

Classical or Old Norse myth? German and Danish approaches to the use of myth in the modern literature at the turn of the 19th century

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ABSTRACT

In the study, I provide a comparative overview of the aesthetical debate that took place at the turn of the 18th and 19th century in Germany and Denmark concerning the use of the Old Norse versus the classical mythology in literature. I discuss Johann Gottfried Herder's ideas on this topic, expressed in his work *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie* (1767) and especially in his dialogue *Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung* (1796), with focus on the following question: Does the rejuvenating potential of the Norse myth as suggested by Herder in *Iduna*, allow any room for the classical inspirations in modern literature? Herder's view will provide a starting point of the comparison for the cultural situation in Denmark where the University of Copenhagen announced in 1800 a prize question on aesthetics "Would it benefit Northern polite literature if ancient Northern mythology were introduced and generally accepted by our poets in place of its Greek counterpart?". The entries in this contest represented the view of the younger generation, namely Adam Oehlenschläger, Jens Møller and Ludvig Stoud Platou. I summarize their views and examine Herder's influence on the debate.

KEYWORDS

reception studies, Old Norse mythology, Graeco-Roman mythology, Johann Gottfried Herder, Ludvig Stoud Platou, Adam Oehlenschläger, Jens Møller

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INTRODUCTION

The turn of the 19th century saw considerable changes in approaches to both the philosophical and aesthetic value of mythology.¹ The ideas of the late Enlightenment and pre- and early Romantic movements formed the backdrop for several aesthetic debates about mythology's use in literature and the fine arts and, more specifically, about the value of Old Norse versus classical Graeco-Roman myth in modern literature.² In this study, I provide a comparative overview of two such aesthetic debates at the turn of the 19th century. The first of these took place in Germany while the second was in Denmark. In Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder discussed the role of mythology in his dialogue *Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung* (1796)³ and proposed using Old Norse myth as a rejuvenating force in modern German literature. On the other hand – and this point is highlighted less often⁴ – he did not completely reject classical and especially Greek models. Herder's thesis provides a starting point for the comparison in the second part of this study, which considers a parallel debate initiated at the University of Copenhagen in 1800 that has attracted – until recently – less scholarly attention.⁵

¹The role of myth in German philosophical and aesthetic thought between the Enlightenment and early Romantic period has been surveyed in several studies. See, e.g., GÖCKEL, H.: *Mythos und Poesie: zum Mythosbegriff in Aufklärung und Frühromantik*. Frankfurt am Main 1981; BÖLDL, K.: *Der Mythos der Edda: nordische Mythologie zwischen europäischer Aufklärung und nationaler Romantik*. Tübingen 2000; LIAMIN, S.: *Mythen der Edda in der deutschen Dichtung*. Heidelberg 2017. The latter two scholars focus on the Norse (Eddic) element.

²When reflecting on the status of myth in this period, it should be borne in mind that approaches to this phenomenon differ from modern ones. As Břetislav Horyna puts it: “[T]he late Enlightenment, thus, did not encounter myth as presented in the latest cultural-anthropological and philological research, but in mythologies that preserved individual mythologems as poetic constants. Therefore, the entire discussion in the second half of the 18th century and towards the turn of the 19th century inevitably moved to the fields of aesthetics and poetics.” (HORÝNA, B.: *Koncepce “nové mytologie” v Herderově dialogu Iduna*. *Studia minora Facultatis philosophicae Universitatis Brunensis* 49 [2002] 13; all translations from Czech and Danish are mine). The narrow connection between myth and poetics was also maintained terminologically. For most of the 18th century, a myth was known as a “fable” (“Fabel”), see GAIER, U.: *Myth, Mythology, New Mythology*. In ADLER, H. – KOEPKE, W. (eds): *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*. Rochester, N.Y. 2009, 165–166, thus linking it etymologically to the Latin *fabula*, meaning both a narration in the broadest sense and a drama or a fable.

³On this dialogue, compare GÖCKEL (n. 1) 330–332; BÖLDL (n. 1) 152–156; HORÝNA (n. 2) 5–34; LIAMIN (n. 1) 184–190; ILLBRUCK, H.: *Literature as Rejuvenation: A Defense of Herder's Defense of Poetry*. *Comparative Literature* 66 (2014) 257–276; ZERNACK, J.: *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and German Culture*. In SUMARLIDI R. ÍSLEIFSSON (ed.): *Iceland and the Images of the North*. Québec-Reykjavík 2011, 158–159.

⁴Several studies – e.g., GAIER (n. 2) 181; ZERNACK (n. 3) 158–159 – underline only the Germanic aspect.

⁵A brief discussion of this debate occurs in STRICH, F.: *Die Mythologie in der Deutschen Literatur von Klopstock bis Wagner*. Halle 1910, 237–239; BENSON, A. B.: *The Old Norse Element in Swedish Romanticism*. New York 1914, 100–101; MJÖBERG, J.: *Drömmen om sagatiden*. Vol. I. Stockholm 1967, 98–99. A recent study by Tim van Gerven examines the related texts in detail with focus on the concepts of the fatherland and the North: VAN GERVEN, T.: *The Copenhagen Question of 1800. Tracing the Intellectual Roots of Cultural Scandinavism*. In HEMSTAD, R. – MÖLLER, J. F. – THORKILDSEN, D. (eds): *Skandinavismen. Vision og virkning*. Odense 2018, 45–72. I have not had access to the updated version of the article published in January 2022 (VAN GERVEN, T.: *The Mythology Debates I: The Copenhagen Question of 1800*. In VAN GERVEN, T.: *Scandinavism: Overlapping and Competing Identities in the Nordic World, 1770–1919*. Leiden 2022, 36–63).



MYTHOLOGY BETWEEN THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ROMANTICISM

While the responses to myth throughout the 18th and early 19th century were numerous, they can be situated on a spectrum. At one end was the culture of thought of the Enlightenment, which “generally speaking, based its attitude to myth and mythology on a single assumption: that reason-oriented science revealed in myth a fable-like character, a fairy tale, a dream-world of early human civilisations and, thus, discerned its falsehood, the polar opposite of all that pertained to science”.⁶ This attitude resulted either in scathing criticism of myth (as was the case, for example, in Christian Adolph Klotz’s *Epistulae Homericae* in 1764)⁷ or in reductive allegorical or historicising readings of myth’s complex value.⁸

At the other end of the scale was the Romantic demand for a “new mythology”.⁹ This phrase’s elusive nature has been underlined by Gockel, who describes it as one of the most disputed concepts of “die romantische Dichtungstheorie”.¹⁰ Nevertheless, some common tendencies can be identified – in particular, the demand for poetry as one of the fundamental forces of modern society with mythology seen as its source.¹¹ According to Horyna, already Herder anticipated the concept of a new mythology in his *Iduna*, defining this mythology’s broad purpose as the “general poetization of life” and a “new shift to the poetic reality of the world”.¹²

Discussions of mythology usually focused narrowly on classical Graeco-Roman myths.¹³ As regards the common attitude to Norse mythology, the following dismissal in the authoritative voice of Swiss scholar Johann Georg Sulzer is representative. In an entry in his handbook *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, which was dedicated to mythology in the fine arts, he claimed:

Was für ein erstaunlicher Unterschied zwischen der Mythologie der Griechen, die so voll Annehmlichkeit, so voll reizender Bilder ist und der armen Mythologie der Celten?¹⁴ [...] Die

⁶HORYNA (n. 2) 12.

⁷HORYNA (n. 2) 13–14.

⁸For a detailed survey, see GOCKEL (n. 1) 27–87.

⁹The concept is mainly connected with the anonymous text *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* (circa 1797) and Friedrich Schlegel’s *Rede über die Mythologie* (1800). For a detailed analysis of these texts, see GOCKEL (n. 1) 312–316 and HORYNA (n. 2) 26–34.

¹⁰GOCKEL (n. 1) 312.

¹¹GOCKEL (n. 1) 312–316.

¹²HORYNA (n. 2) 20.

¹³A significant example is the widely circulated mythology handbook, Benjamin Hederich’s *Gründliches Lexicon Mythologicum* (1724), which focused exclusively on classical myths. Johann Georg Sulzer, author of the first systematic encyclopaedia of aesthetics in the German language, towards the end of the 18th century, claimed in the entry on “mythology” that every nation has its own mythology: “Aber gemeinlich versteht man unter dieser Benennung das Fabelsystem der Griechen, oder der Römer.” (SULZER, J. G.: *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste*. Vol. II. Leipzig 1775, 280–281).

¹⁴The confusion between Norse Germanic and Celtic mythology is common in older German commentaries on ancient works and was spread through the influential work of Swiss historian Paul Henri Mallet.



angenehmen Früchte des griechischen Erdreichs stechen nicht mehr gegen die herbe Frucht des nordischen Schleedorns ab als die reizenden Bilder der griechischen Fabel, gegen die rohen der Celtischen.¹⁵

The contrast between these two mythologies – the charming and highly imaginative myths of the Greeks versus the poor and raw ones of the “Celts” – as further simplified in effective botanical imagery, proved rather persistent and was, as we shall see, invoked repeatedly by Danish authors.

MYTHOLOGY IN *IDUNA*

Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung was published in 1796 in the journal *Die Horen*, which was edited by F. Schiller.¹⁶ Significantly, Herder anchored his discussion of Norse mythology’s usefulness for modern writers in a Norse myth. This was the myth of the goddess Iðunn, the guardian of apples, which provided the gods with eternal youth. Iðunn was also the wife of the god of poetry, Bragi.¹⁷ After a short introduction, the text presented four dialogues between two characters: Frey, who represents a sceptical attitude to Norse mythology and poetry in general, and Alfred, who tried to promote both these things. Although Alfred is usually seen as Herder’s implicit spokesman, the significance of Frey’s role should not be overlooked since his objections were also reflected in the final consensus between the characters.

The importance and originality of the dialogue lie especially in two intertwined topics introduced in the first dialogue: first, the epistemological role of imagination and poetry (narrowly connected to language), and second, the opportunity to take up the mythology of related Nordic nations and adapt it to the needs of German literature.

The core of the epistemological theory is summarized by Alfred at the beginning of the first dialogue:

Unsre Vernunft bildet sich nur *durch Fictionen*. Immerdar suchen und erschaffen wir uns ein *Eins in Vielem* und bilden es zu einer *Gestalt*; daraus werden *Begriffe, Ideen, Ideale*. [...] Ohne Dichtung können wir einmal nicht sein; ein Kind ist nie glücklicher, als wenn es *imaginirt* und sich sogar in fremde Situationen und Personen *dichtet*. Lebenslang bleiben wir solche Kinder; nur im *Dichten der Seele*, unterstützt vom *Verstande*, geordnet von der *Vernunft*, besteht das Glück unsers Daseins (FA 8, 156–157).

The power of the imagination was here given primacy in the cognition process:¹⁸ its creative force alone was said to enable us to find our way through “the forest of sensual objects that

¹⁵SULZER (n. 13) 282. The passage is quoted also by VAN GERVEN (n. 5) 49.

¹⁶HERDER, J. G.: *Iduna oder der Apfel der Verjüngung*. *Die Horen* 1 (1796) [HERDER, J. G.: *Werke in zehn Bänden*. Vol. VIII. Edited by G. ARNOLD ET AL. Frankfurt a. M. 1998, 155–172 = FA]. For a discussion of Schiller’s polemic against the opinions that Herder expressed in *Iduna*, see GAIER (n. 2) 180–181; BÖLDL (n. 1) 152–155. For details of Herder’s Old Norse scholarship, compare BÖLDL (n. 1) 136–138; GROHMANN, W.: *Herders nordische Studien*. Rostock 1899; STOLPE, H.: *Die Auffassung des Jungen Herder vom Mittelalter*. Weimar 1955, 70.

¹⁷Cf. SNORRI STURLUSON: *Edda*. Translated by A. Faulkes. London–Vermont 1987, 25.

¹⁸As Manfred Frank puts it: “[die Vernunft] genealogisch abkünftig ist aus dem einen Vermögen der Einbildungskraft, die auch am Ursprung der Sprache steht” (FRANK, M.: *Der kommende Gott. Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie*. Vol. I. Frankfurt a. M. 1982, 143).



surrounds us”¹⁹ while understanding and reason (“Verstand” and “Vernunft”) had the role of organising factors in the process. Mythology was included in this model of human knowledge precisely because of its mediating nature. Back in an early essay *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie* (1767), Herder had claimed that mythological characters, images and ideas could serve as sensuous representations of general truths. At the same time, however, as Horyna emphasises,²⁰ they were used not “because they uncovered truths, but because of their poetic durability and illustrative sensuous nature in personifying things”.²¹ Thus, according to Horyna, “in 1767 [...] there was still no sign of an idea we would not meet until *Iduna*: that the totalitarian claims of enlightened reason could be undone via imaginative power, fiction, fantasy”.²² This theory was, he argued, an important bridge to early Romanticism’s demand for a “new mythology”: “[K]nowledge is not only rational; there is also a poetic knowledge which has for the human being the same non-negligible significance. The impact of this idea was immense and it can truly be understood as a gateway to the early Romantic understanding of not only mythology, but especially poetry, philosophy and the theory of knowledge.”²³

These were the grounds on which Herder’s Alfred staked his claim to a mythology corresponding with one’s own ways of thinking and language (“Denkart und Sprache”).²⁴ As Trabandt has shown, these two concepts were almost identical in Herder’s thought.²⁵ As there was no surviving mythology from their own German ancestors (except for the corrupt remnants found in folklore traditions; FA 8, 159), Alfred suggested adopting the mythology of a neighbouring “Volk, auch deutschen Stammes” (FA 8, 158).

Turning to potential processes of cultural appropriation, Alfred invoked the example of classical cultures. Where the Greeks had succeeded in not only taking over foreign cultural elements but also adapting them to their own ways of thinking and language (“sie *idiotisirten* es

¹⁹“[In dem Walde sinnlicher Gegenstände, der mich umgibt, finde ich mich nur dadurch zurecht und werde über das Chaos der auf mich zudringenden Empfindungen Herr und Meister, dass ich Gegenstände von andern trenne, dass ich ihnen Umriss, Mass und Gestalt gebe, mithin im Mannigfaltigen mir Einheit schaffe [...] Unser ganzes Leben ist also gewissermassen eine *Poetik*: wir sehen nicht, wir erschaffen uns Bilder” (*Über Bild, Dichtung und Fabel*, FA 4, 635; quoted in GAIER [n. 2] 171).

²⁰HORYNA (n. 2) 16.

²¹“Wenn ich Mythologische Ideen und Bilder gebrauche, so fern gewisse Moralische, oder allgemeine Wahrheiten durch sie sinnlich erkannt werden: so sind mir ja Mythologische Personen erlaubt, die durchgängig unter einem bestimmten und dazu sehr Poetischen Charakter bekannt sind [...] Der Wahrheit wegen brauche ich sie auch nicht, aber ihrer Poetischen Bestandtheit: und wenn es personifizierte Dinge sind, der Anschauung wegen.” (HERDER, J. G.: *Sämtliche Werke*. Vol. I. Edited by B. SUPHAN ET AL. Berlin 1877 [= SWS] 427).

²²HORYNA (n. 2) 20.

²³HORYNA (n. 2) 19.

²⁴HERDER, J. G.: *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie*. In *Ueber die neuere Deutsche Literatur. Fragmente*. Riga. 1767–1768 [= SWS I 426–449].

²⁵He underscores Herder’s thesis that “Gedanke am Ausdrucke klebt” (FA 1, 556), see TRABANDT, J.: *Herder and Language*. In ADLER, H. – KOEPKE, W. (eds): *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*. Rochester, N.Y. 2009, 120. This narrow link between language and thought explains Herder’s emphasis on the use of “Stammwort” when naming deities in *Iduna* (FA 8, 159–160 and again 164).



in ihrer Denkart und Sprache”, FA 8, 157),²⁶ the Romans omitted this second step – whatever they took over from the Greeks remained a foreign element.²⁷ For Herder, I would suggest that these examples were more than a historical digression: they represented two possible models for the proposed introduction of Norse mythology into German culture. On the one hand, there was the Roman model, which could be identified with the work of German poets of the Baroque period (for example, Opitz and Gryphius) and their treatment of classical history and mythology (FA 8, 158). In this vein, Frey asked whether Opitz was a poet or actually a translator (FA 8, 158). The appropriation process of this model was rather mechanical, involving the translation of only superficial elements while omitting the actual demands of a different way of thinking, historical situation and so on.²⁸ On the other hand, there was the Greek model, which allowed for creative appropriation. Following the example of the Greeks meant becoming not a mere imitator but a true poet fulfilling Herder’s ideals for the modern use of mythology (cf. FA 1, 450).

The text repeatedly mentioned Greek culture, most importantly in the fourth and concluding dialogue, which actually identified this culture as the basis for any potential adoption of Norse mythology:

F. Vorausgesetzt also, daß Du die griechische Mythologie nicht herabsetzen, nicht kränken willst.

A. Auf keine Weise; ich halte sie für die gebildetste der Welt.

F. Vorausgesetzt, daß Du die Regel des griechischen Geschmacks in Kunst und Dichtkunst nicht verkennst.

A. Ich weiß, was wir ihr zu verdanken haben. Bildende Kunst und eine Philosophie der Künste war unter dem nordischen Himmel nie zu Hause.

F. Vorausgesetzt also, daß Du keinen barbarischen, nordischen Ungeschmack, weder in Tönen noch sonst in Worten und Werken aufzubringen Lust hast.

A. Ich habe schon bezeugt, daß ich Rohes roh aufgetragen nirgendher wünsche.

F. So kann Dir zugestanden werden. (FA 8, 171–172)

Norse mythology could, thus, only be adopted on condition that this neither diminished nor offended Greek mythology and that Greek taste in art and poetry was respected

²⁶On Herder’s use of the concept of “*idiotisch*” in the sense of “individual”, see particularly Menges’s analysis (MENGES, K.: Particular Universals: Herder on National Literature, Popular Literature, and World Literature. In ADLER–KOEPEKE [n. 25] 191). A similar concept is at work in Herder’s description of the specifically “*idiotisch*” nature of individual languages, see TRABANT (n. 25) 120.

²⁷“Die Römer dagegen hatten für sich eine harte Mythologie, bei welcher sie griechische Dichtungen und Bilder zwar oft als ein fremdes Spielwerk brauchten, dagegen aber zu einer eignen Poesie, Philosophie und Kunst nie gelangten” (FA 8, 157).

²⁸Compare Herder’s critique of purely formalistic classical imitation (cf. MENGES [n. 26] 190 and 194).



and all the “raw” and “barbaric” Norse elements avoided.²⁹ Greek cultural heritage was, thus, presented as an essential corrective when it came to both taste and art theory (“Philosophie der Künste”). It provided an implicit guideline concerning what should be discarded as “raw” and “barbaric”, and thus, enabled the creative and tasteful appropriation of Norse myths.

THE AESTHETICS ESSAY CONTEST AT UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN, 1800

One of Herder’s suggestions in *Iduna* had been addressed to the Academy of Sciences in Copenhagen, which should, he wrote, arrange some kind of contest on the topic of Norse mythology’s origins (FA 8, 164). It was, however, the University of Copenhagen that in February 1800 included among the topics of its annual essay contest across eight different disciplines³⁰ a question on aesthetics that came even closer to Herder’s dialogue. That question was as follows: “Would it benefit Northern polite literature if ancient Northern mythology were introduced and generally accepted by our poets in place of its Greek counterpart?” (“Var det gavnligt for Nordens skjøne Litteratur, om den nordiske Mythologie blev indført, og af vore Digtere almindelig antaget i Stedet for den græske?”).

The entries in this contest represented the views of the younger generation: Ludvig Stoud Platou (1778–1833), Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) and Jens Møller (1779–1833), all of whom were students by that time and would later become professors and important figures in Danish and Norwegian cultural life. The prize was awarded to Stoud Platou, but two other entries were rated highly, as can be seen not only from the award of a first *accessit* (honourable mention) to Oehlenschläger and a second *accessit* to Møller but also from the publication of all of these essays in the journal *Minerva* the following year. As the analysis below bears out, the contest provides an interesting illustration of Denmark’s changing cultural climate at the turn of the century.³¹

²⁹Herder, thus, endorsed Sulzer’s objection to the rawness of Norse mythology (see above, pp. 78–79).

³⁰These were theology, jurisprudence, medicine, philosophy, philology, mathematics, history and aesthetics. The essays could be submitted in either Latin or Danish, except in the case of aesthetics (Danish only) and philology (Latin only). The questions were published along with the results of the previous year’s contest in *Kiøbenhavns Universitets-Journal*, edited by Professor Jacob Baden (the questions for 1800 in: Kongens Fødselsfest, samt ved den Leilighed uddelte Premier til de Studerende, og udsatte Pris materier for indeværende Aar [The King’s Birthday Celebration, together with the Prizes Awarded to Students on that Occasion, and Prize Topics Announced for the Next Year]. *Kiøbenhavns Universitets-Journal* 8 (1800) 8–9; the results with the jury’s reviews in: Kongens Fødselsfest, samt ved den Leilighed uddelte Premier til de Studerende, og udsatte Pris materier for indeværende Aar. *Kiøbenhavns Universitets-Journal* 9 (1801) 12–16; the question in aesthetics with reviews by Jørgen Kierulf and Jacob Baden here on 14–16). The rules allowed only unpromoted students to participate (VAN GERVEN [n. 5] 45).

³¹As a philosophical and literary movement, Romanticism is generally understood to have been introduced to Denmark two years after this contest through the lectures of Norwegian-Danish philosopher Henrik Steffens (HENNINGSEN, B.: Henrik Steffens. Ein norwegisch-dänisch-deutsch Gelehrter, ein europäischer Intellektueller, ein politischer Professor. In HENNINGSEN, B. – SEEGER, J.: *Henrik Steffens: Einleitung in die philosophischen Vorlesungen*. Freiburg–München 2009, 171–172). The chief promoter of Danish Romanticism was none other than Adam Oehlenschläger whose poem *Guldhornene* (*The Golden Horns*, 1802) became a manifesto for Scandinavian literary Romanticism.



LUDVIG STOU PLATOU

Stoud Platou's essay was the longest of the contest entries and consisted of three parts: 1) on the origins of mythology, 2) on mythology's uses and usefulness for ancient and modern poets and 3) on Greek and Norse mythology.

Stoud Platou explained myth's development based on strict rationalism and a teleology of progress. Human civilisation – like nature and human beings themselves – was undergoing “evolution from the minor to the major, from the worse to the better”.³² Myth had been born in a less developed epoch of human culture out of the confusion between the apparent and the real:

Led only by the senses, which are so often deceitful, and without the torch of knowledge to light up the dark paths of their journey, they mistook the apparent for the real. Deprived of reason and natural science, we would have acted the same way. [...] Reason, the only reliable guide and leader of the imagination, remained drowsy or, more precisely, it was sound asleep.³³

Trusting in reason and science, disregarding the senses and even resorting at times to trite metaphors of light and darkness, Stoud Platou openly championed the rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment. Myth could not, he claimed, guarantee the recognition of truth since “the first germ of every mythology actually sprouts from a misunderstanding of cause and effect”.³⁴ If myths had any value, then this was because some wise men in ancient times had been “able to discern the unreasonable in these figments of the human imagination. However, not daring to declare them false, they attributed to them a learned allegorical meaning”.³⁵ Stoud Platou, thus, implicitly adopted the so-called *integumentum* (“hidden veil”) theory.³⁶ The use of allegory and sensuous images in myths was due, he argued, to a deficit in the language of ancient times, which “could not express any abstract concepts („Begrep”)”.³⁷ His model, thus, opposed rational knowledge, which was underwritten by abstract concepts and conveyed in words, with the imperfect perceptions of the senses expressed in images.

His account of poetic uses of mythology drew heavily on Herder's work *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie*.³⁸ Though he did not acknowledge the source, Stoud Platou included a near translation of Herder's above-cited passage that presented mythology as a sensuous rendering of abstract truths.³⁹ He repeated Herder's claim that mythology should be means and

³²STOUD PLATOU, L.: Forsøg til en Besvarelse af det ved Kiøbenhavn's Universitet for Aaret 1801 udsatte Priiissspørsmaal: Var det gavnligt for Nordens skionne Litteratur, om den gamle nordiske Mythologie blev indført og almindelig antaget, istedet for den Græske? [Part I] [An Attempt to Answer the Prize Question Posed by the University of Copenhagen for the Year 1801: Would It Benefit Northern Polite Literature...]. *Minerva* 64 (1801) 292.

³³STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 293–294.

³⁴STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 295. His authority was MEISTE, L.: *Über die Einbildungskraft*. Zürich 1795.

³⁵STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 302.

³⁶As GAIER (n. 2) 166, puts it in a Lucretian expression: “The *integumentum* (veil) theory of fable defended the stories for centuries against the reproach of fictitiousness, maintaining that they were ingenious inventions and interesting, witty, sweet covers that gild the bitter pills of truth.”

³⁷STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 302.

³⁸The essay's polemic against Klotz was also drawn from this work: see STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 311–313 and SWS I 426–429.

³⁹STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 314; for Herder's view, see above, p. 80.



not ends.⁴⁰ Along similar lines, he went through different literary genres and examined mythology's application to each one.⁴¹ Interestingly, this discussion included another uncredited passage that bore a striking resemblance to one from Herder's *Iduna*.⁴² The similarity in the wording practically eliminates the possibility of mere coincidence. As I have not been able to identify any common source for this passage, it seems probable that Stoud Platou did not acknowledge his familiarity with *Iduna*. Even so, in his own points of theoretical departure, he broke free from the influence of Herder's dialogue.

The third part of the essay turned to the differences between Greek and Norse mythology, which though they had the same basic traits, were as distinct in "colour" ("Kolorit") "as the South is from the North".⁴³ Here Stoud Platou admitted the superior refinement and beauty of Greek mythology, explaining this conclusion via geographical, climatological, linguistic and historical arguments.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, he noted, Norse mythology had its own advantages – while Greek myths served the poet who sought to "enchant us in a gentle and happy dream of tenderness, beauty, friendship and love", the Norse stories illustrated other virtues including bravery, loyalty and respect for women (see note 42). He also attributed to them "a certain raw and gigantic beauty" that Greek mythology lacked because of its refinement ("Uddannelse").⁴⁵ For Danish readers, Norse mythology had a distinct and indefinable charm since it pertained to their own ancestors.⁴⁶ Stoud Platou recommended learning this mythology not from obscure and raw sources but from existing or forthcoming masterworks by contemporary authors, who would, thus, have a role among students of Norse mythology similar to that of the canonical Greek and Latin *auctores*.⁴⁷

Overall, then, the critic recommended the use of Norse mythology without, however, calling for the abandonment of classical examples.⁴⁸ Just as these examples had helped to re-establish "refined taste" after the Middle Ages, which hungered only for the marvellous and fable-like, so

⁴⁰STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 312; SWS I 436.

⁴¹STOUD PLATOU (n. 32) 320–332; SWS I 433–439.

⁴²"...saaledes kan han [Digteren] til en anden Tid fremstille for vore Øine af den nordiske Mythologie og ældgamle Sagar store ædle og forbausende Mønstre **paa Diærvhed og Tapperhed i Liv og Død, paa Trofasthed, paa Venskab, Kysthed, Høiagtelse og Hoffliged mod det svagere Køn**" (STOUD PLATOU, L.: Forsøg til en Besvarelse af det ved Kiøbenhavns Universitet for Aaret 1801 udsatte Priisspørsmaal: Var det gavnligt for Nordens skønne Litteratur, om den gamle nordiske Mythologie blev indført og almindelig antaget, istedet for den Græske? [Part II]. *Minerva* 65 (1801) 26). The catalogue of Norse virtues given by Alfred in *Iduna* is practically identical: "Freundschaft mit dem Freunde bis auf den Tod, **Tapferkeit und ein guter Muth im Leben und Sterben, Redlichkeit in Haltung seines Worts, Keuschheit, Hochachtung und zarte Gefälligkeit gegen die Frauen**, ein hilfreich Gemüth gegen die Unterdrückten: das waren Eigenschaften, die diesen Volksstamm von allen Stämmen der Erde unterschieden. Wir Deutsche gehören zu ihm" (FA 8, 167). (Wording identical to Herder's text has been marked in bold while looser similarities have been underlined.)

⁴³STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 12.

⁴⁴STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 12–19.

⁴⁵STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 36.

⁴⁶STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 35–36.

⁴⁷STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 40–41. Mentioning especially the works of Johannes Ewald and Christen Pram.

⁴⁸Explicitly STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 58. This conclusion may have won him the sympathy of one of the members of the jury, Jacob Baden, who considers the part in which the author supports the necessity to keep (also) the Greek mythology as a source for the modern literature, the best. Cf. his review in Kongens Fødselsfest 1801 (n. 30) 15.



too, he claimed, should they now dispel anything “overblown and bombastic”.⁴⁹ Stoud Platou, thus, came to a similar conclusion to that of Herder in *Iduna*: classical examples should serve as a corrective when it came to taste. While Herder had argued, however, that Greek taste should be used to eliminate all the “raw” and “barbaric” elements of Norse mythology, Stoud Platou saw it as a safeguard against anything “bombastic”, thus guaranteeing the classicist ideal of moderation. His ideal was, thus, a happy union of Norse and classical mythology. The two, he wrote, should “with their own leaves, flowers and colours contribute to the beautiful wreath of our polite literature”.⁵⁰

JENS MØLLER

Jens Møller’s ongoing interest in the use of Norse mythology is clear from another essay that he wrote in 1812, which gave rise to a passionate debate on the use of Norse mythology in the fine arts, following the example of his friend, the German scholar and promoter of Norse culture, Friedrich David Gräter.⁵¹ Møller’s 1800 essay had also been rather dependent on the young Gräter’s Norse scholarship. His introduction concerning his own attitude to classical and Norse mythology struck quite a personal note:

For I have known Graeco-Roman mythology since childhood, like all young pupils in the country. Can it be any wonder, then, that I had an *a priori* love of these gods and heroes, in whose company I was, so to speak, educated [...] In contrast, my attention turned more seldom to our own antiquities, but then the noble feeling of patriotic love – or whatever it should be called – had twice the force...⁵²

While he recognised the value of Greek mythology, Møller called for the introduction of Norse mythology as well. One of his arguments was the greater emphasis on morality and chastity in the Norse stories.⁵³ The decisive case for Norse mythology among Scandinavian writers was based, however, on the aesthetic category of the “interesting”. Taking as his authority the prominent German late Enlightenment figure Christian Garve, Møller claimed that it was natural for us to be most interested in people most similar to ourselves, that is, those who “share our way of thinking, our language and our customs and whose deeds and actions come near to those [...] of our own nation and our times”.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, he did not wish to expel Greek

⁴⁹STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 40–41.

⁵⁰STOUD PLATOU (n. 42) 57–58. I would thus not concur with T. van Gerven’s opinion that: „Platou in his conclusion nevertheless took side for Greek mythology as the more advantageous and suitable mythology of the two“ (VAN GERVEN [n. 5] 55).

⁵¹Cf. BENSON (n. 5) 101. Gräter addressed the topic in 1807, however Herder has already touched upon it in his *Iduna* (FA 8, 161–162).

⁵²MØLLER, J.: Forsøg til Besvarelse af det ved Kiøbenhavn’s Universitet fremsatte Priisspørsmaal: Var det gavnligt for Nordens skønne Litteratur, om den gamle nordiske Mythologie blev indført og almindelig antaget, istedet for den Græske? *Minerva* 64 (1801) 35–36.

⁵³MØLLER (n. 52) 82. For tracing the idea of the morally respectable state of being in the ancient, uncivilized cultures back to Rousseau, cf. VAN GERVEN [n. 5] 56.

⁵⁴MØLLER (n. 52) 83–84.



mythology from the Scandinavian literature but tried to demarcate a line across different genres that would preserve idyllic poetry as the absolute domain of Greek mythology while opening up other poetic forms to both influences.⁵⁵

ADAM OEHLenschLÄGER

The short contribution by Adam Oehlenschläger made the strongest case for Norse mythology. In his brief theoretical introduction, Oehlenschläger also built on Herder's *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie* though he did not acknowledge his source; he repeated the call for mythology as means and not the goal of poetry and he elaborated on this claim his argument that the introduced mythology should be the one most fruitful for a given literature and not the one most beautiful in itself (i.e. Greek mythology).⁵⁶ The following claim seems to draw on young Herder's ideas about mythology's mediating role (which was, in Oehlenschläger's view, itself a product of poetry) and to move beyond it: "Bringing non-sensuous things into beautiful sensuous form is the essence of poetry. [...] However, experience teaches us that the more we submit fantasy to the tutelage of the educated ("dannede") reason and its capacities for abstraction, the weaker its power becomes and the less daring and original its creations are."⁵⁷

In the next part of the essay, Oehlenschläger rejected Sulzer's characterisation of Norse mythology as "raw" by distinguishing between the "raw" ("det raae") and the "unrefined" ("det udannet", corresponding to the German "ungebildet"). The second category, he argued, meant that the Norse mythology has not been sufficiently and tastefully tapped by a discriminating poet.⁵⁸ This was actually also its greatest advantage as it opened up new possibilities for original poetic creation.⁵⁹ The same was true, Oehlenschläger claimed, of ancient Nordic history to which he paid great attention, thus foreshadowing Romanticism's interest in national history.⁶⁰

In discussing Greek mythology, Oehlenschläger tried to reject the two basic principles of classicist poetics – *imitatio* and *aemulatio* – though he did not use these terms explicitly. Concerning the principle of *imitatio* he claimed that poets could either merely "repeat what had been already said, or else change it".⁶¹ This option for change led him to the second principle, *aemulatio*. In an acrobatic feat of logic, Oehlenschläger accepted another classicist axiom – that classical ancient texts have the status of "masterworks" – to support the rejection of classicist poetic rules. If these texts were indeed masterworks, then emulation was impossible since any change by a modern "emulator" would inevitably be a deterioration.⁶² And even in the highly

⁵⁵MÖLLER (n. 52) 91–92.

⁵⁶OEHLenschLÄGER, A.: Forsøg til Besvarelse af det ved Kiøbenhavn's Universitet fremsatte Priisspørsmaal: Var det gavnligt for Nordens skønne Litteratur, om den gamle nordiske Mythologie blev indført og almindelig antaget, istedet for den Græske? *Minerva* 63 (1801) 274.

⁵⁷OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 272–273.

⁵⁸OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 282.

⁵⁹OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 283–284.

⁶⁰OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 287–289.

⁶¹OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 283–284.

⁶²OEHLenschLÄGER (n. 56) 284.



improbable case that another masterwork was created, “it would nevertheless arouse unpleasant feelings”.⁶³

A precious metal (“Malm”) that have had some thousand years to cool off to its form, does not profit easily from the recasting, one is used to see it in its old shape, one puts, so to say, no trust in a newly created thing and it lacks the ancientness (“Ælde”) and nobleness (“Høitidelighed”).⁶⁴

Even so, Oehlenschläger did not go so far as to reject classical mythology. Throughout his essay, he paid it minimal attention but returned to it in the closing paragraphs:

I hope no one will blame me for being one-sided in this study since I have not touched upon the advantages of Greek mythology. I deemed this unnecessary because I know that no one doubts them. [...] I hope no one will think that I consider only the latter one [Norse mythology] beneficial or that I claim it should have an exclusive monopoly at the expense of the former one. [...] For poetry, any subject is more or less applicable.⁶⁵

Oehlenschläger’s apparent defence of Greek mythology’s value resulted, however, in a kind of relativising of its position as just one of the many potential subjects fitting for modern poetry.

CONCLUSIONS

Although they approached the topic from different theoretical positions, the four authors discussed in this study reached a similar conclusion: the use of Norse mythology in German (or, as the case may be, Danish) literature was highly recommended, but should not occur at the expense of Greek mythology. The role left over for Greek culture varied from case to case – while Stoud Platou idealised a happy union between the Norse and classical elements in Danish literature, Oehlenschläger made the relativist case for using Greek mythology as one of many sources. Herder and Stoud Platou shared an idea of Greek (and, in Stoud Platou’s case, also Roman) culture as a corrective of literary taste although the emphasis of the two authors differed. Unlike Herder, the Danish writers did not need to justify the appropriation of a different culture, and so his appeal to the Greek model of cultural appropriation was irrelevant in their context. The call to usurp Norse mythology for the purposes of German literature was, thus, replaced by an appeal to the greater interestingness of domestic topics and to a feeling rather hesitantly called “patriotic love” (Møller, Stoud Platou). Herder’s influence can be observed in all three Danish contributions. It seems, however, that the authors built on Herder’s early ideas about mythology expressed in *Vom neuern Gebrauch der Mythologie* and did not directly reflect on his later theoretical development in *Iduna*.

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⁶³OEHLenschläGER (n. 56) 284.

⁶⁴OEHLenschläGER (n. 56) 284.

⁶⁵OEHLenschläGER (n. 56) 296.

