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Odin as a Paragon of Shamanhood and Fatherhood

Today in secular western society we understand mythology to be a human creation. We, as humans with a pervasive need to rationalize the world, created our creators in a series of myths to better define our place in existence. These myths are a reflection of our worldview and ideals. In proto-Indo-European pagan religions this included a familiarly structured pantheon populated with archetypal gods. At the top of this pantheon there is an idealized patriarch figure. The Greeks created a pantheon that reflected their inner lives and the wish fulfillment that they could not attain in life and at the top of this pantheon was an idealized patriarch, Zeus. While not exactly morally ideal he is an incarnation of early Greek wish fulfillment. He was virile and physically powerful. He usurped feminine power, spiting his wife Hera, in his creation of Athena and he commands respect and obedience from his progeny. The Zeus character models the “good life” and ideal self for the Greek male to follow. This same archetypal theory derived from observations of the Greek mythos, that the patriarch of early Indo-European, familial pantheons served as an object of admiration and wish fulfillment, can be applied to other, similarly structured mythologies to illuminate the ideals and values of those cultures. Therefore, insight about the archetypal ideals of the Norse people may be gained by recognizing the psychology behind the creation of mythological character of Odin.

The late Sukumari Bhattacharji, doyen scholar of Sanskrit, wrote in her book, *The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology from the Vedas to the Puranas*, about the comparative parallels between Odin, Zeus and Veruna, chief god of the Vedic pantheon until replaced by Indra (41, 278-280). Odin one-eyed, according to Bhattacharji, must have originally been a sun-eyed sky god, much like Veruna and not too far off from Zeus (41). Veruna and Odin, as well as Osiris of Egypt, were also closely associated with death. Odin and Osiris themselves, in their respective mythologies, are, in fact, dead. Zeus here is the outlier, since his brother, Hades, took on the role of ruler of the underworld, but all of these gods show close parallels in their individual lives and domains that make their place as venerable fathers conspicuously repetitive. This reveals that these chief gods, if not one and the same in origin, are one and the same in purpose. That is to say that as “chiefs” of the celestial community these gods mirror the human chiefs of the early Indo-European tribal communities as venerable elders or powerful warriors. Therefore, Odin, chief of the Norse pantheon, can be reasonably understood as idealized figure to the Norse culture in the same way as Zeus was to the Greeks and an indicator of the inner lives of his worshippers. His place as a highly regarded and admired god is undisputed, but who exactly is one-eyed Odin? What is he to the Norse people and how does he reflect their sense of self? The written myths can tell us.

First and foremost, Odin was wise and would go to any lengths to further his wisdom. In the Poetic Edda, there is a poem called the *Hávamál*, which translates to “sayings of the high one”. Within the verses of the poem there are instructions, fables and proverbs attributed to Odin himself. The lessons provided in Odin’s wisdom include sacred rules for reciprocity and hospitality, warnings about the finality of death and post-mortem judgment as well as instructions on how to seduce women (another Zeus parallel) (*Hávamál*). This impartation of

wisdom from Odin to humankind suggests a god very committed to knowledge and structured life. He attains a sort of Promethean status as a champion for humanity.

Apart from instructions for daily life, the *Hávamál* contains the myth of Odin's sacrifices for the sake of wisdom. One of these sacrifices is written in the *Völuspá*, the first poem in the Poetic Edda. In the poem, a seer relates to Odin the creation of the cosmos and the events of Ragnarök. While she recounts this information, she reveals to Odin that she knows how he lost his eye and begins to tell the story of how he sacrificed it by casting it into Mímisbrunnr (Mimir's well) in exchange for a draught of its water which contains "wisdom and intelligence" (*Völuspá* ll. 28-29, Prose Edda p. 27). Also in the Eddic poem, *Vafþrúðnismál*, Odin wagers his very own head in a contest of wisdom with the giant for which the poem is named. In this act, he attains a status as preeminent fatherly wiseman superseding the giants who, until Odin's success in this competition, had been the height of wisdom and ostensible patriarchs of the pantheon (Jakkobson 12).

Examples of Odin's exploits in his quest for knowledge are numerous, but principal among them and most Promethean is his self-sacrifice upon Yggdrasil, the tree that connects the nine worlds of the Norse pantheon. In lines 139 to 146 of *Hávamál*, Odin describes how he "hung on that windy tree for nights full nine" in a somewhat Christ like act of self-sacrifice (McKinnell 90). The extent of Christian influence upon the tale of Odin's sacrifice is unclear since there exists no litmus test of orthodoxy for heathenism, but the myth remains part of Odin's character and is reasonably well-sourced given the various names for Odin, such as "Gullgóðin" (Gallows god), "Váfuðr" (Dangler) and "Ceiguðr" (the one made to sway), which "couldn't have existed without a preexisting myth" (McKinnell 91-92). It is by this suicide that Odin discovers runes and then delivers them to humanity (*Hávamál* ll. 139-146). Even if Christ like in deed,

Odin's sacrifice was not for the salvation of humankind from corruption, but rather in order to bring a different gift to us: language.

The primacy of language alone speaks volumes about the Norse people. Its place of value tells us that their culture valued the power of the spoken and written word. Wise and articulate elders who resembled Odin in bearing and character must have been highly venerated. Language and runes were the root of that wisdom in that they captured knowledge and thought. However, apart from being the root of wisdom and intelligence for the Norse people, language held a distinctly magical power, and Odin, by giving language to the people, gave them magic, since the two, in Norse mythology, are one and the same. Allan Asbjørn Jøn, author of "Shamanism and The Image of The Teutonic Deity, Óðinn", writes that Odin's sacrifice upon Yggdrasil mirrors the shamanistic ordeals that many magical traditions require for initiates to be recognized as shamanic leaders (70). The preferred method of sacrifice for the Norse tribes, according to Jøn, was hanging by the neck (70). Fasting, pain and a connection with the spiritual were critical parts of such a ritual. Odin went without "loaf or horn", was wounded with his spear and sacrificed himself to himself (Havamal ll. 139-140). In this way Odin's tale serves as an etiological myth for Norse Shamanistic rituals which require an emulation of his deeds. He is, therefore the recognized authority on magic to the Norse shamanists of old and his purpose in the pantheon expands to include magic as well as wisdom. After all magic, to those who practice it, is only an extension of wisdom. Odin, by capturing the runes, the foundation of Norse magic, and making them "submit to him as their rune-master" takes his place, not only as a wise old man, but as the original shaman and highest spiritual leader (Jakkobson 69).

Yet more than simply founding magical practices, Odin accomplishes the ultimate in those practices. He transcends death. It is not as simple as existing in a spiritual realm and

therefore being already incorporeal and technically not alive. Odin skirts the line between life and death, riding on Sleipnir to Hel and back. Death is the biggest mystery to those contemplating spiritual existence, and presents a boundary of knowledge where only the highest mystics can probe. Odin extends his power into this domain by passing between worlds and dying, ritualistically, upon Yggdrasil (McKinnell 91). His foreknowledge of his own fate, though revealed to him by the seer in *Völuspá*, is another mystical privilege that he is afforded as a master shaman. Additionally, his steed, Sleipnir, "is the typical steed of the shaman", according to Hilda Ellis Davidson (142). Davidson writes in *The Road to Hel* that, in shamanistic traditions a shaman "is usually represented as riding on some bird or animal" on any journey to the underworld (142). Typically, this bird or animal serves as some guide or facilitator of movement that would otherwise be impossible and while the choice of a horse is not unusual, Sleipnir's spiderlike array of legs is. Davidson posits that this eight-legged horse is actually a funeral bier, citing a funeral dirge of the Gondi people who, in their mythology, include Bagni Maro, the eight-legged horse, as a guide for the dead to the underworld (143). Given the curious parallels between Indian and European mythologies established by Sukumari Bhattacharji it seems more than likely that as Odin moved from plane to plane he died either figuratively or literally and was borne upon a funeral bier to his destination.

Most interestingly of all however, given the patriarchal role of Odin in a familial pantheon, is that the wandering god defines fatherhood for the Norse people. Odin is, among all those other things, a father. He is *the* father in the same way that he is *the* mystic. Effectively fathers should be to their children as Odin is to his, at least in Norse culture. This is best illustrated by illustrating the Greek sense of fatherhood in Zeus. Zeus lived in perpetual fear of being overthrown. Henpecked by Hera and defied by his progeny, Zeus' relationships were

based in his authority and the fact that he was ostensibly the man in charge. His relationship with his own father was not much better, since they had a falling out over a nasty but of castration.

Zeus was also a disloyal womanizer.

Odin did his own but of womanizing, but his role as knowledge giver and shaman defines his sense of fatherhood, actually the Norse sense of fatherhood since he is a creation of theirs, by handing down important lessons. In the aforementioned *Hávamál*, Odin taught life lessons and magic to those who would read it. Zeus did nothing of the sort. Instead Prometheus had to intervene to save humanity from their abusive father. Odin shares more with Prometheus in sensibilities than he does with his fellow father Zeus. Reflecting the Norse people as this must, this reveals to us an idea of the Norse family structure, besides magical practices and the valuation of wisdom. Extending out from Odin, Thor can be seen as a role model for a young warrior, the wise man's son. The Norse do, quite predictably, have some disparaging things to say about women through Frejya (*Lokasenna*, *Poetic Edda* ll. 1-65). Ultimately, the Norse sense of fatherhood seems rather healthily developed when compared to the Greeks' if their mythology is any indication, and that father figures have an explicitly religious role to play for their progeny. Shamans also, as male leaders whose word is to be well heeded, evoke this sense of patriarchal ethos. Therefore, as father figure, shaman and wise man, Odin defines gender norms, ethics and social roles for the aged Norse male past his Thor-like warrior age, when he is, like Odin, to be most respected.

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