

Marten Eskil Winge,
'Thor's Battle with
the Ettins', 1872.



Norse Codes in a Wartime Childhood

Nicholas Tucker

Like other British wartime children, I grew up at a time when *Grimms' Fairy Tales* were under a cloud. Their occasional cruelty, and the enthusiasm with which the Nazis had taken them up, had turned some liberal parents against them. So my first encounter with any sort of magical tales was in 1943, aged seven, with a collection of parentally preferred Norse myths and legends. These were contained in a book that eventually had to be re-bound, so avidly was it devoured.

C.S. Lewis described in his autobiography his fascination as a boy with the bleak sense of total otherness he found in ancient tales from North Europe. More earthbound myself, and without the family tragedy (the death of his mother) that Lewis as a child might have been trying to escape from in his reading, I immediately set about reshaping these stories to my own current circumstances. In my imagination, Norse characters soon came to at least halfway resemble those I knew best at home. Wise Odin I reimagined in the shape and style of my father, another adult figure who always seemed to know everything, although minus the detail of possessing only one eye. His wife Frigga was a version of my mother, who if not exactly sitting at her spindle every day certainly spent some of the time knitting.

Norse giants meanwhile seemed very similar to those older boys on the school playground whose rough games and lofty indifference to the needs and feelings of younger children turned them into adversaries always best avoided. But the mighty Thor was more like an amalgam of dustmen, road-menders, coal delivery men and other grown-ups of apparently effortless strength familiar on the domestic scene and often quite friendly to their youngest customers. Other Norse Gods, sitting around passing occasional judgements and always with a high regard for their own dignity, I rebirthed in the shape of the various aunts, grandparents and old family friends who when together occupied something of the same role in our own family gatherings. In the ultimate vagueness of my imagination, Norse characters could therefore both come over as exotic characters in their own right on the page while also at the same time seeming very like people in my own life. Uninterested in resolving this particular conundrum, I was happy simply to read and re-read their adventures, letting my imagination go where it willed.

My favourite character was Loki, always in trouble for his mischief although, at least in my view, hardly deserving of his final punishment of being bound in a deep cave with venom from a poisonous serpent dripping onto his face. Surely a sharp scolding from Odin, I thought, might have been enough. But I always did my best to filter out examples in the

stories of extreme violence and cruelty. I much preferred more pleasing images like magic apples, wondrous swords, fearless horses and the cosmic tree Yggdrasil, which sounded as if it might have been as much fun to climb as some of our favourites on nearby Dartford Heath. I loved too those vast feasts everyone in the Norse tales so enjoyed, reminiscent in my imagination of my own and other children's birthday parties at their best. The frequent magical occurrences in these tales, while having no direct correlations in my own young life, found many echoes in my fantasy world. Lying in bed at night, safe from any unwelcome attentions from my older brother, I could at last become master of my universe, using all possible magic tricks finally to get my own way.

Frey, the god of fertility, and his relationship with the ravishing giantess Gerda, also had strong resonances for me. Early visits to the cinema had already acquainted me with images of huge, impossibly beautiful women film stars. The American actress Maureen O'Sullivan was my particular favourite, such a good wife to Tarzan and so pretty in her cut-down jungle outfit. I would often gaze at the publicity photograph I had cut out of her, aware of strong emotions going on inside. Attractive bigger girls at school also began to evoke similar feelings. It didn't matter what their personalities were like or whether I had ever exchanged a single word with them. Their beauty, as I saw it, was reason enough in itself to justify my would-be romantic attentions. So when Frey fell in love with Gerda on first seeing her, I could entirely understand where he was coming from.

Bravery and cowardice, two perennial themes in Norse mythology, were also qualities I recognised from my own life at home and school, with cowardice almost inevitably my first resort. As for the fjords and frozen mountains in these tales, while there were no direct counterparts in the London suburbs where I grew up, it was still easy to imagine them. Newspapers, magazines and newsreels would often include shots of brave Russian soldiers fighting the Germans in the ice. And when it did snow at home the instant transformation of familiar scenery did indeed have something magical about it.

Seeing Wagner's *Ring* cycle years later and reuniting with my heroes of long ago was a heart-warming experience. There were few new books published for children during the war, and plenty of older classics stored in warehouses were destroyed during the London Blitz. I am glad my edition of the Norse myths and legends survived to make it into my childhood. House-training these savage little stories in my imagination to better suit the even tenor of my own daily existence was an agreeable process. Occasional air-raids still going on at the time might well have been experienced by others as modern versions of the final destruction of Valhalla, but I never believed that my family's ultimate fate would be anything like the one ultimately suffered by Odin and company. And, fortunately for me, so it transpired.

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