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Vikings Past and Present

17 September, 2019

### The Dual Roles of Fate in *The Prophecy of the Seeress*

The *Poetic Edda* is an Old Norse Icelandic text containing poems about and relating to Norse Mythology. The first, *The Prophecy of the Seeress*, is a grand overview of the entire history of the Norse universe, from its very beginning to the end and subsequent rebirth of the world. In this poem, *fate* denotes two meanings: a characteristic essential to humans, and the predestination of all the events of the universe. This first meaning is most clearly shown when humans are created. This fate is personal and determines individuals' lives and actions. The second is a function of the poem's structure as a prophecy and of the cyclical nature of time. It is universal and applies to everything that exists, determining the grand narrative of the nine worlds.

In verse 17 of *The Prophecy of the Seeress*, the gods find two pieces of driftwood on the beach- "Ash and Embla, lacking in fate." Without fate, Ash and Embla are simply sticks on a beach, but the gods endow them with breath, spirit, blood, and fresh complexions (v18). Little is stated explicitly in the poem about these two pieces of driftwood, but it is implied that through these gifts, they become human. The next three verses deal with the establishment of the beings known as The Fates, further implying that the creation of these two humans led to the creation of fate itself. The reader could infer from verse 21, where the Fates "chose lives / for the sons of men, the fates of men" that the creation of humans necessitated the conception of a specific "personal fate" to govern the lives of individuals.

It is worth noting that humans are not the only beings who possess "personal fate." In verse 32, the reader learns that the god Baldr is fated to die, as the narrator states, "I saw for Baldr... / ... his fate in store." "Personal fate", therefore, is not just a human characteristic, but a divine one, too. However, assuming that The Fates represent "personal fate," some gods existed before "personal fate" did. Perhaps those gods that existed before The Fates are exempt from "personal fate," or "personal fate" can be applied retroactively after conception of a being. It is unclear from the poem if other intelligent beings also possess "personal fate".

Fate exists in another form as "universal fate." *The Prophecy of the Seeress* predicts the future, implying predestination of world events. If the events that she predicts were subject to change, she could not predict them accurately, and it seems reasonable to assume the poem was composed as a reliable record of the past and the future. Parts of the poem are in the future tense, such as verse 43: "the fetter will break." In addition, the structure of the poem is cyclical and, as John Lindow notes in *Norse Mythology*, symmetrical. Events from the beginning of the poem, such as the creation of the Earth, happen again at the end. Verse 56 states, "She sees, coming up a second time, / earth from the ocean." This conception of time, where events happen up to infinite times as time winds in a circle, necessitates a "universal fate." Some events that have happened before *will* happen again.

The symmetry that Lindow notes, saying "The later present looks forward directly into the near future. The creative work of the near past is undone in the near future..." (42) implies a type of mythic, tangible foreshadowing. Events that occur near the beginning of the time cycle are likely to either occur again or be mirrored near the end. The game pieces that the gods play with in verse 8 are again present in verse 58. While the second appearance is not an exact repeat of their first (they are being used in verse 8, but lie unused in the grass in verse 58), it is

clearly a distortion of the first. Their presence in verse 58 is not possible without their presence in verse 8.

The two types of fate present in *The Prophecy of the Seeress* are distinct, but they are complexly interwoven and play off of each other. Baldr's death, for instance, is an event of "personal fate" in Baldr's life and arc, but is also an essential aspect in the major "universal fate" event of Ragnarok-- the destruction of the gods. This poem provokes countless more questions on the nature of fate and free will, but these are not within the scope of this paper.