



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

The Dragon of the North:
The Supernatural Nature of Knowledge in *Völuspá*

Ritgerd til MA-prófs í 21013

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September 2013

Háskoli Íslands

Íslensku og menningardeild

Medieval Icelandic Studies

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September 2013

"In the Norseman's metaphor, resurrection from death is a birth, and death is a gestation of life."

Ursula Dronke (1997, 43)

Abstract.

This thesis is an exploration of the mythological poem *Völuspá* and the nature of knowledge within the world presented by the text. I will argue that knowledge is a supernatural force, and that the world will ultimately be destroyed as a result of its influence.

The action of *Völuspá* revolves around the Æsir's central domain, and throughout the course of the poem, that domain is invaded and infiltrated by supernatural forces in the shape of various types of knowledge, including awareness, prophecy, and fate. This knowledge is strongly connected to women and perceived as immoral, due to its origins outside the domain of the Æsir and the negative consequences it garners.

Völuspá was shaped by myriad ancient traditions, Babylonian and Judeo-Christian prominent among them. These ideas can be seen in the traces of Mother Goddess cult beliefs that exist in the poem, including creation by women and cosmological lunar imagery, and by indications of the shift to masculine societies, such as naming as a creative act and an excess of violence in the society. These traditions will be explored as a way of interpreting the text and placing it in a moral and eschatological context.

Útdráttur.

Í þessari ritgerð er fengist við goðsagnakvæðið Völuspá og eðli þekkingarinnar í heiminum sem við kynnumst í kvæðinu. Ég mun rökstyðja að þekkingin sé yfirnáttúrleg og því muni heimurinn að lokum farast hennar vegna. Í Völuspá hnitast atburðarásin um meginýfirráðasvæði Ásanna og í rás kvæðisins er ráðist inn á það svæði og þar komast inn yfirnáttúrleg öfl í líki margvíslegrar þekkingar, s.s. örlög, spádómar og fjölkynngi. Þessi þekking tengist konum sterklega og er talin ósiðleg vegna þess að hún er upprunnin utan valdsvæðis Ásanna og vegna neikvæðra afleiðinga sem af henni spretta. Völuspá var mótuð af fjölmörgum fornum hefðum, bæði frá kristni og gyðingdómi og Babýlon. Þessar hugmyndir má sjá í leifum af trú á hina fornu móðurgyðju sem sjást í kvæðinu, meðal annars sköpun kvenna og tunglmyndmáli og með vísbendingum um skipti til karllægra samfélaga eins og nafngiftir sem sköpunarferli og ofgnótt ofbeldis í samfélaginu. Þessar hefðir verða skoðaðar sem leið til að túlka textann og setja hann í siðferðislegt og goðsögulegt samhengi.

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Acknowledgements.

My thanks are owed:

First and foremost to my parents, who got me here; to the Mjóstrætlingar, past, present, and future; and to the people (you know who you are) who made this crazy year worthwhile.

To Ármann, for advising (and dealing) with me; to Terry, who first put this idea in my head; and to Haraldur and Torfi, for being absolute rockstars.

Introduction.

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea." This passage, Revelation 21:1, is the first descriptor in the book of the new world that will descend from Heaven following the biblical apocalypse. It is not an unfamiliar image, and the idea of a new world emerging after the first perishes in a cataclysmic event is one that is widespread. The bible, of course, is a hugely influential text on subsequent beliefs and religions, but its images and motifs had been evolving for thousands of years prior to its manufacture. At times, the links between the biblical texts and its predecessors are unrecognizable at best, but they can still be discovered.

The mention of the sea—or rather, its exclusion—in the new world is one such link. The motif of the sea is one of the most prevalent in the creation myths of myriad traditions, Babylonian and Judeo-Christian prominently among them. In the *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh, the world is created in a void by reshaping and reappropriating the body of Tiamat, the primordial Mother Goddess (Pritchard 1966). That void is represented by the sea—chaotic, dark, and uncontrollable. This representation persists, and is even present in the creation account of Genesis, as "darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Gen 1:1; Campbell 1973, 297). This "deep," often zoomorphically imagined as a dragon—something to be symbolically conquered—is not named in Genesis, but is so elsewhere in the Old Testament. Ralston, in his discussion of how this idea is adapted for a monotheistic tradition, explains, "The sea is primeval chaos, the waters of disorder and darkness, the home of the chaos monster....The Biblical writers remember that the monster was a great dragon, a serpent one of whose familiar names was Rahab" (1973, 394).

Rahab, and the ideas that this dragon represent, can even be seen in the Old Norse mythological poem of *Völuspá*, which will be the main focus of the present study. In the poem, the world is reborn after an apocalypse which consumes the planet. The Ragnarøk of *Völuspá* is the result of a cosmological moral flaw, and its seeds are sown by the presence of supernatural knowledge in the world. The immoral nature of this knowledge is signified by many things, and the presence of a dragon in the world that emerges after the Ragnarøk is not an unimportant factor in analyzing the cosmology put forth in the poem.

There are many types of knowledge in *Völuspá*, but the one that I am interested in could be classified as "magical." This knowledge is characterized in a handful of ways: Its source is one that exists outside the central sphere of the *Æsir*; the consequences of its dispersion are negative; and it is invariably connected to women and female figures. Its origins mark it as supernatural, as it is never present in a world that has been untouched by outside influences. This supernatural nature subsequently marks it as immoral, and its negative consequences and association with women reflect this nature.

The link between women and evil is a reoccurring theme in the Norse literature, which reflects Christian tenets and is highly indicative of its Christian influence. Jochens notes similarities and differences, stating that "in both traditions women are associated with evil, but, while Christians saw human women as responsible for bringing evil into the world, in the Nordic tradition this role is performed by supernatural female beings" (1989, 361). But this idea is not limited to the two traditions: Even before the Church and the Patristic writers could further shape it, "the idea is precisely articulated and embodied in myth: that what is feminine is chaotic, destructive, demonic, and is to be feared and mastered" (Baring and Cashford 1993, 283). Helga Kress argues such a thing as well, and even links together the ideas of supernatural knowledge and its resulting violence—something that will be discussed along with the Gullveig figure below. She states, "They need to turn to the outside, however, to gain access to the knowledge stored there, and they win that knowledge by means of violence and deceit. Those elements outside society which they do not have power over but are seeking to win, are often defined as feminine" (2012, 83). These female beings, tied historically to that supernatural evil, are some of the prime movers in *Völuspá*.

The female figures of the poem can be classified in different ways, and they play varying roles in its narrative. Each class represents a different type of magical, or supernatural, knowledge: The *jötnar* who bring about the *Æsir*'s greed for gold represent an awareness of self; the *norns* who emerge from the lake below Yggdrasill represent fate and the mortality of mankind; the *völur*, the first female presence in the world, represent prophecy and the gift of foresight; Gullveig and *Heiðr* represent reproduction and the role of women in the cycle of death and rebirth; Freyja, as one of the *Vanir*, represents the supernatural realm itself. These women interact with and operate in a society that is largely defined by men and a rigidly structured

morality that is contingent on the placement of these women and the realms that compose their world.

Thus crucial to the present study is the idea that the Æsir inhabit the most central space, and that their morality, as long as it is untainted by outside contact, is absolute. The truth of this idea is consistently reinforced in the Norse myths, as the center of the action moves with the Æsir and they are never seen or portrayed as invaders of the lands that they enter, only as victims of occasional invasions. In light of their centrality, the other cultures that exist in the world—most notably that of the Vanir and the jotnar—are seen as wrong or "as something pre-cultural" (Schjødt 2008, 392). Despite wars and societal mergers, the Æsir are never forced to assimilate to another culture, because "The norms that the Æsir stand for are 'the right ones' in relation to the Vanir, that is, they are those which stand for the society in which the myths functioned, and they are the ones to which the Vanir had to subject themselves" (392). The myths revolve around the Æsir, and their needs and motivations are the main lens through which they are viewed (Clunies Ross 1994, 49). While the Æsir's morality is centrally aligned due to their location both physically and literally, it is in turn due to this morality that they occupy a central space and that the surrounding cultures are seen as inferior. Schjødt explains that "Vanir society with its acceptance of incest cannot be used as a model for human society," so they play no active part in the myths that do not serve the Æsir's ends (2008, 393).

This idea of at least two contrasting and dynamic worlds is a biblical one, and it plays a crucial role in the establishment of both a central space and an "other" world for that space to be seen against (see Speiser's introduction to Genesis and his discussion of the hands responsible for the book). "The Vanir as a collective group," Schjødt argues, "thus represent a semantic category which is, at one and the same time, temporal and spatial: it is before and it is outside" (2008, 392). And it is this category—this markedly separate space—that the Æsir are seen against. These two worlds are constantly at odds in the Norse myths, and the interplay between them is crucial for conceptions of knowledge in *Völuspá*. The morally flawed world exists on the edges of the central realm of the Æsir, and the boundaries between them are fluid, at best. While invasions of this "other" world into the Æsir's space are often the more influential of their interactions, the Æsir have no shortage of consequential crossings into the supernatural realm.

Neil Price, in discussing the chthonic implications of the Gotland stones, actually quite neatly reiterates the cosmological structure of *Völuspá*'s world. He argues that the stones actually

stood for land claims, and that "the holding was literally bounded by statements about the dead," as told through the pictorial story that appeared in sequence on the stones (2012², 33). Working from Andrén's hypothesis that the stones represent doors to other worlds, Price sheds new light on the door motifs in the works of Ibn Fadlan and the *Völsunga* fragment, since in these texts, the doors and passageways to other worlds—to the supernatural realm—are located on the outskirts of a space; they serve an important function to those inhabiting that space (in the example of the Gotland stones, claiming the land) and yet they remain untouched by the central sphere of authority (33). This idea of a clear central space ringed by the supernatural should not now be unfamiliar: The Æsir came into the world and erected that same ring of authority, establishing their own central space surrounded by but separated from the supernatural realm.

To recapitulate, then: While there is more than one type of knowledge present in *Völuspá*, the most influential of these is supernatural. This supernatural knowledge comes in many forms, but they are all of them associated with women and represented by the various female figures of the poem, who exist in diverse and peripheral spaces in the world. The Æsir inhabit the most central of these spaces, and that is reflected in both the societal and moral structure of the world. Supernatural knowledge, then, which has its origins in those peripheral places inhabited by women, is thus an immoral force in a world that is so defined by the centrality of the Æsir. Its presence in such a world as that of *Völuspá* will have only negative consequences, and will even lead to its ultimate destruction.

My aims for this interpretation and analysis of the poem do not include an attempt at reconstructing Old Norse religion, or even the shedding of light on generally pagan religious ideas. My concern is by and large cosmological, and my goal is to discover what shape a cosmology would take that is lifted straight from the present text alone; and then to determine what that cosmology says about the nature and morality of knowledge within it. I am not so concerned with a real-life application, historical or contemporary, of any conclusions therein. My scholarly interest is rather the historical context into which *Völuspá* is placed—the literary traditions and early societies that shaped it, along with how that context influences the poem as we have it in its present form.

The Old Norse Literary Tradition.

While the main Old Norse source that I will be analyzing is the poem of *Völuspá*, parallels will be drawn from a handful of other poems found in the Elder Edda, as well as Snorri Sturluson's *Glyfaginning* and *Ynglingasaga*. A quick discussion of the issues and complexities of the Old Norse corpus as a whole, however, is a prudent place to begin, for while the present study is not bogged down by the ambiguous conclusions that may or may not be drawn from the texts regarding medieval Icelandic society, those conclusions are shaped by myriad historical influences, and I refer to these influences repeatedly in this paper.

The debate regarding the sources for Viking Age Scandinavia and whether or not they can be used, to whatever degree, to reconstruct that society is ongoing and ever-changing. Valid evidence has been offered on both sides of the debate, although no final position has been, or may ever be, reached. One of the main concerns in this debate is the influence of Christianity on the written sources. While opinions vary, Schjødt argues that these Christian-influenced sources can be used to reconstruct elements of pagan Scandinavia, as Christianity was not coherent at the time and Scandinavia had been influenced by Christianity even before Christianization began, and some pagan elements survived the shift (2012). Andreas Nordberg also argues that the texts alone can serve as valuable primary sources, and that their philological value especially should not be overlooked (2012, 124). He maintains that Christianization was not a point of static, and that the delineation of what is specifically "Old Norse" versus what belongs to another time or tradition is a later academic development and should not be trusted absolutely (125-26). There were shifts in conceptions of worldview and perceptions of time, "which took the form of a blending together of heathen and Christian mythology" (Steinsland 2006, 924).

Furthermore, Schjødt stresses the importance of the interplay between Christian and pagan elements, and opposes the rejection of comparative religion as a legitimate method of study, given that "otherwise, what we are left are simply some singular statements which we will never be able to fit together" (2012, 280). Using the sources in such a way, the lines between authenticity and reconstruction are, of course, blurred, but Schjødt argues that an objective standard is impossible to reach, and that religion is one aspect of a civilization that will always reveal some relation or other across societies. Dumézil also puts forth such a conclusion while analyzing the basis of comparisons between Indo-European myths. He argues that the vocabulary of Germanic languages is more southern Indo-European than not, and "it is not less

true, especially for very ancient times, that community of language implies a rather considerable minimum of community in concepts and in their mode of organization, in short 'ideology,' for which religion has long been the principle expression" (15-16). Here again is the idea that religion can be a most telling element not just about one society, but about whole families of traditions. In Schjødt's own words, "No religion has ever existed in a 'pure' form, unpolluted by other religions and world views" (2012, 265).

Christianity is no exception to this rule. The Bible is teeming with Near East imagery and ideas, and many Judeo-Christian traditions have their roots in these societies. That these Judeo-Christian traditions are so strongly influenced by the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Caananite myths is an important thing to remember when analyzing Norse mythology through the lens of Christian writers (Baring and Cashford 1993, 58-61, 178). Dumézil champions a model that supports such parallels with the Near East traditions. He analyzes the myths in a comparative Indo-European framework, the various traditions dependent on their shared history of a "tripartite social class system" which is extended to every aspect of life, including cosmology, and is most obviously mirrored in the Indian caste system (Dumézil 1973, x-xii). As is such, he focuses his comparisons of the Norse myths to those of the Indo-Iranian societies, drawing parallels from the Vedic texts and the Indian pantheon.

But all Indo-European comparisons, not just of the 'Scandinavian-Indic' variety that Dumézil speaks of most often, are then "explained by common prehistoric heritage." Such comparisons, he argues, are "thus legitimate and even methodologically necessary" before assigning meaning or discarding anything about a text (1973, 16). The influence of Near Eastern ideas can thus be felt in Old Norse literature, even when those ideas fail to surface in the Bible: Parallels that cannot be found in Christian myth *can* be found further back in time, in the myths and traditions that in turn shaped Christianity (Turville-Petre 1964, 283-84).

The cow Auðhumla, who plays a prominent role in the creation myth of *Gylfaginning*, is a prime example of such a Near East element (Faulkes 2005, 11). Because no source can be linked to Snorri's works, Turville-Petre supposes—rightly so—that the element must come from an altogether older tradition (1964, 277-278). Anders Hultgård corroborates this view, arguing that such elements as Auðhumla "seem to be rooted in genuine pre-Christian tradition" (2012, 214). Turville-Petre claims that the two traditions, Near Eastern and Norse, "resemble each other in ways which makes it impossible to think of independent development. In other words, the

Norse creation myth must be influenced by the eastern ones, but it is not yet possible to say when and how this influence was exerted" (1964, 278). This interplay does not occur solely within religious beliefs and practices, but can be applied to general worldview and seen represented in the Old Norse literary tradition.

The *Völuspá* Manuscripts.

Völuspá, as my main text, begs further examination. The poem exists, either in fragments or in its entirety, in three places: The Codex Regius, Hauksbók, and Snorri's *Edda*. The Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4to, was produced in 1270 and is comprised, in part, of the the Poetic Edda, the first poem of which is *Völuspá*. The version of the poem found in the Codex Regius is generally accepted as the most authentic, although its true original form is lost (Dronke 1997, 62). Hauksbók, AM 544 4to, while dated to the early 14th century, contains two leaves of *Völuspá* that were written much later, although the exact date is debated (61).

One of the most notable differences between them, the Hauksbók contains an interpolation after stanza 61 that prophesizes the coming of a divine ruler; obviously a later element, the stanza is mostly disregarded, given both contextual and linguistic considerations (Dronke 1997, 87-88; Steinsland 2006, 920). It serves no purpose for the present study, other than to demonstrate explicitly the Christian influence on the text. These two variants had common ancestors—now lost—and multiple stanzas from both versions are cited in the four main manuscripts of the *Edda*, although these mostly help to illuminate the history of the earlier texts (Dronke 1997, 61-62).

While the Codex Regius was written after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, and the new religion was ubiquitous on the island by that time, pagan traditions had been persistently influential, and, as Hultgård states, "there was still room for the development of syncretistic phenomena" (2012, 212). Such phenomena included the recording of centuries-old tales and traditions, transmitted orally and transformed over time. While the written texts were influenced by a religious shift to Christianity, this shift nevertheless shaped more than religion; and Christian ideologies can be seen bleeding into pagan conceptions of cosmology. As is such, the mythological poems contained in the Poetic Edda of the Codex Regius are not untouched by Christian influence, although the weight of that influence varies poem by poem. It is

exceptionally well demonstrated in *Völuspá*, and my analysis of the poem is strongly dependent on the view through such a lens.

The Cult of the Mother Goddess.

It is important to note that Auðhumla is not simply an element of Near Eastern traditions, but is also the remnant of an even more crucial historical trend: The shift from Mother Goddess cults to those of patriarchal warrior gods. The shift from the Mother Goddess to what becomes the Judeo-Christian god is not just a shift from feminine to masculine, but one that alters the entire structure of creation. This shift can first be seen in the *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh, as the shaping of Tiamat's body is no longer the central act of creation, eclipsed instead by Marduk's ordering of the universe, which becomes the more fundamental act (Baring and Cashford 1993, 273-74; Speiser 1983, 9). The deity, female or male, is no longer the substance of the world, but rather the external creator that exercises control over the pre-existing elements. As Baring and Cashford succinctly explain:

The god becomes the *maker* of heaven and earth whereas the goddess *was* heaven and earth. The concept of 'making' is radically different from 'being', in the sense that what is made is not necessarily of the same substance as its maker, and may be conceived as inferior to him; while what emerges from the mother is necessarily part of her and she of it. (1993, 274)

They speak of a "fundamental dualism" that results from the separation of the creator from what is created, which introduces new ideas regarding what is spirit and what is nature. "In the myth of the god," they state, "nature is no longer 'spiritual' and spirit is no longer 'natural', because the divine is transcendent to creation. Spirit is not inherent in nature, but outside it or beyond it..." Removing the creator from their creation introduces a hierarchy hitherto unseen in nature, and grants a power to the deity previously unheard of. Due to this newly formed divide between spirit and nature, "creation is the result of a divine act that brings order out of chaos" (274).

Echoes of this shift can be felt in the cosmology presented in *Völuspá*, as the act of creation presented therein is a very clear mix of both traditions. Ymir¹ settling in what appears to be a void in stanza 3 recalls the Babylonian tradition and the use of Tiamat's body to shape the world, while Bor's sons "lifting up the land" and the Æsir's naming and ordering of the world

¹ The placement of Ymir in this role is fascinating but not ultimately important. It is simply yet another example of the blend of traditions seen in *Völuspá* and the shift to patriarchal models, as the role he fills here would historically be that of a goddess.

recall not only Marduk's actions but the biblical acts of the Judeo-Christian God. Given the tone and ultimate end of the poem, however, it is equally clear which tradition was favored.

There is evidence of ancient and long-lasting conceptions of the Goddess as a bird and of the world as a cosmic egg (Baring and Cashford 1993, 13-15, 58-63; Campbell 1973, 276). As this idea evolved, the world was broken into three regions: The Upper Waters, the Earth, and the Lower Waters, i.e. the sky, the earth, and what was beneath the earth. Baring and Cashford insist that a distinction must be made regarding the last of these regions, as anything that is 'beneath the earth' could easily be classified as the 'underworld' or as an early designation of Hell. Using artistic evidence, however, they argue that "'the notion of the 'underworld', with its connotations of darkness, lifelessness and menace, was not present before the traumas and anarchy of the late Bronze Age" (13-14). This distinction is a crucial one, as it will become increasingly rare to see a worldview represented by female imagery that does not also convey negative ideas about that cosmology.

Lunar imagery was an inherent part of mother goddess cults, symbolic of ancient ideas regarding life and death. Life and death, light and darkness, were the two elements of a never-ending cycle; and just as the 'underworld' did not always have negative connotations, neither did darkness always equate to evil, or even to something's end. Baring and Cashford explain the worldview of mother goddess societies thus:

With the passage of time, they must have come to trust in the reappearance of the crescent moon, and so to recognize darkness as the time of waiting before the resurgence of new life. With death they would have felt that they were taken back into the dark womb of the Mother and believed that they would be reborn like the moon. (1993, 19)

This idea was not simply an abstract one. It was an image for life and death, something figurative and symbolic, but it also colored the very society they lived in and affected how they interacted with and treated the natural world. Lunar imagery, and the cosmological understanding represented by it, informed a world where "darkness was not something antagonistic to light, nor death to life, but an aspect of the being of the Mother Goddess. Everything that existed, including themselves, was an expression of the Goddess" (19). As this worldview shifted into one with patriarchal values, the acceptance and understanding of both elements began to be lost, resulting in the linear cosmological spectrum seen in *Völuspá*—birth on one end, death on the other—that will be further discussed below.

The consequences of this loss of understanding are crucial and influential, and the shift from the lunar imagery of the goddess to the solar imagery of the warrior-creator god has widespread implications for future societies regarding not only conceptions of life and death but also of gender. This shift is particularly relevant for the study of the Norse mythological poems, as "it has influenced the Judaeo-Christian view of nature, matter and whatever else has been defined as feminine, and it has structured our paradigm images in mythology, religion, literature, science and psychology" (Baring and Cashford 1993, 283). It shaped the Christian worldview that subsequently influenced the literature in its present state.

The Æsir: Creation Myths.

Völuspá is one of the poems in which pagan and Christian elements are both clearly employed. Indeed, despite the decidedly pagan subject matter of the poem, Turville-Petre maintains that "few would now deny that it is colored by Christian symbols, and particularly in the description of the Ragnarøk" (1964, 9; Jesch 2012, 294-95). This particular emphasis on Ragnarøk is crucial, as it makes *Völuspá* unique among the Eddic poems: It contains a full, cyclical account of the birth, death, and rebirth of the world—and one that is not found in any other source. This is not a troubling fact, however, since that "syncretistic phenomena" was still occurring at the time of its documentation, and many elements found in *Völuspá* overlap with those in the other poems, such as the presence of Ymir during the birth of the world, even if his role is not the same throughout all accounts.² Hultgård hypothesizes from the texts that "different creation myths were circulating" (2012, 214), and these myths were varied in their sources, taking elements from a number of different traditions, as discussed above.

That mix of traditions is obvious even in the first stanzas of *Völuspá*. Ymir is present in stanza 3, although his role is drastically minimized from that which he plays in in both *Gylfaginning* and *Vafþrúðnismál*, where he is the clear primogenitor of the giants (Faulkes 2005, 9-11; sts 30-33). The focus in *Völuspá* is given instead to the Æsir, who have an active role in creation evocative of the biblical model. They shape both the natural and the material world, naming and ordering the heavens in stanza 6, and building and creating temples and tools in stanza 7. There is nothing inherently wrong with the world that the Æsir presently inhabit, and while the jötnar presumably exist contemporaneously, the two groups occupy different and isolated spheres, and the moral righteousness of the Æsir is absolute in the world they have created.

This Golden Age, however, does not last for long. Stanza 8 sees the Æsir for the last time in their unaltered state, as they entertain themselves with games in the meadow, and where *var þeim vetterigs / vant ór gulli*. The arrival of the three jötnar women out of Jötunheimar alters the trajectory of the entire universe, although the seeds are here only just being sown. These women are the first contact the Æsir have with the world outside of that which they created: It is

² Clunies Ross argues that his role is more alike than it may at first seem (1994, 152-154), given the tendency of the *Völuspá* author to omit time between stanzas. Dronke acknowledges the discrepancy of Ymir's role that exists within *Völuspá* itself, but comments that the poet "smoothly ignores the contradiction" (1997, 35).

their first encounter with the supernatural. Before this event, the *Æsir teitir vóro*, and they were, in a sense, emotionally and psychologically complete. I specify "in a sense," however, because it is notable (indeed, crucial) that the *jötnar* do not give the *Æsir* anything they do not already have: They do not engage in creation; they do not alter the *Æsir* or the world in which they live. The *jötnar* simply awaken something that is already inherent within them. It is not an alteration as much as it is a broadening of experience, a widening of the *Æsir*'s emotional and rational capacity.

This event, occurring so close chronologically to the creation of the world, begins already the steady slide to its destruction. The awakening within the *Æsir* of their greed for gold is the first example in the world of supernatural knowledge, a forbidden thing whose immorality will rend the very fabric of the natural world, leading ultimately to its destruction. A want of gold is not knowledge in and of itself, but it is the broadening of the *Æsir*'s experience that is crucial: They have been made aware of a hitherto dormant part of themselves, and are thus now capable of recognizing and exploring other such parts. They now have the ability to acknowledge and want for things that exist outside of their making, that linger on the periphery of their central moral sphere. Knowledge is the *Æsir*'s forbidden fruit, the thing they never knew enough to seek.³

Strictly in the text, however, there are no immediate negative consequences to the *Æsir*'s want of gold. After the arrival of the *jötnar* women, they return once again to their thrones and continue to deliberate and create, and the dwarves that they bring into being have no negative effect on the world.⁴ Their next act of creation is similarly auspicious, as the three gods breathe life into *Askr* and *Embla* and they become superior beings because of it. However, one important thing here is of note, which lends credence to the argument that supernatural knowledge is a negative thing: These beings that the *Æsir* find and animate are said to be *þrlqglausa*, 'free of fate.' They, like the *Æsir* before them, were created with certain limitations in place, without the awareness of supernatural knowledge and the potential for it within

³ This idea is very strongly influenced, of course, by the biblical creation account in Genesis. The nature of the knowledge gained by Adam and Eve by eating of the tree in Eden is widely debated, but there is linguistic evidence that the Hebrew of the passage may "convey the idea of totality," suggesting that the knowledge they gain comes in the shape of a broadening of their experience. See Turner's 2000 commentary to the book, p. 31.

⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that dwarves are not an element present in the reborn and morally perfected world. While there are no negative consequences to their making, the moral flaws of the *Æsir* still bleed into their creations.

themselves. The Æsir remove these limitations, causing their creations to reflect their own altered morality.⁵ The consequences of this are not immediately felt, but it is still a shift—ultimately portrayed as negative—and it is not unimportant that this shift comes from an outside source, that all knowledge to be gained or sought henceforth has a supernatural impetus behind it.

Clunies Ross presents an interesting alternative interpretation not just to the creation of Askr and Embla, but to all of the Æsir's creative acts. She posits that after the upheaval acted upon the Æsir's society by the coming of the jǫtnar women, the subsequent actions of the poem are part of a "series of crises to which the gods had to find a solution or risk the disintegration of their society" (1994, 160). The creation of the dwarves and the animation of Askr and Embla in light of these crises suggest that the Æsir's solutions to them "by and large take the form of acts of creation and regulation"; these creative acts continue until they degenerate in time into a series of unsuccessful, violent attempts (160).

The Æsir's myriad potential motivations aside, however, the animation of Askr and Embla share the same negative implications, and both interpretations say more about the Æsir than they do about their creations. My interpretation stresses the moral flaw of the Æsir awoken by the jǫtnar women; Clunies Ross' stresses the threat felt by the Æsir in response to the invasion of such a feminine influence embodied by the jǫtnar (165). If anything, her model is more gendered, since within it, the animation of Askr and Embla serves as "an all-male society's attempt to reproduce itself" by such means as she refers to as pseudo-procreation (167).

Gender.

Creation is a crucial aspect of the cosmology in *Völuspá* not simply for the insight it gives into the nature of knowledge, but for how that insight operates in a gendered, societal sphere. No goddesses are named or even mentioned in the poem while the world is being created, despite the active roles given to a handful of named gods. However, the Æsir are also

⁵ This concept of lacking fate in a perfected condition is mirrored in the creation of the world. That Yggdrasill is a source of supernatural knowledge and serves as an indicator of the moral state of the world will be addressed below, but for now, it is interesting to note that when the world is first created, the tree is still beneath the earth: At its conception, in its perfected condition, the world is also free of fate. After the Æsir animate Askr and Embla, Yggdrasill is stood blooming in the world, suggesting its altered nature (st. 19).

referred to as one entity while they create, so an exploration of the gender composition of this entity can serve to help illuminate the gender politics of the Æsir.

Jochens argues that any evidence for the presence or absence of goddesses is tenuous at best, and she maintains that "Assumptions about their presence must be adduced from silence" (1989, 352). She begins her investigation of this silence by offering a rather in-depth analysis of the language used to refer to the gods as a whole, and she concludes that they are often referred to with non-gender-specific plural titles, which suggest a mixed-gender group of ruling powers (349). She warns, however, that this language is still ambiguous due to its possible connections with the Mother Goddess cults: These gender-neutral titles could have been previously used to refer specifically to such goddesses (349). Despite its early feminine connotations, Jochens argues that the language took on a more masculine meaning over time, mirroring the shift away from Mother Goddess cults that Germanic society as a whole underwent (349-50). The likelihood thus remains that *Völuspá's* ruling powers are exclusively male.

In order to further explore the agency of women potential in the text, Jochens compares the portrayal of women in *Völuspá* to their portrayal in the wider mythology. She discovers that in the poem, the goddesses are presented as passive figures, limited to mourning or simply existing; while in other sources they are granted much more agency (1989, 252-53). *Völuspá* excludes, for example, Frigg's plan to rescue Baldr and Freyja's objections to being a prize of the jotnar, and Jochens suggests that *Völuspá's* silence regarding the goddesses may simply be a narrative feature, rather than an indication of the masculine gender composition of the Æsir.⁶

However, Jochens weakens the likelihood of this suggestion by analyzing the context in which the powers convene, and drawing parallels between that context and the structure of contemporary Germanic society. Within this comparative framework, the convention of the gods is reminiscent of the Þing, as is the managerial business they attend to. Jochens comments, "Since all these activities are political in nature, it is hard to imagine that they would not—as in human society—be solely the prerogative of males" (1989, 350). This is a solid assumption, but there is still no explicit evidence to support her claims. While it is tempting (and often prudent) to assume that gender ambiguity defaults to masculine, it may be a rash assumption in this case. Although allusions to the Þing are made, the powers also convene in other socially recognizable

⁶ Given the quick-paced chronology and minimal textual evidence in later stanzas regarding the First War of the Æsir and Vanir, this suggestion is not entirely implausible.

ways, namely at feasts. The Æsir are referred to with masculine pronouns at Ægir's feast in *Lokasenna*, although the goddesses are unquestionably present in that instance. If there is a feminine presence at these—also socially male-dominated—gatherings, there may be reason to believe that women are present at their political gatherings, as well. Furthermore, not even the gods are named or given individual roles at these conventions, so the lack of explicit female participation is not necessarily an indicator of their absence.

Raudvere also comments on the gathering of the gods, but gender is not a concern of hers. The refrain of *Þá gengo regin öll / á røkstóla* in stanza 6 is simply "the first time in the poem the gods are referred to as a collective," and she argues for the ritualistic nature of their meetings by also comparing them to the Þing and its subsequent feasts, where seating and other ceremonial characteristics are tantamount (2012¹, 104). The likelihood that the exclusion of female participation does not signify the absence of goddesses diminishes, however, as both of these types of gatherings generally occur in a male-dominated space, and Raudvere presents no evidence that would suggest the Æsir are of a notably composite gender composition. Her emphasis remains on the activity of these conventions, where the powers (most likely male) consider names for the elements of the natural world, an act she deems worthy of central focus because "naming becomes an important step in the creation, as the act confirms the developing structure of the universe" (104).

It is this sheer importance of naming, however, that makes the gender composition of the Æsir so crucial. The cosmology presented in any given text is highly indicative of the worldview of that text's society, and the significance of inherent creation versus the presence of an external creator cannot be overstated. If men alone are "confirming the developing structure of the universe," then this signals a total shift away from the Mother Goddess cults of the past to the patriarchal model first seen employed in the *Enuma Elish*. Given the explicit textual evidence of the gods' roles in both creation and recreation, Jochens states that "The conclusion is hard to escape that these creative and recreative activities are entirely within the male domain" (1989, 351).

Further strengthening the argument that women are excluded is the fact that the same exclusion holds true for the destruction of the world as it does for its creation. Jochens asserts that no women play an active role in the Ragnarök, which she claims is unsurprising given the gendered nature of war in Germanic societies. It is interesting, and very telling, however, that

female figures *are* included but in a secondary sense: They give birth to the creatures that *will* be responsible for the destruction, and they suffer as victims of that destruction (1989, 348-349). Looking solely at mankind, both men and women may suffer during the Ragnarøk, but the language is such that men are the only primary actors in the transgressions for which they are being punished (355).

Reproduction.

The animation of Ask and Embla was discussed above, and while that discussion focused more on the motivations and consequences of that act for the Æsir, it is an equally important event for conceptions of reproduction. Jochens comments on these various conceptions found throughout the mythological poems, and she suggests that before biological human reproduction was established in the mythology, there was a solely male method present at the dawn of time, illustrated by Ymir's birth and his acts of procreation in both *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Gylfaginning* (1989, 347). It is not explicitly stated how all of the Æsir first came into being, although the mention of both wives and children suggest that biological reproduction was already the norm.

The sole participation of male deities in acts of creation is reminiscent of the primordial method of reproduction, and one that glorifies a cosmology that neither lacks nor wants for the presence or involvement of women, both at the dawn of time and in the reborn world. In *Völuspá* especially, both of these male-dominated ages are presented as utopian: The greed for gold was not awoken at the beginning of time, and the (male) survivors of the Ragnarøk are not tempted or changed by it in the end. Clunies Ross offers a historical precedent for such a glorification, stating that "it is often the case that the organising metaphors of many human cultures restrict, downplay or even deny the importance of the female's role in procreation while allowing males to appropriate what are in effect female capacities" (1994, 146). This erasure of women can be seen in Christian doctrine, and its influence can be felt in *Gylfaginnig*, as there are "similarities between theories of the diminished creative role of the female in both Christianity and Norse myth, but pseudo-procreative symbolism is also present in both systems" (146, 150).

Jochens argues that humanity, however, never underwent a period of such pseudo-procreative reproduction, given that Ask and Embla are clearly meant to be of the opposite gender and that "the recognition of them as the first human couple is undoubtedly helped by the

fact that their names begin with the same letters as Adam and Eve" (1989, 354-55).⁷ If such is the case, then complications regarding human reproduction do not arise until the rebirth of the world after the Ragnarøk. The only named (and thus most likely only present) humans are male: A pair of brothers survives the destruction. *Vafþrúðnismál* has a male/female couple tasked with repopulating the world, but no such thing can be found in *Völuspá* (356).

The *völur* will be discussed in more detail below, but reproduction also plays a part in determining both the narrating *völva*'s authority and her morality. She comments on the pseudo-procreative acts of Ymir, and can do so authoritatively because she was raised by giants and present before even the gods (Jochens 1989, 347). And yet it is this link that also cements the association of women with immorality. Óðinn accuses the *völva* in *Baldurs draumar* of birthing trolls, not only smearing her moral status, but doing so through her sexuality—more specifically through reproduction (361).

An analysis of reproduction is important for ascertaining the nature of knowledge due to the many usages of the motif of birth, death, and rebirth throughout the poem. *Vafþrúðnismál* may associate women with creation in a positive way, but *Völuspá* contains most regularly pseudo-procreative acts, and presents a world in which everything women create or alter is done for the worst (Jochens 1989, 359-61). These motifs of death and rebirth will find the strongest echoes with Gullveig, a figure who has much to say about the nature of supernatural knowledge; and her rebirth into Heiðr draws magic into this theme. Jochens then ties all three elements neatly together by observing that "Predicting the future naturally involved magic. It is not surprising, therefore, that childbirth, the chief female activity open to unpredictability, is occasionally included in magical incantation" (1989, 360).

⁷ Clunies Ross presents evidence to weaken this assumption, 1994, p. 172.

Supernatural Women.

For all that the goddesses are portrayed as behaving passively, there are a number of other female figures in *Völuspá* that have a considerable role in the outcome of events and are crucial for understanding the nature of knowledge. These figures are the *völur*, the three jötunn women, the norns who dwell under Yggdrasill, and the figure of Gullveig and Heiðr. All of these figures are linked indisputably to supernatural knowledge, and they each represent a different aspect of it in the world.

The Völur.

If the female figures of *Völuspá* represent different types of supernatural knowledge, it is telling that the *völur* are in the world before the blooming of Yggdrasill, as their existence thus predates that of fate. The *völur* are mainly concerned with prophecy, and one of the most reoccurring mentions of a characteristic of theirs in the poem reflects that. This reoccurring element is the refrain of *fiqlǫ veit hón fræða— / fram sé ek lengra*, along with the similar declaration in the last half of stanza 29, where it is said that *sá hón vítt ok um vítt— / of verǫld hveria*. Both of these phrases are framed in the language of seeing, but in the sense of being cognizant of something. This connotation does not solely suggest distance, but also a length of time: The *völva* recites events of the past for which she was not present; and she is able to foretell the events of the future which will undoubtedly come to pass. She knows the fate of not only the beings that inhabit the world, but also the fate of the world itself.

While this ability is certainly supernatural, there is nothing immediately immoral about it. However, if all supernatural things are to be taken as inherently immoral (which I would argue is a safe enough assumption at this point) then by that assumption alone another link between knowledge and immorality is forged. Even disregarding that assumption, though, the immoral nature of the *völva's* sight is evident in its outcomes and the circumstances surrounding its application. Knowledge of the future has never been beneficial to the Æsir, and the immoral ways in which they go about acquiring it (paying for it with gold, performing *seiðr*, offering sacrifices) only serve to deepen the moral flaws that will tear the world apart.

The *völur* are undeniable representatives of the supernatural realm, and, fittingly, they are also the predecessors of every representative that follows them: The *völva's* age is a crucial

feature of both her possession of supernatural knowledge and her ability to bestow it upon others. She begins *Völuspá* with a recitation of her own memories of the beginning the world:

Ek man iǫtna
 ár um borna,
 þá er forðom mik
 fœdda hǫfðo.
 Níó man ek heima,
 níó íviðiu,
 miǫtvið mæran,
 fyr mold neðan (st. 2)

She was brought up by giants *forðom*, 'in early times,' and she recalls them in their early days. Even if she came into being after Ymir was settled in the void, her age allows her to speak of that event with authority. This allowance is essential for establishing her authority as a source of supernatural knowledge. Jochens states that "In order to convince Óðinn of the truthfulness of her prophecy, the sibyl begins by telling about events in distant times, reaching beyond even Óðinn's own experience" (1989, 347). Raudvere argues the same, stating that "The direct speech of the *völva* confirms her authority to speak on behalf of Óðinn, Father of the Slain, and her legitimacy as a speaker comes from her position in the genealogy of wisdom. In a few lines her heritage is traced back to the world of giants, before the beginning of time." That the *völva* can speak with more authority than Óðinn given these requisites of age and experience leads Raudvere to suggest that "Death and primordial chaos seem to be fundamental to clandestine knowledge" (2012¹, 102-103).

However, the *völva's* age is important for more than just the memories it grants her: Her memories give her authority; her age gives her an authenticity which ensures the "truthfulness of her *prophecy*" (*italics mine*), suggesting that because she is wise, she has the gift of foresight, as well. Jochens reasons that this "special ability" to prophesize is because of the *völva's* age, but she does not delve more deeply into why this is so (1989, 348). Raudvere, on the other hand, suggests that the *völva's* age grants her this ability due to the above mentioned fundamental aspects of clandestine knowledge. Her age, and thus her relation in time to primordial chaos, gives her access to the clandestine knowledge she possesses. As Raudvere states, "The seeress (*völva*) speaks not only on Óðinn's command, but also with the authority of a ritual specialist with access to sources independent of time" (2012¹, 101). That these sources are supernatural in nature and perceived as immoral is paralleled in the narrating *völva*, since "her knowledge gives

indications of the more shadowy parts of the universe that nevertheless appear to be necessary for access to clandestine knowledge of the future" (105).

Despite its importance, age is not the only characteristic that gives the *vǫlva* access to knowledge or grants her authority to speak of the future. Her knowledge is supernatural and, accordingly, she herself exists on such a plane. This knowledge exists on the periphery of the *Æsir*'s central society, and in order for it be brought into the world, it must be recovered from those peripheral spaces. The rituals and methods to do so are thus supernatural in nature, as well; they are often classified as magical, and the practice of *seiðr* is most connected to these rituals. Raudvere states that "Old Norse mythology tells repeatedly of how wisdom is sought in encounters between the realms of *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðar*, where neither place seems to have the conditions or resources to fulfill the potential of the knowledge gained" (2012¹, 107). That *Miðgarðr* and *Útgarðar*—places not as central to the *Æsir* as *Ásgarðr* and yet still not peripheral—lack these resources is proof again not only of the supernatural nature of nature, but also of its forbidden one. *Seiðr*, then, as a means to access this knowledge, is likewise made forbidden, as its methods "make use of border zones that render access to permeable areas where vital prerequisites for insight are accessed" (107). In an attempt to uphold the natural order of the world, both knowledge and its means of acquisition are seen as something immoral.

One such means of acquisition is the performance of *utiseta* (seen in stanza 28), 'sitting out,' wherein a subject approaches a *vǫlva* and undertakes a ritual with her to gain her knowledge. The ritual includes the elements of solitude, a ceremonial discussion between the *vǫlva* and the seeker (most often *Óðinn*), as well as a payment made by the seeker to the *vǫlva*.⁸ *Utiseta* is an immediate indicator of the "otherness" of the *vǫlva*. She may be present in the world unlike *Mímir*'s well and the roots of *Yggdrasill*, but she is situated symbolically in a peripheral space, on the fringes of whatever central society the action of the poem is occurring in. She is a solitary figure, and she must be sought out in the space that she inhabits. The *vǫlur* act as intercessors between the supernatural and mundane realms: They are present in the world and yet possess knowledge that originates outside of it. Unlike the other supernatural figures presented in *Vǫluspá*, however, the *vǫlur*'s knowledge does not affect the world unless it is

⁸ Jochens provides examples of this payment being made by all who seek a *vǫlur*'s knowledge, stating that "Just as Norse farmers had to give presents to human *vǫlur* before they would predict the future, so *Óðinn* offers 'hringa ok men' (str. 29) to this ancient and superior *vǫlva* in return for prophecy" (1989, 358).

actively sought out; it is only after their knowledge is bought that the consequences of its existence begin to be felt.⁹

Dronke comments on the nature of the the narrating *völva* and notes, interestingly, that "Though the memories she reveals are awesome, there is no suggestion that she is unhuman" (1997, 31). The "othering" nature of the *völur* despite their potential humanity is an essential element when placing them in a societal context. The *Völuspá* author has been far from generous with their portrayal of women, but nevertheless, Jochens argues that "The poet shows awareness of an older order, however, a mythology in which female powers had been important, and a society where male leaders, when faced with difficult decisions, would have asked advice from women" (1989, 359). She further posits that sibyls were able to gain ground in such a patriarchal society due simply to their status and perception as supernatural outsiders. Despite the complex politics generally at play in any instance where a sibyl is called upon, it is her status and gender that are the cruxes of these interactions. Jochens explains that "Unable to choose between political alternatives or fearful of their outcome, men occasionally sought advice from 'the others,' that is, women" (360).

An important part of these dynamics, however, are the means by which such a society that sought advice from women remained so patriarchal. These means, it turns out, can be found in the same aspect that gave women such authority: Jochens argues that the "evil stain that is often associated with wise women" arises from the fact that occasionally a sibyl's advice would be too vague or unintelligible, and disaster would result from reception of the prophecy, causing men to blame the sibyl for faulty advice (1989, 361).

This tendency to call upon women in times of trouble supports the idea that these societies, however strongly, were still newly patriarchal, and that strong male authority had not yet been established. Remembering the past, leading men would look to "the female half of society, imagining that a few women possessed the supreme wisdom and knowledge they wished to obtain. In the mythological realm such a figure could not be one of the regular goddesses, since that would demean the male gods, but she had to be found from an entirely different race": Since the *völur* were strongly linked to the *jǫtnar*, they fulfilled this requirement (Jochens 1989, 361). This distinction only serves to further separate the *völur* from any other figure in the

⁹ This ritual is reflected even in the structure of *Völuspá*, and reinforces the power that the *völur* holds over her subject. "In the case of *Völuspá*," Raudvere argues, "the *seiðr* ritual is constitutive for the frame story, and the invocation in the initial stanza leaves no doubts about the legitimacy of the preemptory voice" (2012¹, 101).

poem. The *vǫlur* are knowledgeable beyond both the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*, and regardless of the views of the *Vǫluspá* author and the portrayal of women in the poem, they are also undisputedly female, and Jochens maintains that the author consistently "identified wisdom and knowledge with femaleness" (1989, 359-60).

The Norns.

The norns emerge from the lake under Yggdrasill in stanza 20, utterly steeped in imagery of destiny and fate. Here, these things are linked directly to knowledge: The norns enter the world *margs vitandi*, 'knowing much,' and it is this characteristic that grants them their abilities. Their knowledge is not of the natural world of the *Æsir*, as they bring it with them from the lake that is located under Yggdrasill, a feature not physically present in the world into which they emerge. With this knowledge, they prophesize the fates of men, and their power is never in question because "Even the gods' actions are ranged under the authority of these female powers, although they are not directly in control of events" (Jochens 1989, 357). Their abilities are unique, and they are accordingly granted a status apart from the *Æsir* and the other beings in the world.

In the creation myths of the mythological poems, especially in that of *Vǫluspá*, the existence and acknowledgment of fate is portrayed not only as something tied to the supernatural, but also as a marker of a flawed morality. The norns are given a unique status on account of their abilities, but this status is a negative one. Notably, their abilities are mirrored by the actions of the *jǫtnar* women: They influence the world but they do not change it. Fate already exists in the world, and in the same way that the *jǫtnar* simply awake the *Æsir*'s inherent greed for gold, the norns awake the *Æsir*'s need for knowledge; and this is a need that will cause the *Æsir* to subvert the natural order in their fulfilling of it.

Gullveig / Heiðr.

One of the most influential female figures in *Vǫluspá* is introduced in stanzas 21 and 22, which read:

Þat man hón fólkvíg
fyrst í heimi,
er Gullveigo

geirom studdu
ok í holl Hárs
hána brendo—
þrysvar brendo
þrysvar borna,
opt, ósialdan—
þó hón enn lifir.

Heiði hana héto
hvars til húsa kom,
völo vel spá
—vitti hón ganda.
Seið hón kunni,
seið hón leikin.
Æ var hón angan
illrar brúðar.

In order to understand how the episode relayed in these stanzas functions not only in the cosmology of *Völuspá* but also in its larger historical and societal context, we must explore the complexities and ambiguities within the text. At first glance, the narrative of stanza 21 seems straightforward: The *völva* remembers the first war in the world,¹⁰ where Gullveig is "studded with spears," or "supported with spears," and burned three times in Óðinn's hall; she is reborn each time, for "yet she still lives." However, the meaning behind this verse is exceedingly complex, given the myriad interpretations of not only what Gullveig symbolizes, but also of her identity.

Rather than immediately stress an allegorical interpretation of Gullveig, John McKinnell analyses the elements of her name to discern how a contemporary audience would have received her in the poem. Personal names with the *Gull*- element refer most often to "wealth or to objects made of gold," and the element also "indicates possession by the gods" (2001, 405-6). Relevant groups of nouns containing the *Gull*- element refer to objects made out of or covered with gold, or to the kennings that refer to women (406). He proposes that the common element *-veig* could refer either to what Gullveig is wearing or to the title 'lady,' or even perhaps to the sense of 'military strength' (406-7). He makes an additional suggestion as well, proposing that if Gullveig is likened to Freyja, then both can be likened to Þorgerðr, patron goddess of Earl Håkon and a user of magic, who is linked to the gods and associated with gold (408-9). He argues that "If Gullveig refers to a figure like Freyja or Þorgerðr, it would make perfect sense for her to be referred to as rich in gold, wearing gold, or made of gold" (410). From these possibilities, he

¹⁰ Which I will henceforth creatively refer to as the First War.

concludes that a contemporary audience's interpretation of Gullveig would have been one of "a female figure made of, wearing or possessing gold, and endowed with military strength" (407).¹¹

Clearly, McKinnell hesitates to interpret Gullveig in any strongly symbolic way, concluding rather that her name serves a solely imagerial purpose. Indeed, he makes a point to specifically state that "There are no compound nouns which refer to any psychological or moral effect of gold," and stresses that "There does not seem to be any warrant in the other uses of the name-elements for taking her as an allegorical figure constructed by the poet to symbolise the intoxicating greed for gold" (2001, 406-407). I argue, however, that despite the frequency of the non-symbolic use of her name's elements, Gullveig's potential importance as an allegorical figure should not be so easily dismissed.¹² Her presence in *Völuspá* is notable and unique, and the consequences of her death and rebirth shape not only the outcome of the poem, but of the entire world presented therein.

If Gullveig *is* meant as a symbol for gold, then the stanza harkens back to the coming of three jötunn women in stanza 8 and their awakening of the moral flaws of the Æsir in the shape of the Æsir's newfound greed for gold. (And it is hard to imagine that any reference to gold, symbolic or imagerial, in the context of *Völuspá* would not recall this event). Auspiciously, Turville-Petre, in his analysis of the name, favors its symbolic interpretation. He argues for the poetic reading of *-veig*, meaning 'strong drink,' and concludes that Gullveig's name suggests "the 'drunkenness' of gold." He thus associates her with the "madness and corruption" caused by the gold found in Ásgarðr (1964, 158-59).

Symbolic of gold and representative of the Æsir's corruption, Gullveig serves as a microcosm of the Æsir's moral development and subsequent deterioration. Parallels cannot help but be drawn between her immolation by the Æsir and the purification of gold by fire. By burning Gullveig, the Æsir are not destroying her, as they intended, but rather purifying her and the moral flaw she is symbolic of. They are, in a sense, ensuring the place of her immorality in their world. They are once again engaged in the act of creation, using materials outside of themselves, but they are no longer the naïve beings they were before the arrival of the jötnar

¹¹ The element of military strength is further supported by the comparison to Þorgerðr, as she is seen to use battle magic against her enemies (2001, 410).

¹² Perhaps the frequency of her name's elements only strengthens the allegory, connecting likewise-named women to the immorality that she symbolizes.

women. By symbolically purifying gold, they have fulfilled their potential to be flawed, and for the first time, their creations immediately reflect that fact.

Even considering that Gullveig is not meant as a symbol for gold, her very presence, murder, and rebirth still holds moral weight for the Æsir. Because of her connections to Freyja and the Vanir, Gullveig still serves as a symbol of fertility, and stanza 21 is the first example of female reproduction in the world. The presence of the sons of Bur in stanza 4 implies that pseudo-procreative reproduction as seen in Ymir's origin and lineage has been eclipsed,¹³ but there has not been such explicit evidence as this: For the first time, the Æsir are forced to face the birth/death/rebirth cycle that is inherent in their world. Gullveig's rebirth is the most feminine, consequential event to yet occur in *Völuspá*. It is also undeniably negative: It starts a war; the Æsir are drawn into the supernatural sphere through Heiðr; and even birth is seen as a supernatural ability, an intercessor in the central space inhabited by male deities, and one that will return as a male province in the reborn world.

McKinnell questions what he finds to be too convenient symmetry in the former interpretation of Gullveig, and in what is perhaps his most salient point, presents two issues with the argument that she is "a quasi-allegorical figure associated with the Vanir, that the Æsir burn her in Óðinn's hall in order to try to exorcise the greed for gold which she represents," and that this "merely leads to her being reborn as the *völva* Heiðr" (2001, 394): The fact that the Æsir first attack the Vanir, rather than the Vanir seeking vengeance for the murder of Gullveig; and the later, non-symmetrical misdeeds of mankind—namely the charge of adultery rather than a greed for gold (395). I will return to his first concern in a moment, but the lack of symmetry between the Æsir's transgressions and those of mankind can be rectified without difficulty: Given the sheer number of kennings that equate gold to women, a charge of adultery—of lusting after something forbidden—can very easily correspond to the Æsir's greed for gold.

Resolving the timeline and justifying the actions of the Æsir require the use of a little more conjecture. Stanzas 21-24, Dumézil notes, are "rapid and discontinuous strophes, which do not narrate, but content themselves with evoking episodes already known to the listeners" (1973, 7). They contain allusions to elements expanded upon elsewhere, such as the hostage exchange and the creation of the mead of poetry. But I will focus on a close reading of the text as we have

¹³ The marriage of Bor and Bestla and the rearing of Óðinn, Vili, and Ve in *Gylfaginning*, chapter 6, and the creation of Ymir and the frost giants in chapter 5.

it in the Codex Reguis variant. Turville-Petre offers a very simplified account of stanzas 21 and 22, summarizing them thus: After her burning in Óðinn's hall, Gullveig is reborn as Heiðr, who practices *seiðr* and in whom wicked women take pleasure (158). Lending credence to McKinnell's concerns, Turville-Petre does not offer any unequivocal explanation for how Gullveig, or Freyja, first came to be in the house of Óðinn; he does, however, suggest that she "had been sent to Ásgarðr by the Vanir in order to corrupt the Æsir with greed, lust, and witchcraft," and that "attempts by the Æsir to destroy her were in vain, and she still lives" (1964, 159).

This is problematic in a few ways. Although he proposes that the lack of concrete evidence in the matter of Gullveig's presence in Óðinn's hall may be excused as part of a general trend of exclusion in the poem, as it is similarly not stated that Freyja was a hostage given to the Æsir despite her clear place among them after the war (1964, 159), his reliance on a potential hostage exchange raises more problems than it solves. A hostage exchange, if it does occur in the narrative of *Völuspá*, must come before stanza 25, wherein Freyja is already in the possession of the jotnar and the Æsir mourn her loss, immediately following the defeat of the Æsir in stanza 24. But if Gullveig is present among the Æsir before the war, why would Freyja be one of the Vanir's hostages after its conclusion? Furthermore, if Gullveig's shared identity with Freyja is simply symbolic, Turville-Petre's logic does not hold. He is nevertheless certain that the cause of the First War is to be found in stanzas 21 and 22, and his supposition regarding the Vanir's attempted infiltration of the Æsir is a plausible one.

The potential existence or lack of a hostage exchange does not, however, solve McKinnell's problem with the Æsir first attacking the Vanir in spite of the Vanir's first-suffered losses. In an attempt to justify the actions of the Æsir in stanza 24, I question McKinnell's assumption that Óðinn's offensive is indeed the first engagement of the war. If the cause of the conflict is to be found in stanzas 21 and 22, and the Æsir are considering terms in stanza 23, then it holds that the war began sometime between these two episodes, and the battle relayed in stanza 24 is, in fact, the *last* one of the war. That it had been going on for some time is implied by a minor but important detail in stanza 24, which reads:

Fleygði Óðinn
ok í fólk um skaut—
þat var enn fólkvíg
fyrst í heimi.
Brotinn var borðve[g]r

borgar ása.
Knátto vanir vígspá
völlo sporna.

The *enn* in the third line is the crucial element here. Óðinn is fighting the last battle in a war that is *still* taking place, one that began immediately upon the murder of Gullveig and was fought unseen for some time before the present action occurs.

Gullveig's thus cemented allegorical interpretation ties her irrevocably to the immoral greed for gold felt by the Æsir, and her role in the war serves a crucially symbolic meaning for the nature of the knowledge she represents. This meaning becomes clear when the outcome of the war is analyzed. The Vanir use *vígspá*, 'war spells,' to successfully overcome the Æsir, and this is telling both in method and result. Chapter four of *Ynglingasaga* tells how Freyja is responsible for teaching magic not only to Óðinn, but to the Æsir as a group (ÍF 13), suggesting that magical ability is an innate one of the Vanir. If the Æsir had Freyja in their possession before the war, it stands to reason that they should have been able to either harness the Vanir's magical power or force Freyja to fight for them, thus being capable of defending themselves from the war spells that eventually defeat them. Yet they did neither, because they rather rejected the unnatural nature of Freyja's abilities and attempted instead to rid themselves of them. The Vanir, on the other hand, as natural magic users, who exist already on the fringes of society and undergo none of the same trials as Óðinn for their abilities, faced no such moral qualms before employing that magic in the war.

Significantly, the Vanir are not introduced in *Völuspá* until stanza 24, and their lack of a narrative heretofore marks them immediately as the "others." They are supernatural in nature, not like the *völur* due to age or origin, but due simply to their location on the fringes of the Æsir's society. Their morality is clearly established by their readiness to perform magic, but it serves as a counterpoint to the morality of the Æsir: The Æsir must subsume the Vanir and the Vanir must adapt to the Æsir's customs and society. That Freyr and Freyja do not do so entirely successfully is a constant point of contention in the mythology¹⁴, and serves to further the Æsir's place at the center, both morally and physically, of the world that they inhabit.

The consequence of the Æsir's reluctance to use Freyja's power is their ultimate defeat in the war. Fascinatingly enough, it is the moral righteousness of the Æsir that leads to their

¹⁴ Chapter four of *Ynglinga saga* specifically makes note of the incestuous marriages of the Vanir with the marriage of Njǫrðr and his sister (ÍF 13); stanzas 30-36 of *Lokasenna* also address this sexual misconduct as seen by the Æsir.

downfall in this instance. Traditionally, such a defeat would rather imply the superiority of the Vanir's society; but despite their victory, they are still the inferior class. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the Vanir's abilities are, in fact, superior: They are supernatural, just as prophecy is supernatural; and the latter is something that the Æsir are not inherently capable of, and something that they often seek to use for their own ends. Nevertheless, the Vanir's customs and morality are still portrayed negatively, and the Æsir remain the central actors in *Völuspá's* world. Despite the Vanir's victory, they are still absorbed by the Æsir and forced to assimilate to their cultural norms. Supernatural knowledge subverts the natural order of the Æsir's world, and it is this order that dictates everything about the poem: The upheaval of the natural order will ultimately result in destruction. The defeat of the Æsir, then, is actually in line with this narrative truth: Supernatural knowledge and the superior abilities it grants will destroy what is "right" with the world—what is represented by the Æsir—and will usher in a new morality that will destabilize and eventually raze the world into which it is introduced.

I return now to stanza 22, and the further complexities offered by the figure of the prophetess *Heiðr*. She plays a crucial role in *Völuspá*, as she is the first to introduce *seiðr*. Hitherto, the supernatural elements present in the world have been in the form of inherent abilities (such as those of the *völur* and *jötunnar*), emotions (such as the greed for gold), or fate. *Heiðr* is born of these things and does indeed reflect them, but she represents a new element in the supernatural sphere: She is a prophetess or a witch, as expected of such a supernatural being, but she is also one who performs *seiðr* and "knows magic staffs, or wands" (st. 29).

The exact nature of *seiðr* is not explicitly stated in the text, but there is a ritual aspect to its performance. Whatever her abilities, they are unique and sought after. They require a wand or a staff: They are not inherent or natural. The need for wands is seen in a different context in stanza 29, when Óðinn pays a *völva* and receives in return *spíðll spaklig / ok spáganda*. That he receives 'wands of prophecy' is noteworthy in this context, as they have been hitherto solely associated with *Heiðr* and human prophetesses. This is the first time that *Heiðr*, as a supernatural being, is directly linked in any way to the *völur*, and that prophecy is seen as a potential facet of *seiðr*—something ritualistic and to be achieved with physical objects rather than an inherent supernatural ability. But these wands are now inextricably linked with supernatural knowledge, which is in turn linked undoubtedly with magic.

Notably, however, there is no explicit feminine link to Heiðr's abilities in stanza 22, but given the feminine nature of every supernatural thing in the poem thus far, a correlation can nevertheless be traced between the two. (Indeed, it is *not* only women who can perform *seiðr*, as Óðinn learns the art and later employs it; but it must not be overlooked that his teacher is a woman and that Óðinn becomes a supernatural being in doing so. Just as the Æsir appropriate the cultures that surround them, the supernatural world appropriates the identity of its practitioners, forcing them into a feminine mold, hence the concept of *ergi* and Óðinn's gender-fluid identity¹⁵). Furthermore, Heiðr's audience is comprised majorly of women, and they are 'ill brides,' or indeed even 'evil women,' depending on the translation and interpretation of *bruðar*.

This issue has been widely debated, but the negative connotation to the term—and thus to *seiðr* practitioners—has remained. McKinnell, however, argues against such a simple conclusion, exploring what exactly is meant by the word *bruðar* (2001, 402). He often describes the scenes in the literature that employ the term as "sinister." He notes that the term often refers to either the brides of giants or giants who are often sexual partners of the Æsir, and that it is often linked to dreams, death, and references to valkyries, as well as suggestions about the treacherous nature and behavior of women (403-404). He thus concludes that *bruðar* is "most likely to refer to a giantess or the like, to a context associated with death, or to sexually motivated unreliability. It does not otherwise appear in contexts directly connected with *seiðr*, so we should probably assume that whoever this woman may be, she needs Heiðr's prophetic gifts because she does not share them" (404). He further argues for the separation of *bruðar* and *seiðr* by pointing out that both Þorgerðr and Freyja are so connected to the Gullveig/Heiðr figure, the delight of these 'evil women,' but Þorgerðr does not possess any magical ability and Freyja does not have prophecy (411).

While I agree that the women referred to as *bruðar* do not possess any supernatural gifts, I argue that McKinnell misses a rather key point by his dismissal of their association with *seiðr*. The two may not be *directly* connected, but *seiðr* itself is laced so heavily throughout the stanza that it would be hard to justify separating the two and clearing them of their negative connotations. The supernatural abilities (or lack thereof) of Þorgerðr and Freyja are interesting

¹⁵ Loki accuses Óðinn of behaving in a womanly manner when he performed magic, stating *ok hugða ek þat args aðal* (*Lokasenna* st. 24); this occurs immediately after Óðinn accuses Loki of giving birth, suggesting that insult and rebuttal are connected by theme. Furthermore, in stanza 91 of *Hávamál*, Óðinn states *þvíat ek bæði veit* when speaking of the behavior of men and women. See also Turville-Petre 1964, 65.

to note, but do not make McKinnell's argument: They are still both supernatural figures, as Freyja has magic and Þorgerðr is undoubtedly an "othered" figure, linked through her associations with gold to the three jǫtnar women who first cause the breach to the natural order in Ásgarðr. Turville-Petre definitely refers to Freyja and her skills in a negative light, saying that along with being a goddess, "she was also a witch (*fordæða*) and mistress of that disreputable magic, *seiðr*" (1964, 159).

As of yet, no attention has been paid to the personal identity of Heiðr. Due to the ambiguities surrounding the interpretation of Gullveig, the identity of Heiðr is similarly ambiguous. Dumézil simply sees her as a "sorceress," one who "sows corruption, particularly among women" (1977, 8). Considering Turville-Petre's interpretation of Gullveig, his identification of Heiðr as a "glittering, seductive witch," clearly of the Vanir, "who were gods at once of riches and of that evil form of magic called *seiðr*," is easy to accept (1964, 159). McKinnell, on the other hand, presents evidence for her identity to be that of the female narrator of *Vǫluspá*, rather than the reborn form of Gullveig, arguing that the first line of stanza 22, *hana héto*, 'they called *her*,' is a third-person reference, which is not an uncommon feature in the poem (2001, 395-97). Furthermore, he argues that since there is a common trend of associating the *vǫlur* with jǫtunn ancestry, and the *vǫlva* who narrates *Vǫluspá* recalls her rearing by giants, Heiðr does fit into such a trend (402).

Linguistically, McKinnell also argues against the simple association of Heiðr with the adjective 'bright,' stating that the association is made because it parallels Gullveig's association with gold, but that if Gullveig and Heiðr are not the same figure, then there might be more behind her name to link her to the narrating *vǫlva* (2001, 399). He proposes that it could be connected to the feminine noun *heiðr*, 'heath,' or to *heidinn*, 'heathen,' which in and of itself is connected to the landscape (399-400). He also suggests a potential connection to the masculine noun *heiðr*, 'honor' or 'praise,' which is connected to the feminine noun *heid*, 'payment' or 'fee' (400). The connection to payment is a tempting one, given that the *vǫlur* are paid for their services, but McKinnell analyzes the names of other *vǫlur* to decide which of these possibilities is most likely, and concludes that since the majority of these names are connected to nature, *heiðr*, 'heath' is the most likely of the meanings (400-402).

Stanzas 21 and 22, however, have wide-reaching consequences for the cosmology and worldview presented in *Vǫluspá* even despite the identity of its subjects. Jochens takes these

stanzas as an account of the arrival of Freyja among the *Æsir*, proposing, as does Turville-Petre, that Gullveig and Heiðr are two of her incarnations. Jochens acknowledges both the debate surrounding the issue of Gullveig and Heiðr's identity and the problems with her interpretation of it, but she argues that it is a secondary issue next to the gender politics its language presents. She states, "While the cosmological position of this figure is open for discussion, there is no question of her gender, and the expression [*angan illrar bruðar*] is undoubtedly to be understood as a collective term for women" (1989, 352). This is a brash statement, but it is not unlikely, as the stanzas do relay the introduction of a unique figure; as Gullveig and Heiðr is the most influential female presence in the poem, it could easily follow that women as a whole are seen only in such a context from here on out. (Indeed, women have hardly been seen as anything but, even—and perhaps especially—in the creation myths). Jochens puts Gullveig and Heiðr further into context by comparing them to the three giant women in stanza 8, noting those women bring evil into the world, and these two women do the same (353). Once again, the exact identity of Gullveig and Heiðr is not important, because, as Jochens concludes, "the association between females and evil is unambiguous" (353).

The importance of the First War is hard to pin down historically or socially. Dumézil argues against the historicizing of the First War (11-15). He grants that there were material changes in the society, along with invasions and subsequent cultural exchange that shaped Scandinavian society over the centuries. This evolution, however, is not the foundation for the impetus or the actions of the war. "We do believe," he states, "that the duality of the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* is not a reflection of these events, nor an effect of that evolution. We believe rather that it is a question here of two complementary terms in a unitary religious and ideological structure, one of which presupposes the other" (1973, 12). These "complementary terms" have always been present, and the two groups do not need to integrate as a victor would with a conquered society, but rather as would two parts of a whole. The violent occurrence of the First War, then, "is not a spectacular manifestation, as is the function of a myth, in the form of a violent conflict, of the distinction, the conceptual opposition, which justifies their coexistence" (12). They do not come together to rid their world of the possibility of violence; rather, there is the idea here that violence is the only means possible to both prepare for and affect any sort of harmony between the two groups in order for them to put forward a unified worldview or religious idea (12-13, 20).

Accordingly, Turville-Petre proposes that it "seems rather to be part of the creation myth. It explains how gods who promoted such different interests as the Vanir and Æsir lived in friendship. More than this, it explains why the Æsir are gods, not only of chieftains and of war, but also of fertility and magic, even of *seiðr*" (1964, 160).¹⁶ This is generally a fair point, but glossing over the war as the means for the Æsir and Vanir to "live in friendship" does a disservice to its complexity. One must examine what each side of the war represents, and why the merger of the Æsir and Vanir can only be achieved through violence. There is a clash of cultures, of course, but there is no attempt to work out their differences peacefully, or even to cohabitate in separate communities. There is only one option, and that is the absorption of the Vanir by the Æsir. The Vanir must be incorporated into the Æsir's central sphere of influence; but it must be done violently, and it must be done symbolically, and the moral righteousness of the Æsir must be upheld even as the two cultures engage in exchange.

Regardless of its impetus, however, the consequences of the war remain equally important. It "leads them to a peace-settlement in which they compromise with and absorb the sexual evil represented by the Vanir," which in turn leads to one illustration of the Æsir's moral decay: They become attached to Freyja and her supernatural abilities, and it is due to this attachment and their fear of her loss that they break their oaths in stanzas 25 and 26. This oath breaking occurs in more detail in *Glyfaginning*, in the episode of Loki and Svaðilfari. Faced with the possibility of losing Freyja in payment to the Giant Builder the Æsir employed to build Ásgarðr's walls, they opt instead to kill him, committing not only the sin of oath breaking but also of murder (McKinnell 2001, 413).

This trend towards violence as a result of shifting perceptions of gender is neither unexpected nor unfamiliar, given the ancient cultures and traditions that inform the text. Dumézil presents the First War as a particularly useful example of his tripartite system and the relation of the Norse mythology to the Vedic material, and states that "Even if the two traditions do not align perfectly or completely," there is enough evidence to establish a clear chain of influence. He argues that "the war of the Æsir and the Vanir is indeed a myth that is *older* than the Germanic peoples, *older* than the dispersion of their ancestors and those of the Italic, Indo-Iranian, and other Indo-European peoples" (1973, 25). The violence of this myth can be explained by such an influence.

¹⁶ Dumézil offers a long analysis of the historical hypothesis, 1973, 7-14.

Historically, the shift from Mother Goddess cults to patriarchal gods comes at a time when the civilization has a growing emphasis on war and goals of empire (Baring and Cashford 1993, 279, 281). The myths and religious traditions that helped shape these new societies center on war, conquest, and brutality, and excessive violence was a natural consequence of such changes (See Baring and Cashford 1993, 285-290 for a summary of the most prominent of these myths). Given the combative nature of medieval Germanic societies, that such a shift occurred should not be surprising. As Dumézil states, "In the ideology and in the practices of the Germanic peoples, war invaded all, colored everything" (1973, 42).

The application of this trend to *Völuspá*, however, is fascinating, as the politics at work in the poem are, at first glance, a reversal of the historical trend: Violence occurs in *Völuspá* only *after* the shift has already taken place, when patriarchal values are already well-established in the society; rather than a shift to the masculine, it is the invasion of the feminine represented by Gullveig and Heiðr that cause the world to break out in violence. Despite this initial appearance, the First War is actually a result of a hypermasculinized need to conquer, and in falls in line with the need to control the elements and to order chaos through whatever means possible. I argue, then, that an invasion of the feminine can threaten the order that the masculine Æsir have so far succeeded in upholding, resulting in a war not only as the sole way to absorb new societal elements, but also as an attempt to retain what control the Æsir have. Simply naming the elements is no longer sufficient, not now that they have brought an unnatural element into their very homes. Brute strength and military conquest is now their only option.¹⁷

Girard discusses the role that violence plays in the sacred, most specifically in sacrifice and sacrificial rituals. One concept he expounds upon is that of the surrogate victim. He posits that when a collective group or specific society can pinpoint the source of any potential evil in that society, that source—commonly a specific person—becomes representative of those evils. It acts as a receptacle for the sins of the society, a scapegoat for their own inherent flaws, which they then attempt to destroy. This attempt is crucial: Girard argues that "In destroying the

¹⁷ A connection between violence and the supernatural realm is not just found in literature: Such a link can also be found in the funeral customs of Viking Age societies. Price draws attention to the fact that excavations and museum exhibits hide what must have been the sensory nature of a funeral, and that the chaos, smell, and general atmosphere were "integral part[s] of the funerary experience" (2012², 26). He goes on to say that "a violent spectacle seems to be important, something confirmed by other, recent finds of Viking Age animal killings in ritual contexts" (26-27).

surrogate victim, men believe they are ridding themselves of some present ill" (1977, 82). This ritual destruction "serves to conceal the existence of man's violent impulses" (82).

This ritual sacrifice of the symbol of man's sins is clearly reminiscent of the murder of Gullveig in Óðinn's hall, but the case of Gullveig is, once again, particularly fascinating. The motive of the Æsir is clear, and given the model of the surrogate victim, they should have succeeded in ridding their society of the supernatural evil that Gullveig represented. The surrogate victim is meant to be a figure "who submits to violence without provoking a reprisal; a supernatural being who sows violence to reap peace; a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health" (Girard 1977, 86). Gullveig, however, is anything but. Her attempted destruction leads only to more violence and to the Æsir's extended awareness of the evil in their society. Girard comments that the role of the surrogate victim is a crucial one for a healthy society, because a full awareness of mankind's inherent capacity for violence would only lead to destruction; and this can be seen in the failure of the the murder of Gullveig. The surrogate victim must be destroyed "so that the entire community, threatened by the same fate, can be reborn in a new or renewed cultural order" (1977, 255). That the murder of Gullveig fails so completely only proves that the Æsir's society, invaded by and saturated with supernatural knowledge, is morally beyond the help of such a model.

Violence is not the only element of Mother Goddess cults and newly patriarchal societies that have echoes in *Völuspá*. Lunar imagery and its replacement by masculine, solar imagery, as discussed above, resonates strongly in the poem, although in a sense that is much more literal than cosmological. It occurs, of course, in stanza 21. The death and rebirth of Gullveig reawakens the Æsir (and indeed their entire central universe) to the expressions of the Mother Goddess that have long been lost in the society. Once again, they are made aware of the birth/death/rebirth cycle, and see firsthand how it operates. The belief that life and death were not mutually exclusive is not one that exists in the created world of the Æsir, as it is one that they rejected along with the feminine deity that embodied it; but in the flames of Gullveig's pyre comes the reappearance of the light of the waxing moon, symbolizing the rebirth of femininity in Asgard, a new awareness of the reproductive cycle, and the spread of hitherto forgotten knowledge about the natural order of the ancient world.

Returning to the question of the gender composition of the Æsir during their ages of creation, I am tempted to propose that the world was a male-dominated one at that time, due to compelling evidence of the absence of women and the strictly narrative unimportance of their participation, and that it remained majorly masculine until the introduction of Gullveig and the assumption of Freyja by the Æsir. Notably, these two events correspond with the introduction of supernatural knowledge into the world; but more than that, they strengthen the tie between knowledge and destruction, as they are mirrored by the consequences of the arrival of the three jötnar women in stanza 8. The jötnar ended the Golden Age of the gods, but they did not do so through openly destructive or even significantly active means. They ended the age because they *changed* something: They gave the gods something that they did not have before—a greed for gold, and that greed manifested and grew until the whole world was changed along with them. Whatever their identity, those women play a clear role in *Völuspá*: Jochens states that "Although these named giantesses eventually became absorbed into the family of the gods, the *völva* clearly blamed the cessation of the Golden Age on the three unnamed giant women" (1989, 348).

In the same way, Gullveig, symbolizing the same gold that first changed the gods, gives the Æsir something else they did not have before—women and female agency, taking the form of magic. The introduction of this magic changes the society for a second time, turning it again for the worse (perhaps resulting in the female-free utopia of the reborn world after the Ragnarök). However, the changes brought into the world by these women—a broader experience, and magic and lots—are present in the reborn world, and suggest that these changes can be perfected. Once again, the tie between women and knowledge is tightened, as they are the ones who first pioneered these changes in the society.

Until Gullveig is burned in Óðinn's house, the supernatural events that have occurred have remained on the periphery of the Æsir's realm, and the actors in those events have both come and gone from the space outside. But Gullveig is incorporated into the Æsir, and her rebirth—the most supernatural element of the episode—occurs in the most central space of Óðinn's hall. The (potentially entirely) male gods are forced to face not only the active presence of women but also the power that women hold over the spheres of life and death. They are forced to evolve, as "Three outcomes of heterosexual liaison that were staved off by the gods in the early days of their activity, namely procreation, mortality and warfare, which may itself lead to death, encroach upon their society as it grows older" (Clunies Ross 1994, 201). As a

consequence of this evolution, magic and supernatural practices, embodied by *Heiðr*'s abilities, find a place in the world.

Gullveig's very existence is supernatural and, as stated above, her presence in *Óðinn*'s hall, in the most central and moral of spaces, is hugely important. She is again forcing a broadening of their experience, making the *Æsir* face the supernatural that exists in their own world. Both the three *jötnar* women and *Gullveig* "make the *Æsir* take defensive action and presumably reject what the women offered" (Clunies Ross 1994, 205). This rejection took the extreme action of murder as the only way for the *Æsir* to retain the control they exercise over their world (210). If the *jötnar* women introduced immorality, then *Gullveig* brings about its consequences. The *Æsir*'s greed for gold has no immediate negative consequences, but this physical embodiment of that flaw, of that inherent supernatural evil, brings about violence, death, and the destructive spread of the supernatural throughout the world.

Freyja.

As stated above, no religion exists in a vacuum, and the pantheon of Norse gods is a testament to this fact. Nordberg argues that the Norse gods are "a legacy from an Indo-European ideology," (2012, 127) and that furthermore, there must have existed local deities alongside the more pan-Germanic ones such as *Óðinn*, *Týr*, and *Þórr*. "Interestingly," he states, "these local deities are often associated with specific places, regions, and lineage groups, and frequently have distinct fertility aspects or chthonic traits," which he believes accounts for their isolation (128). Coming from such a larger ideology, it holds that these minor deities would be associated with elements that are characteristic of an older order.

This has interesting applications for *Freyja*. *Freyja* adheres to Nordberg's classifications of a local deity, as her fertility aspects and chthonic traits are perhaps her most notable elements; and yet she is worshipped as widely as the major gods of the pantheon. This can be explained by her origin and her status: Nordberg argues that such elements as *Freyja* possesses are responsible for the localization of certain deities, but when applied to *Freyja* herself, these elements mark her as the "other": Her worship may not be localized, but she is swathed in the imagery of Mother Goddess cults and she cannot claim the same place in the pantheon as the

other (male) deities. Her otherness cannot be forgotten, and in a deity that is widely worshiped, this manifests itself in the possession of such characteristics.¹⁸

Freyja's unique place in the Norse pantheon can be partly explained by her strong connection to supernatural knowledge. Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, in her exploration of the identities of Frigg and Freyja, presents both textual and archaeological evidence for the connections between women and supernatural knowledge. Textually, Eddic poetry is the first place where Frigg is unambiguously listed as a member of the Norse pantheon; whereas Nerthus, clearly associated with the Vanir, has been present in textual sources since Tacitus (2006, 420). Given place names in Scandinavia, the Vanir seem to have been more widely worshipped, or to at least have served a more practical purpose in the society, despite their outsider status. This may be explained by their function. Ingunn states that "The Æsir stand nearer to being sky-gods, gods of war, knowledge and the upper social classes; they are connected to culture and male social order, whereas the Vanir are closer to the earth and its products, water and untamed nature and fertility" (422).

Archaeologically, Ingunn traces a linear development between the carvings of bird-like figures and the early belief of valkyries as women who could transform into birds and who had power over battle and death. Freyja, as more strongly connected with bird imagery than Frigg, is seen at times as the queen of the valkyries, and falls into this tradition, further backed by the fact that worship of the Vanir predates worship of the Æsir, and that "belief in obscure female powers with magical abilities, like disir, norms and valkyries, seems to be much older than the belief in deities with known names" (2006, 421). This strong belief in powerful women may explain why Freyja has a stronger personality and cult in the society than Frigg, despite the latter's higher status as one of the Æsir. Furthermore, Frigg is not a receiver of sacrifices, and her power and personality are tied with that of Óðinn (422-23). Freyja, on the other hand, "seems to have retained her independent powers and worship in spite of the intrusion of the Æsir gods" (423).

This intrusion, as Ingunn rightly calls it, is an interesting matter. When the Æsir arrive in the north, rather than entering the space and assimilating to its culture, they instead shift the status of "other" away from themselves and onto the society they are infringing upon. Despite origins in the north, what was central to that space is now seen as being "outside" of it: The Æsir

¹⁸ He also suggests that Þorgerðr may have been a local deity, once again not only associating her with Freyja, but reinforcing the idea that such traits as they possess are othering and/or isolating (2012, 128).

pervade wholly whatever place they settle, reinforcing their moral righteousness and shifting the center of society to wherever they happen to be. These intrusions shed light on the structure of society with the Æsir at its moral center, and thus illuminate the subsequent morality of seeking and acquiring knowledge within that society.

Incorporating Du Bois' theory that *seiðr* originated with the Sami in the north, Ingunn makes an interesting connection between *seiðr* and Freyja's tutelage of the Æsir, as the Æsir are said to have come into the north from below (422). This connection holds with ideas of knowledge and *seiðr* as supernatural and outside of the central world of the Æsir, as the north is a border zone in and of itself. In this respect, Freyja is still the "other," an outsider in her own home; and *seiðr* becomes a supernatural practice, something that is pushed to the fringes of the very place where it originated. The Æsir must assume Freyja and her supernatural practices, must bring it into their society (with shame, and negative consequences), and must force it to assimilate to *their* society, rather than vice versa.¹⁹

¹⁹ And it *does* assimilate to their models, as magic is present in the reborn world, and yet it is perfected for their society (i.e. performed without women).

Óðinn.

The shift away from Mother Goddess cults also changed the conception of time in some of these societies that later strongly influenced the biblical model. Because of the difference between the death/rebirth cycles of the moon and the constant presence of the sun, "time for humanity became linear: it had a beginning with birth and an end with death" (Baring and Cashford 1993, 297). This, of course, extended to conceptions of the world itself. *Völuspá* has been shown to exemplify an interesting mix of the remnants of both traditions, and this is no exception: The poem is particularly interesting in the way it both supports and subverts this linear cosmological model. The support for the model is shown in the ideal framework of the present world, while its subversion is implemented by the events that actually occur in the poem. Despite how the cosmology of the world falls into line with that of Mother Goddess cults, the poet's tone and moral incentives allow *Völuspá* to serve the patriarchal, biblical end. The world of *Völuspá* is unnatural and imperfect, and since it did not end but was reborn after its destruction, it is not the utopia it is meant to be: A flaw still emerges even in its reborn state. In other words, the cosmology adhered to in the poem is against Judeo-Christian doctrine, but the moral judgment of that cosmology is aligned with it.

Despite the rejection of cyclical cosmology by these later patriarchal societies, the idea that the supernatural realm can be accessed on either end of their linear spectrum—that knowledge can be gained from both the beginning and the end of time—thus has its roots, like so many other things, in the cosmology of Mother Goddess cults wherein lunar imagery was representative of the world. Knowledge can be gained from both birth and death because they were not always the opposite ends of the spectrum but the two elements of a never-ending cycle, existing contiguously and concurrently: They inhabit the same space in Mother Goddess cosmology like they do not anywhere else, because, within that cosmology, "life and death did not have to be perceived as opposites, but could be seen as phases succeeding each other in a rhythm that was endless" (Baring and Cashford 1993, 21).

Óðinn occupies a unique place in *Völuspá* as a result of this interplay of cosmological ideas and their consequent timelines. Whereas female figures are associated more with birth and fertility, Óðinn's realm is that of the dead, and his unaccompanied acquisitions of supernatural

knowledge reflect that.²⁰ The nature of that knowledge, however, is no different than that of the *völur* or any other female figure: It comes from the same source, and that source lies outside the natural order of the *Æsir*'s central space. Like all supernatural and magical knowledge in *Völuspá*, that which Óðinn acquires is perceived as immoral and evokes destructive connotations.

Utiseta.

Stanzas 28 and 29 narrate a typical example of Óðinn's interactions with a *völva*, one of the most common ways he acquires supernatural knowledge. The first half of stanza 29 reads:

Valði henne Herfóðr
hringa ok men.
Fé[kk] spiðll spaklig
ok spáganda..

One of the most notable features about this interaction is that it is very much an *exchange*: Óðinn is aggressive in either seeking out or raising a *völva*, but the service that she then offers him is a paid one. No knowledge is free, and the *völva* does not divulge her own without some price having been paid. Knowledge is a commodity, and that Óðinn pays for it with gold is not insignificant, pragmatically or symbolically. Pragmatically, the value of this knowledge is made clear given the high cost that Óðinn pays for it.²¹ Symbolically, gold represents the very immoral deed that Óðinn is currently engaging in, and that he values so highly something that the *Æsir* were never meant to covet just reinforces the flawed nature of the world that has emerged in the narrative of *Völuspá*.

There is some debate about the ultimate authority of the *völva*, and whether or not she is being controlled by Óðinn in these instances. Jochens argues that the *völva* is in fact more powerful than Óðinn and that she in no way questions her power or quavers under Óðinn's gaze. Regarding the *Vitoð ér enn, eða hvat?* refrain that the *völva* poses to Óðinn many times, Joches

²⁰ Funeral customs also strengthen the bond between Óðinn and the dead. Inebriation was a well-documented element of Viking funerals, but Price reasons that the complexity of excavated graves hardly displays the fruits of a drunken labor. He gently suggests that there is a deeper, perhaps ritualistic meaning behind the custom, and he links this deeper meaning to worship of Óðinn, stating that "the elements of sacred frenzy and ecstasy associated with, for example, the cult of Óðinn are well-known and may not be irrelevant here" (Price 2012², 25).

²¹ See Raudvere, who states that within the ritual of *utiseta*, there is the "recognition of this kind of knowledge as precious" (2012¹, 107).

insists that there is a "self-assurance and superiority that is veiled in her rhetorical questions" (1989, 358). She also refers to an instance in *Baldur's draumar* wherein Óðinn forces a *völva* to tell him of the future; while Óðinn controls her at this time, Jochens makes the crucial point that, under Óðinn's control or not, "the *völva* in our poem emerges clearly superior to the chief god, and in both poems he is obviously ignorant about the future" (358).

Once again, the *völur's* place on the outside of society is ensured, as their powers and supernatural knowledge are uniquely held. In his analysis of prophesying women, McKinnell emphasizes the often hostile or forced relationship of the *völva* and her subject, and suggests that one "should probably assume a similar hostility between Óðinn and the narrating *völva* in *Völuspá*," despite that in the poem, he is not wary of her knowledge, but rather forcing her to speak (2001, 398-99). I would argue, however, that Óðinn is hardly forcing the *völva* to speak. Óðinn comes to her but, as emphasized above, he pays her for a service she then renders. She is the authority in their interactions; she asks him rhetorical, arguably condescending questions and is clearly unafraid to tell him of the future.

Sacrifice.

Another interesting aspect that Óðinn brings into the acquisition of knowledge is the implications surrounding the loss of his eye in Mímir's well. Turville-Petre explains that "Óðinn's sight was his most precious possession, and for this reason he must sacrifice a part of it" (63). This fits nicely into the idea of knowledge as a commodity, but it does not shed light on the nature of the acquisition itself. The knowledge Óðinn receives is supernatural, of course—its source exists under the roots of Yggdrasill, and Óðinn is one of few beings who have visited the well due to its peripheral location—but there is nothing inherently supernatural or immoral about personal sacrifice, which is the main element of this particular acquisition. But neither is this the only time that Óðinn willfully sacrifices something for the knowledge that he gains: He also chooses to hang himself in the episode told in *Hávamál* (stanzas 138-141), sacrificing his life for access to forbidden knowledge. Óðinn does not gain this access simply by seeking out supernatural figures on the periphery of society, but by the very act of his sacrifice.²² As

²² It could further be argued that the Æsir sacrificed much when the three jötunn women first came to Asgard: They lost their naivety and thus their perfect world; but that was not a willful act of sacrifice as is Óðinn surrendering his eye to the well.

Swenson summarizes, "It is through his sexual engagement with the well of the norms that Óðinn gains power. He takes from 'her' the runes" (2002, 278).

The implications of the requirements of such self sacrifice, as Swenson hinted, are gendered ones. Óðinn, who is taught the art of *seiðr* rather than possessing inherent skill, must undergo an additional step to gain supernatural knowledge, whereas women (both the *vǫlur*, as the original source of this knowledge, and Freyja, as one of the Vanir and gifted with natural inclinations) have to do no such thing. Óðinn is essentially an interloper in the supernatural realm and must make further efforts, and sacrifice is the price he pays for his transgressions into that realm, making his sacrifice something that is, indeed, immoral. That Óðinn must take more drastic steps and must change his inherent nature more severely is implied elsewhere in the myths: Notably by Loki in *Lokasenna*, where, Turville-Petre states, "It is even implied that Óðinn changed his sex, as he often changed his form" (1964, 65).²³ These measures are perceived as negative even by supernatural figures themselves: Dronke comments, "The *vǫlva's* sardonic tone borders on insult when she tells Óðinn that she knows where he has 'hidden' his eye" (1997, 50).

Without the sacrificial element that allows Óðinn to acquire supernatural knowledge on his own, he must then appeal to feminine, supernatural beings, as he does each time he seeks out a *vǫlva* to prophesize for him. Stanza 45, then, presents yet another aspect of knowledge acquisition that is unique to Óðinn. This is the first time in *Vǫluspá* that Óðinn is seen acting independently of women or female tutelage and is yet neither engaging in personal sacrifice. This is also the first time that prophecy, generally associated with the *vǫlur*, is connected to the dead; but these two events are not coincidental. In the absence of women, another supernatural element must take woman's place, and Óðinn converses with Mim's head using knowledge that was brought into the world by women.

There is no explicit evidence for what, exactly, Óðinn and Mim's head are conversing about. He "speaks" with the head, suggesting that this interaction is much more of a dialogue than any of his interactions with a *vǫlva*. Furthermore, he does not offer payment for Mim's knowledge and he is in control of the exchange. Turville-Petre also questions the nature of this discussion, noting that "When he [Óðinn] made the hanged men talk, or sat down beneath them, he was clearly in quest of occult wisdom, which belongs only to the dead, just as he was when he

²³ This recalls, of course, the supernatural realm's appropriation of its practitioners, discussed above.

woke up dead men..." (1964, 45). Óðinn raises the *vǫlur* for knowledge about the future as well as the past. "We may wonder," he states, "what kind of wisdom it was that Óðinn acquired from the dead, and especially from the hanged" (45). Given the lack of both women and sacrifice, it is probably safe to conclude that Mim's head is not offering Óðinn prophecy, but perhaps simply wisdom. That Óðinn requires a supernatural being for such a discussion suggests that there is none other who would have the capability to speak with him:²⁴ His knowledge is unnatural, and he has broadened his worldview further beyond any of the Æsir; by doing so, he has set himself apart (i.e. outside) from his peers.

The Two Trees.

The *Rúnatal* of *Hávamál* is a crucial insight into the methods and morality of knowledge acquisition, and not solely for its element of sacrifice. While I discuss the scene in greater detail below, I do so for perhaps an unexpected component. The Christian influences on the mythological poetry are seen incredibly clearly in this anecdote, and it provides a unique and endlessly fascinating context in which to analyze the nature of knowledge.

The scene of Óðinn's hanging in stanzas 138 and 139 of *Hávamál* is often compared to Christ's crucifixion, and for good reason. There are similar elements present in both scenes: The sacrificed deity being hanged on a tree, pierced with a spear and left without nourishment. One of the elements often argued for, however, is the roots of both Yggdrasill and the Cross. Turville-Petre mentions the rootlessness of both trees, and while Evan differentiates between the Cross's rootlessness and Yggdrasill's roots "whose mystery none can pierce," both acknowledge that the roots of the trees are something to be compared (Turville-Petre 1964, 42-43; Evans 1986, 29). I argue, however, that this is not the comparison that should be made.

A Christian parallel can no doubt be drawn between the two scenes, given the Christian influence on the Norse literature, but I share both scholars' hesitation to end any comparison there, and reach a more widely drawn conclusion. Turville-Petre states, "While we cannot preclude the possibility of Christian influence on the scene described in *Hávamál*, when we analyse the lines, we realize that nearly every element in the Norse myth can be explained as a part of pagan tradition"; and Evans provides the Norse context to the elements in the scene, from

²⁴ This echoes the earlier discussion of *seiðr* and its implementation to gain access to supernatural realms in search of adequate resources to deal with supernatural knowledge.

the duration of Óðinn's hanging and his long association with the spear, to his many names referring to gallows and Yggdrasill's translation as "Óðinn's horse" and the gallows imagery therein (Turville-Petre 1964 43; Evans 1986, 29-33). It follows, then, that Óðinn's motifs should only evoke elements of Norse myth, and he should not be seen as a Christ figure so literally.

Nevertheless, the Christian element should not be overlooked, and it perhaps seems strange that such a crucial scene as stanza 138 would be untouched by Christian influence. I argue, then, that it is *not* untouched, but that a crucial point is missed by solely comparing the actors in these scenes (and the crosses that bear them) when a more telling parallel could be drawn, comparing Yggdrasill with another very well known tree of Judeo-Christian myth. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a widely debated topic, and the verses that pertain to it in Genesis have myriad and intricate interpretations; but the comparison of its motifs to Yggdrasill is too intriguing an exercise, regardless.

The story of the Fall in Genesis is a well-known one: God creates the tree of knowledge and forbids Adam and Eve to eat of it; the Serpents tempts Eve, who eats the fruit and subsequently offers it to Adam; God punishes the pair and banishes them from Eden. But it is not that simple. The tree of knowledge is one of two possible notable trees in Eden (the other being the tree of life), but only the tree of knowledge is forbidden, and the punishment for eating of it is death.²⁵ Already, then, there is a clear correlation between knowledge and death, something that has been firmly established in Óðinn's myths and exploits.

That knowledge leads to death is a common theme in the Old Testament,²⁶ whereas it is the reverse in the Norse myths, and knowledge can only be gained *through* death. An explanation to this reversal can be found in the shift from Mother Goddess cults, where, in societies that worship a patriarchal god, death is the ultimate end. The concept of rebirth into the living world is not something found in the Bible, whereas Óðinn is capable of such a thing because the images and ideas of Mother Goddess cults are still prevalent in Norse society.

The role of women is the same, of course, and it is Freyja as it is Eve who is responsible for bringing supernatural knowledge into the world and teaching it to mankind. The placement of the trees is crucial as well, as they are central to the spaces that both Adam and Eve and the Æsir inhabit, and yet they are links to the supernatural realms. These are the places to which Eve

²⁵ Gen 2:17 reads: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

²⁶ The fall of Babel and the Enochian deluge being two of the most prominent examples.

and Óðinn go to receive knowledge, and these are the places from which sin and moral flaws enter their worlds. Yggdrasill comes from under the earth, and "out of the ground" God made the trees grow after the main acts of creation were done and the world was established (Gen 2:9). Genesis 2:6 has "a stream rising from the earth," rivulets of water running from Eden and what appears to be the base of the trees, and this very clearly recalls the mysterious roots of Yggdrasill.

Turville-Petre goes so far as to claim that Yggdrasill is the "centre of the divine world," and compares how its canopy extends over and upholds the world, "even as the main pillars uphold a house" (1964, 279). The supernatural is seen here, as it is seen in Eden, as the center of the world. Just as the tree of knowledge is the root of the Fall of man, so is Yggdrasill the root of destruction in Ásgarðr, ushering in the Ragnarøk as it bursts into flame.

Yggdrasill.

Yggdrasill is a crucial element in the cosmology of *Völuspá* even before it has bloomed, when it is still "fyr mold neðan" (st. 2). The tree acts as an indicator for the state of the world at any given time, and it is also a feature symbolic of the supernatural and inherently immoral nature of knowledge. This can be seen in stanza 46, where special attention is given to Yggdrasill's age. The tree is still standing although it is burning, but it shudders under the growing tension that is beginning to tear the world apart. It is a symbol, a manifestation, of the negative consequences of the existence of supernatural knowledge. Its strain is reflected in the ever-degenerating state of the world, and it is the only material sign that anything is amiss in the wider configuration of the world: Yes, animals are acting out and men are committing sins against each other—the consequences of supernatural knowledge manifesting in the world's beings; but the state of the *world itself* is indicated solely by the tree, an unmovable presence in the world since the early days of its conception, now struggling under the weight of a morally flawed world.

Yggdrasill can be linked to most all of the supernatural elements that are present in *Völuspá*, and indeed, it is often their source: The dew from its leaves, the well under its roots, the norms who emerge from its lake. It serves as a sort of mascot for these elements in the world. Yggdrasill, like the biblical tree of knowledge, exists in a liminal space. Its roots reach beyond the world known by the Æsir, and it thus clearly transcends the world's natural order. That this irrefutable association of the Tree with the supernatural is an immoral one is seen plainly as its branches ignite before the end of the world: It is, quite literally, the harbinger of destruction.

Stanza 54 is also noteworthy with regards to Yggdrasill's unique status. In this stanza, the world undergoes drastic physical change. There is a clear symmetry between the world's destruction and its creation:

Sól tér sortna,
sígr fold í mar,
hverfa af himni
heiðar stiðnor.

There is now darkness where there was light, seas where there was land, a void where there were stars. But Yggdrasill, once again, supersedes this natural order. If the same symmetry was applied to the Tree as to the rest of the natural world brought under the control of the Æsir, then

it should have died and sunk back under the earth whence it came. But it does not. It kindles flames that reach to "heaven itself," transcending the boundaries of the natural world. It does not wilt and destruct, it is not torn asunder; but rather it burns, its smoke dissipating up into the air, away from the ground from which it emerged.

This particular method of destruction should resonate in a few ways. If the knowledge represented by Yggdrasill was a natural and moral element of the world, then the above-mentioned symmetry should have applied. Instead, the tree must be destroyed, and in a manner that could be considered violent. It exists in the world unnaturally, and it must be essentially eradicated before the world is reborn. Death by fire, of course, recalls the murder of Gullveig and thus the purification of gold, symbolic of the fatal moral flaw of the *Æsir*. This theme, however, can extend beyond the destruction of the world to its rebirth. Prophecy and magic exist in the world that is reborn after the Ragnarök, but as natural (and masculine) elements. Like Gullveig, like gold, the knowledge represented by Yggdrasill is subjected to fire and reborn in a new, perfected form.

Fluid.

Having thus discussed the supernatural implications of Yggdrasill in more depth, I return now for a moment to conceptions of gender. The norns in stanza 20 are once again noteworthy, and Raudvere argues for their symbolic importance as they stand under an Yggdrasill that is bloomed and mighty, and yet also soon to be destroyed (2012¹, 105). That Yggdrasill has bloomed draws an immediate parallel to the second stanza where it is still under the ground, and indicates a change in the nature of the world. The presence of these women under a blooming Yggdrasill does not just connect women to the liminal space of the tree, but also to knowledge. All of these elements are then grouped together and portrayed as immoral, given the fey nature of the tree.

The supernatural elements that originate from Yggdrasill (its dew, the well, the lake at its roots) all have in common their association with fluid. Raudvere links this association with fluid to women through the norns, and argues that their presence at the foot of the tree is symbolic of cosmological rather than ritual concerns, which grant access to ideas not only about the nature of knowledge, but also of its acquisition. She argues that "the quest for knowledge suggests two inevitable parts of a divination ritual: access and communication" (2012¹, 105-06). The first part

of this ritual, she states, is "connected to fluids," such as those associated with Yggdrasill, which emphasize the "transformative nature of fluid; something which makes the tropes useful for visualizing the acquisition, application and communication of the knowledge received" (106).

Propitiously, this connection to fluids can be seen in both a historical and archaeological context. Ingunn Ásdísardóttir says that it is "safe to assume" that a goddess cult existed in Nordic society, and that it did so over a significant period of time, given the wealth of archaeological information and the recurrence of specific motifs, such as bird imagery (2006, 418-419). She goes on to state that three traits in particular are connected with this cult: Fertility, death and the afterlife, and sacrifice (419). Acknowledging the lack of textual overlap with the archaeological materials, Ingunn nevertheless ties these findings together by their connection to water, as they are found in or around water, and connected to sacrifice or death. "It seems thus quite likely," she concludes, "that this goddess may have been the kind of fertility divinity that later came to be defined as Vanir gods" (419). It should then not be surprising that these motifs of bird imagery and sacrifice are so strongly connected to Freyja.

Heimdallr.

Yggdrasill also has rather strong connections to Heimdallr, who offers another unique perspective on the nature of knowledge in *Völuspá*. Unlike most of the Æsir, Heimdallr's origin is not only known but also rather supernatural in nature (*Gylfaginning* ch. 27). His rearing by nine sisters draws an immediate parallel between him and the narrating *völva* of the poem, not solely for their connection to the number nine, but also for the supernatural influence of their upbringing. That Heimdallr's birth appears to have been a strictly female occurrence recalls, of course, the pseudo-procreative methods employed by Ymir. As expected with such a supernatural origin, Heimdallr possesses supernatural abilities. He can "see far ahead," something associated not only with the Vanir (*Þrymskviða* st. 15), but also with the *völur*: Again, he is connected to this other most prominent group of supernatural beings. Even his physical, peripheral location in the myths suggests his supernatural nature: Dumézil notes that "in space he is posted at the threshold of the divine world (1973, 126-27); and any who fall outside of Dumézil's tripartite system are those who are "typically concerned with beginnings and endings," two not-so-unconnected things that more often than not have strong supernatural undertones (Dumézil xv).

Heimdallr's connection to Yggdrasill is first seen in stanza 27, which relays how the *volva* is aware that Heimdallr's hearing is 'hidden' beneath the tree. Unlike his foresight, which can be credited to the supernatural circumstances of his birth, the particular ability of his hearing seems to come from Yggdrasill itself. This is particularly interesting when compared to the loss of Óðinn's eye in Mímir's well. Both Heimdallr and Óðinn have gained unique abilities from the tree, but the exchanges do not seem equal. Óðinn sacrificed his natural sight for supernatural insight, but any potentially negative consequences of Heimdallr's 'hidden' hearing are nowhere to be found: His senses seem solely elevated.

What is even more interesting about stanza 27 is the lack of any indication that the Æsir are aware of Heimdallr's unique position. The *volva* knows, of course, and Óðinn is thus told; but they are both supernatural beings in their own right, and their narration is unreliable as a source for the other Æsir. That Heimdallr's hearing is specifically 'hidden' has connotations of secrecy and moral ambiguity. Even the *volva* has "no knowledge of his death" (Steinsland 2006, 921). Is this secrecy why he is never ostracized like Freyja and Óðinn? He stands apart from the natural order of the Æsir, but his morality is never brought into question.

Heimdallr is also connected to Yggdrasill through the events immediately leading up to the Ragnarøk. In stanza 45, it is he who ushers in the apocalypse, as Yggdrasill ignites when he blows the Gjallarhorn. The link between Heimdallr, Yggdrasill, and the supernatural has already been established, and the events here only serve to reinforce that link. He is the facilitator of the destruction of the world, and while the action of the stanza is arguably more focused on both the burning of the tree and the interaction between Óðinn and Mímir's head, it is these decidedly supernatural events that Heimdallr is facilitating.

That his supernatural knowledge is indeed immoral is furthermore made clear by even a quick look at the structure of stanza 45, which reads:

Leika Míms synir,
 en miqtuðr kyndiz
 at en[o] galla
 Gjallarhorni.
 Hátt blæss Heimdallr
 —horn er á lopti—
 mælir Óðinn
 við Míms hqfuð.

The arrangement is fascinating, since the telling of these two present events—the ignition of the tree at Gjallarhorn's sound and Óðinn's conversation with Mímir's head—is so entwined. There are two mentions of Óðinn and Mímir and two mentions of Heimdallr and the tree; and rather than being paired together by theme, they are paired instead one with each other, suggesting that they are also entwined literally, and not just narratively. The two events are occurring contemporaneously, and they are feeding back into each other: At the beginning of the end, all supernatural elements culminate into one devastating event.

Conclusion.

Sér hón upp koma
 qðro sinni
 iqrð ór ægi
 iðdiagræna.

After everything that has transpired—after the world has been rent asunder and consumed—it is yet again reborn after the cataclysmic events of the Ragnarøk. *Reborn*, not created, and that is a noteworthy distinction to make given the consequences of Gullveig's rebirth and the evolution that the Æsir subsequently underwent. This reborn world is a reflection of the previous iteration, which had been partially consumed by fire and is thus now perfected.

No women are named or active, and there is textual precedent enough to take this as an indication that women are excluded entirely from this utopian world. Jochens states that "it is difficult to avoid the impression that the poet considered goddesses too unimportant to mention. One might even argue that having identified femaleness with evil, he expressly excluded goddesses, on the ground that the new world would be better without them" (1989, 354).²⁷ The morality of this new world is thus made clear.

As stated above and seen in stanza 59, Hqðr and Baldr inherit the world, and it is presumed that they will be responsible for its future: Once again, reproduction is an issue with cosmological and moral implications. Clunies Ross proposes a theory on why the sole presence of males is not only far from problematic, but actually a favored state of affairs. She argues that pseudo-procreation shifts the focus from the biological processes of reproduction "to the birth and development of the spiritual person and the institutions of political, religious and social control in society. These they affirm to be a male preserve" (1994, 147). The mastery over their world that the Æsir lost upon the advent of supernatural women has been regained. That the reborn world is populated and entirely controlled by men ultimately suggests the moral superiority of such a world.

Interestingly, although not surprisingly, supernatural elements first introduced by women are present in the reborn world. Stanza 57 explicitly states that the Æsir commemorate the runes of Óðinn, and this is of note for a few reasons. The runes are said to be *fornar*, 'old' or 'ancient,' and this descriptor is often used in a ritualistic, religious, or magical context (Zoëga 2004, 144).

²⁷ She notes also that the jötnar are similarly excluded, regardless of gender, as they have long been associated with supernatural evil, strengthening her latter suggestion of intentional and meaningful exclusion.

As discussed above, age is a crucial element in the supernatural, and the commemoration of the runes is a clear link to the old world, forged in one where many things are new: Fields are freshly sown and old hurts are healed. The only other link to the previous world is the gaming pieces that are found in the grass in stanza 58, and the connotations of gold hardly need repeating. However, the gold of these pieces is now a celebrated trait, and they are now *undrsamligar*, 'miraculous.' Compared to the power of the runes and the storied history of the gold they are made of, these pieces seem now almost superfluous: They are facilitators of entertainment rather than cosmological upheaval.

Furthermore, the runes are said to be Óðinn's in particular, further connecting them to the past and especially to the supernatural. Their source remains outside the central sphere, and they exist now only because Óðinn recovered them from the supernatural realm of the dead. The knowledge commemorated by the Æsir may no longer have immoral implications, but its inherent nature has not changed. This association of the runes solely to Óðinn is yet another example of the appropriation by men of what was originally a woman's domain. When the runes make their first appearance with the norms in stanza 20, they are immediately owned and controlled by these supernatural women. In the reborn world, they are characterized by man, specifically Óðinn. Raudvere states that by carving the runes and weaving the fortunes of men, the norms "seem to control the destiny of the whole universe, which is doomed to inevitable destruction" (2012², 238). Given the awesome power that the runes bestow upon their user, it is not surprisingly that there was want by the male powers to regain such control over their world.

The same can be said for Hœnir's lots in stanza 60. While their origin is not commented upon in the stanza, and they are not specifically linked to the past in the same way as the runes, they nevertheless have a history in *Voluspa* and their first, supernatural origin cannot be forgotten or dismissed. Nevertheless, they are another supernatural element that now seems to carry no moral weight. For any of these elements, there is no longer a "suggestion of recrimination or reproach or rejection of that old world" (Dronke 1997, 59). It has been remade, quite literally, with the best of both worlds.

However, this reborn utopia may not yet be so easily dismantled. It is clear from these examples that a reckoning has occurred, and that the morality of the world is once again perfect despite the presence of things that were once immoral. But it is equally clear from these

examples that magical and prophetic knowledge—morally accepted by the Æsir or not—is still supernatural in nature; and the last stanza of the poem is a chilling and ominous forebodement of the fate of this seeming utopia.

Baring and Cashford posit that in the *Enuma Elish*, "The defeat of Tiamat may have served to discredit the Sumerian 'Mother' land, which is now portrayed as threatening and evil in the image of a dragon worthy of destruction" (1993, 279, 290-96). The image of a dragon as a remnant of Mother Goddess societies is not limited to the Near East materials, but can in fact be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The figure of Rahab, who opened this paper, is referred to numerous times throughout the Old Testament as a "fierce dragon of the 'deep,' or sea" who is constantly at odds with Yahweh (Whatham 1910, 330). Baring and Cashford state that "The dragon-monster who was Tiamat is distanced and abstracted in Genesis into Tehom, a formless void" (1993, 298); Whatham points specifically to Job 7:12, Jeremiah 5:22, and Isaiah 51:9 as a few of many verses that retain the image of dragons and their conquest by mankind as a symbol of control over the natural world.

The influence of the *Enuma Elish* and other Near East traditions on *Voluspa* has been previously discussed, and this Babylonian image of the dragon as a harbinger of destruction finds a resonant parallel in this last stanza of the poem. Dronke interprets this dragon as Níðhogggr, the same serpent who forever gnaws the roots of Yggdrasill, and thus associated with the supernatural sphere that the tree inhabits. Níðhogggr is "not susceptible to astrological explanation: he is a subterranean being, a being of the deep, a wretch who will be on the side of the demons and monsters in that final battle when land and gods will perish" (Dumézil 1973, 143-44). Recalling Revelation 21:1, the presence of a figure associated with the sea, representative of primordial chaos, suggest that this world is not so perfected, after all.

Despite the identification of the dragon as Níðhogggr, first seen in *Voluspa* in stanza 38 sucking the corpses of the dead, Dronke interprets his role quite differently. She argues that he is there "to take away from the last battlefield the dead that are its appointed food" (1997, 60). He is there to cleanse the carnage of the battle and in doing so make the reborn world even better yet. Dronke ends the poem with the same positivity that infuses the rest of the actions that occur after the Ragnarøk.

This interpretation, however, takes for granted that the corpses from the final battle—specifically those of the "ignoble," of the ones who did not deserve life (60)—are still lying on

the field; and there is no evidence that this is the case. Features and objects of the old world carry over and reemerge, certainly, but all of these things are positive and serve only to improve and reinforce the moral rightness of the world. Even the simple need for *Níðhogg*, interpreted as a being that punishes the wicked in a world where evil is not meant to exist, suggests that this world may not be all that it seems. There is a chance, therefore, that despite the newly recovered moral righteousness of the *Æsir*, the supernatural and feminine nature of knowledge cannot be overcome or fully appropriated. Consequences of its existence can still be felt—not, this time, as an inherent flaw sown into the fabric of the world, but as an external evil in the shape of a dragon that is neither created nor capable of being controlled.

It is not coincidental that the destructive events of *Voluspa* are largely cosmological—the stars are veiled, the sun is consumed, the earth crumbles—and that so many cosmological elements have feminine connotations: Baring and Cashford state, "What was feminine was the dragon-mother, the earth and moon, darkness, chaos, confusion, nature as emptied of spirit; and what was masculine was the sky-father, the heaven and sun, light, order, clarity, spirit as freed from nature" (1993, 285). In its moral decay, the world becomes decidedly feminine, and it is destroyed as a result. But even after the inception of a second Golden Age, when the world is reborn with a perfected morality, "Even yet the world is not purged of evil for the cruel, dark, glittering dragon is seen bearing corpses in his wings" (Turville-Petre 1964, 281). Knowledge endures, and its supernatural nature is still its defining feature.

In the act of conquering the dragon, of exercising control over the faceless deep that exists before a creative act, the god or gods of a society prove their mastery of the natural world which they inhabit. The chaos of the world is spoken of as feminine and represented by feminine figures; and thus the subduing of this feminine presence is often a violent, destructive thing. If women and the chaotic, supernatural knowledge they bring into the world is not checked and conquered, then that world will ultimately be destroyed. One could pose to the *Æsir* the same question that was posed to the redeemed people of the Lord in Isaiah 51:9: "Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab, and wounded the dragon?"

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