

The Spaewife's Prophecy: A Verse Translation of the Norse Poem Völuspá, with an Introduction and Notes

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ABSTRACT: The epic poem *Völuspá*, in which an ancient seeress foretells to Odin the tragic fate awaiting his son Baldr and the eventual destruction of the gods at Ragnarøk, is an acknowledged masterpiece of medieval literature. However, outside the world of Norse studies it remains surprisingly little known. *Völuspá* was composed in pre-literate Iceland and transmitted through performance for several centuries before being committed to vellum, but none of the available English translations (including W. H. Auden's less than faithful version) were written to be read aloud, making the poem much less likely to be included in university courses on European or world literature. My verse translation, *The Spaewife's Prophecy*, attempts to convey the enigmatic power of the original text, while the notes are intended both to make the poem accessible to readers unfamiliar with Norse mythology and also to situate it in the material and cultural world of the Icelanders.

RÉSUMÉ: Le poème épique *Völuspá*, dans lequel une antique voyante prédit à Odin le destin tragique qui attend son fils Baldr, ainsi que la destruction finale des dieux lors de Ragnarøk, est un chef d'œuvre reconnu de la littérature médiévale. Cependant, il est surprenant de voir combien il demeure peu connu en dehors du monde des études du norrois. Le poème a été composé en Islande avant l'apparition de l'écriture et transmis oralement pendant plusieurs siècles avant d'être transcrit. Toutefois, aucune des traductions disponibles en anglais (y compris celle de W. H. Auden, qui s'avère d'ailleurs peu fidèle) n'a été rédigée pour être lue à voix haute, ce qui ne favorise pas l'inclusion du poème dans des études universitaires de littérature européenne ou mondiale. Ma traduction en vers, *The Spaewife's Prophecy*, tente de transmettre la force énigmatique du texte original, tandis que les notes ont pour but à la fois de rendre le poème plus accessible aux lecteurs peu familiers avec la mythologie nordique et de le situer dans le monde matériel et culturel des Islandais.

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Introduction

“Hush now and hear me”: Translating the Norse Poem *Völuspá* for the Speaking Voice

On 21 April 1971, a remarkable act of cultural restitution took place in Iceland: a Danish frigate docked in Reykjavik harbour and, witnessed by a crowd 15,000 strong and on television and radio by much of the rest of the Icelandic population, a small procession of three naval officers stepped ashore, each carrying a modest parcel, the first installment in the return of the wealth of medieval manuscripts stripped from Iceland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The two larger parcels held the two volumes of *Flateyjarbók*, a beautifully illuminated collection of sagas and other writings, but the first to be carried onto Icelandic soil was a small and battered book, its plain and often abbreviated text stretching thriftily from edge to edge of the time-darkened vellum pages. It was *Codex Regius*, the main source of one of Iceland’s greatest literary treasures, the anthology of mythological and heroic poems known as the *Poetic Edda*. When, later that day, the Danish Minister of Education handed over the three volumes to his Icelandic counterpart, photographs of the event show that *Codex Regius* was the first to be surrendered. His laconic words, “Værsgo! Flatøbogen og Kongebogen” [There you are! The Flat Island Book and the King’s Book], used an idiom more commonly employed when offering someone a cup of coffee, in a deliberate attempt to make light of the pain of Denmark’s loss. Back in Copenhagen, the flag over the Royal Library was flying at half-mast.

Codex Regius, so called because in 1662 it was presented by the Icelandic Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson to King Frederick III of Denmark, is far older than its name, and its contents are older still. The unknown scribe, almost certainly a Christian and probably a cleric, who chose for whatever reason to record this treasury of heathen literature, copied down the Eddic poems in about 1270, but the opening poem, *Völuspá*, which I have translated as *The Spaewife’s Prophecy*, seems to have been composed in a pre-literate Iceland, probably around the year 1000. Arguably the greatest and certainly one of the most compelling of all Old Icelandic poems, it weaves a series of oblique and haunting mythological references into a history of the pagan cosmos from its creation to its eventual destruction and rebirth. Scholars will argue forever about whether *Völuspá* is the work of an individual poet or a masterpiece of folk literature; what we do know is that it was created for performance and preserved by being performed. It is

hard for modern readers to imagine a society in which memory is the medium through which complex texts are handed down, but in fact not only the literature but also the law code of Iceland was originally preserved in this way, and as Gísli Sigurðsson points out,

people would not have missed what they did not know... nor were they eager to divest themselves of the burden of their memories and write down the laws—as people today are tempted to think. There is much more reason to assume that Lawspeakers were not impressed by the laws being read from vellum. Such men were proud of their knowledge and regarded oral skills... as a necessary part of the education of aspiring men of law.

(11)

The original performers who spoke or sang or chanted the Eddic poems would have felt a similar pride in their own knowledge and skill and might well have been puzzled by the idea that a poem can exist in silence.

The early Icelandic settlers did, of course, have a way of recording brief texts, not by writing them down but by inscribing them, using an alphabet already a thousand years old. We tend to think of runes as having occult significance (the word “rune” itself means secret, and runes could indeed be used to inscribe magical words on amulets), but as R. I. Page explains, they were for the most part simply a practical way of conveying information.

Most Germanic men would carry a knife at their belt. A stick of wood could be picked up anywhere. What more easy than to shave a stick so that it had two or more flat sides, and on each side to cut the letters of a message? And how much simpler than the Christian method of flaying a sheep or cow, preparing and stretching the skin, cutting it into pieces, making a pen from a bird’s quill, manufacturing ink from metallic salts and galls or from lampblack mixed with gums, and then writing (in our sense of the word) a text.

(7-8)

Originally designed to be cut into wood in straight vertical and diagonal strokes (avoiding horizontal ones which might split the line of the grain), runes were also useful for carving an inscription on a stone grave-marker or scratching the owner’s name on a bone comb or a metal helmet, but texts of any length had to be preserved in the most economical medium of all, the human memory. When Thorgerd, in *Egil’s Saga*, having lovingly tricked her grieving father out of starving himself to death, tells him, “Now I want us to stay alive, father, long enough for you to compose a poem in Bodvar’s memory and I will carve it on to a rune-stick” (Scudder 151), she is actually tricking him for a second time by suggesting that he should write just a few lines of verse in memory of his dead son. “Egil said it was unlikely that he would be able to compose a poem even if he attempted to.

'But I will try,' he said" (152), and as Thorgerd hoped, his sorrow finds expression and relief in a powerful and moving lament far too long to fit onto a rune-stick.

Although it comes down to us from a culture in which poems were created for performance, Terry Gunnell gloomily reflects that these days, "a majority of us first encounter *Völuspá* visually in the form of black and white printed symbols stretched from left to right across on the page of a book, facing up at us perhaps from the desk of a school classroom or a library" (63), limiting our live engagement with a text that "was never meant to be read in private but *heard, seen, and experienced*" (65). Gunnell teaches in the University of Iceland; teachers, or would-be teachers, of Norse in the English-speaking world have an even greater cause for gloom, as what has become known as the crisis in the humanities threatens to drive their subject to extinction. Even as Norse studies flourishes at the highest level, with exciting new translations of the sagas into English, a major international project to produce a definitive scholarly edition of the corpus of skaldic (court) poetry, and a multi-volume German commentary on the Eddic poems, opportunities for university students to learn Old Icelandic are shrinking fast as is the enthusiasm of students themselves for learning minority languages. The American poet Randall Jarrell, writing in 1965, wryly said that "God gives every animal a way to make its living, and... He has given us poets students. But what He gives with one hand He takes away with the other: He has taken away our readers" (78). In the case of the *Poetic Edda*, the readers crucially needed if the subject is to survive are students themselves, and the gods seem to be taking them away.

Being excited by a text in translation can often make students eager to engage with the original, but my translation of *Völuspá* is also an attempt to address the comparative lack of an audience outside the area of specialist Norse studies for a poem that is an undisputed masterpiece of medieval European literature. A great poem that engages so powerfully with a major mythology should be, in translation at least, on the radar of all students of literature, and yet this is far from being the case. Many years ago, I taught a modernism seminar in which one of the group began complaining bitterly about the obscurity of *Finnegan's Wake* (a text he had not been required to read and had plainly never opened), only to be silenced by a visiting American student who drawled gently, "But it's not a bit obscure. Everyone has heard of it." *Völuspá*, in that sense at any rate, is not a bit obscure—there are currently about a dozen English translations in print and more can be found on the internet—yet hardly any of my students have heard of it. This is the more striking because at the University of York, an English city which markets itself as Viking Jorvik, Norse literature continues to be taught, and the students I questioned were passionate enough about both languages and medieval literature to have joined my undergraduate Dante reading group in order to spend an evening a week studying *Paradiso* in the original, reading it aloud in Italian around the class, simply for the fun of it. Only four out of those twenty-one

enthusiastic linguists had heard of the *Poetic Edda*, and only two had actually read *Völuspá*, one as part of the Norse literature module, with vivid enjoyment, and one in Auden's translation (which I will expand on later) with intelligent bafflement, while seventeen usually bright young faces just looked at me blankly.

There are historical factors that help to account for this depressing state of affairs. In nineteenth-century Britain, despite the Victorian fascination with all things Norse, the myths and stories of the Northmen were already beginning to be relegated to the nursery, as Rudyard Kipling's description of a childhood encounter with his "Deputy 'Uncle Topsy,'" William Morris, vividly illustrates:

We settled ourselves under the table which we used for a toboggan-slide and he, gravely as ever, climbed on to our big rocking-horse. There, slowly surging back and forth while the poor beast creaked, he told us a tale full of fascinating horrors, about a man who was condemned to dream bad dreams. One of them took the shape of a cow's tail waving from a heap of dried fish. He went away as abruptly as he had come. Long afterwards, when I was old enough to know a maker's pains, it dawned on me that we must have heard the Saga of Burnt Njal, which was then interesting him.

(15-16)

Victorian and Edwardian children, including Kipling's own son and daughter, learnt their Norse myths from Annie and Eliza Keary's *The Heroes of Asgard and the Giants of Jötunheim* (1857), a text that, in one form or another, went on being reprinted well into the twentieth century, although, as Andrew Wawn points out, "If *The Heroes of Asgard* lost its way after 1944, it will not have been helped by a world war fought against a state whose leaders were still fantasising about rebirth after Ragnarök from the Führerbunker in 1945" (200).

Old Norse continued to be taught in the English departments of British universities, partly as a way of adding rigour to what could be seen as a soft subject before the invention of literary theory, yet the list of classic European texts that every student of literature was expected to know, in translation at least, remained essentially Mediterranean—the Bible, Homer, Plato, the Greek dramatists, Virgil, Ovid, and Dante—and this did not change when Norse in the original began to drop off the syllabus. Icelandic literature, in Pétur Gunnarsson's words,

was, is and continues to be the best-guarded secret of European cultural history. Even prodigies who set themselves the task of running through the entire literary history of the continent (Auerbach, Steiner, Kundera...) run straight past the Icelandic chapter.

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Meanwhile, Norse myths soon regained their old status as a suitable subject for the child reader, with first Roger Lancelyn Green, then Kevin Crossley-Holland,

and now Neil Gaiman taking up the baton from Annie and Eliza Keary. Although Gaiman's "vigorous, robust, good-natured version of the mythos"—which, as Ursula K. Le Guin points out, "plays down the extreme strangeness of some of the material and defuses its bleakness by a degree of self satire" (*The Guardian* March 29, 2017)—also appeals to the present-day adult readership for children's fantasy fiction, the Vikings are still thought of in Britain today as at best a primary school topic and at worst a kind of historical joke, even (it sometimes feels especially) in Viking Jorvik, the city of Eirik Bloodaxe.

However, it was Viking Jorvik that first gave me the opportunity to discover how an audience engages with *Vǫluspá* when they encounter it not "in the form of black and white printed symbols" but in a live performance. In 2001, I was commissioned by York's Jorvik Festival to write a music theatre piece, *The Skald and the Spaewife* (Woolf 2016), based on *Vǫluspá*, the related poem *Baldrs Draumar* [Baldr's Dreams], and the Baldr stories in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, and I discovered that there is indeed an audience for a spoken English *Vǫluspá*. Our potential spectators were so numerous, in fact, that it was impossible to crowd them all into the beautiful medieval undercroft of York's Theatre Royal.

In our contemporary anxiety about the possible disappearance of the book, we tend to forget how large a part live poetry still plays in our own society. Published poets often make most of their living, such as it is, from reading their work aloud, while all school and university teachers of literature are poem-speakers by trade. In translating *The Spaewife's Prophecy*, it is those teachers and their students that I particularly want to address. Although there is a wealth of manuscript research and scholarly commentary for academics to draw on, and a number of translations which do an excellent job of helping students of Old Icelandic to make sense of the original, there is still a need for an English version that attempts to do for *Vǫluspá* what Seamus Heaney so memorably did for *Beowulf*, by finding "a familiar local voice" that makes the poem "speakable" (xxi). While all too aware that I am no Heaney, whose *Beowulf* in his own honey-tongued reading convincingly summons up the world of the mead hall, I do have many years' experience both as a literary translator and as a writer of verse for performance, and I have tried not only to capture something of the power of the original, and to make literary as well as scholarly decisions about the many enigmas in the text, but also to shape my translation for the speaking voice.

Whether or not *The Spaewife's Prophecy* passes the mead hall test, I would never want to say, as Stanley B. Greenfield does in the introduction to his own version of *Beowulf*, "The fact that translator has succeeded translator... testifies to the dissatisfaction each has felt with his or her predecessors' efforts to capture the literal meaning, narrative movement, or poetic qualities of the original" (27), although I hope that I have been able to add something fresh to the great body of work that Carolyne Larrington describes in her engaging essay "Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English." As Reuben A. Brower valuably reminds us in his

classic essay “Seven Agamemnons,” “reading one translation means an obligation to read many and not merely those of our contemporaries” (194). No translation can exactly reproduce the “poetic qualities of the original,” but it is possible to glimpse its complexities and ambiguities by comparing the versions of several translators; and, in the case of *Völuspá*, this will also give the reader a sense of how the text fits into the wider context of the Eddic mythological poems. Among recent translations, I would particularly recommend Carolyne Larrington’s *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford World’s Classics)—justly seen as a standard text since its first publication in 1996, and reissued in 2014 in a new and effectively revised version—and Andy Orchard’s lively and readable *The Elder Edda* (Penguin, 2011), while teachers, in particular, might be interested in Jackson Crawford’s *The Poetic Edda* (Hackett Publishing, 2015), which was created for use in the classroom.

In addition to giving us a more nuanced idea of the original, sampling the work of many translators enables us to explore contrasting aspects of the reception of a poem. For instance, Larrington addresses the likely range of interests of her “implied reader... the regular buyer of World’s Classics translations” (2007, 30), by pointing out that

the poetry of the *Edda* gives some of the best evidence for the religious beliefs and the heroic ethics of the pagan North before its conversion to Christianity around the year 1000. Its stories are the interpretative key to modern depictions of northern myth and legend, in painting, sculpture, literature, film, computer games, and the operas of Richard Wagner, to list only a few of the *Edda*’s modern reflexes. These stories also formed the bedrock from which the complex and highly sophisticated court poetry of medieval Scandinavia sprang, composed in a poetic style which employs mythological and legendary material in its rhetoric of allusion. (2014, ix)

Conversely, translating *Völuspá* for the speaking voice has meant attempting to strip the poem, for the length of the implied performance, of its later cultural and political contexts, important as they are, in order to plunge the audience into the immediacy of its stark and savage world.

It goes without saying that this can only be the illusion of immediacy at best. Even closely related languages and cultures do not map transparently on top of each other, and the gap between my intended listeners and the original hearers of the poem is a *gap* in the Old Icelandic sense of a chasm, although hopefully one which can be bridged by the thing that enables us to transcend cultural chasms, the human love of stories. Umberto Eco, quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt, points out that if a translation is to communicate the raw power of an ancient text, it “cannot and should not be a commentary” (91), but given the fact that the poem makes allusive and riddling use of a wealth of narrative material unfamiliar to a present-day audience, it needs to be accompanied by one. For my own students, hearing the old tales of the Icelanders was an important part of the workshops

in which they helped me to test out my translation, although interestingly they all wanted to listen to the mysterious words of the poem before having them explained. Some of these stories can be found in other Icelandic poems and some have been lost, but the greater part of the narrative treasure hoard that the poem's original hearers would have held in common can be found in a text some decades older than *Codex Regius*, *Gylfaginning* [The Tricking of Gylfi], the section of his *Prose Edda* in which the great historian, poet, and mythographer Snorri Sturluson draws and expands on his own copy of *Völuspá* to retell the legends of the old gods, artfully framing them in a debunking myth of his own devising to prevent his Christian readers from being lured into paganism.

In one important respect, *Völuspá* is still an evolving work of literature, as the human myth-making tendency manifests itself in the often ingenious story material created by scholars as they attempt to solve the riddles and fill the lacunae in the text. I discuss some of this story material in the Notes where it is relevant to my interpretation of the poem, but (with no disrespect to a fascinating field of study), I have resisted the temptation to play hunt the thimble or the Jabberwock in the tulgey wood of comparative mythology. The aim of the commentary is to help my modern audience to share a little of the mindset that an original audience would have brought to the poem, and though it is likely that members of that audience would have had some familiarity with Irish and Anglo-Saxon culture and some knowledge of Christianity, they would certainly not have related the World Tree Yggdrasil to “rites of Indian horse sacrifice” (Dronke 126) or told themselves that “to a certain extent parallels are to be found among the ancient Mexicans” (Clarke 36). Instead, I have tried to show how the poem draws not only on the myths but also on the physical world and the material culture of the Icelanders. As well as gods, giants, monsters and trolls, I consider green leeks, Viking daymarks, blacksmith’s tongs, driftwood, sea eagles, and the volcanic landscape of Iceland itself, and also the wolves and mistletoe that feature powerfully in the story but are absent from the fauna and flora of the island.

Every translation has to begin with a source text, and *Völuspá* has undergone many rearrangements as editors attempt to recreate the original poem (if indeed it ever existed in a single, definitive form) from the surviving written versions and include or reject passages that appear to be later interpolations. In addition to the *Codex Regius* text and the one from which Snorri Sturluson quotes extensively in *Gylfaginning*,

a separate version of the poem exists in *Hauksbók*, a manuscript comprising what is in effect the private library—a collection of historical, religious, and scientific texts—of Hauk Erlendsson, an Icelandic lawman who spent the last years of his life in Norway. The version of *Völuspá* in this manuscript is written in an Icelandic hand from the middle of the fourteenth century and thus may have been added to it after Hauk’s death in 1334.

(Lindow 317)

Margaret Clunies Ross speculates that the inclusion of *Völuspá* in such a collection shows “a desire to align native with foreign encyclopedic knowledge” (12), and it certainly attests to the continuing importance of the poem more than a century after Snorri used it as a major mythological source. However, possibly because of a scribal error, the *Hauksbók* version strikingly lacks the verses about the death of Baldr, which are central to the tragic action of the poem in *Codex Regius*, and conversely it includes a penultimate stanza that attempts to Christianize the conclusion of the narrative.

As a verse translator with a listening audience in mind, I needed a source text that would enable me to offer a strong and coherent reading of a poem whose every line has been the subject of intense scholarly debate, and fortunately it was not hard to find one. Ursula Dronke’s edition, with its textual scrupulosity and its learned, imaginative, and sometimes eccentric commentary, is a monumental work of individual scholarship of the kind that government bean-counting of academic research outputs has made almost impossible today. Like the eighteenth-century antiquaries whose passionate engagement with their researches she shared, she “worked on [her] magna opera with legendary slowness” and, like many of them, she had the good fortune to be “extraordinarily long-lived” (Sutherland 77), though sadly her proposed edition of the entire corpus of Eddic poetry eventually proved to be more than a lifetime’s work. It was her magical and labyrinthine edition of *Völuspá* that I used when writing *The Skald and the Spaewife*, and it was partly due to her that the poem has continued to haunt me ever since. Sigurður Nordal, another distinguished editor, imagined *Völuspá* was mocking him “in the words of the sibyl, ‘Vituð ér enn—eða hvat?’ [Would you learn still more—and what?]” even as it lured him on, since “the harder it is to understand, the more powerfully it attracts one” (79-80). *The Spaewife’s Prophecy* is my own attempt to answer that insistent question.

It has to be admitted that Dronke’s resemblance to an eighteenth-century antiquary sometimes extends to editorial practices that conflict with more recent, new philological ideas. Far from “striving to retain as many features of the original, and introduce as little interpretation, as possible” (Driscoll 102), she sometimes allows her “new and complex idea of [the] structure and content” of the poem “to influence her selection of its text” (McKinnell 2001, 116). It can be hard for editors who live long and closely with a much-loved work of literature not “to see themselves as collaborators with the author” (Driscoll 90), but Dronke’s belief that “without a conception of the structure of the poem we have no basis for determining the best text” (25) gives her edition the narrative drive that my translation needed, although my reading of *Völuspá* is of necessity very different from hers. Heather O’Donoghue, in her moving and admiring obituary for Dronke, describes how

Ursula, with endless patience, and after years of study, developed a confident understanding of the text's literary dynamic, with its interplay of mediumistic voices, and its sudden switches between past, present and future. For Old Norse scholars, *Völuspá* had been a challenge; Ursula restored it as a work of art. (*The Guardian* March 25, 2012)

However, the complexities and nuances of a reading primarily addressed to Old Norse scholars would be impossible to convey to a listening audience and might sometimes be at odds with the way the poem works as an oral text. To take an obvious example, in her analysis of the first stanza, Dronke suggests that

the scene that rises to the mind is of a priestess in a hallowed assembly. Beside her stands a statue of Óðinn, armed: he is Valfǫðr, father of the slain in battle. The living are Heimdallr's sons, the dead are Óðinn's. Her human audience belongs to both.
(31)

In performance, especially with hearers unfamiliar with the poem, something very different happens. The opening lines set no scene for the audience to picture. Instead, the performer first demands a hearing, then identifies us, the audience, as Heimdall's children, representatives of all mankind. Already the performer, whether male or female, has become the unearthly *spæwife*, and now she tells us that, at Odin's command, she is going to cast her memory back and tell us tales from the dawn of time. By the beginning of the second stanza, if the performer is compelling enough, we have suspended our disbelief and are listening spellbound to a storyteller raised by primeval giants before the world began.

Creating a verse translation for performance also requires the application of Occam's razor: "entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem" [entities should not be multiplied beyond what is necessary], so rather than following Dronke's interpretation of the speaker's occasional switch of pronoun from "I" to "she" as indicating the summoning of other spirit speakers in O'Donoghue's "interplay of mediumistic voices," I have given my *spæwife* a single voice. While the changes of pronoun may simply be the result of two centuries or more of oral transmission, in live performance they serve an important function: by allowing the audience to see the *spæwife* from the outside, as we approach the point at which she becomes a character in the story as well as its narrator, they signal direct speech. "She" meets Odin's one-eyed gaze and, speaking in the first person, taunts him with her superior knowledge. "She" sees the portent of the valkyries riding and, speaking in the first person, tells Odin what he needs and fears to learn, the coming death of his beloved son Baldr. "She" holds dark knowledge and, speaking in the first person, foretells the doom of the gods. In fact Occam's razor has a double edge here, to be applied not only to the interpretation of the

poem but also to the words that convey it. The scholarly translator of a text open to multiple and conflicting readings must attempt, in Dronke's own words, "to cover all possibilities" (151), but this may involve a scrupulous closeness to the original, which, though invaluable for a reader trying to make sense of the Norse, could leave a listening audience perplexed:

Hod and Baldr will settle down in Hropt's victory-homesteads,
the slaughter-gods are well—do you want to know more: and what?
(Larrington 2014, 11)

I have tried, without over-simplifying the narrative, to use the plainness needed to clarify the poem for the hearer to sharpen the blade of the verse: my nouns "cut the runes" which spell out human fate, they don't "grave on tablets" (Bray 283) or "incise the slip of wood" (Dronke 12).

At this point, any reader familiar with the poem as *Song of the Sybil*, the version W. H. Auden translated with Paul B. Taylor, may be feeling understandably perplexed by my account of its narrative trajectory. Translating *Völuspá* into verse has inevitably meant crossing swords with Auden, described by O'Donoghue in *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* as the only writer to have "approached *The Poetic Edda* as a poet," although she adds the tactful warning that "his versions have their own literary worth, but are very free" (2000, 555). In the case of *Völuspá*, that freedom amounts to a radical, though in some ways very old-fashioned, re-ordering of the poem in the light of Auden's belief that it "reflected a spiritual intensity" which sang to him "of redemption" (Taylor 229), a belief so strong that "he made himself an emblem of his own message" (232) by having the word GIMLÉ, the name of the hall thatched with gold in which the righteous will dwell after Ragnarök, printed onto a sweatshirt so that he could wear it "over his heart" (234). Peter H. Salus, who co-wrote the introduction to *The Elder Edda: A Selection* with Taylor, has recorded that "when the *Völuspá* (the 'Song of the Sybil') was translated in 1967, Wystan felt that the poem made better sense if some of the strophes were re-ordered" (150), following the lead of the Norwegian philologist Sophus Bugge (1833–1907) who "in an effort to clarify the poem" (Bellows 3), decided that it should begin with the stanza describing the mysterious witch *Heiðr*, whom he identified (not very convincingly, despite John McKinnell's interesting defence of his theory) as the *spæwif*e herself, immediately followed by the stanzas describing the *spæwif*e's face-to-face encounter with Odin.

The argument against this rearrangement goes well beyond the fact that there is no textual evidence to justify it. The central encounter with Odin marks the point at which the *spæwif*e's account of the past becomes a prophecy of the future, making *Baldr*'s impending fate a key moment in a darkening drama. The original audience, living on a volcanic island and subject to millennial fears, must

have been left wondering uneasily where they themselves fitted into the timeline of a world descending into moral and physical chaos, since for them Baldr's death had already occurred. Bugge's rearrangement breaks the chronological spine of the poem, leaving its narrative crippled, with Baldr's death becoming just one more episode in a series of loosely related events. In *Song of the Sybil*, this downplaying of significance is even more marked, as Auden's valkyries, rather than preparing to ride to the realm of the gods, ironically unaware that Baldr will die through treachery instead of in battle, are on their way to help the Goths. (Since the valkyries, the "choosers of the slain," have the task of ensuring that the best and bravest warriors end up in Valhalla, the feasting hall of the war dead, the Goths might not have been too grateful for their assistance.)

For Auden the Christian convert, the spiritual resolution of the poem lies not in the miraculous return of Baldr, whose possible interpretation as a sacrificial Christ figure is downplayed in Salus's introduction, but in the interpolated penultimate two line stanza of the *Hauksbók Völuspá*, in which a mighty ruler descends from above (though, confusingly, Salus's brief notes to the poem identify this ruler as the resurrected Baldr himself). Auden even provides his mighty ruler with a rainbow door to ride through and completes the Christianizing of the end of the poem by treating these lines as the opening of the final stanza, ensuring that the appearance of the corpse-laden dragon is seen as satanic. Other amendments include making the Sybil speak only in the first person and omitting every repetition of the ominous refrain in which she foresees Ragnarök, which Auden in any case treats as a distant vision of the twilight of the gods rather than a terrifying prophecy of their doom. Auden started work on his Norse translations in 1966, four years after the Cuban missile crisis, a time when the Cold War had turned the potential destruction of the world into a cultural given, which may help to explain why he focused his version of the poem on the spiritual refuge of Gimlé. However, as my Dante group student James Wood acutely pointed out, the effect of Auden's reordering is that readers experience *Song of the Sybil* as a maze, from which they emerge into the daylight puzzled but emotionally unscathed, rather than as a labyrinth leading inexorably towards an inner chamber where an ancient terror lies in wait.

Despite having taken so many liberties with the text, Auden was beside himself with fury when Stephen Spender, with the support of the critic Frank Kermode, refused to publish *Song of the Sybil* in the magazine *Encounter* without the omission of the *Dvergatal*, a lengthy catalogue of dwarf names which Auden maintained was "part of the magic of the poem" (Taylor 231). The *Dvergatal* does have its own magic though not everyone falls under its spell (one Old Norse MA student declined to come to my *Völuspá* workshop on the grounds that the poem is full of garden gnomes). However, like the penultimate *Hauksbók* stanza, it is an interpolation, and editors often leave it out, as indeed I have done myself on the Occam's razor principle, since although dwarves do get their unhappy moment

in the sun in a line and a half of stanza 49, not one of the 63 listed in the catalogue plays any part in the action of the poem. (I explain in the Notes how the *Dvergatal* found its way into the text.) A number of these dwarf names, including that of Gandalf himself, famously reappear in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and clearly it would have been impossible for Auden to discard a passage so important to his old friend and teacher, to whom he dedicated his selection from *The Elder Edda* when it appeared in book form in 1969.

Part of the problem with *Song of the Sybil* is simply the half century that has elapsed since Auden set out to "versify," in his own word (Carpenter 429), Taylor's more rough and ready versions of the Eddic poems. Much as translators everywhere may want to discount the old Italian proverb "traduttore: traditore" [translator: traitor], every translation is at best an honest forgery, a counterfeit version of an original which can never be truly reproduced, and forgeries have a way of being unmasked by time, even when the forger is a major poet in his own right. However, Auden's attempt to "carry the force of the Icelandic into a contemporary English socio-mythological context" (Taylor 228) was strongly influenced by the language of Tolkien, that contemporary myth-maker who had taught him Anglo-Saxon as an Oxford undergraduate and whose *Lord of the Rings* trilogy he greatly admired. At this distance of time (and despite the success of Peter Jackson's film series), Tolkien's trilogy reads like an attempt to prove that prose fiction can be written in Parnassian, the language which Gerard Manley Hopkins said could "only be spoken by poets," who resort to it when "the inspiration which is the gift of genius" fails them (1956, 216). In Auden's translation, this kind of Parnassian all too often obscures the Sybil's message, from the description of the ogresses who end the golden age of the gods as Thurse Maidens to the double-take as the reader realizes that the drake of the final stanza is actually a dragon that Auden himself wants us to see as hellish. (Tolkien cannot be blamed, though, for Auden's all too memorable opening line, "Heidi men call me when their homes I visit," (144) an attempt to anglicize the name Heiðr which irresistibly summons up Johanna Spyri's little Swiss heroine.)

Although *Song of the Sybil* is an interesting and passionately felt experiment which tells us a great deal about the inner spiritual life of its translator, it is impossible not to regret the English *Vǫluspá* that Auden might have crafted without Gandalf's hand on his shoulder. To get a vivid sense of this, we only have to turn to the end of *The Shield of Achilles*, the poem in which Auden compresses Book 18 of the *Iliad* into a twentieth-century vision of a world without redemption, in which evil ideologies are served by brain-washed armies, the crucifixion is hideously re-enacted for unmoved spectators behind the barbed wire of a concentration camp, and feral children inhabit a solipsistic wasteland from which any glimpse of innocence is lost. In the final stanza, in which the lame god Hephaestus leaves Thetis, mother of the doomed Achilles, gazing in horror at his handiwork, we have the very elements from which Auden might have created an

enduring version of *Vǫluspá*: the plain, stark language with its repeated hammer blows, which reminds us that smiths and poets are both makers (“makars” in the old Scots word), and the authentic shiver of a death foretold.

While *Song of the Sybil*, with its tongue-twisting archaisms and its heavy use of significant capital letters, appears to have been written more for the eye than the ear (try saying “Then came Three, the Thurse Maidens” aloud), (146) it does contain the memory of a speaking voice. The verse form in which many of the Eddic poems, including *Vǫluspá*, were written shares its patterns of stress and alliteration with the Anglo-Saxon poetry that Tolkien used to recite at the start of his Oxford lectures, holding the undergraduate Auden spellbound. It is not surprising that, as he re-translated Taylor’s versions of the poems into verse designed to copy those sound patterns, the English voice he found himself echoing was the voice of Tolkien himself, especially given their shared love of Norse mythology. For Seamus Heaney, the essential starting point for his translation of *Beowulf* was to find a voice for the poem, and it went without question that it must be a speaking voice.

It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the metre might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. Without some melody sensed or promised, it is simply impossible for a poet to establish the translator’s right-of-way into and through a text. I was therefore lucky to hear this enabling note almost straight away, a familiar local voice, one that had belonged to relatives of my father’s, people whom I had once described in a poem as “big voiced Scullions.”... And when I came to ask myself how I wanted *Beowulf* to sound in my version, I realized I wanted it to be speakable by one of those relatives.

(xxi)

The voice of the Scullions, its “weighty distinctness” (xxi) recognized rather than chosen as the “enabling note” of the translation, allowed Heaney to take possession of the poem by presenting it as an extended act of speech.

In translating *The Spawife’s Prophecy*, I recognized that enabling note in a couple of verses from one of the Scots oral ballads I learned as a child, which induce the same thrill of mysterious dread as the stark landscapes and subterranean rivers of *Vǫluspá*:

O they rade on, and farther on,
 And they waded through rivers aboon the knee,
 And they saw neither sun nor moon,
 But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,
 And they waded through red blude to the knee;
 For a’ the blude, that’s shed on earth,

Rins through the springs o' that countrie.
(Scott 89)

“Mirk” means dark, and “stern light” is starlight, but it is not just the Scots vocabulary that makes these lines feel as if they come from somewhere far older than the rest of the ballad, in which Thomas the Rhymer is seduced into spending seven years with “the queen of fair Elfland” and returns with the unwelcome gift of a tongue that can never lie. However, as well as giving me “the note and pitch” for my translation, the ballad of True Thomas offers a note of caution about the text of *Völuspá* itself. The printed source of the ballad is Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the title of which hints at his belief that the great Scots ballads were not folk literature but the work of long-forgotten bards, an issue as earnestly debated by eighteenth-century antiquaries as Norse scholars now debate whether or not the Eddic poems are the work of long-forgotten skalds. When it came to presenting evidence for the old minstrels, Scott was not above putting his thumb on the scales, and a look at his own source material, “Thomas Rymer, & Queen of Elfland,” from the ballad repertoire that Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown of Falkland (1747–1810) claimed to have memorized in childhood, shows us that these apparently ancient lines owe more than a little of their mystery to Scott himself. Anna Gordon’s version simply reads:

For forty days and forty nights
He wade thro red blude to the knee
And he saw neither sun nor moon
But heard the roaring of the sea
(219)

I said earlier that literary forgeries have a way of being unmasked by time, and this includes Scott’s own pastiche sequels to the ballad, but without the documentary evidence it would be hard to detect his bardic hand here. Albert Bates Lord, the author of *The Singer of Tales*, tells us that

the oral traditional style is easy to imitate by those who have heard much of it... a person who has been brought up in an area, or lived long in one, in which he has listened to the singing and found an interest in it, can write verse using the general style and some of the formulas of the tradition.
(18)

However, sometimes an imitation of this kind can be absorbed into the tradition, becoming an authentic part of it, as has happened here. In an oral culture, the period when things start being written down is when they can be lost, but it is also when they can be creatively transformed for one last time. Whether or not

Völuspá was originally the work of an individual skald, we will never know the extent to which it was reframed by the scribes of the surviving texts or their immediate informants, and in a very real sense this hardly matters. Although, as performers of oral literature have always done, we can make our own choices among the variants that have come down to us, we have no need to use them to reconstruct a lost and perhaps mythical urtext. The ancient place from which the poem speaks to us is still fiercely present in the words set down on vellum, “For a’ the blude, that’s shed on earth, / Rins through the springs o’ that countrie.”

While I lack the fluency needed to turn *Völuspá* into convincing Lowland Scots, the “melody,” in Heaney’s word, of these lines made it clear that the language of my translation should be plain but dark, oral but not colloquial. It should not feel modern but should avoid the Victorian mock-antiquity of maidens, days of yore, and gods making merry, and the most savage stanzas should be tested on the hairs on the back of the neck. I also decided, insofar as humanly possible, to avoid any phrase that I knew to have been used by another translator, while still staying as close as I could to the sense of the Norse, and this paradoxically freed up the language of my translation by forcing me into creative lateral thinking. Eco tells us that Wilhelm von Humboldt

proposed a difference between *Fremdheit* (which can be translated as *foreignness*, *unfamiliarity*, *strangeness*, *alienness*) and *das Fremde* (usually translated as *the strange* or *the unfamiliar*)... Readers feel *Fremdheit* when the translator’s choice sounds strange, as if it were a mistake; they feel *das Fremde*, that is, an unfamiliar way of showing something that is recognisable, when they get the impression they are seeing it for the first time, under a different guise.

(90)

It is just this kind of revelatory strangeness with which *Völuspá* confronts its audience, and I have tried to convey this in English, though I have flavoured my translation with a word or two of Scots, beginning with the title.

Völuspá means the *spá*, or prophecy, of the *völva*, a woman with magical powers, though the word originally meant “wand-bearer.” Wands have shrunk in both size and significance in the modern world, but the description in *Eirik the Red’s Saga* of Thorbjorg, a *völva* from Greenland known as the *lítilvölva* [little prophetess], shows her equipped with a magic staff “adorned with brass set with stones on top” (Kunz 658). Like the unearthly *völva* of *Völuspá*, Thorbjorg has the power to call up spirits and foretell the future, a form of magic called *seiðr*, which was practised mainly by women (any man who engaged in it would be thought shamefully effeminate). The word *völva* has a number of possible English translations, including prophetess, seeress, sibyl, and wise-woman, but none of them seemed quite right for my performance version of the poem. Nineteenth century translators often used the Swedish literary term *vala*, while more recent

ones opt for sibyl or seeress. Auden's Sybil was really a sibyl, but as Jenny Jochens points out,

Germanic women enjoyed a monopoly over intuitive or spontaneous prediction, and in contrast to Near Eastern and Greek sibyls whose mantic utterances required interpretation from male priests, Germanic prophetesses spoke rationally and of their own volition,
(114)

something that is emphatically true of the *vǫlva* of the poem. An additional problem with both sibyl and seeress is that they are words that belong among Terry Gunnell's "black and white printed symbols," both because the page of a book is the only place you are likely to encounter them and also because saying "*The Seeress's Prophecy*," or "*The Prophecy of the Seeress*," or even "*The Prophecy of the Sibyl*" is like saying "Saint-Saëns' Swan." I needed to find a title which could be spoken aloud without sounding like a mouthful of feathers and a name for my *vǫlva* that would connect her to a still meaningful oral tradition.

Fortunately the Norse word *spá* is cognate with the Scots word "spae," to utter a prophecy or foretell the future, and a *spæwife* is a woman with the power to do just that. A belief in divination of this kind survived in folk memory well into the twentieth century in remote parts of Scotland, as exemplified in a television programme on the history of crofting made by James Hunter in 1982, in which Aonghas MacAmlaigh [Angus MacAulay] of North Uist sorrowfully recalls, "there was a seer over in Lewis that predicted that all these Highlands would be left to the graylag goose and nobody living here. That was about one hundred or maybe two hundred years ago. And it seems to be working that way, that people are leaving." MacAmlaigh does not specify the gender of the seer, but it is significant that the word *spæman*, a male soothsayer, is far less common than *spæwife*. In Scotland too, foretelling the future tended to be seen as a female skill, though the legendary Thomas the Rhymer, known as the Scottish Merlin, was a famous exception. As I puzzled over the more intractable riddles in the text, I was reminded too of the *spæwife* in Robert Louis Stevenson's poem of the same name, who responds to every question with the mocking words, "It's gey an' easy spierin'" [It's easy enough to ask] (156-57).

Vǫluspá is written in a Norse metre called *fornyrðislag* [the order of ancient words] which consists of "long lines" made up of two "short lines," each containing two stressed syllables, divided by a *cæsura* (a heavy pause for rhythmical effect) and linked together by a regular pattern of alliteration. As Bjarne Fidjestøl points out, this can be thought of as a form of internal "rhyme" in which "the initial sound of one word recurs as the initial sound of another—as far as that goes, just the opposite of the end-rhyme with which we are most familiar" (304). The rhythm of the verse is flexible, with no rule about the number of syllables in a line, unlike

the stricter metrical patterns of modern poetry, but the alliterative “rhymes” must always fall in the same place, with either one or both of the “lifts” (stressed syllables) before the *cæsura* “rhyming” with the first, but never the second, of the “lifts” that follow it. This all sounds complicated but is really quite straightforward, as you can see from the opening lines of *The Spaewife's Prophecy*:

Hush now and **hear** me, all **h**allowed **k**indred,
Heimdall's **ch**ildren **h**igh and **l**ow.

For an audience accustomed to *fornyrðislag*, the regular alliteration both makes the verse memorable (like rhyme, it has a mnemonic function) and helps to carry the story forward. In Fidjestøl's words, “the metre fits the language snugly and is submissive to the content of the poem” (307). However, ears used to English rhyming verse may find this unvarying alliterative pattern rigid and intrusive, while the limitations on word choice which it imposes can reduce translation to an ingenious puzzle-solving exercise.

As I looked for a more fluid alternative, the final line of Gerard Manley Hopkins' elegy for Felix Randal the farrier became both an example and a command: “fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!” (1985, 48). Though Hopkins' “sprung rhythm” is very different from the stark and pared-down prosody of *Völuspá*, here we have the pattern of double beat/pause/double beat, we have a free use of alliteration that nonetheless links the two halves of the line together, and above all, as in the final verse of *The Shield of Achilles*, we have the swing of the smith's hammer. Since I would be translating directly into verse with no intervening literal prose version, my own or anyone else's, I would have to keep that hammer beat going through all the many revisions of the poem. To fettle (again a part of my Scots vocabulary) means both to make and to mend or adapt, so is an appropriate word for a translator, and I have borrowed it from Hopkins' farrier to describe the smithing of the gods.

While I have tried to keep the sound of the verse as authentic as possible, writing for oral performance by readers, and for audiences, who may well be unfamiliar with Norse pronunciation has inevitably meant that Óðinn and Þórr have had to become Odin and Thor. But in order for the poem to retain at least a trace of the otherness of Norse, while remaining reader-friendly, I have adopted John Lindow's orthographic solution. In *The Spaewife's Prophecy*, as in his *Handbook of Norse Mythology*, “the letter þ (thorn) is... represented as *th*, *ð* (eth) as *d*, and *ǰ* (o-hook) as *ö*... Other characters, such as *æ*, *œ*, and *ö*, have been retained. In addition, the nominative singular final *r* has been removed from names,” with the obvious exception of Baldr, “and the accent marks have been removed from the names ‘Odin’ and ‘Thor’, since these forms are the most widely used in English” (xv). Since it would obviously cause confusion for a character to be called Höd in the poem but Høðr in the Notes, these conventions have been retained in the

commentary. Lindow ends his “Note on Orthography” by saying that although “these compromises naturally create inconsistencies... I hope they will not divert from the aim of the work.” In Lindow’s case, that aim was “to let the texts speak for themselves” (xv); in mine, it is to allow the text to be spoken.

Carolyn Larrington concludes her essay on the English translation history of the *Poetic Edda* with a salutary warning: “translations are not for all time, but simply for their own particular age, ‘a stop-gap until made to give place to a worthier work’ as [Benjamin] Thorpe modestly observes” in 1866 (2007, 40). *Völuspá* itself is like the great sword, with a damascened blade, which was Helgi’s name-gift in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* [*The Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson*]:

A ring on the hilt, courage in the heft of it,
 a point causing dread of the one who wields it;
 on the cutting edge lies a blood-stained serpent,
 coiled round the sword-boss an adder’s tail.
 (stanza 9, my translation)

I already knew, before I embarked on the task, that all my hammering could never make *The Spæwife’s Prophecy* into more than a light-weight and disposable simulacrum, but, such as it is, I hope it will convey something of the poetic heft of the original and perhaps help to inspire the worthier work that will replace it.

The question my students most wanted an answer to was how the poem was originally performed. As Benjamin Bagby explains,

no written musical sources of the *Eddic* poems dating from the Middle Ages are known to exist; indeed, we would have no reason to expect such sources to have been written at all. The milieu in which these poems were originally transmitted, sung, and acted out was that of a uniquely oral culture, and professional minstrels (*leikari*) passed on repertoires and techniques from generation to generation without the hindrance and expense of writing.
 (11)

Edda: Myths from Medieval Iceland, Bagby’s brilliant and scholarly reconstruction, with the early music ensemble Sequentia, of how the poems might have sounded at the time of Snorri Sturluson, includes a spine-chillingly compelling performance of *Völuspá*. The booklet that accompanies the CD includes Ursula Dronke’s *Völuspá* text together with her parallel translation, enabling listeners without Norse to follow the story while enjoying the fierce music of the verse and students of Norse to appreciate in detail how a poem they may already know “visually in the form of black and white printed symbols” comes to life in performance. Alternately, to hear the poem sung by a genuine believer in the old gods, look on YouTube for Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, sheep-farmer, poet, singer of *rímur* (traditional

Icelandic oral ballads), and modern founder and priest of Ásatrú, the worship of the Æsir, which in 1973 he persuaded the Icelandic government to recognize as a religion. It has to be said that, in strictly musical terms, the extravagantly bearded and mythologically ancient-looking Sveinbjörn (who sadly died in 1993 at the age of only 69) was no great singer, but he chants the Eddic poems as if they were imprinted on the marrow of his bones.

Nobody knows the origins of the mysterious word *Edda*, which may come from the Norse *óðr* [poetry or poetics] or the Latin *edo* [I relate or declare], but may simply mean the book from Oddi, a place connected with both Snorri Sturluson and Sæmundur the Wise, long mistakenly believed to have been the author of the *Poetic Edda*. Although probably just a coincidence, it is alarmingly apt that the word *Edda* also means great-grandmother. An age-old voice has a story to tell, one she has kept repeating for a thousand years in many lands and languages. She will speak through my words, though she will not validate them, and whether or not you are sitting comfortably, she will begin.

THE SPAEWIFE'S PROPHECY

1. Hush now and hear me, all hallowed kindred,
Heimdall's children high and low.
Father of the War Slain, you want me to summon
old stories of beings from far back in time.
2. I remember giants of ancient birth
who fostered me in ages gone.
Nine worlds I remember, nine roots of the tree
that measures out fate deep underground.
3. Back in the foretime of Ymir's dwelling
there was neither sea-sand nor cold sea-water,
earth was absent and sky was vacant,
an empty chasm where no grass grew.
4. Then Bur's sons raised up the land
to fashion out of it mighty Midgard.
Sun shone from the south on the stones of that hall
and the ground was covered with green leeks.
5. Sun from the south, the moon's companion,
cast her right hand round the rim of heaven.
As yet the sun knew not her hall,
as yet the stars knew not their places,
nor had the moon found out his might.

6. Then went the powers to their judgement seats,
 most holy gods, and gave thought to this.
 They named the night and they called her children
 morning and noon-day, ninth hour and evening,
 so the tally of time through the years was reckoned.
7. The Æsir met in Idavöll,
 they raised altars and reared high temples,
 built furnaces to fashion treasure,
 forged tongs and fettled tools.
8. Joyful in the meadow they played at chequers—
 they had no lack of well-worked gold—
 till three dread ogresses appeared,
 monstrous daughters from the Land of Giants.
9. Then went the powers to their judgement seats,
 most holy gods, and gave thought to this:
 who should fashion the race of dwarves
 from Ocean's blood and Ymir's bones.
- 10-16.*****
17. Till three of the Æsir, powerful and kind,
 left their companions and came to a house
 where they found on the sea-shore, lying helpless,
 Ask and Embla, with fate unspun.
18. No breath they had, no power of thought,
 no warmth or voice or living colour;
 Odin gave breath, Hœnir gave thought,
 Lódur gave warmth and living colour.
19. I know of the Ash called Yggdrasil,
 a tall tree spattered with shining clay.
 Dew from its boughs falls in the dales.
 It grows ever green by the well of fate.
20. Three wise women, powerful in knowledge,
 come from the lake beneath the tree,
 the first called Fated, the next, Unfolding,
 (they cut the runes) and the third, Foretold.
 They framed laws, they chose lives,
 spelled out the fates of humankind.

21. The first war in the world she recalls,
 when Goldenpower they stabbed with spears
 and burnt her alive in the High One's hall.
 Burnt three times, reborn three times,
 no matter how often, she lives still.
22. Sky-Bright they called her in the houses she came to,
 a wise witch who could read the future,
 skilful in wand-charms and mind-snaring magic,
 always a joy to wicked wives.
23. Then went the powers to their judgement seats,
 most holy gods, and gave thought to this:
 if the Æsir should pay the heavy price
 and all gods share wealth and worship.
24. With Odin's spear hurled at the host
 the first war in the world went on.
 The shield-wall of Ásgard was broken down,
 the Vanir with battle-spells trod the field.
25. Then went the powers to their judgement seats,
 most holy gods, and gave thought to this:
 who had mingled the air with malice
 to yield Ód's girl to the giant race.
26. Thor alone struck out in rage;
 he seldom sits still when he hears such things.
 Oaths were forgotten and binding pledges,
 the contract broken between them made.
27. She knows where Heimdall's horn is hidden
 under the shining sacred tree.
 She sees the torrent brimming over
 from Slain-Father's pledge. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
28. She sat out alone when the Old One came,
 the terrible god whose gaze she met.
 What do you ask of me? Why do you test me?
 I know all of it, Odin: where you hid your eye.
 It lies in the famous well of wisdom,
 Mímir's well, who drinks mead each morning
 from Slain-Father's pledge. *Would you learn still more—and what?*

29. Torques and arm-rings War-Father gave her
for wise speaking and wand magic.
Widely she saw into all the worlds.
30. From far away she saw valkyries coming,
ready to ride to the gods' domain,
shield-bearing Destiny, Strife, War and Battle,
Wand-wielder and Spear-strife.
31. I saw for Baldr, the blood-stained god,
Odin's child, his hidden fate.
There flourished high up above the fields,
slender and fair, the mistletoe,
32. and from that plant, which seemed so slight,
came the fatal arrow that Höd shot.
Baldr's brother was quickly born;
Odin's son was a killer at one night old.
33. His hands were unwashed, his hair uncombed,
till Baldr's assailant he brought to the pyre;
but Frigg's tears flowed in Fen Halls
for Valhalla's grief. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
34. She saw, bound fast under Cauldron Wood,
one in the likeness of malice-filled Loki.
By him sits Sigyn, and of her husband
she has little joy. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
35. There falls from the east, through poison dales,
the cold river Dread full of knives and swords.
36. To the north there stood on moonless fields
the golden hall of Sindri's race.
A second stood on never-cool ground,
the beer hall of Brimir the giant.
37. Far from the sun she saw a hall
built on Dead Man's Strand and its doors look north.
Down through the smoke-hole poison drips.
Its walls are woven from serpents' spines.

38. She saw there, wading through heavy streams,
oath-breakers and man-killers
and cunning seducers of handfast women.
There the spite-dealing dragon sucked corpses of men
and the wolf ripped them open. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
39. In the east sat a crone in Iron Wood,
suckling the spawn of Fenrir the wolf.
Out of that brood, in monstrous guise,
one will emerge to devour the moon.
40. He feasts on the flesh of dying men,
stains red with blood the homes of the gods.
Sunbeams will blacken in the summers that follow,
and weather turn wicked. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
41. The gleeful Swordsman, ogress's guardian,
Sat on a grave-mound and struck his harp.
The cock Fialarr, gleaming crimson,
crowed above him in Gibbet Wood.
42. Over the gods crowed Golden-comb,
rousing the warriors in Odin's hall,
while underground, in Hel's domain,
another cock crows, as red as rust.
43. Garm bays aloud before Hel-Mouth Cave.
The fetter will break and the wolf run free.
She holds dark knowledge: I see far forward
to the doom of the war gods, Ragnarök.
44. Brother will fight and slaughter brother;
close kin will defile each other.
It is hard on the earth; whoredom holds sway.
An axe age, a sword age, when shields split asunder,
a wind age, a wolf age, before the world founders.
No man then will spare another.
45. Mím's sons dance as the Gjallarhorn
kindles the doom with its clarion note.
Heimdall blows loudly, the horn held high.
Odin consults with Mímir's head.
The great Ash Yggdrasil shakes where it stands;
the ancient tree groans as the giant breaks loose.

46. Now Garm bays aloud before Hel-Mouth Cave.
The fetter will break and the wolf run free.
She holds dark knowledge: I see far forward
to the doom of the war gods, Ragnarök.
47. Hrym drives from the east with his shield held high.
The monstrous serpent, writhing in fury,
beats at the waves and the pale-beaked eagle
shrieks, ripping corpses. The Nail Ship is loosed.
48. From the east a longship moves through the water
filled with Muspell's host, and Loki's the helmsman,
Byleist's brother, and travelling with him
are the giant's brood and the ravening wolf.
49. What troubles the Æsir, what troubles the elves now?
All Giant Land's in uproar; the gods meet in council.
Before their stone doorways the dwarves are lamenting,
those lords of the rock face. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
50. Surt rides from the south with branch-scathing fire,
the sun of the war gods gleams from his sword.
Crag's crumble to scree and troll-wives roam free.
Armed men march from Hel as the sky splits asunder.
51. Then Frigg must suffer her second grief
when Odin goes forth to fight the wolf,
while Beli's bright slayer battles with Surt,
for Frigg's darling there must fall.
52. Then comes the great son of the Battle-Father,
Vidar, to fight with the slaughtering beast.
His hand thrusts the blade into Loki's son
right to the heart, avenging his father.
53. Then comes Thor, mighty offspring of Earth,
Odin's son, to fight with the serpent.
Midgard's defender strikes in his fury—
All mortals now must abandon their home.
Nine steps back takes Earth's son,
Spent from the spittle of the shameless viper.

54. The sun starts to blacken, earth sinks in the sea,
 the bright stars fall out of the sky,
 fierce ash-clouds rage against life-feeding fire,
 and flames flicker high against heaven itself.
55. Now Garm bays aloud before Hel-Mouth Cave.
 The fetter will break and the wolf run free.
 She holds dark knowledge: I see far forward
 to the doom of the war gods, Ragnarök.
56. A second time she sees Earth rise
 out of the ocean, growing green.
 Waterfalls flow where the eagle soars,
 hunting for fish on the high fells.
57. The Æsir meet in Idavöll,
 and speak again of the earth-girdling serpent,
 remember together mighty matters
 and the ancient runes of the great god Odin.
58. Then will be found again in the grass
 the marvellous golden chequers lying,
 that once they had owned when time was new.
59. Then cornfields will flourish that never were sown,
 all ills will be mended, Baldr will return.
 Höd and Baldr will dwell in the walls of Valhalla,
 sanctuary of war gods. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
60. Then shall Hœnir cast lots with twigs,
 and the two brothers' sons will make their home
 in the wind's wide realm. *Would you learn still more—and what?*
61. Fairer than the sun she sees a hall,
 thatched with gold it stands at Gimlé.
 There shall the righteous dwell forever,
 blessed all their lives with lasting joy.
62. Then comes the dragon flying darkly,
 glimmering serpent from moonless mountains.
 Over the battle-field Spite-Dealer flies,
 wings heavy with corpses. Now she sinks down.

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The Spaewife's Prophecy is dedicated with love to the memory of my father, Barnet Woolf, who found the idea of Old Norse irresistibly comic, but taught me by example how to write verse for the speaking voice.

Notes

The Spaewife's Prophecy can seem quite opaque to present-day readers, both because the original hearers of the poem would have known about the many characters and stories to which it obliquely refers and because, in Andy Orchard's words, "the confusing array of shared names of apparently different entities, of multiple names for the same individual and of seemingly transparent names that define specific attributes has contributed greatly to muddying the waters of understanding" (xliv). I hope that the following notes will remove at least some of the confusion for the general reader without lessening the mysterious power of the poem, and that Norse scholars will forgive the inevitable simplifications and omissions.

In order to make the translation reader-friendly, I have replaced the Icelandic characters *ð*, *þ*, and *ǫ* with *d*, *th*, and *ö* respectively, omitted the nominative singular final *r* from proper names except in the case of Baldr, and used the familiar English forms of the names Odin and Thor.

1: The Icelandic title of the poem, *Völuspá*, means the prophecy of the *völva*, a seeress or spaewife who is summoned up by the god Odin to reveal the ominous future that awaits the *Æsir*, the Norse gods of *Ásgard*. The final words of the poem, and comparison with the related poem *Baldrs Draumar* [*Baldr's Dreams*], strongly suggest that he has raised her from the dead. Before telling Odin what he really wants to know, the spaewife proves her credentials by beginning her story at the very dawn of time, addressing it both to the god who has summoned her and to a human audience of "Heimdall's children."

In the poem *Rígsþula* [*Rig's List*], Heimdall, the watchman of the gods, disguises himself under the name of Ríg (the Irish word for king) and goes on a journey on which he rewards three couples who share their board and bed with him by fathering a son in each house he visits. Great grandfather and great grandmother offer him a loaf of coarse bread as part of the best meal they can put on the table and, nine months later, great grandmother gives birth to Thrall, a coarse and

clumsy but cheerful lad who happily marries a girl just like himself and becomes the ancestor of all serfs. Grandfather and grandmother offer Rig a wholemeal loaf along with a filling and tasty supper, and grandmother's son is the red-haired and ruddy-faced Carl, ancestor of all farmers, while father and mother offer fine white bread and roast meat, washed down with goblets of wine, and mother's blond son Jarl, with his fierce eyes like a young snake, becomes the ancestor of earls and kings. Since all classes of men are hallowed and related to each other by their descent from the god, the spæwife is speaking to all mankind.

Odin is a god with many names. Here the spæwife addresses him as *Valfǫðr*, the father of brave warriors slain in battle, who after death spend their days fighting and their nights feasting in Valhalla, the hall of the slain.

2: The spæwife claims she was raised by giants whose race existed before the cosmos took shape, and her earliest memories suggest that the same is true of herself, since she can remember the World Tree Yggdrasil before it grew above the ground. The giants are ancient enemies of the Æsir, so the spæwife owes no allegiance to Odin though she obeys his command to speak. The nine worlds are the subterranean realms of the dead.

3: Snorri Sturluson relates in his *Prose Edda* how the primordial giant Ymir was created from the vapour that formed when the poisonous frozen rivers of Niflheim, the fog-world which would later be ruled over by Hel, goddess of the dead, met "the sparks and molten particles that came flying out of the world of Muspell," a region of fire. Snorri gives the mysterious name of Ginnunga gap to the vacant chasm where "the rime and the blowing of the warmth met" (10). While the etymology of this name is unclear, John Lindow, following Jan de Vries, concludes that it "was probably a proto-space filled with magic powers" (141).

4: In Snorri's version of the creation myth, the frost-giants were generated from Ymir's body, while the frost from which Ymir himself was created formed a cow called Audhumla who fed Ymir with four rivers of milk and also licked a beautiful and powerful man called Búri into being out of the salty ice. Búri's son Bur married Bestla, the daughter of one of the giants, and their son Odin, together with his brothers Vili and Vé, killed and dismembered their maternal ancestor Ymir and made the earth and sea from his flesh and blood and the dome of the sky from his skull, thus beginning the ancient enmity between the Æsir and the giants, which will reach its terrible climax at Ragnarök, the doom (though Snorri calls it the twilight) of the gods.

The stony hall on which the sun shines is Midgard (Tolkien's Middle Earth), the enclosed space at the centre of the cosmos which will presently be inhabited by human beings, and the green leeks, which are the first plants to grow there, are generated by that fertilizing heat. Ursula Dronke points out that "in later colloquial usage *laukr* [leek] might refer to a variety of plants, including grass,"

but she is surely right to conclude that “it is improbable that the poet intended *laukr* to signify no more than grass here” (116). In their study, *Runic Amulets and Magic Objects*, Mindy MacLeod and Bernard Mees tell us that the leek was a phallic symbol, “associated with penises, lust and fertility in Germanic tradition” (43), while in Old Norse poetry leeks also have a different kind of potency: *ímunlaukr* (battle-leek), *benlaukr* (wound-leek), and *randar laukr* (shield’s leek) are all kennings for swords. The symbolic power of what might appear to us to be a humble and even a comic plant becomes apparent in *Guðrúnarkviða in forna* [*The Old Song of Guðrún*] when the grief-stricken Guðrún describes her husband Sigurd as surpassing her brothers who murdered him

like a green leek sprung up from the grass,
 or a tall stag among fallow deer,
 or red-glowing gold beside grey silver.
 (stanza 2, my translation)

Whether we understand the word “leeks” literally or metaphorically here, we need to forget the cropped, pallid vegetables of the supermarket and imagine the newly created earth made fertile by thrusting, green vegetation crowned with strong, blade-shaped leaves.

5–6: The gods now meet in council and establish time in the cosmos by imposing order on the heavenly bodies. This can be seen as the start of civilization or, for critics of a more apocalyptic turn of mind, such as Haraldur Bessason, as the beginning of the end for the Æsir:

No sooner have the heavenly bodies found their appropriate places in the firmament than the gods proceed with their calendric computations. They distinguish between night and day and divide the day into shorter periods. This concept of time has a direct bearing upon the terminal illness of the gods.... We notice that the gods only divide the day into shorter units of time and leave the night undivided. In the world of man, the night therefore parallels, as it were, an earlier description of the primeval void in which there is continuous darkness.
 (73)

It seems unlikely, though, that the inhabitants of the land of the midnight sun would have thought of night in precisely these terms, and a closer look at how the Icelanders measured time suggests a different interpretation.

Thorsteinn Vilhjálmsson points out that “in the North... the celestial pole is high in the sky and the diurnal orbits of the sun and the moon do not rise nearly as steeply as they do in the South,” which “means... that they can naturally be referred to the horizon almost all the time” (93), enabling the landscape around any given point to be used as a clock. In this system, the 24 hours are divided by

three into eight “daymarks” corresponding to points on the horizon, which could be indicated by stone cairns if natural landmarks were lacking. Two of the names given by the gods are daymark names: *miðr dagr* (midday) and *undorn* (3 p.m., also known as *nón*, from the Latin for nine, since 3 p.m. is the ninth daytime hour when morning starts at 6 a.m.), and if we take night, morning, and evening to refer to *miðnætti* (midnight) *miðr morgun* (mid-morning: 6 a.m.) and *miðr aptann* (mid-evening: 6 p.m.) then we can see that the naming of the gods fixes the daymarks in the heavens just as an Icelandic farmer would mark them out on the skyline surrounding his farmhouse. Kirsten Hastrup tells us that for the Icelanders, “the day was defined by the visible movements of the sun, and this was directly acknowledged in the name given to this particular unit of physical time: *sólarhringr*, ‘sun-ring’ or ‘sun-course’” (19). By fixing the daymarks, with midnight as the starting point, which gives birth to all the rest, the gods establish the sun-ring, enabling the sun to learn the limits of her hall, the stars to find their rightful places in the sky, the moon to discover his power as he waxes and wanes through the 28 days of the lunar month, and the orderly procession of time to begin.

Bessason is right, though, to detect an ominous note here. The repetition of the opening lines of stanza 6, which form the first of the poem’s three refrains, will gradually chart the gods’ descent first into corruption and then into powerlessness in the face of their impending doom, when the moon will be consumed and the skies will blacken into “continuous darkness” as Ragnarök culminates in the extinction of the sun and the stars.

7: The meaning of *Idavöll*, the name of the plain where the gods now gather to engage in the arts and pleasures of their golden age, is unclear. John Lindow suggests that it may mean “either ‘eternal field’ or perhaps ‘shimmering field’ or even ‘field of pursuits [of the gods]’” (198), while Dronke translates it as Eddying Plain, on the assumption that the name “refers to the cyclic ebb and flow of the world and its gods, a perpetually returning cosmos” (118). At this stage in the story, the *Æsir* are builders and makers. There are as yet no human worshippers, so they raise altars and temples to themselves and also practice the ancient and magical arts of the smith. They are both goldsmiths and blacksmiths, smelting gold ore in the furnace and forging the tongs which blacksmiths use to hold red-hot iron.

8: Among the treasures which the *Æsir* fashion for themselves are the gold playing-pieces used in the game of the gods. While no one knows for certain how this mysterious board-game was played, we can guess from the end of the poem that it had cosmic significance. The ominous arrival of the three ogresses, which brings an end both to the game and to the golden age of the gods, must refer to a story known to the original audience and now lost. They come from the land

of the giants, ancient enemies of the Æsir, but seem to bear some resemblance to the norms, the Norse version of the Fates, who will appear later in the poem.

9: For the second time the gods meet in council, and plan the creation of the dwarves “ór Brimis blóði ok ór Bláins leggiom” [from Brimir’s blood and Bláinn’s limbs]. Both Brimir and Bláinn are names for the primordial giant, Ymir, whose blood has become the ocean and whose bones have become the mountains inside of which the dwarves will live. Dronke suggests that “when they lose their birthright of easy gold, the gods arrange for an alternative source, through the creation of creatures who will reside where gold is, in the stony veins of the earth” (38). However, the poem never mentions dwarves supplying the gods with gold, and their creation from rock and salt water is followed by the creation of human beings from logs of wood washed up by the sea. Since, in the mythological cosmos of the poem, both dwarves and humans exist, both have to be created.

10–16: These verses contain the *Dvergatal*, an interpolated catalogue of dwarf names. While I have omitted the *Dvergatal* from my translation (it was not originally part of the poem, none of the dwarves it lists play any part in the story, and a recitation of their 63 names would be likely to weary a modern audience), its attachment to *Völuspá* casts a revealing light on the oral culture of the Icelanders. Randall Jarrell says of the Norse poets that they “loved nothing so much as referring to the very dishes on the table by elaborate descriptive epithets—periphrases, kennings—which their hearers had to be specially educated to understand. Loved nothing so much, that is, except riddles” (1973, 17). Since the creation of both kennings and riddles depended on an extensive knowledge of “the names of gods, dwarfs, giants, valkyries, sea kings as well as synonyms for man, woman, weapons, battle, sea, ship etc.” (Simek 332), lists of these things became a literary genre in their own right, and the *Dvergatal* is just such a list, or *thula*; and since lists are not easy things to remember, attaching them to memorable texts was an ingenious way of making sure they were not forgotten.

17: The first word of this stanza, *Unz* [until], suggests that something must have been omitted from the poem when the *Dvergatal* was added to it. The house the gods visit is Midgard. Ask and Embla, who become the first man and woman, are “lying helpless” because they are logs of driftwood washed up on the shore until the gods bring them to life. Ask means ash but the derivation of Embla’s name is unclear; it is usually translated as elm but it may mean vine, although that does not really fit a log of driftwood.

18: Two of the three gods whose gifts bring Ask and Embla to life are rather mysterious figures, and there is some uncertainty too about the nature of the gifts themselves. Rudolf Simek tells us that Hœnir “has been seen as a god of the heavens, of the clouds, even as a sun-god or as a water-god, mostly as a swan or

stork shaped bird-god, a bird-shaped personification of Odin's intellectual abilities," but he adds that "all of these explanations are extremely unsatisfactory" (156). Hœnir, who reappears as a diviner at the end of the poem, gives the gift of *óðr*, which can mean thought, or voice, or even poetry. I have taken it that Odin and Hœnir between them give two gifts which imply a third: if you have both breath and thought, you have a voice.

Lódur is a god whose identity has been entirely lost. Some scholars have suggested that he may in fact be the trickster Loki, Odin's blood-brother and deadly adversary, whose association with fire might be relevant here. However, though undoubtedly powerful, Loki could hardly be described as kindly, and it is hard to imagine him performing any good deed that did not have a sting in the tail. The gift of *lá*, which Lódur gives to Ask and Embla, is also puzzling, as its primary meaning is the lapping of waves along the seashore, though here it must mean a different kind of liquid, the warm blood that transforms dead wood into living flesh. The gift of *lá* comes with the addition of *litr góðr*, which literally means good colour or appearance, and is usually understood in a cosmetic sense: Dronke translates it as "comely hues" (11). However, the idea that the first man and woman must have been beautiful, natural as it may seem to a Christian audience, requires the biblical myth of the Fall to account for the homely appearance of much of the subsequent human race, something which in the case of *Rígsþula's* cheerfully ugly Thrall is due instead to his having been fathered by a god. Another way of interpreting this stanza would be to take it that each of the three gods offers a single gift, and that *litr góðr* is a consequence of Lódur's gift of *lá* just as the power of speech is a consequence of Odin and Hœnir's gifts of breath and thought.

While the pared-down diction of the poem means that visual description is kept to a minimum, no Icelander would have had a problem in visualizing the pair of driftwood logs that the three gods find on the shore. "Driftwood has always been a valuable resource in Iceland, where tall straight trees are not commonly found. Much of Iceland's driftwood originates in Siberia, and after floating across the Arctic Ocean, it accumulates on north-facing coasts in Iceland. From the saga age into the modern age, Icelanders have used driftwood to supply the wood for many of their needs" (Short 122). For the English-speaking reader, who may be more familiar with driftwood as the name of a paint effect, the artist Paul Nash's description of two dead elm trees offers a sense of how Ask and Embla might have appeared before their transformation into flesh and blood suffused them with living colour.

Both trees were by now bleached to a ghastly pallor wherever the bark had broken and fallen away. At a distance in sunlight, they looked literally dead- white, but,

at close range, their surfaces disclosed many inequalities of tone and subtle variety of ashen tints.

(12)

19: The creation is now complete, and the World Tree Yggdrasil is fully grown, with branches and roots that stretch out over all the regions of the cosmos. Yggdrasil is evergreen but, like the universe of which it is the axis, it is not everlasting. Its roots are continually gnawed by the dragon Níðhogg (Spite-Dealer) and a horde of other serpents, while four harts browse on its foliage. However, as Snorri tells us, it is protected by “the norns that dwell by Weird’s well” who “take water from the well each day and with it the mud that lies round the well and pour it up over the ash so that its branches may not rot or decay. And this water is so holy that all things that come into that well go as white as the membrane called the skin that lies round the inside of an eggshell” (19). These libations of white mud make the great tree shine with renewed fertility. “Weird’s well” means the well of Fate; the Old English *wyrd* is the equivalent of the Norse *urðr*, a sense that still survives in the Scots idiom “to dree one’s weird” [to endure one’s fate]. The three witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* are “weird sisters” not because they are strange beings but because they are a local version of the Roman *Parcae*, the Fates.

20: The three lake-dwelling wise women are the norns, and they too are “weird sisters.” As their names suggest, they constitute an implacable version of the past, the present, and the future. *Urðr*, who shares her name with the well, represents what had to happen, while *Verðandi* [Becoming] represents what is in the unstoppable process of happening. Since a past and a present conceived in this way predetermine the future, it is these two who cut the rune staves that cryptically spell out the fates not only of humankind (including the now human Ask and Embla) but, as we will later discover, of the gods themselves. *Skuld*, the third norn, has a name which means Shall or Must: she represents what is inevitably going to happen. We have already moved a long way from the golden age of the gods, and it is no surprise that the next few stanzas plunge them into conflict.

21: The first war in the world, between the *Æsir* and a rival tribe of gods, the *Vanir*, begins with two stanzas that have to be considered together, each of them concerned with an enigmatic female figure. The nature and identity of Gullveig and Heiðr, whose names I have translated as Goldenpower and Sky-Bright, has generated a vast amount of critical debate. The great Norse scholar Gabriel Turville-Petre, writing in 1953, had no doubts about the first of them:

Yet another wicked woman came to the city of the gods, and she was called Gullveig; a name which probably means ‘Gold-Power’, and symbolizes the corrupting

influence of gold. The gods riddled Gullveig with spears, and burnt her three times, but she lives to this day. The youthful innocence of the gods was now past; avarice and treachery were enkindled in their hearts. They engaged in wars and broke their covenants. Their happiness and welfare declined with their morals.
(57)

While it is fair to say that the attitude to worldly wealth of a dedicated and scrupulous professor of Old Icelandic in the years of austerity immediately following the Second World War might well have echoed that of the unknown cleric who set down the poem on the vellum of *Codex Regius*, there are good reasons to suppose that it was not also shared by the gods of Ásgard, whose previous experience as goldsmiths would in any case have taught them that gold is refined, not destroyed, by burning. As John McKinnell points out, “if the defining vices of the gods are oath-breaking and murder” (crimes that they will commit in the aftermath of the Æsir Vanir war), “and greed for gold... it seems odd that evil men are later punished for oath-breaking, murder and—not the greed for gold, as we might expect, but the seduction of other men’s wives” (2014, 35). Instead of representing the corrupting influence of gold, he suggests it is likely that “the poem’s first audience” would have recognized Gullveig as “a female figure made of, wearing or possessing gold, and endowed with military strength” (48).

In the context of the war against the Vanir, such a figure is not hard to find. Dronke suggests that the Æsir, in attacking Gullveig in Odin’s Hall, “are desecrating and trying to destroy a golden image of the ‘bride of the Vanir’, Vanabrúðr Freyja, whose divinity characteristically manifests itself in a multiplicity of distinct figures with distinct names” (41). The Vanir are fertility gods who practice brother sister incest, so the beautiful Freyja is probably the consort of her handsome brother Frey, but she also has a mysteriously absent lover or husband called Óð, for whose loss she weeps tears made of gold. As McKinnell suggests, she is also “endowed with military strength” (2014, 48); Snorri tells us that “wherever she rides to battle she gets half the slain, and the other half Odin” (24).

22: In the opening line of stanza 21, the spæwife refers to herself for the first time in the third person. Whether we accept Dronke’s theory that the speaker is summoning up other spirit voices or opt for the simpler explanation that “the eddic poems often present different viewpoints on the same action, because the poems were kept alive by being recited for many centuries during which they were constantly subject to reshaping by their performers” (Sigurðsson 4), the change of pronoun creates ambiguity about who is being referred to at the start of stanza 22. This has caused some scholars to speculate that Heiðr may not be Gullveig but the spæwife herself, and even (as I discuss in my introduction) to rearrange the poem accordingly. However, if we compare the spæwife’s trenchant condemnation of seduction and incest later in the poem with Freyja’s own reputation for indulging in both, and add in Snorri’s advice that “it is good to

pray to her concerning love affairs” (24), it is easy to see which of the two would be more likely to give delight to wicked wives. The word used for this delight, *angan*, literally means fragrance, suggesting a sensual aspect to Heiðr’s magic powers.

If the Æsir Vanir war is a cult war, in which an established religion tries to prevent the rise of a competing creed, we might expect, after the failure of an official attempt to stamp it out, to see the new belief system (like the Greek cult of Dionysus) strengthening its appeal to the less powerful members of society, including women.

Another puzzle in this stanza is the meaning of the name Heiðr, which could come from the adjective *heiðr*, used to describe the brightness of the sky and the heavenly bodies, or from the feminine noun *heiðr*, which means heath or forest, or from the masculine noun *heiðr*, which means honour. I have chosen the first of these, to suggest that the Sky-Bright Heiðr, like the gleaming golden Gullveig, is a manifestation of Freyja.

23: Once again the gods go to their high thrones, not in order to perform an act of creation but to debate whether they should share their godhead, and the offerings of their human worshippers, with these powerful interlopers.

24: Far from attempting to curb their own avarice, the Æsir decide to wage outright war, but the Vanir have battle spells that make them proof against the magic power of Odin’s spear, which will later cause the defeat of any army over which it is hurled. The wooden ramparts of Ásgard are destroyed in the ensuing conflict.

25: The Æsir Vanir war ends with a truce and an exchange of hostages, which bring Freyja, together with her father Njörd and her brother Frey, to Ásgard. All three become part of the pantheon of the Norse gods, but now the Æsir risk losing not only Freyja but also the sun and the moon as payment to a master builder who offered to replace their broken ramparts with a giant-proof wall of stone. The Æsir agreed to the bargain on condition that the builder completed the wall single-handedly in the course of a winter, confident that this would be beyond his powers, but with three days left before the beginning of summer, the work is almost done.

With the fertility goddess Freyja given in marriage to the master builder and the sun and moon gone from the sky, the Æsir would face a dark and barren future, so they meet in council yet again, this time to find someone to blame for the impending catastrophe (largely of their own making). The question they ask effectively answers itself; where there is malice and mischief in the air, you can expect to find Loki the trickster. The master builder has made such good progress with his seemingly impossible task because Loki persuaded the Æsir to let him have the help of his powerful stallion. Urgent measures are needed if the gods

are to invoke the penalty clause so, as Lindow comments, Loki “sacrifices his honor or worse to help the *æsir*.” He “changes himself into a mare to seduce the master builder’s horse and bears a foal from it, not something that would enhance a man’s reputation in the hyper-masculine society that was medieval Iceland” (217). This time, Loki has chosen to be his own fall guy and use his mischief-making to undo the effects of his malice, but the stanza contains a warning that such malice holds the power to poison the air and threaten the very sources of light and life.

26: Snorri spells out how this episode ends:

when the builder realized that the work was not going to be completed, then the builder got into a giant rage. But when the *Æsir* saw for certain that it was a mountain-giant that they had there, then the oaths were disregarded and they called upon Thor and he came in a trice and the next thing was that *Miöllnir* [Thor’s hammer] was raised aloft. Then he paid the builder’s wages and it wasn’t the sun and moon, instead he stopped him from living in Giantland and struck the first blow so that his skull was shattered into fragments.

(36)

The gods are now oath-breakers and murderers, and their ancient enmity with the giants, a much more dangerous feud than their rivalry with the *Vanir*, has become yet more bitter.

27: As the history of the cosmos reaches the narrative present moment, the *spæwife* herself becomes a character in the story. In Sigurður Nordal’s words, in the following stanzas “the sibyl is both narrator and subject. She speaks of herself in the third person, as is often done in ancient poems, even where there is less reason to do so” (96). She begins by reaffirming her possession of occult knowledge, linking it to the two gods invoked at the start of the poem. Both *Heimdall*’s horn and *Odin*’s eye are hidden in the well of wisdom, one of three wells underneath the World Tree, *Yggdrasil*. Later in the poem, the blowing of *Heimdall*’s horn, the *Gjallarhorn*, will herald the beginning of the last fatal battle between the *Æsir* and the giants.

28: The *spæwife* now confronts *Odin*, Father of the War Slain, face to face. “When all portents are ominous and the gods can no longer see what course to follow, *Óðinn* must go to the *vǫlva*, where she sits in the open air practising her magic arts, and ask to buy more perilous knowledge from her” (*Fidjestøl* 314). The power balance in this encounter is entirely on the *spæwife*’s side. She meets *Odin*’s challenging gaze, demonstrates her supernatural credentials by telling him, as she has already told her human audience, that she knows the hiding place of the eye that he pledged to *Mímir*, owner of the well, in exchange for wisdom,

and mocks the one-eyed god's need of her own gift of vision in a refrain that she will repeat throughout the rest of the poem.

As Fidjestøl suggests, the spæwife's sitting out alone has a magical significance. The ritual practice of *útisetá* [sitting outside] "required staying out at night, preferably at a crossroads, to obtain secret information" by communicating with spirits. "Poetic and narrative texts suggest that originally this ritual was limited to females." It was later prohibited by the church (Jochens 116-17).

29: Odin rewards the spæwife in advance for her prophecy. From this point on, the poem will be concerned with the narrative future, but as the names of the *norns* made clear, this is a universe in which what has happened dictates what must happen, and both are equally unchangeable. Odin is powerless to avert the terrible events she reveals to him.

30: The prophecy begins with a vision of the valkyries, Odin's handmaids who transport dead warriors to Valhalla, the hall of the slain. They are coming for Odin's son Baldr, unaware that he will die through treachery and not in battle. I have omitted a second interpolated passage:

Now have been named the war leader's women,
valkyries ready to ride the earth,

since turning the riding of the valkyries from a portent into a *thula* would break the dramatic tension just as the spæwife is about to reveal to Odin the tragic fate awaiting his son.

31–33: In Snorri's version of the story, Baldr, the most beautiful and beloved of the gods, is troubled by bad dreams, so his mother Frigg asks everything in the world, animate and inanimate, to swear never to hurt him, omitting only the green mistletoe which seems too young to do him any harm. The *Æsir* then amuse themselves by throwing weapons at the apparently invincible Baldr, until Loki, who has tricked the details of the oath from Frigg while disguised as a woman, sharpens a twig of mistletoe into a lethal dart and persuades Baldr's blind half-brother Höd to join in the game with his treacherous help. Baldr is struck by the dart and falls down dead, leaving the *Æsir* overwhelmed with grief.

The spæwife's version of the story contains the ambiguous phrase *blóðgom tívör*, which could mean either blood-stained god or blood-stained sacrifice, leading some scholars, including Dronke, to interpret the story as a sacrificial fertility ritual initiated by Odin himself. "Men sacrifice in winter for the renewal of the year and its growth," and the sacrificial spear lends "to the dying god the mistletoe's evergreen connotation of survival through winter's death" (Dronke 53). However, as Lindow points out, "analysis of the Baldr story as Odinic ritual

runs up against the fact that in *Völuspá* Baldr's death leads directly to Ragnarök" (69), and the idea of a winter sacrifice is contradicted by Baldr's radiant youth. Snorri describes him as "so fair in appearance and so bright that light shines from him" (23), while the poem calls him *Óðins barn* [Odin's child], a word which Dronke points out "is nowhere else used of a god" (53). The idea of "mistletoe's evergreen connotation of survival" may be misleading too. Mistletoe does not grow in Iceland, and the poem's description of it as "slender and fair" may suggest that an unfamiliar plant was being imagined as a tall and graceful sapling or shrub rather than the evergreen hemiparasite to which Virgil compared the golden bough.

The *spæwif*e adds a further story in which Odin fathers a monstrous child on the giantess Rind who, the night after he is born, kills *Baldrs andskoti* [the one who shot Baldr]. This vengeance on the unfortunate Höd for a crime for which he is morally blameless though physically responsible contrasts strikingly with a similar episode in *Beowulf* in which Hæthcyn accidentally shoots and kills his brother, a heartbreaking wrong for which there can be no legal redress. As Höd's body burns on the pyre, Frigg weeps in her watery palace, Fensalir [Fen Halls], for Valhalla's grief at the loss of Baldr, who has been claimed not by the valkyries but by Hel, the goddess of the dead.

Hel is one of three monstrous offspring fathered by Loki on an ogress called Angrboda; her brothers are the Midgard serpent and Fenrir the wolf. The *Æsir* rightly perceived these newborn infants to be potential threats to the safety of Ásgard and dealt with them accordingly, throwing the serpent into the sea, where it grew so large that it eventually girdled the earth, banishing Hel to rule over the nine realms of the dead and chaining Fenrir with an unbreakable band, a task which could only be accomplished after the god Týr agreed to place his right hand (which was duly bitten off) in the monster's mouth as a pledge of the *Æsir*'s good faith.

Frigg's tears are a reminder of another story narrated by Snorri, in which Odin's son Hermód rides his father's eight-legged horse Sleipnir, ironically, the very foal to which Loki gave birth, down to Hel (not the Christian place of eternal punishment but the Norse underworld that shares a name with its presiding goddess) to beg for Baldr's release. The condition set by the goddess is that all things, animate and inanimate, must first weep for Baldr, and accordingly even "the stones and trees and every metal" shed tears, "just as you will have seen that these things weep when they come out of frost and into heat" (Snorri Sturluson 51). In an inevitable parallel with Baldr's killing, this otherwise universal mourning is sabotaged by an old giantess sitting in a cave who gives her name as Thökk [Liking or Thanks] and says that she will weep dry tears for Baldr and let Hel keep what she has. Thökk is presumably Loki himself, once again in female

guise, gloating over his victory, though he will not get the chance to do so for long.

34: The punishment that the Æsir devise for Loki is also described by Snorri. They capture his two sons, Váli and Narfi, and turn Váli into a wolf that rips his brother apart. Loki is then bound to three great stones with his son's entrails, which turn to iron, holding him fast. Then a venomous snake is fastened above him, and although his wife Sigyn holds a bowl to catch the poison, when the bowl is full and she must leave to empty it, the poison drips onto Loki's face and his convulsions cause earthquakes. He will lie bound like this until Ragnarøk. His punishment, which explains the seismic activity of Iceland's volcanic landscape, takes place in a subterranean cavern beneath the hot springs of Cauldron Wood.

35: The next few stanzas describe sinister features of the underworld, beginning with a river that, by contrast with the volcanic springs of Cauldron Wood, has waters so bitterly cold that they can kill. The east, where the giants live, is an ominous direction for the Æsir.

36: At this point, Snorri's version of the story radically alters the chronology of *Völuspá*, listing the three halls of stanzas 36 and 37 among the "many mansions that are good, and many that are bad" that will exist after Ragnarøk and making both Sindri and Brimir the names of the halls themselves rather than their owners (56). This rearrangement, along with the echo of John's Gospel chapter 14, verse 2: "in my Father's house are many mansions," turns the passage into an account of a post-apocalyptic heaven and hell. In the spæwifé's vision, Ragnarøk is still ominously in the future, and the uncanny landscapes she sees are full of portents of its approach. The gold hall of the dwarf Sindri, deep in the rock, and the warm beer hall of the giant Brimir, under the sea, may seem to offer short-lived relief from the torturing of Loki and the deadly cold river, but they are a lead-in to the third hall, in which vengeance is exacted for human crimes corresponding to those of the gods.

37–38: Snorri describes the hall on Dead Man's Strand as being "woven out of snakes' bodies like a wattled house, and the snakes' heads all face inside the house and spit poison so that rivers of poison flow along the hall, and wading those rivers are oathbreakers and murderers" (56). The poison-cold river of stanza 35 has become a torrent of snake venom (as in the punishment of Loki) through which human evil-doers are condemned to wade. The blood-sucking dragon is Spite-Dealer [Níðhǫgg], though the corpse-rending wolf cannot be Fenrir, who has yet to break free from his bonds.

There are no wolves in Iceland, where "when the settlers arrived, the arctic fox and the field mouse were the only land mammals on the island," with the occasional exception of "solitary polar bears travelling on ice floes from

Greenland" (Byock 28), but the settlers will have brought memories of wolves with them from Norway, and tales of these supposedly savage creatures will doubtless have grown in the telling. From this point on, the poem returns insistently to the idea of the wolf as a portent of the coming doom.

39–40: While the ancient crone, suckling her wolf-brood under the leafless trees of an iron forest, offers us a nightmare glimpse of a world in which procreation has become unnatural, the exploits of her moon-devouring son may reflect a real and terrifying act of nature. At the period when the poem was composed, the Eldgjá [Fire Chasm] volcanic eruption of 934 and its atmospheric consequences may still have been on the cusp of living memory. "This lava outpouring was one of the two largest terrestrial fissure eruptions of the last 11 centuries," and the cloud of toxic gases that it released "dimmed and reddened the sun" and caused "a very cold winter, famine, and a widespread disease epidemic" not only in Iceland but across Europe and the Middle East (Stothers 715).

41–42: The harpist, *gláðr Eggþér*, who plays on a grave-mound while the three cocks rouse the giants, the gods, and the host of Hel to prepare for Ragnarök, creates a problem for the translator: how, in all seriousness, can the build-up to a war that will end the world begin with a character called happy Eggthér? His job description is also a puzzle: he could be a giantess's herdsman or a giantess's guardian, while Henry Adams Bellows suggests that he "seems to be the watchman of the giants, as Heimdall is that of the gods" (18). Dronke, rather absurdly, tells us that "nothing is known of this pastoral giant, guarding his sheep and playing his harp" (143), though the poem makes no mention of sheep, and we might expect a giantess's herdsman to be in charge of something more sinister.

Lindow speculates that "the giantess in question" might be the crone of the previous stanza, and "possibly therefore Angrboda" (in which case her wolf offspring must have been incestuously fathered by her monstrous wolf son). He dryly adds, "Why anyone working for her would be happy is unexplained; perhaps Eggthér was especially fond of the harp" (102). Dronke, despite adding a flock of sheep to Gibbet Wood, has a convincing answer to this. "Any minstrel striking his harp to inspire warriors before a battle must appear *gláðr*—confident, elated at the strenuous prospect of destroying an enemy. But this minstrel exulted with good reason: he knew that this time the giants would be the destroyers" (56).

I have dealt with the problem of Eggthér's name, which sounds inescapably comic to an English-speaker, by considering its meaning. As Lindow points out, it is "identical to that of Ecgtheow, who in the Old English epic *Beowulf* is the

father of Beowulf" (102), and while that is probably just a coincidence, both names mean Sword-thane; *egg* in Norse is the cutting edge of a sword blade.

43: In the third of the poem's refrains, the *spæwif*'s prediction becomes a vision of apocalypse. Garm may be the Norse equivalent of the hound Cerberus, or he may be Fenrir himself, the great wolf who will break his fetter and run free before Ragnarök. *Gnipahellir* [Gnipa Cave], where his baying echoes the crowing of the three cocks, is "the cavernous mouth of the underworld" (Dronke 56).

44: Murder becomes fratricide and seduction becomes incest as all the bonds of human society break down, as the cosmos itself is about to do.

45: Mím, or Mímir, is the owner of the well of wisdom, so his sons are probably water spirits, who cause floods as the final battle is heralded by the blowing of Heimdall's horn. The verb *leika* [to play] can also mean "to dance (used of choppy seas)" and "to lick, flicker (used of flames)" (La Farge and Tucker 158). Catastrophic floods, like the darkened sun and wicked weather of stanza 40, are a dramatic consequence of volcanic activity in Iceland. "Rather unusual things happen when a volcano erupts under an ice-cap that lies in a large crater. The hot gases, steam and molten rock, expelled at temperatures of well over 750° C, melt the lower parts of the ice. The meltwater accumulates under the ice, fills the crater, and then suddenly gushes out from beneath the ice-cap and rushes downhill at great speed like a river in flood. For perhaps a day or more, the rate of discharge can be higher than that measured at the mouth of the River Amazon" (Scarth 77).

However, the Mímir whose severed head Odin consults is not the owner of the well. He was one of the Æsir, famous for his wisdom, who was sent as a hostage to the Vanir along with Hœnir, whose own wisdom gained the admiration of his hosts until they realized that he was simply voicing Mímir's counsels and had nothing to say when Mímir was absent. Feeling cheated by this, the Vanir beheaded Mímir and returned his head to the Æsir. Odin then embalmed the head and gave it the power of speech, turning it into an oracle, although at this desperate juncture it has no advice to give. It is likely that these two versions of Mímir, both associated with wisdom, represent what Lindow calls "a conflation of figures and conceptions" (232), though it is unclear quite how they are connected to each other.

The giant who breaks free as the World Tree shakes and groans is Loki. Although he is always referred to as Loki Laufeyjarson [Loki the son of Laufey], this name is a matronymic. We may guess that his mother Laufey, about whom almost nothing is known, was a goddess, but although he lives among the Æsir as if he is one of them, Loki's father was the giant Fárbaúti, and he himself is the father of monsters. For Loki the trickster, trouble-making was a malicious game, but in causing the death of Odin's beloved son Baldr, he pushed the game too far.

In the torture chamber that the Æsir devised for him his convulsions shook the earth. Now, as he breaks free from the iron entrails that bound him and joins his father's race in the mutually destructive final battle with the gods, he has become a malignant embodiment of evil.

46: The ominous refrain is given immediacy by the addition of the word “now.”

47–48: The enemies of the Æsir approach from the east, both on land, led by the giant Hrym, who according to Snorri will be accompanied by “all the frost-giants” (54), and by sea in the longship Naglfar, steered by Loki, whose monstrous children, the Midgard serpent and Fenrir the wolf, have also broken free and joined the avenging host. Snorri tells us that Naglfar, the Nail Ship, “is made of dead people's nails, and it is worth taking care lest anyone die with untrimmed nails, since such a person contributes much material to the ship Naglfar which gods and men wish would take a long time to finish” (53). Muspell, whose name may refer to the conflagration that will destroy the world, is probably a primordial giant; his followers are “the hordes of evil beings that will invade the world at Ragnarök” (Lindow 234). Byleist's brother is Loki (nothing is known about Byleist himself).

49: As the giants prepare for battle, the gods meet in council for the final time, no longer striding impressively to their judgement seats. The spæwif's ironic questions mock their impotence in the face of impending disaster. She equates them with the equally troubled elves, lesser supernatural beings divided by Snorri into light-elves, “fairer than the sun to look at” and dark-elves who are “blacker than pitch” and live underground (19-20). The mountain-dwelling dwarves have even greater reason to lament. Their rock citadels are about to fall, but venturing outside will be just as fatal to them. When the sun rises, they will turn to stone.

50: The futility of the gods' deliberations is made plain as the fire-giant Surt rides to join the conflict, armed with the bright sword that once belonged to the god Frey, and which will now cause his death.

The third line of this stanza, unusually, has an internal rhyme, which I have preserved in translation. The Scots word “scree,” meaning a mountain slope made up of loose stones, appropriately comes from the Old Norse *skriða*, a landslide. Trolls were originally hostile giants rather than the brownie-like creatures they later became, so the troll-wives released by the crumbling of the mountains are almost as threatening as the army of dead warriors marching from Hel. All these

hostile forces come together to confront the Æsir in a cosmos that is already splitting apart.

51–52: The doomed gods now engage in single combat with their adversaries. Odin is killed by the wolf Fenrir, which in turn is killed by Odin's son Vídar. In Snorri's account, Vídar will survive Ragnarøk, along with his half-brother Váli, the killer of Höd (56). The handsome Frey, who earlier defeated the giant Beli armed only with a stag's antler, kills and is killed by Surt.

Frigg's sorrow at the loss of her husband is emphasized by the unexpectedly intimate word *angan*, used earlier in the poem to describe the delight that the wicked wives took in Sky-Bright's magic. Here it tenderly sexualizes Frigg's love for Odin as she faces the certainty of his violent death, allowing us to glimpse the cosmic tragedy for a moment through the lens of her personal grief.

53: The final struggle is between Thor and the Midgard serpent. Despite fighting with berserker rage, Thor fails to save Midgard and its human inhabitants, who must now abandon their mortal home, and although he overcomes the serpent, he is himself overcome by the venom of its dying spittle. In Dronke's moving words, "his steps are numbered, as he treads each realm of death, and he has barely the strength to take them" (59). The final lines of the stanza are among the most ambiguous in the poem, leaving it unclear whether Thor or the serpent is without fear of shame, but the act of spitting poison at an adversary he has failed to defeat in equal combat is so despicable that I have attributed the lack of concern to the serpent.

54: The description of the end of the world again resembles a major volcanic eruption, with ash clouds blotting out the sun and stars and molten lava shooting up into the sky. Stothers tells us that "two recent studies" of the Eldgjá eruption "have determined that intense fire-fountaining took place during the most active phases... while violent explosions due to the mixing of magma with meltwater lofted tephra [volcanic ash] and gas" into the stratosphere (722). However, at the climax of the devastation caused by Ragnarøk, the whole earth sinks into the sea and is destroyed.

55: The final repetition of the refrain underlines the apocalyptic vision of the previous stanza while also reminding us that this is something foreseen that still lies threateningly in the future.

56: The lines describing the green earth that rises again out of the sea offer a paradisaical vision of Iceland in a single brilliant image. In W. B. Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium," "the salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas" (217) are symbols of a *Tír nan nÓg* [Land of Youth] in which the aging poet no longer has a place, but in *Völuspá*, written a thousand years earlier, they signify a world both

restored and made new. As the salmon leap up the waterfalls to spawn, the “pale-beaked eagle,” which earlier tore at the corpses of the drowned as the Midgard serpent lashed the waves with its monstrous cable of a body, is transformed into a pale-headed, yellow-beaked sea eagle swooping down on its natural prey.

57–59: Snorri tells us that in this new earth,

crops will grow unsown. Vídar and Váli will be alive, the sea and Surt's fire not having harmed them, and they will dwell on Idavoll, where Asgard had been previously. And then Thor's sons Modi and Magni will arrive, bringing Miollnir. After that Baldr and Hod will arrive from Hel. Then they will all sit down together and talk and discuss their mysteries and speak of the things that had happened in former times, of the Midgard serpent and Fenriswolf. Then they will find in the grass the golden playing pieces that had belonged to the Æsir.

(56)

We know that the version of *Völuspá* that Snorri used as source material was not identical to the *Codex Regius* text, and also that he was anxious not to appear to validate the pagan mythology of the poem. (His Æsir are not gods but human tricksters descended from the Trojans.) Either way, the *Codex Regius* version significantly reverses Snorri's ordering of events, making Baldr's return a consequence of the finding of the golden chequers. The game of the gods has been restored, and the wrong done by Loki to the ties of kinship is mended. The ruined Valhalla, hall of dead warriors, becomes the sanctuary where Baldr will dwell in peace with the brother who killed him.

60: Hœnir, who gave the power of thought to Ask and Embla, is the only god from the first generation of the Æsir to survive Ragnarøk, and now he performs an act of divination to discover the future of the third generation of gods. The Roman author Tacitus gives an account of the Germanic peoples casting lots by slicing “a branch cut from a fruit tree into slips” (44), which were thrown at random onto a cloth, after which the diviner would pick up three of the slips and interpret the marks on them; Hœnir may be doing something similar here. The wind's wide realm is a kenning for the sky, so Hœnir's lot-casting tells us that the sons of Baldr and Höd will live not in the ruins of Valhalla but in the heavens.

The spæwife now asks her question for the final time, but its tone has changed. Her vision is almost over and there is only one thing left to learn.

61: The hall thatched with gold, which will be the dwelling-place of worthy warriors or perhaps of all worthy people, is deliberately contrasted with the hall on Dead Man's Strand where evil-doers were punished: “far from the sun” becomes “more fair than the sun.” The name Gimlé may mean a place protected from fire.

At this point, the *Hauksbók* version of the poem includes an interpolated passage, of which we have only a fragment, which builds on the similarity between Gimlé and the Christian concept of Heaven by introducing what is clearly a reference to Christ on the Day of Judgement:

Then comes the power to divine judgement,
strong ruler of all things down from above.

Although I have not included it in the text, where it would undermine the sinister twist with which the poem ends, this interpolation gives a glimpse of what may have been going through the minds of the Christian scribes to whom we owe the surviving variants of the poem as they took on the task of conserving a treasure trove of mythological lore from the pagan past.

62: In the final stanza, the blood-sucking dragon Spite-Dealer [Níðhogg], glimmering with ghostly phosphorescence, leaves Hel's underground kingdom and flies, laden with corpses, over a battlefield, reminding both Odin and the spæwife's human audience that they face embattled times, with Ragnarøk still lying ominously in the future. In the last few words of the poem, her task completed, the spæwife returns to the grave.

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