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Master's thesis

The Divine Feminine

A Study of the Cyclical Representation of Life and Death in Irish and Norse Female Supernatural Figures

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Summary

This thesis explores the cyclical rotation of life and death embodied within the divine female supernatural figures found in both medieval Irish and Norse texts. These two aspects often appear at odds with each other, literally being at opposite ends of one's lifetime. A beginning and an end. The exploration of this thesis will demonstrate how the divine feminine in Irish and Norse figures merge these dualling aspects into one, creating a cycle that is integral to the literature and culture in which they are a part of. Their capabilities in creating this rotation are shown through themselves as individuals or groups, but also through their relationships with both the natural world and other figures they encounter. They craft and manipulate these elements to propel an often-prophesized fate, create new life, and govern those same lifeforms after they have passed on to the afterlife. These women demonstrate exemplary power and domain over the realms in which they reside, and their ability to combine the elements of life, fertility, and death establishes that a cycle between these factors is not only impressive, but essential.

To begin, I summarize my intentions within the thesis, and introduce the subject as a whole, including statements and a brief overview of previous scholarship about the theme of the divine female and the role they play within pre-Christian religion. Chapter one examines the Irish female supernatural figures, centering on the Morrígan and other beings who are associated with her. The section is divided into four parts and addresses how each of the core elements that the she is associated with not only connect her to the common perception of her association with a war-goddess, but how they also connect her to the concept of abundance and fertility. Chapter two covers several Norse female beings who are closely linked with varying concepts. These individuals and groups include the likes of Freyja, the love-goddess, the *valkyrja*, retrievers of the slain, Hel, an ambiguous death figure, and finally the *nornir*, a collection of figures who are associated with one's fate. A number of texts from each respective culture will be discussed and evaluated in their relation to the proposed cycle that these figures create. The conclusion of this thesis restates the objective and research questions of this the and briefly compares similarities between the two cultures and how this overlap further demonstrates the importance that was placed on the divine female in accordance to my initial thesis statement.

Foreword

I would like to begin by thanking my thesis adviser, Kristen Mills, Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Nordic Studies at Universitetet i Oslo. I appreciate your feedback and wisdom through this academic period and for introducing me to the wonders of medieval Ireland. Your mentorship and guidance have been unparalleled.

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Introduction

As Hilda Ellis Davidson states, "the association of the goddess who brought fertility and new life and growth into the world with the realm of death is a widespread and ancient concept."[1] There is truth in recognizing that supernatural women are often depicted encompassing seemingly contrasting elements of fertility and death, and taking that a step further, stating that they take these two duelling concepts and fuse them together to create a cyclical rotation. When these aspects of life come to mind, we often imagine opposing visuals. Sexuality and fertility represent prosperity and abundance, while death depicts a lack there-of and absence of the listed elements. Why then, do we see a copious number of female beings enveloping both? The answer is transparent – one cannot operate without the other. Looking at both Irish and Norse cultures in the Middle Ages, we see this duality of life and death within the major female characters that are amongst some of the most important in the pantheon of gods. The goddess of death does not need to be disconnected from the human world, nor does she need to remain stagnant within her assigned realm. The key figures evaluated within this thesis demonstrate the ability to not only operate in a multitude of environments, but operate as dominating forces within said spaces. They are assigned with the task of maintaining the cycle of life and incorporating the dual concepts of prosperity and death into one reoccurring rhythm. Without these supernatural female deities, the world of pre-Christian religion would not be able to function. This thesis will explore in detail the ways in which the divine feminine within the Irish and Norse corpus demonstrate their connection with the concept of death and the afterlife, and how these simultaneously indicate their connection to life and prosperity.

In the Irish texts, the figure of the Morrígan is prominent in tales of war and carnage, while also acting as a key figure in ensuring the fertility of not only land but beast. She is associated by name and description to several other figures within medieval Irish literature that share in her abilities and connection to life and death. On the Norse side, we see a handful of female figures who fit into Ellis Davidson's previously mentioned statement, such as the well-known fertility deity known as Freyja, a goddess who is born of the Vanir and brings vast knowledge to the Æsir. Not to be forgotten are the *valkyrja*, women on horseback who are tasked with retrieving favoured warriors who have fallen in battle and are to be

[1] Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 174.

brought back to Valhǫll. Finally, there is the somewhat ambivalent figure of Hel[2], daughter of Loki who resides in *Niflhemir* and wields domain over the majority of the deceased. In tandem with her are the *nornir*, three figures who know and control the fate of all the living in the world. They are key figures in the cycle of life and death within the Norse literary corpus.

When discussing the divine feminine, Britt-Mari Näsström identifies that the 'Great Goddess' has an "ambiguous character that is comprised of both good and evil, sometimes divided into two goddesses who are apprehended as mother-daughter or two sisters."[3] While this statement is a seemingly romanticized and generic view regarding a supreme-female goddesses, this thesis sets out to demonstrate a combination of two duelling elements within the divine female. Scholars such as Mary Condren and J.J. Bachofen speculate the recession of these female beings from so-called 'Great Goddess' to that of under-recognized divinity due to a shift from the maternal to the paternal[4], their "diverse variety of lore stemming from the goddess' decline from mother-goddess to war-goddess under the patriarchy."[5] Thinking of these figures as 'mother' goddesses can be misleading, as I do not necessarily mean a literal giver of birth, although that is relevant to some of the figures discussed. Within the context of this thesis, a better term to refer to these divine females is 'interdimensional' as opposed to 'great goddess' or 'mother goddess'. They are individuals who, through their possession of governance over both life and death, demonstrate their domain over a vast corpus of concepts.

My initial intention for exploring the subject of a cyclical timeline within these divine feminine figures stems from, what I perceived, as a stronger association with one end of the spectrum than the other in regards to the governance that these beings encompassed. With the Morrígan, she was clearly associated with war and carnage, and Freyja specifically centered around the notion of love and fertility. Knowing that there were elements of both within these two key female figures, I set out to further examine 1) why certain aspects of these supernatural women were emphasized over the other and 2) why such impressive individuals

[2] It is widely argued whether the 'figure' of Hel was actually a single figure or rather simply a location to which the dead went after they had passed. This subject will be touched on later in Chapter two in the section regarding Hel and the *nornir*. For the purpose of this paper, it is to be assumed that at some point Hel was given the status of a physical figure who held control of a portion of the dead.
[3] Britt-Mari Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*. Lund Studies in History of Religions, Volume 5, (Lund: Lund University, 1995), 73.
[4] J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen,* Translated by Ralph Manheim, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1967), 73.
[5] Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland,* (San Francisco: Haprer & Row, 1989), 28-36.

appear to be downplayed in comparison to their male-counterparts. In developing my research question and expanding my knowledge on these two medieval cultures, it became apparent that there were more than the two figures I had originally planned on focusing that encompassed the idea of life and death interacting as one; hence, an in-depth inclusion of *valkyrja,* Hel, and the *nornir,* and the mention of other figures that the Morrígan is associated with, such as *Badb,* Macha, and Nemain. The recognition of several female characters working independently as well as in tandem with one another within their respective cultures, led me to the objective of demonstrating that the divine female played an integral role within the survival and thriving of not only the human realm but also that of the gods. They were the dominant force behind crafting the tapestry of life and therefore ultimately death, controlling several aspects of the journey along the way, weaving the dual concepts together into a never-ending cycle.

Due to limited space, I will only be touching on evidence found in literature and not of material culture. However, I would like to mention that there is significant information pertaining to archaeological findings that correspond to this topic and would hope to explore said material in the future. In regard to the literature, however, it is integral to note that the vast majority of sources from which I am drawing my conclusions were written post-Christianity, both in medieval Ireland and Scandinavia. While this absolutely has an impact on the perspective in which these texts were written, they are integrating pre-Christian oral traditions and themes. There is a vast literary corpus surrounding the mentioned figures within this thesis, but I have chosen the literature which I believe best demonstrates their correlation between life and death and the ways in which they link the two opposing concepts.

The first chapter discusses medieval Irish culture, and predominantly focuses on the figure known as the Morrígan. The main chapter is then broken down into four sub-sections, focusing on specific aspects of the Morrígan that integrates her with the cyclical concept of life and death. These sections, in order, are her readily-known association with the concept of war, and her involvement with the seemingly contradictory notions of fertility and prosperity that conjoin with her death elements. Proceeding that is the Morrígan as a sovereignty figure, arguing that she is the 'ultimate' representation of this figure within the medieval Irish, especially with her relationship to the great war hero Cú Chulainn. Next, in an analysis of her affiliation with cattle and how they provide a link between the realm of war and abundance. The final section of this chapter discusses the Morrígan as a mother and her direct association with the earth and her involvement in the natural cycle of the physical world.

The second chapter covers medieval Norse material, and several supernatural women are discussed. To begin, I cover the goddess Freyja, denoting her complexity as a goddess and how she encompasses a variety of governance, and emphasizing her importance and influence amongst the pantheon of Norse deities as she is often subdued by her male-counterparts. Her association with fertility, sexuality, and prosperity are stated, as well as an in-depth look at her association with the afterlife and the realm of the dead, her interactions with *seiðr*, her connection to war and warriors, and finally animals in correlation with the goddess. The following sub-section covers the *valkyrja,* and indicating how these beings operate outside the box in which they are often pigeon-holed into, and have strong agency over death, acting not simply as messengers but holding the ability to control and manipulate it. As well, their association with fate is discussed, therefore connecting them to the regenerative timeline that is the process of life and death. To conclude, I discuss the figures of Hel and the *nornir*, beings who exemplify immense control over the life span of every individual in existence. They show that no being is capable of escaping fate, accentuated specifically in regards to Hel in *Baldrs Draumar* and the general perception of the *nornir* figures.

Chapter 1 – The Irish Morrígan

1.1 The Morrígan – Simply a Goddess of War?

The Morrígan has been categorized under or associated with several different titles - the Morrígan, the Badb, Macha, Nemain, Fea, Danu, and one of the "daughters of Ernmas" [6]. With these names, she is frequently depicted in association to war and death.[7] However, as Anne Ross indicates, the "basic Celtic goddess type was at once mother, warrior, hag, virgin, conveyor of fertility, of strong sexual appetite which led her to seek mates amongst mankind equally with the gods, giver of prosperity to the land, protectress of the flocks and herds."[8] Clearly, these female deities encompassed quite a bit more than simply having domain over one fragment of civilization[9], and the Morrígan is no exception to this rule. While her status as a war-goddess is imperative to her character, she embodies a cornucopia of traits that correspond to the goddess that Ross discusses. Angelique Gulermovich Epstein states in her dissertation that the designating factors that we have for the Morrígan as a deity associated with both war and death are 1) her prophetic abilities, 2) her incitement of heroes and men into battle, 3) her terrible noises that are associated with war, 4) her use of both magical and physical assaults, and 5) her overall enjoyment and joy in carnage of battle.[10] This section will explore in detail the ways in which the Morrígan displays these five characteristics, and how these simultaneously indicate her connection to life and prosperity. Operating within these dual concepts, the Morrígan as a figure demonstrates how these opposite concepts are commonly brought together within a divine female supernatural figure who in turn then demonstrates a cyclical construct, melding both concepts of life and death into one never-

[6] Angelique Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts", PHD diss, (University of California, 1998), 3

[7] As stated by Angelique Gulermovich Epstein, the titles of the Morrígan, Macha, Badb and Anu/Danu are virtually interchangeable names for the war-goddess and can be assumed that when she is referred to as her different titles in literature it is in reference to one individual or the triple-goddess as the Morrígan has come to be known. The names Fea and Nemain are not as clear, but she is closely associated with them both and will not be referred to as heavily as the others within this paper.

[8] Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*: *Studies in iconography and Tradition*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1967), 233.

[9] While I do believe that the Morrígan encompasses most of the traits laid out by Ross, I do not believe that this is true for all of the female Celtic deities that we know of. Several of them may encompass a handful of these traits but it is inaccurate the think that all of the Celtic deities held domain over all of these concepts. The sole focus in this thesis is Morrígan as a prominent Irish deity, and therefore I only mean to refer to her involvement with these concepts.

[10] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", , 93.

ending rotation. Her actions within battle have violent tendencies, and it is apparent that she revels in the spoils of war, but she operates as an agent of fate by using the notion of brutality to incite a timeline that she not only wants to control, but has vast knowledge of. Her actions are meticulously thought out, driving forward the cycle of life and death. Within this section, various figures associated with war who are also connected with the Morrígan will be discussed. While these figures are closely associated, it is imperative to not conflate the differing individuals.

1.1.1 Aiding and Enjoyment in Battle

When analyzing the medieval Irish literature, it is not difficult to connect the Morrígan to war as she is depicted in several instances as showing great joy in the carnage and actions of battle. Often depicted as cackling amongst the dead on the battlefield, the image of this sinister goddess relishing in the spoils of war portrays her enjoyment, an otherwise chilling visual for anyone who would observe this terror. Two instances of the joy that the Morrígan portrays either during or after war can be seen as follows:

Bid buidech in Badb derg dib
Do comragaib cath archim[11].

The red Badb will be grateful to them
For the battle-encounters I see.[12]

Dinne bud buidech badhba aniugh nár cath catharda atáid ag fuirech re feoil . augus bud buidhech braineoin.[13]

Today the *badba* will be grateful for our civil war, they await flesh – and the ravens will be grateful.[14]

The term '*buidech*' appears in both passages, clearly identifying the happiness of the war-goddess even at the idea of a battle that is yet to come. A multitude of the imagery presented describes her being fed by the slaughter of people on the battlefield, and echoes of laughter can be heard while she enjoys her meal. In *Tochmarc Ferbe*, we are told that a group of warriors have fed the Badb by means of their weapons. Matthias Elger interprets this as an

[11] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 209.
[12] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 209.
[13] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 209.
[14] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 209.

implication that she feeds on the dead, and the description of her as 'red-mouthed' represents the blood of the corpses that she has devoured.[15] Through this depiction it is to be understood that the Badb gains power from consuming the dead, adjacent to that of the carrion bird that she is often represented as. Egeler as well refers to Epstein's translation of the word *mesrad* that is used within the text as meaning both 'harvest, mast' and 'feeding the mast', and therefore "the severed heads of the dead warriors may not only be harvest, but harvest for eating."[16] Referring to the dead as 'harvest' associates death and fertility of crops, incorporating both life and death in the Morrígan's delight in war. Her ability to create war in turn allows for her to live as she physically absorbs the death of others. She is herself a cycle through the act of war and death.

As Carey indicates, the chief function of the war goddess during her main appearances is to confuse and weaken armies,[17] aiding the side she is fighting beside in slowing down their enemies and claiming victory. While the story of *Cath Maige Tuired* strongly indicates the Morrígan' s connection to sovereignty, which will be discussed in depth in a proceeding section, it also includes her abilities as a war goddess. This text encompasses the duality of the Morrígan by showing how she has domain over both death and fertility. As Carey indicates, her chief function in *CMT* and the *Táin Bó Cuilagne* is to confuse and weaken armies. Towards the beginning of the text, we see the three heroes - Lug, Ogma and the Dagda - going to the Morrígan and requesting her aid in the battle against their enemies. In terms of physical guidance, she agrees to this request by spending seven years preparing and creating weapons for the trio.[18] While she is not active physically on the battlefield, her appearance in warfare is still present, simply in the form of some mystical influence, by sorcery, or in a form of animal disguise.[19] She is able to offer information to those she is assisting, as shown in *Cath Maige Tuired* when she tells the Tuatha Dé Dannan where the Fomoiri will land, and she herself says that she will meet them when they arrive and kill the son of the king, Indech. While the description of this event is not present within the text, there is evidence that she does complete as she said she would, describing how she will "take from him the blood of his heart and the kidneys of his valour. "Dobert-si didiu a dí

[15] Matthias Elger – "Death, Wings, and Divine Devouring: Possible Mediterranean Affinities of Irish Battlefield Demons and Norse Valkyries.", *Studia Celtica Fennica V.* 3-25, 2008, 7.
[16] Elger – "Death, Wings, and Divine Devouring", 7.
[17] John Carey, "Notes on the Irish War Goddess." *Éigse: A Journal of Irish Studies.*Volume XIX: Part 2, 263-275, The National University of Ireland, 1983 – 267.
[18] She does not complete this feat alone as other members of the Túatha De help in the making of these weapons, but she is an active part in their construction.
[19] Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, Translated by Myles Dillon, (County Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), 33.

bois den crú-sin deno…"[20] ("Later she gave two handfuls of that blood to the hosts …").[21] Here we see that the figure does have the ability to participate in war if she decides too, but her physical assault is not explicitly described as part of the narrative. A similar instance occurs in *Cath Muige Tuired Cunga* when the three figures of Morrígan, Macha, and Badb, say that they will go with the Tuatha Dé against the Fir Bolg after already attacking the enemy with a magical assault. As Angelique Gulermovich Epstein states, we do not know if the offer is accepted nor are we offered a description of the attack, but a "physical attack seems implied."[22] Through both magical and physical assaults, the Morrígan demonstrates her ability to engage in warfare, and does so in order to propel her desired or prophesized outcome.

1.1.2 Prophecy and Noise

We see the majority of the Morrígan's prophecies being invoked within some context of battle – whether that be prior, during, or after – or within a war-torn setting. These prophecies appear in a variety of mediums as well, whether that be in the form of songs, battle-cries, or general poetry. The Morrígan is credited with a number of poems known as a *roscad, rosg*, or *rithelaerg*, defined as an "unrhymed composition descended from Old Irish rhetoric".[23] Of all the relationships that the Morrígan is involved in within Irish literature, the one that stands out inherently is that between herself and the legendary hero Cú Chulainn. Throughout the Ulster Cycle, the exchanges between the two characters are often of confusion and complication, as their relationship fluctuates between that of enemies, and that of patron deity[24] and hero. In the many instances in which we see these two interacting it becomes apparent that the Morrígan encapsulates the traits of a war and death deity. *Aided con Culainn* or "The Death Tale of Cú Chulainn" shows several instances of the goddess using her domain over death, with prophecy being a prominent component. Prior to this tale, in the *Táin Bó*

[20] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, p. 44 folio 66b, section 85.
[21] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, translated by Elizabeth Gray, (CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a project of University College, Cork, College Road, Cork, Ireland – http://www.ucc.ie/celt, 2003), 45.
[22] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 77.
[23] Proinsias Mac Cana, "Laíded, Gressacht 'Formalized Incitement.'" *Ériu* 43 (1992): 69–92, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30007420, 82.
[24] Angelique Gulermovich Epstein makes reference to the Morrígan's actions of destroying Cú Chulainn's chariot in *Aided Con Culainn* so he is unable to go into battle as one of the first times we see her acting as the hero's patron deity.

Regamna, she makes a promise to Cú Chulainn to be present at his time of death, saying to him "Is oc (do) ditin do báis-[s]iu atáu-so ocus bia[25]"("it is at the guarding of thy death that I am; and I shall be.")[26] In *Aided con Culainn,* she is seen to have destroyed the hero's chariot prior to him riding into battle, as she has prophesized his death and knows that he will not return if he makes it to the battlefield. This is an example of how the Morrígan has claim over the concept of death and her ability to not only prophesize the coming of one's end but also have some semblance of control as to when and how it happens.[27] Her attempt to defer him from riding into battle is of a destructive nature, but her intentions were that of saviour. She has now gone from promising to be at the hero's death in what appears to be an ominous manner, to now attempting to save the hero's life. This could be due to the complex relationship between the deity and hero that has followed her seemingly threatening initial spoken promise, but is more likely due to the Morrígan prophesizing his end and therefore demonstrating to him her ability to see into his future. While this text is meant to explain the eventual strife between the two figures in the *Táin*, it can also be taken as a foreshadowing of the hero's death. After her words pertaining to his death, Cú Chulainn goes on to say how he will be the survivor of the great cattle raid, but the Morrígan continues in stating that there is no way in which he can come out of this battle alive, especially with her aiding the Irishmen. Like the Morrígan, this text encompasses dual concepts – one of foretelling of the *Táin Bó Cúalinge*, while also demonstrating the Morrígan's abilities as a prophetess in telling the audience of the coming death of the great hero. The *Táin* depicts the duality of life and death - the feats exhibited by Cú Chulainn morphing him into a legendary hero, while simultaneously prophesizing his death. The root of these actions is the war-goddess herself, understanding and shaping the life of those around her based on the prophecies she has seen. Her control over life and death allows for the progression of both concepts, specific in this instance to Cú Chulainn's life, to be paralleled within these two texts.

A frightening component to the verbal communication the Morrígan demonstrates during battle is noise. Mac Cana explains that loud noise has been a fundamental component of psychological warfare for a long part of human history[28], a component that the Irish war-goddess employs. Cú Chulainn shouts during battle, Lug chants a spell in *Cath Maige Tuired*

[25] Unknown, *Táin Bó Regamna: Eine Vorerzählung zur Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Johan Corthals, (Verlag: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenchaften, 1987), 32.
[26] Unknown, "The Cattle-Raid of Regamna: The Yellow Book of Lecan". *Heroic Romances of Ireland, Volume II* ed. and trans. A.H. Leahy, (London: David Nutt, 1906), 11.
[27] Lady Greogry, *Cuthulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster,* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 334.
[28] Mac Cana, "Laíded, Gressacht 'Formalized Incitement.", 70.

whilst moving around the group with one eye open and hoping on one foot, and those around these war heroes use noise to rouse them, such as Cú Chulainn's charioteer and Fergus when he is being attacked by the Morrígan in the form of an eel. It is common to see verbal offense executed or led by specialists in magic[29], such as the example of Lug or the war-goddess causing confusion over the men of Ireland so they fight amongst themselves. Outside of coherent verbal interactions, noise and sound in the form of screeching and cries are common occurrences. Depicting the figure of the Badb[30], a common being associated with that of the Morrígan[31], we see the war goddess associated with terrifying depictions of noise. An example that recounts her treacherous cries are as follows:

> Rogairsed badba 7 bledlochtana 7 amaite aidgill co clos a nallaib 7 a nesaib 7 i fothollaib in talman. Robo comcosmail re hidnaib uathmara in laithe dichra dedenaig ag dedail no droinge duineta o dirim in domain se.[32]
>
> The *badba* and monsters and hags of doom cried out so that they were heard from the cliffs and waterfalls and in the hallows of the earth. It was like the dreadful agonizing cry on the last anxious day when the human race will part from the multitude in this world.[33]

It is clear from this instance alone that the sounds of the Badb are disheartening. This is not a unique situation either, as these are common typos when relating menacing sounds to the war-goddess.[34] These screeches are not merely used, however, to strike fear into those who hears them. The Morrígan applies these frightening shrills to intimidate and forewarn of the coming destruction that usually follows these sounds of war. Clamor of this nature acts as a telling of the coming of a death-messenger, someone (or something) who not only has the ability to evoke chaos but simultaneously foretells of one or more individual's impending doom. A similar being who demonstrates these characteristics is the Banshee, an Irish supernatural death-messenger who is rooted in Irish folk-belief and who's traditions concern aspects of both life and death.[35] They are often depicted as death-messengers, and while not

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[29] Mac Cana, "Laíded, Gressacht 'Formalized Incitement", 71.
[30] Important to note that *badb* is also a type of crow, and it is not always clear whether this figure is representing a corvid or a humanoid in these examples. The Morrígan, however, does have a strong association with these carrion birds, associating her to these instances or bird-like shrieks.
[31] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 52.
[32] Unknown, "The First Battle of Moytura.", Ed., trans. J. Fraser, *Ériu 8*: 1-63, 1916, 44.
[33] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 207.
[34] For further examples of references to the Badb screeching during battle, I recommend reading Angelique Gulermovich Epstein's dissertation "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts" and Kristen Mill's article *Demna Aeóir* 'Demons of the Air.'
[35] Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Messenger. (*Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1916), 15

necessarily seen, they are most definitely heard. The correlation between these figures corresponds to loud noise as well as another prominent representation of the messenger of death within medieval Irish literature – the washer-motif which will be discussed in-depth in the concluding section of this sub-chapter.

While the two previous sections have demonstrated how noise and prophecy were used to cause chaos and fear, the Morrígan also demonstrates her abilities within these mediums in a positive context. Outside of prophecy the Morrígan demonstrates incitement through the use of noise and prose, encouraging warriors into battle and stocking their abilities before or during combat. Incitement to battle is a large component to provoking an individual to fight, and this is a practice that is frequently carried out by females. This is often due to their special relationship to the hero or because of their association with him as an individual, such as sexual interest, love, loyalty, or kinship.[36] This kind of relationship can be demonstrated through the Morrígan's incitement towards Cú Chulainn when he is in his youth. This will be talked about more in depth in the next chapter, but her attack on the hero's honour, *gressacht*, propels him to fight. Throwing insult towards an individual was used as a form of verbal noise to instigate and progress war. The Morrígan uses this tactic in her desire to not only create but continue confrontations, thus more importantly stimulate her prophesized or desired timelines through the art of incitement. She is also seen announcing the victor and therefore completion of war, bestowing on her the ability to not only cause war, but to end it and determine the successful party. The passage reads: "Íar mbrisiud íerum an catha & íar nglanad ind áir, fochard an Morrígan ingen Ernmais do táscc an catha-sin & an coscair móair … Conid do sin inneses Badb airdgníomha."[37]("Then after the battle was won and the slaughter was cleaned away, the Morrígan, the daughter of Ernmas, proceeded to announce the battle and the great victory which had occurred there … and that is the reason the Badb still relates great deeds.")[38] While there are those who are unlucky in battle, there are also the victors, and the Morrígan demonstrates through her abilities that she has a say in both sides of the battlefield. She goes on after this passage to describe a world full of prosperity, abundance, and peace. To further demonstrate the duality of the Morrígan, the text immediately follows, and finishes, with her prophecy of the end of the world, reciting "Ni

[36] Mac Cana, "Laíded, Gressacht 'Formalized Incitement, 87.
[37] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, p. 70 folio 70b, section 166.
[38] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, 71.

accus bith nombeo baid: sam cin blatha, beti bai cin blichda"[39]/I shall not see a world which will be dear to me: summer without blossoms, cattle will be without milk …"[40] We see here within a short section the combination of the Morrígan's shared representation of the positive and negative effects of spoken sounds in regards to warfare. She holds domain over all aspects of war, representing through her actions that there are both pros and cons to its outcome. And while there is victory and a time of prosperity in the aftermath of war, there will also come a time where that ceases to be and doom will return.

1.1.3 An Omen of Death

As mentioned previously, the correlation between the Morrígan and the banshee is hard to ignore. While the banshee named is primarily a later phenomenon, the connection to noise and their roles as foreboders of death are what draw parallels between these two figures.[41] The banshee is often depicted in some form of aural manifestation, with their cries following the course of streams and rivers.[42] In connection with bodies of water, the depiction of the washer at the ford is one that is rooted deeply in the Morrígan's portrayal as a fore warner of death. Similar to uttering a spoken prophecy, we see the war-goddess demonstrating a physical omen of one's coming death. The washer at the ford motif is most commonly described as woman in some form who is seen washing either the body parts or the clothing of the individual whose impending death is being represented. There are three prominent examples that describe the washer at the ford motif explicitly naming the female figure as either the Morrígan or the Badb. The first regards the hero Cú Chulainn, who, as described in the next sub-chapter, has a close connection with the war-goddess. On his way to meet the men of Ireland, the hero and his group come across a maiden who is washing the armour of Cú Chulainn in the river. The second instance we see is in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, where Conaire and his company are greeted by a hag-like figure when they are seated at the

[39] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, p. 72 folio 70b, section 167.
[40] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, 73.
[41] While it is tempting to say that both figures are also often depicted as carrion birds, it is unfortunately not the case when it comes to the figure of the Banshee. As Patricia Lysaght explains, the belief that the banshee appears in crow-shape has not existed within living memory and if ever was the case, died out long before that. She refers to a questionnaire statement made by a correspondent from Waterford that summarizes the findings of whether or not the banshee was ever seen as a visual representation of a carrion bird; this section and the entirety of her book should be referred to for further information on this misconception. She does however mention that another name for the death-messenger in some areas is the Bow, which stems from the Badb.
[42] Lysaght, *The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Messenger,* 130.

Hostel.[43] We see the death-messenger in hag form, but still delivering the prophecy of death to the hero,[44] therefore appearing as an omen of death outside of the washer-motif. She is referred to here as Cailb, but when she names her thirty-one titles to Conaire she includes Badb and Nemain in her list, letting Conaire know who she truly is. While the Morrígan is not amongst one these titles, her association with the two listed figures connects her to this event. The final example we see is in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*, differing from the other two examples as this depiction is seen post-mortem. This is amoung the earliest of the motifs[45] and the Morrígan is described as laughing as she washes the entrails of the dead, a more menacing and sinister depiction than seen in the previous examples.

From these three instances, it is made clear that the same motif can be used to portray a different version of the omen of death and depending on the description, can invoke different emotions in connection with the loss of the individual. The Morrígan shifts between beautiful and hag-like, as seen through other sovereignty figures. The versions we see of the washer motif from *Togail* and *Reicne Fothaid* represent an aggressive and gruesome episode of delivering the news of death. Both descriptions see the goddess as a feral or deformed hag-figure, physically portraying an unwanted sight. In *Togail* specifically, there is a sexual connotation in connection with the Badb, as she is described with traits such as "her pubic hair hung down to her knee."[46] This occurrence shows that the sexuality related to the war-goddess does not always represent that of desire, but can be perceived as grotesque and ugly, the mixture of violence and sexuality representing the 'darker face of the goddess'.[47] On the opposite hand, the Morrígan as the washer in *Aided Con Culainn* depicts a different representation of the motif. Seeing as the Morrígan is portrayed as a young and innocent looking woman who is weeping while she washes Cú Chulainn's clothing, the image gives a sense of mourning and sadness for what is to come. We know from an earlier encounter that the Morrígan is trying to stop the hero from going to battle as she knows that he will meet his doom. The encounter evokes empathy for the hero from the war-goddess, and with this and

[43] Unknown. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Medieval and Modern Irish Series: Volume VIII. Edited by Eleanor Knott. Dublin: Stationary Office, 1936.
[44] The reason I include this example in the washer at the ford motif is because she is represented as a hag and in this instance used as a fore warner of death, two of the three most common components of the ford motif. While not near water, the Badb is still used in this instance as a death omen and therefore I deemed worthy of including.
[45] Kristen Mills, "Death, Women, and Power: Theme and Structure in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*.", *Ériu* 68 (2018): 65–98. https://doi.org/10.3318/eriu.2018.68.7, 83.
[46] Unknown, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel,* translated by Whitley Stokes, volume 22, Halle/Saale, Max Niemeyer, 1901, 42.
[47] Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship & Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147.

her appearance as a bird at his death, we see that the relationship of the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn has come full circle.

Another instance that should be categorized as a version of the washer motif is the Morrígan's tryst with the Dagda. As Kristen Mills explores, this instance combines the washer narrative with an erotic element, combining the two[48] and encompassing the duality of the Morrígan. The aftermath of the interaction between the two is one of both prosperity and death, depending on the perspective from which one is looking. The Tuatha Dé are victorious in their defeat of the Fomoiri, while the latter suffer great losses and many are left dead. These events are a direct result of the interactions between the two deities, as will be described in detail in the following chapter on sovereignty. Here we see the war-goddess representing the washer at the ford and exemplifying her dual abilities as being able to create abundance while simultaneously cause destruction and war. Even in her form of a death-messenger, the Morrígan displays her association with life as well, and as seen from the other washer examples she does not always explicitly deliver the news of death in a purely heinous manner.

1.2 Sovereignty – Fertility through Kingship

An integral aspect of Irish literary texts is the depiction of the sovereignty figure and her connection to both the land and kingship. Through this female individual, the continuation of Ireland is allowed as she passes on the rulership of the land to its rightful leader, one who will continue the prosperity and success of the country. By her description alone, the Morrígan can be viewed as a sovereignty figure, as Rosalind Clark has outlined the deity with her connections to death, fertility of the land, and procreation of cattle.[49]

1.2.1 – *Cath Maige Tuired* and the Dagda

Cath Maige Tuired illustrates how the Morrígan demonstrates her ability as a sovereignty figure and her overall importance in the history of the progression of Ireland. The text depicts several encounters that she has with different members of the Tuatha Dé Dannan as they prepare to go to war with the Fomoire for the control of Ireland. The following passage

[48] Mills, "Death, Women, and Power: Theme and Structure in *Reicne Fothaid Canainne*.", .87.
[49] Rosalind Clark, Aspects of the Morrígan in Early Irish Literature*, Irish University Review*, Autumn, 1987, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Autumn, 1987), 223.

depicts a crucial interaction between the Dagda, the chief deity of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, and the Morrígan:

> Boí tegdas den Dagdae a nGlionn Edin antúaith. Baí dano bandál forsin Dagdae dia blíadhnae imon Samain an catha oc Glind Edind. Gongair an Unius la Connachta frioa andes. Co n-acu an mnaí a n-Unnes a Corand og nide, indarna cos dí fri Allod Echae (.i. Echuinech) fri husci andes alole fri Loscondoib fri husce antúaith. Noí trillsi taitbechtai fora ciond. Agoillis an Dagdae hí & dogníad óentaich. 'Lige ina Lánomhnou' a ainm an baile ó sin. Is hí an Morrígan an uhen-sin isberur sunn.[50]

> The Dagda had a house in Glen Edin in the north, and he had arranged to meet a woman in Glen Edin a year from that day, near the All Hallows of the battle. The Unshin of Connacht roars to the south of it. He saw the woman at the Unshin in Corann, washing with one of her feet at Allod Echae (that is, Aghanagh), south of the water and the other at Lisconny north of the water. There were nine loosened tresses on her head. The Dagda spoke with her, and they united. "The Bed of the Couple" was the name of that place from that time on. (The woman mentioned here is the Morrígan.)[51]

While it is not explicitly referred to that the Dagda and the Morrígan engage in intercourse, the context of the encounter, along with the site being named "The Bed of the Couple", gives reason to understand that this is what occurs. The result of this union is the victory of the Dagda and his party over the Fomoiri, thus granting the Túatha Dé power over the land of Ireland. With the Dagda being the chief deity, and referred to in many texts as a king[52], it indicates his significance as a ruler of Ireland. In this instance we can see the Morrígan as not only a manifestation of sovereignty, but also a figure connected with fertility, since by sleeping with him she ensures his continued power, his succession, and the prosperity of the land. This union is between two clearly supernatural beings, that are prominent amongst the pantheon of Irish deities. The Morrígan can be argued to be one of the most prominent of sovereignty figures in Irish literature as her assurance of victory to the Dagda allows for the Tuatha Dé Dannan to gain control over Ireland. This union further ties into the notion that the Morrígan is connected to both the concept of life and death. While 'life' is created through the copulation of these two deities in the form of the Túatha Dé Dannan taking claim over the land and continuing its growth and prosperity, there is simultaneously the outcome of war and destruction, one that the Morrígan takes an active part in. The destruction that the Dagda

[50] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, p. 44 folio 66b, section 84.
[51] Unknown, *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, trans. Elizabeth Gray, 45.
[52] Angelique points this out as a footnote in her dissertation – she mentions that one of these texts is the *Lebor Gabala*

and the rest of the Tuatha Dé Dannan bring upon the Fomoiri results in regicide, the action of killing a king. In this instance the Morrígan is creating a cycle of kingship - bestowing future kingship on one results in the death of another, both actions in which she takes direct intervention. The location bears another name as well, 'The Ford of Destruction'[53], which indicates how the sexual side of the Morrígan is directly related to war and battle. *Cath Maige Tuired* as a whole depicts the Morrígan as a representation of war, fertility, and prophecy[54], demonstrating her abilities as a deity that operates within a cyclical cycle.

The act of intercourse within the above passage should be duly noted in reference to the Morrígan's connection to sovereignty and fertility. Intercourse in myths and legends frequently implies a subsequent birth,[55] which in many cases is true when relating to the sovereignty goddess. In this instance, the Morrígan is the literal embodiment of Ireland, not only by her association with sovereignty but also with the description of her size and stature, often seen in descriptions of earth-deities, a point that will be further explored in a later chapter. It is only natural to then associate the physical fertile land with the Morrígan. By carrying out a tryst with the Dagda, she is passing on the responsibility of keeping the land prosperous by giving birth to a prosperous leader. Mac Cana explains that the act of intercourse is integral, and the subsequent result is the deity as a mother figure to a king and therefore the maternal figure of a royal lineage.[56] The sexual imagery of the Dagda, who within this story gains domain over Ireland as he is the head-deity of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, sleeping with the land itself guarantees the fertility of the land, and the actions of the Dagda are crucial to the maintenance of the nation's prosperity. Without the act of intercourse, and therefore the fertilization of the land within the sovereignty myth, there is no assurance that the king can succeed in his rule. We see how the alternate outcome of denying the passing along of sovereignty, at least royal sovereignty, through intercourse is represented in the relationship between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn.

[53] Gulermovich Epstein – "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 84.
[54] Clark, *Aspects of the Morrígan in Early Irish Literature*, 230.
[55] Emily B. Lyle, *The law of succession established by Eochaid Fedlech and its implications for the theme of the Irish sovereignty goddess*. In: Etudes Celtiques, vol. 42, 2016. pp. 137.
[56] Proinsias Mac Cana, "Aspects of the theme of King and Goddess in Irish literature.", In: Etudes Celtiques, vol. 7, fascicule 1, 1955. pp. 76-114; doi : https://doi.org/10.3406/ecelt.1955.127488, 88.

1.2.2 Cú Chulainn the King?

The relationship between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn is perhaps the most influential of all of the goddess' interactions with any individual in the Irish literary corpus. Their relationship represents her abilities as a sovereign over both life and death; using this hero as a representation of her abilities as a divine feminine who has domain over the cyclical concepts of birth, prosperity, and death. The first interaction we encounter between the two figures is told to us in *Incipiunt macgnímrada Con Culaind* or 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', where the Morrígan presents herself to the young hero in the form of a carrion bird. She insults him by saying "Olc damnae laích fil and fo chossaib aurddrag!"[57]("Poor stuff to make a warrior is he who is under the feet of phantoms!")[58] While on the surface this appears to be an offense to Cú Chulainn, this should instead be interpreted as an act of incitement towards battle. As Mac Cana has indicated, there are several instances in which a *gressacht* is used to incite an individual by ridicule. This insult is an example of such[59], even though it is not explicitly termed so.[60] While this meeting is adversarial in nature, the interaction between these two is what commences the hero's glorious deeds, therefore giving the Morrígan direct influence over Cú Chulainn's life as one of the greatest Irish literary heroes. This cycle concludes in a similar manner in which it began; with the Morrígan appearing at the death of Cú Chulainn in the form of a raven. The Morrígan in her avian form represents an omen of death, and we see her appear when it is understood that the hero has officially ended his time in the natural world.

While the legendary hero has a tremendous career within the Irish literature, he never attains the title of king. The reasoning behind this may be in connection to the Morrígan as a sovereignty figure. It is known that the relationship between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn is one that teeters between positive and negative. As noted in the previous chapter about the Morrígan and her connections to war and death, it is seen how her influence through violence, insult and battle aided in molding the Irish hero. In Recension One of *Tain Bó Cuailgne* we are provided with a preface to the pair's eventual combat that is not included in

[57] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge* from the Book of Leinster, Edited by Cecile O'Rahilly, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), 16.
[58] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 172.
[59] Mac Cana, "Laíded, Gressacht 'Formalized Incitement.'", 80.
[60] Mac Cana indicates that this act of exhortation by insult was so common that it does not have to be specifically mentioned as such in the text itself, especially in shorter and less formal situations.

the second recension; *Imacallaim na Mórígna fri Coin Culaind* or 'The Conversation of the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn'. We see in the below passage the exchange that commences:

Co n-aca Cú in n-ócben chuci co n-étuch cach datha impe 7
Delb roderscaigthe furri.
'Cé taí-siu?' or Cú Chulaind.
'Ingen Búain ind ríg,' or sí. 'Dodeochad chucut-su. Rot
charus ar th'airscélaib, 7 tucus mo ṡeótu lim 7 mo indili.'
'Ní maith é mind inbuid tonnánac, nachis olc ar mbláth, amin
gorti. Ní haurussa dam-sa dano comrac fri banscáil céin no mbeó
isind níth so.'
'Bidim chobair-se dait-siu oc sudiu.'
"Ní ar thóin mná dano gabus-sa inso.'[61]

Cú Chulainn saw coming towards him a young woman of
Surpassing beauty, clad in clothes of many colours.
'Who are you?' asked Cú Chulainn.
'I am the daughter of Búan the king,' said she. 'I have come to
you for I fell in love with you on hearing your fame, and I have
brought with you my treasures and my cattle.
'It is not a good time at which you have come to us, that is, our
condition is ill, we are starving (?). So it is not easy for me to
meet a woman while I am in this strife.'
'I shall help you with it.'
'It is not for a woman's body that I have come.'[62]

What is made explicitly clear from this passage is that Cú Chulainn refuses the sexual advances made by the Morrígan. The result of this dismissal of the goddess' proposal is that the relationship between the two immediately becomes adversarial, and therefore we have an explanation[63] as to why the Morrígan attacks Cú Chulainn in three different animal forms whilst he is fighting Lóch mac Mo Femis on the Foray of Cualinge. Crucial to note is that the young woman, who has not announced her true self to the hero, claims to be the daughter of a king, and could potentially pass on kingship through marriage if Cú Chulainn were to progress in a relationship with this individual. Either through the disguised promise of marriage to a royal or through the act of intercourse in which kingship would be passed to the hero through the sovereignty motif, the denial of the woman's advances by the hero ends both paths in which kingship could be attained.

[61] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension One*, Edited by Cecile O'Rahilly, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), 57.
[62] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension One*, 176-177.
[63] There is a second version of events that lead to this attack on Cú Chulainn by the Morrígan within *Tain Bó Regamma*, but that will be discussed in further detail in the section on cattle raids.

While not gaining kingship from his interactions with the Morrígan, it is apparent that the hero does gain notoriety through his feats as a hero, and not without the aid of the goddess. While their relationship is often hostile, after the duel on the Foray of Cualinge there is a shift in how the two interact from that point forward. The Morrígan enters this scene as an adversary to the hero, transforming into and attacking as a white, red-eared heifer accompanied by fifty other heifers who are connected in pairs with a chain of white bronze, then into an eel, and finally into a she-wolf. The two face off and the battle ends with neither losing but both being injured. They part ways and Cú Chulainn soon after comes upon an old woman who is milking a cow. It has been prophesized that the Morrígan cannot be healed unless by the hand of Cú Chulainn, so, unknown to the hero, this woman is the Morrígan once more in a transformed state. She relieves his thirst[64] by allowing him to drink from all three teats of the cow, and in return he heals her wounds wholly. At this point she reveals herself to him, and he is not pleased that it was her he had healed as he exclaims "Acht rofessin[d] combad tú…nít ícfaind tria bith sír"[65]("Had I known that it was you…I should never have healed you.")[66] While their relationship still appears tumultuous, at this point we see a change in the actions taken by the Morrígan in regards to the hero. From this point forward, she appears to be on the side of Cú Chulainn, and aids him in his heroic feats. Continuing on in *Tain Bó Cúalnge,* the Morrígan brings confusion[67] over the host army and is acting as an agent on the side of Cú Chulainn and the Ulstermen. The concept of liquid-pouring is engrained in the sovereignty figure motif,[68] and therefore we can see this as the Morrígan passing on a form of 'kingship'. Due to his success in keeping the Donn Cúailnge within the Ulster's borders and driving the forces of Medb back, he gained the reputation of the greatest warrior in Ireland at a very young age. While it appears the possibility of king of Ireland was no longer on the table as the Morrígan does not present the opportunity of

[64] This example is in stark contrast to another narrative that has sovereignty as a main concern where we see druids deprive King Conaire of drink and he dies of thirst when his agent, Mac Cécht is unable to find him any relief as all the bodies of water in Ireland are hiding themselves from him. This is an example of sovereignty being taken away from a king who is unworthy, whereas in the above-mentioned instance we see the Morrígan deeming Cú Chulainn as worthy and giving him the drink that he so desperately needs after being wounded and exhausted from battle.
[65] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension One*, 63
[66] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension One*, 182
[67] Recension 1 of the *Táin* is translated as 'she attacked the host'. While these are different verbs used to describe her actions within the setting, it is clear that she is acting on the side of the Ulstermen and Cú Chulainn. The term 'confusion' has been interpreted by Angelique as more of a magical or psychological attack as opposed to a physical one, and I am inclined to agree with her on that statement. She states that such an attack is reminiscent of one that is seen previously in the *First Battle of Moytura* by the Morrígan, Badb and Macha.
[68] Demonstrated in the works of Mac Cana's *Aspects of the theme of King and Goddess in Irish Literature* and Bhreathnach's "The Sovereignty Goddess as a Goddess of Death?".

passing of sovereignty to the hero again, the events of the interaction between the hero and the goddess after their battle led the Morrígan to pass on the success of the hero through an act tied directly to the sovereignty myth, as well as her own interjection and aid into his heroic affairs.

1.2.3. The Death of Cú Chulainn

Cú Chulainn is referred to as 'the king of all heroes', specifically at the time of his death. The hero makes a number of powerful enemies over the next couple of years, the most notable being the man who takes Cú Chulainn's life, Lugaid mac Cú Roí. *Aided Con Culainn* depicts the enemy of Cú Chulainn having three magical spears made, each of which can kill a king. Lugaid joins forces with queen Medb and other enemies of the hero, and when Cú Chulainn breaks his *geis* and his magical strength falters, his enemies attack Ulster shortly after. Regardless of the Morrígan's attempt to halt him from entering battle by destroying his chariot,[69] he thwarts her attempts and answers the call to war. The battle commences with Cú Chulainn and Lugaid riding into battle to meet, and the following ensues:

Íar sin dano ro:gab Lugaid in tres gai indlithi ra:boí oc maccaib Calatín. "Cid bias din gai-seo, a maccu Calatín?" "Tuitfid rí dé," ar meic Calatín. "Ro:chúala lib do:fáethsad din gai ro:léci Erc imbúaruch." "Is fír ón," or sé. "Da: rochair rí ech hÉrend dé, i. in Líath Macha … La ssin do: lléci Lugaid in ṅgai do Choin Chulaind so n-ecmoiṅg ind cotarlaic an ro:buí ina broind co rrabi for fortchi in charpait.[70]

After that Lugaid grasped one of the three prepared spears of the sons of Calatín. "What will come of this spear, sons of Calatín?" "A king will fall by it," said the sons of Calatín. "I heard from you that [a king] would fall from the spear that Erc cast a short while ago." "That is true," he said. "The king of horses of Ireland fell by it, that is Líath Macha." … With that Lugaid casts the spear at Cú Chulainn so that it hits him and so that what was in his belly spilled forth so that it was on the cushion of the chariot.[71]

Just before this passage within the text, it states that there were in fact three spears that were thrown and killed an individual with the title of 'king'. The first was thrown by Lugaid and killed the king of all charioteers, Láeg mac Riangabra. The second is hurled by Ercmac Carpi, who injures the king of all horses, Líath Macha. Both of these individuals have close relations

[69] This version of events only occurs in the oldest recension of *Tain Bó Cúalnge* from *Lebor na hUidre* ('Book of the Dun Cow') from the twelfth century.
[70] Unknown, *The Death of Cú Chulainn: A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of* Brishlech Mór Maige Muirthemni *with Introduction, Translation, Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary, (*Bettina Kimpton. Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 2009), 23.
[71] Unknown, *The Death of Cú Chulainn:* 42

with the hero Cú Chulainn, as they are his personal charioteer and his horse. This description of the titles which Cú Chulainn holds, as well as those who are in his company, gives notion that the hero did have some form of kingship after all. While not a ruler of Ireland, he is given the title of king of all warriors, but this would not have been accomplished without the aid, incitement, and interactions of the Morrígan. His denial of her sexual advances potentially disallowed the passing on of royal kingship, but seeing his potential in battle as she faced off with him herself and experienced his ability to hold his own against a goddess, she makes the decision to aid in his becoming a king amongst warriors. In a way, he regains the Morrígan's approval as a leader with their adversarial interaction, and being a deity who has domain over war, she decides to mold him into a king of warriors.

The final interaction between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn comes at the hero's death, and in this telling the relationship between the two has come full circle. Just as she first appears to him when he is a child, at the commencement of his great heroic deeds, she appears once more in the form of a carrion bird, a raven to be specific, and perches on the dying hero's shoulder, indicating that he has passed. While not explicitly stated in the poem, I would agree with the potential interpretation presented by Gulermovich Epstein; that due to what we know of the nature of the Morrígan, further intentions of her being present at Cú Chulainn's death are apparent - not only as a symbol that he has passed, but her intent on waiting to feast on his corpse.[72] Carrion birds are a representation of a cyclical life and death cycle, as they are beings who scavenge on the flesh of dead and dying creatures, all while providing themselves with energy and fuel to live, and aiding in breaking down a carcass and giving its remains back to the earth so it can also thrive and prosper. In the fifteenth century edition of *Aided Con Culainn*, a slightly different version of events occurs when the hero falls, as "do bí a inathar rena chosaibh ann sin, do thúirn in branfiach Badhbha forsna hindaibh."[73]("His entrails were before his feet and the raven of the Badb descended onto his extremities.")[74] There is no mystery as to why the Morrígan is often represented by these birds. If her intentions are to devour the hero, she would be continuing the cycle in which she has been present since the childhood of the hero, and completing his life cycle by then recycling his energy into her own and giving back to the earth. Seeing as she has been presented in this form before, it is not a stretch to conclude that this is her in disguised form.

[72] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 134.
[73] Anton Gerard Van Hamel, Ed. *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories,* Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 3, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), 110.
[74] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 140.

Her being present keeps with her promise to guard over the hero, even when he is moments from death she stands by his side through his passing. Keeping with the notion that the Morrígan stands as a sovereignty figure, her presence at the hero's death could also been seen as a means of her revoking Cú Chulainn's sovereignty. As Máire Bhreathnach proposes, the sovereignty figure has the ability to take away kingship when it is no longer suited.[75] In this instance it should not be taken that Cú Chulainn was no longer worthy of his title of 'king of all warriors', but rather her presence at the time of his passing confirms that it his time to depart the mortal world and leave his mortal titles behind. Her taking away his sovereignty is parallel with his life being taken, and her revoking his kingship over warriors and moving forward to find the next individual who is worthy of such a position.

1.3 Cattle Raids – A Link Between War and Fertility

1.3.1 Medieval Ireland's Main Warfare

One of the many components of the Morrígan that ties together her connection with both life and death is her governance over cattle. Her relationship to these creatures does more however than simply align her with a species of animal – it aligns her with battle, prosperity and fertility, and the progression of the nation of Ireland. In medieval Ireland, the main source of warfare was cattle raids[76], and therefore it is only natural to have the Morrígan be so closely aligned with the bovine. These raids were seen as an incitement of battle, which has been previously touched on as a reoccurring concept of the Morrígan. As seen in the *Taín*, the initial instigation of battle comes from queen Medb wanting to breed one of her cows with Donn Cúailnge, a great bull who resided in the land of Ulster in the house of Dáine Mac Fiachna. From this instance alone we see numerous moving parts – the breeding of one of her cows with Donn would mean that Medb owned one of the most prestigious calves in Ireland, therefore heightening her prominence, social standing, and political power. Her desire to do so stems from the fact that her husband Ailill owned a special bull named Findbennach, who had been a calf of one of Medb's bulls, but Findbennach "Acht nírbo miad leis beith for bantinchur, | act dochúaid co mboí for búaib in ríg"[77]("had deemed it unworthy of him to be counted as a woman's property, so he went and took his place amoung the king's

[75] Máire Bhreathnach, "The Sovereignty Goddess as the Goddess of Death?", ZCP 39, 243-260. 1982, 260
[76] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 10.
[77] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 3.

cows.")[78] Here we see how the cows themselves are integral parts of the story, as they are given human competency that indicates their understanding of their own importance within the social and cultural structure. The intentions of queen Medb[79] breeding this bull are surrounded by the dual concepts of sex and war in itself, as she promises 'intimate friendship' with Dáine Mac Fiachna if he allows her this loan of the bulls, clearly carrying sexual undertones. This is contrasted by the events that lead to the war beginning, when Dáine Mac Fiachna's men hear the queen stating that the exchange would have been done by force if Donn's owner did not agree willingly, and hence leading to the outbreak of battle. This is further exemplified when we see the Morrígan going to Donn Cúailnge and warning him against the men of Ireland. She says to him "Maith, a thrúaig, a Duind Chúalnge, déni fatchius dáig ar [bíth] dotroset fir Hérend 7 not bérat dochum loṅgphoirt meni déna faitchius[80]/Good now, O pitiful one, Donn Cúalinge, be on your guard, for the men of Ireland will come upon you and will carry you off to their encampment unless you take heed."[81] This passage indicates that the Morrígan has a special interest in keeping this integral animal safe and where he belongs, but also foreshadows the relationship she has with the men of Ulster and ultimately, the hero Cú Chulainn.

As touched on in the previous section, the Morrígan does not necessarily ally herself completely with the hero and his people as we see hostile moments between the two and acts on her part that appear to go against both sides. We know that this is a part of the role of the war goddess, as she uses the power of incitement to provoke war, a concept in which her true allegiance lies. Seeing as she has prophetic abilities and also appears to be the driving force behind the outcome of war, she would either know that the Ulstermen would come out victorious, or said outcome is in her best interest and the best interest for the nation of Ireland, and therefore she begins with aiding the bull that is connected with the eventual victors. Donn Cúalinge is also mentioned as being the best of the bulls in Ireland, and therefore keeping him safe would mean that he could then continue to breed impressive offspring, benefiting the nation, and giving the Morrígan all the more reason to have his best

[78] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 139.
[79] Scholars have debated whether or not Queen Medb is an extension of the Morrígan, as she demonstrates the dual aspect of the offering of intimacy with the counter promise of war if her demands are not met. This instance is quite similar to the exchange between the Morrígan and Cú Chulainn when she approaches him in disguise and his denial of her advances leads to their conflict in the *Táin*. Cecile O'Rahilly indicates in his introduction of the *Táin* that the two females are parallel in sovereignty but not in person, and I am inclined to agree with him. The author of the text could be using the same literary devices with both female characters as a means to drive the plot, and exemplify how women were often used as agents of incitement to battle.
[80] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 36.
[81] Unknown, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, 174.

interest in mind. She even prophesizes the futures of both Donn Cúalinge and Cú Chulainn within the same prose, paralleling their significance and indicating how important the success of cattle is to the nation of Ireland.[82] Her desire to aid him demonstrates the Morrígan's ability and intention to ensure the survival of the most capable cattle, through Donn Cúalinge's symbolism of war and prosperity of the land. What is especially interesting about the interactions with these bulls is how they come to represent the two regions in which they are sided. Towards the end of the *Táin*, we see that the two bulls go to war with each other, and the outcome sees the Donn Cúalinge as the victor.[83] These two bulls are used as a symbol of the two nations and the success of Ulster against Connaught. The Morrígan having domain over these beasts indicates that she has domain over the land and its cycle, both now represented through her passing of sovereignty and through her governance over cattle.

1.3.2 Fertile Associations

The numerous instances we see the Morrígan in company with the cattle should also be an indication of her connection with these animals and their prosperity. As Rosalind Clark indicates, her administration over cattle is a key link to her connection with fertility.[84] She is depicted with bovine more than any other creature throughout the literature, and is even known to transform into one. We see her morph into a white, red-eared heifer as the first of three transformations she takes when facing off against Cú Chulainn. As a cow herself, she is accompanied by fifty other heifers, clearly indicating that the species has a connection to her. The sheer number of cows that accompany her in battle demonstrates that she aids in their prosperity while also linking them to the world of war and destruction. We also see the Morrígan milking a cow when she meets Cú Chulainn after their altercation, and she feeds him milk from three of the teats of the cow. This interaction is quite significant, as it not only aids in relieving the thirst of the hero and contributes to his healing, but also can be seen as

[82] Garrett S. Olmsted, "Mórrígan's warning to Donn Cuailnge" In: *Etudes Celtiques*, vol. 19, 1982. Pp 165-172. DOL: https??doi.org/10.3406/ecelt.1982.1712, 165.
[83] At the end of the *Táin*, Donn Cúalinge does also appear to die with the reading of the passage "After that he turned his back to the hill and his heart broke like a nut in his breast." This death comes after he has slaughtered the women and children of the territory of Cúalinge. While he does pass, and whether or not the wounds he sustains from his fight with Findbennach aid in his death, he is the unopposed victor in the one-on-one fight with his foe as he is depicted spreading the remains of his enemy throughout the land. Garrett Olmstead also indicates that it is necessary for Donn to die as his death is compensation for the death of Lugaid mac Cú Roí, the man responsible for Cú Chulainn's death and Donn's human parallel in significance.
[84] Clark, *Aspects of the Morrígan in Early Irish Literature*, 229.

the pouring or passing of a liquid that is essential to the sovereignty myth.[85] In this instance the war goddess is using an agent of battle to revive an individual who is perhaps the most important war hero in all of medieval Irish literature – three war-related beings being connected and revived through a substance that is literally the food of life. Once again, these animals and the deity's connection with them encompasses this cyclical notion of joining two contrasting aspects of life – death and fertility – and combining them into an exceptionally powerful divine female entity.

While Gulermovich Epstein states that the Morrígan does not have an association with fertility due to her alignment with cattle,[86] I am inclined to disagree. A blatant fertility connection to cattle that is demonstrated in the literature is the intention of breeding. The Morrígan is depicted as taking part in the copulation of cattle, specifically ones that are significant in stature, such as Donn Cúalinge. The conflict between the Morrígan and the Irish hero is demonstrated with her wanting to mate an Otherworldly cow with the great bull, seen in both *Táin Bó Regamma* and *Echtrae Nerai*. When confronted by Cú Chulainn in the former story, the Morrígan states: "Do-ucus-sa in mboin si éim a síd Crúachan condo rodart in Donn Cúailgni lem .i. tarb Dáre maic Fiachnui."[87] (I brought this cow out of the fairy-mound of Cruachan, that she might breed by the Black Bull of Cualnge, that is the Bull of Daire Mae Fiachna.")[88] We see a similar situation in another story *Táin Be Aingen* which a fairy gifts her mortal husband, Nera, a cow, which the Morrígan carries off to once again mate with Donn Cúalinge, and the calf from this exchange is fated to be the cause of the *Táin*.[89] This series of events again demonstrates the correlation that cattle hold between fertility and war – their breeding was an essential component of medieval Irish prosperity while also being a major stimulant for battle. Seeing as these animals carry a dual concept of life and death, it is only natural that the Morrígan have governance over them.

There are tales in which the Morrígan is involved with cattle that do not appear to reflect a fertility aspect, but instead have a more ambiguous meaning behind their tellings. A *dindschencas* narrative tells the story of how the Morrígan steals cattle from Odra, who is the wife of the lord of cattle, Buchat. This story aims to tell how the Odra River gets its name, as the Morrígan first steals the cattle from Buchat's wife after she has fallen asleep while

[85] Bhreathnach, The Sovereignty Goddess as the Goddess of Death?", 258.
[86] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 126.
[87] Unknown. *Táin Bó Regamna,* trans. By Johan Corthals, 32.
[88] Unknown. "The Cattle-Raid of Regamna: The Yellow Book of Lecan", 11.
[89] W. M. Hennessy, "On the Goddess of War of the Ancient Irish.", *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy (1836-1869)* 10 (1866): 421–40. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20489002, *431.*

watching the cattle, and when she finds her resting for a second time she turns her into a river, hence giving the body of water its name.[90] Perhaps this is the Morrígan's way of punishing someone who is not properly taking care of cattle, a domain in which she is clearly very closely linked. While Clark argues heavily for cattle being a main link to fertility for the Morrígan, and Gulermovich Epstein disagrees and emphasizes her relationship to cows as a link to battle, there is no reason to not agree with both of these theories. The connection between bovine prosperity and battle incitement is blatantly obvious throughout the Irish literary corpus and the Morrígan is a prominent figure in a large number of these tales. She uses the concept of cattle to create warfare, while also clearly making an effort to keep the species alive and prosperous. Without cattle fertility, the largest component of Irish warfare is eliminated, and therefore both components work together in tandem to keep the cycle of life and death in check, with the Morrígan being a driving contributor behind the instigation of both aspects of this cyclical concept.

1.4 The Morrígan as a Mother

1.4.1 An Earth Goddess?

Within medieval Irish literature, we see numerous accounts that link the Morrígan with the earth. She is depicted as being large in stature, with the image of each foot straddling either side of the river during her tryst with the Dagda. The 'Dindgnai in Broga' being referred to as the Morrígan's breasts, meaning to represent hills[91], also demonstrates her representation as abnormally large in size. Her physical appearance as described in numerous sources is one of a wild, primal being, giving her an animal-like appearance that connects her with the wild and the unknown. We see the Morrígan transform into creatures from all levels of nature - sky, land, and sea – indicating that her magical abilities connect her to the earth. Also not to be forgotten is her substantial connection to cows and bulls. In the *dindshenchas* story about Emain Macha, the following geographical reference is recorded:

[90] Unknown, *The Metrical Dindschechas*, Vol. 4. ed., trans. Edward Gwynn, *Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series 10, (*Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1924), 198-200.
[91] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 83.

In Gort na Mórrígnae asrubart is Óchtar nEdmainn insin. Dobert in Dagdae don Mórrígain in ferann sin ro aired leesi é íarom.[92]

"The Garden of the Morrígan," I said, "that is, Óchtur nEdmainn. The Dagda gave that land to the Morrígan, and afterwards it was plowed by her.[93]

This passage could be denoting a sexual connotation, with the term 'plow' potentially holding a double meaning, but regardless, this text demonstrates that the Morrígan not only has a section of land directly named for her, but also fertilizes the land.[94] As indicated earlier, the description of the Morrígan in *Cath Maige Tuired* could be an indication of the goddess as an earth deity. Discussed in further detail later in the thesis, the Morrígan and the chief deity of the Tuatha De Dannan copulate over the Boyne River on the date of Samhain. The Morrígan in this instance is seen to be the embodiment of the land, both physically and metaphorically, and her connection with water here is crucial. As Anne Ross has indicated, "the Celtic mother-goddesses, who frequently also functions in the role of war-goddesses and prognosticators, have a widespread association with water."[95]

The second significance to this encounter is that this is an extremely significant time of year for the Irish people, it symbolizes a holiday that means to bring a renewed vitality to the people of the land.[96] The time of year signifies the cyclical calendar of the harvesting period, with the previous year coming to an end and the bountiful season along with it. And yet, with the turn of the year there is the looking forward to the resetting of the crops and the celebration of the previous year's abundance. This time of year, incorporates a beginning and an end, life and death, and therefore is only natural that the Morrígan is associated with it. While the tryst between the Dagda and the Morrígan does symbolize the passing on of sovereignty and the transition of power over Ireland from the Fomoire to the Tuatha Dé, it is also a symbol of the land becoming new again, associating the earth with the Morrígan. During this time, it is thought throughout Irish literature that the normal order of the universe had been suspended and the barrier between the natural and supernatural worlds are temporarily dissolved.[97] Many of the great mythic feats occur during this time period as

[92] Van Hamel, Ed. *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories,* Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 3, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1933), 37.
[93] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 197.
[94] While the land does not grow fertile crop, but only pig-fennel due to the Morrígan killing her kin in the garden, this further demonstrates how the idea of growth and crop is also linked to slaughter when associated with the war-goddess.
[95] Ross,. *Pagan Celtic Britain, 20.*
[96] Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, 42.
[97] Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, (Middlesex: Newnes Books, 1968), 127.

members from the Otherworld, and humans from the mortal world, are able to overlap. This festival period pulls the earth and the supernatural together, and the Morrígan combines those two worlds in her mating with the Dagda. She brings the natural world of Ireland together with the chief of these Otherworldly-beings and unites them, creating a new period of prosperity. As Kirsten Mills presents, this is a notably liminal period[98], indicating that this is a symbolic, transitional time where a cycle is getting ready to regenerate. Another significant individual related to the events of Samhain is Cú Chulainn, whose death takes place on this date. As discussed previously, the Morrígan is present at this event as well, only this time the event is depicting the loss of life, as opposed to signifying a rebirth of a new year and a new ruling people of Ireland. With this, we see the duality of the time of year being directly associated with the Morrígan. Her presence at two different events taking place at the same time of year indicates that she has not only an association with a concept that is tightly tied to the land itself, but also has domain over the dual aspects of life and death. Furthermore, Samhain demonstrates a cycle of life and death, and the subsequent evolution of death into new life, a concept that we have seen the Morrígan tied to in several instances now. With all this being said, calling the Morrígan an earth goddess may be stretching her abilities too far afield. While it is apparent that she has a connection with the land in several different contexts and has domain over some aspects of nature, she does not demonstrate abilities that align her with other noteworthy earth deities, such as the Greek figure Gaia. However, it is integral to understand the significance that the Morrígan does have in relation to the natural world. Her connection and embodiment of the land demonstrates her abilities in holding domain over prosperity and abundance, expanding on identity outside simply that of a war-goddess.

1.4.2 A Biological and Metaphorical Mother

With all that is detailed about the Morrígan, one might not be inclined to include her in the category of a maternal figure. We know from the literature that she is named as a 'mother', but these instances are not necessarily all biological. However, in both the *Bodleian* and *Rennes Dindshenchas*, the Morrígan is named as the mother of Méche, but no birth story is accounted for.[99] We see the maternal connection in the following passage:

[98] Mills, "Death, Women, and Power", 85.
[99] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.",

Berba his inti ro lairea na tri natracha barar a cridib Meichi maic na Morigna, iarna bass do Mac Cecht im-Maig Meichi … Delba tri cenn natrach batar forsna tro cridib batar im-Meichi, 7 mina tairsedh a bas no oirbeordais na nathracha ina broind cona fac badais anmanna beo I nErind.[100]

Berba – into it the three snakes which were in the heart of Méche, son of the Morrígan, were cast, after her was killed by Mac Cecht in Mag Méchi … The shapes of three snakes' heads were upon the three hearts that were in Méche, and if this death had not taken places, the snakes in his breasts would have grown until they would have left no animal in Ireland alive.[101]

While this passage indicates that the Morrígan has a biological child, there is no mention of a maternal connection between her and her child. Instead, we see that Méche is acting as an agent of destruction, one that poses a threat to all of Ireland if left unresolved. This demonstrates that the Morrígan as a mother figure is still including an element of war and destruction in her offspring; them being an extension of her tendencies towards violence and carrying out her abilities to incite war. This is, however, an important demonstration of how she continues the cycle of battle through the means of childbirth. In doing so she is enabling war to continue in Ireland, while also allowing for a hero to step forward and continue the prosperity of the country.[102] Another reference to the war-goddess as a mother comes from the *Lebor Gabála*, where it is stated that she birthed three children by her biological father.[103] The only thing we know about these children is that they supplied the weapons used by Lugh at the Second Battle of Moytura.[104], once again demonstrating how her offspring directly correlate to war. In terms of metaphorical motherhood, another instance where we see the Morrígan referred to as a 'mother' is recorded in the *Acallam na Senórach*. The passage relates a group of twenty-six male and twenty-six female warriors as "clan na Morrigna ingine Ernmais" ("the children of the Morrígan daughter of Ernmais.")[105] Gulermovich Epstein explains that the word *clann* identifies a family group, but is often used to refer to a warband.[106] We see here another example of how even her metaphorical offspring are associated with war, giving the implication that she has birthed her own small army. Once

[100] Unknown, "The Bodleian Dinnshenchas.", Ed., trans. Whitley Stokes, Folklore 3: 467-516, 1892, 483.
[101] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 184.
[102] Mac Cecht is the champion of Conaire, and he goes on to play an important role in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*. Here we see the Morrígan in connection with another important Irish hero and demonstrates that she plays an integral role in his development as a hero.
[103] As will also be seen in the Norse section of this thesis, we see reference to the sexual or marital relationship between a major female deity and a blood relative in both cultures. It seems likely that in this instance, this was not meant to be viewed as a positive case.
[104] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 183.
[105] Unknown, "Acallamh na Senórach.", *Irische Texte.* Ed. Trans. Whitley Stokes and E. Windisch, eds. Series 4 Part 1. Leipzig: S, Hirzel, 1900b, 140.
[106] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 185.

again, the role of fertility and destruction are paralleled with the Morrígan. Motherhood is meant to be one of the most intense and intimate bonds a woman can have, and using this concept as a means to portray destruction only exemplifies further the connection the goddess has with both aspects of life. She both creates and devours life.

1.4.3 Connections with Childbirth

Supernatural female figures are often invoked in times of crisis and transition, such as birth and death.[107] A text that demonstrates the link between the war-goddess and motherhood is that of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. As Sjoestedt states, "the sexual character of the *Badb*, and her connection with a rite of childbirth, provide the link between the mother-goddess and the goddess of war."[108] The physical description of the Badb, as previously touched on, draws attention to her genitals and reproductive organs. We see a common theme of overtly explicit reference to the female body in the figures of Sheela na gigs. While the symbolism of these figures has been debated, the overtly-sexual icons of the Sheela na gigs depict the influence female sexual power had on medieval Ireland. These figures show a female-figured being, often depicted as a hag, exposing her genitalia, most often with her hands pulling apart her vulva.[109] Parallels can be drawn between the Sheela na gigs and female sovereignty, which I have argued the Morrígan is the prime example of. Catherine Karkov indicates that these figures can be associated with land and power based off their distribution alone[110], and they bare similarities to several Irish saga characters, such as "the goddess who personified the sovereignty of Ireland as an old crone, lonely and barren until sex with the future king transformed her into a fertile beauty."[111] A woman's body and its abilities to embody fertility were not shied away from, as seen in the textual evidence of female sexuality, especially that of the sovereignty goddess and other female Irish deities. It can easily be seen how these figures could be representing an Irish female goddess; the inclusion of a swollen vulva is a common effect of childbirth, and the vulva is the central,

[107] McCoy Narelle, "The Quick and the Dead: Sexuality and the Irish Merry Wake." Continuum, 26:4, 615-624, DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2012.698040, 618.
[108] Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts,* 35.
[109] Dexter and Goode, *The Sheela na gigs, Sexuality, and the goddess in Ancient Ireland,* 4.
[110] Catherine E. Korkov "Sheela-na-gigs and Other Unruly Women." *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 318.
[111] L.M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland,* (Ithaca, 1966), 69-70.

foundational image of creation[112], a concept that the Morrígan has been connected with in numerous ways, not just in her own sexuality and fertility but also that of the land and its creatures. The figures many shapes and forms parallel that the Morrígan can be portrayed in numerous different ways, as a hag or a beautiful maiden, and exemplify further that the sexual connotations related to the war-goddess are deeply rooted in Irish history and of utmost importance to her as an individual who represents birth and fertility.

Another figure worth mentioning who is often named in association with the Morrígan and direct connection with childbirth is Macha.[113] Specifically referring to the individual described in *Noenden Ulad Emuin Macha*, gives explanation to two significant parts of medieval Irish literature. The first is the naming of Ulster's capital, Emain Macha[114], as it represents the twins in who Macha gives birth to at the climax of the tale. The second is her role in cursing the Ulstermen right before her death. In doing so she burdens them with the pain of childbirth whenever the region is in danger. This means that the men are unable to defend their province during its greatest need in the *Táin*, leaving the hero Cú Chulainn alone against the men of Ireland, ultimately leading to his demise.[115] While it is not necessarily the act of childbirth that connects Macha with the Morrígan, the circumstances around it parallel the figure with the war-goddess. The first indication is the awful noise that Macha releases whilst giving birth to the twins. Shrill and horrifying noise is heavily associated with the Morrígan, especially as a sign that war is on the horizon. The curse she lays on the Ulstermen is only brought about when they are needed in battle, so the combination of a terrifying shriek as well as a prophetic-curse puts the actions of Macha in tandem with that of the war-goddess. Furthermore, if we are following the way in which the Morrígan has demonstrated her involvement in the fate of the war hero, Macha as a character follows a similar pattern. This act of cursing Cú Chulainn's companions in war lead to his death, and while the Morrígan at this point is thought to be on the side of the Ulstermen, it has been seen previously that her actions are not always in the best interest of those she supports. Her

[112] Dexter and Goode, *The Sheela na gigs, Sexuality, and the goddess in Ancient Ireland,* 13.
[113] 'Macha' is one of the many titles either paralleled with or closely related to the Morrígan. In this instance, it should be understood that this Macha is not meant to be the same person as the Morrígan, but a character who has often been associated with her. For this reason, I thought it appropriate to include her in the discussion of childbirth one of her roles within the text is that of giving birth, and the circumstances in which she delivers her children have a direct link to later important events in Irish literature, ones that the character of the Morrígan is directly associated.
[114] Gregory Tenor sets out in his article titled *Macha and the Invention of Myth* to demonstrate that this mentioned Macha figure is not named so in earlier Irish tradition and was later abstracted from the place names of Emain Macha.
[115] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 189.

intentions are meant to propel a specific timeline, one she has prior knowledge of. It is apparent that she knows of the eventual death of Cú Chulainn through prophecy, so if Macha is an individual who is an extension of the war-goddess, her curse would be understood as a progression of a pre-determined agenda.

Chapter 2: Norse Figures

While prominent deities such as Óðinn, Þórr, and Freyr promptly come to mind when thinking of Norse pre-Christian worship, it is essential not to forget nor underestimate the abilities and domain of the divine feminine in Norse society. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, supernatural female figures hold and control substantial presence in the realm of both the living and the dead. Without their influence and aid, the world would crumble and there would be chaos left in their absence. It can be argued that the divine female holds the majority of domain over the realm of the dead and the living within Norse culture, and they bring the two together to create a coherent flow to the natural timeline of humanity and the celestial. Similar to the Morrígan, there are a handful of female Norse deities who represent the cyclical connection between life and death. In this chapter, four different figures will be analyzed in regards to their connection to the duality of life and death, in order to demonstrate that they bring together these seemingly contrasting concepts within a cyclical rotation.

2.1 Freyja – A Goddess of Plenty

The goddess Freyja holds an extremely important place amongst the Norse pantheon of gods. She is the only named female within the Vanir and much of her associations are with sexual love and fertility. Her connection to fertility and sexuality is clearly displayed in numerous medieval sources. She is identified as having numerous love interests, the first being her husband Oðr, probably originally a double of Óðinn, for whom she weeps golden tears when he travels far and she wanders the world in search of him. Her more promiscuous or 'taboo' actions as a sensual being appear in *Lokasenna*, or "Loki's Quarrel". Loki is frustrated with his fellow deities, and calls out Freyja specifically for her sexual actions. He insinuates to all those gathered that Freyja has slept with the majority of the male gods and beings that are known, including her own brother, Freyr. He states, "Þegi þú Freyja, þú ert fordæða og meini blandin mjög, síðstu að bræður þínum siðu blíð regin´[116]/Be silent Freyja, you're a witch and much imbued with malice, you were with your brother."[117] While this may seem like a warped concept to our modern ideals of relationships, the Vanir and Æsir

[116] Unknown, "Lokasenna", *Eddukvæði, (*Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1999), 122.
[117] Unknown, "Loki's Quarrel", *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 86.

gods practiced endogamy, the same inter-familial relations that was touched on in the Irish chapter, indicating that this was not uncommon for pre-Christian religions. The giantess Hyndla describes the goddess' erotic adventures as lecherous or even obscene with statements such as "hleypur þú, eðlvina úti á náttum sem með hǫfrum Heiðrún fari[118]/You run about, noble lady, out in the night as Heiðrún runs in heat amoung the he-goats."[119] From these descriptions and several others within the eddic poetry that would take too long to recount, it is apparent that Freyja was depicted as a sexual and promiscuous figure. Sexuality is obviously a large component of fertility, and these passages indicate that the goddess is greatly attuned with prosperity.

Outside of blatant sexual desire, many of the functions that we see the goddess associated with would be an active part of people's everyday lives, such as protecting vegetation and assisting in childbirth.[120] She is closely connected with her brother, Freyr, and father, Norðr, who are fertility deities associated with several fertility rites. When the war between the Vanir and the Æsir concluded, the Vanir gods gave the gift of life to mankind, and without this the human race would have perished. Their functions as deities were to "give men the power that created new life and brought increase into the fields, among the animals, and in the home."[121] Her close involvement with her male family members establishes that she would most likely also be involved in similar cult practices, especially in the sphere of prosperity. They were deities who were favoured with the procreation of mankind, animals and vegetation[122], concepts that would not seem far-fetched to associate the goddess with based on what we see from her in the medieval material. Näsström goes so far as to state that the *Dísablót*, a seasonal sacrifice to the Dísir that took place in the autumnal months, was devoted to Freyja.[123] While there is unfortunately no concrete evidence backing up this view, her brother's association with the *Álfablót* allows for the plausibility of such a claim. Else Mundal and Folke Ström both make arguments for the Dísir representing a primeval collective of fertility goddesses[124], and as we see this group of beings mentioned mainly in earlier literature, it could be plausible that their cult died out and their devotees turned to Freyja to represent their practices. Ström has also made claim that not only the male gods

[118] Unknown, "Hyndluljóð", *The Poetic Edda*, trans. L. Hollander, (Austin, 1928), stanza 48.
[119] Unknown. ´The Lay of Hyndla´, *The Poetic Edda,* 251.
[120] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North,* 61.
[121] H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe.* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 125.
[122] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North,* 78.
[123] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North,* 129.
[124] For a further analysis of these perspectives, turn to *Diser, Nornor ocj Valkyrior* by F. Ström and *The Position of the Individual Gods and Goddesses in Various Types of Sources – with Special Reference to the Female Divinities* by E. Mundal.

dominated the cult at Uppsala, but that Freyja also played an important role.[125] With this statement I am inclined to agree, if not simply because it does stand to have two of the three primary Vanir deities so active within the cult at Uppsala and leave out one which was evidently heavily worshipped as a fertility goddess.

We see in the poem *Gylfaginning* the story of the great wall being built around the gods´citadel, and the giant demanded Freyja, along with the sun and the moon, as his payment. As Turville-Petre proposes, the explanation behind this myth is the changing of the seasons, and by taking away the chief goddess of fertility the giants threaten to plunge the world into eternal cold and darkness, a reality the northern people have to fear.[126] While Freyja's abilities are emphasized greatly in regards to her sexual prowess, it is essential to not disengage with her close connection to fertility of the human race and the earth. With the majority of extant sources for Norse mythology post-dating the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity, Freyja's overtly sexual proclivities would have made her an easy target, and therefore her abilities as a fertility deity outside the realm of sexuality would have been diminished, or emphasized further with her male counterpart.[127] The scandalous affairs of the goddess displayed in these and other texts are in accordance with "the general pattern of female fertility deities."[128]

Outside of the sphere of erotic love, we also see Freyja conjoined with the concept of childbirth. Freyja is known to have a strong connection to the female gender and is called upon often in times of childbirth, while her name gives rise to the title of "frúvur", a term linked to women of substance.[129] In *Oddrúnargrátr*, after an exhaustive labour and giving birth to twins, Borgny exclaims "Svo hjálpi þér hollar vættir, Frigg og Freyja og fleiri goð,

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[125] F Ström, *Diser, Nornor och Valkyrior,* (Göteborg, 1961), *55*-56.
[126] , E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, (Conneticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 177.
[127] We see several instances, both in literature and in material history, associating sexuality and fertility with Freyr. We know that he was the main fertility deity in Sweden, seen especially in the temple at Uppsala. From these findings, we know that it is not shied away from to have representations of overt sexuality shown, such as Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis* describing the statue of Freyr at Uppsala being depicted with an enlarged phallus, or the use of a horse penis in the fertility ritual described in *Vǫlsa þattr*. The phallus is a symbol of fertility but can also be paralleled with death, which gives explanation to their increased presence with grave sites in the form of sacred white stones. These stones can also be depicted in the form of female genetialia, or both male and female reproductive parts combined. With all this being said, the constant representation of Freyr in an overtly sexual manner leads to the hypothesis that this was normal for the pre-Christian representation of fertility, and Freyja would have been linked in a similar manner to fertility in the way her brother was. Female sexuality was clearly changed with the emergence of Christianity, and Freyja's overt sexuality would have been attempted to be subdued, eradicated, or shed in an unsavoury manner.
[128] Ström, *Diser, Nornor och Valkyrior*, 101.
[129] John Lindow, *Norse mythology : a guide to the Gods, heroes, rituals, and beliefs*, (pp. XV, 365). (Oxford University Press, 2002), 126.

sem þú felldir mér fár af höndum[130]/May the kindly beings help you, Frigg and Freyja and more of the gods, as you warded off that dangerous illness for me."[131] Childbirth, as displayed in this instance, is not always an event of comfort nor happiness. The process of giving birth can be seem like an endless feat, with labour lasting for hours and the woman being in pain for the majority of the time. Involving the goddess Freyja in a birth that is difficult emphasizes the distress that is also connected with it, associating the process of birth with the struggle that comes with bringing a new life into the world. She is prayed to as one of the beings who is there to help women through this often-difficult procedure. Her participation in childbirth is further exemplified with the Norse saying: "Freyja hjelpe kona dysse og nynne bane"[132], calling for Freyja to aid those along the path to giving birth. Finally, the elder-tree, which was dedicated to Freyja, was thought to ease the pain of childbirth.[133] Several instances connect the deity to childbirth, indicating that her abilities as a goddess are not limited to that of romantic love. We see her connection to creation and to new life through her involvement as a deity who aids in the cycle of life. As Turville-Petre states so precisely, "Freyja is thus goddess of fertility, birth and death, the ever-occurring cycle,"[134] While Lotte Motz disagrees[135] with this statement the evidence surrounding Freyja as a fertility deity is not one to be ignored. She is undoubtably associated with erotic and romantic love while also relied heavily on in the act of childbirth. Sexuality and rebirth were seen as a continuous cycle linked to fertility. In saying this, it is not far-fetched to state that the goddess is linked to death. Fertility does not simply pertain to the birth or fertilization of something, but also includes the cycle of death that every living thing will inevitably face.

2.1.1 More than just a Pretty Face

The goddess, through all of her abilities, deomonstrates her awe-inspiring presence amongst both gods and men. The best-known text in which Freyja is represented, *Þrymskviða*, shows the reslience of the goddess. When she is told by her fellow deities that

[130] Unknown, "*Oddrúnargrátr*". *Eddukvæði.* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1999,) 265.
[131] Unknown, "Oddrun's Lament", *The Poetic Edda*, translated by Carolyne Larrington. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 200.
[132] J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* I-II, (Berlin, 1970), p. 311, n..
[133] I Reichborn-Kjennerud, "Lægerådene i den eldre Edda," *Maal og minne* (Oslo, 1923), 22-23.
[134] Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 177.
[135] Lotte Motz "The Great Goddess of the North", *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* Volume 113. (Lund: Lund University Press, 1998).

she is expected to marry the giant Þrymr in order to retrieve Þorr´s hammer and save themselves, she rejects this so vehemently that her sacred necklace breaks in half, leaving the gods to walk away with their heads hung low. She single-handedly uses her wits to combat the drunken aggressions of the giant Hrungnir when none of the other gods dare to approach the jötun. She takes on the "female, aristocratic cup-bearer role"[136] and stalls with enough time for Þorr to return and send the giant on his way. In *Heimskringla*, when the major male deities have all passed, Freyja is able to uphold the cycle of abundance and prosperity as one of the only prominent deities remaining, and her importance is demonstrated in her ability to do so. All of these instances shed light on the amazing abilities and feats of the goddess who is all too often glossed over as lesser to her male counterparts. Her ability to operate within the realm of both life and death, and her active agency within these realms exemplifies a powerful deity who is paralleled in importance to her kin of Freyr and Óðinn.

While her connection to fertility and sexuality is integral to her identity as a goddess, it is crucial to understand that she has many other abilities outside of this realm of the erotic. While this is what she is primarily known for, there is ample evidence to connect her with the notion of battle and the realm of the deceased. Not only is she aligned with war and both active and fallen warriors, but she is said to have domain over half of them, as is exhibited in the following passage from *Gylfaginning:*

´En Freyja er ágætust af ásynjum. Hon á þann bæ á himni, er Fólkvangr heitir. Ok hvar sem hon ríðr til vígs, þá á hon hálfan val, en hálfan Óðinn ... Henni líkaði vel mansöngr. Á hana er gott at heita til ásta.´[137]

"Freyja is the most splendid of the goddesses. She has a home in heaven called Folkvangar (Warrior's Fields). Wherever she rides into battle, half of the slain belong to her. She delights in love songs, and it is good to call on her in matters of love."[138]

This passage exhibits two dual aspects of the goddess – first she is identified as a prominent deity amongst the pantheon of gods and therefore her importance is not to be taken lightly. The second, of course, being that she has a connection with both war and the deceased. The place in which she resides is named for the art of war, and she holds claim over half of the fallen in battle. What is truly significant about this is that with this one sentence she is placed alongside in stature with the chief deity of the Norse gods, Óðinn himself, in regards to the

[136] Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Valkyrie: The Women of the Viking World*, (London: Bloomsbury Publsihing PTC, 2020), 8.
[137] Snorri Sturlson, ´Gylfaginning´, *The Prose Edda, (*Akureyri: Prentverk Odds Björnssonar, 1954*),* 41-42.
[138] Snorri Sturlson, "Gylfaginning", 35.

deceased on the battlefield. It is known that the male god governs over Valhǫll, the 'Hall of the Slain' in which the strongest of the warriors reside after they have fallen in battle. While Freyja may not govern the hall containing the strongest warriors, this does not take away from the importance of her role over a percentage of the slain. Närstrom also indicates that along with those who have fallen in battle, Freyja also receives women who commit suicide in order to protect their honour.[139] Seeing as honour was an integral part of Norse culture and valued deeply by warriors, her connection to women who also follow this pattern, and who are commonly the inciters of battle for men to protect their honour, demonstrates her connection to the warrior class. This passage perfectly sums up the dual concepts that Freyja encompasses: both the erotic and fertile, paralleled by war and death.

The poem *Skáldskaparmál* is another text that exemplifies the duality of the Norse goddess. To begin, she is referenced as "eigandi valfalls ok Sessrúmnis,"[140] ("the possessor of those fallen in battle, of the hall Sessrumnir").[141]. The term '*Sessrumnir'* translates to 'seat-room', which implies that she may have a great-hall similar to that of Óðinn´s in Valhǫll. From this and the previous section we see that not only does she hold domain over half of the slain in *Fólkvang,* but she also has a grand residence that parallels that of the chief deity. While these references may be subtle, they still indicate the importance that Freyja held over the dead and her importance amongst the pantheon of gods. In numerous literary sources that we have from the medieval Norse period we can see Freyja being referenced as a deity of the afterlife from the titles, descriptions, and kennings that are used in replacement of her name. To begin, we see within *Njal's Saga* that she is called "val-Freyju"[142] or "battle-Freyja"[143], which is a reference to her collection of half the slain on the battlefield. 'Val' in Old Norse translates to "death" or "battle", therefore connecting her directly to the afterlife and as a goddess who has domain over the dead. Finally, there is a section that speaks of Freyja's Hall of the dead:

"Fólkvangur er inn níundi en þar Freyja ræður sessa kostum í sal. Hálfan val hún kýs hverjan dag en hálfan Óðinn á."[144]

[139] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North,* 88.
[140] Snorri Sturluson. "Skáldskaparmál" *Edda*. Finnur Jónsson. (Reykjavík: Sigurðr Kristjánsson, 1907), 152.
[141] Snorri Sturlson, "Skaldskaparmal", 111.
[142] Unknown, *Brennu-Njáls Saga,* (Reykjavík: Mal og Menning, 2013), 151.
[143] Unknown, *Njal's Saga*, trans. Robert Cook, (Lodon: Penguin Group, 2001), 130.
[144] Snorri Sturlson, "Grímnismál", 79

"Folkvang is the ninth, and there Freyja fixes allocation of seats in the hall; half the slain she chooses every day, and half Odin owns."[145]

Once again, this description of Freyja owning half of the slain re-establishes the importance that Freyja has as a goddess of death. We see also in *Egils Saga* the hero's daughter Torgjerd, along with her father proclaim that they will starve themselves to death as they view life as meaningless with the passing of her brother. She states "I have had no supper, and I will not have any before I have arrived at Freyja's."[146] This short passage further illuminates that the goddess had domain over the dead, and implies that she may govern a group of the deceased that is outside that of fallen warriors. Her association with the dead in both the eddic and saga literature reflects her union with both the supernatural and human realm of death. We have seen her connection to fertility in terms of childbirth and prosperity in earthly abundance in the preceding sub-chapter, and now we see her association with death depicted in a similar manner. Her union with these concepts within the realm of man gives us the understanding that individuals associated, worshipped, and looked to Freyja in regards to these dual matters of both life and death. Her presence within both spheres illuminates the cyclical construct of life and death, and how she upholds the order and flow of both. The fact that it is confirmed and reiterated in multiple sources that she has possession over part of the realm of the deceased validates the argument that fertility is not only seen as present during life, but also in the afterlife, and therefore Freyja has domain.

A text from Norse medieval literature that demonstrates the cyclical and dual construct of the goddess is *Sǫrla þattr*.[147] This tale envelops several of Freyja´s abilities into one, and displays the extent of her importance and power as a goddess. The text begins with Freyja encountering four dwarves who are making a beautiful collar which she desired, offering them gold and silver in exchange for the item. This is thought to be the same piece of jewelry known as the famous Brísing necklace.[148] The dwarves, however, wanted as payment for each of them to spend one night with her, and to this she agreed. After she acquired the collar, Óðinn, who is the husband of the goddess in this tale as Freyja is referred to as his love-maiden or ‚frilla'[149] learns about her infidelity in aquiring this gift through sexual exchange and has Loki steal it from Freyja, promising only to return it to her if she kindles a

[145] Unknown, "Grimnirs Sayings", 50.
[146] Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar, 1933, ed. Jón Sigurðsson et alia, Copenhagen, chp. 76
[147] It is important to note here that this story does not involve the characters as supernatural beings or gods, but merely as humans.
[148] Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 176.
[149] Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, *Frigg og FreyjaÆ* Kvenleg goðmögn í heiðnum sið, (Reykjavík: ReykjavíkurAkademían, 2007), 182.

never-ending battle between two kings. She agrees to this, and under the name Gǫndul she sets out to complete said task. We see here not halfway through the story that Freyja is a complex and powerful character. We see here an account of the goddess using her sexual prowess as a means to attain something that she desires, and since it is no secret that she is desired by many, it would fit well within her means as a deity associated with sexuality to use her abilities to benefit her in such a way. This connection to material abundance is something that is often seen associated with the goddess, as she is associated with gold and wealth in several instances. We know that she is the biological mother of at least two children - two daughters by the names of Hnoss and Gersemi. Both of these names mean 'jewel', directly connecting her offspring with precious gems and wealth. This materialistic affluence can be associated with abundance, furthering the idea that Freyja is a deity connected with prosperity in numerous different contexts.

The remaining section of the text demonstrates a darker side to the goddess, one that aligns her with death, manipulation, and magic. To fulfill what was asked of her from Óðinn, under her disguised title, she meets one of the kings, Heðinn, who will become the main target of her wrath. She is described in the text as 'tall and fair to look at'[150], obviously using her beauty as a means to get the attention of the king. She incites the two kings to fight one another to see who is best. After seeing that they were evenly matched, they swore brotherhood and lived in peace. However, Gǫndul-Freyja appears again to Heðinn, and this time is described as even more pleasing to look at than the first time. At this meeting she gives him a laced drink, making him so delirious that he did not remember that he had sworn brotherhood to Hǫgni, and convinces him that he is less than Hǫgni since he is not married to a queen of noble heritage. The following is what the goddess then tells the king to do after he suggests marrying his rival's daughter:

"Minnkast þá metnaðr þinn" segir hún,
"ef þú biðr Högna mægða. Hitt væri heldr til, ef þik skyrti hvárki hug né hreysti, sem þú lætr at sé, at nema Hildi í burtu, en drepa drottningu með því móti at taka hana ok leggja hana niðr fyrir barðit á drekanum ok láta hann sníða hana sundr, þá er hann er fram settr."[151]

"That will diminish you", she said. "if you ask Hǫgni to become his son-in-law. It would be better if you are not lacking the courage and bravery to abduct Hildr and kill the queen by taking her and laying her outside the board of the dragon-ship and let it cut her asunder, when it sets afloat."[152]

[150] Flateyabok – does this need a citation?
[151] Sörla þáttr eða Heðins saga ok Högna. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. (Reykjavík. Bókaútgáfan Forni. 1943-1944), chapter 7.
[152] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North,* 84.

This instruction is one of extreme violence, and one that would absolutely provoke war between the two kings. Bewildered from the drink, Hǫgni follows through with this task and a never-ending war begins between the two kings. This is accomplished through Freyja's magic, as she resurrects the dead and allows the continuation of war and carnage.[153] This story allows for the demonstration of the goddess' power, cunning and brutality. We see that she plays the role of seductress, using her sexual affinities to incite these kings into the act of war. Second, we see the skillful way in which she is able to manipulate these figures into war against each other. She uses tactics as a war-goddess to ensure that violence is inevitable, and she continues bloodshed, unceasingly, through her use of magic. This is perhaps the most impressive ability demonstrated by the goddess in this account. She uses magic as a way of manipulation, but also displays incredible power to resurrect not just the two kings, but both of their armies continuously so that they can fight repeatedly. While it is Óðinn who asks this of her, Freyja is the one demonstrating her abilities and carrying out such impressive feats. We see that this impressive use of magic displayed by the goddess goes beyond that of this isolated tale, and her proficiency of *seiðr* is what makes Freyja so profound.

2.1.2 *Seiðr*

Freyja´s abilities in *seiðr* align her with the most powerful of the gods as well as in some instances with those who have passed. We see the powers of magic used by the Vanir in the poem *Völuspá,* which Näsström explains is Freyja acting through the sorceress Gullveig who attacks the Æsir with witchcraft and distrotion.[154] We also know that she was the individual who brought this magic to the Æsir, and most notably to Óðinn, making her an extremely powerful goddess. One of the many abilities that *seiðr* gives to one who practices it is the ability to harm or even kill an intended subject, as exemplified in the previous section. Another example of the awfulness that can surround this skill is stated in *Ynglinga Saga* when listing the abilities Óðinn pocesses by using *seiðr* magic*: „Svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi"*[155](“Likewise how to bring people death, ill-luck or

[153] Motz “The Great Goddess of the North”, 38.
[154] She presumes this due to the name Gullveig meaning “drunkenness of/power of gold” and therefore carries associations with Freyja. Regardless if this observance is correct or not, it demonstrates the destructive nature of the abilities of *seiðr,* and Freyja would share in the abilities of her fellow Vanir kind if these three figures are actually separate from one another.
[155] Snorri Sturlson, “Ynglinga Saga”, *Íslanzk Fornrit XXVI - Heimskringla I,* (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag: 1941), 19.

illness")[156] While this quote is describing Óðinn ´s powers, since she is the one who taught the chief deity this skill it can only be concluded that Freyja would share in these abilities. Her use of sorcery demonstrates another ability in which she has a connection to the afterlife. There is a deinifite darkness to seiðr, as it can include harmful magic and even go as far as inflicting death upon its victims, as demonstrated within the capabilities of Freyja in *Sǫrla þattr*. We also see a sexual connotation with its use, as an account is given in *Landnámabók* where a ´woman skilled in witchcraft was brought to trial in Iceland for ´riding´ a man to death."[157] The visualisation of a dark, magical, and seductive woman is inherent, and with her connection to this chaotic side of magic we see a form of Freyja that goes beyond her role as a love goddess.

Another group of female figures[158] that are connected with *seiðr* and with the goddess are the *vǫlva.* Like Freyja, these prophets showed a duality within their practices. Freyja was often consulted on the prosperity of community and love, both subjects for which these seeresses were called on. Ellis Davidson comments on how the *vǫlva* journeyed through the countryside to be present at feasts to invoke abundance, asked to foretell the coming season, and even used *seiðr* to fill a bay with fish, taking an "active part in bringing of plenty to the

[156] Snorri Sturluson, "Ynglinga Saga", *Heimskringla or the lives of the Norse kings*, trans. Erling Monsen and A.H. Smith, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1932), 5.
[157] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 122.
[158] I think it is important to note here that while the majority of *seiðr* was practiced by women, we also see accounts of men harnessing these magical abilities, such as Óðinn. The chief deity does operate outside of the human world however. I do not wish to state that this ability was restricted to women, but within the time period of these accounts the practice of this magic was seen as emasculating. As Margaret Clunies Ross indicates, the practice was meant to be restircted to the female goddess who then taught other female figures this power. She argues that "the sexual inversion associated with the practice of *seiðr* in males has to be understood as a sexually defined metephor for the practice of sorcery itself." She goes on to discuss the act of receiving spirits as an act of submission like that of receiving penetration from another man.

land."[159] In *Völuspá*, the tale is being told from the perspective of one of these figures, and the poem describes the use of this magic with evil and destruction. As earlier stated, some scholars speculate that the character of Gullveig is in fact Freyja herself, and if accurate, portrays an immense amount of power from the goddess. This is displayed in the following stanzas:

Það man hún fólkvíg
fyrst í heimi
er Gullveigu
geirum studdu
og í höll Hárs
hana brenndu.
Þrisvar brenndu,
þrisvar borna,
oft, ósjaldan,
þó hún enn lifir.

Heiði hana hétu
hvar er til húsa kom,
völu velspá,
vitti hún ganda,
seið hún kunni,
seið hún leikinn,
æ var hún angan
illrar þjóðar.[160]

She remembers the first war in the world
when they stuck Gullveig with spears
and in the High-One's hall they burned her
three times they burned her, three times she was reborn,
over and over, yet she still lives.

Bright One they called her,
wherever she came to houses,
the seer with pleasing prophecies,
she practiced spirit-magic,
she knew *seid, seid* she performed as she liked,
she was always a wicked woman's favourite.[161]

It would be reasonable to believe that the figure of Gullveig is in fact Freyja, as she shows knowledge and expertise in *seiðr.* This imagery of the goddess presented in this poem is one of violence and destruction, indicating a darker side to the deity that is often recognized when she is invoking her use of *seiðr.* If we do understand this being to be that of the war goddess, which I agree with, then we also see her ability to withstand the wrath of the Æsir as well as Óðinn. Her association with this magic makes her extremely powerful, and not only does she display an equally matched opponent against the gods, she also appears to emasculate the male deities as is thought to be part of the art of *seiðr*.[162] Drawing these connections between Freyja and the *vǫlva* links the goddess to the world of prophecy as well, with the assumption

[159] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe,* 120.
[160] Unknown. "Völuspá". *Eddukvæði.* (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 2017), 10.
[161] Unknown, "Voluspá", *The Poetic Edda*, 6.
[162] Margaret Clunies Ross, "Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse myths in medieval Northern scoiety" *Volume 2: The Reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland*, (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 173.

being that she is capable of this act as she is not only associated with the *vǫlva* but the master of the magic that they practice.

2.1.3 Connection to War

Based off her role as governing a realm of the dead and specifically fallen warriors, we can easily recognize Freyja as a deity closely connected with the concept of war. As described in the previous chapter regarding the Morrígan, we see in detail her close relationship with the war hero Cú Chulainn. In the Norse corpus, we see Freyja involved with a warrior herself, however this relationship is more intimate than the latter. In the poem *Hyndluljóð*, we are greeted with the hero Ottar, who is the protégé of the goddess and she wants to aid him in gaining his inheritance against the competing claims of another individual named Angantyr. For Ottar to be successful in this task, he must gain knowledge about his entire ancestry, and Freyja plans to help him by meeting with the giantess and *vǫlva* Hyndla who will recite said information which Ottar can retain. Within this tale, there are a few interesting points of note. First, we see that Freyja transforms Ottar into a battle-hog to which she 'rides' to see the giantess. This transformation demonstrates Freyja's magical abilities, while also potentially implying a sexual relationship between the two figures.[163] At the very least, we see here the power dynamic between the two, as visually Freyja is on top of the hero and asserting her dominance as someone who has power and authority over him. We know that Ottar is deeply devoted to the deity, as within the poem the goddess describes a shrine for which the hero has made for her:

Hǫrg mér gęrði hlaðinn stęinum; nú´s grjót þat at glęri orðit; rauð hann í nýju nauta blóði; æ trúði Óttar á ǫsynjur.[164]	He made a sanctuary for me, faced with stone Now that stone has turned to glass, He's reddened it with fresh ox blood, Ottar has always trusted in the goddesses.[165]

[163] This notion is speculation, but with the pattern we see between a war goddess and her proteges/young heroes it is not far-fetched to assume that there could have been a sexual relationship between the two. Hyndla also implies that Freyja is promiscuous within this same poem, potentially relating to her relationship with the hero, or at least meaning to imply that an intimate relationship is plausible.
[164] Unknown, ´Hyndluljóð", *Eddadigte*, trans. Finnur Jónsson, (København: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1932), 145.
[165] Unknown, ''The Song of Hyndla", *The Poetic Edda* – 246.

Carolyne Larrington further explains that the phrase 'turned to glass' implies that the stone has become smooth and changed mediums because of the frequency in which the hero has made sacrifices to Freyja.[166] His actions demonstrate his allegiance to the goddess as well as indicating that sacrifices to the deity were not uncommon. Furthermore, Freyja aligning herself with a war hero re-establishes her connection to war and battle, and she undoubtably wants to enable young Ottar to achieve great status and victory. As will be touched on in a coming section, her transformation of the hero into a hog is not random, as the goddess is described as riding her own hog, Hildisvíni, into battle. She is establishing a link between her abilities in war to that of the young hero, literally turning him into a form of battle transportation and a weapon of destruction.[167]

The way in which Ottar is capable of retaining the lineage which Hyndla recites is compelling. After the giantess has recited his lineage, Freyja asks her to 'give some memory-ale' to the boar so that he will be able to recall all that the giantess has said. The pouring of liquid is deeply rooted in the sovereignty motif, and this could be seen as a third-party means of Freyja passing on hero-ship to Ottar. He has gained the knowledge necessary to attain his inheritance and these two female figures hold the power in passing that information on to him. Both women share the ability to practice *seiðr*, a key component of such being the ability to invoke prophecy. While not explicitly stated, based off literary patterns it could be assumed that Ottar's future is known to Freyja, and she is using her position to incite the hero to fufill his pre-determined timeline. The image of a supernatural figure pouring a drink for a warrior can also be interpreted as a metaphor for intimacy, as will be further touched upon in the section pertaining to *valkyrja*. Passing along this drink of knowledge could also be a further indication of the sexual relationship between the goddess and the hero. This poem demonstrates Freyja as a complex figure who represents more than the conventional fertility deity would suggest.

2.1.5 Animals and the Goddess

Imagery of animals being associated with deities is present throughout the extant of the Norse literary corpus. We can see the cyclical process of fertility that encompasses both

[166] Unknown, *The Poetic Edda*, 315.
[167] The term battle-hog is a name for helmet in skaldic poetry, and while it is evident that Ottar was transformed into an actual boar in this poem, it further illuminates the idea that Ottar is closely aligned with war and his future is one meant for battle.

life and death when discussing these supernatural figure relations with animals and beasts. In regards to Freyja, there are several that bare a connection with the goddess. The first, are cats. Taking a step back to the link between Freyja and the *vǫlva,* we see these animals further linking the two together. *Erik the Red's Saga* describes an important seeress who is detailed to be wearing white gloves that are lined with cat fur. Mentioning this detail within the saga in relation to the *vǫlva* suggests that the feline spirits accompanied and aid the figure on her spiritual journey.[168] Snorri tells us that Freyja traveled in a carriage pulled by cats in *Gylfaginning* and she arrives to the funeral of Bladr in said wagon. It is evident that these cats are one her main sources of transportation, and are used as creatures to aid in times of movement, linking the human and the supernatural world together. Turville-Petre also states that her association and identification with cats, as well as other beasts such as goats (running after her lover as the mythical goat, Heiðrún) and dogs (a Christian poetaster describing Freyja as a *grey* or 'bitch'), is indicative for a goddess aligned with fertility and sensuality as they are prolific and sensual beasts.[169] Further stating that cats are the most lascivious of animals, this view is most strongly aligned with the feline, but not necessarily backed up by any credible evidence. It can, however, be understood that Freyja does have a close connection with these animals, and their association with magic also aligns them with *seiðr* and the *vǫlva,* therefore incorporating them into the rotation of life and death.

The second animal connected to the goddess is a boar. We see two specific connections to Freyja and hogs - one in correlation with fertility and the other with war. Freyja is known by many names, and one in particular, Sýr, translating to 'the Sow'. In calling her this, she is ultimately being depicted as a symbol of unlimited fertility,[170] representing a female pig used for breeding. She is referred to as this title in three different works – *Gylfaginning, Skáldskaparmál,* and *Nafnaþulur* – and we know these animals are also integral to Vanir worship and sacrificial practices as they are frequently present at the *blót.*[171] Second, we see her association with these animals through the art of war, as we know she owns a war-hog named Hildisvíni that she rides into battle. Here now we see from this telling of Freyja with her battle swine that she is not just a passive figure in warfare - but that she actively participates. As stated earlier, the name of her hog was also used as a term to describe war helmets, again associating Freyja with the concept of battle and death. Between

[168] Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe*, 120.
[169] Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the* North, 176.
[170] J. de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte,* 313.
[171] Simek, Rudolf (1996). *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. D.S. Brewer. ISBN 978-0-85991-513-7. Archived from the original on 20 April 2023. Retrieved 26 May 2020.

her association with cats and boars specifically, we see the connection of the goddess with both concepts of life and death. These animals represent fertility, war, and a transitionary period associated with connecting the natural and supernatural world, aiding the deity in creating a cyclical course over which she has domain.

2.2 *Valkyrja*

The second representation of the divine female in the Norse corpus that holds power over the notion of life and death are the *valkyrja*. The common understanding, especially demonstrated by Snorri, is that these women were agents of Óðinn, who were sent to the battlefield after a great war and assigned the task of choosing the slain and then return with them to Valhǫll. Afterwards these women would then also be present in the great hall, waiting on the men and pouring them libations as they wait for their next great duel at the commencement of Ragnarök. They hovered over men on the battlefield, sitting upon their horses waiting to determine who would be chosen to die and whisked away to the afterlife. Their main role was one of a psychopomp, one who "acts as a guide of souls to the place of the dead."[172] Upon further inspection however, it is apparent that these women held much more power than what is on the surface, and do not narrowly act as obedient workers for the chief god himself. The surviving literature we have involving these figures indicates women often had complex interactions with the warriors that they encountered, and would even step outside of their assigned duties and use their sexual prowess as a means to create a different narrative for themselves.

2.2.1 Death – A Double-Sided Coin

Gro Steinsland describes these beings as "seductive harbingers of death"[173] and their presence is one that can often personify the moment of death. In *Völuspá*, the *valkyrja* forbode the destruction of the world and their entrance emphasizes the dreadful aspects of the battlefield[174], making their presence one of terror and a shocking understanding of what is to come. While they seem to provide a romantic and enticing view of the afterlife to the warrior who has fallen, their appearance is not to be taken lightly. The imagery of them in the form of

[172] Egeler, "Death, Wings, and Divine Devouring," 9.
[173] Gro Steinsland and Øivind S. Jordfald. Eros Og Død I Norrøne Myter. (Oslo: Universitetsforl, 1997.)
[174] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*, 137.

ravens on the battlefield reflects this horror, as they are there to devour the living and transport them to their afterlife, which remains one that is engulfed by war and violence. The conflicting nature of the *valkyrja* is best depicted in *Gisli Saga*, and is depicted in two dream women who represent the dual aspects of the beings split into two individuals. In his dreams, Gisli sees these two women, and describes that one is good to him, while the other shows him visions of gruesome and terrible things. While never explicitly referred to as a *valkyrja*, the context in which they are presented has drawn scholars to conclude that, at the very least, the evil dream woman is representing these supernatural women.[175] There are definite Christian overtones in relation to this saga, especially in the yearning for Gisli to uphold a moral life that the good dream woman is presenting, but this character also displays a role of guiding Gisli towards a pleasant afterlife that is parallel to the *valkyrja*, thus depicting pre-Christian traits attributed to that of the supernatural female. As Serenity Young argues, "the conflicting dreams reflect the ambivalent nature of *valkyrja* as bringers of fertility, death, and rebirth."[176] In regards to Gisli, they show the duality of their character, with one representing a pleasant afterlife and treating the main character kindly, acting as a guide in his transition from living to dead. There is a comfort in evoking glory in their death and their coming afterlife, and they are seduced into death rather than slain in life.[177] The other woman demonstrates the brutality of war and destruction that the *valkyrja* are aligned with, representing that while they provide an honourable rebirth for the fallen warrior, the way in which he comes to death's door is through bloodshed and violence. These women are both guardians and destructors of warriors.

2.2.2 Complex Figures

As stated above, these figures were not simply messengers of Óðinn, but acted often on their own accord and sometimes even strayed from the All-Father's bidding. One of the earliest references we have comes from a poem written in the tenth century, *Haraldskvæði*,[178] in which the poet portrays a multi-faceted woman who he titles *valkyrja.* She has the ability

[175] P.S. Langeslag, ,"The Dream Women of 'Gísla Saga.'" *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 1 (2009): 47–72, 53.
[176] Serinity, Young, *Women Who Fly : Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 62.
[177] Judy Quinn, 'HILDR PREPARES A BED FOR MOST HELMET-DAMAGERS': SNORRI'S TREATMENT OF A TRADITIONAL POETIC MOTIF IN HIS *EDDA." Reflections on Old Norse Myths* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 100.
[178] R.D. Fulk ´Þorbjorn hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði) Hrafnsmál* in Diana Whaley (ed.), *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035.* Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinaivan Middle Ages 1. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 91.

to speak with carrion birds, which are closely associated with death, as well as being attractive, clever and ambitious, she all at once encapsules the dual emotions of captivation and terror. The Helgi poems[179] are a collection of eddic poems that strongly associate the *valkyrja* with their control over the life and death of warriors. All three poems are centered on the meeting and battle expeditions of the hero and his *valkyrja* lover. It was not common for *valkyrja* to marry, and so within these poems the author allows the *valkyrja* to exploit her sexual attraction and operate within her own accordance, even if that goes against the wishes of her kin.[180] The *valkyrja* not only has an intimate relationship with the Helgi figures, but also aids and protects them in battle, showing their favouritism and manipulating war and even the moment of death so that their heroes can live on. She demonstrates an extreme grip of her power in these poems by acting as a life-giving force, rather than one who takes away life as is so often depicted. She protects her chosen warrior in battle, she heals wounds, and she resurrects those who have fallen in order for them to continue on the battlefield as well as alongside her in the marital bed. This is seen, however, not in a pleasant fashion, but instead in the grotesque manner in which Helgi's wounds continuously bleed, and when he does eventually die at the hands of the *valkyrja*'s brother, he is unable to make the transition to Valhǫll on account of his lover's grieving. While he does eventually transition to the afterlife, this is not due to the intervention of any other gods, but rather due to her understanding of needing to let her lover go, based on his own wishes. Through the complex relationship between *valkyrja* and hero within these stories we see the divine figures abilities demonstrated beyond the scope of the original task in which they were meant to carry out. She shows her competence in acting as both life giver and taker, and operating within her own prerogative.

2.2.3 Weaving the Fates of Men

Darraðarljóð is a poem within *Breunnu-Njals saga*[181] that shows a change in the depiction of these female figures. The poet of this work "chose the metaphor of weaving as

[179] Unknown. *Eddukvæði.* Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1999.

[180] Judy Quinn, "Valkyries." *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures, Volume iii*, ed. by Jens Peter schjødt, John Lindow, and anders andrén, PCRN-HS 3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) pp. 1513–1526 BREPols PUBlisHERs 10.1484/M.PCRN-EB.5.116987, 1520.

[181] Unknown, „Brennu Njáls Saga*" Islenzk Fornit XIL*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, (Reykjavík: Ríkisprentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1971), 455.

the vehicle for representing the *valkyrja* ' task of deciding warriors' fates in battle, a change that significantly domesticated and feminized the earlier masculine image."[182] Not only do we see these figures present on the battlefield and acting as mere transports to the afterlife, but we see them not directly inserted into the decision of one's fate. This text displays a gruesome image of the *valkyrja* weaving, demonstrated in their spoken verses:

Sjá er orpinn vefr	Is this web woven
Ýta þǫrmum	and wound of entrails
ok harðkléaðr	and heavy weighted
hǫfðum manna;	with heads of slain;
eru dreyrrekin	are blood-bespattered
dǫrr at skǫptum,	spears the treadles,
járnvarðr yllir	iron-bound the beams,
en ǫrum hrælaðr;	the battens, arrows:
skulum slá sverðum	let us weave with our swords
sigvef þenna.[183]	this web of victory![184]

Through the entirety of this poem, we see the *valkyrja* acting independently of Óðinn and intervening in war to protect their favourite warriors. They have agency over the battlefield and are literally weaving the lifeline of warriors, holding their fate in the palm of their hands. By operating in a state in which they control and predict fate, they are therefore positioned at both ends of the lifeline – at the time of creation and at the time of destruction. They are weaving a tapestry of life, one that is in constant motion and thus creating a cyclical rotation. The control is now placed on them, and these actions parallel them to figures who are constantly associated with the fate of men, the *nornir*.

2.3 Hel and the *Nornir*

Thus far, we have discussed Norse figures who play an integral role in the connection between life and death, and who also demonstrate a sexual and fertile element to their character. We now move on to beings who demonstrate a stronger prophetic influence over the dual elements, but who do not demonstrate an obvious connection to sexuality. While not displayed in the seductive nature as the previous beings, they still control the dual aspects of

[182] Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*. Ithaca, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998),137
[183] Unknown, „Brennu Njáls Saga*"* 455.
[184] Unknown, *Njáls Saga*, Translated by Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander, (Hertfordshire: Wordswroth Editions, 1987), 349-350.

life and death. Their purpose within the literature is to control the fates of those around them, and without their influence numerous important events would not take place. They play an integral role within Norse culture and further establish how the divine female, while not necessarily conceptually 'sexual', are essential in bringing life and death into a cyclical rotation.

2.3.1 Hel

While we have seen in the previous two sections divine female beings who are connected with the honourable resting place of the dead and those who die in battle, we now turn to the remainder of the deceased. In *Gylfaginning*, we are given a description of Hel and her abilities as a monstrous child of Loki:

> Hel kastaði hann í Niflheim ok gaf henni vald yfir heimum, at hon skyldi skipta ǫllum vistum með þeim, er til hennar varú sendir, en þat eru sóttdauðir men ok ellidauðir … Hon er blá half, en half með hǫrundar-lit; því er hon auðkend ok heldr gnúpleit ok grimmlig.[185]

> Hel he threw down to Niflheim and made her ruler over nine worlds. She has the power to dole out lodgings and provisions to those who are sent to her, and they are the people who have died of disease or old age … She is half black and half a lighter flesh colour and is easily recognized. Mostly she is gloomy and cruel.[186]

The image of this half-corpse figure demonstrates how she was meant to be perceived – monstrous and horrifying. However, the most significant section of this passage is the notion that Hel was made ruler over nine worlds by the All-Father. What is exactly meant by this can be murky, but a plausible conclusion is that she is given power over the dead of the nine realms, as she is assigned to dwell in the 'world of mist and shadows'.[187] When we think about the category of beings who have passed that she has been assigned to, we see that this is the majority of the population. While not a glorious death, dying of old age is the most common means of passing, and therefore Hel has control over a vast population of the deceased. The addition of criminals only amplifies the amount, and while they are not demonstrated as the best of people, they still have a place amongst Hel's halls. Aside from the realm that Hel resides over, we know of four other places in which the dead reside. We know that Freyja and Óðinn govern those who fell in a warrior 's death in Valhǫll and

[185] Snorri Sturluson. "Gylfaginning" *Edda*, 39.
[186] Snorri Sturlson, ´Gylfaginning´, *The Prose Edda,* 39.
[187]Christopher Abram,"Hel in Early Norse Poetry." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006): 1–29), 1.

Fólkvangr. Also mentioned in literature is Rán, a realm that is governed by a goddess of the same name who takes in those who die at sea. We also know of gravemounds in which the dead reside.[188] The majority of these places are operated by females, and the majority of the dead are split between the female governed realms. Hel, along with her fellow divine women, hold domain over a significant populace of those who have departed.[189]

2.3.2 *Baldrs Draumar*

A character within the Norse mythological corpus that the figure of Hel has a close connection with is that of the god Baldr. While Hel does not demonstrate prophetic abilities herself, an integral interaction between Óðinn and a *vǫlva* takes place within the realm of Hel. Baldr was continuously having ominous dreams about his demise, and Óðinn descends to the realm of Hel[190], looking for answers as to why his son is having these dreams. He awakens a seeress and demands she give him answers, which she does, prophesizing that he will be killed by his brother Hoðr. At the end of the poem, she also relays this prognostication to Óðinn before he departs:

Hęim rið Óðinn ok hróðigr ves, svá komið manna męirr aptr á vit, es lauss Loki líðr ór bǫndum ok ragne rǫk rjúfęndr koma.[191]	Ride home, Odin, and be proud of yourself! May no more men come to visit me, Until Loki is loose, escaped from his bonds, and the Doom of the Gods, tearing all asunder, approaches.[192]

Clearly an integral figure in the literary corpus, the death of Baldr led to the opening of the gates of Hel and inaugurated fall of the Norse gods.[193] Interesting to note about his death is that this great deity ends up in Hel, a place that is not meant for such a remarkable

[188] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*, 88.
[189] Judy Quinn, "The Gendering of Death in Eddic Cosmology." In *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives Origins, Changes, Interactions.* 54-57, (Nordic Academic Press: Chicago, 2006), 57.
[190] Important to note here that Óðinn does not have an ineraction with the figure of Hel within this poem, he simply travels to a place called Hel. Christopher Abram speaks about the differences between Hel as a location and Hel as a person in his article *Hel in Early Norse Poetry*. He explains that the goddess as a figure was most likely a later literary personfication of the place in which the dead resided.
[191] Unknown, ´Baldrs draumar", *Eddadigte*, 142.
[192] Unknown, "Baldrs Dramr", *Poetic Edda*, 237.
[193] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*, 112.

god, or any for that matter. Hel holds domain over those who have died as criminals or outside of the battlefield. It is understandable logistically why Baldr would end up in her realm as he was killed by mistletoe at the hands of the god Hoð. However, such a treacherous place was obviously not considered to be the correct resting place of a god described as being "so beautiful and so bright that light shines from him."[194] The reasoning behind Baldr ending up in this realm is to allow for the events of Ragnarök to take place, and without Hel's intervention in this story this feat would not be as easily accomplished. In Hermoðr's ride to the realm of the death goddess, *Nifelheimr*, he speaks with the goddess directly and asks her to allow for Baldr to return with him as the Æsir were full of sorrow at the loss of their beloved kin. Hel answers that a test must be made in order for him to return, and that "at þat skyldi svá reyna, hvárt Baldr var svá ástsæll - "sem sagt er. Ok ef allir hlutir í heiminum, kykvir ok dauðir, gráta hann, þá skal hann fara til ása aftr, en haldast með Helju,"[195] ("if all things in the world, alive or dead, weep for him, then he will be allowed to return to the Æsir. If anyone speaks against him or refuses to cry, then he will remain with Hel.")[196] To begin, she makes it apparent that all things must show their love for the god, not just those that are alive. In doing so she is asserting that all things are of equal importance in this matter, and the dead have just as much to contribute as the living. Objects that are no longer living play a role when making a crucial decision that will affect all that are present, and especially in the instance where the discussion of bringing someone back to life is in question. A huge significance is placed on the goddess in this situation, as she is demonstrating that she has the power to bring someone back to life, within the boundaries of her test being completed. She also demonstrates her authority over death, as she is able to deny an extremely popular god to be brought back to his family, one of the members of that family being the chief deity himself. She indicates within the poem that she not only has the power to keep the dead, but also the capacity to choose to not release them.

2.3.3 *Nornir*

Another important group of divine female figures with a connection to the cyclical rotation of life and death are the *nornir*. As Karen Bek-Pederson states, "the role and identity of the *nornir* are inextricably bound up with the notion of fate and, therefore, a discussion of

[194] Snorri Sturluson, "Gylfaginning", *The Prose Edda.* Translated by Jesse L. Byock. (London: Penguin Group, 2005), 33.
[195] Snorri Sturluson. *Edda*. Finnur Jónsson, 75.
[196] Snorri Sturluson, "Gylfaginning", *The Prose Edda*, 68.

the *nornir* must also include a discussion of the concept of fate."[197] These beings often operate more as background figures, as they are not depicted as embodying any form of emotion when carrying out their prophecies or fates related to an individual. When they hand over the dead to Hel, they show neither discretion, nor comfort, nor mercy. While ambiguous, they are clearly identified as beings who encompass the duality of life and death, as they are present both at childbirth and at death. They appear at the time of birth to set out the child's course of life (*ørlog*), and again when it is time for one to depart the human world, stating their decree (quiðr) or judgement (dómr) of where one will spend their afterlife, based on how they spent their time living.[198] The number nine is often associated with these beings, and with that can come several interpretations. The *nornir* are sometimes described as being in groups of nine, or three, a factoral of nine. In many of the contexts of nine appearning in medieval Norse literature, it represents an intermediary phase between life and death.[199] The most prominent example of this being when Óðinn hung himself from the world tree for nine days in order to attain the knowledge. A similar instance where we see someone in a state of being and not-being is during the time of pregnancy, which takes up the span of nine months. The *nornir* are closely linked with the act of pregnancy and childbirth as they are called-upon for both, determining the life of this now existing being.

When discussing a cyclical rotation of life and death, we see the *nornir*, and one in particular, linked directly to this process. In *Völuspá,* we read the following passage:

Ask veit eg standa, heitir Yggdrasil, hár baðmur, ausinn hvíta auri, þaðan koma döggvar þær er í dala falla, stendur æ yfir grænn Urðarbrunni.[200]	An ash I know that stands, Yggdrasil it's called, a tall tree, drenched with shining loam; from there come the dews which fall in the valley, green, it stands always over Urd's well.[201]

Urðr, here named in context to the well from which the *nornir* arise, is situated under the roots of of the world-tree, which is known to support all the realms of the living and the gods combined. Urðr is specifically named as one of the *norninr,* and perhaps the most important one as the well is attributed to her. As Grö Steinsland has hypothesized, this stanza

[197] Karen Bek-Pederson, *The Norns in Old Norse Mythology,* (Scotland, Dunedin Academic Press Ltd, 2011), 13.
[198] Judy Quinn, "The Gendering of Death in Eddic Cosmology." 54-55.
[199] Gulermovich Epstein, "War Goddess: The Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts.", 143.
[200] Unknown. "Volsupá". *Eddukvæði,* 9.
[201] Unknown. "Voluspá". *The Poetic Edda,* 6.

demonstrates a cultic ritual within this context, one in which *hvíta auri* is poured over the tree.[202] If this accurate, Näsström states that this "describes a cyclic process and suggests an affinity between the well and the tree … these contradictory aspects of Life and Death are untied and mediated in Urðr´s person."[203] The tree of life is being fed by the well of the *nornir* who reside below it, and in response a ritual is formulated to replenish the well by pouring water over the tree as it trickles down. Demonstrated here is an astounding observance of the *nornir* enabling the tree of knowledge to grow, working in tandem with it as an active part in the timeline of the entire cosmos. This indication gives credence to the *nornir* overseeing the entirety of the world and all who dwell within it, determining their entire lives, from the moment they are conceived to the moment of their passing.

We see a correspondence between many of the female figures already spoken of, amongst others, and the *nornir*. More often than not, the carrying out of the decisions by both Hel and the *nornir* are spoken by the *vǫlva*, especially in regards to the latter, as there are few instances of these beings speaking on their own behalf. They are silent givers and takers of life. Judy Quinn terms the *valkyrja* as 'kindered spirits' of the *nornir*, as they are drawn into conversation with those who are on the brink of death, and act within their own interest as opposed to carrying out a strict timeline that is pre-determined by fate.[204] Demonstrated by the abilities of Hel and the *nornir* especially is the inability for Óðinn, or any other deity for that matter, to intervene in the pre-determined fate set out by these figures. While representing a group of beings that are often seen as looming in the background, in some cases not even making a sound, their influence and control over the cycle of life and death is undeniable. What unites all of these Norse figures is the fact that Freyja, *valkyrjur* Hel, and *nornir,*all represent an otherworldly power conceptualized in female form which both gives and takes life.

[202] Grö Steinsland, "Treet I Voluapá", ANF, 1983, 124-125.
[203] Näsström, *Freyja – the Great Goddess of the North*, 146.
[204] Quinn, "The Gendering of Death in Eddic Cosmology", 54.

Conclusion

Female figures depicted within the cosmological order of religions have always played an integral role throughout human history. Athena began her life by erupting through her father's head, a metaphor of the wisdom and cunning that she would bring to the Greco-Roman world. Anat, whose belief began in Mesopotamia and was later integrated into Egyptian lore, brought her strength and aided the weather god Baal in his struggle for kingship. Chīmalmā, an Aztec goddess who birthed the great deity Quetzalcoatl, governs over life, death, and fertility, and is a guide for those on their path to rebirth. What do all of these female deities have in common – while often operating within a culture that is patriarchal, they are nonetheless given copious amounts of power that is essential to the continuation of the people in whom they have domain over and the fellow godly-figures that they live among. Prominent amongst these female figures are deities connected to the peoples of the Irish and the Norse. Both of these cultures include interdimensional female figures within their pantheon that embody dual aspects that bring together the concepts of both life and death. What has been confirmed in this thesis is that the supernatural female characters known within the two cultures of medieval Ireland and Scandinavia demonstrate the ability to encapsulate the dual seemingly contrasting concepts of life and death, and furthermore bring those dueling concepts into one being that demonstrates a cyclical rotation. While these cultures intersected over the span of their existence, they share beliefs that are independent of one another. With that being said, we see within these female characters an overlap of similar traits that indicate the existing pattern within women figures from a variety of cultures.

This thesis has shown that within both the medieval Irish and Norse corpus, we see a connection of the divine female to the dueling aspects of life and death, integrating both of these elements into a supernatural woman. With the association of these beings to another realm, or at least one that is outside of the human world, we see with them the integration of magical abilities that aid them in their governance over both the living and the dead, controlling and prophesizing a pre-determined timeline that they often had associations with crafting. The Morrígan uses her demand of magic with her in battle, whether that be through physical attack or noise that is used to strike fear and confusion into her opponents. This ability can also be translated into that of prophecy, speaking of events that are to come and then shaping the course of time to steer those involved towards the designated happening. Parallel to the war-goddess, we see the Norse figures discussed all associated in some form with magic, and more specifically *seiðr*, whether that be their direct use of it or having their

actions spoken through those who have control over it. Extending on the topic of war, there are several elements that both cultures encapsulate in their association with battle. We see a link between land and beast, integrating the initiation of war and also a means to use them as a part of the violence.

Simultaneously, these same creatures represent the prosperity of the land, linking the fertility of the same environment in which they are used as tools of destruction. Their appearance can either indicate abundance, or a sign of terror and impending doom, as demonstrated by the carrion bird forms associated with both the Morrígan and the *valkyrjur.* The relationship that these figures have with war heroes is integral to both parties' development and demonstration of abilities, with the former aiding and inciting warriors through their life, and appearing in several different forms both during their demise as well as their transition to the afterlife. They portray connotations with the concepts of fertility and abundance through war and death, as well as more obvious notions such as childbirth, wealth, sexual and romantic love, and the development of society and the natural environment. They often portray a seductive discourse, conjoining the paradoxical attractive and fertile being with one of death and violence. The copious similarities that these two medieval cultures display indicate that the divine female incorporating the duality of life and death into an ever-repeating rotation was a prominent aspect of pre-Christian religion, and therefore a substantial amount of importance was exhibited in these beings.

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