



Authenticity vs. Cultural Conformity: The Interpretation of Norse Literature for a Japanese Audience

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Abstract

The Norse gods and Norse literature has been adapted and interpreted numerous times, yet the study of Norse reception in Japan is seldom explored. In Japanese media featuring the Norse gods as characters, their personalities, behavior, and even genders are changed for the sake of the story and to better fit into Japanese culture. In addition, comparing Japanese portrayals of other gods to their interpretations of the Norse gods help show the unique beliefs influencing each character. Specifically, as seen in *Kamigami no Asobi*, Japanese character archetypes are imposed onto the Norse gods, changing their personalities significantly from the mythology, and in *Danmachi*, cultural beliefs about sexual promiscuity as well as gender expression can be seen through the characters of Loki and Freya. This thesis aims to explore the cultural factors at work shown in these portrayals.

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Introduction

A Japanese animated series, or “anime” as it is colloquially called, refers to a style of animation rather than a genre in and of itself. Anime encapsulates works of all genres and includes feature films as well as television series, and has been an incredibly popular medium in Japan for decades. And while many anime series or movies are original works, a large number of them are originally based on manga, or Japanese graphic novels.

Through this media, Japanese cultural values are seen at work. Although many manga and anime are translated into various languages, the authors are Japanese, as is the intended audience, therefore many aspects of Japanese culture and values are portrayed. As will be discussed over the course of this thesis, this phenomenon is true no matter the origins of the characters, as many historical and mythological figures from various countries and time periods have been portrayed in anime. These Japanese cultural values and norms result in unique interpretations of these foreign characters, and their personalities are altered as they are filtered through a Japanese lens.

An increasing amount of Japanese media features the Norse gods or stories from Viking Age literature, an interesting source of inspiration as East Asia had little to no contact with the Vikings in the Middle Ages. While modern media has lately made a shift towards favoring more “realistic” portrayals of the Middle Ages, significant changes from the source material is seen in Japanese media portraying it. These interpretations of Viking Age literature and mythology are a perfect example of reception theory at work.

Reception theory, in essence, is defined as the audience of any creative work not accepting its meaning passively, but rather actively interpreting through an individual’s values and life experiences. The meaning gathered from that work is more about the relationship between the work and the audience rather than an inherent quality of that work. Stuart Hall was one of the most well known proponents of this theory, which he discussed in his 1973 article, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse.” He states that media presents “encoded” values and messages to the audience which are then “decoded,” or interpreted, which is where

the “encoded” message is filtered through the individual’s personal experience, values, and beliefs, thus creating a new interpretation with every viewing experience.¹

In reference to the field of Viking history, reception describes how a modern audience interprets and reimagines Norse mythology and literature. Media adaptations featuring them are a concrete manifestation of reception, as cultural ideas and values from the individuals making them are imposed onto the source material and reimagined for a modern audience. As most modern audiences have not read the original Norse literature, their ideas of what a Viking is comes from this media portraying them. Therefore, examining these interpretations can show the specific cultural values and audience expectations at work.

The main analysis of this thesis will be dedicated to the intersection between reception studies and media studies, and how modern media can show reception theory at work. Chapter one will outline Old Norse reception in Japan while briefly touching on the show *Vinland Saga* and how it demonstrates the scope of Japanese interest in Norse mythology as well as highlighting the reception theory at work in this interpretation of Icelandic saga literature. Chapter two will thoroughly examine two shows and how the Norse gods are interpreted as characters in them. The first sub-chapter will cover *Kamigami no Asobi* and the various Japanese character archetypes placed onto the Norse gods featured, altering their personalities from the original mythology. The second sub-chapter is dedicated to *Is It Wrong To Try And Pick Up Girls In A Dungeon?* and how themes of gender identity and sexual expression are shown through the Norse gods and then interpreted through a Japanese cultural lens. Finally, chapter three focuses on a more international comparison in order to put Japan into context of Norse reception elsewhere. Other gods are also featured alongside the Norse gods in these shows, so an evaluation of their treatment and interpretations can show the differences or similarities between Japan’s view of the Norse gods versus other pantheons.

¹ Adrienne Shaw. “Encoding and Decoding Affordances: Stuart Hall and Interactive Media Technologies.” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (May 2017): 592–602.

I. Cultural Context

As one of the first media interpretations of a Viking in Japan, the anime *Vicky the Viking* premiered and became the most culturally relevant interpretation of a Viking for a time. The show featured a nine year old Viking named Vicky and his adventures. This 1970's childrens' show was very popular and actively attempted to work against harmful ideals held during World War Two. The function of this work during this time period is very telling about how Japan reacted after the end of World War Two by criticizing ancestor worship and Nazi ideologies specifically.² As the Nazis commonly used Norse symbols to further their own ideology, this show became a positive interpretation of a Viking as a way to move Japan away from Nazi values. Further interpretations in the late 20th century of Vikings or Old Norse culture used this show as a basis, as for a time it was the only Japanese depiction of a Viking. This idea of a Viking is the result of their interpretation of western media depicting Vikings that reached Japan, such as the 1958 movie *The Viking* which became very popular there. Their new Viking media also scarcely delved into the original Old Norse material and relied entirely on their idea of who a Viking was, what they looked like, and what they did, as influenced by western media. This would change as later media moved towards telling a more "accurate" version of history and the source material became more commonly consulted. However, even this type of media is still prone to bias and the cultural values of the creators.

As time passed, interest in Old Norse history and mythology grew, as evidenced by the increase in media interpretations. In 2005, a manga series titled *Vinland Saga* published its first volume, and in 2019, the television adaptation of the same name premiered, with both the manga and the anime reaching record levels of popularity within Japan and abroad. This popularity indicates that it is both reflecting and influencing how the Japanese receive Norse mythology and history, and thus is an important show to briefly touch on. While the scope of this thesis is too narrow to discuss *Vinland Saga* with the detail it deserves in addition to the other shows in chapter two, a short examination in this chapter will provide a good foundation for the coming analysis. While interest in medieval Norse material is growing, Norse reception in Japan is still currently a rarely-studied subject. However, the international success of this show has recently

² Maxime Danesin. "Beyond Time & Culture: The Revitalisation of Old Norse Literature and History in Yukimura Makoto's *Vinland Saga*." *Mutual Images Journal* 2 (2017): 187-188.

begun to draw the attention of scholars, as they explore its impact on the field of Norse reception studies as a whole as well as within Japan.

The plot of *Vinland Saga* follows the fictional early life of Thorfinn Karlsefni, an Icelandic historical figure who followed after Leif Erikson in his exploration of Vinland, a disputed territory thought to be in the northeastern part of North America.³ Both the manga and the anime roughly follow Icelandic saga accounts, while taking some artistic liberties along the way. While the main analysis of this thesis examines the presentation of the Norse gods as characters in Japanese media, and this series does not contain any portrayals of them, it still grants insight into how Japan views and interprets Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian literature and gives some context to how they may view and characterize the Norse gods. Trends in Japanese reception of medieval Scandinavia literature can be seen and applied to reception of Norse mythology as well.

One central ideal to the Icelandic sagas is a Eurocentric viewpoint that is all but entirely removed from *Vinland Saga*. This Eurocentric viewpoint describes the phenomenon throughout European history that Europe is culturally, and perhaps intellectually, superior to other cultures and people from other regions. This is explicit in volume one which depicts Vikings meeting with the native people in Vinland. By all historical accounts, these encounters were either initially hostile or resulted in hostility after a few meetings, and this hostility is justified by the natives' supposed cultural inferiority.⁴

The *Saga of Greenlanders* describes first interactions between the Vikings and the Native Americans.⁵ It recounts that no inhabitants of Vinland were encountered during the first few expeditions, but after traveling further south they came upon nine men sleeping in three boats, whom they killed. In retaliation, a fleet of boats later descended on the entire crew, driving them back to Vinland. In a second meeting, the Vikings and the natives attempted to trade, but fighting

³ These spellings are the anglicized spellings of the names Þorfinnr Karslefni and Leifir Eiríksson. Also, the exact location of Vinland is vaguely described, so various scholars have placed it anywhere between Labrador and Florida, but the general consensus is that it was likely new present-day Newfoundland. Robert McGhee. "Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse: A Review of the Evidence." *American Antiquity* 49, no. 1 (1984): 6.

⁴ McGhee, "Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse." 4–26.

⁵ Also called Grœnlendinga Saga or The Vinland Saga.

broke out when one native attempted to steal weapons.⁶ During both encounters with the natives as described in the *Saga of Greenlanders*, there was hostility from both sides and no semblance of friendship developed.

However in the manga, there is no mention of any conflict, with the character of Leif Erikson saying that they became “immediately friends despite not having the same language.”⁷ There is no reference in any currently published volume of the manga to the Native Americans being culturally inferior to the Vikings nor any unkind treatment. In fact, the Native Americans are entirely ignored throughout the rest of the series. As explained, this is significantly different to the treatment of the Native Americans as described in the saga accounts. Therefore, rather than this scene representing the Vikings’ treatment of natives, which was hostile, it better highlights the Japanese government’s attitude towards native populations in Japan throughout history, who ignore the existence of their own natives.

An interesting point in comparison to this story is the treatment of the native Ainu people by the Japanese government. The Ainu are a group of people indigenous to the present day prefecture of Hokkaido in northern Japan, as well as some areas of nearby Russia. In 1899, Japan passed the Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act, which labeled the Ainu as former aborigines, denying their status as indigenous people and forcing them to become Japanese citizens. This act also forbade the use of the Ainu language and revoked their right to fish and hunt, both severely damaging the Ainu cultural identity. Things began to change in 1997, when the Japanese courts acknowledged the Ainu as indigenous people for the first time, and the succeeding decades brought about some legal protections. However, these are mostly surface-level, as there is currently no law that clearly defines what indigenous means in this context, does not outline anti-discrimination measures, and there has been no condemnation of the past actions of the government in its role in the subjugation of the Ainu, minimizing their role in the destruction of their culture.⁸

There is an argument to be made that the scene in *Vinland Saga* of the Europeans meeting with Native Americans more closely reflects the Japanese interactions with the Ainu. The

⁶ McGhee, “Contact between Native North Americans and the Medieval Norse.” 9-10.

⁷ Danesin, “Beyond Time & Culture.” 192.

⁸ Zaman, Mashiyat. “The Ainu and Japan's Colonial Legacy.” *Tokyo Review*, February 26, 2021. <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/03/ainu-japan-colonial-legacy/>.

Japanese government has largely ignored the Ainu's presence in Japan until very recently. This scene reflects how the Japanese government largely ignored the native population in their own country and diminished their hardships. Even now, it is apparent that the government has done little to support this group and will likely continue to do so. This parallels the scene in *Vinland Saga*, where the natives are reluctantly acknowledged, and then promptly forgotten with any unfavorable history overlooked.

Culturally in Japan, there is an unfortunate trend of ignoring unfavorable historical events, leading to an under-educated population regarding some of Japan's military past. Much of the younger generation is ignorant of events such as the Nanjing Massacre or the existence of sex slaves from South Korea and Taiwan known as "comfort women."⁹ These events are hardly taught in Japanese schools, not allowing the country as a whole to atone for the past and honor those affected. By barely mentioning and ignoring the Native Americans, it tells the audience that problematic history is to be ignored and dismissed for the sake of preserving their own honor.

Medieval European interpretations in Japan are comprised of mostly stereotypical fantasy elements. As such "these popular literary works are often mostly adding to Japanese values some stereotyped medieval elements, such as the social structure, knights, stone castles and its bestiary, regardless of their original complexity or even temporality."¹⁰ This can be seen throughout Japanese media, as it is increasingly popular to depict medieval European elements and popular historical and literary figures, as evidenced by the growing amount of anime and manga depicting them, but there are always undertones of Japanese culture and societal values. What this means is that while the media reflects Norse mythology or literature on a surface level, or any other medieval time period depicted, the internal morality remains culturally Japanese. This is the core of reception theory in relation to media studies: examining both the outer presentation of one culture being received, while keeping in mind the values of the culture doing the receiving.

⁹ Oi, Mariko. "What Japanese History Lessons Leave Out." BBC News. BBC, March 14, 2013. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21226068>.

¹⁰ Maxime Danesin, "The European Middle Ages through the prism of Contemporary Japanese Literature: a study of *Vinland Saga*, *Spice & Wolf* and *l'Éclipse*." *Mutual Images Journal* 1 (2016): 100.

While the Japanese show an interest in various pantheons, there is an argument to be made that there is a slight favoritism towards the Norse gods. Although it would be a stretch to claim that there is a universal, widespread interest in Japan towards the Norse gods, it is apparent that there is at least some growing interest and familiarity with this mythology as evidenced by an increasing amount of media featuring the Norse gods. Likewise in media where they are side-by-side with gods of other pantheons, they are often the most developed characters and have bigger roles in the plot. The two shows to be analyzed in chapter two follow this trend, as many gods from different countries are featured, but their roles are often less important than those of the Norse gods. In *Kamigami no Asobi*, an overview of the plot can be coherent and complete with hardly any mention of the other gods, as they are background characters and have no effect on the plot. They are purely side characters whose entire purpose is to fill out the cast, with hardly any development in comparison with the Norse gods. These characters are entirely surface level, do not undergo any significant change throughout the series, and could have been replaced or removed from the show without any consequences to the plot.

However, in *Danmachi*, other gods are more heavily featured and some can be considered main characters, but both of the Norse gods depicted are at least equally important, if not more so in some instances. For example, early in the series, a Mesopotamian goddess is framed as an antagonist, especially towards a Norse goddess. However, after this character is killed, it is revealed that the Norse goddess has been pulling the strings the entire time, and she takes on the role as the main antagonist for the remainder of the series thus far. These plot points and characters will be discussed in the following chapter, demonstrating how shows and other transcultural works grant insight into the Japanese attitude towards medieval European mythology and history.

Examining Norse reception in Japan subverts a lot of principles of reception theory as a whole. The areas of the world that study Norse reception the most, such as the United States, Great Britain, and Northern Europe, can all claim heritage from the Vikings in some fashion, to varying degrees. In fact, one third of surveyed British people claim to be descended from the Vikings.¹¹ This perceived connection to history undoubtedly affects how one interprets or receives it and thus is important to acknowledge.

¹¹ Dahlgreen, Will. "3 In 10 Claim Viking Blood." YouGov, March 14, 2014.

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2014/03/14/third-us-think-were-vikings>.

In studying East Asian reception, that aspect is entirely removed, and without an inherent emotional connection or sense of identity, their interpretations vary significantly from those in other countries, as to be discussed in the following chapters. As this angle of reception studies continues, “the diffusion of European medieval elements into late 20th and early 21st century Japanese fiction invites us to investigate this trend, as this might enable us to reorganise the pieces of our cultural memory into an original, intriguing and revitalised form, even perhaps challenging our perception of our past and culture through a new, transcultural, multicultural and globalised prism.”¹²

As will be examined in chapter three, studying reception challenges our own perspectives by presenting new ones, and the introduction of a Japanese viewpoint in relation to Norse literature proves to be very interesting. While currently the field of Japanese-Norse reception has been under-researched, the growing popularity in media reflecting this reception, such as these anime and manga featuring Norse gods and stories, calls for further investigation into the unique features of this form of reception in comparison to other countries.

¹² Danesin, “Beyond Time & Culture.” 186-187.

II. Animation Analysis

I. Kamigami no Asobi

The previous chapter discussed Japanese treatment and interpretation of the Icelandic sagas and cultural factors at play. This chapter will discuss two shows more in depth, specifically looking at the Norse gods as characters and how they are portrayed. Examining this portrayal in comparison to the literature shows how cultural factors affect media interpretations. While all adaptations by their nature are subject to artistic interpretation and are bound to vary at least slightly, analyzing these differences can tell us what was changed and why.

The first of two shows to be analyzed is *Kamigami no Asobi*,¹³ where the main character Yui Kusanagi, a normal Japanese highschooler and daughter of a Shinto priest, is asked by Zeus for help. He has transported Greek, Egyptian, Norse, and Japanese gods to a magical school he has created, and he asks if Yui would do him the favor of attending. His goal is for her to teach the gods about humanity and love, and thus strengthen the fading bond between the humans and the gods. This world is based on a modern Japanese high school, and all the characters are expected to partake in classes and other school activities. The Norse gods featured in this show are Thor, Loki, and Balder, the latter two being the most heavily featured throughout the show and more important to the plot.¹⁴

Unlike many other anime television shows adaptations, *Kamigami no Asobi* was not originally a manga or a series of novels, but rather it was a dating simulator video game, in which the player could choose which of the gods to date. It is a part of a wider genre called *otome*, which encompasses a wide variety of games related by a common feature: they are almost exclusively marketed towards women and young girls.¹⁵ A common theme throughout these

¹³ This name translates to Play of Gods, but as the show is only available with English subtitles and has not been voiced in English, all discussion of the show online uses its Japanese name.

¹⁴ Instead of the standard spelling of Baldr, in this show his name is spelled as Balder. The *Kamigami no Asobi* character will be referred to with this spelling, while the Norse god will use the original spelling.

¹⁵ Kim Hyeshin, "Women's Games in Japan: Gendered Identity and Narrative Construction." *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 2-3 (2019): 185.

games is datable characters with whom the player can interact and form a relationship, usually featuring several men to choose from.¹⁶ *Kamigami no Asobi* is no different, with eight men to choose from as a love interest, most notably including Balder, Loki, and Thor, as well as other gods from different pantheons.

The characters' names in *Kamigami no Asobi* make significant reference to different aspects of the Norse gods. Each of the Norse gods portrayed in this anime is given a last name, each referencing items belonging to the gods in the mythology. The name Thor Megingyozu comes from megingjörð, a belt worn by Thor. This belt is one of the three magically powerful items in Thor's possession, the other two being the hammer Mjöllnir and the iron gloves Járngreipr.¹⁷ Loki Laevatein is named after the sword Lævateinn crafted by Loki to slay a monster in the poem *Fjölsvinnsmál*.¹⁸ And finally, Balder Hringhorni is named after the ship Hringhorni, which was used as Baldr's funeral ship in *Gylfaginning*.¹⁹ As seen in the names, and later actions, of these characters, it is obvious that the showrunners had extensive knowledge of Norse mythology.

Balder is introduced as the god of light, and he is shown to be very charismatic and well-liked by the other gods, although he and Loki have a particularly close relationship. He is very fair skinned, with long blond hair and blue eyes. Later in the series, it is revealed that Balder is also the god of destruction, as Loki states, "Light always invites darkness. The stronger and brighter the light, the deeper and blacker the darkness."²⁰ As the god of destruction, Balder is destined to lose control of his powers and destroy the world as a result. Loki explains that the

¹⁶ Kim, "Women's Games in Japan." 170.

¹⁷ Orchard, Andy. *Dictionary of Norse Myth and Legend*. (London: Cassell, 1998), 111.

¹⁸ Originally this sword's name was translated as Hævateinn, but scholar Sophus Bugge replaced the letter h with the letter l in his translation of the Poetic Edda, and this then became the common vernacular. Bugge, Sophus. *Saemundar Edda Hins Fróða: Norroen Fornkvaedi. Islandsk Samling Af Folkelige Oldtidsdigte Om Nordens Guder Og Heroer Almindelig Kaldet*. (Christiana: P. T. Malling 1867), 347.

¹⁹ Sturluson, Snorri. *Edda - Prologue and Gylfaginning*. Translated by Anthony Faulkes. (London: Viking Society For Northern Research, 2005), 49.

²⁰ *Kamigami no Asobi*. Season 1, Episode 11, "Chains of Fate." Directed by Tomoyuki Kawamura. Aired June 15, 2014. 4:40-4:45.

gods and Yui attending this school was Zeus's final attempt at saving Balder. If successful, both Balder and the world would live on, but if unsuccessful, Balder would need to die to prevent the destruction.

Despite their close friendship, Loki would need to kill Balder himself, as Balder's mother made everything in the universe promise to bring no harm to Balder, and everything agreed except for mistletoe, making Loki's mistletoe sword the only object that can kill him.²¹ Towards the end of the series, as time runs out and Balder grows more unstable, Loki and Balder retreat to a cliffside and reminisce about their childhoods, and Loki laments that he was unable to save Balder. Balder is remorseful towards Loki for solely shouldering the burden of trying to save him and revealing to Loki that there is one other thing besides his mistletoe sword which can hurt him. As the other characters approach and watch on in disbelief, he takes a step backwards off the cliff.²²

Balder's characterization bears a strong resemblance in both personality and fate to his Norse counterpart. In *Gylfaginning*, it is said that "(Baldr) is best and all praise him; he is so fair in appearance and so bright, that light shines from him,"²³ which is reflected in *Kamigami no Asobi* by Balder's charisma, personability, and good looks. In both, he is described as the god of light, however, in *Kamigami no Asobi* he is also the god of destruction, which is inspired by the story of the death of Baldr. This story begins with Baldr experiencing dreams prophesying his incoming death. Worried by this, he confides in his mother who then makes everything in the universe swear to bring no harm to her son; however, mistletoe, thought too innocent to do any harm, was overlooked and became the only thing that did not make this promise. After learning this, Loki fashions a weapon out of mistletoe and tricks the blind god Hodr into throwing it at Baldr, killing him instantly. Baldr's death was foretold to be the first event of Ragnarök, the end of the world, so the gods attempt to revive him. Hel, Loki's daughter and the ruler of the underworld, says that Baldr will only be brought back to life when everything in existence weeps

²¹ *Kamigami no Asobi*, "Chains of Fate." 7:30-8:05.

²² *Kamigami no Asobi*, "Chains of Fate." 16:30-21:55.

²³ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 23. "(Baldr) er beztr ok hann lofa allir. Hann er svá fagr álitum ok bjartr svá at lýsir af honum," Sturluson, Snorri. *Edda - Prologue and Gylfaginning*. Edited by Anthony Faulkes. (London: Viking Society For Northern Research, 2005), 23.

for him. The only one to not participate is a giant woman, who is implied to be Loki in disguise, thereby ensuring the beginning of Ragnarök.²⁴

There are many obvious similarities between this story and the events that occur in *Kamigami no Asobi*, such as Loki's weapon being the only thing able to kill Baldr, and interestingly, Baldr's death being indirectly caused by Loki, not directly. Neither iteration of Loki harm Baldr by their own hand; in one story he tricks another into doing it for him, and in the other story Balder commits suicide to spare Loki the pain of killing him. A significant difference between the two versions however is Loki's motivation and intent. In *Kamigami no Asobi*, Loki is trying to prevent the end of the world by killing Balder and he is deeply upset at the thought of harming his friend. In the mythology, Loki's intentions are much more malicious. He successfully starts Ragnarök by purposely tricking someone into killing Baldr and potentially prevents his resurrection.

Kamigami no Asobi's Loki is initially shown to be cold and distant to most of the other characters, with the exception of Balder. His cold demeanor is contrasted by his loud appearance, including red hair and green eyes, most likely a reference to his role as the god of fire in this show.²⁵ Personality-wise, he is very mischievous, frequently sneaking prohibited things into school and playing pranks on the other students. In episode six, he tricks Yui and another character named Tsukito into wearing "lovers' rings," which, when the pair is split between two people, are magically magnetized to each other, forcing the wearers together. These rings also cannot be removed until the wearers "tacitly understand each other," and violently electrocutes anyone who attempts to forcefully remove the rings, which guides the plot of the rest of the episode.²⁶ This is one of several pranks that Loki commits throughout the entire show, and it is stated that this is a well-known character trait of Loki and something he has frequently done in his past. He is not disliked by the other gods, but his frequent pranks do garner annoyance from them. This character trait is in reference to Loki's role as the god of mischief, or the "Æsir's

²⁴ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 48-51.

²⁵ This role of Loki as the god of fire is likely due to a conflation between him and the god Logi which will be explored in the following chapter.

²⁶ *Kamigami no Asobi*. Season 1, Episode 6, "The Moonlight's Feelings." Directed by Tomoyuki Kawamura. Aired May 10, 2014. 7:05-8:30.

originator of deceits and disgrace of all gods and men,” in the mythology where he is shown antagonizing the other gods and repeatedly proves himself to be unreliable and untrustworthy.²⁷

The two characters Balder and Loki have an interesting relationship that drives the plot of the show. As mentioned previously, Balder is destined to destroy the world, and Loki, being the person emotionally closest to him, is the only one who can kill him or save him. Loki reveals that the pair have been close friends since childhood and made a pact to “always be together,” hence his protectiveness over Balder and his initial cold disposition to Yui.²⁸ Their close relationship results in each lashing out towards the main character when one feels that the other is threatened. As demonstrated, this relationship is wildly different from what we see in the mythology, where Loki is antagonistic towards Baldr. How they express emotion towards each other and towards the main character fits into the mold of certain common character archetypes and tropes in Japanese media.

While the characters’ appearances and personalities largely derive from the mythology, they have been altered slightly in order to fit into Japanese character archetypes and fulfill certain tropes expected from a Japanese audience. The character archetypes included are yandere, tsundere, and kuudere. Yandere is “an archetypal character of anime and manga who is lovingly warm or timid and shy but then later brutally violent or highly aggressive.”²⁹ These types of characters are almost exclusively women who tend to obsess over a specific man, often to the point of a psychotic break resulting in homicidal tendencies. However, there are a small number of male characters who fit into this archetype. Tsundere is “an archetypal character or anime and manga who is initially harsh (often violent) then later gentle, or one who is initially seen as cold and aloof on the outside, but later shown to be loving and warm on the inside.”³⁰ Conversely to yandere, these characters emotionally mature and learn to open up over time, despite their initially harsh exterior. These characters are more often than not men who need a

²⁷ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 26. “Rógbera Ásanna ok frumkveða flærðanna ok vomm allra goða ok manna.” Sturluson. *Edda*. Edited by Faulkes. 26.

²⁸ *Kamigami no Asobi*. Season 1 Episode 8 “The Solitude of Light.” Directed by Tomoyuki Kawamura. Aired May 25, 2014. 18:03-18:40.

²⁹ Richard W. Kroon, *A/V A To Z: An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Media, Entertainment and Other Audiovisual Terms*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 760.

³⁰ Kroon, “An Encyclopedic Dictionary,” 706.

woman to help them break down their emotional walls. Finally, kuudere is a “seemingly cold and cynical person who seems like (they) do not have emotions.”³¹ These types of characters are stoic, expressionless, and remain level-headed in stressful situations. All three of the Norse gods depicted in this series were reimagined in order to fit into one of these character archetypes.

Balder, despite the convention being comprised nearly entirely of women, fits into the yandere character archetype. In the first half of the series, Balder is kind and friendly towards the main character, expressing a desire to get to know her better. However, Yui begins to grow closer to other characters as well and they become friends. In episode eight, Balder notices Yui and Loki talking to each other. He then forcefully leads Yui away from Loki, showing extreme jealousy towards Loki, telling Yui, “I won’t let even Loki have you.”³² Yui is forcibly embraced by Balder even as she struggles against him, but he restrains her. Loki soon catches up to the pair and Balder becomes aggressive, injuring both Loki and Yui before he collapses.³³ In this scene, Balder shows that he has little regard for Yui’s wellbeing, her reciprocation of his romantic feelings, and her desire to have friends and emotional connections outside of him. To him, all that is important is that he alone possesses her, and he is willing to go to any length, including harming her and his childhood best friend, to ensure this.

His actions in this scene are hallmark examples of yandere character traits. Despite his affection for Yui and his initial charisma, he appears to develop issues regulating those emotions and begins lashing out towards those he cares about most. While harming a significant other may seem counter-intuitive, for someone who falls into this archetype, they often believe that if they themselves cannot have the object of their desires, then no one can. This can lead into assault or, in extreme cases, homicide of their love interest or those who they feel may pose a threat to their relationship. His jealousy, possessiveness, and aggression towards Yui and Loki all warrant his label of yandere.

On the other hand, Loki is shown to fit into the tsundere character archetype. Initially in the series, Loki is extremely cold, bordering on hostile, towards Yui. He sees her as inferior to him for being a human, and he dislikes her growing relationship with Balder. Eventually, Loki is

³¹ Laida Limniati, “Feminist Approaches to Manga Between the 1970s and 2000s.” *Helsingfors Universitet* (2007): 11.

³² *Kamigami no Asobi*, “The Solitude of Light,” 12:20.

³³ *Kamigami no Asobi*, “The Solitude of Light,” 10:10-12:30.

shown to begin to warm up to Yui, growing protective of her against Balder's aggression, and opening up to her about the knowledge of Balder's power and destiny. Unlike Balder's jealous possessiveness, Loki's affection is more self-sacrificing and genuine, resulting in an affectionate and trusting friendship between him and Yui by the end of the series. This character development culminates in episode twelve, the series finale. As the gods fight in a climactic battle, Loki and Yui share a brief tender moment. She gives him a weapon to help him, and Loki snarkily replies "I never liked you from the beginning," before his composure breaks, he smiles and adds "you know I'm a huge liar don't you?" and kissing her on the forehead.³⁴ This final interaction demonstrates that Loki had a significant change of heart towards Yui and now feels emotionally close enough to her to openly show affection. This development is in line with his character archetype, as initially he is emotionally distant, but eventually warms up to Yui by the end of the series.

Thor in this series is depicted as the god of lightning and brother to Balder. He has short green hair with a lightning bolt shaved into one side. He is rarely featured in this series, serving as a much more minor character than the other Norse gods. However, what is shown about his personality fits into the role of a protective older brother, which contains aspects of the kuudere character archetype. Throughout the series, he is shown as aloof, level-headed, and as a voice of reason during conflict. He has taken on a role of protector towards Loki and Balder, explicitly stating at the end of the series that "my role is to watch over them."³⁵ This manifests in helping Loki prevent Balder from destroying the world, and also keeping Loki in line when it comes to his pranks.

While this character archetype has some surface-level similarities with the tsundere archetype such as showing little emotion generally but affection to a select few, the most notable difference is the lack of development. Kuudere characters often do not change their traits over time, rather they are ingrained in their personality. Whereas with yandere and tsundere characters, the entire archetype revolves around development and change in their behavior and personality. Yandere and tsundere characters begin by acting one way and evolve into acting in a

³⁴ *Kamigami no Asobi*. Season 1, Episode 12, "Eternal Separation." Directed by Tomoyuki Kawamura. Aired June 22, 2014. 17:30-17:45.

³⁵ *Kamigami no Asobi*, "Eternal Separation." 18:40.

completely different way. With kuudere characters, such a dramatic shift is rarely seen and these characters' behaviors tend to stay consistent.

This interpretation of an aloof and pragmatic Thor is wildly different from the mythology. Norse Thor is incredibly hot-headed, impulsive, and prone to anger outbursts which cause many problems for him. The story of Thor and Utgarda-Loki shows many instances of Thor's arrogance and his tendency to use force to get what he wants. In the beginning of the story, a farmer's son injures one of Thor's goats, which enrages him. Terrified at the sight of Thor's anger, the farmer offers his son and daughter as slaves to Thor in exchange for mercy, which he accepts.³⁶ Then Thor and his group meet a giant who camps with them. During the night, Thor attempts to steal from and murder the giant, but he is unsuccessful and the giant seems unaware of this fact. Later, Thor is brought to the castle of Utgarda-Loki and is issued a series of challenges, which he thinks he can win easily. The first is a drinking challenge, the second is lifting a cat off the ground, and the third is wrestling an old woman, all of which he fails. Utgarda-Loki explains that the drinking horn was connected to the ocean, the cat was in actuality the midgard serpent, and the old woman was time itself, therefore he was set up to fail. Consumed by anger, Thor attempts to murder Utgarda-Loki, but his magic helps him escape easily.³⁷

Another story is the poem *Brymskviða*, in which Thor's hammer *Mjöllnir* is stolen and he and Loki disguise themselves as women to get it back. They pose as Freya and a servant, as the giant *Brymr* who stole the hammer requests Freya's hand in marriage before returning it. After a feast, "Freya" is presented with *Mjöllnir*, which Thor happily accepts and uses to kill all of the giants in attendance.³⁸ Both of these stories demonstrate that Thor is quick to anger and his aggression leads to impulsivity, a personality that differs significantly from the *Kamigami no Asobi* interpretation.

All three of these characters still share many similarities with the source material which inspired them, however, they were significantly altered in order to fit character archetypes familiar to a Japanese audience as well as the story the showrunners wanted to tell. These new

³⁶ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 38.

³⁷ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 39-46.

³⁸ Benjamin Thorpe, "Thrymskviða." Essay. In *The Poetic Edda*, (Lapeer, Michigan: The Northvegr Foundation Press, 2004), 97-103.

characters are filtered through the lens of Japanese culture and reception of the original mythology. These alterations to the personalities of the Norse gods reinforce what values are important in Japanese society by emphasizing them in these new characters. Namely, the new characters of Balder, Loki, and Thor present ideals of loyalty and redemption.

For example, these three characters show great loyalty to each other, standing together in the face of adversity. As for Loki and Balder, both go through a mild redemption arc, as Loki was initially hostile to Yui and later opened up to her, and Balder became possessive and aggressive towards her which he later overcame. Imposing these ideals onto characters taken from another culture shows that these values are important to Japanese culture and would resonate with a Japanese audience.

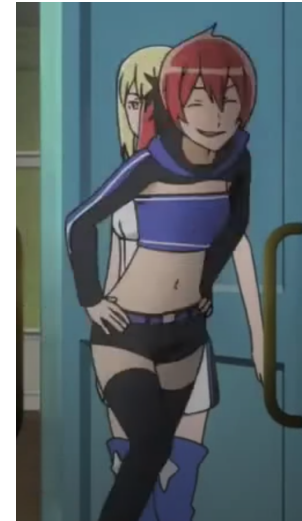
II. Animation Analysis

II. Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls In A Dungeon?

While not entirely revolving around the Norse gods, the show *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls In A Dungeon*, or *Danjon ni deai o motomeru no wa machigatteiru darō ka* (hereafter *Danmachi*), features two of them with different degrees of importance. In *Danmachi*, gods of various pantheons decided to descend from their realm to live amongst, and rule over, humanity. The gods are very powerful and high-status individuals who recruit adventurers to serve under them in their “family” in order to protect the community and keep order. Unlike *Kamigami no Asobi*, this show does not take place in a modern setting, rather, it uses a pseudo-medieval environment that mirrors the expectations set by the fantasy genre. In the city of Orario, adventurers are ascribed a level representing their power, and they each possess unique, named abilities similar to those seen in video games. Common themes with several characters in this show are those of sexuality and gender expression, which are best seen in the characters of Loki and Freya. These two interpretations are striking in comparison to other media featuring these characters. As will be discussed, both Loki and Freya subvert ideas of gender roles and gender expression by partaking in sexually explicit behavior. Some aspects of their behavior and appearance are based in mythology and some deviate significantly.

The plot of *Danmachi* follows the main character, Bell. He is an inexperienced but up-and-coming adventurer who appears to be improving remarkably fast, of which the other gods begin to take notice. The two Norse gods depicted, Loki and Freya, are two of the most powerful gods in their society with numerous powerful adventurers serving them. Loki does not show much interest in Bell, content with the adventurers she has, however Freya grows to desperately want to recruit Bell by any means necessary and steal him from Hestia, the goddess he already serves. The female characters in this show each conform to and subvert traditional gender roles in varying ways. Their sexual expression, gender expression, and behavior towards potential partners each grant insight into the source material they are inspired from. They also highlight the changes made from said source material that show the new cultural factors at play that come with such an adaptation. These female characters depicted include the two Norse gods Loki and Freya, as well as two other major characters, Hestia and Ais, for comparison.

Loki is depicted as a woman in this show, with short, red hair that is often tied into a ponytail. Loki appears tomboyish, often sporting outfits consisting of shorts and a shirt which exposes her stomach. She is tall and slender, and also flat-chested, which is something she seems to be insecure about, as other gods frequently tease her for it. Most of these interactions are portrayed comically, however. Personality-wise, Loki is outgoing, boisterous, and mischievous. This reputation usually expresses itself as sexual harassment of her adventurers, who are almost exclusively female. She also is shown to be weak-willed when it comes to alcohol, and can be easily persuaded into drinking too much. Loki's main role as a side character is that of comic relief, as her lighthearted personality and mischief lead to comedic situations and witty dialogue. Despite her comedic relief role, she is shown to be well respected by the other characters and is a powerful god in their society.



*Fig 1: Loki's standard outfit.
"Reason." 3:17.*

Loki's behavior and appearance contain many qualities that would ordinarily be ascribed to a male character. During a formal event in season one, she wears an elegant black gown, but at a similar event in season two, she wears a dark red tuxedo. She is exclusively attracted to women and expresses this attraction through groping her female adventurers. Her lesbianism is one of her defining traits and colors her interactions with those around her and determines who she chooses to spend time with. As a goddess, Loki chooses which adventurers to recruit to serve her, and her family comprises about 80% women. Each member is subject to repeated unwanted groping from Loki, except for one woman who constantly rejects her. The comedy from Loki's character comes from this subversion of heterosexual sexuality, and her occupying what would be a masculine role.

Loki, despite being a woman, has many masculine traits relating to both her appearance and her behavior. This begs the question, why depict her as a woman? There are several reasons which may have inspired this depiction. In the mythology and most modern depictions, such as the Marvel comics and films, Loki is a man, however, there are several instances in the mythology where Loki shapeshifts into a woman or a female animal. As mentioned previously, after the death of Baldr, Loki is implied to shapeshift into a female giant and prevent his resurrection. Similarly, in *Loki and Svaðilfari*, in order to lead a male horse away from its owner,

Loki shapeshifts into a mare.³⁹ This shows that while Loki typically presents as a man, he is open to changing his gender when the situation calls for it. As a result, there have been several modern adaptations of Norse mythology featuring a female Loki, some of which will be explored in the following chapter.

Loki's depiction as a woman in *Danmachi* specifically could be a reference to Loki's gender fluidity in the mythology, or there may be some cultural reasons at work. In this show in particular, much of the plot revolves around Bell's infatuation with an accomplished swordswoman, Ais, who is an adventurer in Loki's family and is the main love interest for Bell throughout the show. They meet in the first episode and he immediately falls for her, and his main goal centers around becoming stronger to impress her and fight alongside her. While Loki admires Ais's beauty and attempts to sexually harass her, she is never successful and constantly rejected by Ais.

While it is easy to argue that the showrunners decide who Ais will end up with, a possible explanation for Loki being depicted as a woman in regards to this plot point is so there is no other male competition for Ais. The lack of male characters around her could be to ensure that the audience only wants to see Ais end up with Bell, rather than another man. With Loki as a woman and Ais not interested in women, paired with their infrequent conversations, the likelihood that the audience will want to see them together decreases, as they are meant to want to see her end up with Bell.

Ais's role, especially in the spinoff show *Sword Oratoria* which features her as the main character, is double edged. For a straight male audience, she is someone to find attractive and lust over, for a female audience, she is someone to identify with.⁴⁰ While she is an admired, strong, and beautiful person, she does not often speak in scenes where she is present, turning her into someone an audience member can easily project themselves onto. She contains many traits that would be desirable to a partner or desirable to possess, which is what attracts audience members to her.

Ais also fulfills the common female role in anime of the "beautiful fighting girl," as seen in other popular series such as *Sailor Moon*. This girl is someone who is "unaware and

³⁹ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 35-36.

⁴⁰ Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. (Oakland: University of California Press. 2006), 134.

uninterested in her own sexual attractiveness,” “loved for her ability to fight,” and is “an absolutely unattainable object of desire,” usually by the main character.⁴¹ All of these characteristics are shown by Ais early on. Even though she is desired by most men in the show, she seems mostly unaware of this fact and has little interest in romance. Her expertise in swordfighting makes her unattainable and unapproachable by Bell in the beginning of the series, who works to prove himself to her.

Conversely to Loki, Freya is characterized as beautiful, soft-spoken, flirty, while also being highly determined, ambitious, and cunning. Her desire is to have the strongest adventurers under her control to expand her power and influence, and she goes to great lengths to realize this goal. She also has the ability to magically charm humans and gods alike in order to do her bidding, although Bell is uniquely resistant to this magic. Due to this ability and his growing strength as an adventurer, Freya begins to obsess about recruiting him, and intends to steal him away from the god he already serves, Hestia, whom Freya sees as beneath her. Many fans speculate whether Freya has any romantic feelings for Bell, as Hestia does, or rather if she sees Bell more as a rare object to add to a collection.

Norse Freya is described as the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, which no doubt inspires this interpretation of her. Norse Freya also uses the alias of Syr, which is coincidentally the name of another character in *Danmachi*, a waitress at the local tavern and friend of Bell.⁴² In the novels, on which the show is based, it has been revealed that Syr is Freya in disguise, using a human form in order to become closer to Bell and win his affection, although this has yet to be seen in the show.

Danmachi Freya is characterized as hyper-feminine, and especially appears so in comparison with Loki. She has waist-length silver hair and is always wearing elegant dresses. Similar to Ais, she is meant for male audiences to lust after, as do most characters in the show.

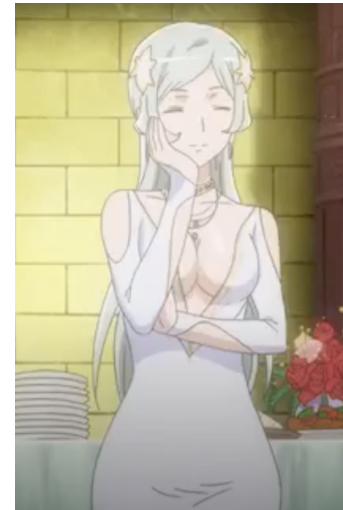


Fig 2: Freya’s introductory outfit. “Monster Festival.” 7:28.

⁴¹ Tamaki Saitō and Hiroki Azuma. *Beautiful Fighting Girl*. Translated by Keith Vincent and Dawn Lawson. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 163-164.

⁴² Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Freyja." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 22, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Freyja>.

However, unlike Ais, Freya uses her beauty and sexuality as a tool to manipulate others. Whether this manipulation is simple teasing and flirting to get a certain reaction, or sleeping with someone in return for influence over that person or for something else that she wants from them.

The first action in the series that shows the subversion of Freya's beauty and sexuality with her ruthless ambition happens in season one, episode three. Her plan has two goals, remove Hestia from the picture and test Bell's strength, so she releases a giant gorilla into the city to hunt them down with little regard to other civilians or possible structural damage.⁴³ This scene shows her dedication to her overall goal of recruiting Bell, to which she becomes more committed to over time. In Japan, ambition is often seen as a masculine trait, with women in the workforce often being overlooked in favor of male colleagues.⁴⁴

In *Danmachi*, as mentioned previously, Freya can magically charm humans and gods alike and force them to act how she wants. She is shown to have no qualms about using this power as she is shown to force people to kill themselves and also charms the entire city in order to make everyone forget that Bell used to serve Hestia, and it is said she could charm the entire world if she wanted to.⁴⁵ Her charm is also able to overpower the charm of other gods, as in season two when she breaks a charm from the goddess Ishtar and substitutes her own.⁴⁶ This shows that Freya has absolutely no aversion to control, as long as she is the one who is doing the controlling.

On the surface, this behavior seems completely contrary to the character of Freya in the mythology, but there are actually a significant amount of similarities between the two. Norse Freya is shown to be very unwilling to get married, as many poems and stories revolve around

⁴³ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 1 Episode 3. "The Blade of a God." Directed by Yoshiki Yamakawa. Aired April 18, 2015. 17:15-17:30.

⁴⁴ 42% of surveyed Japanese female employees agreed with the statement "my boss does not know my career ambition," which was four times higher than women surveyed in Hong Kong. Moriyasu, Ken, Nikkei Asian Review chief desk editor. "My Boss Doesn't Know My Ambitions,' Say Japan's Working Women." Nikkei Asia. December 1, 2017.

⁴⁵ Fujino Ōmori and Suzuhito Yasuda. *Danjon ni deai wo motomeru no wa machigatte iru darōka famiria kuronikuru: Episōdo Fureiya*. (Tōkyō: Esubīkurieitibu, 2019).

⁴⁶ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 2 Episode 10. "Longing to Be a Hero." Directed by Hideki Tachibana. Aired September 14, 2019. 19:50-20:10.

her trying to get out of a marriage set up for her. While this could be interpreted as an aversion to sexuality, it actually points to a resistance toward control, as Norse Freya is also shown to use her sexuality to get what she wants, which will be discussed more in a succeeding chapter. This aversion towards being controlled is a commonality between the two Freyas.

In the Loki and Svaðilfari episode in *Snorra Edda*, marriage to Freya is set as a wager against a giant; if he wins the bet he can marry her. This deeply angers Freya and she insists that the other gods ensure that he does not win.⁴⁷ As mentioned in the previous chapter, Thor impersonates Freya and kills the giant who intends to marry her against her will in order to rescue her from the arrangement, as well as get back his stolen hammer.

Both Loki and Freya are shown to be hyper-sexual in their own ways in *Danmachi*. Loki sexually assaults women and Freya uses her charm and attractiveness to control and influence people into doing her bidding. Conversely, Ais is never sexual and portrayed as very pure, similar to Hestia who is a virgin goddess. An interesting thing to note is that for all four characters, expression of sexuality is portrayed negatively. In Loki's case, her sexual expression is rejected and played to the audience as a joke. It is also exclusively directed towards women, a behavior which is still largely unacceptable in Japan in comparison to other countries.

For Freya, her sexuality is correlated with her ruthlessness and framed as antagonistic. In episode four of season one, Freya is seen watching Bell from a window in a high tower. During this scene, ominous music plays and Freya wears a previously unseen outfit, an incredibly revealing dark red and purple dress.⁴⁸ It is at this point that Freya is fully revealed as an antagonist in the series and her behavior becomes more outwardly manipulative and conniving. Freya also shows extreme jealousy over her other male adventurers, not allowing women near them at all. At the end of



Fig 3: Freya's antagonistic outfit. "The Weak." 21:17.

⁴⁷ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 35.

⁴⁸ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 1 Episode 4. "The Weak." Directed by Daisuke Takashima. Aired April 25, 2015. 19:26-19:42.

season two, she kills another god out of jealousy for getting too close to Bell.⁴⁹ In this scene she returns to wearing the sporadically seen revealing dress, which she continues to wear for the rest of the series thus far.

This dress is a visual representation of Freya's moral descent as a character. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this show tends to correlate immorality with revealing clothing, with the most antagonistic and evil characters consistently wearing very little clothing. This outfit worn in scenes where Freya is plotting or committing evil acts is a deliberate choice, as the music during these scenes helps reinforce the feelings of anxiety or dread that comes with seeing her behavior.

However, the events of the show are not chronologically the first time that this character engages in this behavior. In a spinoff novel series, *Familia Chronicle*, several of Freya's adventurers backstories are detailed and it is shown how they came to serve Freya. In the story of the Gulliver brothers, Freya is shown to use her sexuality in order to obtain what she wants. The four brothers are jewelry makers, and Freya attempts to recruit them, but they are bound to their boss and cannot go with her. She then commissions a necklace which takes four days to complete. After the fourth day, it is revealed that Freya has spent those four nights with their boss in exchange for their freedom.⁵⁰

These characters and events are actually based off of four dwarves in the story *Sörla Þáttur*. In this story, Freya approaches four dwarfs who possess a beautiful necklace called *Brísingamen*, for which she is overcome with longing. She offers anything the dwarves could want in exchange for it, and they request that they each spend a night with her, to which she accepts.⁵¹ Although the details of the story have been altered slightly, like Freya sleeping with the dwarves' boss rather than with them, the story from the original mythology is clearly recognizable as inspiration.

A pattern seen through the behaviors of all the female characters discussed is demonization for expression of sexuality. Loki is mocked and Freya is manipulative, while Ais is

⁴⁹ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Longing to Be a Hero." 19:50-20:10.

⁵⁰ Ōmori Fujino, and Niritsu. *Danjon Ni Deai O Motomeru Nowa Machigatte Iru Darōka Famiria Kuronikuru: Episōdo Fureiya*. Tōkyō: Esubīkurieitibu, 2019.

⁵¹ Nora Kershaw, trans. "The Tháttur of Sörli" In *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1921), 38-57

revered for her purity and Hestia is immune to Freya's charm due to her status as a virgin goddess. Both Freya and Loki are active in their pursuit of sexual partners, whereas Ais and Hestia are passive. Ais is pursued by Bell while she is unaware of his feelings for her, and Hestia never takes the initiative to pursue Bell herself. She explicitly shows affection towards him and does not hide her feelings, but she expects him to notice and reciprocate. Although she can be suggestive at times, she ultimately hopes for him to be the one to make the first move. The show favoring these types of depictions of women and portraying those who act differently in a negative light helps subconsciously reinforce stereotypical gender roles.

As evidenced by the comparison to the literature, the personalities of the gods have been altered in the anime for various reasons, including the sake of the story and the integration of these characters into Japanese culture. The next chapter examines how gods of other pantheons are treated similarly in anime while comparing how media from other countries interprets the Norse gods.

III. International Investigation

While it is important to examine the reception of Norse mythology in Japan in its own right, an international comparison is useful in determining general trends in reception, and how those trends are replicated or subverted in Japan. Examining how different cultures interpret the same stories can grant huge insights into the values of that culture. It is also useful to examine how Japan treats other pantheons and how those interpretations differ to that of the Norse gods. While *Kamigami no Asobi* and *Danmachi* both feature other gods alongside the Norse gods, *Danmachi* is the only one that spends any time significantly developing these other gods as characters. *Kamigami no Asobi* treats the other gods only as minor side characters, so the comparison in this chapter will rather focus on the supporting cast in *Danmachi*, as well as briefly touching on other pieces of media.

A notable example is Ishtar, a Mesopotamian goddess and important character in *Danmachi*. As mentioned in chapter two, she functions as an antagonistic character for the first half of the series, especially towards Freya and their overlapping desires to recruit Bell. To refresh, Freya feels threatened by her at the end of season two due to her growing power and more frequent attempts to steal Bell, and Freya eventually murders her.⁵² While Freya's actions during this scene are notable and have been already discussed previously, revisiting this scene and these characters allows us to compare the two characters' personalities and behavior, as they have significant overlap.

Ishtar is a goddess of beauty, as is Freya, whom Ishtar views as a rival. She is portrayed as very prideful, believing herself to be the most beautiful woman, and resenting the frequent claims by others that Freya's beauty outmatches hers. Ishtar also possesses the same charm ability as Freya, although Freya's ability is shown to be more powerful by overriding Ishtar's influence and affecting those who had already been charmed by Ishtar. In their final confrontation, Ishtar had charmed a man acting as her bodyguard, whom Freya then easily influenced to get him to turn on Ishtar. This demonstration of power shocks Ishtar, who even in her final moments cannot accept that she had been bested by Freya⁵³

⁵² *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Longing to Be a Hero." 19:50-20:10.

⁵³ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Longing to Be a Hero." 19:50-20:10.

Physically, Ishtar's appearance is very striking in comparison to the rest of the cast. While Japanese anime has a reputation for designing scantily-clad female characters, this outfit is extreme for the genre. Her outfit is very revealing, lacking shoes and consisting of a low skirt with a long slit up to her hip, a top piece that is little more than a thin ribbon, and many pieces of gold jewelry including a tiara. The members of her family consist of similarly dressed women, often with darker skin matching hers. Much like Loki, Ishtar's family is composed almost exclusively of women, although each god's behavior towards their respective family is very different.

Her family was among the most powerful in the city, rivaling those of Freya and Loki. Residing in the pleasure quarter of the city, they oversaw the brothels and prostitutes, having a near monopoly on the industry, with the emblem of their family being a prostitute.

Ishtar viewed sex as a sacred act and prostitution as a way for women to control men's aggressiveness, therefore justifying her behavior of using her sexuality to get what she wanted from people, mostly men.

Ishtar is heavily sexualized from her initial introduction as a character. The show portrays her and her actions negatively, especially those relating to her sexual behavior. Undoubtedly her behavior is objectively morally wrong due to the harm she causes, as will be discussed later, but from her first interaction with some of the other main cast, there is an obvious harsh lens of scrutiny focused on her.

Ishtar is also known to have many slaves serving her. In episode seven of season two, another character informs Bell that she heard a rumor that her childhood friend had been deceived and sold into slavery.⁵⁴ Later, it is revealed that she was sold to Ishtar to work as a prostitute.⁵⁵ This character, Haruhime, is in stark contrast to the rest of the Ishtar family. She is an incredibly soft-spoken young woman, with fair skin, blonde hair, and green eyes. She is of noble birth, and lived a sheltered life until she was sold into slavery. She also continues to dress

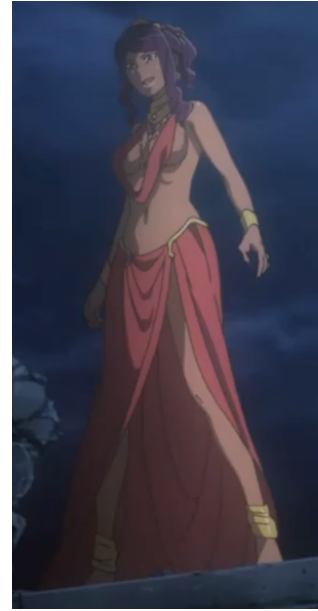


Fig 4: Ishtar moments before her death. "Longing to Be a Hero." 19:03

⁵⁴ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 2 Episode 7. "Fox Person."

Directed by Kozo Kaiho. Aired August 24, 2019. 14:05-14:13.

⁵⁵ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Fox Person." 15:17-15:22.

very modestly, wearing a kimono which fully covers her body. Her behavior differs significantly from the other members of Ishtar's family in the sense that she is not sexually aggressive at all and faints at the first hint of her own sexual attraction to Bell.⁵⁶

Prostitution, despite its prevalence in the city, is heavily frowned upon, as "to a hero, a prostitute is a symbol of destruction."⁵⁷ As Bell looks through a book of "heroic stories," he comes across a story where "a hero gets involved with a prostitute and almost meets his end" and "the hero regains honor by slaying her."⁵⁸ This scene comes at a time when Bell is deciding how much to risk in order to rescue Haruhime. The society portrays this as a bad thing to do, but Bell ultimately decides that he must save her and do what's right.

In episode eight of season two, Aisha, a member of Ishtar's family, recounts a story about her disobeying Ishtar and destroying a powerful item. As punishment, Aisha was beaten within an inch of her life, then raped and charmed by Ishtar so that she cannot disobey orders again, even if she wanted to.⁵⁹ Aisha is the one sent by Ishtar to capture Bell, but when he tries to escape with Haruhime, Aisha recaptures her and lets Bell escape.

Notably, while most of Ishtar's family are her victims in some way, Haruhime is Bell's main focus for rescue. Due to other plot events, Haruhime is in the most immediate danger, but the wellbeing of the other members of Ishtar's family is not questioned during the rescue. The other darker skinned women are left to fend for themselves while the blonde, white, and weak victim is perfect for rescue.

Ishtar's wording for her desire to capture Bell is also telling of her views on slavery and peoples' autonomy. She orders her family to capture Bell, wanting to beat Freya in their race to capture Bell for themselves. She explains to them, "Freya is very interested in Bell, but for some reason she does nothing. So we'll take him for ourselves. If the kid became my slave, what would she think then?"⁶⁰ Slavery is obviously a terrible thing, both in reality and the society of the

⁵⁶*Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 2 Episode 6. "City of Lust."

Directed by Hideki Tachibana. Aired August 17, 2019. 15:12-15:19.

⁵⁷ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Fox Person." 9:43-9:47.

⁵⁸ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Fox Person." 9:17-9:43.

⁵⁹ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* Season 2 Episode 8. "Killing Stone."

Directed by Toshikazu Hashimoto. Aired April 18, 2015. 19:22-20:18

⁶⁰ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "Fox Person." 17:43-18:04.

show. While an audience does not need this line to understand how comfortable Ishtar is with keeping slaves, it helps demonstrate how disposable people are to her, and how she only sees their worth in how much they can be controlled.

Freya was seen as a more wholesome and respectable version of Ishtar, until Ishtar's death, where Freya then fully takes over her role as a demonized sexual woman and main antagonist of the series. Interestingly, Freya's descent into a villain correlates with her embrace and exploitation of her sexuality. These two traits go hand in hand, as a goddess becomes more evil, she also becomes more sexual.

Sexuality is treated as a weapon, both by the characters using it to get what they want and the audience who places judgements onto these characters and their behavior. While of course many of the actions taken by these characters are reprehensible, simply expressing sexuality becomes associated with these actions due to how the characters are presented.

As for Loki, one aspect of the character that is common to many interpretations, except for the original mythology, is either red hair or another association with fire. In both *Kamigami no Asobi* and *Danmachi*, Loki has red hair, with *Kamigami* Loki having the role of the god of fire. A conflation between Loki and fire, which is not seen in the mythology, has ingrained itself into collective consciousness and eventually made its way to Japan.

This association begins with the story of Utgarda-Loki. As explained in chapter two, this story features Thor and a giant, but it also contains the character Logi, who is an incredibly important character when talking about Loki. Loki is challenged to an eating contest against Logi, who wins by not only eating all of the meat, but the bones and the plate as well. Later, it is revealed that Logi, whose name means flame, is actually fire itself, which is why he was able to consume everything⁶¹

While this story shows Loki and Logi interacting, it does not explain why many people conflate the two characters. In *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a cycle of four operas written by Richard Wagner loosely based on Norse mythology, features his amalgamation of the two characters Loki and Logi, named Loge. This character combines aspects of both Loki and Logi, as Loge is the god of fire, a known trickster, and the instigator of Ragnarok. The popularity of

⁶¹ Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Faulkes. 41-45.

Wagner's Ring Cycle instilled this association between Loki and fire that has permeated our modern conception of him.⁶²

An additional association to fire is the slight resemblance Loki bears to the Greek god Prometheus. In the Greek story, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity. As a punishment, he is chained to a rock and eternally tortured. In Loki's case, for starting Ragnarok, the end of the world, he is also chained to a rock and tortured. Both punishments involve animals as well, as Prometheus has his liver eaten every day by an eagle which then regrows, and Loki has a snake dripping venom into his eye. While the reasoning for the punishment is opposite, one brings about the dawn of humanity and one ends everything, the imagery of each character receiving their punishment is very similar.

In *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, this association between Loki and fire is also present. *American Gods* is a novel published in 2001 which tells the story of a man named Shadow and his involvement with gods of various pantheons residing in the United States. The Norse gods are featured heavily; most of the novel features Odin as a mentor character to Shadow, before he and Loki are revealed to be the antagonists. As another twist, Shadow himself is revealed to be Baldr, the son of Odin.

In Loki's first appearance, his hair color is directly mentioned, "he knew that there would be close-cropped hair beneath the black driver's cap, cut close to the scalp like the embers of a fire."⁶³ Then immediately after this description, another using a similar wording is used: "And his lips twisted into a crooked smile and embers danced in the shadows of his eyes."⁶⁴ During this scene, Loki then lights candles to begin a ritual between the main character and the other gods.⁶⁵ This character is also shown smoking in nearly all his appearances. No other gods are described with such a close association to fire.

Another feature of Loki reflected in media is his gender fluidity. As mentioned previously, Loki often shapeshifted into a woman in the mythology, and some media reflect this

⁶² Bell, Richard H. *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle: The Genesis and Development of the Tetralogy and the Appropriation of Sources, Artists, Philosophers, and Theologians*. (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2021). 43-46.

⁶³ Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. (New York: William Morrow, 2011), 561.

⁶⁴ Gaiman. *American Gods*. 561.

⁶⁵ Gaiman. *American Gods*. 564.

by portraying Loki as a woman. The gender swapping of historical or mythological characters is not uncommon in Japanese media, and *Danmachi* is far from the only piece of media to feature Loki as a woman. However, western media has done this as well, a notable example being the character of Lady Loki, who appears in a 2007 run of the *Thor* comics and again in the new Marvel tv series *Loki*. Lady Loki is the name for the character of Loki during the time when he takes on a female form. In the comics, after the events of Ragnarok, the gods come to Earth and take on human forms. However, Loki decides to steal the form intended for Sif, trapping her in the body of an elderly woman in hospice care, resulting in Loki inhabiting a female body. Loki's personality remained largely unchanged, still retaining the ambition to usurp Thor from ascending the throne of Asgard and the tendency towards deception. While many fans criticized this story, saying that it was only "an edgy way to add some sex appeal to a beloved Marvel villain," Lady Loki was not treated as a costume by Loki or by other characters, she was referred to as a woman and Loki adapted her identity.⁶⁶ Loki eventually returns to a male form later in the series, but Lady Loki has been featured several times as cameos throughout other comic series and in the new Marvel series titled *Loki*.

In this series the character of Loki, played by Tom Hiddleston, encounters numerous variants of himself from different, parallel universes, one of which is a woman who prefers to go by the name of Sylvie. This is potentially a reference to another Marvel comic character who goes by the same name and has yet to be seen on screen, but it is also likely done to avoid confusion between the characters within the show.

Loki is not the only character in *Danmachi* to switch genders from their original mythology; the Greek god Hephaestus is also a woman. Despite this change, her appearance and personality is very similar to that in the mythology. *Danmachi* Hephaestus is the goddess of blacksmithing, taking her work very seriously with a stern and pragmatic personality. Her appearance consists of bright red hair and a red left eye, with her right eye covered by an eyepatch to conceal a mysterious deformity, horrifying anyone who accidentally sees it, except for Hestia and another character who becomes Hephaestus's love interest. This deformity

⁶⁶ Johnston, Dais. "Everything You Need to Know about 'Loki's Shocking New Character Reveal.'" Inverse. June 16, 2021. <https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/lokis-huge-character-reveal-explained-lady-loki>.

undermines her self-esteem regarding her appearance but does little to affect her work, which is her source of pride.

The personality and appearance of Hephaestus were directly taken from the mythology, but the manga has taken some artistic liberties. The Greek Hephaestus is the god of blacksmithing, metalworking, and fire. In all accounts, Hephaestus is either born with or later obtains a physical disability which affects his appearance so much that he is described as repulsive. This is the direct inspiration for *Danmachi* Hephaestus's deformity and eyepatch. Yet despite her eyepatch, she is a very conventionally attractive woman.

Another example in Japanese animation is the character of King Arthur in the show *Fate Stay Night*, where this individual is a woman. Based on a video game, the show follows Shirou Emiya who enters a tournament called the Holy Grail War. In this competition, individuals can summon warriors from history and legend to help them fight. He summons King Arthur, whom he grows close to over the course of the show. Her name was changed to Artoria Pendragon, or commonly known by the nickname Saber. Her story prior to the events of the show follows the legend of King Arthur somewhat accurately, but rather with the message that the gender of the king does not matter, so long as they are willing to do what is necessary. This gender swap of King Arthur may have been done to convey the message of gender equality, but many fans think that the main reason was to facilitate a romantic relationship between the two lead characters, Shirou and Artoria.

Ishtar is also featured in the *Fate Stay Night* universe in the spin-off show *Fate Grand Order*, but she is interestingly portrayed with very light skin. This contradicts her origin as a Mesopotamian goddess, as people from this region of present-day western Asia commonly have darker skin. This is attributed to her body not being her true form, but rather a human who was made into a vessel for her, which explains why her appearance does not match her mythological origins, however, it is said that Ishtar's true form outside of a host has blonde hair, which is again contradictory.

Her outfit is similarly revealing to Ishtar's in *Danmachi*. Her outfit comprises little more than a bikini alongside gold jewelry. A notable difference is the color and composition of the



Fig 5: Hephaestus's introductory outfit. "Monster Festival." 9:35.

outfits. *Danmachi* Ishtar's outfit is a dark red color, and her top is a very precarious ribbon which is not securely attached to her. *Fate Grand Order* Ishtar on the other hand, she wears a revealing but secure top, with filigree that slightly resembles armor. The main color of her outfit is also white, in stark contrast to the red in *Danmachi*, although both have gold accents and jewelry. The color choice of these two characters' outfits is interesting to note, as color theory dictates that red has more associations with passion and violence and white with purity, visually signifying the reputations of these characters.



Fig 6: *Fate Grand Order* Ishtar.
“The King and His People.” 7:40.

This character is extremely different from *Danmachi* Ishtar and is portrayed in a much better light. *Fate Grand Order* Ishtar is a goddess of good harvest, war, and lust, and is one of the most revered goddesses in the show. Both characters are very flirtatious throughout their respective series, but the difference between behavior between them is that the former does not do this to manipulate people, while the latter definitely does so and is more demonized for her behavior. Expression of sexuality does not diminish the integrity of *Fate Grand Order* Ishtar, while *Danmachi* Ishtar is seen as immoral and reprehensible for her behavior.

The race of *Fate Grand Order* Ishtar points to a larger problem throughout Japanese media regarding race and racism, which is clearly seen in *Danmachi*. Out of the thirty-three gods featured in *Danmachi* so far, including the novels and spinoff shows, there are only four who have dark skin: Ishtar, the two Hindu gods Ganesha, and Kali, and the Iranian demonic figure Aeshma. These four gods are all associated to varying degrees with violence, unintelligence, and sexual promiscuity, and the latter three are hardly developed as characters, with Kali and Aeshma not yet appearing in the anime.

Ganesha's character mostly serves as comic relief. He speaks in a loud voice and makes poses in the background and he often repeats his name in conversations, exclaiming “I am Ganesha” to anyone within earshot.⁶⁷ Several times throughout the series, he is shown to be terrible with money, draining his family's accounts to host lavish parties and commission statues of himself. Overall, his character is portrayed as unintelligent, vain, and is someone for the other

⁶⁷ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* “The Blade of a God.” 17:40.

characters to laugh at, especially the other gods who look down on him. Even though Ganesha is not a violent or an immoral character, his unintelligence is a main character trait which is reinforced throughout the show. While Ganesha does show other qualities like a strong sense of honor and loyalty towards his family, these are often overshadowed by his unintelligence and pride.

In episode three, several monsters escape the custody of Ganesha's family due to a suspected intruder. While a member of his family expresses concern about the reputation of the family, Ganesha firmly tells them that "rank and pride matter not, the safety of the people is our top priority."⁶⁸ By alerting the attendees of the festival in order to evacuate them, his family ends up publicly taking blame for the incident, instead of quietly trying to resolve it without notifying the guests. Later in the episode, he is also shown to clean the stadium alongside his family, showing his respect for them by aiding them even with small tasks seemingly beneath a leader. And yet this brief scene is immediately followed with a pose, a look into the camera, and an exclamation of "I am Ganesha!"⁶⁹

Kali on the other hand, is an incredibly violent goddess. Her hair is dark red and she wears a skull mask, with the rest of her outfit consisting of extremely revealing white fabric that barely covers her. She owns a colosseum where adventurers fight each other or monsters, ordinarily to the death, with little regard for the wellbeing of said adventurers, as she finds entertainment in seeing how the battles play out. Some of these adventurers are young children, whom she has no qualms about letting die in her colosseum. Kali has not featured yet in the anime but is a minor character in the manga. Due to voice actor announcements and concept art released, many fans speculate that she may appear in the upcoming season release.

This interpretation of Kali is dramatically different from the original Hindu goddess. She is known as the goddess of death, change, and time, making her a very revered and honored goddess. While Kali is shown to be violent, her rage is not directionless, as she only targets



Fig 7: Ganesha posing and exclaiming his name. "The Blade of a God." 17:46.

⁶⁸ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "The Blade of a God." 4:11-4:14.

⁶⁹ *Is It Wrong to Try and Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* "The Blade of a God." 17:30-17:42.

demons and other evil spirits.⁷⁰ In Hinduism, these aspects of Kali do not make her evil, and due to the direction of her violence, they are even commendable. *Danmachi's* interpretation is a significant deviation from the original Kali, turning her into an immoral person who takes pleasure and finds entertainment in violence and needless death.

And finally, Aeshma is shown to be incredibly prideful and flirtatious, consistently choosing to be topless in most situations. His main motivation is to create the perfect adventurer through forcing selective breeding in his family, viewing the adventurers in his family as little more than animals. His flirtation is the means to this end of searching for women to potentially create the perfect adventurer. The consent of these women is unimportant, as Aeshma continues to pursue them even after their sometimes numerous refusals. Aeshma is also not featured in the show, but rather in the PC browser game *Danmachi Orario Rhapsodia*, which was unfortunately discontinued on May 15, 2019.

As mentioned, all of these other characters wear extremely revealing clothing, including Ishtar, with both Ganesha and Aeshma being completely shirtless. While Kali is not flirtatious and Ganesha is not violent, by dressing them the same as the other dark-skinned characters, it helps associate all of these traits to each other and to each character. In the morality of the show, and that of Japanese culture, all of these traits are portrayed as negative and as a result, these characters receive heavy scrutiny from both the other characters in the show and from the audience.

This relationship between immoral behavior and revealing clothes is sealed when Freya murders Ishtar. As mentioned briefly in chapter two, during this scene Freya changes her outfit from her standard tasteful light-colored elegant dresses to the much darker one that is extremely revealing, with huge cutouts across her torso and legs, which she continues to wear throughout the rest of the series thus far.



Fig 8: Promotional art for Kali.
(<https://danmachi.fandom.com/wiki/Kali>)



Fig 9: Photo of Aeshma.
(<https://danmachi.fandom.com/wiki/Aeshma>)

⁷⁰ Kinsley, David, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 76.

As mentioned in the analysis of her in chapter two, this outfit change signifies her descent as a character and marks a turning point where she fully changes as a character and all pretenses of kindness are dropped. This new outfit paired with her behavior change adds to the association between revealing clothing and expression of sexuality with evil and immoral behaviors.

It is very interesting to note that the only dark skinned gods are also the characters who are most often heavily associated with violence and sexuality. Through their violent personalities, revealing clothes, and manipulative behaviors, the association between their character and their appearance is clear. While there are other violent characters who wear revealing clothes, like Freya, there are many other white characters who do not, thus diminishing the effect of a singular character. The representation of an entire race is not diminished by the reprehensible actions of one individual, because there are clear examples of many other more moral individuals. But when there is little representation, and all examples of that representation are terrible, then it makes a statement about the perception of that entire group. It is a clear pattern when all of the non-white characters exhibit some combination of unintelligence, violence, and sexual promiscuity.

Racism in Japan is a very big issue, and unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not grant enough space to thoroughly examine racism and its reflection in Japanese media, however it is important enough to at least mention in relation to *Danmachi* and the presentation of its characters. There is a clear distinction between the treatment and characterization of the white characters versus the non-white characters. While racism is a worldwide problem, there is a conversation to be had about the representation of black and dark skinned characters in Japanese media, and the treatment of people in the society at large.⁷¹

Examining the treatment of other gods and characters in both Japanese and western media helps reinforce the reception we see towards the Norse gods. These patterns point to inherent cultural values in Japanese society and the overlap in interpretations also points to a cultural influence from Europe onto Japan. Reception does not happen in a vacuum, by its definition it relies on the cultural values, or influence from other cultures, of the audience affecting their interpretation of a work. Therefore evaluating the reception of one culture in

⁷¹ Illmer, Andreas. "Black Lives Matter Pushes Japan to Confront Racism." BBC News. BBC, August 27, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53428863>.

comparison to others' reception of the same work, can explain the differences in mindset and values.

Conclusion

A common growing theme in modern medievalist media is a concern for authenticity. This concern appears to be reflected in Japanese medievalist media concerning the Norse gods. Over time, there has been a shift from inaccurate yet entertaining depictions towards reflecting the original mythology as closely as possible. While there are still artistic liberties taken with these shows, audiences enjoy and appreciate the effort taken to accurately (according to their interpretation) reflect the time period depicted.

In this type of historical media, “authenticity, as the engine of mainstream historical filmmaking, has three chief functions: as an aesthetic strategy, a reception discourse, and a marketing discourse.”⁷² These three functions of accuracy all work together to form the final product seen on screen, cater to the expectations of the audience, and portray the intended messages from the showrunners.

This question of historical accuracy stems entirely from reception of the time period, asking the question, “has the past been conveyed in a way that the spectator can reconcile with his or her perception of the historical reality?”⁷³ Shows like *Vinland Saga* rely heavily on this perception of historical accuracy from its audience. Studies show that audiences have a greater expectation for historical accuracy when the media portrays historical events and individuals, rather than just being set in a certain time period with a fictional story, as is the case with *Vinland Saga* which, while it does contain fiction, also portrays historical events and people from Icelandic saga accounts.⁷⁴ Throughout the internet are articles and forums praising *Vinland Saga* for its accuracy in presenting the Viking Age, when in actuality, many of the details in the show are at least in part fabricated. As mentioned previously, while the main character of Thorfinn Karlsefni is based on a real person, the entirety of his early life portrayed in the show is entirely fiction. Yet because the premise is somewhat based on the literature, its, and other media’s,

⁷² Mattias Frey, “The Authenticity Feeling: Language and Dialect in the Historical Film.” *Research in Film and History* (2018): 1.

⁷³ Frey, “The Authenticity Feeling.” 1.

⁷⁴ Frey, “The Authenticity Feeling.” 7.

“achievement in the historical film genre is often judged according to the perception of historical accuracy rather than by aesthetic criteria.”⁷⁵

However, regardless of the degree of historical or literary accuracy in the media discussed, examining them within their cultural context can grant huge insights into Japanese culture and values. In the analysis and discussion of the previous anime series, manga, and various other media, the Norse gods and Norse literature are altered significantly in order to fit into Japanese culture. Especially in *Vinland Saga*, the roles the perception of authenticity plays are clearly seen at work. While *Vinland Saga* is accurate in some ways, the show as a whole is praised by audiences and critics for its accuracy to Icelandic saga accounts, disregarding the fabricated aspects.⁷⁶

As seen in *Kamigami no Asobi*, Japanese character archetypes are ascribed to the Norse gods who are then molded to fit into them. This significantly changes the personalities of these characters while still retaining surface-level traits that make them identifiable. Likewise in *Danmachi*, certain values are imposed onto the Norse gods and those taken from the mythology are exaggerated. For example, Freya is liberal with her sexuality in the mythology, but in the show this behavior is amplified and becomes a core character trait.

In both *Kamigami no Asobi* and *Danmachi*, the personalities of all the gods portrayed are changed to varying degrees for different reasons. *Kamigami no Asobi* makes the Norse gods more recognizable to a Japanese audience by putting them into a common framework of established archetypes. *Danmachi* uses many of the gods in the show to portray examples of moral and immoral qualities. By demonizing sexuality and praising purity, the showrunners and the authors of the novels impose judgements onto these characters and their behavior, reinforcing these ideals in Japanese culture. Ultimately, authenticity and accuracy to the mythology was sacrificed for the sake of the cultural integration of these characters into Japan.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Stubbs. *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 34.

⁷⁶ Kotzathanasis, Panos. “Anime Review: *Vinland Saga* (2019) by Shuhei Yabuta.” *Asian Movie Pulse*, October 28, 2020.

<https://asianmoviepulse.com/2020/10/anime-review-vinland-saga-2019-by-shuhei-yabuta/>.

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