Óðinn Stole My Mythological Virginity
Do You Want to Know More? And What?

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The space fashioned in the creation passages of the medieval Icelandic poems "The Sayings of the High One" and "The Seeress's Prophecy" offers the reader a unique understanding into Norse branches of Germanic culture during the Viking Age. Two texts, *The Poetic Edda* (a collection of eddic poetry) and Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (a narrative which begins with gods as historical and patriarchal kings), each written during the 13th century, are vehicles of the production and reproduction of pagan mores and values. While the storyteller of *The Poetic Edda* is unknown (though Sæmundur the Wise once held the distinction), the author and compiler of *The Prose Edda* is known, Snorri Sturluson, an "ambitious and sometimes ruthless leader" who "was also a man of learning, with deep interests in the myth, poetry, and history of the Viking Age."[1] Sturluson's translation stands as an authoritative reading that influences our collective views on Norse Mythologies.

1. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, i.

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Reader-response criticism works within a triadic relationship between the author, the work, and the reader. And they are always based within a historical context controlled by the dominant cultural biases and power systems which influences our knowledge and understanding. Only when new historical approaches are then disseminated, do the old narrative misreadings dissemble. How then, if these aspects are controlled or conditioned by such inherent structural systems (which were historically patriarchal back to pre-Christian times), can the feminine divine stand as an agency of authoritative narration? Misreading (reading against the grain) of the work contributes to unpacking knowledge and power structures that gain authority through oppressive historical repetitions. By subverting the authority of Óðinn as the main source of knowledge and inverting his authority, I give that voice, knowledge, and power back to the Seeress. Listen closer to the renowned and reanimated Seeress in "The Seeress's Prophecy," who perceives a more far-reaching vision than that of Óðinn himself. I imagine the Seeress, her back stone straight, her head tilted just so, with a searing tone (resplendent with underpinnings of scorn) asking Óðinn, "Do you want to know more: and what?"[2]

LITERARY TERMS, MAGIC, AND GENDER

Let's begin then, with the 'what'—literary terms. Remember, there is no ideal reader. Agency and authority emerge within a triadic interpretation based on cultural and historical context. There is no universal reader outside authoritative power systems. So, we must consider the story teller's imagination inverting formed identities and spaces within the constructs of both sacred text and folktale telling. Inside this paradigm, a symbiotic and sacred relationship lays encapsulated as an inherited legacy. The genre or classification of the storyteller, the work and the reader's critical response begins an ancient text's reanimation of sorts. Within this newly formed liminal space, "the meaning of texts is the 'production'" or "creation of the individual reader," then enters a realm of formed magic mirroring an informed universal consciousness.[3] At that moment, the reader's imagination, aided by the writer's words, evokes the creative power stored in the mind's eye and expresses, in form, the magic of identity. Here the narrative authority is controlled by the construction of an ideal or universal reader. The reader is now both linked to and informed by the storyteller within the written work, "with the basic conditions of our existence."[4]

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[2]. Larrington, "The Seeress's Prophecy," vv. 28, 29, 34, 35, 38, 40, 49, 59, 60.

[3]. Abrams and Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 330.

[4]. Tatar, The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales, 8.

Within this symbiotic relationship of storyteller, work, and reader, signposts signal identity (and therefore the form or traits) of the character through imagery. As Elizabeth Cowie suggests, the reader navigates "a system which produces through the articulation of signifying elements."[5] Words then act as "signposts" pointing us onward or "signalling" to us how to perceive a piece, a character, or space. Identity through imagery, however, is often shaped in a gendered landscape, one skewed by the storyteller's experience within a universal consciousness which supports his masculinized space. When magic or the use of magic occurs in medieval Icelandic literature, ("women's magic" in particular is textually denounced), it penetrates the heteronormative discourse; imagination, identity, and space emerge fractured, stolen, and subsumed within a new form of the storyteller's themes.

Figure 20: *The Norns* by Karen Johannsson

Gendered Themes Collide: Óðinn Usurps the Female Deity

These themes nestled within the storyteller's imagery, emerge as fluid forms of social mores and values expressions. In *The Prose Edda*, Snorri Sturluson's underpinnings of Christian Humanism, insert and invert female identity into a dismissive haunted mythological space of banishment. The creation theme according to Snorri, sets Judeo-Christian Patriarchal norms as the foundations of the world with, "In the beginning, almighty God created

[5]. Cowie, "Woman as Sign," 49.

heaven and earth and all that pertains to them. Lastly, he created two people, Adam and Eve."[6] This paradigm denies the female's point of view (the Seeress and other female deities), her knowledge and position as storyteller.

In earlier versions of the sagas less influenced by Christianity, underpinnings reflecting this paradigm are seen developing. In Carolyne Larrington's translations of eddic poems "The Sayings of the High One" and "The Seeress's Prophecy," concurrent themes of birth and rebirth cradle feminine magical knowledge, but within the beginnings of an intrusive narrator's view, the feminine space and place is dictated and delineated. Here, in "Sayings of the High One," Óðinn penetrates the creation myth.

> I know that I hung on a windswept tree
> nine long nights,
> wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
> myself to myself,
> on that tree of which no man knows
> from where its roots run
> (v. 138)

In this space, Óðinn infiltrates the unknowable of women's wisdom. Armoured and engorged with hypermasculinity, he is now usurper of the sacred identity and form of woman. And what? He emerges as thief of feminine runes. Divine symbols of sacred place upon the image of world order, now lay shattered and out of balance. He rides upon "Yggr's Steed" (Yggdrasill, the World Tree) "hung on a windswept tree." The world tree's identity, "Yggr" (another name for Óðinn and "Steed" or stud) manifests as "the source of life and all knowledge, and all fate" from whose "fruits heal the womb ailments of women" as he awaits the birth of knowledge in the form of runes.[7] Óðinn is penetrated "with a spear," the phallic symbol of war, of destruction, of production and reproduction as he sows his body through a brutal wound, a mad, man-made vagina, he invites "[him]self into [him]self" (line 137). Óðinn, the storyteller, re-inscribes the surface and space of women's most sacred source of being—giving life.

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[6]. Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 3.

[7]. Lecouteux, Encyclopedia of Norse and Germanic Folklore, Mythology, and Magic, 323.

While pregnant women endure the "long nights" of nine months with a mother's hope to enter the delivery room, Óðinn the "All Father" mocks feminine divinity by enduring "nine long nights," foregoing nine months, to enter the delivery room of wisdom. Irony drips with his blood, as Óðinn pronounces the use of his sacrificial spear Gungnir (quaint naming of a phallic symbol) which is fashioned from Yggdrasill's branches. These are the very same branches from which practitioners of *seiðr*, of women's magic, receive their staffs. Throughout the Eddas, there are whispers of derision should any man practise seiðr, but here? Óðinn's punishment for seeking women's magic? He, the new usurper of divine feminine identity, dons his cloak of hubris, warm in a newfound awakening and utmost authority. Óðinn, the storyteller, is rebirthed on "that tree of which no man knows/from where it's roots run" (v. 137). In Larrington's translation of "The Seeress's Prophecy," the Seeress, with grace and beauty, to whom the female reader imagines the night belongs, amongst the stars, as she dances unadorned—hands over the words of all women's magic to the Hanged Man. As the runes drift towards Óðinn's grasping hands, even as "nine times the Space that measures Day and Night is endured, the Seeress knows the God's fate can never be averted—regardless of held or stolen wisdom.[8]

Figure 21: By Steinunn Bessason (2023)

[8]. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 50.

SEIÐR AS WOMAN'S SONG

Seiðr, according to Annette Høst of the Scandinavian Centre for Shamanic Studies, "was a living tradition used for divination and transformation up until middle or late Viking age."[9] Women entered communities, escorted by a chosen man (as befitting her status), one hand on their staff and a sacred song at the ready as they waited to sit upon the *seiðhjallr* (seiðr seat). Wise women sought the story's ending to whatever plighted the people gathered in the hall. Back to the beginnings, the role of the Seeress (writer) transforms to storyteller, shaping the work for the audience (readers) before her. I remember when Haraldur Bessason told me to read *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America*, translated by Magnús Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson. *Grænlendinga saga* recounts a moment in time for me as a 20-year-old reading chapter 4 where "Guðrid is told her future," and I learned of Þorbjörg lítilvölva from *Eiríks saga rauða*. Imagine, being the last of nine sisters, who, according to the footnotes, "had all been prophetesses."[10] Þorbjörg's dress mirrors that of the Goddess Freyja, an homage, I believe, to the woman who gave the gods the gift of divination.

> She wore a blue mantle fastened with straps and adorned with stones all the way down to the hem. She had a necklace of glass beads. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white cat's fur. She carried a staff with a brass-bound knob studded with stones. She wore a belt made of touchwood, from which hung a large pouch, and in this she kept the charms she needed for witchcraft. On her feet were hairy calfskin shoes with long thick laces which had large tin buttons on the ends. She wore catskin gloves, with the white fur inside. (81-82)

I include this description to mark the space of honour within the works referred to as the Eddas. While Óðinn swung grasping for power—the *völva* (staff carrier), the *seiðkona*, or *spákona* (seeress)—Þorbjörg, engages the spirits with "sweet" song. A song whose listeners wonder if they, "had ever heard a fairer song," as they are embraced within a narrative wholly feminine and divine. While some songs are "strong" or "harsh" according to Høst, they do not evoke the violence of Óðinn's demand for the knowledge hidden within runic magic. Þorbjörg shares her knowledge with the community and in "The Sayings of the High One," a collection of "wisdom stanzas" to instruct the community of acceptable mores and

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[9]. Høst, "The Legacy of Seiðr," 11.

[10]. Magnús Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson, *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America*, 81-84.

values, Óðinn inserts himself over the omniscient storyteller and emerges as narrator and booster arbitrating women's sacred knowledge.

> I know an eighteenth, which I shall never teach
> to any girl or any man's wife—
> it's always better when just one person knows,
> that follows at the end of the spells—
> except that one woman who embraces me in her arms,
> or who may be my sister.
> (v. 163)

Óðinn will trade rune magic for sex while a seeress will teach the willing seeker, destined by birth, the connection between the world seen and unseen which she honours. From the branches of Yggdrasill, her staff ground her to the earth as she seeks to share knowledge to heal the community. As I read these passages of old, I thought back to January 2018, the night Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson *allsherjargoði* (Ásatrú chief religious official) gave a lecture at the University of Manitoba in the Icelandic Collection. A composer of note, he premiered "a choir and orchestral piece, *7 Friends*" at the University of Manitoba.[11] That cold winter eve, he stood at the lectern insisting there was no music in the Eddas. With Óðinn's hubris he presented on screen four overlapping ancient magical staves that linked Winnipeg, Iceland, and Manitoba's Interlake region. Without seeking permission from seeresses in the New World, he brought shame of a particular patriarchal form. Within the Eddas, the power of prophecy, the use of magic within the walls of the Icelandic Reading Room, manage in this day and age to both honour and denigrate.

Figure 22: Icelandic actor and musician Björk as Seeress in *The Northman* (2022)

[11]. Wray Enns, "Winnipeg New Music Festival returns with more envelope-pushing pieces."

THE SEERESS KNOWS

Dated to the latter part of the tenth century and written in the *fornyrðislag* metre, "The Seeress's Prophecy" penetrates the heteronormative discourse by situating identity, space, and place outside of the storyteller's Judeo-Christian politicized imagination.[12] However, within the paradigm of storyteller, work, and listener, the one who transcribes directs the experience. The first of the poems included in *The Poetic Edda*, "The Seeress's Prophecy," situates identity in the given title with voice in the first-person narrative. The Seeress, the teller of tales foretold, predates the creation of the world. She observes Óðinn's betrayal of Ymir and all that the future will bring for Giants, Gods, Vanir, Elves, Dwarves and Humans alike. The Seeress sees the origin of imaginings, of literal space—of form's fluidity. She is the breath of magic's beginnings—of spirit's dance to become. While Óðinn in "The Sayings of the High One" hangs "on that tree of which no man knows / from where its roots run," the Seeress shares the knowledge of the ash tree, Yggdrasil, "the mighty Measuring Tree down below the earth" and of "nine worlds" and "nine giant women" with the reader, as Óðinn remains in boastful darkness.[13]

In Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, the Seeress is both a foremost source of knowledge and a source in need of correction. As the Seeress recites the creation of the world, Sturluson's cultural colonialist conquest of authorial intent occurs in the 22nd stanza. The omniscient narrator's heteronormative discourse suggests place now acts as a politically sanctioned catalyst for paradigms of hyper-masculinity. Snorri recounts a time when, "she remembers the first war in the world," this removes the power, the place, the space, and the identity of the Seeress as a magical Goddess overseeing creation. An active agent turns a passive observer as a re-producing identity "through definitions of similarity, continuity, and different versions of identity work to include and exclude populations in specific ways."[14] In this shift, a sacred text of creation enters a dimension of a mythical folktale/legend far removed from magic as a source of feminine power. At this point, I believe writer/storyteller, work, and reader/listener use universal consciousness as bricks of imagination's bridge to embrace polytheistic religion. Divination tumbles in the reader/listener's mind from community conduct viewed from a source of magic infused to a practical application.

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[12]. Larrington, "The Seeress's Prophecy," 3.

[13]. Larrington, "Sayings of the High One" v. 138; "The Seeress's Prophecy," v. 2.

[14]. Mackey, "Death by Landscape," 125.

FROM SACRED TEXTS TO LORE

The division of sacred texts to folktale, legend, and lore negates their shared commonality. In The Book of Runes, Blum opens with "The Speech of the High One" from *The Poetic Edda*. Runic magic's "function determines form, use confers meaning and an Oracle responds to the requirements of the time in which it is consulted." First, the reader sees and intuitively acknowledges the signal of male autonomy and absolute authority in the opening page. Blum further admonishes, "that the Runes are not meant to be used for divination or fortune telling. The disposition of the future is in God's hands, not ours."[15] This follows the writing of *The Saga of Eric the Red* as a work "written under the influence of some churchmen" even though "Christians had sought out many of these *völvur* who were skilled in the art of magic" and then of course having learned a fate, "had them killed for heresy."[16] Numerology, "the branch of knowledge that deals with the occult significance of numbers" is unironically featured in numerous religious texts.[17] The Talmud, "is the record of rabbinic teachings that spans a period of about six hundred years, beginning in the first century C.E." is "made up of two separate works: the *Mishnah*, a compilation of Jewish laws [...] and the *Gemara*, the rabbinic commentaries and discussions on the *Mishnah*."[18] In the same period of time that these texts were compiled, it is believed that *gematria* began to be employed where "each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also a number, so that every Hebrew word has a numerical value."[19]

In the Eddas, the object is signified in position as a whole and elevated into the realm of magic through a numerical standing. Of the 62 stanzas in "The Seeress's Prophecy," stanza 60 has 3 lines, stanza 22 has 5 lines and stanza 21 has 2 lines (Larrington 12). In the 21st stanza, line 83 and 84, "they laid down laws, those chose lives" and the next, "for the sons of men, the fates of men" an omniscient narrator, invokes the "male gaze" of institutional religious rights rupturing the individuality of women's magic, women's voice of origin within this hegemonic patriarchy of heteronormative discourse. The Seeress is submerged within the narrative structure of a sacred text and emerges in form briefly as "the

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[15]. Blum, *The Book of Runes*, 14-15.

[16]. "9. Thorbjorg litilvolva - Can she see the future?," Overview, Saga Museum, accessed May 25, 2024, https://sagamuseum.is/overview/#thorbjorg-litilvolva.

[17]. *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (2011), s.v. "numerology."

[18]. The Talmud, Reform Judaism, accessed June 9, 2024, https://reformjudaism.org/talmud.

[19]. Potok, *The Chosen*, 128; for more information about gematria, see also Issitt and Main, *Hidden Religion*, 8-11.

silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning."[20] She transpires into a Grimm's caricature of the lackless female agency found in the works of folktales, legends, and myths. Regardless of the Judeo-Christian or Muslim religious dictates, the people choose who to elevate; and "despite being on the margins of the society in Iceland the völva was a greatly respected profession and only suffered if the prophecy did not suit the protagonist of the saga."

THEORISTS HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE

Figure 23: *The Messengers* by Nicole Nixon

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) speaks of "romantic nationalism," Max Luthi (1909-1991) speaks of folklore form and structure's "one dimensionality" of characters, and in Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson speaks of a religious base of conduct under "one named God." Judith Butler, a post structuralist, suggests that narrative structure incorporates a "surface of permeability" for which gender is performed, an 'act,' of "corporeal style" constructed through societal "legitimation" when in fact, gender, she contends is a "regulatory fiction."[21] A nation's landscape is the production and reproduction of written work. For, "if the state is what binds, it is also clearly what can and does unbind. And if the state binds in the name of the nation conjuring a certain version of the nation forcibly, if not powerfully, then it also unbinds, releases, expels, [and] banishes."[22] The historical figures of the author, the work, and even the reader, are often assumed masculine, which is why the voice of the feminine within texts is submerged.

When the storyteller enters the realm of the imagination, the altered state of words sacred to the clan, the oral manifests into the written record. The law of the culture, the

[20]. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 35.

[21]. Butler, "Gender Space Architecture," 96.

[22]. Butler and Spivak, Who Sings the Nation-State?

way of ascent as male or female warriors, penetrates the universal consciousness of archetypes found throughout the world. Freyja, who chooses half the slain with Óðinn, shares in their perpetual resurrection. When identity is wrapped wounded in the chanting and toning of the divine feminine, an echo of the Seeress, of Freyja, reweaves the wounds of the fallen lain dead in lands languishing upon paper. When viewed through the lens of the written creative process, a shift occurs when the oratory technique is introduced. Consider as Old Norse's musical cadence, when spoken. In tone and inflection, we listen as the storyteller takes us back to how the Sagas were shared. A place of female agency where space constructs a perpetual memory as it thrives within and without form, stretching across generations.

Now tell me, do you want to know more? And what?

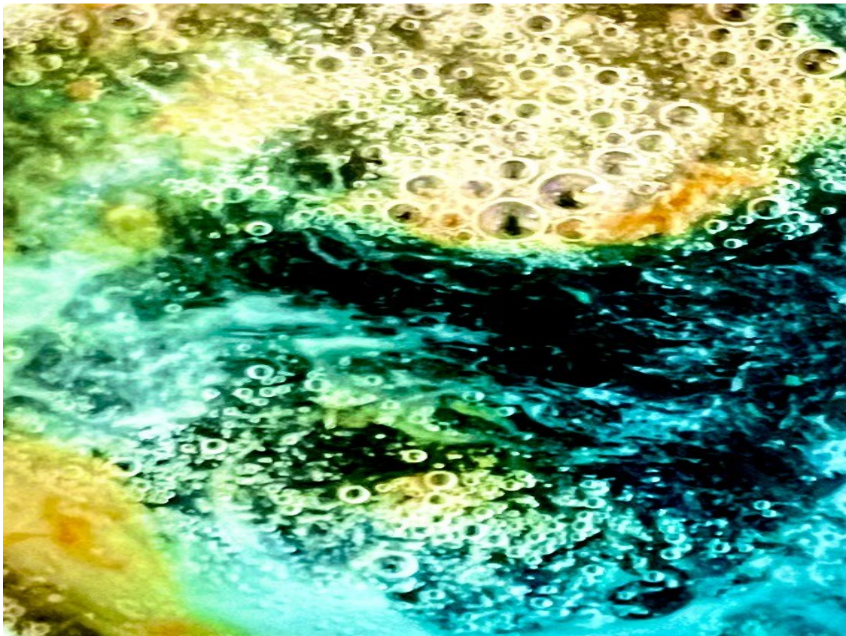

Figure 24: *Before* by Diane Alexander

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