

**FATAL SPINSTERS: THREAD WORK IN 19<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY ARTISTIC  
DEPICTIONS OF NORSE MYTHOLOGICAL WOMEN.**

**FILEUSES FATALES : LE TRAVAIL DU FIL DANS LES  
REPRÉSENTATIONS ARTISTIQUES DE FEMMES DE LA MYTHOLOGIE  
NORDIQUE AU XIX<sup>e</sup> SIÈCLE.**

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**Abstract:** Spinning, weaving and thread work in general are common occurrences in tales and legends across the world, but in the case of Norse mythology, the motif is actually rare. Despite the scarcity of textual material tying Norse mythological women to these crafts, the national-romantic artistic production of the 19<sup>th</sup> century took this motif and ran with it. We find spinning and weaving Norns, valkyries and goddesses in paintings, engravings and sculptures. Although the thread work motif is inaccurate at best to the source material, it is efficient in conveying different stereotypes that participate in the narrative effort of artistic compositions. This paper looks into 19<sup>th</sup>-century art and scientific literature of the period in order to determine why and how the thread work motif came to be associated with Norse mythological women: be it the influence of the classical Fates motif, the varying translations of the source material or the clichés tied to women and their crafts, there are several reasons why thread work was deemed appropriate to represent the women of the Norse pantheon.

**Keywords:** Arts; Spinners; Norse Mythology; Women

**Résumé :** Le filage, le tissage, et le travail du fil en général sont des occurrences courantes dans divers contes et légendes à travers le monde, mais dans le cas de la mythologie nordique, le motif est en réalité assez rare. Malgré le peu de source textuelle liant les femmes de la mythologie nordique à ces pratiques, la production artistique nationale-romantique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle a pris ce motif, et s'en est emparé. On trouve des Nornes, valkyries et déesses filant et tissant en peinture, gravure et sculpture. Si le motif du travail du fil est au mieux inexact par rapport aux sources, il n'en reste pas moins efficace car il exprime différents stéréotypes qui participent de l'effort de narration à l'œuvre dans les compositions artistiques. Cet article s'intéresse à l'art du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et à la littérature scientifique de l'époque afin de déterminer pourquoi et comment le motif du travail du fil est devenu associé aux femmes de la mythologie nordique: que ce soit l'influence du motif des Parques classiques, les traductions variables des textes source ou les clichés attachés aux femmes et à leurs artisanats, il y a plusieurs raisons pour lesquelles on a estimé que le motif du travail du fil était approprié pour les femmes du panthéon nordique.

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**Mots-clés :** Arts ; Fileuses ; Mythologie Nordique ; Femmes

It would seem obvious that the Norns spin thread. They are, after all, the Norse equivalent to the Roman Parcae, and as such they could share similar attributes. The *fate-as-thread* metaphor is a well-known, efficient one (Bek-Pedersen, 2009, p.23) and it would then seem self-evident that any mythical being intertwined with some concept of Fate would symbolically spin, twin or weave, and that the artistic representation of such beings would have them practicing their craft. And it is the case that in 19<sup>th</sup>-century visual arts Norns, valkyries and Norse goddesses sometimes spin: be it H.W. Bissen's *Alvitra*, Constantin Hansen's *Freia*, or Alois Delug's *Nornen*, Norse mythological women work with thread.

However, there is one slight problem: Norns do not really spin. As pointed out by Karen Bek-Pedersen, Norns and other female supernatural beings of the Old Norse mythology do not spin nor weave as a primary activity (Bek-Pedersen, 2007, p. 1). Only *three* occurrences of such craft appear in all sources available: *Darraðarljóð* – a poem in *Njáls saga* –, *Völundarkviða*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* – both from the Poetic *Edda*. The first one concerns weaving valkyries, the second one spinning valkyries, and the last tells of Norns possibly spinning, but more likely twining<sup>2</sup>. In all the other narratives of the Old Norse myths telling of the valkyries, Norns, and goddesses, none presents them working with thread, and the ones that do are scarce and likely influenced by foreign traditions (Bek-Pedersen, 2007, p.7).

This raises a question: if there is so little evidence supporting the motif of mythological Norse spinners, why is it so common in late modern artistic renditions of Old Norse supernatural women? This paper will examine the motif of mythical spinners and thread workers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century art, first exploring the classical influence in the representation of the spinning Norns, then looking at other types of motifs attributed to the Norns in earlier depictions, before studying examples of the Fate-as-web metaphor, and finally looking at thread work as a motif of feminine domesticity.

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<sup>2</sup> Twining, or plying, is making one stronger thread with several spun threads twisted and plied together.



fig.1 Alois Delug, *Die Nornen*, 1895, Mart Museum Roverto

### The Norns as Fatal Spinners

In his 1895 painting depicting the Norns, Austrian Painter Alois Delug chose to represent the three women sitting around the spring *Urðarbrunnr*, as they are described in *Völuspá* and Snorri's *Edda* (fig.1). They are spinning a single, long thread that seems to spring out of the water. It almost tangles next to the skull on the bottom right corner of the canvas and hangs from the elder Norn's left hand. She is clad in a dark cloak, unlike the two other Norns who wear white, and she rests in a pensive, almost melancholic posture. To her right the middle-aged Norn holds the thread up high above her head, and it loops in her left hand before falling to the middle of the composition. The youngest Norn, eyes closed, is reaching out for the thread with her left hand while holding embroidery scissors in her right hand. In terms of symbolism, these Norns do not correspond solely to the descriptions given in Norse texts and take from the *Moirai* and *Parcae* of Greek and Roman mythologies: the spinning of the thread



is usually attributed to these classical Fates, but none of the Norns are said to spin and cut the thread of destiny<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, none of them are said to keep their eyes closed or be blind, and when the thread is mentioned in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, it is not said to spring out of the water. So, the question stands: why did Alois Delug represent the Norns like this? What were his inspirations and what could have motivated his choices?

Alois Delug might have chosen this representation because the image of the Greco-Roman Fates spinning the thread of life was well-known, familiar and widely used in European art (Rosich, 2018). Just in Denmark for example in 1808, painter C.W. Eckersberg had painted *De tre Parcer, Clotho, Lachesis og Atropos spinder livets tråd*, probably as a training for the Danish Academy's gold medal competition of 1809 (Hornung & Monrad, 2005, p.60), painter C.G. Kratzenstein-Stub sketched a composition on the same subject in 1813, and sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen made a plaster cast for a bas-relief depicting the three Fates in 1833. Being academically trained in Vienna, Alois Delug was also familiar with classic representations of the Fates, such as Rubens' or Salviati's – which until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was still attributed to Michelangelo (Bisceglia, 2016, p.242). The parallel between the Norns and the Fates is easily drawn, and the attribution of spinning to the Norns in art can be explained in that sense. Delug's piece is a late-romantic painting and is high in symbolism. Delug, in associating the Norns and the Fates, creates a web of symbolism that make his composition both spiritual and dramatic: the atmosphere, that of dawn or twilight, evokes the endless cycle of beginnings and endings of the day as a metaphor for life, just like the thread that starts out of the water spring – another symbol of life – is a representation of one's lifetime and passes around the composition in a cycle. First, from the bottom right it paradoxically starts with touching death in the form of the skull and ends pointing towards the spring again, but will never touch it, as the last Norn is about to catch it and has her

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<sup>3</sup> Even in the case of the classical Fates, it is unclear whether they are said to *cut* the thread. In Ovid, *Amores* 2.6.46, the Parca does not cut her thread, she just empties her distaff like in Plautus, *Menaechmi* 5.5; nor does she in Catullus 64. She does break it in Statius, *Thebais* 8.26: *stamina rumpebant*. As for the Greek Moirai, in Plato's *Republic* 10.620e and *Laws* 12.960c, Atropos makes the thread, i.e., fate, "irreversible" but is not said to cut it, and neither in Hesiod nor Plutarch do we find the cutting. In Homer, the thread is already spun, but never said to be cut. Whether or not the Moirai and Parcae do cut any thread in the ancient sources would be a whole other inquiry in and of itself. What is certain is that there is a common conception that they spin and cut or break the thread, see for example Petersen, 1849, p. 141.

embroidery scissors ready to cut the thread. The symbolism of Delug's work is quite classic and easily readable for its late-nineteenth-century audience and it is perhaps the main reason why the Norns feel like they are the Fates' first cousins in this composition: the painter must deal with the audience's *horizon d'attente*, i.e., the limits of what is expected and understood by an audience based on its prior knowledge of the arts and the current context (Jauss, 1990, p.49).

Another reason for the motif of the spinning Norns is simply translation discrepancies. As stated, the action the Norns are carrying in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* is unclear and can be translated in different ways (Bek-Pedersen, 2007, p.3). Looking at some of the translations available throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century in different languages gives an idea of what their craft was identified as. In 1822 Finnur Magnússon published the third volume of his Danish translation of the *Edda*. On page 275 of the translation of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* the Norns' action is translated as *de spunde, they spun* (Magnússon, 1822, p.275). Arvid August Afzelius translated in Swedish *spunno, they spun* (Afzelius, 1818, p.142), while Frederik Sanders' *Edda Sämund den vises* translates it as *de toinnade, they twisted* (Sanders, 1893, p.175). In the Grimm Brothers' German translation *Lieder den Alten Edda*, the verb used is *schnüren*, to tie or to lace with a string (Grimm, 1815, p.57). Rosalie du Puget in her 1846 French translation, translated *Elles filèrent*, they spun, and added in the precedent stanza another mention of spinning, which is not to be found in other versions. It gives a paradoxical course of narration: "les Nornes, qui avaient filé la vie de ce jeune noble", "the Norns, who had spun the life of this young nobleman", before "filèrent avec force le fil du destin", "spun with force the thread of destiny" (Puget, 1846, p.361). As for the latin translation published 1818 by the Árni-Magnússon Commission in Copenhagen, it gives *nerunt*, which can be understood as *they spin, they intertwine*, or *they weave*, and gives *Parcae* for the Norns (Árni-Magnússon Commission, 1818, p.56). As we see depending on the year, the edition chosen or language read, the description differs: the Norns could spin, twin, fasten, or even weave. Therefore, depending on the copy available to the artist or how they learned about the Norns, they could understand them as practicing different crafts, including spinning. This, associated with their resemblance to the classical Fates, makes their representation as spinners a logical artistic choice.

But the enquiry can go further: if there is very little mention of any spinning Norns in the Old Norse texts, how come the parallel with the Fates was drawn? In order to answer this question, one would have to look into philology and the study of Old Norse myths in the



19<sup>th</sup> century. One major work in this field was Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, first published in 1835 and re-edited four times. In an attempt to reconstruct a lost German(ic) Mythology, Jacob Grimm drew from the Norse, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon sources, as well as on folk tales and traditions. His work therefore offered analyses of Norse deities and particularly of their names, attributes and functions.

In *Weise Frauen*, the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of his *Deutsche Mythologie*, Jacob Grimm analyses single women that are often associated with activities such as spinning and weaving – occupations that, according to Grimm, tie the deities to the domestic sphere, as opposed to the battlefield. Many mythological women are thus spinsters, for they spin, and have no husband to help them ascend to the status of goddesses like their married counterparts analysed in chapter 13. Norns are amongst Grimm's spinsters and are said to either "sit on their chair or [...] roam through the country among mortals, fastening their threads" (Grimm, 1882, p. 421)<sup>4</sup>. However, Grimm seems undecided on the subject: do the Norns spin? After comparing Romance and Germanic traditions and tales of fays who spin<sup>5</sup>, Grimm writes: "Of such stories there are plenty; but nowhere in Romance or German folk-tales do we meet, as far as I know, with the Norse conception of *twining* and *fastening* the cord, or the Greek one of spinning and cutting the thread of life" (Grimm, 1882, p. 413). He does not mention this *fastening* of the cord any further, nor does he elaborate on the *twining*, but both possibly refer to the one occurrence in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. Shortly after he writes: "The weaving of the Norns and the spinning of the fays gives us to recognise *domestic motherly* divinities" (Grimm, 1882, 416). The construction of the sentence lets us think Grimm does not use spinning and weaving interchangeably, but in this chapter, he does not describe Norns as being essentially weavers, except once on the subject of what he identifies as an Anglo-Saxon Norn (Wyrð, ie. Urðr), p.415. Later, he questions again this domestic activity:

"Of the norns, none but Skuld the youngest can be a valkyrja too: were Urðr and Verðandi imagined as too aged or too dignified for the work of war? did the cutting, breaking, of the thread (if such an idea can be detected in the North) better become the maiden practised in arms?" (Grimm, 1882, p. 422)

<sup>4</sup> The translation used is by James Steven Stallybrass and is based on the 4<sup>th</sup> edition. For all other texts that do not have an English translation available, the text is given in its original form, then translated.

<sup>5</sup> In Grimm's categorisation, fays are a category of fairy women under which fall Norns and Fates.



Here we find the hypothesis that the gruesome task of cutting the thread befell the younger Norn Skuld, which also happens to bear a valkyrie name: this has led to the assumption that she is both Norn and valkyrie. This task would be hers because valkyries are tasked with death and the afterlife. But again, Grimm does not quote any source for this possible cutting of the thread, and even questions whether the Norns of the Old Norse mythology did in fact, spin thread and cut it like the Fates of the classical myths are thought to do. Throughout this chapter and particularly about Norns, Grimm continuously compares the Germanic and Nordic supernatural women to the Greek and Roman deities, to the point that it would be easy to assume he thinks they are equivalent in all aspects. He writes: "In the same relation as *norn* to *örlög* [destiny], stands *parca* to *fatum* [...], and also *αἴσα* [Aisa], *μοῖρα* [Moirai] to *ἀνάγκη* [anankè, necessity]" (Grimm, 1882, p.410) or "I have set norns and *μοῖραι* [Moirai] side by side" (Grimm, 1882, p.426). Grimm spends pages 414 and 415 describing the Moirai and Parcae and their impeding roles as spinners and cutters of the thread of life. But if the motif of spinners, oftentimes by number of three, occurs regularly in folktales and legends – "German legend is full of spinning and weaving women" (Grimm, 1888, p.1402) – these activities are not said to occupy the three Norse Norns at the spring Urðarbrunnr. However, the conception of Norns as personifications of Time, coming from the assumption that their names mean Past, Present and Future in a perfectly rounded metaphorical triptych reinforces the idea of the thread as an allegory of lifetime, and comforts the parallel with the Fates. This reading of their names was questioned early on, but it is so pleasing that it persisted.

In Grimm's study as well as in others, the term *norn* encompasses an entire array of supernatural women, and not all of them are the three Norse Norns who stay near the water under Yggdrasil's shadow. These three Norns are the only ones in Norse mythology identified as individuals with names and occupations, tied to a specific, important dwelling place and given the cumbersome task of ruling over the course of human life – among other tasks. Their number and their role make them similar to the Parcae and Moirai, but that does not mean they spin or work with thread. On the one occasion the words *norn* and thread are mentioned together in the Old Norse sources, they are not named, and could be any other norns, for it is never said how many there are and if the ones at Urðarbrunnr are the only ones. In this sense, Grimm's understanding of the norns is that they are a generic type of fay-like domestic deities who foresee and foretell, allot fortune and give out bounties and curses. When he speaks of



the norms weaving, spinning or possibly cutting thread, he is not specifically speaking about the three Norse Norns at Urðarbrunnr. The entanglement of Norns and Fates is indubitably present in Grimm's work, but not necessarily on the precise subject of spinning and weaving: both types of figures are similar because they are three, and they allot a destiny to every individual.

As pointed out by Grimm and reinforced by modern philological studies, these activities are in general not only associated with women, they are also associated with Fate and serve almost always as a metaphor for the inevitable passing of time and thus the unfolding of destiny: Dietrich (1962) has studied this motif in Homer, Raymon J. Starr (2009) in Virgil, Maria C. Pantelia (1993) establishes the symbolic distinction between spinning and weaving in Homer, and Bek-Pedersen (2009) studied the philosophical implications of the Fate-as-web metaphor. Essentially, the association of Norse supernatural women with spinning and weaving, although not solidly based on actual sources, comes as no surprise as these activities are found in many European tales and myths where they have several symbolic meanings transferrable to the representation of Old Norse deities.

Moreover, the motif of Norns as spinners is present in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, which premiered in Bayreuth in 1876. The three Norns appear in the prologue, spinning a thread (or rather, for scenic reasons, a rope) that eventually breaks, foreshadowing the Twilight of the Gods. Perhaps Wagner chose to make his Norns look like classical Fates, or maybe he was himself influenced by the work of philologists who had already drawn this parallel in the preceding decades. The influence of Wagner's work is immense, and it is a possibility that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists were not painting the Norns of the Norse or Germanic mythologies, but specifically the Norns of Wagner's *Ring*. An example of this is Hans Makart's project for a ceiling decoration at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna (fig.2). Dated around 1870, this artwork represents several scenes from Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*. On the bottom left corner, as a trompe-l'oeil decoration, sit the Norns. In terms of effect on the viewer, the Norns are supposed to look like they sit at the base of one rib vault, as if they were part of the architecture itself and overlooking passers-by. They are represented as three old women in voluminous draperies, spinning thread. The Norn in the middle is enthroned and holds scissors. As stated before, in Wagner's *Ring*, the Norns do not cut a thread, it breaks on itself as the Norns were spinning it, and they sing *es riss! es riss! es riss!* (Wagner, 1876, p.10).





fig.2 Hans Makart, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, c.1870-85, Belvedere Museum Vienna

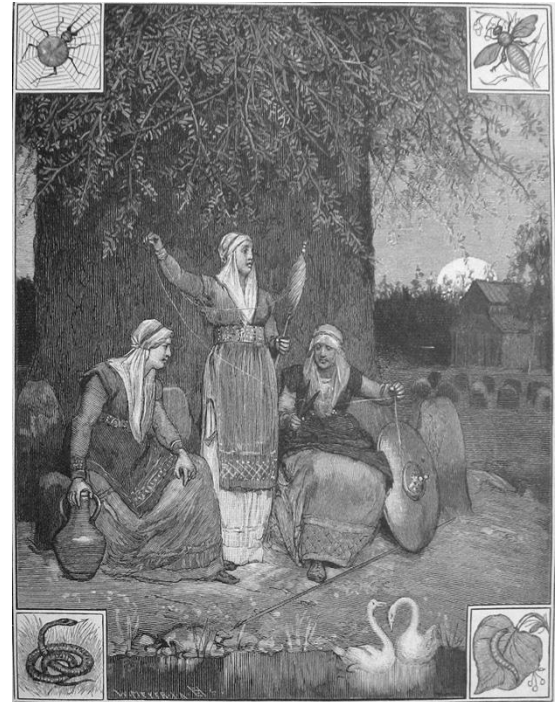


fig.3. Anon. *Normorna vid Urdarbrunnen*, published 1893, Stockholm

But Makart's work is not precisely dated and could perhaps have been made before the staging of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and based on vague descriptions. In his rendition of Wagner's Norns, one of them is ready to cut the thread, again showing that the artistic representation of the Norns is influenced by centuries of images of the greco-roman Fates spinning and cutting thread.

Makart and Delug's compositions are large-scale paintings, the type of which was exhibited in Salons and now hangs in museums. But another thriving field of representation was engraving, and especially for the purpose of illustrating books and textbooks. In the case of the Norse myths, these books could be translations of the *Eddas* for a public larger than the narrow circle of philologists and linguists that studied them, or revised national histories of Northern European countries. Many books of this nature were produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it would be nearly impossible to cover all of them in this paper. But we can look at some pertinent images, and the text that accompanies them.



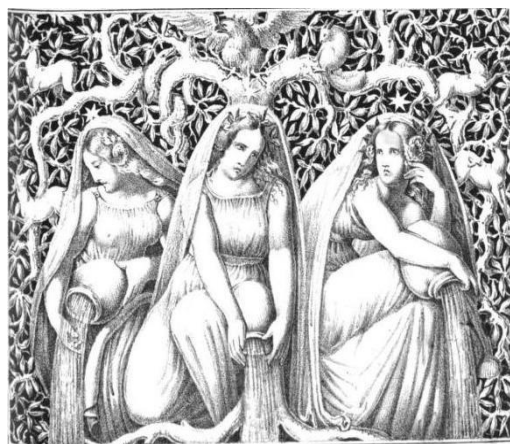
*Edda Sämund den vises* is a Swedish translation of the *Edda* published in 1893. It is a rich edition, since it contains many illustrations to give visual embodiment to the myths retold. By the time this was published, the *Edda* had been translated in Swedish already, and the aim of this new version was certainly to make the content accessible to a larger number of Swedish readers and reinforce the status of the *Edda* as a national, if not generally Scandinavian, canon of literature and culture. On page 7 is reproduced an engraving of the Norns, which is not signed besides the engraver's name and company (fig.3). We can see three women in richly decorated, layered clothing, complete with veils covering their heads. They are under a large ash tree, among decorated vases, on the bank of a lake or river where swans swim. This is undoubtedly the setting described in Old Norse myths as *Urðarbrunnr*. Two of the Norns are spinning a long thread. Again, the spinning is represented as a common activity, and a highly symbolic one: the unique thread is handled by two personifications of Time, and the whole scene serves as an allegory for the passing of time and the eventual end of it - once the thread either runs out or is broken. What is particularly striking here is not just the fact that their spinning makes them Fate-like, it is also their clothing. Instead of being dressed in white, classical-looking drapery, they are wearing folkloric garments. This demonstrates a certain shift in the representation of Old Norse deities: first paralleled with Greek gods and represented with similar attitudes and style (Ljøgodt, 2012, p.150; Kuhn, 2000, p.212-215), they are now being made to look more native. This is in part made possible through the national-romantic endeavour of scholars and intellectuals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who identified clothing worn in rural regions of Europe as traditional or typical of a population and region, and therefore national (Maxwell, 2014; Thiesse, 2013); and in part through the gradual abandonment of classical canons as reference works for composition and style. With this appearance and despite the spinning, the Norns here cannot be mistaken for Greek Moirai like Alois Delug's characters could. One could think that the representation falls short by making the Norns practice an activity that is in fact foreign but as the reading of the text that accompanies the image will show, it was such a common conception that the Norns were spinners and weavers that this representation was expected. The text is a Swedish translation of the *Völuspá*. Stanzas 19 to 21 describe the Norns as three *mör* (maidens) and name each one. But there is no clear description of what they do exactly, yet the motif is present in the image, as if evident. The illustration is therefore based on something other than just this text and

draws its notions of the spinning Norns elsewhere. The image shows not only the spinning, but also the tree Yggdrasil, a hall in the background, and the two swans said to swim on Urðarbrunnr. One Norn has a shield at her side, identifying her as Skuld, the Norn-valkyrie, and the one not spinning has her hand on an amphora, as the Norns are primarily said to care for the Ash tree by watering it in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* 16 (and implied in *Völuspá* 19).

### The court at Urðarbrunnr

The watering of Yggdrasil by the Norns is more clearly attested in Snorri's *Edda*, and implied in *Völuspá*: it is one of the Norns activities and has nothing to do with thread work or the popular Fate-as-thread metaphor. It was nonetheless represented, and it is worth noting that this motif was favoured in the earlier decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with other cognate attributes.

As early as the 1770's, Danish artist Johannes Wiedewelt represented the Norns at the spring busy watering the young tree Yggdrasil, still a sapling. As pointed out by Nora Hansson (2019, p.83), despite Wiedewelt's neoclassical style the Norns do not look like typical classical deities: the clothes, attitude and composition make them stand out as something different than the usual academic canons. The illustration follows other Norse drawings Wiedewelt executed as illustrations for Johannes Ewald's play *Balders Død*, but the Norns do not appear in this play, and it seems Wiedewelt illustrated more than just Ewald's work. Wiedewelt's Norns are not



Nornen.

fig.4 Anon. *Nornen*, published 1832, Berlin.

spinning nor weaving, and all of them are busy watering Yggdrasil, as described in Old Norse sources<sup>6</sup>.

In 1832, German author Amalia Schoppe published a book titled *Die Helden und Götter des Nordens, oder: Das Buch der Sagen*, which is not a direct translation of the *Eddas* but rather, a handbook or guide to the heroes and gods of the Old Norse myths. At the very end are included unsigned engravings illustrating some deities. The very last one represents the Norns, right under the valkyries (fig.4). The three Norns are represented young, sitting under a very stylised tree with animals. They wear a *peplos* and a long veil, akin to a *palla*, and the three of them are pouring water out of vases. They are represented just like allegories of water springs, river sources and other water personifications in classical art<sup>7</sup>. In this instance, the Norns are strongly associated with water and Yggdrasil. They are still assimilated with classical figures, but they are not represented with the visual codes of the Fates, albeit their number three. However, in the chapter dedicated to them, Amalia Schoppe describes the Norns as follows, drawing the parallel with the Fates:

Man sieht, daß die Nornen viel Aehnlichkeit mit den Parzen der griechischen und römischen Fabellehre haben; allein die Dichtung von den Nornen ist weit schöner und tiefer, als die von den Parzen.

One can see, that the Norns have much resemblance to the Fates of the Greek and Roman mythology; but the poetry of the Norns is far more beautiful and deeper than that of the Fates. (Schoppe, 1832, p.121)

In the following pages, she describes the Norns' duty towards Yggdrasil, and the power they hold over both gods and men. There is no mention of any thread: the spinning motif for the Norns in arts is now common but was not always ubiquitous. It seems the spinning motif is superimposed on other attributes of the Norns to make them even more identifiable as figures of Fate. This goes back to the idea of the public's *horizon d'attente* mentioned earlier in this paper. The motif of the spinning Fates was widely known, used and represented in Academic arts and poetry. Therefore, the artists would use the motif of the three spinning classical Fates as a basis for the representation of the Norns not only because of their number

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the image, see Langer, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> See for example works by Antoine Watteau (1718), Carle van Loo (1740), or Philips Galle (1587) who drew many water nymphs. As they are women, they are more related to naiads and nymphs than they are to river personifications, which were canonically male since the Renaissance, see Lazzaro, 2011.



and the one mention of thread work associated to them, but also because the adoption of the classical motif would make it easier to recognise the Norns as fate deities. As we see with the illustration in Amalia Schoppe's book, representing the Norns watering Yggdrasil as they are described in *Völuspá* leads to a similitude with the water nymphs of Greek mythology, which might have been a confusing representation when attempting to represent fate deities. Moreover, it is possible that the artists representing the Norns re-used the motif of the spinning Fates not only for purposes of clarity, but also as references to earlier works executed by their peers. Eckersberg represented the three Parcae in 1808: the three women are represented each at a different stage of life, the youngest holds the distaff from which the middle-aged one pulls and spins a thread that the eldest would cut if she were not stopped by a young man. Eckersberg later became professor and director of the Academy, and his works were undoubtedly influential. Later, Bertel Thorvaldsen represented the motif, too. It seems the motif was originally intended as funerary art, for the tombstone of Thomson Henry Bonar, but was never executed as such. Instead, it morphed into different compositions before being made into a plaster cast. The finished product in marble was executed twenty years after the sculptor's death by Christian Constantin Olsen under H.W. Bissen's supervision, but Thorvaldsen's sketches and plasters remain, and we can thus follow the sculptor's thought process when composing this piece. The earliest sketch held at the Thorvaldsensmuseum is dated circa 1814: the figures, barely identifiable as the Fates, are arranged in a dense group composition, all sitting. In a sketch dated 1817-1818, the sculptor chose to arrange them in a more linear, bas-relief-style composition with two of them sitting on both sides, facing each other, and one standing in the middle facing the viewer. In this composition, only the one on the left is occupied with thread as she holds a distaff. The one on the right is writing on a tablet and the middle one stands with her arms wide open, seemingly in front of a sort of stone monument. The resemblance with H.E. Freund's later plaster bas-relief *Mimir and the Norns* is striking (fig.5). At that time, Freund was living and working with Thorvaldsen in Rome. It is likely that he was familiar with Thorvaldsen's sketches of the Fates and drew from them for his relief. Years later in a sketch dated c. 1832 we see that Thorvaldsen was in turn influenced by Freund's own relief: the three Fates now have wings and the one standing in the middle has hers fully open like in Freund's bas-relief. Most importantly, they are now all spinning together, with distaff, spindle and scissors: the tablet and stylet are gone, and so is the stone

monument, thus making the Fates much more identifiable as the classical ones, and not as the Norns. By the next year, the wings are gone, and the figures are not sitting as close to one another. In the end, the figure in the middle has both her scissors and an hourglass and she turns her back to the viewer, which is possibly a visual representation of her name Atropos meaning *she who cannot be turned*.

We see then how the thread motif is a way of identifying the Norns as deities of fate and destiny. Representing them as such, although it is not entirely truthful to the textual sources, is an artistic device required for clarity rather than the result of a naïve confusion, and then a device even necessary in the representation of the classical Fates, as we have seen with Thorvaldsen's composition. However, we will see that there are other representations of the Norns that depart from this classical reference and use other motifs to identify the Norns with the idea of time passing by and the inevitability of Fate.

The Norns' association with Urðarbrunnr and their watering of Yggdrasil from its water justifies the representation of the three women with water jugs or vases, as seen in the Swedish illustration earlier and in Amalia Schoppe's book. But this association goes further: in *Gylfaginning* 15, Snorri states that the well Urðarbrunnr is a place of *law* or *court*. Furthermore, the Norns' word is said to be unquestionable and irreversible, it is unshakeable as it is law.



fig.5 H.E. Freund, *Mimir og Balder rådspørger nornerne*, 1821-22, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek Copehagen

They are said to emerge from the well in *Völuspá*, and with that, the motifs of law, fate, the well and the Norns come together in a mythical representation of Fate as decree (Bek-Pedersen, 2011, p.91-92). It is no surprise then, that they are sometimes represented with both water jugs and scales or tablets. In Hermann Ernst Freund's bas-relief *Mimir and the Norns*,



which illustrates a scene from Adam Oehlenschläger's *Nordens Guder* rather than an actual scene from the *Eddas*<sup>8</sup>, the three deities are shown in a pyramidal composition. To the left, looking at the viewer is sat Urðr, writing on a tablet as if sealing one's fate as law. Standing, hand on her left hip and a foot on a pouring water jug is Verðandi, with wings and a scale in her hand as per Oehlenschläger's text. She resembles roman allegories of Justice, although she is not blind-folded. But the idea of Fate being tied to the concept of judgement is coherent and heavily linked to both an ancient iconography and a Christian conception of the afterlife. Finally, there is Skuld in a pensive state, answering Mimir's questions<sup>9</sup>. The elements attributed to the Norns in Freund's work based on Oehlenschläger's description relate to concepts of law, fate and their irremediable course, and less to the concept of Time as passing by continuously until it ends, which the thread metaphor symbolises.

Later, Johan Ludvig Lund painted the Norns with similar attributes (fig.6). In his painting housed in the Statens Museum for Kunst, Lund represents the three Norns around Urðarbrunnr, although the water is barely visible<sup>10</sup>. The landscape of rocks and trees behind them as well as the colour palette are evidence of academic training as they are reminiscent of classical paintings. The composition follows the same principles as Freund's bas-relief: Urðr on the left is dressed as a middle-aged matron, holds a stylus and a tablet, and looks to the left – to the past. Verðandi is standing, two water jugs beside her, looking at the scale she has in her hand. She, too, is dressed classically with draped garments under a plastron-like red bodice. Skuld has her finger on her chin and is clad in a green long tunic and red mantle. Both the scale and Skuld's position indicate that Lund read Oehlenschläger's work (Langer, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Adam Oehlenschläger's *Nordens Guder* is an epic poem in thirty cantos first published in 1819, and heavily based on the *Poetic Edda*, but is not a translation of it. Some scenes are merged, some subtracted, some added (Oehlenschläger, 1870).

<sup>9</sup> Freund re-purposed this composition in his Ragnarok Frieze, with slight changes. See Munk, 1995, p. 37, and Langer, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Lund produced two other compositions on the subject of the Norns, analysed in Langer, 2021.



fig.6 J.L. Lund, *De tre Norner*, c.1844, Statens Museum for Kunst Copenhagen

The style is overall influenced by Italian Renaissance paintings like Raphael's or Da Vinci's, although it is clearly recognisable as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century painting as Lund was affiliated with the Nazarene group of painters.

The ornaments worn by the Norns are meant to make the women look more Nordic, as if Lund attempted to have his Norns be less neoclassical than Freund's: the spiral motifs are typically associated with bronze-age archaeological findings and can be found in many representations of Norse deities from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Verðandi's tiara is a real bronze age object, actually a necklace instead of a tiara, found in Denmark and held in the National Museum among other necklaces of the same type (Fabricius, 1854, p.27; Worsaae, 1854, p. 48). This very necklace is also present in Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann's *Moder Danmark* (1851), and very similar ones can be seen in Herman Wilhelm Bissen's *Alvitra* (1847), and his *Ydun* (1858) - it was even made as an accessory for costumes in stagings of Bournonville's ballets, for example *Et Folkesagn* (Jurgensen, 1987, p.82). Urðr's brooch is modelled on archaeological findings (Worsaae, 1854, p. 98), Skuld's necklace seems to reproduce ancient golden beads





(Worsaae, 1854, p.86), even her headband could be inspired by ancient jewellery, and the stave she has on her lap is a runic calendar, possibly based on an existing one. Runic calendars could be sword-shaped, which befits Skuld as a Norn-*valkyrie*. Interestingly, the only mention of *valkyries* and weaving is in *Darraðarljóð*, and it also mentions swords: the ones the *valkyries* use to *beat* their *battle web*. Coincidentally, in weaving there is an object called a weaving sword. These are used across different types of weaving practices but in the case of weaving on Scandinavian warp-weighted looms, they are elongated objects made from wood, bone or iron, slid between warp threads (in the shed) and pushed up to *beat* the weft threads (that is, to condense the threads together) (Boudry, 1979, p. 25). Depending on use and preference, weaving swords can be elongated, spear-shaped or sword-shaped, to the point that actual swords could be repurposed for this use, and some have been mistaken for weapons in archaeological findings (Mazow, 2017, p.11). What Skuld has on her lap in Lund's painting is undoubtedly a runic calendar and serves as a typically Norse symbol for Time, but it is worth noting that in this context the physical similarity of runic calendars with weaving swords is fascinating.

### Fate woven

We do find a weaving sword in another depiction of the Norns. In 1854, Danish historian Adam Fabricius published a *Danmarks Historie for Folket*, which aim was to educate the Danish population on the history of the people who were there before them and reinforce the identity and lineage between the two. It tells not only of kingdoms, battles and expeditions of the pre-Christian era, but also of the ancient religion of the North as a way to explain how ancient populations perceived the world. It says about the Norns:

Urd betegner Fortid, Verandi Nutid, Skuld Fremtid. Deres Forretning var hever Dag a væde Træet med Vand og Dynd fra Kilden for at forfriske og forynge det. De vævede ved Menneskets Fødsel den Væv, som afgjorde hele hans fremtidige Skjæbne, og udspændte deres Væv fra Øft til Vest, fra Solopgangen til Solnedgangen. Bestemmelserne vare uforanderlige; thi 'Urds Ord kan Ingen modsige, hvor byrdefuldt det end falder'. (Fabricius, 1854, p. 105)

Urd denotes Past, Verandi Present, Skuld Future. Their occupation was to care for the tree with water and mud from the spring to refresh and rejuvenate it. At the birth of a man, they wove the fabric that determined his entire future destiny, and stretched their fabric from east to west, from sunrise to sunset. The provisions were unchangeable; for 'No one can contradict the word of Urd, no matter how burdensome it may be'.



The thread is replaced here with an entire web, or fabric. It is stretched *est to west*, from sunrise to sunset, which is a clear reference to *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*. Still, the use of



fig.7 Constantin Hansen, *Nornerne*, published 1854, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

weaving to represent the Norns seems awkward as no text explicitly describes them at the loom. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* does not mention weaving explicitly: this notion could come from the translation Fabricius used to write his work, or an interpretation of the text.

Fabricius' writing is illustrated with an engraving by Constantin Hansen (fig.7): it represents the Norns around a vertical loom. Only one of them seems to be working on it, with her weaving sword in one hand and what looks like a polishing stone or warp weight in the other. The one in the middle has a spear, certainly indicating she is supposed to be the Norn- Valkyrie Skuld, and the one to the left holds a runic calendar. They are in conversation, as if the viewer stumbled upon them in their daily activities: this reminds us of the setting of the poem *Darraðarljóð*, wherein Darrað stumbles upon the valkyries working at their loom. Like the Norns of the Swedish book, they are wearing more native-looking garments – or at least, less classical-looking ones – and since they are not spinning, they cannot be confused for classical Fates. In fact, they look almost like mortal women occupied at the loom. The whole composition centres around the weaving activity and particularly the loom: it is based on an

existing one, brought to Copenhagen from the Faroe Islands in 1848 and held in the collections of the National Museum (Hoffman, 1964, p. 142). First described by Worsaae in 1849, it is then reproduced in a drawing by Magnus Petersen in *Afbildninger fra det Kongelige museum for nordiske oldsager i Kjöbenhavn* on page 123: we can see the weights, the pin beater hanging down, a distaff on the left and the weaving sword intertwined in the warp threads. This loom was of particular interest to historians and philologists, as it is also mentioned in N. M. Petersen's second edition of his translation of *Njáls saga*, dated 1862: a long footnote to the *Darraðarljóð* poem describes looms used both in the Faroe Islands and Denmark (according to Petersen) and the tools necessary to work them<sup>11</sup>. Petersen names the small beater *væver-ske*, *weaving-spoon*, for lack of a better word, and the sword-shaped tool *slagbord*, *beating-board* (Petersen, 1862, p.350-351).

Of interest is also Petersen's translation of the poem: in his 1862 edition in stanza 2 the women refer to themselves as *Valkyrier*, with a note stating that perhaps the best translation is *vinende*, *friends*, which is the term used in the first edition of 1841. Even though Petersen points out some names given are Valkyrie names, and in stanza 6 the weavers say "*lov har Valkyrier/ val at kaare*", literally "*let have Valkyries/ slain to choose*", one could interpret the valkyries and the weavers as two different groups. In his 1849 *Nordisk mythologi: forelæsninger*, Petersen writes: "Og i Darradskvædet (i Njála) finde vi dem, tolv i tallet, vævende, som norner, den blodige kampvæv" (Petersen, 1849, p.236): "And in the story of Darrad (in Njála), we find them, twelve in number, weaving, as norns, the bloody battle-web". The way he describes the weavers seem to indicate he considered norn as a role or occupation the valkyries could take on, this being perhaps justified by the existence of Skuld, still considered both Norn and Valkyrie: "Denne norn [Skuld] er, som nys bemærket, tillige valkyrie" (Petersen, 1849, p.141), "This norn is, as stated before, also valkyrie". In his descriptions of the twelve valkyries, the weaving seems to be what makes them norns, again pointing at a general misconception that one of the Norns' main characteristics is that they weave.

In his presentations of Norns, Petersen writes that at Helge's birth they "*snoede de skæbnens snore*", "*twisted the threads of fate*", and adds as an explanation:

<sup>11</sup> The first edition is dated 1841, and while it describes warp-weighted looms in the same lengthy footnote, it does not of course mention the one in the Museum.



De udspændte altså deres væv fra øst til vest, fra solens opgang til dens nedgang, fra livets morgenrøde til dets aften [...]. De tre norner udspændte væven imod tre verdenshjørner. (Petersen, 1849, p. 138)

Thus, they stretched their web from east to west, from the sun's rise to its setting, from the dawn of life to its evening [...]. The three norns stretched the web to the three corners of the world.

There is no explanation for how the *twisted threads* suddenly become one *stretchable web* in this text. Similarly, when Petersen talks about *Vǫlundarkviða* he says the three valkyries *virke skæbnen, influence fate*, and that they *spinde dyrebart lin, spin expensive linen*, before explaining: "det er skæbnens væv de slynge", "it is the web of fate they twist" (or *wrap*) (Petersen, 1849, p.238). Again, the link between valkyries, fate and weaving is drawn, although the story only mentions spinning. Petersen's description of the Norns is very likely the source for Fabricius' description of the Norn's web, and the source for Hansen's understanding of the Norns as weavers, thus taking into account the likely association of Petersen's 'weaving' Norns from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* with his weaving 'norns' (valkyries) from *Darraðarljóð* and *Vǫlundarkviða*.

This motif of the weaving Norns can also be seen in the libretto of Hans Peter Holst's *Nornerne* (1868), a preface to August Bournonville's mythological ballet *Thrymskviden*:

har Du da forglemt, / At dette Sted er helligt, / At denne Lund er viet vrede Norner? / I Fjeldet [...] / De spænde deres Væv fra Øst til Vest, / Fra Livets Morgen- til dets Aftenrøde, / Den store Væv der gemmer vore Skjæbner – [...]

*Fjeldet aabner sig, og man seer i en Klippehal Nornerne ved deres Væv i en magisk Belysning.* (Holst, 1868, p.18-19)<sup>12</sup>

Did you forget, that this place is holy, that this grove is devoted to angry Norns? In this mountain [...] they stretch their web from East to West, from life's morning until its sunset; that great web which hides away our destinies – [...]

*The mountain opens, and one can see in a stone hall the Norns at their web in a magical illumination.*

In this scenario, the Norns are seen at work at their web, and the description is again the one given by Petersen. It is known that Bournonville read Petersen's work, and perhaps Holst did too (Bournonville, 1979, p.350). There is no readily available depiction of what this looked

<sup>12</sup> A translation of the libretto by Patricia McAndrews (Bournonville, 1982, p. 50-60) exists, but it has not been used here, for it does not translate *from life's morning until its sunset*: perhaps the sources used are different, seeing as the libretto could have been re-worked for later staging.



like on stage but delving into the Royal Theatre's archives in Copenhagen could shed light on this particular question.

Petersen's assumption that the weaving valkyries are norns, and his systematic identification of any fateful thread as a web is not entirely absurd. The two activities of spinning and weaving are cognate, and so are the norns and the valkyries, as Grimm had pointed out. Holst's and Hansen's images combine the idea of Norns ruling over Fate in their relation to thread work, as well as their closeness to valkyries as presented in *Darraðarljóð*.

This Norn and valkyrie assimilation, or confusion, can be seen in other instances, such as in Lorenz Frølich's *Hother hos Nornerne* (fig.8), which illustrates Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* 3, where Hotherus meets *silvestrum virgines*, wood maidens. Although they are usually read as being valkyries, Frølich deemed them to be Norns, perhaps in the same sense as Grimm considers norns: fay-like, mysterious women related to prophecy and fate. In this sense, the Norns are associated with the famous witches of *Macbeth*, as we can see in Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* (Grimm, 1882, p.407) or Grundtvig's *Nordens Mythologi*:

Vi finde imidlertid ogsaa Navnet i Pluralis (wyrdas) og kan see, det har betegnet Nornerne, og selv Tre-Tallet spore vi i Sagnet om de tre Urde-Søstre (werd-sisters), som spaaede Macbeth hans Skæbne. (Grundtvig, 1832, p. 225)

However, we also find the name in plural form (wyrdas) and can see that it has denoted the Norns, and we can even find the number three in the legend of the three Urde-Søstre (werd-sisters) who predicted his fate to Macbeth.

Frølich does indeed make his Norns look like Macbeth's Weird Sisters: they are sitting around a cauldron, throwing ingredients in it and prophesying to Hother. This recalls Johannes Wiedewelt's illustrations for Johannes Ewald's *Balders Død* (1774), wherein the three valkyries of the play are represented around a cauldron as per the stage directions (fig.9): Ewald was heavily influenced by *Macbeth* (O'Donoghue, 2014), and Wiedewelt represents it with much dramatization in his watercolours.



The valkyries and the Norns are thus considered similar and sometimes interchanged in 19<sup>th</sup>-century representations: both are a kind of magical women ruling over human fate. Both are said to be respectively weaving in *Darraðarljóð* and spinning in *Völundarkviða*, and either twining, fastening or spinning in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, and it is unsurprising that the assimilation of their figures also encompassed the assimilation of these activities, hence the weaving Norns in Hansen's illustration and Holst's prologue.

### A Domestic activity

As we have seen, the poem *Darraðarljóð* is not the only mention of valkyries working with thread. In *Völundarkviða* we meet with three valkyries wearing swan feathers. They take off their swan garments and spin costly linen on the bank of a lake. There, Völundr and his brothers see them, and each takes one as his wife. After nine winters, the swan-maidens long for their fate, and unable to resist it any longer, they fly away. The three valkyries are named, and one in particular is of interest to us: *Hervör alvitr*, wife to Völundr. According to Grimm, Hervör "alludes to hosts and battles", and *alvitr* is an adjective alluding to "the gift of prophecy": this leads Grimm to further demonstrate how closely related norns and valkyries are. Her spinning is associated with fate, as she is said to "*draw a weird*" in the first stanza (Grimm, 1882, p.425)<sup>13</sup>. In 1857, Danish sculptor Herman Wilhelm Bissen completed a plaster



fig.8 Lorenz Frølich, *Hother hos Nornerne*, 1852, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.



fig.9 Johannes Wiedewelt, *Illustrationen af Balders Død*, c.1780, Kunstbiblioteket Danmark, Copenhagen.

<sup>13</sup> Not all translations give this sense to the line: it says *alvitr*, which could be interpreted as Hervör's name or not.



statue representing (Hervör) Alvitra, designed as part of a series of statues of women for the Queen's Staircase in Christiansborg which was meant to present Queens of Denmark and exemplary women from both Norse and classical traditions. The programme for the series of statues is held in Rigsarkivet in Copenhagen<sup>14</sup>, and it describes Alvitra as follows:

Helteqvinder som Elskerinde. Alvitra. Vaulundurs Hustru. Valkyrien har grebet Rokken; Svanen, hvis Ham har baaret henda over fjerne Riger staaer ved hendes side.

Heroines as Lovers. Alvitra. Völund's wife. The valkyrie has taken the spindle; the swan, whose appearance has carried her over distant realms, stands beside her.

As mentioned earlier, Alvitra wears a tiara copied from a bronze-age necklace, as well as a plain necklace and spiral arm-rings, also copied from archaeological finds. The neckline of her long dress is held close by a circular fibula. These elements, as well as the cut of her dress, differentiates her from classical representations of women. As per the programme, she was supposed to face Antiope the Amazon, wife of Theseus. Eventually she was placed facing Atalanta, the huntress<sup>15</sup>. In both cases, the contrast is striking: the Greek heroines are variations of classical canons, but Alvitra is very different visually<sup>16</sup>. The attributes chosen to identify her are highly symbolic: the swan identifies her as a valkyrie, since valkyries and swan-maidens are associated in several texts (Boyer, 2014 p.95), and her distaff and spindle characterise her as supernatural, inasmuch as spinning is associated with fate, prophecy and magic. Moreover, it is an attribute given to longing or abandoned women (Starr, 2009, p.914). In this understanding of the symbolism of spinning, it still represents the passing of time, but not as the inevitability of fate and death, but rather as empty time: it is the occupation of women longing for the freedom to leave or waiting for their lover to return – women who are then stuck at home and tied to the domestic sphere. In Alvitra's case, it is tied to her magical nature as a swan-maiden, but from the moment she is married to Völundr she *longs* for her fate, or

<sup>14</sup> Rigsarkivet, Rentekammeret, Slotsbyggningskommissionen (1820-1845), 424.36: Sager vedr. Bissen, Eckersberg, Jerichau og I.P. Lund.

<sup>15</sup> Christiansborg burned down, and the statues were retrieved in pieces. Charlotte Christensen explains that the order in which the statues were found does not correspond exactly to the programme held in the archives (Christensen, 1995, p. 167).

<sup>16</sup> Bissen's Antiope is based on an antique statue of a wounded Amazon, of the Mattei type, and his Atalanta is based on an antique of Diana/Artemis hunting. Both marble statues are held at the Vatican's Chiaramonti Museum in Rome, where Bissen lived for a few years.

for battle, depending on translations. In some translations, the valkyries are said not just to *part* or *leave*, but to *flee* (Boyer, 1992, p.569). It would then mean that the marriage was a trap for the young women, who longed for freedom, and the spinning in the first part of the poem could be an omen of their future situation. This idea would be reinforced by the comparison of this Norse legend with its Old German parallel, where Völundr is Weyland (or Wayland, Wielant) and steals the feathers to blackmail one of the swan-maidens into marrying him. Grimm discusses the motif of the swan-maidens in his study of valkyries and writes: "they lay down on the bank the swan-ring, the swan-shift; who takes it from them, has them in his power" (Grimm, 1882, p.428). As stated before, in Niels Matthias Petersen's interpretation the three valkyries of *Völundarkviða* are even handling the *web of fate* (Petersen, 1849, p.238), probably due to an association with the *Darraðarljóð* and a disregard for the difference between spinning and weaving, either technically or symbolically (Pantelia, 1993).

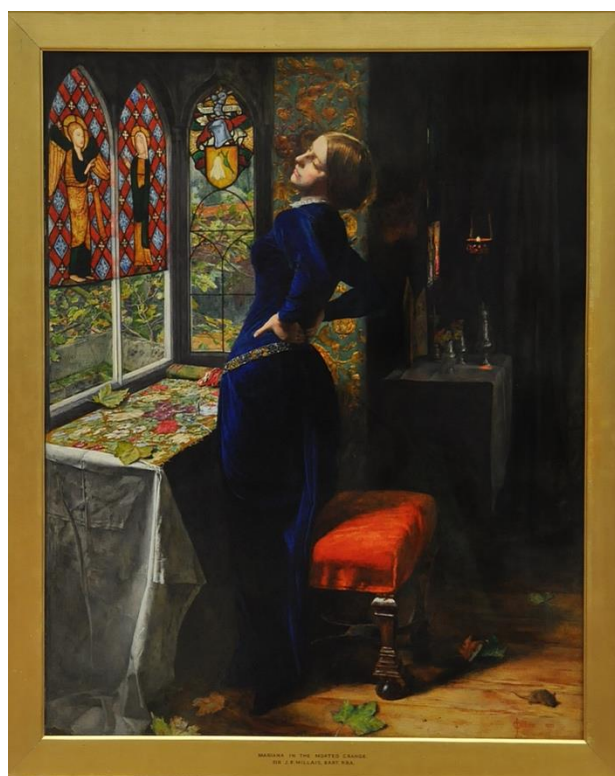


fig.10 John E. Millais, *Mariana*, 1851, Tate, London.





**fig.11** Nils Blommér, *Heimdal överlämnar Brisingsmycket till Freja*, 1846, Malmö Museum

In classical literature and in representations of it, thread work is often associated with miserable, trapped women. For example, John Everett Millais' *Mariana* (1851) shows the young woman in a moment of dissociation, absorbed in her thoughts, as she stretches her body after working at her embroidery in her lonely dwelling (fig.10). Her work is here a symbol of her loneliness and with the dead leaves that have landed on it, a representation of how much time has passed since she stood up. The painting is based on Lord Tennyson's poem, where Mariana laments "I am very dreary, He will not come". Even more striking are John William Waterhouse and William Holman Hunt's versions of *The Lady of Shalott*, all based on another of Lord Tennyson's poems<sup>17</sup>. Again, it is the story of a woman trapped alone in a tower and waiting. The Lady of Shalott is represented entangled in her tapestry by Hunt (circa 1888-1905), and in 1894 Waterhouse used the same motif: we can see her at her loom, shuttle in hand, knees circled with thread. In his 1915 version titled with a quote from the poem, "*I am*

<sup>17</sup> Lord Tennyson based his poems on pre-existing stories: Mariana from Shakespeare, the Lady of Shalott from Arthurian legends. The poems correspond to a romantic revival of ancient narratives held up as national literary canons in Great Britain.



*Half-Sick of Shadows, Said the Lady of Shalott*", Waterhouse paints her sitting at her loom, arms up behind her head: just like Mariana, she stretched and then stayed in this position, lost in her thoughts. In this image she has a yarn winder at her side, from which she directly pulls her warp thread to use it on her loom.

The Pre-raphaelites' taste for ancient legends and artistic style echo other European endeavours to revive old, possibly forgotten tales just like Old Norse myths. In their paintings, they effectively represented thread work as an attribute of desolate, forlorn, weary women. Under this same category falls Bissen's *Alvitra*, and Freyja, who in the Norse tales is forever in search of Óðr, her husband. Freyja is a Vanir and a witch and has been living in Asgard with the Æsir after the war between the two groups. She is what Grimm describes as a peace-weaver: a woman going from one community to the other, thus ensuring the peace between the two. In his *Illustreret Danmarkshistorie for folket*, Fabricius only mentions Freyja twice, but she is nonetheless illustrated by Constantin Hansen (Fabricius, 1854, p.136). The sources mention her necklace, her red-gold tears and her chariot pulled by cats as her attributes, and Hansen did give her a large necklace and a cat, but the most noticeable attributes she is given are a distaff and a spindle. This brings her closer to representations of Fates and other magical and legendary women. Nils Blommér also represented Freyja spinning, in a less obvious way. In *Heimdal överlämnar Brisingsmycket till Freja*, we can see a small spindle on Freyja's lap (fig.12). From the spindle the thread, ever so slightly painted with a single line, leads to a distaff put down against her leg. In Nils Andersson's similar composition on the same subject, the distaff is discreetly put on the foreground, in the shadows. These compositions suggest that while Loki and Heimdall were arguing over the necklace, she was sat on her throne, spinning. She then resembles the aforementioned women, who spin and weave in their homes while waiting for a resolution.

While this motif ties her to domesticity, it also identifies her more generally as a young woman - both notions being very much linked in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century context. Spinning is so typically feminine that in his epic retelling of the *Edda*, Adam Oehlenschläger had a female dwarf spin Sif's hair instead of it being forged by a dwarf like in the Old Norse sources

(Oehlenschläger, 1870, p.161)<sup>18</sup>. Thread work has magical connotations and symbolic implications pertaining to Fate, or even poetry or battle, but it is also a craft which in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century starts to be considered as endangered. With the progressive industrialisation of the thread and textile manufacturing process, the practices of spinning, weaving and hand-sewing naturally become rarer and rarer. Thus, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the world of textile, costume and dress becomes a new subject of study for folklorists who try to define what is national dress and preserve what they perceive as long-lasting traditional practices (Thiesse, 2013; Maxwell, 2014), the motif of spinners, weavers and seamstresses becomes increasingly common in the arts. Interestingly, the distaff and spindle have more success than the very common spinning wheel: spindle and distaff looked more antique in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when spinning wheels were still common use.

For example, William Adolphe-Bouguereau painted in 1873 a lively portrait of a young girl spinning, barefoot and dressed as a peasant. This falls directly into the romanticisation of rural environments as being closer to tradition, and their inhabitants closer to the cultural roots of a nation and living an enviably simpler life. A particularly interesting depiction is made by French painter Alfred Agache, who represented the Parcae, not as young women draped in classically looking white garments, but as old women in traditional attire. The notions of historical tradition, domesticity and femininity as well as some kind of legendary element come together in Albert Anker's *Queen Bertha and the Spinners*, 1888 (fig.13). The painting depicts Bertha von Schwaben surrounded by young girls spinning yarn. Grimm writes at length of *Bertha* as a legendary figure associated with spinning and spinners: "Berchta, like Holda, has the oversight of spinners; whatever spinning she finds unfinished the last day of the year, she spoils" (Grimm, 1882, p.273). The association of Bertha von Schwaben with the legendary Germanic figure of the spinner Bertha or Perchta gave way to a positive figure of the Good Queen Bertha, owing to the work of Swiss folklorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom were influenced by Grimm's work (Rumpf, 1977, p.191). This figure of the matron spinner is, according to Grimm and then to other philologists, linked to the Norse deity Frigg,

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<sup>18</sup> The story of Sif's hair in Snorri's *Edda* makes no mention of female dwarves, nor do they appear in all skaldic and eddic sources (Clunies Ross, 1994, p. 165-167), but this does not mean female dwarves do not exist (Mikučionis, 2020, p. 139-169) - still, in the Norse tradition, they do not seem to spin.



fig.12 Alfred Anker, *La Reine Berthe et les Fileuses*, 1888, Vaud Museum, Lausanne.

wife of Odin. She is never in eddic or skaldic sources described as a spinner. But as Grimm writes:

This superintendence of agriculture and of strict order in the household marks exactly the office of a motherly deity, such as we got acquainted with in Nerthus and Isis. Then her special care of flax and spinning (the main business of German housewives, who are named after spindle and distaff, as men are after sword and spear), leads us directly to the ON. Frigg, Odin's wife, whose being melts into the notion of an earth-goddess, and after whom a constellation in the sky, Orion's belt, is called Friggjar rockr, Friggæ colus [distaff]. Though Icelandic writings do not contain this name, it has remained in use among the Swedish country-folk (Grimm, 1882, p.270)

There is no description of Frigg as a spinner or weaver with a distaff or loom or anything of the sort in eddic or skaldic sources. But there is the name of the constellation of Orion's Belt, which is called *Frigg's spindle*, and with this and by way of association with other legendary figures she could be considered as a spinner and was therefore represented as such several times. One can find Frigg with a distaff in an 1895 textbook of Norse myths by Hélène Adeline Guerber (fig.14). The text associates Frigg with other Germanic figures: "In other parts of



Germany, Frigga, Holda, or Ostara is known by the name of Berchta, Bertha, or the White Lady" (Guerber, 1895, p.58). And it states that Frigg

diligently twirled her wheel or distaff, spinning golden thread or weaving long webs of bright-colored clouds.

In order to perform this work she owned a marvelous jeweled [sic] spinning wheel or distaff, which at night shone brightly in the sky in the shape of a constellation, known in the North as Frigga's Spinning Wheel (Guerber, 1895, p. 47).

Thus, on page 48 can we see Frigg enthroned, with distaff and spindle, two small babies and a crane at her side to denote her matronage over family matters, and two goats in the forefront. Her distaff almost looks like a sceptre, and this representation echoes images of Odin, who often is represented like Zeus/Jupiter. A similar representation occurs in R. Reusch's *Die nordischen Göttersagen*, with an illustration of Frigg by Ludwig Pietsch (Reusch, 1865, p.27) (fig.15). Frigg is dressed in medieval-looking attire, complete with veil and jewels, and sits enthroned on Hliðskjálf, which is decorated with two dragon heads, just like the precedent illustration. Behind the throne is the distaff, at the centre of the composition. The exact same illustration is reproduced in Wilhelm Wagner's *Nordisch-germanische Götter und Helden: in Schilderungen für Jugend und Volk*, a history textbook aimed at the general population (Wagner, 1882, p.106). Three pages later is reproduced Carl Emil Doepler's illustration of Frigg and her maids talking with a Valkyrie. Again, Frigg is enthroned and behind her is a distaff. On page 124, another of Doepler's illustrations shows Frigg walking in the forest with her handmaids, a distaff tied to her waist. The legend states: "Frigg as Ostara", Ostara being a Germanic goddess described in the chapter relating to the image. In all these illustrations, the distaff really distinguishes Frigg as a motherly, matronly, domestic divinity, because of the many associations that come with thread work in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century context. Despite her not being explicitly described as a spinner or weaver in the textual Old Norse sources, her counterparts in other folklores and myths are in fact spinners. And if we add to that the fact that the distaff is so closely associated with housewives and domesticity and that Frigg is a motherly deity; the association of Frigg with spinning makes sense, as it did with other Old Norse deities. While the use of this motif was never accurate, it was more a question of using symbolically charged artistic devices to convey the right meaning rather than any sort of truthfulness to the historic sources: artists were not looking for faithful depictions, but for poetically efficient



fig.13 Anon, *Frigga*, published 1895, New



fig.14 Ludwig Pietsch, *Frigg*, published 1865, Berlin, 1882,

ones, depictions that work within a cultural context where thread work was associated with women, domesticity, Time, Fate and magic.

### Conclusion

We have seen that the attribution of spinning and weaving to the female deities of the Norse pantheon is a recurring motif throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The paradox in this situation is that the mythological women of the Old Norse pantheon are not typically spinners – it is not a major characteristic ascribed to them in textual sources -, yet they are represented working with thread, as if the motif were evident. The motif is ubiquitous in classical art: the Greco-Roman Fates are said to spin the thread of life, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the metaphor of one's lifetime being like a thread spun and cut was well known and understood. Since the Norns are a trio of fate deities, they were immediately assimilated to the classical Fates in philological studies such as Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie* or N.M. Petersen's works, as well as in literature and the arts. This does not mean that there was a genuine confusion or lack of understanding of the Norns' Nordic identity and their specificities, but simply that a motif from the Fates was transferred to the Norns because the two types of deities were analogous: the thread motif as one of the Norn's activities is mentioned once in the Old Norse texts, and was already present

in the arts as an attribute of the Fates – it is all that was needed to effectively transfer the spinning motif from the Fates to the Norns, as the motif had long proved to be an efficient allegorical device to convey the idea of time, inevitability, death and fate.

The motif is also used with other female deities, which are not necessarily associated with fate. In these cases, the motif reflects domesticity, femininity, magic and time passing by more than it is an allegory of fate. This is in part due to the pervasive influence of the Greco-Roman classical mythology and its own figures of spinners and weavers: Athena, Arachne, Penelope, Circe, Philomela, Dido, Andromache are all women who spin or weave. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a parallel was easily drawn between these well-known figures and the lesser-known, recently rediscovered deities of the Old Norse and Germanic pantheons and folklore. The thread-work motif is then given to deities such as Frigg and Freya because they are mythological women with spinner cognates in folklore, or because their situation echoes the predicaments of other women who spin and weave. In these contexts, the craft has symbolic implications such as representing Time as in delay, waiting or even boredom; or representing language, word or poetry. The attribute of wives in classical myths is often spinning or weaving, and although neither Frigg nor Freya are weavers or spinners, giving them these attributes makes it clear they are wives and deities of the feminine, domestic sphere. Interestingly, in the two cases where Old Norse women are explicitly said to spin and weave, they are valkyries. Valkyries are often represented as unnamed, undefined warriors, and rare are the representation of the ones who spin and weave. In the case of Alvitra, the motif is represented along with her other attribute, that of flying and having swan feathers: together they allude to her situation as a woman trapped, and waiting to escape. In the case of the gruesome weaving valkyries, there is an impressive lack of representation, despite the motif being so striking.

The attribution of thread work to Old Norse mythological women in the arts seems to be both a result of philological observations pertaining to their resemblance with other figures known to spin, and a practical need for clarity and eloquence: using classical canons, symbolic motifs that will convey the right idea, enabled artists to make their characters' functions and nature easily identifiable and understandable.



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