

The Fate of the Norse: A Study into the Concept of Fate in the *Völuspá*

Within the stanzas of the *Völuspá*, the most prevalent theme is that of fate. In fact, the seeress of the *Völuspá* very thoroughly tells of the past, the present, and the future fates of the world. However, if one were to look to other sources of that period for a better understanding of fate in Norse society, one would find it very difficult to nail down an exact concept. It is not that the medieval Norse were an inherently confused people, but rather that they simply believed a great many things about fate and never went through a process of unifying these various concepts. In the context of the *Völuspá*, however, there is a definable unity in the concept of fate, although its application varies among three different races of beings. The Norns tell and give fate to the gods and to humans, and their own fate is undefined. The gods, though fated by the Norns, set the fate of mankind. Thus mankind is the receiver of fate and creates fate for no one.

Before diving into this fatalistic hierarchy, one must understand the basic elements of what is meant when using the word “fate” in the *Völuspá*. There are two Old Norse words for fate, both of which correspond to the Anglo-Saxon word *wyrd*. The first word, which is most used in the *Völuspá*, is *örlög*, and the second is *urðr*. *Örlög* technically means “the primal law, fate, weird, doom,” and it is also used in the negative *örlög-lauss* which means “fate-less” (*örlög*). The reference to the other word, *urðr*, is solely in the name of the oldest of the Norns (Grimm 409). According to Cleasby, *urðr* means “a weird, fate” (*urðr*). These two words are two very significant pieces of information for unlocking the nature of the concept of fate in the *Völuspá*.

The word *örlög* can be further divided into two parts, *ör-* and *-lög* and the definition

of each solidifies the correct view of what the whole word means. According to Paul Bauschatz *ör-* “signifies something that is beyond or above the ordinary” and *lög* means “law” in Old Norse (7). This means that fate was as strong and binding as law in Old Norse society, and that it was from higher beings.

The word *urðr* is not so easily tacked down as is *örlög*. On the one hand *urðr* is simply “fate,” but it is used as the personal name of one of the Norns, or Fates (*örlög*). *Urðr* refers to the oldest of the Norns, who is the giantess with knowledge of the past (Grimm 405). Otherwise, the word *urðr* is a cognate of the Anglo-Saxon word *wyrð* (*urðr*). According to the *Beowulf* poet “Gæð a wyrð swa hio scel,” which means “Things always go as they must” (Fulk 116-17). This example in *Beowulf* and the actual meaning of the cognates *wyrð* and *urðr* lead to the conclusion that fate is inescapable to the people of Norse society.

Though the purpose of this paper is to show primarily the role of fate in the *Völuspá*, one should note that the different implications of various words is very important, and that outside sources can certainly help one to understand the role of fate in the *Völuspá*.

According to E. O. G. Turville-Petre, the three giantess women of the *Völuspá* are called *Urðr*, *Verðandi*, and *Skuld* (280). Each giantess has a unique purpose, which is inherent in the meanings of their names. Their names are laid out specifically in the *Völuspá*: “*Urð hétu eina, aðra Verðandi, / -skáru á skiði- Skuld ina þriðju[.]*” W.H. Auden translates this to “[t]he Fate Maidens, first Urth, / Skuld second, scorers of runes, / Then Verdandi, third of the Norns:” (17). *Urth*, in this case, is the Norn who sees into the past, *Skuld* is the Norn who sees the things that “must be,” and *Verdandi* is the Norn who sees what is happening currently. In order to avoid the confusion of the different linguistic approaches to these words, the above translation of the names of the Norns will be used for

this paper.¹

Snorri Sturluson writes, in the Younger Edda, that the Norns mentioned above are the same Norns who visit those that are born and “shape their lives” (18). This understanding of the Norns does not conflict with the image of the Norns that one finds in the Elder Edda and more specifically in the *Völuspá*; therefore, one may conclude that the Norns “shape” the fate of every man at his birth. Snorri goes on to say that they “shape men’s lives,” which is similar in nature, but the context implies that men’s lives are shaped not only at their birth, but also throughout their lives (18). Grimm cites one of the sagas called *Nornagestssaga* to show that men receive fate at their birth, and in the same thought he says that there are more than just the three Norns of old (408-10). He says, as does Snorri, that there are bad norns and good norns that roam the lands, knocking on doors and pronouncing fate upon the newborn children, and they often times appear as witches or women of the wild (Grimm 408-9). In the *Völuspá*, however, there are only three Norns mentioned. Their names are found in stanza twenty, and the line directly following is, “they laws did make, they lives did choose” (Hollander 4). This translation by Hollander is significant for proving that, at least within the sixty-five stanzas of the *Völuspá*, the concept of fate is solid and unchangeable. This also shows that although their names have etymological roots that suggest that each controls a certain element of fate (past, present, and future) it implies that they all control the future fates of men together.

Of the three, *Urðr* is the oldest and most authoritative. As discussed above, her name is “Fate” in a general sense. However, Grimm’s conclusions that her name inherently identifies with the past strongly implies that the past is an essential element to fate,

¹Grimm uses the elements that modify the names of the Norns to differentiate between the functions of each Norn.

possibly moreso than the present and future. To further understand the character of *Urðr*, Bauschatz notes that the well from which she and her counterparts make their judgements on men and gods is called *Urðrbrunnr* which he translates as “the well of *Urðr*,” again showing the importance of *Urðr* (16). Then, Grimm calls her a “cruel and warlike” being (406). In addition to that, she and her sisters come from a mythical realm called *Jotunheim* and were daughters of etins or giants, which would lend to the war-like nature of *Urðr* since *etins* were often painted as large, war-prone creatures (Snorri 16, Hollander 3).

Grimm theorizes that there was a time in pagan belief when *Urðr* was the only Norn that presided over the well of fate. He partially bases his claim on the fact that the well is named after *Urðr*, but also provides philological and etymological evidences that concern the origins of her name as well (Grimm 407-8). One should remember that the meaning of her name implies that her knowledge is concerned with the past. In addition, Grimm’s claim that she is the only, or at least primary, Norn in the context of the story told in the *Völuspá* corresponds with a view of history and time that is cyclical. The *Völuspá* poet begins his poem with the prophetess telling of the past, which is significant since one may know the future only by knowledge of the past. Indeed, the very semantic meaning associated with the word wisdom in Old Norse society is knowledge of the past, according to Paul Bauschatz (16-17). So, logic may then make the connection that the past and the future are inherently connected in the Old Norse language and society. That is why the end of the poem deals with the rebirth of the world and the coming of *Baldr* from the dead, both of which usher society into a new era. Fate becomes cyclical because the future is as solid a reality as the past, and there will always be the *Ragnarök* to end the era.

With this picture of the Norns in mind, consider that they distribute fate to

gods and men in the *Völuspá*. In addition, neither the gods nor men seem to have power over their own fate. They merely accept it as an unchangeable truth. Even Grimm, whose thoroughness is remarkable, does not find any source texts that would question the authority of the Norns in the matter of fate. As for the fate of the Norns themselves, the poet never addresses this, which could imply that they live outside the confines of such a paradigm, or that they choose their own fate, unlike any other beings. Either way, the Norns seem to be a step higher even than the gods.

The relationship between the Norns and the gods begins in stanza eight. The appearance of the Norns ends what seems to be a golden era in Norse society. From this climax, society among the gods and men begins to falter and tend toward chaos. The Norns, who one must recall are daughters of giants, from their very first meeting are not friendly with the gods, and it seems that at this point the “curse” or “doom” of the gods is set (Hollander 3). What may also be implied by this appearance of the Norns is the judgement, called the *Ragnarök*, which dooms the gods in the ultimate destruction of the world by the fire of *Surtr* and his sons (Hollander 11).

Ragnarök is the last war, but even the first war seems connected to the fates and their antagonistic relationship with the gods. The first war broke out after the Aesir tried three times to burn a witch in Óðinn’s hall. So it says, “I ween the first war in the world was this,/ when the gods Gullveig gashed with their spears,/ and in the hall of Hár burned her--/three times burned they the thrice reborn,/ ever and anon: even now she liveth” (Hollander 4). One must now ask who Gullveig is. Evidence is given in the very next stanza that she is a witch because the text calls her a *Heiði* which is a name often given to witches (Hollander 4). In this same line and the line following the *Völuspá* poet says that this *Heiði*

would visit houses and was known as a “wise seeress” (Hollander 4). Since the poet mentions that she is a “wise seeress” it also means that she is a skilled fortune-teller, and thus an ally of the Norn. In addition, the text mentions that she was welcomed by the “wicked women.” Witches took on the nature of those that they followed, and every indication of the text shows that this witch and those that “welcomed” her were terribly wicked, a conclusion that could also be implied by the fact that the Norns, whom these witches served, were giants, traditional enemies of the gods. Since the gods could not kill this witch, one must assume that either she was more powerful than the gods or that the Norns were watching over her since she was their mouthpiece. Nevertheless, this caused war to break out between the Aesir and Vanir.

Ragnarök is of special importance since it is the ultimate end of the Norse mythos and the main subject of the *Völuspá*. The word *Ragnarök* can be split into the two words, *ragna* and *rök*. *Ragna-* is from the noun *regin* which means “gods” and *-rök* means “judgement.” When these two pieces of a whole are joined, they take the meaning “fate/doom of the gods” (*Ragnarök*). This single word defines the fate of the gods in a general sense because *Ragnarök* is always looming in the background of their choices. But John Stanley Martin notes that “the destruction of the world of gods and men by external forces and the subsequent renewal of all things” are two subcategories of *Ragnarök* (Martin 5). Martin also believes that the *Völuspá* poet sees the world as a cycle in which good will always triumph. One might think that this seems like a reasonable conclusion since Baldr the Good comes back after *Ragnarök* is completed (Hollander 12). However, the reappearance of *Nithogg* in the final stanza seems to leave room for doubt in the mind of the reader. In fact, one should not assume that since *Baldr* is reborn at the end of the poem that the poet intends for his reader to have hope that good was triumphant. It is quite to the

contrary since chaos has indeed won and good only begins the cycle anew.

Thus far, one is justified in believing that the gods are completely helpless and at the mercy of Fate. Nevertheless, the gods do have some power over fate, just not their own. Like the Norns, the gods sit in judgement seats, or *rök stóllar* (*rök*). Some also translate this as “thrones of fate,” which would actually be more fitting since the Norns and gods deal out fate as kings would deal out their commands. The most prominent example of the gods giving fate in the *Voluspá* is in stanzas seventeen and eighteen when the three gods give life and soul to the logs on the seashore (Hollander 3). It seems that directly after the two logs gained the gifts of the gods they also gained fate, as it says,

[17] To the coast then came, kind and mighty,
 from the gathered gods three great Æsir;
 on the land they found, of little strength,
 Ask and Embla, unfated yet.

[18] Sense they possessed not, soul they had not,
 being nor bearing, nor blooming hue;
 soul gave Othin, sense gave Hænir,
 being, Lóthur, and blooming hue (Hollander 3).

Edgar Polomé explains that it is “from Othin, man receives *qnd*, in which everyone agrees is the ‘breath of life’... Such a gift is quite in keeping with the very nature of Othin as the sovereign god meting out *life-giving* power.” He goes on to say that “[t]he same meaning, ‘inspired cerebral activity,’ should also be ascribed to ON *óðr*, which is usually translated ‘mind,’ ‘reason (understanding,’ or ‘sense’ in the context of the *Voluspá* stanza...” (269). Polomé also notes that Hænir is “rather the instrument of godly inspiration, the one who utters the message conveyed by outside wisdom” (272). Then he says that Lóthur gives *lá* which is “vital warmth,” *læti* which is “voice,” and *lito góða* which is “good color” (282). He

then presents an argument that *Lóthur* is normally known for neither warmth nor speech nor wisdom, but rather with water and silence, which are not in accordance with the gifts that he gives to man. Polomé discusses the most important etymological roots, but what he does not mention is that the *Voluspá* poet may have attributed these things to *Lóthur* simply, as poets often do, to complete the alliteration of the verse. No matter who these gifts come from, or why, the poet implies that without the above stated gifts mankind of the Norse mythos would not have gained fate. Thus, one could conclude from this passage that gods can give fate to humans.

There is another example of a more direct bestowal of fate upon mankind and it is found in one of the sagas called *Gautrekssaga*. Concerning this excerpt of the saga, Grimm explains that the gods directly “shape” the fate of mankind. So it says, “Then spake Thorr, who was wroth with the mother of the lad: I shape for him, that he have neither son nor daughter, but be the last of his race. Odinn said: I shape him, that he live three men’s lifetimes” (858-59). Grimm goes on to say that “Thorr plays here exactly the part of the ungracious fay, he tries to lessen each gift by a noxious ingredient. And it is not for an infant, but a well-grown boy, and in his presence, that the destiny is shaped” (859). Grimm draws attention here to the fact that the gods directly influence the fate of mankind. This is not to say that every source concerning fate in the Norse mythos would agree, but it is certainly something that appears to be fairly universal, thus applicable to the *Völuspá*.

Fate is always tending towards the chaotic end. The character of the god *Baldr* is key to understanding this cyclical nature of fate in the *Völuspá* because he is that which signifies all that is good in the world. In Old High German *Baldr*’s name is *Paltar*; in the Anglo Saxon it is *bealdor* or *baldor*. Both the names in the OHG and AS signify “lord,” “prince,” or “king” (Grimm 220). Another translation by Grimm is the occasional appearance

of the word *Bæl-dæg* which means “white-god” or “light-god,” both of which give the image of a pure and blameless god. Therefore it is inherent that *Baldr* is a pure god and the embodiment of goodness in *Midgard*. So when he is slain by *Hoth*, the blind god, with a mistletoe, the *Ragnarök* can no longer be held back (Hollander 117). It was *Loki* who guided the hand of the blind god to kill *Baldr*, and it was *Loki* who eventually turned himself into an old woman and refused to cry for *Baldr* in order to keep him in *Hel*’s realm since only the tears of all of the women present would bring *Baldr* back (Davidson 184). There is one other reference at which point the prophetess of the *Voluspá* says,

[45] Brother will fight brother and be his slayer,
 brother and sister will violate the bond of kinship;
 hard it is in the world, there is much adultery,
 axe-age, sword-age, shields are cleft asunder,
 wind-age, wolf-age, before the world plunges headlong;
 no man will spare another (Larrington 10).

This passage occurs directly after the death of *Baldr* at the hand of *Loki*, which can also be seen philosophically as the death of goodness in mankind, when evil seems to triumph over good. Since *Baldr* represents goodness in the world, it is this final act of *Loki*’s that is the cause of the *Ragnarök*. Combine that with the translation of the words *Paltar*, *bealdor*, and *baldor*, and according to Turville-Petre there is a reasonable assumption to be made that the death of *Baldr* signifies the death of the good lords or the death of the good ring-givers (117). If this is the case, then there would be reason for the claim of the prophetess in the *Voluspá* when she says, “no man will spare another,” because without a good lord or ring-giver, the world would be plunged into anarchy and chaos; however, after *Ragnarök*, *Baldr* will come back, as mentioned above, and goodness will be restored, but that in no way signifies that goodness will triumph over evil.

Although goodness will indeed be revived and restored, one must not forget that mankind's fate was, is, and will always be looming before him, and that must be why the poet included the following two stanzas at the end of the poem,

[64] Adown cometh to the doom of the world

the great godhead which governs all.

[65] Comes the darksome dragon flying,

Nithhogg, upward from the Nitha Fells;

he bears in his pinions as the plains he o'erflies,

naked corpses: now he will sink.

The implication that is so very important here is that although a new era in which the gods and men may "live in ease and bliss," there is still the "doom" or fate of the world that must be remembered (Hollander 12-13). One must remember and know the past events so that one may also determine the future events, such as *Ragnarök* that is always looming.

Ragnarök is so key to understanding the concept of fate because it is what drives the story of the *Voluspá*. The world begins with the bliss of gods and men, which comes from the goodness of *Baldr*, but will eventually end in the chaos which was fated to the gods by the Norns. Chaos will triumph in the end and the world will begin anew with the rebirth of *Baldr*, forever and anon. That is the message of the *Voluspá*. Also, the hierarchy which cannot be ignored is that the Norns give the fate of chaos to gods and men, the gods give fate to mankind, and mankind gives fate to no one. This is a hierarchy that is generally accepted throughout Norse literature and particularly in the *Voluspá*. All beings in this hierarchy perceive their own role in total acceptance. They may resent their fate, but in their minds it cannot be changed, and so the cycle of fate will continue towards chaos forever. "*Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel.*" "Things always go as they must."

Works Cited

- Bauschatz, Paul. *The Well and the Tree*. Amherst: U of Mass. Press, 1982. Print.
- Davidson, H.R. Ellis. *Gods and Myths of the Viking Age*. New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing, Inc., 1964. Print.
- Grimm, Jacob. *Teutonic Mythology*. Trans. James Steven Stallybrass. 4 vols. New York: Dover, 2004. Print.
- Lönnroth, Lars. "The Founding of Miðgarðr (Völuspá 1-8)." *The Poetic Edda: essays on Old Norse mythology*. Ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington. New York: Routledge, 2002. 1-26. Print.
- Martin, John Stanley. "Ragnarok: an investigation into old Norse concepts of the fate of the gods." *Melbourne Monographs in Germanic Studies*. Vol. 3. Netherlands: Royal VanGorcum, 1972. Print.
- "örlög." *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. The Germanic Lexicon Project, 2003. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.
- Polomé, Edgar C. "Some Comments on Völuspá, Stanzas 17-18." *Old Norse literature and mythology; a symposium*. Ed. Edgar C. Polomé. Austin: UT Printing Div., 1969. 265-90. Print.
- "Ragnarök." *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. The Germanic Lexicon Project, 2003. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.
- "rök." *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. The Germanic Lexicon Project, 2003. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.
- Sturluson, Snorri. *Edda*. Trans. Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1995. Print.
- The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Carolyne Larrington. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.

The Poetic Edda. Trans. Lee M. Hollander. Austin: UT Press, 2003. Print.

The Beowulf Manuscript. Trans. R.D. Fulk. London: Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

Turville-Petre, E.O.G. *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*.

New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964. Print.

“urðr.” *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. The Germanic Lexicon Project, 2003. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.

“Völuspá.” Trans. Paul Taylor and W.H. Auden. Iowa City: The Windhover Press, 1968. Print.