

THE VÖLVA AND ODINN

After the Aesir-Vanir war, the *Völuspá* returns to the seeress who is speaking prophecy. Addressing Oðinn, she declares that she knows the hidden place of Heimdall's horn, "under the radiant, sacred tree." There she sees the foaming flow of a mighty stream "from Fjolnir's pledge | know ye further, or how?" She is alluding to Oðinn's plucking out one eye as the price of a drink from Mimir's well, in order to obtain wisdom. And yet Oðinn has come to the *völva* in search of her foreknowledge.¹⁷¹

*alone she sat out, when the lord of gods,
oðinn the old, her eye did seek.*

The *völva* is "sitting out" on the land, in the old heathen way of dreaming. Grounded in primordial consciousness, she is indifferent to Odin's rank, or the rings and necklaces he lays before her to elicit her prophecy. Judy Quinn brings forward a lesser-known version of



Oðinn approaches the völva seeking her prophecy. Lorenz Frølich.

Völuspá 29, which says, “War-father chose for her necklaces, wealth, wise spells [*spáklig*] and prophecy-wands [*spáganda*].¹⁷² The *spáganda* might well have been envisioned in the form of distaffs, like many of the forged iron staffs of 10th century *völur*. (Indeed, Lorenz Frølich depicted the *völva*’s staff in this very form, in the late 19th century before most of them were found: see preceding page.) Carolyne Larrington translates *spáganda* as “a rod of divination.”¹⁷³ Ursula Dronke renders it as “spirits of prophecy”—but if Oðinn had those to give away, he would have no need of the *völva*’s help.

There is nothing the *völva* wants from Oðinn; it is he who is the supplicant. She “knows more than Oðinn,” comments Ursula Dronke,¹⁷⁴ and the *völva* reminds him of that:

**What seekest to know, why summon me?
Well know I, Ygg, where thy eye is hidden,
In the wondrous well of Mímir
Each morn Mímir his mead doth drink
Out of Fjölnir’s pledge: know ye further or how?**¹⁷⁵

Her mocking tone taunts Odin’s pretensions as a wizard; has he not cast one of his eyes into Mimir’s well in hopes of gaining second-sight? (Parenthetically, it could be asked, has he not bragged of knowing things that witch-women did not? and did he not boast in *Hávamal* of using his magical prowess to coerce women?) Why, then, does Oðinn bring offerings to the *völva* for her oracular seeing?¹⁷⁶ In the next verse the seeress supplies the answer:

*the fates í fathom, yet farther í see
see far and wide the worlds about.*¹⁷⁷

Now the seeress enters into a foretelling of what is to come—but she recounts it in the past tense.¹⁷⁸ Time is irrelevant in this dream-state of seeing. The *völva* sees the valkyries gathering for battle, with the norn Skuld at their head, and she names them. Her tone turns dire: she foresees the doom of Baldr, son of Frigg and Oðinn. The beloved son is to be slain by his own brother, despite his mother’s efforts to protect him. She sees, too, the binding of Loki who brought about that slaying, and all the woe that follows as things fall apart.

The *völva* repeatedly challenges Óðinn with the refrain: “Know ye further, or how?” *Vituð ér enn, eða hvat?* literally means, “Know you yet, or what?” Lindow translates, “Would you know yet more?”¹⁷⁹ and Dronke: “Do you still seek to know? and what?”¹⁸⁰ Again and again the *völva* repeats this majestic phrase, circling back to it in a rhythmic punctuation that savors of long-established ceremonial verse.

The prophetic giantess Hyndla repeats a similar phrase, “wilt thou know further?” (*viltu ennlengra*) in a poem known as the “Shorter Völuspá.”¹⁸¹ The witch Busla speaks a comparable line (*e a viltu flulu lengri*) in *Bósa saga*.¹⁸² When the old ways remained intact, the *völur* would have pronounced ritualized questions of this kind in their oracular ceremonies. Except for these few fragments, their oracular litanies, their *seiðlati* and *varðlokkur* have been obliterated.

RAÇNAROK: DOOM OF THE POWERS

The greater part of the *Völuspá* foretells the end of the Aesir’s world. The *völva* names the fell powers who will attack creation—the Serpent gnawing, the Wolf rending—and now another refrain emerges: the chilling image of a terrible hound of destruction:

**Garm bays loudly before Gnipa cave
Breaks his fetters and freely runs.**¹⁸³

The seeress prophesies the atrocities of war unleashed on humanity, that same war that Óðinn delighted in provoking and gloried in as a victor. Now he becomes its victim, and falls to a more powerful assailant, undone by his own calculus of “might makes right.” The warnings against the rule of violence have gone unheeded, and so the decline into mayhem becomes inevitable:

**Brothers will battle to bloody end
And sisters’ sons their sib betray**¹⁸⁴

The oracle speaks of an “axe-age, sword-age... wind-age, wolf-age,” as the world is riven by terrible wars: “Will the spear of no man spare the other.”¹⁸⁵ The male Aesir fall in battle. The Tree of Life shudders, as land sinks under the ocean. The sun dims, the stars fall, and the world is on fire.

In this destruction, the fate of the goddesses is left unspoken; the poem alludes only to Frigg's sorrow at the loss of her loved ones. However, at the end of *Heimskringla*—which is notorious for treating the deities as historical characters—Snorri nevertheless comments, “Freyja alone remained of the gods.”¹⁸⁶ The life principle survives, in the form of the Vanadís. And so the *Völuspá* concludes by foretelling regeneration after the horrors:

**I see green again with growing things
the earth arise from out of the sea
fell torrents flow, overflies them the eagle
on hoar highlands which hunts for fish.**¹⁸⁷

Another Eddic poem, the *Vafthrúðnismál*, echoes this account. A wise giant predicts that before the wolf Fenrir swallows the sun (“Elf-Beam”), she will bear a daughter orb. “On her mother’s path will the maiden fare,” after the fall of the Aesir at Ragnarok.¹⁸⁸ A pair of humans survive too; Life and Life-Speeder, the future ancestors, hide in a grove.¹⁸⁹ Baldr returns, and Njörðr will “come back home to the wise—the future-knowing—Vanir.”¹⁹⁰ The surviving Aesir meet on the plain where their ancestors once played draughts, and find the fallen golden pieces in the grass. As Jochens points out, the poem’s masculine bias is repeated in St. 63, as the Earth is “repopulated by a pair of males without the mention of women,” as it began.¹⁹¹

The *Völuspá* concludes by abruptly shifting back to the pagan seeress herself. Having spoken her prophecy, she subsides or falls back: “now she will sink.” This passage has always struck me as referring to the *völva* sinking back into her meditative trance after delivering her prophecy, like a shaman at the end of a powerful ceremony.

The seeress of *Völuspá* has often been interpreted as a giantess who is returning into the earth. But some writers insist on treating her as a dead *völva* who has unwillingly been summoned from the grave, as Oðinn does to the *völva* buried outside the gates of Hel in *Baldurs draumr*. Jenny Jochens remonstrates, “Scholars have often, but without grounds, interpreted the relationship between the two as one in which Oðinn is able to force her to speak.”¹⁹² As the *Völuspá* makes clear, the *völva* is *not* dead and buried when Oðinn approaches her, but is engaged in the spiritual practice of “sitting out.” Recall, too, how