

10-5-2014

Of Monsters and Gods

Gerður Kristný

Panel: Religion and Writing. The author discusses how religious heritage shapes an author's writing.

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Recommended Citation

Kristný, Gerður, "Of Monsters and Gods" (2014). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 533.
https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/533

Of Monsters and Gods

By Gerður Kristný (Iceland)

The Poetic Edda is a collection of old Norse poems preserved in an Icelandic manuscript and dating from the second half of the thirteenth century. It was written on white calfskin, so we can just imagine the extent of the writer's happiness whenever a white calf was born: it meant the story could be continued on the next layer of calfskin.

The Poetic Edda is about old Nordic mythology and tells the stories of the gods worshiped by the Vikings. You might have heard of Óðinn, the father of the gods, Freyja the goddess of love and Thor, the god of thunder. Thor has made it big in Hollywood recently, what with being in the Avengers, and being best friends with the Hulk and Iron Man. The Nordic Mythology has always been an inspiration to authors all around the world, including Tolkien, August Strindberg and Jorge Luis Borges, just to name a few. And it still continues to influence authors.

In 2010 I published a poetry book where I retold one of the Eddic poems. The original is called Skírnir's Journey in the English translation. My own poem, on the other hand, is called Bloodhoof and was published in England in 2012 by Arc Publication, with the translation by Rory McTurk. This particular story is the only one that exists about the fertility god Freyr.

It goes: One day, Freyr doesn't have anything to do and, as The Smiths sang when I was a teenager "The devil will find work for idle hands to do." So he takes a seat on Óðinn's throne, which is just like using Google earth because the whole world can be seen from that throne, and lays his eyes on a giantess, called Gerður. Upon seeing her, he decides he must have that woman at all costs, so he gets his servant, called Skírnir, to go and get her for him. Skírnir sees this as an important business opportunity and asks Freyr for his sword and his horse, called Bloodhoof, as payment for this service. The sword is no ordinary sword since it can fight on its own. Freyr agrees, and Skírnir sets off to woo Gerður. At first, Skírnir offers her precious gifts, but she refuses. She doesn't want to leave her family or her home, the world of the Giants. So Skírnir then resorts to threatening her. He threatens to ensure that no one will ever love Gerður and that she will spend the rest of her days looking straight into Hell. At last, he threatens to kill her and her whole family, at which point Gerður finally gives in and promises to follow Skírnir to Freyr. And that is the end of the poem.

When the world comes to an end, as is predicted in the Nordic mythology, Freyr will be one of the first gods to die, since he doesn't have his sword. A horrible fate awaits men who buy women. But Freyr's offering of his sword is the reason Vikings and scholars of today alike have considered the poem a romantic and beautiful one.

But when I read the poem, I saw a story of violence, and that is how I wanted to retell it. I wanted to give Gerður – my namesake – a voice. It was important that she got permission to say goodbye to her mother, a person never mentioned in the original text, and I wanted to see what happened after Gerður and Freyr met each other.

This ancient mythology shows us how the Vikings thought about relationships between men and women and unfortunately it also shows us how little has changed. Women are still being trafficked left and

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right. I am just going to mention the abduction of some 300 Nigerian adolescent school girls in April by Boko Haram militants, kicking off the *Bring Back Our Girls!*- campaign.

I chose to write the poem as a feminist but there was another way to interpret the myth. Freyr symbolizes fertility, Gerður is believed to symbolize the earth, and Skírnir, the sun. If the woman symbolizing the earth is taken from her natural habitat, it is no wonder we are facing global warming, with all the dangers that comes with it. Bloodhoof has to return the giantess back home so that balance can be restored on earth.

Old mythologies are worth reading again and again. They bring us messages from the past to explain the present, and help us predict the future. We should listen.