

## REVIEWS

*The Poetic Edda, Vol II:  
Mythological Poems*

Edited with translation,  
introduction and  
commentary by Ursula  
Dronke.

Clarendon, Oxford, 1997.  
443pp., £65.00.  
ISBN 0-19-811181-9

This handsomely produced and exorbitantly priced volume is a significant contribution to scholarship. It includes five major poems which are expertly handled and analysed in detail: *Völuspá*, *Rígsþula*, *Völundarkviða*, *Lokasenna* and *Skírnismál*. In addition, a briefly annotated edition of *Baldurs draumar*, together with a translation, appears as an appendix to *Völuspá*.

Ursula Dronke (hereafter abbreviated U.D.) is an experienced editor and, on the whole, her treatment of the text is sound. However, I can hardly be the only reader to question her punctuation of stanza 2, lines 5-8:

Nío man ek heima,  
nío íviðjur,  
miqtvið mæran,  
fyr mold neðan.

Nine worlds I remember,  
nine wood-ogresses,  
glorious tree of good  
measure,  
under the ground.

What U.D. seems to have failed to grasp is the obvious fact that lines 5 and 8 belong together; the most striking feature here is the reference to the nine underworlds which the Sibyl, like Saminoïdes, must have visited in a state of ecstasy. Although the parenthical lines 6 and 7 form a part of the Sibyl's memory, the poem offers no information about the locations of the 'nine wood-ogresses' and the 'glorious tree of good measure', but there is no reason to doubt that these features were associated with her experiences on earth. The statement 'Nine worlds I remember [...] under the ground' has several analogues in other early poems, such as *Vafþrúðnismál* 43: 'I've been to all the worlds, I've visited the nine worlds below the dark one of death.' In *Lokasenna*, Óðinn accuses Loki of having spent eight winters beneath the earth, and in *Gróttasöngur* the

sorcerous Fenia and Menia  
were reared for nine years  
beneath the earth.

Having committed herself  
to the dubious notion that the  
glorious tree is subterrestrial,  
U.D. assumes that 'the  
VǫLVA first knew the world  
tree only as its roots, before it  
broke into the light' (p. 110),  
but her crucial comment on  
the four lines quoted above is  
to be found in the following  
appreciation of the VǫLVA:

Her memory goes to the  
brink of time: she recalls  
the nine ÍVIÐIUR,  
the 'wood-ogresses' who  
are the giantess-roots of  
the world tree: recalls  
them even before their  
holy offspring, Heimdallr,  
was born VIÐ IARÐAR ÞRQM,  
'at the edge of the earth'  
(*Hyndluljóð* 35), when he  
was still in gestation in the  
timber of their nine bodies  
FYR MOLD NEÐAN,  
'underground'. [p. 31]

It is hardly an overstatement  
to say that *Vǫluspá* deserves  
a lighter touch.

*Vǫluspá* 2, of which I have  
quoted the last four lines,  
provides important keys to  
the nature of the poem as a  
whole. The opening lines run

thus:

Ek man iǫtna  
ár um borna,  
þá er forðum mik  
fœdda hǫfðu.

I remember giants  
born early in time,  
who long ago  
had reared me.

What is crucial here is the  
identification of 'I' and  
'giants'. Assuming that the  
VǫLVA is truthfully  
describing her own upbringing  
here on earth, the term  
IǫTNAR, 'giants', demands an  
explanation. U.D. rejects any  
such mundane speculation of  
that kind, and confidently  
refers to them as 'the first  
inhabitants of the cosmos' (p.  
31). *Vǫluspá* has been called  
the earliest female voice in  
Norse literature, but the  
VǫLVA can hardly have been  
so old that she was coeval  
with the primordial  
HRÍMÞURSAR, 'frost giants',  
in *Vafþrúðnismál*, eons before  
the creation of Man.

Notwithstanding her  
arcane knowledge of alien  
worlds and a mystical  
association with Odin, the  
VǫLVA is essentially human.  
She is one of us. The enigma

## REVIEWS

of her persona becomes clearer once we start thinking about the semantic range of the term IOTUNN. The most common sense of course is 'a giant'; the noun is a cognate of the ON verb ETA 'to eat'; its original meaning was probably 'a great eater; cannibal'. Secondly, since cannibalism was associated with sorcery and witchcraft, it is not surprising that IOTUNN could also develop the sense 'a wizard', as e.g. in *Völuspá in skamma*, in which the ancestry of VQLUR, VITKAR, SEIÐBER-ENDR and IOTNAR is traced back to their ultimate progenitors. This meaning agrees with the Low German cognate ETENINNE, 'a witch'. Thirdly, just like RISI, BERGRISI, and TROLL, IOTUNN could denote 'a Sami', which is not surprising when we bear in mind that the Sami people were famous for their magical powers.

The most likely explication of our problem is that in *Völuspá 2* the term IOTUNN is used ambivalently, suggesting both the Sami wizards who fostered the VQLVA and taught her witchcraft (cp.

Snorri's account of Gunnhildr in *Haralds saga hárfagra*, ch. 32), and also the primeval giants of myth. It is tempting to think that, just like Gunnhildr, the VQLVA belonged to Hálogaland, and was sent to Finnmark to be educated in the magic arts. Also, it makes sense that *Völuspá* was composed by a woman with special talents and training. The uniqueness of this greatest poem of the North may be due to Sami influence.

U.D. has radically different ideas. She is in no doubt that *Völuspá* was composed by a male poet, who used

three types of sibylline figure: (a) VQLVA A ('I'), the speaker of the poem, addressing mankind; (b) VQLVA B ('she', and briefly 'I' in one dramatic episode from the past), whose memories, thoughts, actions, and visions of past, present and future are reported by VQLVA A; (c) VQLVA C ('she'), a narrative figure in a myth of the past, Heiðr. [p. 99]

*Völuspá* is a poem of immense complexity, and this

fragmentation of the VǫLVA's personality is hardly conducive to a better understanding of it.

In connection with U.D.'s relevant observations on the class division in *Rígsþula*, it should be noted that the description of ÞRÆLL is probably based on Norwegian ideas about the Sami. His complexion, [HǫRUNÐ SVARTR], can be compared to that of Geirmundr and Hámundr, whose mother was Permian: 'Both of them were very swarthy' [SVARTIR MJǫK] (*Landnámabók*). Their nickname HELJARSKINN indicates a black-bluish colour. Skalla-Grímr, whose grandmother was a Sami woman, was 'dark and ugly' [SVARTR MAÐR OK LJÓTR], and so on.

U.D.'s assertion that *Völundarkviða* is comparable to the Old Irish tale *Aislinge Oengusso* is misleading. The *Dream of Oengus* is a variant of the same tale as the myth of Freyr and Gerðr, which is told in *Skírnismál* and by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*. The essential plot involved is that a young god falls in love with a girl he has never met in person, and whose

identity is unknown to him. This is what the Irish call SERCC ÉCMAISE, 'love in absence'. After his condition has been diagnosed (in the *Dream of Oengus* by a celebrated physician) a messenger is sent off to persuade the distant girl to come and join the love-sick god. *Völundarkviða* is about a young Sami smith who takes a non-Sami wife, and suffers terribly for his mistake.

Notwithstanding my serious misgivings over several interpretations, I welcome this publication and look forward to the two remaining volumes of *The Poetic Edda* under Ursula Dronke's imaginative editorship.

Hermann Pálsson