

RECORDING: You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky at the National Museum of Denmark at a Viking exhibit. I'm looking at these rune stones. We just watched a film about a raid.... (FADE DOWN)

I know I sound very subdued in that recording, but I was just being respectful of all the people around me. I was actually captivated by this exhibit.

Even before I visited Copenhagen, I knew that I wanted to do an episode about Viking folklore. It's amazing to me how many modern fantasy worlds are inspired by Norse mythology -- Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, Dungeons & Dragons, How to Train Your Dragon, Marvel and DC comics, the works of Neil Gaiman. There are also a ton of video games like Assassin's Creed Valhalla, God of War Ragnarök, and Baldur's Gate, just to name a few.

But in my research, I discovered a mystery. I didn't realize how much of Norse mythology was lost to history. In fact, the myths were misunderstood and misinterpreted for centuries. After a thousand years, we're only now beginning to understand how little we know about them.

And I think that desire to fill in the gaps is what attracts so many fantasy writers. But when we fill in the gaps, are we seeing the world through their eyes? Or are we creating mirrors of ourselves?

Ada Palmer is a history professor at the University of Chicago. She's one of the top experts on Norse mythology, and sometimes, even she's baffled by it. Like we know that Ragnarök is supposed to be the end of the world. But:

ADA: I was just doing this with my students a couple days ago where one was asking, well, what exactly happens to the world at the end of Ragnarök? And I said, well, you know, the sons of two brothers shall inhabit widely the windy world. That's what we got my friend

<laugh>

ADA: Like, unless that sentence makes more sense to you than it does to me, you have as much information as I do.

In the days of yore, Norse mythology was mostly an oral tradition. Some of the written poems have survived but one of our main sources is an Icelandic scholar named Snorri Sturluson.

In the 13th century, he compiled a collection of the myths, but he had no idea that his text would be one of the few compilations we'd have around today. For instance, there are a lot of ancient poems about Jötunns, which were these supernatural beings the gods were often fighting.

ADA: Snorri gives us a list of 30 something Jötunns killed by Thor, and we only actually have the stories about four of them. And the reason we have the stories is that Snorri gives us the stories of the ones that are more obscure because he thinks we might not know them, and he leaves out the better known, more important ones. You know, 90% of these stories we just don't have, we only have the ability to realize what the negative space is that's there.

When Snorri was writing down the myths, the lands the Vikings had conquered had been fully Christianized. So Ada says, we have to contend with Snorri's perspective. He often misunderstood or disapproved of his ancestor's pagan beliefs. And his work was not exactly a best seller.

ADA: The text was sitting there in the library for hundreds of years, but at this point, it serves somebody's interests to read it.

The point in history that she's referring to is after The Renaissance. Greco-Roman culture became the language of power in Europe. But the nations of Northern Europe were feeling jealous. They're like, "Why is everyone so into this Greek and Roman stuff? Have you ever heard of Odin or Thor? No? Well, they were like a really big deal once."

By the 19th century that evolved to, "You know what? Our ancient culture is actually better than your ancient culture!" But to prove that they had to alter the Norse mythology to make it fit 19th century norms.

ADA: We have all of these stories in Ovid about Zeus running around and having lots of affairs, and they want to claim, but look, the Viking gods are, are not like that. The Viking gods are reliable and courageous and monogamous and all this, and they're totally not monogamous. It's extremely clear, right, certainly around Odin more than anyone else. The nationalists then try to fix this by cherry picking the canon. And they'll look at a poem where it's very clear that the gods are behaving badly. Like Harbard song, which is one section of the Poetic Edda in which Thor and Odin have a boasting insult contest in which Odin is listing all of the women he's having sex with. And Thor is listing all of the Jötunns that he's brutally murdering, and they're going back and forth, uh, and that poem they just decide is fake. Uh, the 19th century decides this poem

cannot be real. This poem, you know, violates too many mythological principles that they're sure are the case. There's another reading of Harbard song that says, well, Odin claims to be doing bad things here. Clearly that's Loki disguised as Odin. And it's Tolkien's generation of linguists who will look at it in the 20th century and say, well, actually the vocabulary in this makes very clear <laugh> that this is one of the original medieval poems that we need to grapple with the fact that there is a bunch of complexity here, and that these gods are not moral paragons the way our nationalist movements want them to be.

If you're wondering if this is the same Tolkien as in the creator of Middle Earth -- yes, same guy. I was not surprised she mentioned J.R.R. Tolkien, I knew he was fascinated by Norse mythology. He even translated Old Norse.

I was surprised to learn he was challenging conventional wisdom that early on. I had read these myths weren't properly understood until much later, like the 1970s. Turns out, there's a reason why the work of Tolkien and some of his contemporaries got overshadowed.

ADA: You know, the generation of linguists in the first half and mid 20th century who are getting the canon fixed, are making great progress when World War II comes. And unfortunately, Nazis love Norse mythology, right? And the head of the Nazi Ministry of Culture did his dissertation on Norse metaphysics.

Even today white supremacists today see the Norse gods as paragons of the Aryan race – even though in the mythology, the gods are not paragons of racial purity. They're the offspring of different mythological beings.

ADA: All of the gods are hybrids of something.

No matter. The Nazis thoroughly Nazified Norse mythology.

ADA: After the war nobody wants to touch this subject. You can't write a book in the '60s on Viking metaphysics without citing half a dozen Nazis because they're the scholars who worked on it and nobody wants to cite half a dozen Nazis.

That finally began to change in the 1960s when, ironically, a group of Jewish writers and artists in New York decided to use Norse mythology for the basis for a new comic book series. I think you may have heard of it.

BREAK

In 1962, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Larry Lieber created Thor comics. In many ways, they were drawing on the 19th century sanitized version of Norse mythology which had come to dominate fantasy literature. You know, Odin was a wise father figure. Loki was simply a devious villain.

But Ada says there's one way they subverted the mythology and made it anti-fascist, whether it was deliberate or not.

In the original comics of Thor and The Avengers, Thor wasn't just this blonde, handsome alien who came from the planet Asgard. Thor was the alter ego of an American doctor named Donald Blake, who walked with a cane. His cane was actually Thor's hammer in disguise. He could use it to transform into Thor.

Ada says the decision to make Donald Blake disabled was spot on for Norse mythology. So many of the Norse gods -- the really famous ones, the lesser known ones -- they all had disabilities.

ADA: Odin is missing an eye. Tyr is missing a hand. Thor has skull damage, which causes him chronic migraines. I often think of him as the God of chronic pain. Uh, Heimdall has false teeth, presumably having had his teeth knocked out in battle. Höd is blind. Loki he's also maimed. He has the, um, scarring on his face for having had his mouth sewn shut. So, they all have, whether on their bodies or in their personal relationships within Asgard, the scars of warfare on them emotionally or medically. And that's something that is very contrary to the, you know, ideal all, uh, all conquering superman that Nazi culture makes out of these figures.

Later in the '60s and throughout the 1970s, academics started seeing the myths with fresh eyes. But it wasn't because of the comics. It was actually a result of the feminist movement.

ADA: Women entering an academic field in numbers for the first time often get marginalized and sort of pushed to the edges of it and therefore get pushed to working on the topics nobody else wants to work on. And so, women started working on these aspects of Viking studies because these are abandoned and marginal topics, and therefore marginalized scholars went to look at them. And it's also the case that it turns out Viking metaphysics is super saturated with gender. So, there was a gorgeous rebirth of new avenues to get at and understand belief, magic, how fate works, et cetera, within Norse cultures.

Carolyne Larrington is a professor of Medieval European literature at the University of Oxford. She wrote a book called *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*.

She says, we can see this type of feminist interpretation in a story like *The Monstrous Child* by Francesca Simon. *The Monstrous Child* was a YA novel which was adapted into an opera. Carolyne likes the way Francesca Simon reimagined the character of Hel – who is a goddess of death.

CAROLYNE: Where she depicts Hel as just a kind of regular teenager, but one who's, who's living with disability because in, in Francesca's version, instead of being half corpse, half human on the kind of vertical plane, so that she's got one side of her face attractive, one side of the face corpse, Francesca makes her into a, a normal girl top half. And then this kind of decaying mass in her bottom half, to all intents and purposes, she's just a teenager who doesn't understand why everybody goes “*eech!*” when they see her, and why they, they throw her out and make her live with the dead, who incredibly boring and complain all the time. But Hel is kind of objected and maybe it's because of her gender. Nobody wants to look an unattractive woman, even if she's reminding you that death is, is very often gendered female in Norse, the Valkyries of the, the women who bring death and hell herself is imagined as desiring heroes and wanting them for her lovers and kind of pulling them towards herself.

If this sounds familiar it might be because Hel or Hela was the villain in the movie *Thor: Ragnarök*. She was played by Cate Blanchett.

HELA: I'm not a queen or a monster. I'm the Goddess of Death.

CAROLYNE: The impact of the movies has been huge, I think, and when I talk to classes of elementary school kids, you say, well, what do you know about Thor? Well, he has this big hammer, and he fights against the giants.

SFX: FIGHTING

THOR: At least make it a challenge for me!

Given that the Marvel Cinematic Universe has turned these gods into pop culture icons, I was curious how different the MCU versions are from the original myths. I asked Carolyne, was Thor even a hero by our standards today?

CAROLYNE: I think he was a hero. And I think what we have to remember with, with Thor as we find him in the Norse sources, is that there must be a huge amount of stuff

missing about him. Because in the original sources, he seems to basically whack things with his hammer and ask questions later. He's patrolling the, the eastern borders, whacking giants so that they can't move in and take over the dwellings of, of humans and gods. So, he's protecting humanity as well. And he, he shouts, he blusters a lot. He gets into this competition with a giant that Loki is using magic to deceive him, and then he's forced to dress up as a woman and go to giant land to retrieve his hammer, which has been stolen. So, it becomes kind of comic figure there as well. Those stories make him look, um, a bit of a kind of meathead, I always think.

Remember, the Icelandic scholar Snorri wrote down the more obscure myths about Thor because he thought his audience would know the famous ones. And they probably did 800 years ago. That's why Carlyne suspects:

CAROLYNE: There must have been much more to him than that because he was the God that when the settlers arrived in Iceland, he was the God that they attributed with telling them where to settle because he's the God of the weather and the winds. So, he sends the ship to the place where they need to be in order to, to settle in this new land. They throw the wooden pillars of their high seats overboard and ask Thor to guide the pillars to the right place. And when they land, they find the pillars there. This is their new home, and they build temples to him, and they incorporate his name in their names because everybody is called Thorgier, or Thordis or Thorberg or Thorkil, all of these names. And, and that's still the case in Iceland today. So, I think Thor kind of in the Marvel movies, he's, he's not as dim as he seems to be in the myths. And he does gradually over the course of the movies, start caring about humans, he takes up his role again of defending humans against these predatory forces which are going to destroy the planet. And so, I think the creators of the, the comic there are getting something back, which got lost in the recording of the myths in the 13th century or so.

Yeah. So, Odin sounds like he was probably the most different in some ways from, you know, Anthony Hopkins fairly, not very well developed Odin, um, sounds like the mythological Odin was way more interesting in many ways. Could you tell me about him?

CAROLYNE: Yeah. He's my favorite actually. He's, he's the god I've lived with longest, I think, because the material that I wrote my doctoral thesis about was wisdom poetry and Odin figures very large there. He's the god of wisdom. He's the god of war. He's got only one eye. He's sacrificed that to gain wisdom from the well that lies underneath the world tree. He hanged himself on the world tree for nine days and nine nights to get the, the wisdom of the runes. And the runes are important because they enable the preservation of knowledge. They allow you to write stuff down, and it allows you also to transmit knowledge to strange people. Not just sending off a messenger and hoping that they get there or sending your ravens, with the runes you can preserve things that need

to be preserved. And I think that that makes those into a kind of culture hero. And he's more energetic in the myths than Anthony Hopkins who looks, he's already at the beginning of the first Thor movie. He's kind of, okay, I've had enough of this now, I think Thor can take over.

ODIN: Do you swear to guard The Nine Realms?

THOR: I swear

ODIN: And do you swear to preserve the peace?

THOR: I swear.

CAROLYNE: And in other, um, appearances in novels, not so much in Neil Gaiman's American Gods, where he's still a grifter, he still, he feels the power ebbing away, but he's got a plan to get it back. But in, um, Douglas Adams, The Long Dark Teatime Of The Soul, he's really past it. And he's made a deal with, uh, a dodgy advertising executive and, uh, a fraudster lawyer to get some money so he can go into an old folks' home where they have linen Irish linen sheets, which is what he really admires. So, he's, he's always being seen in contemporary culture as on the way out. He's finished, he's, he's the past generation. We need to be moving on from him.

Does that reflect our modern culture being very youth oriented, that a character like Odin can really be a complex, interesting hero in the past, but in today's popular culture, he needs to be kind of, you know, one foot in retirement?

CAROLYNE: Yeah, I think, I think so. It's something to do with Thor's physical presence I think. He's big and beefy, and he fits the superhero mold better than Odin who doesn't fight himself. He works through magic or, or trickery.

Speaking of trickery, Loki perfectly fits the mold of the modern villain in movies like The Avengers.

LOKI: I am Loki of Asgard and I am burdened with glorious purpose.

But there is a really important aspect of him that's often forgotten. In the myths, Loki is a father. His children are seen as monstrous. One of them is Hel, the goddess of death. In the Marvel movie she's portrayed as Odin's daughter, but in the myths, she's Loki's daughter. Loki is also the father of a giant direwolf named Fenrir, and a giant serpent called Jörmungandr.

CAROLYNE: The real breach between Loki and the other gods comes with the point at which the, the gods say, we do not want these monstrous children in our community. We can't cope with that kind of difference. So, Loki's not depicted as being particularly fatherly. It's not as if you find him in the myths hanging out with his children in this way.

But nevertheless, the, the father son bond in Norse culture is so important that you can't help feeling that this is one of the things that just shifts Loki decisively into that position where he defects not physically, but in terms of his loyalties, he defects of the side of the, the giants and leads them at Ragnarök against the gods.

BREAK

The tone of the Thor movies is pretty light. More often, the tone of fantasy worlds inspired by Norse mythology is dark. In fact, they fit into a genre called grimdark. Carlyne thinks that's probably more accurate. There is a sense of fatalism that's baked into Norse mythology.

CAROLYNE: Because it is always heading towards Ragnarök. And there's no way of getting around that in the sense Odin is constantly questing, constantly going to ask giants, prophetic other people within the, the mythic universe, what do you know about Ragnarök, to see, I think if they know an alternative story in which the gods don't die, when he doesn't get devoured by the wolf. And everybody's telling the same tale, this is what's going to happen.

And Ada Palmer says it's actually interesting to compare Norse mythology to Christianity. Because in Christianity, one of the big theological questions is "Why is there evil? If God is good and omnipotent, how could God allow evil in this wonderful world that he's created?"

ADA: The Vikings are backwards. Given that the world is fundamentally uninhabitable and made of ice and fire and volcanoes and monsters, given that it's incredibly so hard to survive a single year. Why is there good? If the world is so fundamentally antithetical to life? How is their life?

Hmm.

ADA: The Viking myths then go into the question of what are the terrible deeds that Odin and others had to do to carve out this space in which life could exist? What are the other monstrous beings that they had to fight off and take the world away from in order to put a fence literally around the bit of the world that is reserved for fragile little humans to live in it? How constantly do they have to fight wars against the predatory monsters that fill our world to drive them away?

She mentioned the phrase "ice and fire." The TV series Game of Thrones is based on a series of books called "A Song of Ice and Fire" by George R.R. Martin. And Game of Thrones has a lot of similarities to Norse mythology. There are giant dire wolves.

DIREWOLF SFX

Ravens are mystical symbols of knowledge.

RAVEN SFX

And everything is heading towards an apocalyptic battle with fearsome icy enemies.

JON SNOW: If we don't win this fight, that is the fate of every person in the world.

When Ada watched Game of Thrones, she saw a lot of surface references to Norse mythology. But she doesn't think it captures the complicated ethics of the Vikings.

ADA: Something like Game of Thrones or similar works is not just that the world is harsh and hard to survive in, but that most of the people are terrible people and betray each other a lot. And the few people who are actually good people don't manage to have their goodness or virtue or loyalty succeed, at least not at first. Often, you know, they'll be butchered and then three generations later, there'll be a surviving good person who will avenge them, usually having to resort to dastardly means to do so. But one of the things grimdark explores is not just a world of harshness, but a world where being a terrible person is often successful and being a reliable or faithful person is often unsuccessful. And that's actually quite different from the ethics we see in Viking sagas that are very adamant about, look, keep your promises, follow the law, settle your feuds, pay blood prices, or you will all murder each other, and everyone will be dead. And indeed, Ragnarök is the penalty for oath breaking. And so often when we see a Viking saga, the fundamental narrative is at some point somebody did something bad, and then somebody else refused to be honest and settle it in the straightforward way and tried to be conniving and tell lies and deceive others, and the consequence of this is that everybody for 30 miles around dies.

Well, now your breakdown of Game of Thrones, is really interesting. I'd love to hear you talk as well about Tolkien because it just seems like some of the values you're talking about are in Tolkien.

ADA: Totally. Tolkien is using the Viking myths, uh, very, very thoroughly and very intimately. But Tolkien was interested in writing a mythology that he could fully respect. And so, he transforms key elements of Viking mythology by adding elements into it to make him more capable of loving and respecting these beings. The Valar and the other primordial good beings of Tolkien's mythology are way better beings than Odin, you

know, and evil enters into this world, but is fundamentally a beautiful world born of song and light and harmony into which enters disharmony. And then we must, you know, gather to, to battle the forces of evil. But it's not the case that in order to make there be Middle Earth at all for humans to live on, you have to commit an act of patricide. Earth is made out of the corpse of Ymir. Ymir is Odin's mother's father. He murdered his grandfather to make the world for us to live in. Tolkien's Valar did not do that, right? <laugh> Tolkien made a world that had a lot of the gorgeous elements of Viking mythology, he draws heavily on the elves and the images of the elves and, and of the Vanir and of Freyr, and he draws on the dwarves and he, he populates it with this richness and this racial pluralness, which Viking mythology had. But he just makes it better. And kinder.

ARAGORN: You have my sword

LEGOLAS: And you have my bow.

GIMLI: And my ax!

You could watch Game of Thrones or Lord of the Rings and not know they were inspired by North mythology. But there are a lot of movies, TV shows, novels, and video games that take place in the world of the Vikings – the world they lived in and the world they dreamed about. Carlyne thinks one of the most interesting examples is The Northman.

The Northman was not a big box office success last year. But the movie got a lot of critical praise. I remember when the trailer came out, my social media feed was ecstatic because the movie looked so raw and authentic. The plot is based on a Viking saga that many scholars believe was the inspiration for Hamlet as well.

CAROLYNE: Which is absolutely on trend for Viking age value system, which is, this guy killed my father, I must kill him. There's no question about it. My honor, my identity, my sense of myself totally resides in that.

AMLETH: I've come to avenge King Aurvandill, to choke my traitorous uncle in his death blood, and to free you.

Alexander Skarsgård plays the main character. The movie was a passion project for him. Growing up in Sweden, he was raised on these stories.

The movie captures the brutality of Viking life. But it's also a fantasy film. The supernatural elements of Norse mythology are depicted as real. At one point, Bjork shows up playing a mystical prophet.

NORN: Power in shadow, snare of my people, hide. Even though your brother stole my eyes, I see you.

Carolynne was most intrigued by the love interest in the film played by Anya Taylor Joy.

CAROLYNE: The Slavic slave who is kind of saying, but does it have to be like this? I recognize the fact you feel obliged to avenge your father, but actually we could just leave and not do this there. If you didn't stay here and take a vengeance, which is going to end up with you dead as well, we could go away. We could go to Oconee. We could have a family life, we could start a new dynasty. But he's so set on vengeance and also locked into the fact this has been prophesied for him.

OLGA: Yet, I cannot truly believe you have extinguished your fire for vengeance.

AMLETH: Hate is all I've ever known, but I wish I could be free of it.

OLGA: That is for you to choose.

Carolynne thinks this character is acting like a bridge between our values and theirs. But she thinks the movie also tries to have it both ways. It was marketed as an action movie.

CAROLYNE: The Northman kind of celebrated this vengeance story and the single-mindedness of even as every reason he had for believing that his father was worth avenging was taken away from him. And so, I think there are ways in which this very alien mindset is quite an interesting one for us to scrutinize. And on the one hand say, we would never think or act like this anymore. But on the other hand, yeah, aren't there ways in which we get set in particularly destructive courses of action and nothing can dislodge us from that? No kind of argument, no kind of things could be different and that kind of imperative, no, we have to do it like this because we have to do it like this. I think that's something that's very recognizable.

I find it interesting that everyone from a 13th century Icelandic scholar to 19th century nationalists to filmmakers today are imposing their worldview on this ancient folklore. But Ada Palmer doesn't think that many of these storytellers have truly captured the essence of Norse mythology.

ADA: I think in one sense we insert our values into everything as we write fiction in part to explore our values, but I also think it's a really grim and uncomfortable worldview. You know, these are gods who aren't even immortal, they're fragile, they're maimed,

they're wound able, they're mortal, they're going to die, they're going to fail. And they're doing all of the work, including betrayals and murders and betrayals to carve out a temporary world in which people can barely survive for a while. It's a lot of work for a not big reward, it's not very comforting, and it makes us feel very fragile. And I think in many eras of history, people have not been comfortable with being made to feel that fragile. But I think it's something that right now is very interesting as we face climate change.

That's what I was just thinking,

ADA: And the fragility of our world, and you know, the fact that we're going to have to work really hard to fix up this world. And when working really hard, the net result of that is going to be that the world is somewhat habitable and not as bad as it could be. And I think that's one of the things that makes it very timely to tell stories about the fact that it is an amazing, major, huge achievement to work hard and carve out a place where some people can live with a decent amount of comfort for a while. And it's such a small achievement compared to the promises of many other religions, but it's also in many ways the most important possible achievement. It's what enables everything that we achieve in life and what makes life worth living.

Personally, I like to reverse engineer the myths. I see them as very fantastical answers to very relatable questions – questions about life, death, legacy, compassion, courage, family, and self-reliance.

We should be so lucky that a thousand years from now, someone or something is just as fascinated by our culture, and the stories we came up with to understand our place in the universe.

CLIP: ICE AND FIRE SONG

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Carolyne Larrington and Ada Palmer. This is Ada singing with her acapella group, which performs songs about Norse mythology. I have links to Ada and Carolyne's works in the show notes.

If you liked this episode, you should also check out my episode from last year on the TV show *Beforeigners*, which imagined what would happen if people from the Viking age mysteriously showed up in modern day Norway. Also if you're into grimdark, check out my episode about *Warhammer* from earlier this year.

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