

Jenny M. Jochens
Department of History
Bowson State University
Bowson, Maryland 21204 USA

VOLUSPÁ: MATRIX OF NORSE WOMANHOOD*

Was Voluspá authored by a woman? This question has not only been asked at various times, but also answered in the affirmative by several scholars captivated by this, the most powerful of all Old Norse poems. Most recently the idea has been--understandably--adopted by feminists. It may seem superfluous to add to the vast scholarship on Voluspá, but in this generation a more important, although related issue, demands attention. This is the perception of females in the poem, and it may throw light on the illusive question of the poet's gender.

Couched in the words of a volva or prophetess (pl. völur), the poem traces in swift strokes the history of mythological and human figures since creation and predicts in powerful images the destruction of the known world and the return of a new. Chronologically the poet distinguishes between the mythical Past, consisting of the creation of all things and creatures (str. 1-20), the mythical Present, stretching from creation to the death of Baldr, (a period in which most of the well-known mythical events take place [str. 21-29]), and the Future, depicting the momentous happenings at the end of the world (str. 30-66). Focusing on the female element, we shall first probe the audience for this great drama and then examine the actors and the events in which they are involved.

Audience

Although the sibyl's prophesy is prompted by Óðinn's question (str. 28), she initially addresses herself to a larger audience. Asking for silence, she defines the assembled multitude as [helgar] kindir (holy children) and mogo Heimdalar (Heimdallr's sons). Either of these terms is further defined by the expression meiri ok minni (greater and lesser). Scholarly discussion has dealt with whether this group consists of gods or humans. Our question addresses whether women are included in this group, either as goddesses or humans. While the poet clearly is aware of social distinctions, differentiations by gender are harder to determine. Theoretically both males and females can be included in the feminine word kind, offspring, but mogr normally denotes male only. In that sense the word is used by our poet to indicate the advancing army of giants (str. 51). Although the parallelism between the two expressions in the first stanza might suggest that mogo here include both sexes, the association with Heimdallr--understandable only from the poem Rigsbula--stresses the male connotation. Since Heimdallr is the father of human sons only, it is difficult to extend the expression mogo Heimdalar to

include both halves of the human race.

The setting of the first stanza is reminiscent of either a Norwegian court with the skald asking for silence, or of the meeting of a þing with the law speaker ready to cite the law. In both cases the actor is male and the female presence is at best minimal, passive, and relegated to the audience. We must conclude that the setting and vocabulary of Völuspá strongly suggest a male audience, although women may be included implicitly in some collective terms.

Giants

If the audience remains vague, the sex of the actors is clearer. The völva relates that Óðinn has given her the task of telling what she best remembers of forn spiðll fira (the firar's ancient tales, str. 1). The word firar is normally taken to mean beings in human form, including giants, gods, dwarves, and humans, the usual division of anthropomorphic creatures in Old Norse mythology. We shall examine the female elements in these four groups through the ages.

In order to convince Óðinn of the truthfulness of her prophesy, the sibyl begins by telling about events in distant times, reaching beyond even Óðinn's own experience. Although not of giant stock herself, her first memories concern the giants among whom she was raised (str. 2). It seems reasonable to assume that parenting and fostering giants must have involved females as well as males. Both Völuspá (str. 3) and other Edda poems indicate that male giants reproduced without female assistance at the beginning of time, but eventually giantesses took on the normal female role. It is even suggested that they reproduced in huge numbers into old age.

The most startling information about female giants in the Past is found in stanza 8 where it is affirmed that the golden age of the gods lasted unz þriár kvómo/þursa meýiar/.../ór iotunheimom (until three giant maidens came...from Giantland). These women are often assumed to be identical with the norns mentioned in stanza 20. The description ámátkar miðk (exceedingly powerful, or, strong and baneful, in Paul Schach's translation [p. 94]) does not fit the normal image of the norns as stern, but impartial powers. Nor is there evidence that the norns come out of Giantland. It is therefore better, with Nordal (p. 36-37), to associate these women with the establishment of difficult marriage alliances between the gods and the giants related by other sources. Although the giantesses Gerðr and Skaði eventually became absorbed into the family of the gods, the völva clearly blamed the cessation of the golden age on the three unnamed giant women.

The Present age contains only a single fleeting glimpse of giants when the gods discuss their dangerous promise of giving Óð's wife (Freyia) to att iotuns (the family of the giants, str. 25). Since marriage with Freyia was the object (Snorri 45:17), this issue is of special interest to giant men, but the

expression implies generations and suggests a gendered society of giants.

Because the sibyl enjoys a special ability to predict the cataclysmic events of the Future, she conjures up vivid images of the final struggle between the gods and the giants. As might be expected in any war, all the actors, individually and in groups, are male, several designated by name or lineage (str. 46, 50, 51, 52). Their success is so terrifying that they, their divine adversaries, and indeed the whole universe disintegrate in a huge conflagration. The female giants, however, are not forgotten. One designated as in aldna (the old one, str. 40) gives birth to monsters of whom one, in the shape of a wolf, will swallow the sun. Presumably the same giantess is mentioned in str. 42 as a þýgr or troll, in connection with her shepherd. As victims of the war the giantesses also fall in the end when the mountains tumble around them (grótbjörg gnata, en gifr rata, str. 52).

Gods

Of giant lineage, the gods are the second group to emerge from the primeval chaos. The Voluspá poet is silent on how the gods are created, but that the first ones are males is clear from the expression Burs synir (Bur's sons, str. 4). Snorri knew their names as Óðinn, Víll, and Vé (14:5). Apparently more gods appear during the Past, since in stanza 18 another male triad is mentioned, consisting of Óðinn, Hœnir (present again in str. 63), and Lóðurr. During the Present and Future other male gods are mentioned by name, Þórr (str. 26, 56), Heimdallr (str. 27, 46), Baldr (str. 31, 62), Hqðr (str. 32, 62), Loki (str. 35), and Víðarr (str. 55), and there are several circumlocutions for Óðinn and Þórr.

Although goddesses have not specifically been mentioned as yet, the poet often uses collective terms to designate the deities. A closer look at these terms as well as at the gods' activities may help us to determine whether, in the poet's mind, females are included in these groups. The Voluspá poet uses the words regin (str. 6, 9, 23, 25), æsir (str. 7, 17, 23,, 48, 60), and goð (str. 9, 23). In addition other collective words for gods, such as bond, hopt, and tívar are found in the poetry. Most of these can not be used in the singular and are not gender specific, but designate impersonal powers in charge of the universe. It might be argued that given sufficiently ancient roots--as is the case of regin--such words could have at some point reflected mother goddesses, or at least the transition from this stage to patriarchy, assuming that the germanic peoples underwent developments similar to those found in Mediterranean cultures. The original meaning of the Indo-European root of regin referring to "greatness", "power", or "authority" is conceivable in such a setting. While this meaning may also have been original among the Goths, Wulfilas in his Bible translation restricted the word to "council" and "deliberation." In the Germanic context where patriarchy was strong, it seems reasonable to assume that

such concepts took on male shapes, when they became personified at the divine level and were reified among humans. The emergence of the rarely used word ásynja, goddess, the feminine form of áss, god, would suggest as much.

The deeds and actions of the deities will further help us to determine whether goddesses are included in the collective terms. The setting for many of the divine activities is described in the following terms: Þá gengo regin qll/á rökstóla/ginnheilög goð (then all the ruling powers/the most holy gods/placed themselves in their judgement seats), a refrain used both during the Past (str. 6, 9) and the Present (str. 23, 25). This exalted place must have been reminiscent of a meeting of the þing. In fact, in stanza 48 where the æsir have a final meeting to decide on action against the incoming army of giants, the þing setting is specifically mentioned. In this location we see the gods giving names to things and concepts (str. 6)--like Adam in the Christian tradition, deciding on who is to create the dwarves (str. 9), taking counsel in a particularly difficult situation (str. 23), and discussing who is behind the irresponsible promise to give Freyia to the giants (str. 25). Since all these activities are political in nature, it is hard to imagine that they would not--as in human society--be solely the prerogative of males.

Two other poems use slightly different formulae in similar situations: Senn vóro æsir/allir á þingi/ok ásynior/allar á máli,/ok um þat réðo/ ríkir tívar,... (Then all the gods/were at the thing/and all the goddesses/available for discussion/the great gods/took counsel as to... ; Drymskviða, str. 14, Baldurs draumar, str. 1). Here the setting of the þing is clear, and the goddesses are designated by the special female term ásynja, suggesting that they are not included among the æsir and the tívar who sit in judgement and make decisions. Like Icelandic women at meetings of the earthly þing, however, they are present for social reasons and seem to have been included for consultation. That the gods were under exclusive male leadership is also understood by the author of Gautreks saga (ch. 7). At a meeting of the twelve male gods summoned to decide on the fate of the hero Starkaðr, Óðinn took the last empty seat. At best the goddesses could only have been present among the assembled fjölmenni.

Outside their seats of authority the gods engage in other important activities. Having decided on the creation of the dwarves, three male gods (Óðinn, Hœnir, and Lóðurr) give life to two humans whom they find on the ground as inanimate bodies (str. 17, 18). They also erect shrines and temples and build forges on which they fashion adornments and tools (str. 7). When all is done, they amuse themselves by playing a board game, until, as we saw, the peace is broken by the arrival of the three giant maidens (str. 8).

The conclusion is hard to escape that these creative and recreative activities are entirely within the male domain. Male gods are specifically named in the creation of humans. Moreover,

building and metal work have been male occupations in all societies, probably for reasons related to men's greater physical strength. In the Old Norse context the association between metal work and males is particularly close, because dwarves, who are exclusively males, (aside from this passage) have the monopoly of metal work as the artisans of cosmos. Also suggesting male pleasure, the board game became part of male education after its adoption from the south. With a single exception (Gunnlaugs saga, ch. 4; Íslensk Fornrit 3:60), all participants in similar games in the sagas are men.

If male gods are the actors and agents in the Past, can it be assumed that goddesses are present, as suggested by the term synior in other poems? We find the words horg ok hof (shrines and temples, str. 7) included in the building activities. Distinguishing between them, Snorri uses the latter in connection with gods (20:8) and the former with goddesses (20:11). If Snorri's interpretation is correct, the Völuspá author is implying the silent presence of goddesses in the mythical Past, since it was necessary to build a special domicile for them. When grgr is occasionally connected with the male god Njqrðr it can be explained by the fact that he was most likely identified with the older female Nerthus known from Tacitus, with whom it would have been correct to use the term. Hgrgr, however, can have designated structures intended for goddesses only toward the end of the pagan period when the texts were composed, since older place names in Sweden make it clear that the term was also associated with male gods. In other words, it is not possible to reach any firm conclusion about the existence of goddesses during the mythical Past. Assumptions about their presence must be deduced from silence.

We are aware, of course, that the Nordic pantheon includes goddesses. In the sections devoted to the Present and the Future the author of Völuspá mentions several female deities by name or circumlocution. Included among the clearly identifiable goddesses traditionally incorporated into the asir family are Freyia (Óðs mey, Óðr's wife, str. 25), Frigg (str. 33, 56 [here called Hlín]), and Sigyn (str. 35). Among these, Freyia originally belonged to the rival group of gods, the vanir. Her rival among the asir may be described in the two stanzas dealing with Gullveig and Heiðr (str. 21, 22), probably other names for Freyia. The poet also mentions a group of illrar gúðar in connection with Heiðr (str. 22). While the cosmological position of these figures is open for discussion, there is no question of the gender of these "wicked women."

Although the goddesses do not participate in the many collective activities undertaken by the gods, the Völuspá poet does ascribe certain actions to goddesses. As to Frigg, Óðinn's wife the poet remembers her tears over the loss of her son Baldr (str. 33) and her grief at Óðinn's death. (str. 53). A similar conjugal role is attributed to Sigyn as she sits, eygi...velglýioð (not ...very joyful, str. 35) over her bound

husband Loki. These three passages, testifying to an awareness of female sorrow, prompted Björn M. Ólson to suggest female authorship of the poem. These passages may be the first evidence of the new emotions that gained entry into the Edda corpus and reached maturity in the Guðrún songs.

It is worth noticing, however, that the Völuspá poet ignores Frigg's imaginative plan of protecting Baldr and her forceful attempt to rescue him from Hel as well as Sigyn's constant interference to assuage her husband's pain. Excluded are also Freyia's vociferous objections to the gods' plan of giving her to the giants in return for the building of a stronghold (str. 25). These features, ascribed to the three women from other sources, suggest more energy and initiative than our poet credits to them.

While the known goddesses thus are depicted as passive or at most showing feelings for kin and family, the situation is different for the enigmatic female person(s) known as Gullveig and Heiðr (str. 21, 22). We recall that giant women bring an end to the gods' first happiness, implying that these women are evil. This impression is reinforced by the description of them as ámátkar, a term normally used for witches. In the divine world, we now see evil associated with Gullveig and Heiðr. It is unimportant in this connection whether we assume that both names indicate Freyia, perhaps at the moment of her entry into the world of the asir from her native family of the vanir. The essential feature for our inquiry is that the two new names stand for female beings who are associated with evil. Heiðr may simply mean "witch." Gullveig, the personification of gold in female shape, brings into the world the first war. Appearing among the gods, she is burned three times, þó hón enn lifir (and yet she lives, str. 21) As Heiðr she offers magic to the gods, and her art is appreciated by "wicked women." Whether these women are goddesses or humans is not clear, but the association between females and evil is unambiguous. In other words, when female figures stray beyond displaying emotions for their male kin, the author of Völuspá suspects their actions as evil.

Not only do anthropomorphic beings perish in the final destruction, but the whole universe is destroyed. Yet for the second time the sibyl sees the earth emerge. In beautiful and poetic images the poet describes the freshness of this new world where muno ósánil/akrar vaxa/bois mun allz batna (unsown fields will bear grain and all grief be assuaged, str. 62). Several of the old gods return, talking about former times. They find in the grass the golden game boards on which they had played in the first age (str. 47, 48). That the new world is better than the old is indicated by Baldr and Höðr appearing together, victim and killer in their former incarnations.

Neither giants nor dwarves are mentioned in this new world. Since both male and female giants are considered evil, there is, of course, no room for them in this better world. It is difficult to say whether the dwarves are left out intentionally. More puzzling, however, is the absence of the goddesses. Perhaps the

Poet meant them to be subsumed under the term asir in stanza 60, or perhaps the brevity of this part of the poem (seven stanzas with one additional stanza in the Hauksbók version) did not allow their inclusion. Nonetheless it is difficult to avoid the impression that the poet considered goddesses too unimportant to mention. One might even argue that having identified femaleness with evil, he expressly excluded goddesses, on the ground that the new world would be better without them.

Dwarves

Little remains to be said about the last groups, dwarves and humans. As mentioned, the universe of the dwarves is entirely male, as indicated by their names. Created from the beginning of time in full numbers, they do not reproduce. In spite of their maleness they are passive in the final struggle, and only groan when earthquakes prevent their return to their mountain dwellings (str. 48). Their reproductive and sexual interests appear only in later sources.

Humans

In contrast to the dwarves humans were created with specific genders in the Past. As we saw, three male gods endow two animate bodies named Askr and Embla with life (str. 17). The recognition of them as the first human couple is undoubtedly helped by the fact that their names begin with the same letters as Adam and Eve. While Askr is normally associated with the ash tree, there is no agreement over the meaning of Embla. The gender differentiation is apparently not yet sharp, since the term glagslausa (without fate) is used about them in the masculine plural inflection, although the neuter would have been expected for two beings of different gender. In the following stanza (str. 18), where the neuter pronoun þau is used, gender equality is stressed when they receive the same four gifts from the gods (önd [breadth], óðr [reason], lá [living warmth, or hair], and litr [looks]).

Nothing is related about humans in the Present. That they have responsibility for the final disaster is clear from stanzas 49 and 45, where crimes of perjury, murder, and adultery are reported to occur both outside (str. 39) and within (str. 45) human families. These transgressions, however, are committed by men, even those involving sexuality. Masculine plural forms are used throughout. In the passage describing adultery (str. 39) the subject is masculine and the object a term for wife or female friend (eyrarúna, "a woman who whispers secrets in a man's ear"). The whole passage runs as follows: ok þannz annars glepr/yrarúno (and he who seduces another man's wife or friend). This þas, however, does not allow one to conclude superior moral standing for women, nor does it suggest female passivity. Like the ten commandments, it indicates a culture intensely focused on males and their activities.

Scholars have used the sexual transgression in these two

stanzas to evaluate Christian versus pagan elements in the poem. Crucial to the discussion are three terms: eyrarúna (str. 39), sifíom spilla, and hórdómr (str. 45). If the poem reflects Christian marriage policy, the first means "wife," the second "commit incest," and the third "lack of sexual morality." Outside our poem eyrarúna is found only in Hávámál (str. 115) where the meaning clearly is "mistress." In the stanza in Völuspá this would define sexual transgression as involving a man and a woman who is not the wife, but the mistress, of another man. Suggesting casualness in both unions in which this eyrarúna would be involved, it implies sexual unions between women and men that hardly deserve the term marriage. If the meaning of "wife" is accepted, it still denotes a far less stable notion of marriage than advocated by churchmen. It is generally agreed that the second term, sifíom spilla does not refer to incest as defined by churchmen and found in the law codes, but to the breaking of kinship ties (Nordal, p. 44). This is also the way Snorri understood the passage (70:13). Since Völuspá may preserve the oldest known use of hórdómr, it is difficult to determine the origin of the word. It is most likely of Christian origin, and in accordance with Christian principles of reciprocity in the marital union, the partners also shared responsibility for adultery. This notion is conveyed in Old Norse by the existence of the gender specific terms hórkarl and hórkona, in addition to the general hórdómsmaðr. Although our poet chose hórdómr over the usual term legorð, fornication, found in the Icelandic law and used only in connection with male perpetrators, he is not implying any sharing by the partners of the responsibility for sexual transgressions, since hórdómr in our stanza is surrounded by words with strong male connotations. In other poetic texts it is also connected with men. The sexual behavior glimpsed from these passages is clearly more pagan than Christian. Women are not identified with sexuality, and they are seen in passive roles as objects of men's desires.

When the earth reappears, humanity also returns. Covering the same events, the poem Vafbrúðnismál indicates that a human couple named Líf and Lífprasir, survive the catastrophe and repeople the earth (str. 44, 45), a detail adopted by Snorri (41:76). The Völuspá poet, on the other hand, describes the new generation of humanity in enigmatic terms: burir byggja/broðra tveggja (str. 63). These lines are not clear as to who these brothers are. For our purposes it is only important to notice that the earth could be repopulated by a pair of males without the mention of women.

The poet, of course, was aware of women's functions in his own society, but the poem's view is nonetheless strikingly male. Envisioning Gimlé, a marvelous gold-covered hall, as the domicile of the new humanity, the prophetess describes the inhabitants as dyggvar/dróttir (str. 64). While we may be permitted to interpret this as meaning "good people" or "blameless crowds" with Nordal (p. 112) or as "worthy people" with Paul Schach (p. 108), the

traditional meaning of drótt is "warrior host." In paraphrasing his stanza Snorri renders it as góðir menn ok réttlátir (good and blameless men, 26:2), probably in opposition to the (male) perjurers in stanza 39 that Snorri also mentions (75:2). In other words, only through half-closed eyes and by a generous extension of the meaning of the word drótt is it possible to glimpse women among the happy crowds in Gimlé.

superior female beings

So far, the poet has neglected females, relegated them to the periphery of the action, or attributed evil actions to them. Beyond his stratified cosmos, however, we can catch sight of certain figures, ancient, powerful, and perceived only as females. Most closely associated with the gods are six named alkyries (str. 30). In other sources they are given the task of hoisting who is to die on the battlefield and of bringing these men to Óðinn, thus forming an important link between the divine and the human worlds. Introduced in Völuspá as a prelude to the future, their arrival signals the beginning of the final struggle. Their association with Óðinn is clear from the expression nonnor Herians (Óðinn's women).

While the valkyries owe allegiance to the chief god, the norns, another group of female beings, are totally independent and their active realm more vast. The valkyries decide on men's luck in battle, but the norns preside entirely over the fate of both humans and gods. According to stanza 20, they are margsitandi (very knowledgeable), and þær log logðu, / þær lif þuro/alda bornom, / þærlog seggia (they established laws, they allotted life for mankind, they decided on fate). Their names, Vörð, Verðandi, and Skuld, are often seen as reflecting the three chronological stages of the Past, the Present, and the Future. Since the word Skuld carries a stronger connotation of obligation than of choice, the three norns seem to symbolize events that have taken place, that are in the process of happening, and that necessarily must occur. Even the gods' actions are ranged under the authority of these female powers.

Both the valkyries and the norns appear in groups. The volva herself, the most impressive figure in the whole poem, however, merges alone. The phrase, ein sat hón úti (alone she sat outside, str. 28) is the technical term for sibyls and magicians who in this way, often by night, attempted to obtain knowledge about the future. Continuing into Christian times, the practice was severely frowned upon by churchmen as suggested in several passages in Norwegian law codes. Outside and alone our sibyl meets inn aldni, Óðinn. Face to face with the chief god she withstands his fierce look as he tries to gain from her knowledge about the future (str. 28). Just as Norse farmers had to give presents to human völur before they would predict the future, so Óðinn offers this ancient and superior volva hringa ok men (rings and necklaces, str. 29) in return for prophesy. Scholars have often, but without grounds, interpreted the relationship between

the two as if Óðinn is able to force her to speak. Neither is there reason to assume, with de Vries, that her questions to Óðinn, hvers fregnið mik?/hví freistið mín? (why do you question me? why do you test me?, str. 28) betray despair on her part. Óðinn's epithet, vggiungr (the apprehensive or the terrible) suggests that this emotion should be ascribed rather to him. Her next statement, alt veit ek, Óðinn (I know everything, Óðinn), including where he has hidden his eye, is indicative of the self-assurance and superiority that is veiled in her rhetorical questions. The poem Baldrs draumar presents a situation where Óðinn, concerned about Baldr's bad dreams, travels to the underworld where he summons a volva from the dead and, against her will, makes her predict the future. While Óðinn is in charge of the sibyl in the Baldr poem, the volva in our poem emerges clearly superior to the chief god, and in both poems he is obviously ignorant about the future. Still alive, the sibyl in Voluspá is sought out by Óðinn, and she convinces him of her authority by willingly telling him events that he could verify from his own knowledge. Thus vindicated, she spends the longest part of her soliloquy unrolling the dreadful happenings of the Future in powerful images, leaving only the promise that some gods, but not Óðinn himself, will return. Suggesting a new disaster, the coming of a dragon, the volva finally sinks away, but of her own volition.

Conclusion

The Voluspá poet does not attribute importance to females, either in his own society or in its current mythological superstructure. While human women barely enter his field of vision, a few goddesses are remembered for their attachment to male kin, but in general both female gods and giants are associated with evil. The poet shows awareness of an older order, however, a mythology where female powers had been important, and a society where male leaders, when faced with difficult decisions, would have asked advice from women. A millennium before Voluspá was composed, Tacitus had afforded a brief glimpse of such an era when the Germanic peoples exhibited these features.

While the author of Voluspá knew only of valkyries and norns, groups of additional female figures, ðísir and fylgjur, do appear in other Old Norse sources. The ðísir are normally interpreted as fertility goddesses and the fylgjur designate female protective spirits. Also antedating the Nordic pantheon, these groups of female divinities link our poem to a religious system where goddesses had been prominent, suggesting perhaps that the worship of mother goddesses had been a universal European phenomenon and not just limited to the Balkan area. Now more illusive than the reigning celestial hierarchy of æsir and vanir, however, these female figures are given added weight in the poem by the appearance of the volva herself. By making knowledge of the Future available to Óðinn only through the mouth

of this propheticess, our poet connects his own society with the older tradition of important females. Like the ancient Germanic tribes and his contemporary Icelandic farmers seeking out human wisdom, he identified wisdom and knowledge with femaleness.

Not limited to the Germanic world, sibyls or propheticesses can also be found in Mediterranean cultures. When the study of *Voluspá* began in earnest, scholars immediately discerned connections between the sibylline oracles in Greece and Rome and the nordic *volva*. Despite similarities, however, it seems more likely that the union between femaleness and wisdom appeared independently in various cultures.

Looking at the problems presented to these women might suggest an answer to why certain women in patriarchal cultures came to be seen as propheticesses and identified with wisdom. In his long tradition the questions posed, with few exceptions, pertain to male activities, such as travels, wars, treaties, and politics, areas high in unpredictability. Concerns universally attributed to women--the production of food and clothing--receive little attention, probably because they occur regularly and, as it were, automatically. Only where climatic conditions caused prolonged famine or when plague raged would every-day problems be brought to the sibyl's attention. In the nordic context, extremely bad weather and famine in Greenland was the occasion for the fullest description of the activities of a human *volva*. Predicting the future naturally involved magic. It is not surprising, therefore, that childbirth, the chief female activity open to unpredictability, is occasionally included in magical incantations.

It seems unlikely, given the strongly patriarchal tenor of all cultures in which sibyls are found, that women themselves invented female prophetic abilities, and, even less, convinced men to accept them. Unable to choose between political alternatives or fearful of their outcome, men occasionally sought advice from "the others", that is, women. Allowed little choice, women did their best to accommodate the demands. Enough cases turned out well so that the practice caught on, thus giving rise to the permanent feature of the propheticess. Occasional bad advice resulting in failure and disaster, on the other hand, provided an excuse to accuse women of bad judgement, thus reinforcing the evil stain that is often associated with wise women.

There is an inner rationale to the existence of a female sibyl in societies where males dominated politics and religion, but had not yet achieved kingship on earth and monotheism in heaven. Leadership, of course, must come from their own gender, but not yet attuned to obeying a single male in political or religious matters, and perhaps recalling memories of powerful goddesses in the distant past, men turned to the female half of society, imagining that a few women possessed the supreme wisdom and knowledge they wished to obtain. In the mythological realm such a figure could not be one of the regular goddesses, since that would demean the male gods, but she had to be found from an

entirely different race. The ancient völva of giant stock admirably fits the requirements.

Although no evil is discernable in the sibyl of Völuspá, most other references to sibyls in the Old Norse context are negative; thus in Baldurs draumar Óðinn ends his dialogue with a völva by accusing her of being the mother of trolls (str. 13). By associating evil with giantesses and goddesses, however, the author of our poem obviously has associated females not only with wisdom, but also with evil, perhaps to the degree of envisaging the new world of the gods as being free of female divinities. At the same time, while neglecting females in the collective efforts of the gods and recalling only the grieving of a few goddesses, he ignores the more active and positive roles played by these and other ásynjur. Human women barely enter his field of vision and only as objects of men's actions. The identification of females with evil also recalls Christianity. In both traditions women are associated with evil, but, while Christians saw human women as responsible for bringing evil into the world, in the nordic tradition this role is performed by supernatural female beings. In contrast to Christianity pagan women are not given responsibility for sexual transgressions.

These perspectives lend little support to the hypothesis of a female author for our poem. Women may have shared its cultural outlook with men, but to imagine that women formulated it strains credibility. We are on firmer ground if we see Völuspá as a repository of many conflicting ideas concerning women as seen by a man around the year 1000. Fleshed out by later authors, these ideas were to remain unreconciled in Old Norse literature. Working with ancient and contemporary perceptions, the poet's vision included human and divine society. Aware of an older order of female prominence in myth and society, he chronicles the relatively neglected position of women in his own world and its mythology and may, at the same time, have suffered from an ubiquitous male fear of women. He nonetheless perceives new, albeit, contradictory roles for women, by allowing them deeper emotional expressions and, possibly, placing on them responsibility for sexual transgressions. Just as Völuspá has been rightly recognized as the font of nordic myth and religion, so it is also the matrix of Norse womanhood.

*Because of restrictions of space, this article is submitted without footnotes. Full documentation will appear in final publication. The text, considered as a single poem, is read in Jón Helgason, Eddadigte I, 2. ed. (Oslo: Dreyer, 1971), pp. 1-15. Snorri's Prose Edda is cited in text by page and line from Finnur Jónsson, Edda Snorra Sturlusonar (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1931). A few page references are to Sigurður Nordal, Völuspá (Reykjavík, 1923); Danish translation by Hans Albrechtsen (Copenhagen: H. Aschehoug, 1927) and to Paul Schach, "Some Thoughts on Völuspá," in Edda: A Collection of Essays, eds. Robert Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (University of Manitoba Press, 1983).