Sisters of Fate

Sisters of Fate:
The Myths that Speak Themselves

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To my parents

Nous ne prétendons donc pas montrer comment
les hommes pensent dans les mythes mais comment
les mythes se pensent dans les hommes, et á leur insu.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss
Mythologiques I, Le cru et le cuit

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

Here before you is a study of a few special women of antiquity who were purveyors of prophecy. The feminine principle is in evidence as the women tried to follow natural law and to recognise the integrity and goodness in human nature.

Despite phenomena and attendant superfluities often surrounding accounts of these women, they were not deities. Some worked in the supernatural, others did not. The outcome was, their prophecies were intended to prompt men to make decisions and to take action. The will of men was presumed to be free, and as to prophecy, men had an option: take it or leave it. Some rejected the prophecy, and others, like Macbeth, should have.

One argument made in these pages is that the control of these women over events was indirect, suggestion rather than supernatural.

The first half of the study, "At the Edge of the World," considers Shakespeare's three witches—actually "wild women" in Shakespeare's source, Holinshed—forest creatures on the "blasted heath." This is followed by a pair of rather incredible spirits from the films of Akira Kurosawa; and then, by the goddess Erda and her daughters, the Norns, of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

The second half of the study, "At the Center of the World," is devoted to the priestesses of Delphi, the Pythia, who were speakers for Apollo. A powerful humanistic element can be discerned in their prophecies, adding support to an argument that these women were actually competent political analysts, with help from Plutarch and others at Delphi who kept them apprised of events in the known world. The Oracle at Delphi operation, it turns out, was more media than mystery. But good media. Doing the right thing was paramount, and a fair number of their prophecies were squarely on the mark.

The book ends with a description of a piece of cloth on a simple loom. The horizontal threads, or woof, run in layers along the warp, the vertical threads. Woof is past action, warp is time. Action intersects time. That which is already woven no longer changes, but new actions are constantly appearing, changing the cloth with new forms, waiting to be read by the Sisters of Fate.

Harbour of Rhodes, 9 May 2012

PART I:

AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

CHAPTER ONE

FATE AND DESTINY

Men think in myths, as myths think themselves out in men.

Instances of this declaration by Lévi-Strauss (*Mythologiques I* 1983, 20) are found in certain female figures associated with predetermination. One example would be the Fates of Greek mythology, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, who are said to decide one's destiny as they deal good and evil at birth. Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis determines the length, and Atropos severs it. In Nordic myth, the Norns, often identified as Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld, function differently because the rope they spin is made up of the strands of past, present, and future. They see what is to come but do not change it. They would if they could. Instead, they warn, like the priestesses at Delphi speaking for the god Apollo.

This study examines the destinies described and acted upon by diverse Sisters of Fate and how they intersect the freedom—or the lack of it—of mankind to make decisions and take action.

Prominent on this continuum are Shakespeare's three women of the "blasted" heath, poised to waylay the future king of Scotland, and singing the words, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1,11).

> Macbeth doth come.
> The weird sisters, hand in hand,
> Posters[1] of the sea and land,
> Thus do go about, about,
> Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
> And thrice again, to make up nine. (1.3, 31–36)

Macbeth, approaching the moor with Banquo, says, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (Ibid., 38).

Banquo is repelled by the women:

[1] swift travellers

What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question[2]?
By each one her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so. (Ibid., 39–46)

Macbeth tells them to speak "if you can," and they utter the words—the prophecy—that will change the history of Scotland:

FIRST WITCH
All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
SECOND WITCH
All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
THIRD WITCH
All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter! (Ibid., 48–50)

Macbeth's reaction is noted by Banquo:

Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

In the ten lines following, Banquo raises the question of control:

I' th' name of truth,
Are you fantastical[3], or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner
You greet with present grace[4] and great prediction
Of noble having and of royal hope,
That he seems rapt withal[5]. To me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time[6]
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favors nor your hate. (Ibid., 51–61)

---

[2] confer with
[3] creatures of fantasy
[4] honor
[5] spellbound at the thought
[6] genesis of events (notes 1–6 are from the Harbage *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare.*)

To "look into the seeds of time" is not to shape events but merely to read them. The term *weird sisters*, "the goddesses of destinie," as stated in Holinshed (1808, 268), suggests they can do more. If they control fate, they possess the power to predetermine events.

The witches make it clear that Banquo, even though "lesser" by birth than Macbeth, is the better man:

> FIRST WITCH
> Hail!
> SECOND WITCH
> Hail!
> THIRD WITCH
> Hail!
> FIRST WITCH
> Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
> SECOND WITCH
> Not so happy, yet much happier.
> THIRD WITCH
> Thou shalt get[7] kings, though thou be none.
> So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!
> FIRST WITCH
> Banquo and Macbeth, all hail! (Ibid., 62—69)

Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, one of Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth*, appeared in 1577, and *Macbeth* was first performed in 1611, according to Harbage (1969, 1107). In Holinshed the sisters are not witches but "creatures of the elder world."

Understandably, it was Shakespeare's duty as a dramatist to keep his audiences at the Globe at least as spellbound as Macbeth, and the decision to depict the sisters as grotesques not only was good for business but would create empathy for Macbeth in spite of his misdeeds. It is this scrim of ambiguity that often veils Shakespeare's work and enriches it.

Holinshed's history sheds light on whether the sisters are passive or active, on looking as opposed to controlling. Holinshed reports the encounter as "a strange and vncouth woonder, which afterward was the cause of much trouble in the realme of Scotland":

> It fortuned as Makbeth and Banquho iournied towards Fores, where the king then laie, they went sporting by the waie togither without other companie, saue onelie themselues, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund[8], there met them thrée women in

[7] beget
[8] open place in an otherwise wooded area

> strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentiuelie beheld, woondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; "All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammis" (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father . . .). The second of them said; "Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder." But the third said; "All haile Makbeth that héerafter shalt be king of Scotland."

The response from Banquo in Holinshed is not a reaction to Macbeth but to his own hurt feelings at being slighted.

> Then Banquho; “What manner of women (saith he) are you, that séeme so little fauourable vnto me, whereas to my fellow heere, besides high offices, ye assigne also the kingdome, appointing foorth nothing for me at all?”

> “Yes (saith the first of them) we promise greater benefits vnto thée, than vnto him, for he shall reigne in déed, but with an vnluckie end: neither shall he leaue anie issue behind him to succéed in his place, where contrarilie thou in déed shalt not reigne at all, but of thée those shall be borne which shall gouerne the Scotish kingdome by long order of continuall descent.” Herewith the foresaid women vanished immediatlie out of their sight. (1808, 268)

In the hours that follow, Banquo and Macbeth try to treat the prophecies lightly:

> But afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken. (Ibid.)

The attributes of nymphs and fairies do not include “beards” or “choppy” (chapped) fingers on “skinny lips.” Only their apparel ―and indeed, their demeanor― is “strange and wild.”

As to Holinshed’s use of the term *weird sisters*, Tolman (1905, 89) posits this argument: “In Anglo-Saxon literature, ‘Wyrd’ is the name of the personified goddess of fate. Wyrd is ‘the lord of every man.’ The word is also a common noun; each man has his own wyrd, or destiny.”

So it is in *Beowulf*, chapter 6, ”Fares Wyrd as she must,” and in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, 3.617: “But O, Fortune, executrice of

wierdes[9],” and in *The Legend of Good Women,* 2580 (9.19): “The Wirdes, that we clepen[10] Destinee.”

“In the second of these lines we have a personification,” Tolman points out, “but the conception is of more than one Wyrd”:

> The word *weird,* as has been said, was taken into modern English from *Macbeth.* Its significance, however, has not been understood. The word in its present use is an adjective, and has a range of meaning indicated by the words *wild, mysterious, uncanny, ghostly*; *weird* in *Macbeth* was vaguely felt to express this combination of ideas.

Shakespeare’s three women, Tolman believes, connect to Nordic myth:

> In the Scandinavian mythology, as it was preserved in Iceland, “Urthr” was the eldest and most prominent of the three Norns, or sister-Fates. The loss of an initial *w* disguises the identity of the word with the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess of fate, “Wyrd.” Both words are to be connected with the Latin *vertere,* the German *werden,* the Icelandic *vertha,* and the Anglo-Saxon *weorthan.*
>
> Apparently because the name “Urthr” is made from that form of the verbal stem which appeared in the plural of the past tense, this goddess came to be looked upon especially as the fate of the past (*des Gewordenes*).

Tolman mentions a source who argues

> that it was bungling word-play of the twelfth century which first gave to the two sisters of Urthr, the fates of present and future, the names “Verthandi” (Pronounced *werthandi—die Werdende*), the goddess of that which is now *coming to be*—from the same verb as “Urthr” and “Skuld” (allied to *shall, soll*). The three Norns guard one of the three roots of Ygdrasil, the great Ash-tree of Existence. Urthr and Verthandi, the Past and Present, stretch a web from east to west, “from the radiant dawn of life to the glowing sunset, and Skuld, the Future, tears it to pieces.”
>
> The weird sisters, therefore, is a phrase which means “the fate sisters,” or the Sister Fates. Schmidt’s explanation of *weird,* in his *Shakespeare-Lexicon,* as “subservient to Destiny,” fails to bring out the dignity of the word both in Holinshed and Shakespeare. The weird sisters are not subservient to Destiny; they *are* destiny.

Is Tolman correct? Do they *act* or do they only *see*?

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[9] fates, destinies
[10] call

He propounds a compelling argument when he says that the sisters address Macbeth and Banquo "as the Norns of the Past, Present, and Future. This fact, which seems to be true in a general way of their speeches in Holinshed, comes out very clearly in Shakespeare."

Over Shakespeare's dialogue, Tolman inserts the names of the Norns, explaining the present tense of the second line:

> This title the king is now bestowing upon him, perhaps at this very instant. In Holinshed, it is "shortlie after"' the three women meet the two warriors that the king honors Macbeth by making him thane of Cawdor:
>
> URTHR, THE PAST
> All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
>
> VERTHANDI, THE PRESENT
> All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
>
> SKULD, THE FUTURE
> All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

The same interpretation can be applied to the Banquo prophecies, Tolman believes, pointing out that Banquo is *lesser* by birth than Macbeth, cousin to the king, and *greater* in integrity because Macbeth's ambition will corrupt him:

> URTHR, THE PAST
> Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
>
> VERTHANDI, THE PRESENT
> Not so happy, yet much happier.
>
> SKULD, THE FUTURE
> Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

Finally, Tolman gives a rebuttal to his position and then defends it:

> It may be that Shakespeare's exact division of the roles into Past, Present, and Future, is in a measure accidental, being suggested by Holinshed in the case of the speeches to Macbeth, and simply repeated in the words addressed to Banquo. It seems probable, however, that the careful distinction observed here between the three Norns is intentional. That "the weird sisters" are those "creatures of the elder world," the mighty goddesses of destiny, can hardly be questioned. (Ibid., 95)

Richard Wagner's representation of the Norns in his tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is given consideration in the next chapter of this study.

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CHAPTER TWO

RICHARD WAGNER AND THE WOMEN OF FATE

Aficionados of Opera became roiled by Wagner's four-opera *Ring of the Nibelungs* long after the 1876 premiere because of political events in a rapidly changing world. Nazi Party strategists believed they saw their *übermensch* in Wagner's four tales, and the fact that Wagner was known to be anti-Semitic[1] helped support their case.

But this is secondary to the work itself, and Wagner's decisions with his *Ring* are laudable. His choices bring northern mythology to the masses. Incorporating Germanic myth gives dimension to his Women of Fate—the Norns, and specifically the goddess Erda—*Erda* with an *e*, Wagner's spelling, Erda for *earth*[2].

The plot of Wagner's *Ring* is straightforward (in the manner of an arrow traveling a very great distance): Alberich the dwarf steals from the careless Rhinemaidens the Rheingold that has the power to give him control of the world. Then the custodian of the world, the god Wotan, identified with Odin, takes the gold from Alberich. Erda warns Wotan: *the Ring will be your destruction*. He refuses to return it to the Rhinemaidens and thus brings about not only his undoing but that of the Norse pantheon.

Not entirely is it greed or ambition leading him to do this; Wotan is trying to save his race of gods. To this end, he has built Valhalla to convene the best of the world's warriors for a future battle that he believes would assure survival of his kind.

In recent years, the mention of Wagner has led to a discussion of J. R. R. Tolkien, whose role is tangential to this. It is known that Tolkien detested Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, and even though he denied it, *The Lord of the Rings* can be seen as his response. Tolkien claimed that the only thing the two have in common is a ring and, "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" (Birzer 2001).

---

[1] Some of his invective against Jews appears to have been directed toward one individual, German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864); his work, however, influenced Wagner.

[2] In ancient Greece, Gaia is the earth mother.

Not quite. With *Lord of the Rings*, admirable though it is, Tolkien was trying to shoot a flaming arrow at the planet Jupiter (Through an astronomer's telescope, it would have been only a small puff of smoke among Jupiter's swirling rings).

In Wagner, Alberich crafts a gold ring that gives great power; in Tolkien, it is Sauron who does this. In both works, the ring would give world domination to the possessor, and in both it finally betrays its possessor. In Wagner, the giant Fafner commits murder to get the ring, in Tolkien, it is Smeagol-Gollum. Both Fafner and Gollum hide in a cave for centuries. In each work, a son inherits the shards of his father's sword—Siegfried in Wagner, Aragorn in Tolkien. In both, an immortal woman gives up immortality for love, and in both, the world is renounced—by Wagner's gods and by Tolkien's elves. In both, the ring is returned to its origin, to the Rhine in Wagner, to Mount Doom in Tolkien. Finally, in both, the world enters a new era.

The outcome? Destruction of the old order, brought about by selling out for the power that the Ring can bestow on its possessor.

Audiences in Wagner's day would have recognised his gods as the European hierarchy of Church and state, committing a fatal error by making a bad bargain (Spengler 2003). It is not insignificant that Tolkien chose to cast his story another way, with the hierarchy trying to correct the error.

When *Ring of the Nibelungs* premiered in 1876, it quickly gained a sizable following, in large part because of fairly widespread sentiment for a new world order. This had begun with the European Revolutions of 1848 and swept across the continent in the 28 years that followed. Wagner, like others, had played to this feeling in some of his previous work, and he brought it to the *Ring* as well.

It was probably inevitable that 44 years after the *Ring*'s premiere a minor regional figure named Hitler would use the opera to sanction his dogma. Hitler and Herman Goebbels got it wrong, as they did with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche; they skimmed the surface, taking what appeared to fit their ideas about an *übermensch.* The cynicism and irony implicit in Nietzsche flew far over the heads of Hitler and Goebbels.

Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. What appears to have set him most on edge were elements of paganism he saw in Wagner: the old religion, headed by the god Wotan, being replaced by something new, a religion without a god.

The old order is dying in Wagner, it is true, but the second part of Tolkien's argument does not stand up because a new world order never comes into being. Had Siegfried survived in the final opera *Götterdämmerung,*

the Twilight of the Gods, Tolkien would have a target. Siegfried would be viewed as representing a new world order, but then, so would his parents, the Walsung twins Siegmund and Sieglinde, or the Valkyrie Brunhilde. But they all perish, along with the old gods.

Still, Siegfried is the best candidate for the chosen one, and this becomes evident as he crafts his new sword, which he calls Notung, not from the shards of the old sword but the filings—the splinters of it (Spengler 2003). He had cut down a mighty ash tree and burned the trunk until it turned to charcoal. He piled it high and pumps the bellows.

Alas, though, Siegfried has to die. In Act III, next-to-last scene of *Götterdämmerung*, he is murdered, speared in the back. And what of the sword Notung? With nobody left to wield it, the sword turns out to be a red herring—certainly not the only one in Wagner.

Unlike Tolkien's work, the closing of Wagner's *Ring* ends in despair. These are Wagner's stage directions, his own words, for the closing of *Götterdämmerung*:

> The layer of dark cloud on the horizon is riven by a reddish glow that grows brighter. . . . The roof and walls of the hall have collapsed, and from the ruins the men and women stare in intense wonder at the fire spreading across the heavens. As the light reaches its utmost brightness, the hall of Valhalla can be seen in its midst, with the gods and heroes seated there, exactly as described by Waltraute in Act One. Bright flames are seen to invade the hall. When the gods are completely engulfed in the fire, the curtain falls. (Wagner, Metropolitan Opera, 1990)

No phoenix rises out of those ashes.

But Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (IMDB 2012) closes auspiciously. The Hobbit Frodo, by all appearances the polar opposite of the heroic Siegfried, says, "I wish the Ring had never come to me! I wish none of this had happened!" Gandalf the wizard replies, "So do all that come to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

Not unlike Hemingway: *we soldier on*.

And Tolkien's elf-queen, instead of accepting the ring and preserving her power, says, "I will remain Galadriel, and I will diminish" (Ibid.).

Both works stand alone, of course. Tolkien's *Ring* is not derivative, but what he ends up doing, he never intended: he makes Wagner even more accessible, just as Wagner had made Norse myth accessible.

According to Spengler (2003):

> Tolkien has taken back Wagner's *Ring.* That may be his greatest accomplishment, and a literary accomplishment without clear precedent.

> To be sure, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a great work of literature to be compared to Cervantes or Dostoyevsky. But it is a great landmark of culture nonetheless. Its revival in a reasonably faithful cinematic version has far-reaching effects on the popular mind.

Both Tolkien and Wagner serve up their feasts rather nicely, on disparate silver platters. And the two works are compatible, which hit home with the author of this study, seeing the reaction of students to both *Rings.* It was one of those epiphanies that come along in university teaching. Students of a philosophy class, having viewed the 1990 Met version of Wagner's *Das Rheingold,* immediately started talking about Peter Jackson's film *Lord of the Rings.*

Naturally, the students would connect the two, since both were about rings, but several were aware of the enormity of Wagner's work and the continuum he covered. They felt greater empathy with the Tolkien characters yet sensed the grandeur of Wagner's gods. Some picked up on the subtleties in *Das Rheingold*, the humor between Wotan, Alberich, and the fire deity Loge[3].

Would the students' perception of Wagner have been possible without Tolkien?[4]

Interestingly, a couple of musically inclined students pointed out Wagner's extensive use of the leitmotif in *The Ring* and how these were associated with specific characters as well as objects like Wotan's spear-staff and Siegfried's sword. These miniature themes also denote certain subplots in the operas.

In similar fashion, numerous films, including the 1960 *Magnificent Seven* (a remake of Akira Kurosawa's 1954 *Seven Samurai*) successfully used the leitmotif as a marker for major characters and other filmmakers followed suit.

The class considered how Wagner reached back to the ancient Tree of Life, Yggdrasill, from which Wotan cut his spear-staff.

This is from the *Völuspà*—the Prophecy of the Seeress:

> I know an ash stands,
> named Yggdrasill,
> a high tree, washed
> with white clay;
> from it come the dews
> that fall in the valleys

[3] Equivalent to Loki, a trickster not unlike Kokopelli, the Hopi flute-player.

[4] In the author's Medieval studies c. 1978 Tolkien was one of our major commentators; however, several of us read his *Ring* for enjoyment.

it stands ever-green
over Spring of the Past. (*Völuspà* 2001, 33)

When Yggdrasill was alive, its roots and branches had extended throughout the universe—to the heavens, to the underworld. Next, in the *Völuspà,* under the heading "The Maidens of Fate":

From there come
the much-knowing maidens,
three from the sea
that lies under the tree:
one was named Past
another Present
—they carved in wood—
and Future the third;
they laid down the law,
they chose lives
for the children of men,
people's fates. (Ibid., 34)

These, of course, are the Norns, usually identified as Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld—past, present, and future. *Carved in wood* is a general description; "wood" also means "plank," as found in one's domicile and upon which family events were customarily recorded, particularly in Norway. *Carved in wood* is equivalent to *cast in stone.*

According to Persson (2012):

> Oftentimes the nornor are named as evil, fiendish and vile. The original meaning of the word "norna" is a matter of great dispute. In their fate-settling context it has been connected to the Swedish dialect word "norna" (nyrna), a verb that means "inform secretly." Another etymology ties the word to an Indo-European root "ner," which means "twist" or "twine." Behind this meaning of the word the conception about the thread of destiny, which the nornor twist and twine. In the cosmic visions in *Voluspá* the nornor appear as universal powers. Their abode is next to the spring at the foot of Yggdrasil. There are three of them, and their names are Urd, Skuld and Verdandi. Their power is great: they decide the destiny of all humans and the laws of cosmos.

In Wagner's *Ring* the presence of the Women of Fate and that of their mother Erda are among the compelling scenes of the tetralogy. He brings in Erda from the Germanic—and she and the women cohere so well in terms of the story that audiences always want more of them. Persson says,

> Of those mentioned in [*Voluspá*] it is only Urd who stands out as a genuine power of destiny. As such she is of particular interest. It is characteristic for the shifts in the belief in destiny that Urd not only was perceived as a personal entity of destiny, but also as the consequence of destiny, as the dark destiny and its result: death. (Ibid.)

In Wagner's account as in others, the three sisters twine the strands of destiny with the purpose of throwing out the rope in a certain direction, setting the scope of the individual—even demarcating lands to be conquered.

In the prologue to the final *Ring* opera *Götterdämmerung*, one of the Norns—Skuld, the future—intends to cast the rope to the north, but it is short—too short—and suddenly snaps.

Yet, all along the sisters had known that it would. Seeing the strands asunder only confirms what Erda had said, that the gods are doomed.

Maybe it was miscalculation by Wagner that Erda, one of his most compelling creations in the *Ring*, appears only twice. The first time is a warning to Wotan, and the warning is significant in this study: she says that impending events could be reversed, that Wotan is not doomed by fate to destroy himself. Wotan has free will.

In the 1990 Met production, Erda, who represents what was, comes up out of the ground, covered in frost—perhaps the frost of the ice age.

In what is a major musical point of the *Ring*, Erda, sings.

> *The eternal world's first ancestress, Erda, warns you. . .*
> *All that is shall come to an end*
> *A dark day dawns for the gods*
> *I charge you, shun the Ring!*

Wotan chooses not to do so. Later, he returns and calls her up again. He wants her to tell him the future, but it is too late, and he knows it. Wagner describes her in his stage directions:

> *Light gathers at the cave-vault, a bluish gleam illuminates the figure of Erda rising very slowly out of the depths behind. She appears to be covered in hoar-frost; her hair and clothing give off an icy shimmer.*

Erda has no answer for him[5].

[5] The response is not amphibilous, with the dual meaning characteristic of the Delphic Oracle.

My sleep is dreaming;
my dreaming, brooding;
my brooding, working of Wisdom.
But while I sleep
the Norns are waking;
they wind the rope
and truly weave what I know:
the Norns will give Thee answer.

The prologue to the final opera *Götterdämmerung* has the three Norns, described in Wagner's synopsis as "daughters of the wise primeval mother Erda," spinning the "golden rope of world-knowing, twining together the strands of the past, the present and the future."

Once upon a time, this same rope had been tied to Yggdrasill, but when Wotan cut a branch to make his spear-shaft, the tree was fatally wounded, and its "foliage faded and fell."

In the synopsis for *Götterdämmerung*,

> By his order the dead tree was felled recently, and its logs piled around Valhalla, in readiness for the destruction of the gods' great hall by fire. Weaving their knowledge into the rope in turn, the Norns are at pains to tie it to branches and rocks to keep it taut. The threads tangle and the Norns recall Alberich's theft of the gold; the rope is damaged by the sharp edge of a rock, and their attempt to draw it tight again breaks it.

And the stage directions that follow are Wagner's words:

> The Norns rise in horror and move together to the center of the stage: they take the pieces of the rope and use them to tie their own bodies together.

They sing:

Our eternal knowledge is at an end!
The world will know nothing more of our wisdom
Down!
To mother!
Down!

The 11th century might be said to mark the end of the Norse gods, at least according to Garrison Keillor (2007) writing about Vikings in one of his essays.

> [T]he Vikings were expert woodworkers, which was how they were able to discover America 400 years before Columbus. Their ships were well built; it is amazing that they survived the ravages of the North Atlantic with their shallow draft that enabled sailing close to shore.
>
> And when St. Olaf converted them to Christianity in the 11th century and they swung away from Odin and Freja and Thor and the skaldic sagas and took up the epistles of St. Paul, they gave up domination by force and learned the art of passive aggression.

Fig. 2–1.Viking longboat sculpture, Reykjavik, Iceland, 2005 (all photos by the author)

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