

Beyond the Wall.

Renaissance Embodiments of the Old Norse god Freyr

Marco Battaglia

Abstract

In his *Gespräch über die Poesie* («Athenäum», III, 1800), Fr. Schlegel reworked some of the ideas put forward years earlier by J. G. Herder – in his controversy with J. Winckelmann – on the need to recover the mythopoietic dimension in national artistic creation and to get rid of the influence of the Greek model, which has been active in German thought for a long time. Schlegel’s work became the manifesto of an upcoming pre-Romantic aesthetic, which for at least two centuries had been rediscovering the memorial heritage of old Germanic mythology, best embodied in the XIIth and XIIIth cent. Old Norse literacy. Among the controversial sources conveying that tradition, works like the early *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* by Adam of Bremen (ca. 1070) and some historical annals of late medieval Sweden generated unprecedented and long-lasting representations of divine *simulacra*, which were able to influence, both politically and ideologically, the Gothicism movement during the Renaissance. This essay focuses on the representation of Old Norse divine triads during the XVIth-and XVIIth centuries, and specifically on the reception of fertility myths connected with the god Freyr.

Keywords

Adam of Bremen; Norse Mythology; Freyr; Gothicism; Swedish Renaissance

Beyond the Wall. Renaissance embodiments of the Old Norse god Freyr

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Vor einigen Jahren ertönte unten am Parnaß ein Ruf, daß oben auf dem Parnaß einige Deutsche Dichter für unsere Nation und Sprache den Gebrauch der *griechischen* Mythologie abschaffen, dagegen aber die *Isländische* einführen wollten. Für Apollo sollte künftig Braga, für *Jupiter Thor* oder *Odin*, für den *Olymp Walhalla* gelten u. s. f. (Herder, *Iduna...*1796: 1)

Klaus Düwel *in memoriam*

Preliminary considerations

In the year 1800, Fr. Schlegel published *Gespräch über die Poesie*¹. In this work, as opposed to the contradictory primitivism of Klopstock as reader of Ossian and the idyllic ‘Parnassus’ of the Hainbund that followed in his footsteps, the author reworked certain ideas expounded years earlier by J. G. Herder about the need to recover the mythopoeic dimension in national artistic creation² and shake off the influence of the Greek model, which had long been present in German thought, from Hölderlin to Heidegger to the aberrations of Aryan ideology. Schlegel’s work soon became the manifesto of an emerging pre-Romantic aesthetic, where he denounced how German

¹ *Athenäum*, III: 58-128, 169-187; Behler, Eichner (1975).

² In the evocative essay *Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjüngung* (in *Die Horen*, V, 1796: 1-28), a natural sequel to *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), in which the scholar polemised with J. J. Winckelmann.

poetry had lost its benchmark (which the ancients had found in myth). He advocated the recourse to new sources of mythological inspiration which, however, were to be understood as spiritual forms of a renewed *Naturphilosophie* (Cometa 1984), perceived as essential for the concept of 'Universal Poetry' shared by the Jena Circle (to which Friedrich belonged, along with his brother August W., Novalis, Schelling, and others).

To tell the truth, Schlegel turned mainly to the East as the cradle of mankind, according to a mainstream view then supported by studies on the origin of Indo-European cultures and languages. In particular, the focus was on Persian – already brought into prominence by Th. More and E. S. Piccolomini, Netherlandish humanists and Leibniz –, but also on Sanskrit, as revived by the insights of Jesuits Heinrich Roth, Johan E. Hanxleden, and Gaston Coeurdoux, even before William Jones. Indeed, for at least a couple of centuries, the new mythological sources extolled by Schlegel had been gaining wide acceptance throughout Europe. In various areas, they merged and gave rise to a new political and identity consciousness that idealised an ancestral freedom which had never entirely vanished, thus imposing themselves with a longevity unforeseeable at the time. Those new sources were represented by vestiges of ancient Germanic religion – continental, insular and especially Scandinavian.

From the dawn of Christianity until the Renaissance era, the survival of ancient deities was turned into a weapon to combat superstitions and practices that were incompatible with the Christian faith, and heed was paid to the euhemeristic theme³. Drawing on Neostoicism and neo-Platonic currents, mythology could survive in the Middle Ages thanks to its allegorical reinterpretation in treatises, homilies, and sermons⁴. Between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in the wake of the extraordinary popularity acquired by astrology from the 12th up to the 14th century and by the theories on astral conjunctions, the reinterpretation of ancient myths and figures from mythographic imagery extended to the theme of the world's creation or of poetry and the arts, as well as to the rituality of work and the seasons. This was accompanied by the forging of various artefacts – from tiny talismans to cathedrals, from paintings to the 15th- and

³ Cf., among others, the apocryphal *Epistula Jeremiae*, Cyprian, *De idolorum vanitate*, Tertullian, *De idolatria*, Commodian, *Instructiones adversus gentium*.

⁴ E.g., in Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, in Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones*, in M. Capella's *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*.

16th-century treatises underpinning the canon⁵. After a necessary process of religious neutralisation, e.g., through the *caveats* on superstition in the *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, the reuse of ancient mythological imagery (as majestically celebrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [ed. 1471]) contributed to the recovery (although not the restoration) of the ideals of classical antiquity. Inaugurated in the *De imaginibus deorum* by Albericus Londoniensis (aka Alexander Neckam, 12th century) and carried out in other well-known works – the anonymous *Ovide moralisé* (1315-28), G. Boccaccio's *De Genealogiis Deorum gentilium* (1360 [ed. 1472]), Giglio G. Giralaldi's *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* (1548), Johannes Herold's *Heydenweldt und ihrer Götter* (1554) or Giacomo Zucchi's *Discorso sopra li dei de' gentili, e loro imprese [...]* (1602)⁶ –, this recovery took shape in numerous artistic representations⁷ commissioned by many patrons (from sovereigns to pontiffs), even after the Counter-Reformation provisions on art (adherence to Scripture, clarity and decorum) that condemned the free and easy-going Mannerism without appeal⁸.

⁵ Cf. Cassirer (1925), Panofsky, Saxl (1933), Sez nec ([1980] 1940), and Panofsky (1960). One might also consider, with the due differences, Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura* (1435), in light of its almost exclusively mythological examples, and the equally renowned *Iconologia* (1593) by Cesare Ripa (illustrated from the 1603 edition), which analytically presented the artistic palingenesis of vices, virtues, and passions of the human soul in alphabetical order.

⁶ Cf. Saxl (1927), Sez nec (1980 [1940]: 199-224). The *Aeneid* was published in 1469 and Cicero's *De natura deorum* in 1471, Hesiod's *Theogonia* in 1474, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in 1488. These 'canonical' texts were followed by *De cognominibus deorum opusculum* (1525) by Pietro G. Montefalco, *Theologia mythologica* (1532) by Georgius Pictorius, *De cognominibus deorum gentilium* (1541) by Julianus A. Haurech, *Le imagini colla sposizione degli dei degli antichi* (1556) by V. Cartari, *Mythologiae* (1567) by Natale Conti. A century later, these were followed by *Pantheum mythicum, seu fabulosa deorum historia* (1659) by François-Amoine Pomey and the massive *De Theologia gentili* (1642-68) by J. Gerard Vossius.

⁷ Examples include *Venus and Mars* and the *Birth of Venus* (S. Botticelli, 1483; ca. 1485), the *Sleeping Venus* (Giorgione, 1508), *The Feast of the Gods* (Giovanni Bellini, 1514), *The Council of Gods* (Raphael, 1517-18), *Homage to Venus* and *The Bacchanal of the Andrians* (Titian, 1518-19; 1523-26), *A Bacchanal* (Dosso Dossi, 1520), *Jupiter and Io* (Correggio, 1533) or the bronzes of Mercury and Minerva by J. G. van der Schardt (1570-80) and the frescoes in the Galleria Farnese by A. Carracci (1597-1608); cf. Bull (2005).

⁸ Cf. Carlo Borromeo (*Instructiones fabricae et suppellectilis ecclesiasticae*, 1577) and Gabriele Paleotti (*Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane*, 1582).

Barbarian rediscoveries and myths of the North

Starting with the discovery by Poggio Bracciolini of Tacitus' *Germania* codex in Fulda (1425), its transfer to Rome (1455) and its printing (1470; 1472), and thanks to the scholar-antiquarian movement (at its peak in the 17th century, Momigliano 1950), the recovery of distant ('barbarian') antiquities contributed to the patriotic construction of alternative identity images in the German-speaking cultures of Scandinavia, England and the German-Netherlandish area. It was to them that the genesis of modern kingdoms was attributed, consequently looking at the literary heritage compiled or translated into various vernaculars, including, of course, controversial local mythological traditions.

Originally attested in petroglyphs, wooden *simulacra* and runic bracteates, the henotheistic religion of ancient Germans is based upon mostly indirect literary documentation. The earliest, from Roman times, aims to transfer cultural *barbaritas* onto the level of religious imagery⁹; the latter, from the early Middle Ages, includes *abrenuntiatio* formulas, legal and homiletic texts, as well as hagiographic and genealogical written works (*Vitae, Origines gentium*). Fragments of censored cultic practices are also sporadically found in Anglo-Saxon poetry¹⁰, whereas the most extensive documentation concerns Scandinavian mythology, variously described (depending on local sources) by authors of the Latin late Middle Ages¹¹, or

⁹ «They [the Germans] rank in the number of the gods those alone whom they behold, and by whose instrumentality they are obviously benefited, namely, the sun, fire, and the moon; they have not heard of the other deities even by report.», Caesar, *Bell. Gall.* VI,21,1, William A. McDevitte. Translator. W. S. Bohn. (transl.), *C. Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic War*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1869; «Of the gods they worship Mercury above all, whom they consider it right on specific days to propitiate with human as well as other sacrifices [...] But, in keeping with the greatness of divinities, they think it proper neither to confine their gods within walls nor to give them any likeness of human appearance [...]», Tacitus, *Germ.* IX, Benario, Herbert W., *Tacitus. Germany – Germania* (with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by –), Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1999.

¹⁰ E.g., in *Beowulf* (vv. 175-176a: *hwilum hie geheton æt hærgtrafum / wigweorþunga*, 'sometimes they promised honours to idols in heathen temples', where the idolatry of the Danes is evoked in connection with the incursions of an anthropophagous monster, while in *Maxims* the condemnation is more explicit (vv. 132-133a: *Woden worhte woes, wuldor alwalda* 'Woden wrought idols, the Almighty the glory').

¹¹ Especially Thietmar of Merseburg (*Chronicon*, ca. 1018), Adam of Bremen

in scattered references in Anglo-Saxon homiletic or sapiential texts as well as in Arabic chronicles.

As far as the more direct representation of idols is concerned, it is worth giving space to three late quotations, all from Scandinavia:

At that time there was a man called Odin who was believed throughout Europe, though falsely, to be a god; [...] The kings of the North [...] created an image of him, his arms thickly encircled with heavy bracelets, and as an expression of their devotion sent it with the utmost show of piety to Byzantium [the seat of the pagan gods]. Delighted in his high celebrity, Odin avidly greeted the donors' affection. His wife Frigg [...] brought in smiths to strip the statue of its gold. Odin had them hanged and then, setting the image on a plinth, by marvellous feat of workmanship even made it respond with a voice to human touch. Nevertheless, [...] Frigg submitted herself to the lusts of one of her servants; by his cunning she had the effigy demolished and the gold which had been devoted to public idolatry she switched to her personal extravagance [...] Stung by this double embarrassment, he [i.e. Odin] took to exile replete with an honest shame [...] (Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, I, VII.1, first quarter of the 13th century; Friis Jensen, Fisher 2015: 53).

He saw three thrones one above the other, and there were three men, one sitting in each. Then he asked what the name of their ruler was. The man who had brought him in replied that the one that sat in the lowest throne was king and was called High, next to him the one called Just-as-high, and the one sitting at the top was called Third (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda. Gylfaginning*, 2, first quarter of the 13th century; Faulkes (1995: 8).

In this temple [...] the people worship the statues of three gods in such wise that the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber; Wotan and Fricco have places on either side. The significance of these gods is as follows: Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops. The other, Wotan – that is, the Furious – carries on war and imparts to man strength against his enemies. The third is Fricco, who bestows peace and pleasure on mortals. His likeness, too, they fashion with an immense phallus. (Adam of Bremen, 11th

(*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ca. 1075), Helmold of Bosau (*Chronica Sclavorum*, ca. 1170), and Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta Danorum*, ca. 1217).

century, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, IV.26, last quarter of the 11th century; Reuter, Tschan 2002: 207).

If the first fragment stands out for its defamatory tone towards the ancient cults, in the second, adhering to the euhemeristic view of the human origin of the gods, the three imposter magicians posing as deities are exposed by the pressing questions of their interlocutor and dissolve as demobilized *simulacra* anticipating the Odin-Mr. Wednesday in Neil Gaiman's novel *American Gods* (2001). The third fragment, the oldest of the three, was composed by a cleric of the Hamburg-Bremen diocese, tasked with the evangelisation of Scandinavia, and refers to the great Swedish pagan temple at Uppsala, to which I will return shortly.

Since the last decades of the 15th century, Scandinavia had been the centre of great tensions triggered by the antagonism between the kingdoms of Denmark-Norway-Iceland and Sweden-Finland, which were involved in the economic exploitation of the Baltic and North Seas. This conflict, which broke out in 1520, was fought for over a century and a half as an armed combat, i.e. through a policy aimed at defending the antiquarian heritage, and as a literary project exalting a glorious past, archaeological finds, language and – after their discovery and circulation – ancient literary documents.

Particularly in Sweden, thanks to the contamination of Jordanes' *Getica*¹² with the book of *Genesis* (alongside the biblical figures of Gog and Magog, who were believed to be descendants of Japheth and progenitors of the Goths), the legendary identification with the glorious Goths became one with the euphoric affirmation of a proto-nationalism (cf. Mohnike 2020) fostered by the emergence of a 'national' historiography that started with the anonymous *Prosaiska kronikan* (mid-15th century) and the *Chronica Regni Gothorum* by Ericus Olai (see *infra*).

If the Paris edition of the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (1514 and 1534, with a prestigious introduction by Erasmus) might be said to represent a climax for Danish politics, it was thanks to the brothers Johannes and Olaus Magnus that the celebration of a Swedish legacy gained international prominence. The former was the Catholic archbishop of Uppsala and author of the magniloquent *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sueonumque regibus* ([1540] 1554, posthumous) and the latter, his secretary and successor, published the sounder (somewhat less extravagant) *Historia de genti-*

¹² Found in 1442 by E. S. Piccolomini and printed by K. Peutingen in 1515.

bus septentrionalibus (1555; Ruggerini 1999: 261-273). The two works were testament to a humanistic dedication to the past, advocating the image of Sweden as a *locus amoenus* in opposition to the Danish arch-enemy. Departing from a typically Renaissance context, the two brothers (who were living in exile due to the Protestant empowerment under King Gustav Vasa) extolled the history of their homeland, attempting to get over the barbaric geo-cultural *topos* through a pseudo-rationalist approach that was part of the linear path of the *historia salvationis*.

Both works hinted at the pre-Christian Nordic religion and the survival of superstitions¹³, which was the result of an ancient debate rekindled by the Reformation and not immune to esoteric suggestions. In this regard, the rewriting (and related engravings) of the above-mentioned passage by Adam of Bremen about the temple at Uppsala deserves special attention, since, in it, the deities allegedly worshipped in the form of a triad could not have been unaffected by the influence of a Christian Trinitarian paradigm that had infiltrated the Norse literary tradition (Bödl 2018: 23-28).

Gender stereotypes

Depictions of local idols by Italian artists in the works of the Magnus brothers represent an important contribution in the humanistic and Renaissance construction process of the European *media aetas*. Confirming Adam's description, possibly already present in the Swedish Tapestry of the Church of Skog (Hälsinge, 12th century, fig. 1), the rough and uncontrolled Thor of Icelandic sources is transformed here into a towering model of placid kingship wearing a twelve-star diadem. He also wields a sceptre that, as opposed to the traditional Mjölnir hammer – an equivalent to Hercules' club and Vedic God Indra's thunderbolt –, would trace him back to the Romans' Jupiter *Anxur* (*Auxurum* in Johannes). Odin, on the other hand, the traditional supreme god and father of the gods (if a fraudulent magician in Saxo's view), plays here the more secondary role of Mars¹⁴, standing next to Thor like a fully armed coeval lansquenet. Most astounding of all, however, is the image of the third deity, no longer associated with Fricco (as in Adam's hypotext), but appearing in the female guise of Frig(g)a, whom the two works respectively locate on the right-hand and left-hand side (figs. 2, 3):

¹³ Johannes in chapters VIII-X of book I, Olaus in book III.

¹⁴ Instead of the traditional Mercury of the *interpretation romana*, which had already been rejected by Saxo Grammaticus.



Fig. 1 – Skog tapestry (Stockholm, Historiska Museet)



Fig. 2 – J. Magnus, *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sueonumque regibus* (1554, p. 38)



Fig. 3 – O. Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555, p. 100)

Tertius Frigga pacem voluptatemque moderabatur: cuius etiam simulachrum turpitudinem sexus prae se ferebat: et ob id tantum apud Gothos, quantum Venus apud Romanos venerabatur. (Olaus 1555: 100)

This deity apparently mirrors two juxtaposed figures, that is to say, Freyja (the 'Lady'), the Norse fertility goddess celebrated like her brother Freyr and sometimes denigrated as Odin's lustful lover (being compared to Venus), and the speechless Frigg¹⁵ (Paul Deacon's Frea and the incestuous Frigge of the Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric), a clairvoyant, protectress of life and the wife of Odin, whose image as a mother grieving over the murder of her son tends to fade over time into that of an elusive divinity with vague Marian similarities. The surprising metamorphosis that had a god turn into a goddess in 16th-century iconography was eventually crowned by means of an unprecedented *status* as woman-at-arms (with sword and bow)¹⁶, a sort of Diana-Hecate-Proserpina. If, on the one hand, any reference to Venus is to be excluded, on the other hand this Frigga would echo the Valkyries of Norse mythology as well as the *virgines silvestres* of the *Gesta Danorum*. In other words, female warriors who – untouched by patriarchal gender stereotypes – stand as icons of masculine *virtus*¹⁷. An example of this is to be found in Lathgertha, the valiant heroine of a legendary tradition handed down through Saxo Grammaticus and the post-Elizabethan theatre, who has recently resurfaced in the television series *Vikings* (fig. 4)

Linguistically, however, with the Old German dialectal form 'Fricco' ('impatient, greedy; determined, bold', also as a masculine proper noun), in the 11th century Adam of Bremen unambiguously indicated («cum ingenti priapo») a god of male sexual fecundity, usually compared to the aisl. Freyr (Old Danish Frø, Old Swedish Frö). In the description of the temple at Uppsala, Fricco had already been referred to by historian and theologian Albert Krantz, in whose work *Regnorum aquilonarium. Daniae Suetiae, Norvegiae Chronica* (1546⁺), a source for Johannes Magnus, the attribute of the god (*simulacrum turpitudinis*)¹⁸ was reminiscent of the Swedish ithyphallic amulet

¹⁵ Contained in the name 'Friday' in Germanic languages, cf. Battaglia (2015).

¹⁶ «Pingebatur gladio et arcu cum armis, quod in illis terris vterque sexus semper ad arma promptissimus esset» (*ibid.*).

¹⁷ For other examples, in addition to Saxo (Aflhild, Rusla, Vébjörg, Visna) and the Nibelungen-Völsunga Brynhildr, see the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, the *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, the *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* or the *Grænlandinga saga*.

¹⁸ «Tertius Fricco, pacem & voluptatem moderatur. Cuius etiam simulacrum turpitudinem prae se ferebat» (p. 368).



Fig. 4 – Lagertha in the television series *Vikings*.



Fig. 5 – Ityphallic amulet from Rällinge Statens Historiska Museum (Stockholm).

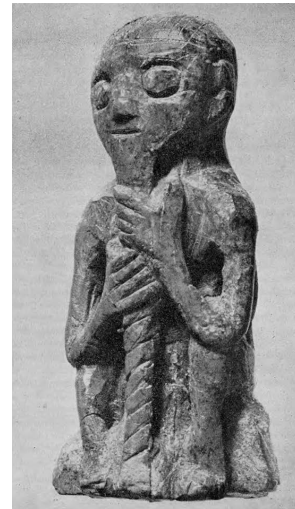


Fig. 6 – Statuette found in Lunda Lindquist (1962: 71).

from Rällinge (Södermannland area, fig. 5), and perhaps, albeit less certainly, of another statuette found in nearby Lunda (Södermannland area, fig. 6).

The linguistic relation between *Freyr* and *Fricco* has extensively been debated, although without reaching a solution (see Wagner 1989, among the most important sources). In Adam's language, the cited Old Swedish form *Frö* would have sounded too similar to the Old German noun *Frō* used for «Lord, (Christian) God», so much so that the chronicler renamed the god with a related form recorded in an earlier passage – *Gesta* IV.9, concerning the destruction of an *opinatissimum simulacrum Fricconis* by Bishop Egino of Dalby-Lund (shortly after 1060) – as well as in a Carolingian capitulary of 802 (Boretius 1883: 97), which denounced the crime of *fornicatio* within a women's convent, committed by a man named Fricco and depicted as a sort of demon.

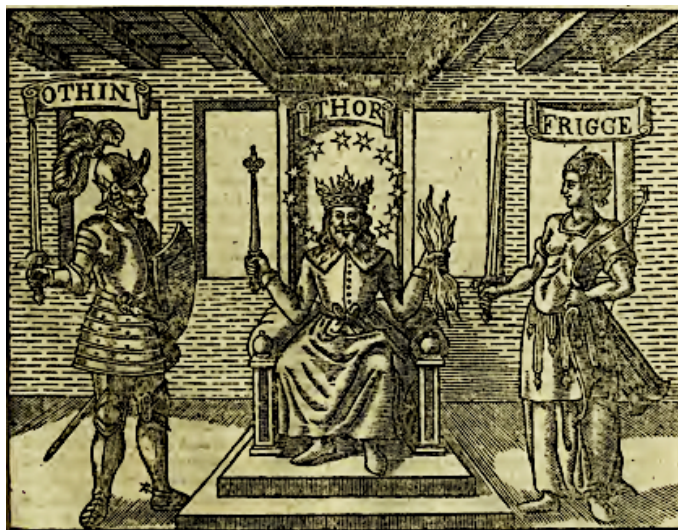


Fig. 7 – H. Stephanius, *Notae uberiores in Historiam Danicam Saxonis Grammatici* (1629: 139)

A little less than a century after the now famous reproduction by the Magnus brothers, it reappeared in the edition of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* edited by S. H. Stephanius (*Notae uberiores in Historiam Danicam Saxonis Grammatici*, 1629: 139), in which the exchange of positions between Odin and Frigge suggests dependence on Johannes' older text. At the same time, Thor holding a flame in his left hand constitutes the oldest iconographic evidence to date of the god's close relationship with thunder and lightning (fig. 7). The popularity of these images evoking a barbaric North, an *alter orbis* populated by monsters and depicted for the first time in the atlas *Carta marina* (1539) by Olaus himself, is confirmed by their echoes in contemporary European culture, from Tudor England to Cervantine Spain. Through early Petrarchan references to Thile (*Familiars* III.1, Pacca 2003) – the Thyle of Pytheas, Virgil, Seneca, and Pliny –, these images naturally extended as far as Italy, as is confirmed by the references found in the Italian 17th-century romances (see, for example, *Coralbo*, *Historia del Cavalier Perduto*, *La Donzella Desterrada*), or, even earlier, by the significant hints contained in Book III of *L'Alfeo* (1593), the unfinished poem by Orazio Ariosto (Ariosto). Most notable here is the faithful application of Torquato Tasso's principles regarding the most suitable setting for heroic poems, i.e. the Northern regions, with their dreary landscapes and anguishing or demonic figures¹⁹.

¹⁹ Cf., in their various aspects, *Galealto re di Norvegia* (later *Re Torrismondo*); *Il Messaggiero*; *Discorsi del poema eroico*.

Importantly, therefore, the debt to the brothers Magnus²⁰ (and in particular Olaus, III,3) stands out in the description of the temple at Uppsala, where Frigga again emerges as an icon of male warlike virtues:

LXXIX

[...] immenso simulacro in seggio d'oro
quel tempio ingombra ed è nomato Toro [i.e.: Thor].

LXXX

A destra ed a sinistra Otino e Friga
si veggono di lui statue minori:
imperio ha l'un d'ogni guerriera briga,
diva è l'altra dei vezzi e degli amori.
Quel che con l'armi i popoli castiga,
armato manifesta i suoi furori:
ma dà Friga a veder con arco e spada
che le donne guerriere ha là contrada.

LXXXI

Siede Toro nel mezzo, e qui si mira
di gemmata corona e scettro adorno;
sopra la testa sua lucido gira
di chiare stelle un bel ordine intorno.
A questo ciò ch'intende e ciò che spira,
ciò che piuma dispiega od alza corno
fanno i Goti [i.e.: the Swedish] soggetto; e quest'han fede
ch'ai rei dia pene, ai buoni ampia mercede.

See also the following excerpt:

LXXXVI

Tu, Friga [...]
Porti arco e spada tu: feri e saetti,
non pur curi gli amori e gli imenei
(Venturini 1982: 106-107)

One of the first cases of media fake news in the modern era must be

²⁰ The translation of Olaus' text by Remigio Fiorentino (*Storia de' costumi de' popoli settentrionali*) was printed in Venice in 1561.

traced to the striking testimony of the Dano-Swedish scholar Herman Pedersen 'Chytræus'. In his chorographic work *Monumenta præcipua, quæ in Scania, Hallandia et Blekingia inveniuntur* [...] (1598)²¹, he mentions the (highly improbable) presence in the southern city of Lund of the same temple as in Uppsala, with the same cults – Thorus, Othinus, Frygga – the last of which is undoubtedly connected to the sphere of marriage and sexual pleasure:

Tertium simulcrum fuit Frigga [...] Hoc crinibus passis mira pulcritudine virgineam fomam referens, fabricatum fuit. Eam juvenes cum virginibus colebant, & omnes, qui nuptiarum, lætitiarum & voluptatum lenociniis & desiderio afficiebantur. (p. 287)

Less than ten years later, at the time of the Gunpowder Plot²², R. Rowlands Verstegan, the son of Dutch Catholic immigrants, published a text that became a milestone for the antiquarian revival in England. This was *A Restitution of the Decayed Intelligence* [...] (1605), where he extolled the continental Germanic origin of Old English institutions, language and even deities, dismissing the inconsistency of Arthurian legends and the Trojan myth traditionally linked to them. His work contains strikingly innovative observations on the mythology of Anglo-Saxon ancestors: in the description of the three «Idols» – Woden, Thor and Friga (figs. 8 a/b/c, pp. 72-77) – the latter is accompanied by engravings by Verstegan himself that lead back to the illustrations in O. Magnus (in the Roman edition of 1554, or possibly in the Basel edition of 1567), as is confirmed in the passage about her (emphasis added):

This idol represented **both sexes**, as wel man as woman, and as an Hermaphrodite is said to have had both the members of a man, and the members of a woman [...] Some honored her for a God and some for a Goddesse, but **shee was ordinary taken rather for a Goddesse** then a God, and was reputed the giuer of peace and plenty, and also the causer and maker of loue and amitie, and of the day of her espetiall adoration wee yet retain the name of friday, and as in the order of the dayes of the week Thursday cometh between wednesday and friday, so (as *Olaus magnus noteth*) in the septentrionall regions, where they made the Idoll Thor sitting or lying in a great hall upon a couered

²¹ Published by S. Lagerbring, *Monumenta Scanensium* I (1748).

²² *The Gunpowder Plot* (or *the Jesuit Treason*), a Jesuit conspiracy that soured the relations between Anglicans and English Catholics for over half a century.

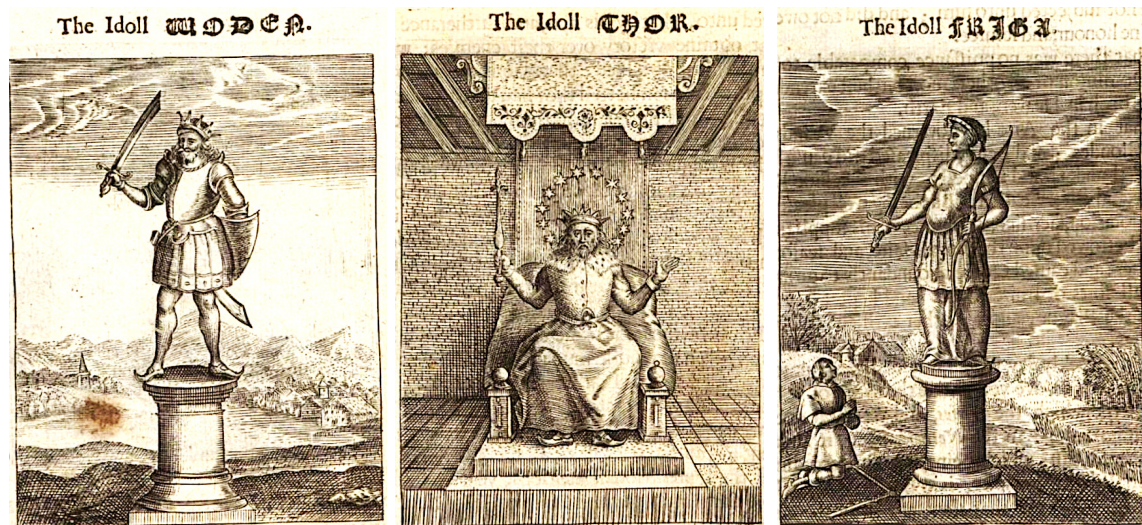


Fig. 8 a/b/c – Illustrations from *A Restitution of the Decayed Intelligence* [...], 1605: 72, 74, 76.

bed, they also placed on the one syde of him the Idol Woden, & on the other syde the Idol Friga. (*ibid.*: 76-77)

Verstegan's influence also hovers in the various translations of a treatise on comparative mythography entitled *πανσεβεια* (*Pansebeia*), or *View of all the Religions in the World* (1652) [1655], by Alexander Ross, a Scottish theologian and translator of the *Qur'an* much appreciated by Herder and who showed familiarity with the themes of ancient Germanic religion²³. In section V of his work, he recalls how, as was the case with the Saxons, for the Danes and Swedes too «*Frea* or *Frico*, was *Venus*, to whom *Friday* was dedicated [...]» (*ibid.*: 149). Ross then proceeds to quote directly from Verstegan, and mentions Friga (emphasis added):

Their sixth Idol was **Friga**; from her our Friday is denominated, and was the same that **Venus** among the **Romans**; she is painted in the habit of a man in arms, with a sword in one hand, and a bow in the other; so among the Romans she was **Venus armata**, and **barbata**, armed and bearded; she is called by the Greeks Θεός in the **masculine**, and by Aristophanes Ἀφροδύες, so by Vergil, *Deus; descend ac ducente Deo flammam inter & hostes*. (*ibid.*: 150-151)

²³ See on this point various Renaissance treatises such as those by Johannes Aventinus, Philippus Cluverius, Johannes Pomarius, the aforementioned R. R. Verstegan, Elias Schedius or Christian Arnold.

And again:

The *Danes* and *Swedes* worshipped the same gods that the *Saxons* did. They call upon *Thor* or *Iupiter*, when the Pestilence is among them, because he ruleth in the ayre: In the time of war they call upon *Wodan* or *Mars*. In their marriages they invoke *Frico* or *Venus*. They had also their *Heroes* or demi-gods; they used to kill nine males of each kind of sensitive creatures, and' (151) 'to pacifie their gods with the blood thereof, then to hang up their bodies in the Grove next the Temple called *Vbsola*. (*ibid.*: 152)

All this points out the debt to Adam of Bremen and the related description of the temple at Uppsala (*Gesta Hamm.* IV.26-27). At the same time, however, Ross was endorsing the new pro-feminine *vulgate* of the deity, as echoed not only in the diaries of the ambassador to Sweden Bulstrode Whitelocke (*their goddess Freid, so they called Venus*)²⁴, but also in William Temple's *Of Heroic Virtue* (1690 [1814]: 366), in which Frea is cast as the goddess of pleasure and is worshipped together with Odin, the god of law and war, and Thor, the meteorological god. Further echoes famously reverberate at the end of Act I of John Dryden's *King Arthur or, The British Worthy* (1691), by way of the improbable invocation to the three pagan 'Saxon' gods (who, as in Verstegan, are placed on pedestals):

Thor, Freya, Woden, hear, and spell your Saxons,
With Sacred Runick Rhimes, from Death in Battle.
Edge their bright Swords, and blunt the Britons' Darts. (1691: 6)

The only exception seems to be Aylett Sammes (*Britannia antiqua illustrata*, 1676), a reader of the Danish historian Pontanus and, especially, of Adam of Bremen, who describes a generic temple with Thor, Woden and Fricco. Though unequivocally represented as a male idol – armed with a bow and arrows, endowed with «a great Priapus» and guaranteeing peace, pleasure and abundance (p. 445 and cf. *infra*, fig. 9) – the latter confirms all the uncertainties surrounding his role and troublesome reception when one reads the passage that defines him:

Laftly, Fricco, who with the Ancient *Saxons* was taken for *Wodens*

²⁴ *A Journal of the Swedish Embassy in the Years 1663 and 1664* (vol. II, 1722: 19-20).



Fig. 9 – *Britannia antiqua illustrata*, 1676: 446.

Wife²⁵, and adored as a Goddess only, is now made with a great *Priapus*, and we know not of what Sex to take her, having the Members of both. Sometimes they worshipped her as a God, as she carried a Bow and Arrows, sometimes as a Goddess, as she wore a Female Vesture.

As a matter of fact, all the Middle Swedish historiographical literature preceding the works of the Magnuses provides a one-sided picture, so much so that, in the mid-15th century, the anonymous author of the *Prosaiska Krönika* still defined the third deity of the sanctuary – a guarantor of peace, carnal pleasures and fertility and honoured on Fridays – in masculine terms («han heet frigh», 'he was called F.')

Then tridie thera gudh han heet frigh honom hedrade the om fredaghen at han skulle giffwa them fridh kötligan lustha och mangh barn [...] Hwilken som brwllöpp wilde göra tha offrade the frigh. (Fant 1818, I: 242)²⁶

²⁵ That is, Frigga, whom Sammes identifies as Woden's wife and supposed goddess of love among the Saxons. Here, the text highlights the fusion of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian mythological traditions by reiterating the mistaken-identity dynamics involving Frigg and Freyja.

²⁶ «The third god is called Frigh, and they worshipped him on Fridays [so]

Similarly, the coeval *Lilla Rimkrönika* (*Chronicon rhythmicum minus*) recalled the male god Frigga [sic!] as a bestower of fruit, children, and pleasure («Frucht, Barn och Lusta» (Fant 1818, I: 252). This concept was reiterated by the father of Swedish historiography Ericus Olai (*Chronica regni Gothorum*, ca. 1470, based in part on ancient material handed down from the *Prosaiska Krönika*):

Tercium quoque, scilicet Frygh, pro fertilitate et abundancia frugum et fructuum terre, hominum et iumentorum honorabant et assidue venerabantur. (Heuman, Öberg I 1993: 25)

It was Olaus Petri, the leading Swedish humanist and reformer²⁷, who officially promoted the unprecedented female image of this deity. In *Een swensk Cröneka* (1539-40), a historical work focussing on educational and moral aspects, after describing the temple at Uppsala (Sahlgren 1917: 10) and the first two gods, the author dwells on the third figure through a learned portrayal that draws on his own classical knowledge (emphasis added):

Then tridhie war **en gudhinna och kallades Ffrigga**, huilken (som noogh troendes är) när **the Latiner haffuer hetet Venus**, och aff henne kallades Frigga dagh, (Sahlgren 1917: 11) [...] Thenna gudhinnan wardt dyrkat for then skul, at the skulle fa **godh gifftermal, mong barn, och fridh oc rolig-heet**.²⁸ (*ibid*: 12)

As regards her fertility prerogatives, the goddess is complemented by another unnamed figure, corresponding to the Romans' Ceres, responsible for good harvests and rural fertility:

that he may grant [them] peace, sexual pleasure and many children [...] Anyone wishing to marry sacrifices to Frigh» (my translation).

²⁷ A scholar and theologian of great depth, translator of the New Testament (1526) and a large part of the Bible (1541), he was nevertheless critical of the Goth-icist identity myth, as well as of the process of the formation of the Swedish state and the new Reformed Church. At the same time, he never gave in to nationalistic propaganda or Lutheran rhetoric.

²⁸ «The third was a goddess called Frigga, who (is still adored) and whom the Latins called Venus, and from her comes the name of Friday [...] This goddess was worshipped in the hope that they could get a good marriage, many children, and peace and prosperity» (my translation).

Teslikes warder ock berordt i wor Swenska Cröneke om ena gudhinno som när the Latiner kallades Ceres, henne dyrkade the här i landet som [och] i annor land, på thet the skulle få godh åår, på korn och kierna.²⁹ (*ibid*: 12)

Olaus Petri's approach may therefore have served a twofold purpose: ennobling the past through a functional parallelism between ancient Roman mythology and local mythology – being unable, in the second case, to point to a (non-existent) second fertility goddess – and replacing Adam of Bremen's scabrous passage concerning the sexual organ of the god Fricco. In my opinion, the chronicler's prestige influenced the choice made by the Magnus brothers, thus paving the way for the wide circulation of this reinterpretation of the myth, reiterated about a century later by Johannes Schefferus, an eminent scholar at the court of Christina of Sweden. In his *Upsalia*, 1666 (chap. VIII 'De Frigga': 95-116), by polemically recapitulating previous interpretations and dismantling the illusions of the Hyperborean school, Schefferus went so far as to question Adam of Bremen on the grounds of a hypothetical (linguistic?) misunderstanding (emphasis added):

Tertium, quod Vpsaliae colebratur, numen, *Fricco* est. Adamus: *Tertius est Fricco*. Crantzius: *Hinc inde latera Toronis cingit Wodan & Fricco*. & mox: *tertius Fricco*. Ericus Olai non *Fricconem* nominat, sed *Friggam*. *Thor, Oden, & Frigga*, inquit, *in tricliniis collocatae*. Ret in hoc consentiunt nostri omnes *Friggam*, non *Friggonem*, vocant, aut *Fricconem*. Johannes Magni *Simulachrum Frigga tertio in loco positum*. Olaus, *Tertius Frigga*. Nempe veteres vocabant *Frig*, aut *Frigg*. Edda in Genealogia Odini *Kona hans het Frigida / er vir kallum Frigg. uxor eius vocabatur Frigida, quam nos appellamus Frig*. Arngrimus in litteris ad Stephanium ex antiquis monumentis, sicut ipse testatur, *Frigg, Odini coniux*. **Ex eo Frig aut Frigg deinde peregrini, primusque, ut opinor Adamus, fecerunt Fricconem, cum dicendum esset Frigga. Juvabat, quod sciebant simulachrum eius fingi cum priapo, unde masculinum numen esse colligebant.** Paulus Warnefridi vocat *Fream* cap. 8 de Gest. Langob. [...] Non aliam hic esse *Fream*, quam quae prius *Frigga* est vocata [...] Fuit ergo femininum numen, non masculinum, ut putasse videtur Adamus, & Othino junctum matrimonio. (*Upsalia*, 1666: 95-96)

²⁹ «Likewise, our Swedish Chronicle reports on a goddess, whom the Latins called Ceres, and on how she is worshipped here as elsewhere in order to get a good harvest of corn and other fruits» (my translation).

The ultimate sanctioning of Frigga as a controversial *simulacrum* of the fertility sphere and a renewed model of womanliness can be traced to the mid-18th century. Paul-Henri Mallet, the main mediator of ancient Nordic culture in the Enlightenment era, presented the characters of that distant mythic world in a treatise (*Monumens de la Mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes, et particulièrement des anciens Scandinaves*, 1756) that constituted the ideological premise on which the early pre-Romantic avant-gardes were based (see Battaglia 2022). The frontispiece of this work, which is characterized by a typical neo-classical detachment from the barbaric Middle Ages, shows an image of the humanistic Frigga in arms before the ruins of a past (and a natural world) outside civilisation (fig. 10).

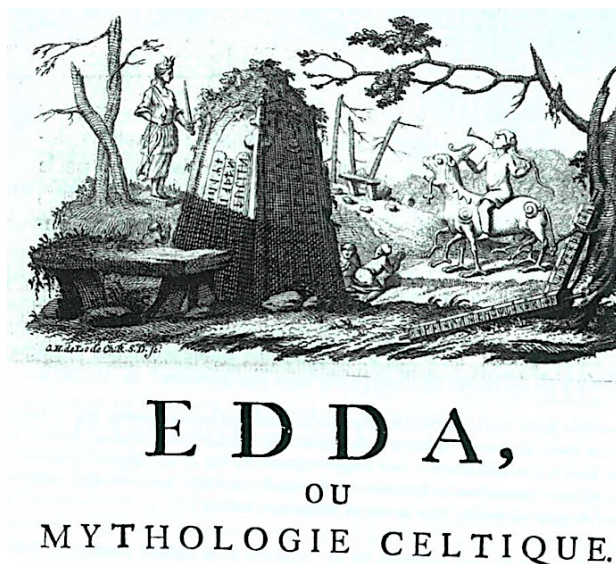


Fig. 10 – *Monumens*, 1756: 1

A remarkable condensation of the two most representative texts of medieval culture in the Northern Renaissance – the work of Adam of Bremen (in the part analysed so far in Chapter IV) and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Chapter *Gylfaginning*) – is carried out in theologian Trogillus Arnkiel's *Cimbrische Heyden-Religion* (1691). This pioneering history of Germanic mythology drew on the euhemeristic and demonological interpretation of myths, as well as on motifs from the patristic repertoire gravitating around the idea of the revelation of depraved pagan idols following the Great Flood. After recognizing «Thor, Othin und Freia» as the main triad in the religion of all Nordic peoples (mistaking Freyja for Frigg), from p. 86 onwards he resumes the image of the dialogue between Gangleri and the illusory triad in Snorri's *Edda* (cf. *supra*, point 2 p. 58, and p. 73) as rendered on f. 26^v of



Fig. 11 – The dialogue between Gangleri and the deceitful triad in Snorri's *Edda* (Cod. Upsaliensis, DG 11, 4^{to}, f. 26^v).



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

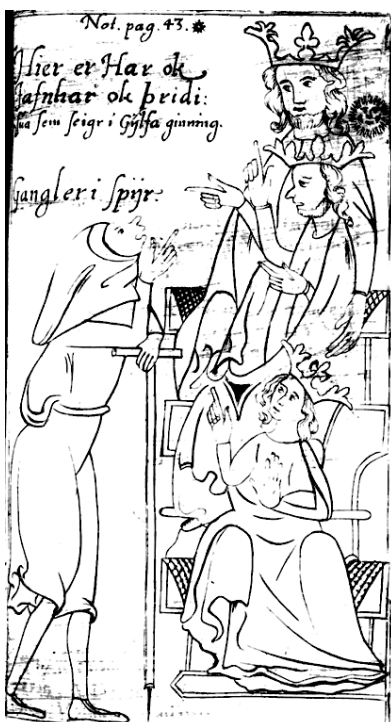


Fig. 14



Fig. 15

Images from P.A. Baer 2021, 'The Deluding of Gylfi', in MyNDIR: My Norse Digital Image Repository. Edition 2.1. Victoria, B.C. University of Victoria HCMC.

Cod. Upsaliensis, DG 11, 4^{to} (fig. 11). Surprisingly, he substitutes the original names of Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði from Snorri's Norse text (fig. 12) with those of the deities at the Uppsala temple, a suggestion probably received through hermeticist O. Rudbeck (*Atland eller Manhem*, 1679, fig. 29), who, in turn, was the author of a genre 'reappraisal' recovered from the great Hyperborean theoretician O. Verelius (*Gothrici & Rolfi Westrogothiae Regum Historia*, 1664. 43[a]); see *infra*, figs. 13 and 14 respectively.

The scope of this rewriting arguably reached its climax in the essay *Die Isländische Edda. Das ist die geheime Gotteslehre* (1777, after p. 103) by pastor Jacob Schimmelman (fig. 15). This was the first German translation of Snorri's *Edda*, which Schimmelman considered as the oldest text after the Bible, predating the birth of Christ by a millennium (see pp. 1-2).

Conclusions

Historically and culturally, the manipulation of the images of idols and the like is a discriminating and functional element among antagonistic *clans*, conglomerates or ethnic groups: the Romans accused the 'barbarians' of this practice, so did Christian missionaries with individual Germanic groups as well as Arabs against Viking guilds on the Volga, but, paradoxically, similar accusations have been levelled at Catholics too by aniconic religions such as Islam or Judaism. The Jews, the Templars and even Pope Boniface VIII have been accused of idolatry.

Despite an allegedly fluid continuity with the ancient world, the cultural 'revolution' brought about by the Renaissance actually marked a significant departure from the themes of the past, which were reworked in new forms. Triggered by profound economic transformations, this departure brought together the philosophical, religious, and political discourses connected with two major topics within the European debate: the imperative need for a religious Reformation and for higher standards for an efficient State. Surprising as it may be, both issues fostered a strong feeling of re-appropriation of the local past, particularly of those intermediate centuries for which the negative label 'Middle Ages' was purposely contrived (Battaglia 2017). One cannot certainly underestimate the Italian Renaissance criticism of the ancient Germans and their descendants, religion and culture, which in the 15th century would still find an outlet through E. S. Piccolomini³⁰ (who

³⁰ «Ipsa quoque religio barbara, inepta, idolorum cultrix atque adeo demoniorum illusionibus labefacta, ut humanis sepe hostium litatum esse apud illos non sit

censored the German Church, then in ferment) and G. Vasari (about Northern European artistic style). However, also thanks to the renewed symbolic value acquired by mythological imagery in literature as well as art, in a large part of European culture (and already in Virgil's Thule) the obscure seduction of ancient Scandinavian *mirabilia* gained a popularity and longevity that went far beyond the above-mentioned auspices of Fr. Schlegel.

The reasons or ideological factors why a god endowed with precise functions was to become a goddess are still unclear, unless one refers to the disintegration and re-functionalisation of an archaic universe brought about by medieval Christianity, along with the evolution of the socio-cultural meaning of sexuality that began during the Renaissance (Laqueur 1990). As the era of Gothicist iconography faded away, the allure of those ancient images seemed to manifest itself again in Georgian England. In the late 1720s, on the Stowe House estate (Buckinghamshire), Lord Cobham commissioned John M. Rysbrack to create statues depicting the seven deities after whom the days of the week are named; these included Odin, Thor and Friga – with their names significantly transcribed in runic characters (see figs. 16 a/b/c).



Figs 16 a/b/c – J. M. Rysbrack, Odin, Thor and Frigga, Stowe Garden, England (photo Wikimedia Commons).

ambiguum. Latrocinia laudi fuerunt, omnia feda, omnia tetra, aspera, barbara et, ut propriis utamur vocabulis, ferina ac brutalia» (*Germ.* II,6), Fadiga (2009: 184-185).

There were also other features stemming from a manipulation dating back to the Renaissance and immortalised in 1732 by Gilbert West, on pp. 18-19 of the poem 'Stowe. A Poem' (dedicated to A. Pope), which unfortunately continues to cling to the traditionally elusive character of Friga's divine *simulacrum* (emphasis added):

First radiant **Sunna** shews his beamy Head,
Mona to Him, and scepter'd **Tiw** succeed;
Tiw, ancient Monarch of remotest Fame,
Who led from Babel's Tow'rs the German Name.
And warlike **Woden**, fam'd for martial Deeds,
From whom great Brunswick's noble Line proceeds.
Dread **Thuner** see! on his Imperial Seat,
With awful Majesty, and kingly State
Reclin'd! at his Command black Thunders roll,
And Storms and fiery Tempests shake the Pole.
With various Emblem next fair **Friga** charms,
In female Coats array'd and manly Arms.
Expressive *Image* of that Double Soul,
Prolifick Spirit that informs the Whole;
Whose Genial Power throughout exerts its Sway,
And Earth, and Sea, and Air, its Laws obey.
Last of the Circle hoary **Seatern** stands;
Instructive Emblems fill his mystick Hands.
In this, a Wheel's revolving Orb declares
The never-ending Round of rolling Years,
That holds a Vessel fill'd with fading Flowers
And Fruits collected by the ripening Hours.
Be warn'd from hence, ye Fair Ones! to improve
The transitory Minutes made for Love,
E'er yet th' inexorable Hand of Time
Robs of its bloomy Sweets your lovely Prime.

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