

A Viking Legend

Reviewed for Old Norse Mythology at the University of Manitoba

Bloomer, Ainsley. *A Viking Legend: The Descendants of Odin*. Winnipeg: Prairie Heart Press, 2023. 324 pages. ISBN: 978-1998-055-23-4.

A Viking Legend by Ainsley Bloomer is one of the best books I have read regarding the retelling of *The Saga of the Volsungs*. *A Viking Legend* not only contains the actual stories but also some interpretations by Bloomer to complete the information given to the reader. There was so much information that was presented to the reader that while writing this essay I struggled a little to figure out precisely what to focus on as I could have focused on anything within the book. For this essay I decided that I wanted to write about the use of magic and curses by humans and gods. I approached the whole book by breaking it down into sections so the first section will be the introduction to chapter 19, the second section will be chapters 20 to chapter 39, and the final section is chapter 40 to the sources, and then picking one story from each section to focus on. Before we dive into the “meat and potatoes” of this book it is important to view the introduction as it provides the readers with the background knowledge about the book and what the author has taken inspiration from while writing. Magic has been a consistent topic within sagas. *The Saga of the Volsungs* is not lacking in the use of magic and curses. Although magic and curses could be used for bad deeds, but magic could be used for good deeds. This essay will view how the use of magic and curses have influenced and changed the paths that heroes in the sagas have taken as well as what challenges they face due to the magic that influenced them. Magic and curses cause many issues for the characters within the sagas because there are ways in which the curses can carry on from one generation to the next. The use of magic and curses brings about bloodshed and chaos for many of the lives that sorcery is involved in. *The Saga of the Volsungs* is one tale in which readers can follow the deadly tracks of magic and how it can turn a man

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into a monster with ease. The first chapter is titled “The Golden Curse” and this chapter discusses the story of Fafnir and how he was transformed from a twisted dwarf to a dragon filled with a lust and obsession for gold. The chapter begins with Odin sitting in his throne Hlidskjalf, while on his throne Odin can see into and over every realm on Yggdrasil. One day while on his throne Odin was unable to see into a forest which was between the human and the dark elf realms, as if the forest had a magic spell over it so that no one could see inside of it²⁵.

This is the first instance where we see magic brought into the story which gives the reader the impression that sometimes even the gods are subject to not understanding or lacking the ability to figure out the origin and purpose of the magic. As the story progresses, Odin takes Loki and Haenir into the forest with him after having his two ravens Hugin and Munin scouting out the forest. While wandering the forest Loki, Odin and Haenir came across an otter with a salmon and Loki kills the otter taking both for their dinner and moved on, after continuing their way they came upon a house in dis- repair²⁶. Odin and his companions knocked and being greeted by Hreidmar the dwarf who lived in the home, he allowed the men to take refuge in his home but was horrified at the death of his son, Ottar. The sons Fafnir and Regin came to their fathers’ side and saw their brother slain, they negotiated and Hreidmar said that the bag made of Ottars skin was to be filled with red gold and the exterior covered in gold (Bloomer 9). Loki is the one who is sent to retrieve the payment, he gets a net from the goddess ran and traps Andvari, Odin’s dwarf son who was turned into a pike by a Norn, Loki takes all Andvari’s gold to save Odin and Haenir. Andvari begs to keep a ring which can duplicate itself but Loki refuses and Andvari curses it “Since the ring will not be with me, I put a curse on it and all the gold you carry will bring death to whomever possesses it, and it will be of no use to anyone” (Bloomer 11). However, this gold would not bring happiness and peace to the dwarf family, instead the curse on the gold had altered their fate to be cruel and bring about death and bloodshed.

The family is satisfied when they have the all the red gold and gold and the cursed ring of Andvari, Hreidmar wants to keep the gold for himself but Fafnir in a rage kills his father and threatens to kill his brother as well. Regin tries to reason with his brother but it is of no use as Fafnir threatens to kill him again, with Regin’s retreat Fafnir takes his gold to a

²⁵ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 5

²⁶ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 8

cave where he can bask in his riches and while the ring duplicates the gold by its own magic, the curse works in a cruel way by turning into a dragon/ serpent. This chapter is full of the use of magic and curses, the interactions between Hreidmar and Fafnir when they have all the gold shows how curses can turn men into monsters by their actions and their words. Fafnir's reaction of killing his father and threatening to kill his brother twice shows that the curse of the gold made him greedy, and lust filled for his hoard.

Though this is only the first chapter there is a lot of magic and curses which are present, from the forest that Odin cannot see into, The Norn which cursed Hreidmar and his sons, Andvari's ring which would duplicate on its own, the curse Andvari placed on all his gold, the curse on Andvari himself, and the curse that befell Fafnir following his obsession with the cursed gold. In the case of this story the curses and magic that were used lead to death and brought about much misfortune to those who encountered the curses and spells. All characters of this story were affected by the curses however the characters who got the brunt of the curses were Ottar, Hreidmar, Regin, Fafnir, and Andvari as these four had been permanently cursed by Norn's and could not escape their curses, but Hreidmar, Regin and Fafnir encountered another curse which was put onto the \gold by Andvari, which doubled the misfortune that befell Hreidmar, Regin, and the soon dragon formed, Fafnir. Fafnir slayed by Sigurd Sigmundson, but the use of magic and curses does not end with the death of Fafnir. In the second section will be focusing on the story of Sigurd Sigmundson and Brynhild Budladottir, and how curses ravaged and destroyed their relationship ending in the death of Sigurd.

The next story I have chosen is the story with Sigurd Sigmundson and Brynhild Budladottir, and the curse that is placed upon Sigurd before his marriage to Brynhild. This is chapter 21 of the book by Bloomer. Our story on this topic begins before Sigurd slays Fafnir, he heads to his uncle, King Gripir, to see what his fate is as his uncle holds the magic/gift of prophecies. Gripir provides his nephew information with his sight on Sigurd's fate, and in-between bouts of information Gripir tells Sigurd that he cannot and does not want to say anymore to his nephew. Sigurd hard-headed as his father and grandfather pushed to have all his questions answered. His uncle tells him he will slay Fafnir and, on his way, back he will find a woman by the name of Brynhild Sigrdrifa Budladottir. It is said he will instantly fall in love with this shield-maiden/ Valkyrie, and she too will fall in love with Sigurd.²⁷ When Sigurd finds Brynhild, she was wrapped in her chainmail coat and laid in a deep sleep, Sigurd noted the look of her in her chainmail coat and cuts it away

²⁷ Larrington, *The Norse Myths A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*, 143

to alleviate any pain she may have (Bloomer 107). Once she is free of her coat she wakes and Sigurd is content to help the very beautiful woman, as many heroes do, and Sigurd asks how she ended up in that position. Brynhild tells her story of how she disobeyed Odin by providing a victory to the wrong king and Odin had pricked her with a magical sleeping thorn which put her to sleep for so long and that she had asked Odin to protect her body while she slept and so there were magical flames which protected her until the right person could come and wake her (Bloomer 108- 109). Sigurd and Brynhild were written as a real Romeo and Juliet kind of romance, so smitten and in love yet fate had other plans, plans that would keep them apart and eventually led to the death of Sigurd. The story continues that Sigurd goes to ask for Brynhild's hand, her family agrees but she can see that they were not fated to be together, Sigurd continues to swear an oath that he would only marry Brynhild and he gives her the ring that Andvari had cursed as her wedding ring and they shared wedding vows again.

The next instance of magic is when Sigurd travels to King Gjuki's kingdom and the king's wife, Queen Grimhild, enjoys Sigurd and wants him to marry her daughter but there is one problem, Sigurd's heart belongs to someone else! Queen Grimhild gives Sigurd a cursed mead, the mead will force him to forget his oath to Brynhild and instead he will marry Gudrun, the daughter of Queen Grimhild. Brynhild was then betrothed to Gunnar, magic took shape as Queen Grimhild taught Sigurd and Gunnar how to shape shift and Sigurd turned into Gunnar and Gunnar turned into Sigurd, this was the only way that Gunnar was able to attract Brynhild, and they spent three nights together²⁸. Sigurd marries Gudrun and Brynhild marries Gunnar and they both come to realize what has happened, in a reconciliation attempt Sigurd goes to Brynhild offering to leave his wife and marry her, but Brynhild betrayed by her husband and love wanted revenge²⁹. Her husband, Gunnar, distraught by her sorrows, asks what she wants to allow him to be her husband and do husbandly duties, Brynhild tells him "You will not enter the same bed as me until you kill Sigurd"³⁰. To satisfy his wife, Gunnar got his youngest brother Guttorm to slay Sigurd while he slept. Sigurd, mortally wounded, killed Guttorm with his sword and died in the arms of his wife and love Gudrun, with his dying breath imploring her to take their children and leave.

This story is not found in one chapter but from Chapters 21 to 34. Due to this being a very detailed story, I had to extend my focus for this saga. This story is far more gruesome

²⁸ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 130

²⁹ Larrington, *The Norse Myths A Guide to the Gods and Heroes*, 144-145

³⁰ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 152

than the last, as the magic and curses not only created love but also destroyed it. This story shows how the manipulation of spells and curses can change the fates of men, the changes lead Brynhild into a madness fouled with revenge and cause Sigurd to die for a curse that was placed on him of which he had no recollection. In this case the magic and curses came in the form of a drink while in the next story the curses will come in the form of a young woman named Aslaug.

I am no stranger to the stories of Ragnar Lothbrok since I had been told them as I was growing up. I have also seen the drama television series *Vikings* and have my own thoughts about the relationship between Ragnar and Aslaug. Ainsley Bloomer included the story of Ragnar Lothbrok and Aslaug in chapter 41 on page 167, titled the “Saga of Aslaug”. Aslaug is the daughter of Brynhild and Sigurd, although she was raised by her foster parents King Heimir and Queen Bekkhild. Her foster parents worried with the death of her parents if perhaps death would befall Aslaug as well, her foster father carved a hiding spot into a harp to carry her and hide her, he kept her safe until one night he allowed a poor couple into his home where they saw the harp and killed the king as they thought he had wealth inside. The couple felt horrible for this action upon finding the little girl and they raised her as their own. She was kept hidden until one day King Ragnar Lothbrok came and Aslaug’s new adoptive parent told her to help the warriors make their bread. The men were bewitched by Aslaug’s beauty and were unable to bring back an edible loaf of bread for their king³¹. Ragnar, made curious by the descriptions his men provided, wished to see this maiden who had distracted his men from their baking. Ragnar did not consider her beauty, rather he wanted to test her intellect and he said to his men “Since you all describe her with such zeal, I wish to see her for myself, but I also want to test her intelligence. A beauty with no brains is no beauty at all. Approach this woman and tell her the King requests her presence. But tell her this, when she comes before the king, she must be neither dressed nor undressed, neither eating nor fasting, and neither alone nor in company”. Aslaug follows Ragnars instructions, and this impresses the king, he asks her to marry him. She only agrees if he is smart in the upcoming battle he plans to partake in. Ragnar survives and she tells him she is cursed, that if they do not take caution when they make their marriage official, she would have a son with no bones. Ragnar did not wait, and she gave birth to the ‘boneless’ child and Ragnar left it out to die, but Aslaug retrieved him from the woods, and they named the boy Ivar. Aslaug concerned for her husband’s safety gave him a shirt that would protect him from

³¹ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 169

any weapon which always allowed him to come home to her. Aslaug could see the future much like her mother and she sees that while in Sweden Ragnar gets an offer from the Swedish king for Ragnar to marry the princess Ingiborg and divorce his current wife³². In trying to convince her husband to stay she tells him that King Sigurd and Queen Brynhild were her parents, and she relays her whole story to Ragnar, he does not believe her, and she provides a prophecy, Aslaug tells her husband “If you do not believe me, ask Aki and Grima. As a child they hid me as best they could by covering me in tar and soot and making me wear cloaks with long hoods. But your men discovered me when they came to our hut. I can prove to you that I am the daughter of Sigurd, as I know from my Fylgia and from Odin, that I will bear you a son whose eye will show the resemblance of the serpent that my father Sigurd fought. We will call our son, Sigurd, Snake in the eye”³³. Aslaug’s prophecy came true and indeed had another son and he bore the serpent in his eye. Ragnar stayed with Aslaug and eventually her enchanted shirt was stolen from his possession. I am unaware of when and where Aslaug became cursed that gave way to Ivar, however she had the gift of foresight like her mother, and she could make prophecies. She did not inflict any curses, but it does make me question if perhaps she put a spell on Ragnar to make him fall in love with her, which shows how deceptive something can truly be.

Overall, it may be said that the use of magic and curses are abundant within Old Norse Mythology. This essay has gone over three different stories, and all had magic and curses used in some form, our first story where Fafnir turns into a dragon because of cursed gold, our second story where Sigurd Sigmundsson forgets about his marriage oath by drinking cursed mead of forgetfulness, and finally in the story between Ragnar and Aslaug where Aslaug herself is the cursed object. Each story has themes which remain the same, a betrayal, a desire or obsession with something, the use of a magic spell or a curse, and finally for some if not most characters death. Fafnir is tormented by his obsession for gold, and it causes him to shift into a serpent whose greed and hunger for gold keeps him trapped in his own personal Hel. Brynhild and Sigurd are the old Norse Mythological version of Romeo and Juliet to an extent, star-crossed lovers, fate tears them apart, and in the end, both end up dead. Brynhild much like Fafnir is driven mad, but it is not gold which fuels her madness but rather the love lost between herself and Sigurd and having to watch her lover be with

³² Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 172

³³ Bloomer, *A Viking Legend: The dreadful and Divine Designs of Destiny*, 173

another woman. Aslaug is not a cursed ring or a enchanted horn of mead, rather she is a princess who is cursed with a boneless son and the magical ability to see the future. Old Norse mythology and is full of blood feuds, magic, kinship bonds, trials and tribulations, interference of the gods in human affairs, and death of significant and important characters. Throughout the essay I examined the used and consequences of magic and curses as well as how they altered and impacted the lives of the characters who were affected. There were different ways in which these curses and magic appeared throughout the Sagas. Some curses took the form of different objects and people, which shows that old Norse civilization thought that anything could be cursed or enchanted and that nothing is as it appears.

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