there arrived among them witches, three unchancy dames **extended horn notes**.

How to respond to this disaster? **drum beats under the horns** The ruling powers, the holy of holies, took to the thrones of destiny. They parleyed hard, and chose to fashion, from the giant Ymir's blood and bones, a dwarf master, the brave Modsuggnir, and next to him, Durin, who directed a great creation of mannikins out of clay. **drumming cont., half-whispered chanting begins in a female voice** They made dwarves of the wax and wane, North, South, West and East. Bifur they made, the master jeweller, one who glitters, and pot-bellied Bombur. **fiddle motif breaks in** They fashioned Annar, father of the goddess Earth, Alpofia, an entranced valin, Midwulf and the ancestor. They made Gandalf, with his magic staff, Storm Elf and Thrawn, and Sonsie[544], the wise one, bold, and peedie[545] Norri, the foundling and the artist. They made the black elf, and Vaeggir the mighty, the one they call 'dwarf of corpses', they made the kingly and his counsellors **accoustic music stops - momentary silence**

Do you want more? [echo effect] **drums start, and a more electronic backing - sense of technological movement to match the movement of the section**

The File, the Needle, the Haft, the Wedge, the Fleet, the Famous, Viffur the deft, the Maker of Horns, Now-You-See-Me-Now-You-Don't, the Howe, the Voe, the Glubbery Field[546], the Warrior protected by an Oaken Shield, the Battler and Odin's Brother. Now I must name the others, those who claim descent from praiseworthy Lofar, dwarves advancing from their biggyins of stone. There

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[542] Jamie's pronunciation/spelling of Iðavöllr.
[543] Jamie's pronunciation/spelling of Jötunheimr.
[544] A Scots word meaning 'cheeky/cheerful'.
[545] A Scots word meaning 'little'.
[546] Spelling uncertain on these last three words

was Odin's ring and Have-A-Go-Hero, He Who Tramples Grave Mounds, Clever Bastard, Crags and One-Eye, Finn the Frost and Finn the Rye (Wry?), Grandad and Randy Govingi, the Elder and the Trickster. This lineage will be spoken of as long as people live.

Piano clash and music stops

[echo/double effects] The skilled witch, darling of her people [effects stop] and then three gods, holy of holies, came travelling from that host to a certain strand, walking a wide shore washed by cooling waves. The deities, mighty and kind-hearted, discovered, beached on that strand, two lifeless branches, ash and elm **electronic beats, bird sounds and music start softly**. What future had they, driftwood from the ocean, brittle branches? Could they live, those pallid sticks? Could they call for the gods' attention with neither breath nor blood? Dumb, helpless boughs. Odin breathed the sap of life into those branches. His companions, in their kindness, gave them blood, quickening their wooden heads with reason, and slowly, as waters lapping at a shore, warm in the sunshine, to the faces of the first ash man and the elm, who became a woman, the colour rose.

pause and music intensifies

I know where a tall ash grows, hoary with age, Yggdrassil, the green and everlasting tree of fate. Between its roots, a wellspring rises, replenishing the glens. And from that source, the waters at Yggdrassil's foot, came three skilled women, whom the people call Urdr, Verdandi and Skuld. On boards of wood, they carve out runes, these mistresses of wyrd, so lay down laws, allot to each his fate. They mete to every newborn babe the cord of his lifespan.

I remember the bright-eyed seer, the first war of the world when, in Odin's hall, so many spears pierced Gullveig, dripping with gold, she couldn't fall. They burned her, burned her, burned her. But reborn, she lives yet.

[*pause and lyrics from a pre-existing electronic/trance track come through: 'she's the one who makes me feel these ways'*]

Then all the great gods, the holy of holies, took to their thrones, the seats of destiny, and parleyed hard, demanding to know who was responsible for this pollution, who betrayed Gullveig, dripping with gold, to the enemy. Should they suffer this outrage, or demand compensation?

[*lyrics come through: 'don't push me, 'cos I'm close to the edge.'*]

Thor stormed and raged - he never could contain himself on such occasions. Oaths were violated, the solemn vows, pacts, contracts and agreements made between them, all laid broken. Odin hurled his sword into the fray, so opening this first battle in the world. The Aesir stockade was breached, the Vanir marched across the plain with their battle spells.

[*singer sings: I'm the one, I'm the one (who has selections/has this medicine? unclear*)]

And I, the bright eyed seer, saw valkyries amassing, far in the distance, skuld bore a shield, skogul, gunnr, gondal and geirskogul, Odin's women, ready to ride to the gods' side, ready to select the slain, to pick among the dead.

[*singer sings: can't hardly breathe, can't hardly breathe can't hardly breathe, can't hardly breathe*]

I sat outside alone in the spirit-laden night when Odin came - looked me in the eye, his one good eye. What do you want? Why try me Odin, father of the slain? Why challenge me, I who know everything? I know you pledged that other eye at Mimir's well, for a mouthful of wisdom. I see the river splash mud over that eye, and Mimir drinking every morning from his glorious, mead-sweet well. Do you understand, thou terror of the gods? Why look me in the eye and read me, I who see far, wide through every world, nine worlds beneath this earth? [*solo violin begins*]

Do you want more?

I know that Heimdal's trumpet's hid beneath the ash Yggdrasil, the sacred tree ever rearing to a cloudless sky.

Do you want more?

So heaped on me, the father of the host, the poet, rings and necklaces, jewellery and wise words, and a prophecy cast with magic wands. Nine worlds I know. Need I say more?

[long pause with violin continuing]

[orchestral backing thickens again but softly, mainly strings] I saw Balder's bloodstained threads of fate being hid away and knew how he'd be slain. Balder, Odin's bairn, assassinated by a dart of pretty mistletoe; the slender mistletoe became a grievous weapon in his brother, Hodor's hand. And who could best avenge this fratricide, but another brother, born that very day, brother both to victim and to his murderer? To this infant, Odin's child, not a night old, was shown his fate, and it

was sworn that ere he washed his hands or combed his unkempt hair, he'd carry Hodor to his pyre. But in her halls, Fensellier, Frigg weeps a mother's tears over this disaster in Valhalla.

[long orchestral interlude with solo violin on top]

[echo voice/double effect: Nine worlds I know. Do you want more?]

piano clash

I see the trickster Loki, the malicious mastermind, bound and captive in a cave. Thairms[547] are his fetters, twisted guts. Do you see what I mean? [echo: do you see what I mean?] Siggin sits by him, her husband, miserably.

[second echo voice leads: or do you want more?]

[2nd echo voice leads in the following sentence, saying each phrase a few seconds before Jamie] Bright, they call her, the bright-eyed seer, darling of witches, the northern shaman.

Out of the east, a river spates through a blighted glen, a sheath for knives and dagger shards and ice-sharp dirks. [faint sound effects of screeching/scraping, followed by a thickening of electronic soundtrack and more jarring sound effects] I see three halls, the first of gold on the northern plain, a clan place for dwarves, then, at an arctic fjord's edge, the hall of Brimir, a giant's beer-swilling howff. The third stands on a corpse-strewn strand, its back to the sun, its doors gape in a bleak embrace toward the wasted North. Through its chill lumb[548] falls a steady drip of putrefaction, serpents form the wattle of its walls. Murderers she sees in this odious hall, breakers of sworn oaths, a man who ruined a girl already betrothed. Here, Nidhoggr sucks on human remains, the wolf tears men apart.

Do you want more?

[echo effects] Darling of the people, the skilled witch,

Far in the east in Ironwood, an old crone suckles her monstrous brood of wolf bairns. One, Fenris, will excel in wickedness and stalk the sun, bringing her down. He'll smear the walls of the gods' abode with bloody gore and gorge himself on the doomed. Summers may come, but no sun gleam above the southern horizon. Darkness will remain, and all winds turn treacherous.

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[547] Scots word for 'guts/intestines'
[548] Scots word for skylight/hanging chimney/flue/stack

[echo effects] Do you understand me, or do you want more?
piano clash

I see the ogres' shepherd, Egber (sp?), as he keeps his merry watch sat on a grave mound, plucking at his harp strings, while, from Gallows Wood, a scarlet cockerel crows, and Gullinkambi crows to raise the gods, the warriors at Odin's hall, while, deep in the very pits of Hel, a third, blood-red rooster crows.

[echo effects] Many spells she knows. Do you want more?

brass burst

Heimdallr lifts his horn aloft, the sound blows shrill through every world.

Brass burst

The blasted ash, Yggdrasil, strains, [echo effects] an axe age, a sword age, brother will murder brother,

Brass burst

The fast-chained wolf at the gates of Hel howls and bays

Brass burst

All fetters break; the beast runs free. [echoes] hardship will come upon the land [echoes stop]. The trickster Loki twists and slips [brass burst] malicious mastermind, unbound, [brass keeps on underneath, blaring intermittently] [echo effect] the ties of blood and clan will be destroyed, the husband's tender vows [echo effect stops]. Enraged, the serpent which girdles earth will thrash the waves, and Naglfar, the ship of death, snap its anchor chain. [percussion and piano sounds in bursts] [echoes] All fetters break, shields will be split. A storm age, a wolf age.

[drumkit begins steady rhythm]

Loki nails his colours to its mast, commands its hellish crew, a monstrous pack...[background echoey voice: the sacred ash strains, but holds. Nine worlds I see]...will run with the wolves, Loki's

brothers, unleashed upon the world, and giants drive out of the east, protected by shields, while carrion crows with yellow beaks feast and feast.

[second voice] Do you want...

Jamie: ...more?

[second voice]: Poverty will...

Jamie: ...drain the land

[both echoing together] A sword age, an axe age
Jamie: I see

[second voice] far into the future

[both echoing together] beyond Ragnarok, the mighty doom of the battle gods.

[second voice] before the world goes down [Jamie echoes 'goes down']

Jamie: And no-one will show mercy to his brother man.

[war shout with instrumental, drums and strings mainly, followed by chanting a little way in]

And the gods and little people, what befalls them? Dwarves struggle and groan at the yets of the rickles of stone[549], as avalanches and agresses shake the land. The gods confer in their assembly, and Odin rides to the wise head of Mimir to beg advice.

[echo effects] Need I go on? Many spells she knows.

Surtr, the fire-blackened giant, the swordsmith, his sword's edge tempered in the smiddy of the sun, closes from the South, and the sun's edge glitters on that blade. The heavens split, and men trudge the burning road to Hel. [music fades, then slowly starts again in next section, growing in intensity]

Then Odin, her beloved Odin, father of victory, father of the slain, the one-eyed, the poet, Odin pits himself against the wolf, Fenris, offspring of the wicked Loki and the crone, and Frigg again

[549]Rickle n., a loose, carelessly thrown together pile of objects. From Old Norse 'hraukr', a small pile of peats.

will weep over this disaster when her husband falls and is consumed in the beast's great jaws. And Frigg again will weep a mother's tears, as her son Freyr, still calling for his favoured sword, falls to Surtr's blade (lone male war cry). And who would best avenge the death of Odin, but another son (lone male war cry, and more come at regular intervals a few times after)? Vidar grapples with the beast, he thrusts his sword and makes it stand in the quivering heart of the wolf, even as his kinsman Thor thunders forth to tangle with the serpent (marked bowing motions on strings and some brass). The world serpent stretches its furious jaws, stretches till its fangs arch high above the head of this glorious son of the goddess, then, shamelessly, it strikes. The venom shocks him, Thor, the brave defender. He staggers back, he staggers nine steps back, the son of mother earth. Earth, whose people are fled, Earth, where every home now lies abandoned. The sun blackens. Black will be the day as fire erupts against fire, playing against heaven itself.

[echoey voice] three times

Three times they burned her, bright.

[double echo effect] Need I say more?
shout and piano clash

And the bright stars vanish. And where the world was, this earth, this garden lush with green leeks, I see [echo effects] far into the future [echoes stop] how earth sinks beneath the waves, and the waves close.

new music starts, more incidental

I see, for a second time, this lush green garden of the earth, rising from the ocean waves. Waterfalls cascade [echo effects and overlap: the southern sun shone in the meadows] and soaring above the fish-filled mountain streams I see an eagle, hunting. [esho effects: far into the future.] The gods will meet on Idavelli, and begin to talk about the mighty world serpent, then recall and bring to mind the great events of the olden days, and Odin's ancient runes. Then afterwards discover, glinting there in the grass, the marvellous golden chessmen they used to own in those far-off days, when they played their godly games.

Do you see now what I mean, or do you want more?

[long musical interlude, voices, digital sounds, birdsong, a real mix of sounds. Synth, electric pulse soundtrack from earlier comes back for next bit]

Corn will ripen in fields where none was sown. All ills will be forgotten. Balder will come back. He and his brother Hodor will live in peace together in the ruins of Odin's battlefields.

Do you see what I mean, or must I go on?

[echo effect] she sinks now, the skilled witch

Must I go on? [singing starts at some point in the next section and interlaces, swelling]

The sons of these two brothers will inhabit the widest farmstead under the sky. She sees a hall [echo effects: She sinks now] thatched in gold at the southern end of heaven, more beautiful than the sun. There, the good will live and be happy forever. [echo effects: she sinks, far into the future] And the dark, gleaming dragon flies down from the mountains, to clear away in his jaws the last remaining corpses of the dead.

Bright, they call me. The bright-eyed seer. She sinks.

[singing of repeated motif in major key, then fade out. Resolved feel.]

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