

Burning the Witch! – The Initiation of the Goddess and the War of the Aesir and the Vanir.

She remembers the first war in the world

When Gold-Brew was hoist on the spears

And in the High One's hall they burned her

Three times they burned the three times born

Often, not seldom, but she still lives!

She was called Bright One when she came to the settlements

The greatly talented Carrier of the Wand

She performed magic, ecstatically she performed it

She knew how to cast spells

She was always loved by wicked women.

Voluspá, st.21-22 (“The Vision of the Witch”), Poetic Edda

One of the most startling myths within the poems of the Poetic Edda is that which speaks of the burning of a witch-woman, as quoted above. Such burnings were not really common in Europe until several centuries after the manuscript of the Poetic Edda was written, and this practice was promoted by the Church, whereas the creators of these myths and poems were the Pagan Vikings preceding it. But in the first poem of the Poetic Edda – the one poem certainly spoken by a woman, a witch-pyre

takes place. Its Pagan origin only becomes obvious when one realizes that it is the witch who comes out victorious.

They burned her in the Hall of the High One, in the hall of Odin, and they stabbed and hoist her on their spears. Three times they did that, and three times she reappeared, as powerful as ever. No matter how often they tried to kill her, the stanza declares, she is still alive!

After this remarkable feat of surviving stabbing and burning three times, the witch proceeded as a professional practitioner. She traveled throughout the lands, visiting the settlements of various people, and was called Heidr – a name that can be translated as the Bright One, or the One From the Heaths (as in the word *heathen* – pagan – someone who practices her religion outside in the wilderness. Faced with the new Faith, the Scandinavian Pagans named their own religion *heidindomr*, “the practice of the heaths”, referring to their outdoor ritual activity as opposed to the Christians). Acting on the needs of others, the heathen witch performed her magic, looked deeply into destinies, and was always much adored by unconventional women.

But who was she, why was her story recounted – and more significantly: Why was it often *not* recounted?

And what significance does her story have anyway?

The Vision of the Witch

Her name during her trials was Gullveig, which can be directly translated as either Golden Drink or Golden Strength, the word *veigr* referring both to an alcoholic strong brew, as well as to power and strength. As we shall see, scholars have invented other translations based on their interpretations of this woman, but I will stick to the actual meaning of her name.

The account of the trials of Gullveig is to be found in the poem *Voluspá* – “The Prophecy of the Witch”. This poem is the first to be presented in the Poetic Edda and is a tale of the world’s history from beginning to end – a

treasure of Norse pagan cosmology. Snorri actively used this poem to describe the pagan cosmos, yet failed to mention the event of Gullveigs trials on the fire even though these are crucial, explaining the original reason for the first war in the world. There is no way Snorri did not know about the myth – he must have consciously omitted it – just as he omitted any mention of Odin’s initiation trials on the World Tree.

“The Prophecy of the Witch” is laid in the mouth of a witch, what the Norse called a *völva*, a “carrier of the sacred wand”, a well-respected female, who, once initiated into her arts, would operate as a traveling, professional diviner and magician. These women were important members of Old Norse society, but also liminal and much feared people, set outside of the normal hierarchy of class and gender.

The witch, the *völva*, who speaks the prophecy that is to shape the framework of the Poetic Edda, the story of the beginning and of the end, is not any human *völva* either – this is *The Old Witch*, an immensely ancient creature who can remember nine *worlds* before the present Universe. The old woman remembers giants who existed before the beginning of time itself, giants who fostered her then.

She knew nine worlds, conceived of as nine *ividjur* – troll-women, giantesses or witches – who personify each universe before this present one that we are experiencing. These nine giantess worlds existed before the present World Tree sprouted from the ground. In fact they gave birth to it in unison, a world, the world as we know it, conceived of as a giant or as a tree. He is *Heimdallr*, the “Splendid World”, he is *Ymir*, primeval Sound, born of nine previous giantesses, coming into existence from the melting ice of the world of the dead.

The ancient *völva* who tells the tale appears to stand outside of Time, older than everyone, observing everything and carrying the memory of all these previous worlds and even the memory of the future.

In the divinatory poem, the *völva* counts up all the major cosmic events – the Creation of the universe, the Golden Age of the gods, the oncoming of fate, the creation of mankind, the first war in the world, the

appearance of the valkyries – warlike fate-spinners, the build up to the *Ragnarök* – the End of the World, and finally the vision of a new and better world to come after the final battle with the forces of chaos.

In the *Völuspá*, every important cosmic event is given only one or more stanzas, which leave little room for details – only the absolutely necessary allusions are being made. The audience to whom the poem was directed already knew and understood the metaphors and the allusions because they knew the narratives behind.

Thus we are dealing with a poem that in a short time is supposed to allude to all the most important events in history in as short a time as possible. Among these major events, most of them duly recounted and filled out by Snorri, are *two entire stanzas* dealing with the coming of the witch, of the *völva* Gullveig, into the halls of the gods. Only this in itself points to her significance, and the significance of her trials.

Her arrival into the cosmic scene sets the beginning of a war between gods that was crucial to the rest of cosmic history. Yet the event was completely ignored by Snorri Sturluson, who wrote a book on Old Norse poetry and mythology during the early 13th century. Neither has the event been given much importance by later scholars. In my opinion, the story of Gullveig should be counted among the most crucial mythical events because it sets the beginning not only of the first war, but of the entire mystery of initiation, a theme running through the Poetic Edda like its very soul, and offers many clues to our understanding of what the many Norse initiation myths are really about.

The Myth of the Witch

Let us look at the poem again:

21. She remembers the first war in the world

when Gullveig was hoist on the spears

and in the High Ones hall they burned her

three times they burned the three times born

often, not seldom, yet she still lives

A witch called Gullveig is connected to the first war in the world. She is stabbed with spears and burned three times inside of Odins (The High One) hall, yet she survives. She proceeds with a new name, Heidr, who travels around as a prophetic or clairvoyant *völva*, performing the mighty divinatory magic of *seidr*, and is much loved by “wicked” (*illrar*) women.

The story continues with Odin casting a spear towards the tribe of the Vanir, thus instigating the first war in the world. The Vanir were a mysterious, powerful people who knew the art of *seidr*, divinatory magic, that the Aesir (the divine tribe of Odin) at this time did not know.

The Vanir, victorious, break down the walls surrounding the fortress of the Aesir, and their victory is only halted when they accept a truce. The two tribes exchange hostages and the Aesir are given three powerful Vanir gods: Njordr, Freyr, and Freya. From Snorri we learn that Freya proceeds to teach Odin the witch’s art of *seidr*, and thus it becomes quite clear that it is the Great Goddess Freya herself who was really behind the figure of Gullveig and Heidr.

The peace agreement also involves the making of Wisdom incarnated: The gods of both Odin’s and Freya’s tribes spit into a kettle and thus produce the figure Kvasir, a being who walks through the worlds teaching everybody about poetry and divine knowledge. The story of Kvasir is also crucial to the Norse mythic quest for divine wisdom.

Thus the actions of the *völva*, interesting enough in themselves, set the course of events that were to follow:

- The arrival of the Vanir gods into the stronghold of the Aesir
- The arrival of the valkyries

- The learning of *seidr* that made Odin so powerful as a victorious god –
- The important quest for wisdom and poetry taking the form of dangerous initiations that become the major themes throughout the rest of the Poetic Edda.

No wonder her trials, the burnings of the goddess-witch, take up some space in the account of great cosmic events – a wonder, though, that they are mostly ignored or sadly misspelled by scholars.

Innovative scholarly views on the burning

As to Gullveig`s trials, scholars have been immensely puzzled in trying to explain them and surprisingly imaginative in trying to bend the text into their imagination. The Swedish scholar Britt-Mari Näsström sums up the most common interpretation of the myth: Gullveig-Freya infiltrates the fortress of the Aesir with her witchcraft, “demoralizing” the women. While she is on with her business, the Vanir break down the fortress, as a revenge for the violent treatment of their kinswoman. The name Gullveig, she claims, means “Thirst for Gold”, which shows her greediness for riches, whereas Heidr simply is a common name for a *völva*.[\[i\]](#)

Another scholar, Margaret Clunies-Ross, who also identifies Gullveig as Freya, explains the “violent treatment” of Gullveig: The Norse cosmos, according to Clunies-Ross, is separated into polarities where the polarity male-female is one of them. The Aesir are basically masculine and represent the orderly and rational world. Gullveig, being female and a master of witchcraft means that she represents a threat to the male Aesir. According to Clunies-Ross, she offers herself to the Aesir, but they will have none of it. That they penetrate her with spears is a symbolic intercourse that leads to death rather than fertility, which is what Gullveig and the Vanir wish for. The “bad treatment” of Gullveig leads to the Vanir starting the war.[\[ii\]](#)

The problem with such interpretations is that they go far beyond what is actually said in the texts. Not only do they imagine happenings that are not written anywhere, they also mix up the course of events.

Both interpretations assume that the Vanir started the war because the Aesir treated their kinswoman so violently. Yet the texts clearly state that Odin and the Aesir started the war.

Both interpretations are assuming that the name “Gullveig” must indicate greediness, whereas the name “Heidr” is dismissed as a common name for a witch. The interpretation of Clunies-Ross that Gullveig offers herself to the Aesir for sex is taken from no other source than the scholars imagination.

Now, the name Gullveig does not actually means “Greed (or thirst) for Gold”. It means, literally, “Golden Drink”. The word *veig* refers to an alcoholic drink like mead or beer, as well as to “power and strength”. The meaning “Thirst for Gold” is based on an interpretation made by Turville-Petre in 1975 and various other scholars who have assumed that it refers to the drunkenness that gold creates, the vanity, corruption and craziness that this precious metal causes.^[iii] This interpretation is based *only* on the assumption that the *völva* Gullveig (and the goddess Freya with whom she is identified) is supposed to be a greedy and corrupt creature with a negative connotation – an assumption that as far as I have read has no basis whatsoever in the sources.

The literal translation, “Golden Drink”, however, makes sense just as it is –because Freya is indeed associated with the Mead of Wisdom, Memory and Poetry. Mead, now, is golden in color, and the mead offered to Odin, and later to the heroes of the Poetic Edda, is offered while in the world of the dead, offered by a *bright, golden* female during an initiation where the initiate is facing certain death – or the acquirement of divine wisdom.

As to the meaning of gold in Norse poetry, it is a marvel that scholars have assumed that gold is supposed to have a negative value. Gold as a metaphor in Old Norse poetry is not exactly associated with corruption,

greed nor drunkenness. Snorri gives a long explanation of the use of gold in poetic metaphors: The metal is obviously associated with divine brightness, illumination within darkness, great cosmic forces and hidden wisdom. In Old Norse poetry, gold has a positive connotation, not a negative one.

The second name, Heidr, means, literally, “Bright One”. Again, the name must be seen in connection to the wise maiden who so often offers the mead of wisdom in the Edda poems; she is always, without exception, described as bright, shining, white or golden.

Thus we may find nothing in Gullveig-Heidrs description that actually denotes greed or other negative values. Her names refer to a sacred drink served during initiation, to the brightness and goldenness of divine wisdom. Not a word is said about greediness in her actions, nor that they had anything to do with immorality, rape, sex nor with strategic infiltration.

Crazed and bad – is the myth really negative about the witch?

Heidrs “crazed” soul probably refers to the ecstatic state in which she performs *seidr*. The reference to her “crazed soul” is very bad translation of the word *hugleikinn*, which was a positive word in Old Norse and which probably really refers to her state of trance. To have a “crazed” soul was considered a sacred state, a state sought by Odin, the berserk warriors and anyone seeking poetic or divine inspiration. A better translation of “*húgleikin*” would be “playful/passionate intent/soul”.

The only negative word in this stanza, seen from a Pagan point of view, is the word “wicked”. The Norse word is *illrar*, which means bad, or wicked, and is the origin of the English word “ill”, “sick”. I have always suspected the original meaning to be “sick women”, because there are several Norse references to how the goddesses and witches may help sick women. But the word *illr* apparently have only “bad”, not “sickly”

connotations. Of course, “bad” can be just another word for unconventional.

One must remember that even the Poetic Edda was written down by 12th century scholars, meaning monks. I have no problem imagining Icelandic monks being formerly well-versed in Pagan lore, and that they had a deep understanding and sympathy for the poems they took care to write down. Most of the stories could easily be disguised as funny and interesting entertainment about ancestors formerly believed to be gods. Yet performing witchcraft must have been seen as “bad” no matter how sympathetic they were otherwise.

Even Snorri, who was no monk and who was obviously generously disposed and even proud of his Pagan heritage of poetry, did not mention the trials of Gullveig/Heidr *at all*. This story, as with the story of Odin on the tree, were powerful stories, utterly pagan, reeking with forbidden, dangerous information about the true depth of a non-Christian past. These stories contain the mysteries of sacrifice and initiations into truly pagan world-views.

My guess is that the rather newly Christianized Icelanders had trouble rendering the stories that in no way could be disguised as anything but a competition to the Christian faith. These stories are telling a Pagan version of Salvation. That was just too much for a medieval Christian to swallow.

Maybe one monk, horrified at the poem he was just about to put to paper, could not help but add a little “wicked”, just like in another poem where the encounter with Death herself is rendered an encounter with a “dead Christian woman”.

That the women who loved her were *illrar* “bad”, is the only line in which a negative description is given – based, perhaps, on the medieval writers or poets view of women who would learn the art of *seidr*. Obviously, the practice of divinatory witchcraft was the art of unconventional women, women who were unmarried, not ruled over by a father, husband or brother, women who would roam the country freely, traveling from place

to place as she chose. The sources tell of women who were considered beyond the normal structures of class and gender, both feared and respected, and who performed an important role as the leaders of cultic rituals wherever they came, or were invited.

A Story of Initiation: The Goddess as First Initiate

In the poem, Gullveig is being burned and stabbed by “them” or “they”. We do not know who “they” are, only that it all happens inside of Odins hall – presumably in Odins presence. Nothing is actually said of aggression or violent treatment on behalf of the Aesir, we may only read through the line that Odin is present and observes the major feat of death-defying that Gullveig performs.

Having been stabbed and burned three times, Gullveig still stands out, alive and shining. With her new name Heidr, she proceeds, now, as a clairvoyant “staff-initiated” woman, operating in society and performing her acceptable, yet liminal functions as a *völva*. These functions were usually positive events in which destiny could be seen with clarity and even changed for the better. Women would be particularly important in the rituals of *seidr*, which was essentially a women’s business, explaining in part why the “bad” (magically inclined) women loved her so much.

What is really being told is a tale of initiation – the first and major initiation in cosmos – the initiation that led to the conquering of death itself.

Pagan initiation, whether they be tribal, mystical or shamanistic, always involved a trial of death, more or less symbolic. The initiation had to do with rebirth as a new and powerful being, and in order to be reborn, one would have to die. Trials could be symbolic reenactments where role-play and imagination itself would bring about the experience of “death” – or they could be real, hardcore trials that actually could have a final outcome.

The experience of death would set the initiate into a different state of mind in which he or she would then learn whatever wisdom was supposed to be conveyed while in the state of not-dead, not-alive. The reinstatement to society was accompanied with a new status and often a new name – religious professionals would come out of the initiation trial as full-fledged shamans, priests or other “officials”, performing his or her duties in society.

Now Gullveig certainly faces challenges fit for a possibly deadly initiation. She comes out of the trials alive, wearing a new name denoting her new brightness, ready to roam the country-side as an initiated religious professional, a *völva*. The “aggression” and “bad treatment” of Gullveig comes into another light: We do not have to look for aggressors or rapists at all: the “they” who stabbed and burned the witch are the same kind of “they” who stab and hang Odin during his trial of initiation in the following poem, the *Hávamál*.

The *völva* Gullveig-Heidr, a disguise for the Great Goddess Freya,, has performed a grand feat: She has conquered death through *seidr*.

Seidr is, after all, the ability to shape ones fate, and the ultimate fate is death. At the beginning of time, just after humankind has been created and fate has been written into the World Tree by the three norns, the Great Goddess in her hypostasis as a *völva* instigates the first trial of initiation known in the Poetic Edda.

Like the Greek goddess Demeter, after having conquered death by bringing her daughter back to life from the World of the Dead, instigated the first Mysteries of initiation in Eleusis, Norse goddess Freya instigated the mysteries of an initiation that had to do with immortality, making of herself the primeval initiate and the ultimate master of initiation.

The initiation of the Goddess: Setting up a pattern

What the stanzas of Gullveig/Heidr/Freya is really about is, no doubt, initiation. The stanzas follow the known ritual pattern of initiation worldwide, in each and every point. The woman called Golden Drink, denoting divine consecration, suffers trials such as the stabbing from spears and the burning from fire. This is a ritual death which is described to us, similar to a later description of Odin being hanged and stabbed in order to become “wise”. Like a successful initiate, she survives her trials and is now a full-fledged professional practitioner: A *völva*, a well-known and much honored title for a woman who can and may perform *seidr*.

She is even given a new name after her trials, just as is common in such rituals: She is now called Heidr, the Bright One, perhaps indicating her enlightened state. The name may also mean “Heath”, the heath being the symbol of pagan ritual of *seidr* itself, since it was performed outdoors in the wilderness. Like any proper *völva*, she starts her career of traveling to the settlements of people in order to offer her services and to teach and heal. Since *seidr* was a women’s art, she is obviously much sought by the women.

This is the true meaning of the story of the tortured woman in the Halls of the High One. It is a story of female initiation, a rare tale in a book that mainly speaks of the masculine mysteries. But it is told, because the story is crucial. Because this is the story of the beginning, what originally happened in the divine sphere, explaining why things later have happened here on Earth.

The goddess herself has entered the hall of the male Aesir and shown them her power: The power of conquering death. In the Norse pantheon, the male gods are *not immortal*. Rather, they depend on the bestowal of youth-renewing apples from the goddess Idunn – whose name means “Returning One”, and is, of course, another facet of Freya, the great Lady of Resurrections.

This major cosmic event – the first demonstration of how to conquer death - happened when Odin could see it. He is not horrified by her behavior. The “they” who torture her are not his servants aiming to

punish her for witchcraft. They are the same kind of “they” who will later initiate him through his own deadly trials.

He wishes *to learn from her*. He wants to learn the secret of immortality. His search, his trials and his battle with and yearning for the goddess of resurrection – is what the whole Poetic Edda is about.

Who were the Vanir?

Freya in the shape of a witch lets herself be publicly initiated through a trial of burning and stabbing, showing to the Aesir that it is possible to defy death itself through the power of *seidr*. This happens in the Hall of the High One, that is, in Odin’s Valhalla, to where the goddess will later lead her chosen initiates. It also happens before or during the war between the Aesir and the Vanir.

The showing is an invitation, and Odin reacts in the only way he knows – by waging war against her people, the Vanir. He “throws a spear” against the Vanir – a poetic metaphor for instigating war. It is the first war in the world.

No one knows who the Vanir really were. Somehow they do not fit into the ordered image Snorri presented. There were supposed to be three worlds – that of the Aesir gods of Ásgardr, the humans of Midgardr, and the trolls, giants, ogres, and thurses of Jotunheimr.

Obviously, this worldview is oversimplified. Some poems relate twelve different worlds in heaven. Nine of them are ruled by Death, the three upper ones ruled by the immortal light elves. Snorri solves the problem by speaking of several heavens, of which Ásgardr is only one. Still, the Vanir stand out. Some scholars say they were gods of the earth and of fertility, others believe that they were perhaps the pantheon of a different tribe and that the “truce” between two tribes of gods reflects a real truce and a blend of two different religious traditions. This is certainly possible, and it is always very exciting to imagine a time, millenniums past, when the patriarchal Indo-European Aesir (Snorri claimed that

they were “Asians”) met the matrilineal Old European Vanir, and how their two cultures eventually blended into one another.

I do believe, however, that if we lose ourselves in historical speculation (some would say, pseudo-historical), we are missing out on some very important points: Namely that the mythology surfacing thousands of years later in the Eddas actually have a message in their own right, and could be read independent of any historical view we might have of their origins. My point is that the myths do not concern themselves with revealing a piece of linear history – they are trying to reveal a mystery transcending all that – a mystery of the real meaning behind life, death and fate itself.

The Aesir – gods of the spirit, mind and passion

This is why we ought to look at the poems themselves and what kind of different roles the Aesir and the Vanir have there. The original Aesir all have names and functions that are, well, “spiritual” in a sense. Or rather, connected to the world of the mind, and of reason. Odin’s name denotes poetry, ecstasy and spirit/breath. He is the giver of breath and spirit to humankind. His brothers are called Vili – “Will”/”Intent”, and Vé – “Awe. The three are born together as a trinity, aspects of each other. Among the other gods is Bragi, who is god of poetry, and thus obviously yet an aspect of Odin, poetry, himself. Another aspect of Odin is Tyr, god of warfare and strategy.

In fact, the Aesir seems to be pure aspects of Odin, the Spirit, representing the world of the mind: Poetry, ecstasy, will, intent, awe, thought, artistic creativity, strategy and warfare.

The trinities also reflect each other: Odin, Vili and Vé constitute the trinity of Spirit, Will and Awe. Odin, Bragi and Tyr constitute the trinity of Spirit, artistic passion and strategic thinking.

There is a third trinity, constituted by the trio of Odin, Loki and Thor.

Loki is a complex character, difficult to pin down, but all in all, his name might be derived from Logi, the fire, and he is indeed a fiery figure, ruled by his passions, and creative to the bone. He is the son of Earth, called Leaf Island, and a father who is described as something that stings and travels. He blends his blood with Odin, and the two were once as close as two lovers.

Thor is also the son of Earth, called Life Friend, and Odin himself is the father. Thor represents the thinking mind, the orderly border between different realities, protecting the Earth and humankind against the chaos of the Outer World.

Odin keeps showing up as a trinity in other guises, too, and is, just like Freya, reputed to have numerous different names. The main theme of the trinity is that of Spirit, Passion and Thought as the threefold nature of the mind itself. Odin and the Aesir, I believe, represent this trinity. Passion and Thought (reason) are children of Earth, but ultimately related to that part of the mind which is always transcendent: the Spirit.

The Ásynjur – female Aesir

What about the female Aesir gods, one might ask. In fact, there were none, originally. The female deities who are wives of the Aesir either show up unexplained, or are said to have come from “abroad”. Even the mother of the Aesir, Besla, is a giantess.

However, the female Aesir become counterparts to their men. Bragi, the God of Poetry is married to the Goddess of eternal, returning youth. Thor, who rules the atmosphere of air and lightening that protect the Earth, as well as the thoughts which protect the known world, is married to the Goddess with the hair of Golden threads – whether that refers to the lightening, the sunrays or the straws of the Earth or something else.

Odin is married to Frigg, whose name means Beloved. Just as his name might mean Ecstasy (or Fury or Crazy), she has a second name, Hlín, which means Peaceful or Mild. Just as his name might mean The Poetry, she has a third name, Saga, which means The Story.

The female Aesir represent what their men are devoted to or complementing: Passion to Youth, Ecstasy to Calmness, Poetry to its Tale, Spirit to Love.

The Vanir – Gods of Movement, Energy, Vibration

Let us have a look at the Vanir deities. They certainly had females, even very prominent ones, but only Njordr's sister/wife and Freya are really mentioned. The male Vanir are concerned with the movement of the natural forces: Rain, wind, sunshine, waves. One Vanir god, Heimdallr, has a name that simply means the Great World. According to some scholars, he is the great, unifying figure mentioned in the Song of the She-Wolf, the giant who simply IS the universe, and to whom we are all related. He is a Vanir, and his power is one of listening and watching absolutely everything that happens. At the end of time, he will blow the great resounding horn of memory.

The female Vanir are concerned with hidden, esoteric arts such as magic, the knowledge of fate, and the mysteries of death.

The Twofold function: Searching and Being

It seems to me that the Aesir represent, in the myths, the condition of the human mind on is threefold search for knowledge. This thirst for knowledge is, indeed, what characterize Odin, Loki and Thor. They all travel widely. The three represent the three aspects of our condition, the spiritual, the passionate and creative, and the rational mind, thought or reason.

In our world of putting rationality most high, it is interesting to note that the Norse poems seem to have great respect for both Spirit and Passion, whereas they have endless fun on behalf of Reason (Thor), who is ridiculed time and time again. They all work in different ways, and the latter is having the hardest time of all. They are all, however, ultimately dependent on each other.

The Vanir, on the other hand, represent something quite different. They seem, first and foremost, to represent movement, existence itself, perhaps, indeed, they simply represent the world and its forces. The world is, however, not just a thing, it is a living creature, a part of everyone, the source of everything. It listens intently to everything, but it also IS the sound of everything.

There is no clear divisions between the Vanir, in this sense, and the giants, who are also concerned with primeval energies of the universe, particularly with winds and waves – the energies of movement. The Vanir only differ from the giants in that they seem to have a taste for civilized law and order, for keeping things together, thus being on the side of the Aesir.

Transcending the Borders: the Feminine Soul

There are numerous feminine beings, giantesses, norns, valkyries, goddesses – but they all come together under the collective of the *dísir* – they were even worshipped as a collective! The *dísir* collective is unified in the figure of *the Dís*, generally believed to be Freya, the Lady.

The female beings transcend the borders between the different worlds. They show up in much the same range of roles in any world, whether it be the world of Aesir, Vanir or giants. They are always the instigators, the teachers, the guides and the consecrators. They are, in fact, the fates, holding the secret purpose of everything. The fates, as explained by Snorri, were not only a trio of women living by the roots of the World Tree: Every individual, whether male or female, actually has a personal fate that follows that individual throughout his or her life, intimately connected to the individual soul.

In fact, since there were several kinds of souls, the fate goddess of each individual could certainly be representing that kind which is eternal, the one that lives on from life to life. She spins the personal destiny of the individual according to how much “awake” she is. These individual,

female fate-souls are ultimately just aspects of the original Fate, the Lady.

As below, so above, and the Aesir and Vanir males also have their fate-goddess – their so-called wives. They may have roles as the counterparts of their husbands, showing ideal balance, but even Frigg the beloved is an instigator of fate. Even the Mild One is a counselor and guide, even the History plays her role actively in the subterranean waters of her realm.

Whereas the male forces may represent the mind, as is the case of the Aesir, or the cultivated, controlled nature, as in the case of the Vanir, the female forces represent something else, something hidden and mysterious, yet to be unveiled – the secret of destinies – both that of the world and that of the individual.

What we must realize when reading Norse mythology is that gender really matters – on some level a female character always represents the eternal fate-soul of a god or individual, whereas a male character always represents the trinity of the mortal mind, the personal spirit and the material body.

Before you react to these gender classifications, stop to think: This has nothing to do, really, with men and women in real life. Old Norse poetry is purely metaphoric: The Eddas concern themselves with telling the tale of individual learning, and gender is used, like any other attribute, to symbolize something in order to bring about the message. The male and female forces of the Old Norse cosmos do not represent men versus women: They represent the different, gendered aspects within a whole human being regardless of sex or gender. We are all Odin, we are all Thor, Loki **and** Freya in all her shapes – all at the same time.

The War and the Truce

The war between the male Aesir and the male Vanir is solved with a truce. The Vanir, helped by their women's magic, were just about to tear

down the stronghold of the Aesir when the mind-camp happened to come up with a great idea: Let's be friends and exchange services!

The Aesir offered a very knowledgeable man and an empty-headed, yet charismatic king to the Vanir. The empty-headed king wasn't always so mindless: In fact, his name was Hænir, and he was the one who once gave the gift of reason to humankind. The Vanir offered the mighty trio of Njordr, Freyr and Freya.

We do not get an explanation for the war. We only know it was intimately connected to the burning of Gullveig/Freya earlier, and that Odin started the war after having observed her trials. The outcome is that Freya comes to Asgardr, and according to Snorri, she certainly taught the art of *seidr* to Odin. My guess is that this end, in fact, was the purpose of the war.

Divine Wisdom flows into the World

The union of the two tribes was sealed by the creation of Kvasir, a being that consisted of the divine essence of both Vanir and Aesir. He was made as one makes a drink – the sacred drink being an important symbol of divine wisdom and consecration. He was sent out into the world, consisting of pure knowledge and wisdom, and anyone who wanted to know anything, could just ask him.

The union between the tribes, in fact the union of Odin and Freya, of the male personal spirit and the female eternal fate-soul, meant that the essence of wisdom came about. It is echoed in the marriage between Odin and Frigg, between Spirit and Love: They had a child, Balder from *Breidablik*, whose name means Courage of **Wide Vision**. He was married to Nanna *Neptrsdottir*, Daughter of the Ring, an image of wholeness. Divine wisdom was flowing freely in the world, available to anyone who sought it.

The Monopolizing of Wisdom and the Death of Balder.

According to some dwarfs, no one was intelligent enough to ask the wisdom out of Kvasir. The two dwarfs were called Fialar and Galar, names that make one think of Pagan priests because of their allusion to “singers of spell-songs” (*gala* means to sing a spell-song). They caught Kvasir and killed him, pouring his divine essence into three cauldrons which they hid from the rest of the world. The image of a priesthood monopolizing divine wisdom is strong in this myth. As the dwarfs die, the three cauldrons of wisdom are taken into the realm of the dead, unseen by gods and human beings. Wisdom is no longer wandering freely in the world, to be granted to anyone who wants it!

The story is echoed in the death of Balder. Just as Kvasir was killed because some people were jealous of wisdom, Balder of Wide Vision was killed by Hödr the Blind, “Blind Strife”, whose aim was guided by the madly jealous Loki. Just as Kvasir became three cauldrons hidden in the Underworld by a giantess, Balder and his wife dwell with their sacred rings in the Underworld, guarded by Hel, who also guards the cauldron beneath heavy shields.

The Sacred Drink of the Underworld

The stories of how Kvasir and Balder died echo each other. Both relate how Divine Wisdom became monopolized and hidden away from the world. No longer was the Courage that Wide Vision married to Wholeness present in the world – Blind Strife, guided by Jealousy, had been victorious. No longer was Divine Wisdom flowing freely into the world, ready for the taking if one only asked. This is the great tragedy and drama of Old Norse mythology, for from this point on, gods and humans alike must struggle for their lives in order to remember the ancient revelations that the union between spirit and love, the individual and the eternal, brought about.

The quest for this wisdom, this knowledge, has now to be sought in the Underworld, symbolized as a sacred drink covered with shields in the realm of Hel, guarded by the dark ogress, the destructive death aspect of eternal fate. It is this quest that is the major theme of Old Norse mythology as it is presented in the Poetic Edda. In the chapter “Hanging the Sorcerer – the Initiation of Odin”, you can read more about this quest, instigated by the Hanged God, the Poet himself.

[i] Näsström, 1998, p. 68, 91, 128

[ii] Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 204

[iii] Turville-Petre, 1975, p. 159, Rudolf Simek, 1996, p. 122, Müllenhof, Krause, Nordal in Clunies-Ross, 1994, p. 204