

IMPACT OF NORSE CULTURES IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Norse religion, more or less, refers to the various religious traditions that were followed and practised by the people who inhabited the Scandinavian region during the medieval times, before Christianity was introduced. Theirs was not an organized religion. All available information regarding their religion was obtained from literary works like Prose Edda and archaeological findings. Norse religion is closely related to their mythology. Deities were either localized or agrarian, the former being spirits supposedly residing in objects or places. These deities were worshipped by religious leaders and people made offerings to them. Agrarian deities were important because Norse people heavily depended on agriculture for their livelihood. They worshipped several deities who were divided into two groups called the Aesir and the Vanir, the most popular among them being Odin and Thor. They were fearsome gods who engaged in bloody battles. Norse mythology had found its ways into arts, literature and movies quite often in the past but it was received universally with its adaptation into Marvel movies which are based on Marvel's comics. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is an American movie franchise that makes interconnected superhero movies based on the characters featured in Marvel comics.

KEYWORDS: Norse Cultures, English Literature, Norse religion, Scandinavian region

INTRODUCTION

The reason for why the Norse evidence in English remained unnoticed for many centuries is due to the fact that the Norse constituents were so thoroughly integrated into English that many of them remained undetected until the nineteenth century. Another factor is that English, Norse, Scandinavian languages, and languages like German and Dutch, belong to the Germanic language group. Therefore, Norse resembled the language of the

Angles and Saxons in many ways. The integration of Norse into English could occur without any disruption of the semantics or phonology of English. As mentioned above, the research conducted on the remainders of Norse in English has been scarce. Particularly in more recent times where there have been few studies on the subject. Looking at the reference list, it is apparent that there is a need for more up-to-date studies, although the publications of Björkman (1900), Lockwood (1975), Thorson (1936), Jespersen (1905), Trudgill (1984) and one, more recent, by Townend (2002) provided the foundation for this thesis. The publication that proved to be of most importance during the compilation of this study was that of John Geipel, *The Viking Legacy: The Scandinavian Influence on the English Language*, published in 1971. According to Geipel himself, his publication is the first of its kind for nearly 120 years; that is the reassessment of the Scandinavian linguistic influence on the English language to full extent. Geipel's publication is in all respect the most recent and thorough on the subject, despite being more than forty years old. Geipel uses the publications of Björkman, Thorson, Lockwood (an earlier publication than the one used in this thesis) and Jespersen in his survey, which denotes the obvious importance of these authors previous publications. The way Geipel structures his survey is also very helpful. He gives a detailed analysis of the common roots of English and Norse and then enlightens the reader with the history of the Vikings in the British Isles. There are two chapters that discuss the evidence of Norse place and personal names in Britain. The last pages of the book include two short appendices with a selection of Scandinavian loanwords in Mod.E and also a selection of British surnames of probable or partial Scandinavian origin. Geipel does not, however, include a detailed chapter on the Norse terms in the more common aspects of the English dialects, i.e. the terms that belong to the most everyday level of the English vocabulary. He does state that the aspects of the English lexicon that are influenced by Norse are that of fauna, natural and topographical, Norse mythology and negative terms, without discussing or listing these words at length in his publication. This thesis attempts to use Geipel's statement and account for the Norse borrowings and categorize them according to these aspects.

OLD NORSE

Old Norse belongs to the Germanic language family. It is the language spoken in Scandinavia during the Viking Age (c.750-1050) and throughout the Middle Ages (c. 1050-1350) (Barnes, 2008). Old Norse was a widely spread language and was therefore not entirely uniform. The language spoken in Norway around 750 differed from the language spoken in Iceland in 1350 (Barnes, 2008). Modern Icelandic is the closest language to Old Norse of all Nordic languages today, both in regards to the inflectional system and the basic vocabulary, and it remains an important factor when examining Old Norse (Barnes, 2008). For example, Old Norse 'Þessi maðr er mikill fyrir sér. Hann bitu eigi vápn í dag, enn nú granda honum eigi ormar.' Without much alteration this text can be grammatically correct in Modern Icelandic; 'Þessi maður er mikill fyrir sér. Hann bitu eigi vopn í dag, enn nú granda honum eigi ormar.' Mod.E 'This man is great indeed. Him bit not weapons today, moreover now harm him not snakes.' – from *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar* (Saga of Ragnar ShaggyBreeches) (Lockwood, 1975, p. 208). Diachronic phonology suggests that the main difference between

Old Norse and Modern Icelandic is phonetics and pronunciation. The inflectional system and basic vocabulary are similar but the pronunciation has changed considerably since the first settlement of Iceland (Barnes, 2008). According to Townend (2002), there was a close link between Old English (OE) and Old Norse. This relationship was broken in the fifth century by the events of the Migration Period, in particular the Anglo-Saxons invasion of Britain. By the time they became reconnected at the beginning of the Viking Age (c. 750), speakers of Old Norse and English had been secluded from each other for approximately two hundred and fifty years. Despite this seclusion, the phonological system of the two languages had remained remarkably similar.

OLD NORSE EVIDENCE IN ENGLISH

As a result of the Viking expansion (c. 750-1050), ON came to be spoken in widely different places such as the Faroe Islands, Greenland and the British Isles (Barnes, 2008). “The first time we hear of Scandinavian pirates in England is in the following passage in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 787:

hēr nam Beorhtric cing Offan dohtor Eadburge. And on his dazum cōmon ārest III scipa Norðmanna, and þā se zerēfa þær tō rād, and hīe wolde drīfan tō þæs cinges tūne, þȳ þe hē nyste hwæt hīe wæron, and hine man þær ofslōh. þæt wæron þā ārestan scipu Deniscra manna þē Anzelrynnes land zesōhtan.” (Björkman, 1900, p. 263).

“In this year King Beorhtric married Offa’s daughter Eadburg. And in his day three ships came for the first time; and then the reeve rode there and wanted to take them to the king’s vill because he did not know what they were; and he was killed. They were the first ships of Danish men that came to the land of the English people.” Translation by Townend (2002, p.1).

Assuming that the year 787 is reasonably accurate, we can assume that Vikings invaded England in the late eighth century. And they remained a dominant part of England for the next 300 years, or until the Norman Conquest in 1066.

In the second half of the ninth century the Vikings had spread over vast parts of England and started to conquer lands and began their permanent settlement. They prevailed in England for the next 200 years, until the Normans invaded. Large groups of Vikings therefore left their part of England, the ‘Danelaw’ that was the part of England which king Alfred allocated to the Vikings, where they would confine their activities (Geipel, 1971). Some of the Vikings went to Scotland, Orkney and Shetland whilst others went home to Scandinavia and some stayed. Therefore, it can be argued that the Viking expansion ended when the Normans invaded Britain.

According to Jespersen (1905, p.62), the first evidence of a Scandinavian loan word in English is in a war-poem written shortly after the battle of Maldon in 993, which would be the verb call, ON kalla. This shows how early the linguistic influence of ON began to be felt. In some instances words acquired a new meaning through the ON counterpart. For example, Mod.E words bread, bloom, dream, dwell, gift and plough were OE terms and signified a fragment, a mass of metal, joy, to make a mistake, a dowry and a measure of land, respectively. Their present meanings are those of ON (Geipel, 1971, p.65). Only by turning to the language and place names in the British Isles can abundant and unambiguous evidence be found of the Vikings stay there (Geipel, 1971).

OLD NORSE IN MODERN ENGLISH

It has been estimated that an educated English speaker has a vocabulary of 20,000- 30,000 words. Studies have revealed that about 400 words in English are incontestably Scandinavian in origin and are still in daily use in standard, literary English (Geipel, 1971, p.69). Although 400 words are a mere fraction of those 20,000-30,000 words it must be acknowledged that most of the ON terms left behind by the Vikings are the very bedrock of English lexicon and the most frequently occurring words in spoken English. Geipel also takes this further and states that if rural dialects are added the number goes quickly from 400 to 2,000 items, enough to allow a person to carry on a simple conversation using entirely ON terms.

There is a major difference between ON and Mod.E. ON is a much more highly inflected language.

“In English the function of a word can often be deluded from its position in relation to other words. We understand: Olav saw the old woman to mean that Olav was the one who saw and the old woman was the one who was seen because Olav precedes saw. In a corresponding ON sentence it would be perfectly possible for the order to be reversed without a change in meaning. Everything would depend on the inflexions. Thus: Ólafr sá konu þá ina gömlu and Konu þá ina gömlu sá Ólafr both mean ‘Olav saw the old woman’, because the forms Ólafr and konu þá ina gömlu are unchanged. If we wish the sentence to mean ‘the old woman saw Olav’, we must alter the forms of the words so that Ólafr becomes Ólaf and konu þá ina gömlu becomes konu sú in gamla” (Barnes, 2008, p.3)

Despite the inflectional and phonetical difference, Mod.E still has many lexical similarities with ON. The ON borrowings in English are not bound to few concepts. Rather, they spread through the English language. As mentioned by Geipel (1971) but not discussed at length in his publication, the most influenced aspects of the English lexicon are that of fauna, natural and topographical, Norse mythology and negative terms, respectively. This thesis will exploit this statement and account for the ON borrowings in these aforementioned aspects. Furthermore, it will explore the borrowing of the ON pronoun þeir, Mod.E ‘they’ and borrowings that altered OE verbs, which occurred after the Viking expansion.

According to Durkin (2009), there are two common motivations for lexical borrowing, one is need and the other is prestige. Borrowing because of need is when a new thing is not known to the borrowing language but has a name in the donor language. Borrowing because of prestige is when a speaker believes that there is greater social status attached to a word from the donor language. That is borrowing for need is necessary and borrowing for prestige is unnecessary. English did both, that is borrowing for example topographical terms which ON was rich of but English was not, is borrowing because of need. Borrowing Norse mythology terms, to include in video games, as will be discussed later in the thesis, is borrowing because of prestige.

NORSE MYTHOLOGY TERMS

The Vikings and Scandinavians in general believed in the Norse gods, at the time of the Viking expansion. Norse mythology has for centuries been a fascinating theme in various subjects, e.g. art, literature, television and the latest being video games. Poetic Edda (Eddukvæði) and Prose Edda (Snorra Edda) are the two great resources when examining Norse mythology (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011). In the tenth century ealdorman Æthelweard wrote a Latin Chronicle, which included a number of genealogies, namely those of royal houses. Æthelweard altered three genealogies by introducing specifically Norse elements, namely that of the Norse gods. Æthelweard included Óðinn, Víðarr and Baldr in the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies, regarding them as merely human kings of the legendary past (Townend, 2002). Proving that the Norse gods have been a major influence from the time of Viking invasion and up to the present-day. One of the earliest and most prevailing examples of the Norse gods in English is found in the weekdays. A week consists of seven days. Of those seven English weekdays four bear the names of the Norse gods. In ON Tuesday was týsdagr ‘the day of Týr’. Týr ‘Tyr’ was the son of Odin and a brave war god, in OE Tiwesdæg. Wednesday was óðinsdagr ‘the day of Óðinn’. Óðinn ‘Odin’ was the greatest of all the gods and the ruler of Asgard ON Ásgarðr, in OE Wodensdæg. Thursday was þórsdagr ‘the day of Þórr’. Þórr ‘Thor’ was also the son of Odin, the strongest of all the gods, in OE Þurresdæg (Harper, 2013). Friday is not as clear as the other three; there is a disagreement on whether Friday was friggjardagr, freyjudagr or frjádagr (Ottóson, 2010). Arguments have been made which support all of these suggestions but friggjardagr has the most reasonable explanation. Frigg was the wife of Odin and queen of Asgard unlike Freyja whose family was Vanir. Their royalty was not as great as that of Frigg, Odin, Tyr and Thor. Friday is fríggjardagur in Faroese, lit. ‘day of Frigg’, nominative Frigg genitive Friggjar (Ottóson, 2010). The Faroese language is a descendant of ON, as was mentioned above. In OE Friday was Frigedæg. The Scandinavian languages (except for Icelandic) also have weekdays which draw their names from Norse gods; Danish/Norwegian tirsdag Swedish tisdag (Tuesday) onsdag (Wednesday) torsdag (Thursday) fredag (Friday). Faroese týsdagur (Tuesday) ónsdagur (Wednesday) hósdagur/tórsdagur (Thursday) and as said before fríggjardagur (Friday) (Dam, 2013).

The Norse gods and their numerous associates have found a more modern field to place their influence and that is in popular culture, i.e. in comic books, television and video games. Since 1951, has Marvel Comics

included the Norse god Thor as a character in one of their comic book series. Thor is a superhero who comes from Asgard and helps the inhabitants of Earth (Marvel Comics [n.d.]). Alongside him are many other references to Norse Mythology. Thor's hammer Mjolnir, ON Mjöl̥nir, is of course present as well as his father Odin, and his half-brother Loki. Other characters include Balder, ON Baldr; Sif, ON Sif; Ymir, ON Ýmr; Laufey, not portrayed as Loki's mother but as his father; the Valkyrie, ON Valkyrja; Brunnhilde, ON Brynhildr; Surtur, ON Surtr; Hela, ON Hel; Heimdall, ON Heimdallr; Bifrost, ON Bifröst; Frigga, ON Frigg; Fafnir, ON Fáfnir; Fenris Wolf, ON Fenrir; Midgard Serpent, ON Miðgarðsormr; Vidar, ON Víðarr and Ragnarok, ON Ragnarök (Avenger693, [n.d.]). Norse mythology has also been an inspiration to many of the most played electronic games in the world; most of them are MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game). Famous games like Halo, Final Fantasy and Ragnarok Online have included characters with names like Ymir, ON Ýmir; Aegir, ON Ægir; Garm, ON Garmr; Sleipnir, ON Sleipnir; Randgris, ON Randgríðr; Jotun, ON Jötunn; Munin, ON Muninn; Hugin, ON Huginn; Ida, ON Iðunn; Gungnir, ON Gungnir; Skidbladnir, ON Skíðblaðnir; Berserk, ON Berserkr and Einherjars, ON Einherjar. Place names include Elfheim, ON Álfheimr; Midgard, ON Miðgarðr; Yggdrasil, ON Yggdrasil; Vanaheima, ON Vanaheimr; Asgard, ON Ásgarðr; Valhalla, ON Valhöll; Vigron, ON Vígríðr; Gladsheim, ON Gláðsheimr; Utgard, ON Útgarðr; Bifrost, ON Bifröst. These games and their characters can be further examined on the webpage wikia.com which hosts service pages for these games, e.g. finalfantasy.wikia.com, ragnarok.wikia.com and halo.wikia.com.

World of Warcraft (WOW) is an online game where players take on the roles of fantasy characters that subsist in a virtual world. Over 10 million people from all over the world subscribe to WOW (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012). WOW has many references not only to Norse mythology but ON as well. The game includes names like, Hodir, ON Höðr; Trollbane, ON Tröllabani; Thrall, ON Þræll and Ettin, ON Jötunn for more examples see Appendix 1.3. In WOW different races have several fictional languages which on many occasions get inspiration from ON; words like re'ka, ON reka, Mod.E 'to drive', push; dogg, ON dögg, Mod.E 'dew'; her, ON her, Mod.E 'army'; haldir, ON haldir, Mod.E 'to hold'; hrím; ON hrím, Mod.E 'frost'; rune, ON rún, Mod.E 'rune'; skalf, ON skjálfa, Mod.E 'to shake'; nei, ON nei, Mod.E 'no' (wowwiki.com, [n.d.]). What is fascinating about this game in particular is the fact that WOW is an English game, commands and instructions are in English, and it is played all over the world by millions of people, which consequently increases the popularity of Norse Mythology and ON.

OLD NORSE IN ENGLISH DIALECTS

English is a widely spoken language and as a result differs in dialect. Standard English, as has been pointed out, borrowed numerous terms from ON. However, there are some English dialects where ON is more apparent. According to Geipel (1971), and Thorson (1936), the places where ON influence are more substantial are Orkney, Shetland, parts of Scotland and the Northern-part of England. The next two

subchapters will look at Norn, the language spoken in Orkney and Shetland until the eighteenth century and Yorkshire dialect, which is the dialect of English spoken in the Northern part of Britain. Both Norn and Yorkshire dialect include many ON terms in their vocabulary.

1. Norn

The term Norn derives from ON norræna ‘Norse language’ first recorded in 1485, and describes the language that was spoken in various parts of Scotland during the Viking Age (1984, Trudgill). It was closely related to the extinct ON and today it is known as the language that existed in Orkney and Shetland up-until the eighteenth century (1984, Trudgill). The Vikings arrived there during the eighth century and ON dialect, or Norn as it came to be called, persisted there until the eighteenth century or even into the early nineteenth century. Scholars were not interested in Norn until it was too late and Norn was practically out of use. Perhaps that was because of the remoteness of the isles or the immaturity of the linguistic sciences. ‘Norn’ became an extinct language, leaving little evidence of its existence behind (Hnolt, 2012). However, Trudgill (1984) mentions that the evidence of Norn in present-day dialects of Orkney and Shetland can be found in some specific areas of the vocabulary, similar to those discussed in this thesis, e.g. fauna and natural terms and furthermore, seasons, holidays, food and etc. He also notes that Shetland speech is rich in words and expressions which have to do with fishing, many of which come from Norn. Trudgill does not, however, discuss at length what these terms are. It must also be similar to the examples at the end of this chapter. The majority of place names in Orkney and Shetland are of ON descent. A study on the place names of Foula ON Fugley, one of the Shetland Islands, revealed that there is one Scottish or hybrid name to every one hundred Norn names. It is likely that the proportion would be similar throughout the Northern Isles (1984, Trudgill, p.365). For those who want to learn about Norn, there is still hope, since there are Norn enthusiasts that are currently working on reestablishing this lost language. They have created a dictionary, based on an etymological dictionary of Norn and various old texts; they are calling this lexicon Nynorn or ‘New Norn’ (Hnolt, 2012).

The Nynorn dictionary includes numerous terms of ON/Norn origin. The examples listed above are terms that describe the most mundane things. These examples were chosen simply because the borrowings are obviously extremely similar to the corresponding ON term, e.g. hvamm, ON hvammr. The same could be said about most of the terms listed in the Nynorn dictionary.

2. Yorkshire Dialect

Yorkshire dialect is a dialect of English spoken in Yorkshire, and in some neighboring areas. According to Thorson (1936), Yorkshire has the most ON loans of all the counties in Britain. And as mentioned by Geipel (1971), to the great-greatgrandparents of many of today’s Yorkshire folk,

“pigs were grice, heifers quees, and bullocks stots, yellow was gool, soft was blowt, large was stor and steep was brandt; bairns would laik where nowadays children play and a man would risp if he had a lop on his rig where today he would scratch if he had a flea on his back” (p.77).

The most notable ON borrowings in Yorkshire dialects are the topographical terms. These terms have influenced numerous place names in Yorkshire. The terms listed below were retrieved from the website The Viking Network, (2004), Yorkshire Dialects of Old Norse Origin and the place names were retrieved from Simpson, (2009), Yorkshire Place-Name Meanings. Unfortunately, there were not enough place names to give examples for all the listed topographical terms.

CONCLUSION

The aspects that required ON terms were fauna, natural and topographical, Norse mythology and negative terms. Furthermore, that some English dialects, e.g. Norn and Yorkshire dialect, were more influenced by ON than Standard English. The ON borrowings found in English have remained in the language since the Viking Age. Naturally, some words became obsolete yet a large fraction of these terms are productive in English, i.e. many Mod.E neologisms stem from ON terms. The difference between this thesis and earlier publications on this subject is the categorization of ON borrowings found in English, as the following Appendices will demonstrate. Previous surveys have simply gathered ON borrowings in English and listed them alphabetically. This is, for example, done in the publications of Björkman (1900), Geipel (1971) and Thorson (1936). The ON borrowings listed in this thesis are categorized by what aspects of the vocabulary they denote. The English terms that derive from ON have become essential for everyday speech. They have held their place in English throughout the centuries and the English tongue would be unadorned without them. To quote Otto Jespersen again “An Englishman cannot thrive or be ill or die without Scandinavian words; they are to the language what bread and eggs are to the daily fare”.

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