

GYLFAGINNING (The Deluding of Gylfi)

The Astronomical Material

by Snorri Sturluson

translated by Carl E. Anderson

Introduction | The Translation | Storybook Adaptation

The Introduction

The myths and legends of the ancient Scandinavians survive better than those of any other Germanic people. This is largely thanks to the Icelanders, who, not long after they were converted to Christianity, developed the most extensive vernacular literature of any medieval society. At first their writings were largely concerned with Christian religious materials, but in time they became interested in writing about their own culture and history as well.

The most famous medieval Icelandic writer was Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). He wrote a number of books, including one best known as the Prose Edda, which contains a great deal of Scandinavian mythological material. Snorri was a great poet as well as a great writer, and he preferred an old-fashioned kind of poetry that made much use of the pre-Christian Scandinavian mythological material. During Snorri's times, however, the Christian Church strongly discouraged anything that was connected with the heathen past. Partially because of this, the kind of poetry Snorri liked was becoming unpopular and was being replaced by new styles of poetry.

Snorri wrote the Prose Edda as an instruction manual on how to write the kind of old-fashioned poetry he liked. He included lots of the old myths and stories so that people would know how to use them in the poetry. As a Christian himself, Snorri did not want to present the myths as if he believed them. So he started the Prose Edda with a story of his own about a king of Sweden called Gylfi who disguised himself as a traveler called Gangleri and went on a journey to visit the Æsir; and gain knowledge from them. The Æsir; were the old Scandinavian gods, but Christian Snorri described them simply as very powerful men. When Gylfi/Gangleri found the Æsir;, he asked them many questions about the creation of the world and the beings who lived in it. The Æsir; responded with many myths and stories. Snorri writes that the Æsir; were trying to trick Gylfi/Gangleri into believing these stories—in this way he can write all about the old heathen myths without getting into trouble with the Christian Church. This is why the first section of the Prose Edda is called The "Tricking of Gylfi" (or, in Old Norse, Gylfaginning).

Snorri explains the mythological material by having Gylfi/Gangleri ask a question of the Æsir;, and having one of the Æsir; answer with a long story or some other mythological information. The Æsir; whom Gylfi/Gangleri asks his questions of are called High One, Just-as-High, and Third.

It is difficult to tell how genuine the myths Snorri wrote about are. By the time Snorri was writing, Icelanders had been Christian for over two hundred years and many of the old stories may have been forgotten or changed. Snorri probably tried to piece many bits and pieces of myths together as best he could. Snorri, however, was very learned in Biblical and classical (Greek and Roman) studies and this knowledge may have affected the way he rebuilt the myths. He may even have made some things up! Because of this, we need to keep in mind, when reading his material, that the myths we are reading may not be exactly the same as the myths told by pre-Christian

Scandinavians.

Since Gylfaginning is very long, only sections about the Sun, Moon, and seasons are translated below. Explanatory notes are included to explain the material more fully.

The Translation of Gylfaginning

[The Æsir;have told Gylfi that three brothers--Òdinn, Vili, and Vè--killed an enormous giant called Ymir. They took various pieces of Ymir's body and made the world out of them. Below, Third tells Gylfi about how the three brothers created the sky and the astronomical bodies in it.]

Then Third says: They [Òdinn, Vili, and Vè] took his [Ymir's] skull and made the sky from it and set it up over the earth with four corners, and under each corner they set a dwarf. These are called so: Austri, Vestri, Nordri, Sudri. Then they took the embers and sparks that flew loose and had been cast from Muspell's World¹ and set them in the midst of Mighty Space², both above and below, to light the sky and Earth. They gave places to all fires, to some in heaven; some flew loose under the sky and yet they set their places and shaped their paths. So is it said in old poems that from this were the days and the year-count reckoned, as it says in Völusp:³

The Sun knew not

where she had her halls.

The Moon knew not

what might he owned

The stars knew not

where their places were.

So it was above the Earth before this took place.

[...]

Then says Gangleri: It seems to me that they had then accomplished much when earth and the sky were made, and the sun and heavenly bodies were set, and the days divided--and from where came the men who inhabit the world?

Then answers High One:

[High One talks for a while about how humans were created. Then he talks about some of the gods, and where they lived. Below he talks about the Sun and Moon.]

Nörfi;or Narfi was the name of a giant who lived in Giantland⁴. He had a daughter who is called Night.⁵ She was swarthy and dark, like her relatives. She was married to a man who is called Naglfari.⁶ Their son is called Audr. Next she was married to someone called Other.⁷ Their daughter is called Earth.⁸ Last she wedded Shining One, who was related to the Æsir.⁹ Their son was Day.¹⁰ He was bright and fair like his father. Then the All-father¹¹ took Night and her son Day and gave them two horses and two chariots and set them up in the sky so that they should ride around the world every two half-days. Night rides in front with the horse who is called Frosty-Mane¹², and at morning every day he bedews the earth with drops of foam from his bit. That horse whom Day owns is named Shining-Mane¹³, and light is shed over all the air and the

earth by his mane.

Then says Gangleri:

How does he steer the path of the sun and moon?

High One says:

A certain man who was called Mundilfari had two children. They were so fair and beautiful that he called one of them Moon but the other, his daughter, Sun, and married her to that man who is named Glenr. But the gods were angered by that arrogance and took the siblings and set them up in the sky, they made Sun drive that horse who drew the sun's chariot which the gods had shaped to light the world from an ember which flew from Muspell's World. Those horses are named like so: Early-Waker and All-Strong. But under the the horses' shoulders the gods set two bellows to cool them, but in some sources these are called "iron-coal".¹⁴ Moon steers the moon's course and controls its waxing and waning. He took two children from the earth, who are so named: Bil and Hjúki, when they were going from the spring which is named Byrgir, and were bearing on their shoulders the tub which is named Sœgr, and the pole Simul. Their father is named Vidfinnr. These children follow Moon, as may be seen from earth.

Then says Gangleri: The sun moves fast, and almost as if she were afraid, and she could not speed her course even if she feared death.

Then answers High One: It is not surprising that she goes at a great speed: that one who seeks her follows closely. And she has no way out except to run away.

Then says Gangleri: Who is it that makes her this trouble?

High One says:

There are two wolves, and the one which is after her is named Sköll.; He frightens her and he will catch her, but the one which runs in front of her is named Hati Hróðvitnisson, and he wants to catch the moon, and so must it be.¹⁵

[...]

Then says Gangleri: Why is there such a great difference, that summer should be hot but winter cold?

High One says:

A well-informed man would not ask this, because this is known by all, but if you alone have become so lacking in knowledge that you have never heard this, then I think it better that you ask unknowingly once than that you should be ignorant any longer of something which it is proper to know about. He is named Agreeable, who is Summer's father, and he is so fortunate in life that that which is pleasant is so named from him. But Winter's father is either called Wind-Bringer¹⁶ or Wind-Cool.¹⁷ He is Damp-Cold's son, and these kinsmen were grim and cold-hearted, and Winter has their character.

[Gangleri/Gylfi goes on to ask High One, Equally High, and Third many things about the nature of the universe and the gods and heroes of Scandinavian mythology. In the end, High One, Equally

High, and Third tell Gangleri/Gylfi about the way in which the universe will be destroyed—but they also tell him how it will be renewed. Above, they told him about the wolf chasing Sun, and how it will catch her at the time when the universe is being destroyed. But High One goes on to tell Gangleri/Gylfi this:]

And you will seem strange to you but that the sun will have a daughter no less fair than herself, and she will travel in in her mother's path, as it says here:

Elf-glory¹⁸ bares a daughter

before Fenrir catches her.

The maid shall ride,

when the powers die,

the mother's road.

But now if you can ask anything more, then I do not know from where an answer will come, because I never heard any man tell at greater length the story of the universe. And now use it as you can.

Footnotes:

1 Snorri has Third describe Muspellsheimr (or Muspell) in this way: "It is light and hot and that region flames and burns so that those who do not belong to it and whose native land it is not, cannot endure it."Back to Text

2 Ginnungahimin (or Ginnungagap) was the name for the primal, undifferentiated cosmos that existed before everything else and was the source for all things. Ginnunga means something like "magical, mighty" and himin literally means "heaven".Back to Text

3 Völuspá was poem describing the beginning and end of the world. It is part of a collection of mythological and legendary poems called the Poetic Edda. Although it describes Scandinavian myths, many scholars believe its material was influenced by Christianity.Back to Text

4 Jötunheimr.Back to Text

5 Nótt.Back to Text

6 Old Norse nagl means "nail", but this is may be a folk etymology for a form related to Latin necare (meaning "to kill").Back to Text

7 The name Annarr seems to be the same as the word annarr, meaning "other, second".Back to Text

8 Jör .Back to Text

9 The Æsir are one of the families of the Scandinavian gods.Back to Text

10 Dagr.Back to Text

11 All-father is a name for Ó inn.Back to Text

12 Hrímfaxi, literally Rime-Mane.Back to Text

13 Skinfaxi.Back to Text

14 Old Norse ísarnkol. This is sometimes simply translated as "bellows". The meaning seems to stem from the understanding of bellows as tools from a blacksmith's forge. Some experts think that "iron-coal" may be a mistake in the original text of the story for "iron-cold".Back to Text

15 The poem Völuspá describes the destruction of the world when the sun and moon are devoured by these wolves.Back to Text

16 A possible meaning of the name Vindlóni.Back to Text

17 Vindsvalr.Back to Text

18 A name for the Sun.Back to Text

The Storybook Adaptation

Gangleri: A King's Search for Answers

by Tania Ruiz

Based on a translation of the Prose Edda

A very very long time ago, there was a king named Gylfi. Gylfi was a king of Sweden, and he lived among his people there happily for many years. The Swedish people trusted their king and expected him to know answers to all questions. But Gylfi soon found that the questions his people asked of him were becoming too difficult for him to answer himself. The people wanted to know where the Sun came from, why it got so cold in the winter, and what will happen to the world in the future. Gylfi did not know the answers to these questions, and felt he could not be a good king for his people until he knew all things. Isn't it sad that Gylfi should feel this way?

So, one night, Gylfi secretly left his home in his kingdom and went on a long journey. He was going to see the gods called the Aesir. Gylfi said to himself as he walked, "They would know the answers. They will help me to be a better king." Gylfi was a bit worried about going to see the Aesir. He was afraid that if they found out he, a king, did not know so many things, they would punish him or take away his kingdom. So, Gylfi decided to call himself Gangleri instead. He trekked on with his new name, practicing all of the questions he would ask the Aesir. Soon he reached the hall of the gods.

Three Aesir greeted him when he arrived, and he told them his new name, but not his real name. Their names were High-One, Just-as-High, and Third. "We greet you, Gangleri. You have traveled far to see us. What is it that you need from us?" High-One said.

Gylfi was very excited, these Aesir seemed rather friendly, and blurted right out, "I would like to know how the world began!"

The Aesir looked at him strangely, and then Just-as-High told Gangleri of the three mighty brothers, Odinn, Vili, and Ve: "It was once that the universe was cold, all ice and snow, and the ruler of this place was an enormous giant named Ymir. Ymir was also the universe, do you understand?"

Gylfi frowned for bit. He thought maybe he understood, but was not sure. High-One raised an eyebrow and grinned, saying, "You are still confused. The whole universe was a cold giant named Ymir. Because he was the universe, he ruled it, see?"

Gylfi's frown flattened until he smiled, "Yes, I see. Yes..."

Third sniggered a bit. Gylfi heard this, and blushed. It is not very nice to make fun of people who do not understand.

Just-as-High continued, "There was only ice to eat, so a giant cow fed Ymir milk all day to keep him alive."

Gylfi interrupted, "What did that poor cow eat, if there was only ice?"

Third smirked, and whispered something to Just-as-High. Gylfi was more nervous than ever, and began to wring his hands a little. It was a good question, really.

High-One cleared his throat and said, "Well she licked the ice, see?"

Gylfi nodded with furrowed brow. His hands were all sweaty.

Just-as-High began again, this time speaking in a very slow way, "She found people in the ice when she licked it."

Just-as-High stopped, looked at Gylfi. Gylfi motioned for Just-as-High to continue. He completely understood that a cow could like people free from ice. Why just the other day...he began to think to himself, but Just-as-High went on, "The grandchildren of these people were three boys named Odinn, Vili, and Ve. They were so very powerful that we, as gods you know, decided that these boys should rule over the universe."

Gylfi was concerned, "Uh, what about Ymir, the giant?"

High-One widened his eyes, and clapped Gylfi on the shoulder, "Good question, Gangleri! Very good question. When these three boys grew to be men, they decided to kill the giant."

"Oh," Gylfi said, thinking that was a rather rude thing to do to the giant who spent all of his life lying in the cold snow and having only milk for food.

Third began, sensing Gylfi's unhappiness with Odinn's choice, "Well, they needed to do this, Gangleri. Imagine being a man like Odinn or his brothers and trying to live in a universe made of a huge frozen giant who drinks milk all day."

"You've got a point there," said Gylfi. High-One and Just-as-High shook their heads in agreement.

Third continued, "Well, Odinn and Vili and Ve had to use the giant's body to make the whole world, since there was little in the universe but him. They took his huge skull and made the sky. To keep the sky hanging above the earth, they made four dwarfs stand at the corners. The dwarfs were called Austri, Vestri, Nordri, Sudri."

"East, West, North, and South...oh, yes, I see..." mumbled Gylfi.

"Odinn and his brothers took embers from distant very hot and fiery lands and put them up into Mighty Space so they could exist over the sky and the Earth. A chariot called Sun was made of embers and sent across the sky to measure a day. A chariot called Moon also raced across the sky. In the time before Odinn:

The Sun knew not where she had her halls.
The Moon knew not what might he owned.
The stars knew not where their places were.

Now, the length of a day and the count of the year was found from the hard work of Odinn, Vili, and Ve! This is why they are rulers and gods, and not the lazy Ymir!"

Gylfi smiled proudly, for he himself and his people were all great-great-great grandchildren of the resourceful brothers. He was standing there for some time, smiling, when he realized that Third had stopped talking. Gylfi looked up to see the three great Aesir staring at him expectantly.

He remembered his other questions. "Uh, well, I am wondering what happened to the universe after Odinn created it? And then where did light and dark come from?" Gylfi asked.

High-One spoke long about how humans were created and where the gods came to live. He got to the part about the Day and Night, and Gylfi listened very carefully.

"Narfi was the name of a very dark giant who lived in Giantland. He had a daughter whose name was Night, and she was also very lovely and dark. She was married to a man called Naglfari. They had a son called Audr. Her second husband was called Other, and together they too have a daughter, named Earth. Her last husband was called Shining One, a relative of ours, actually," High-One smirked proudly, and continued, "and they had a son called Day."

Gylfi tried to keep track of all of the children and husbands.

High-One then said, "Odinn took Night and her son, Day, and gave them each a horse and chariot. He set them in the sky and told them to ride around every two half-days. Night was to ride in her chariot at the front with her horse Frosty-Mane. Every morning the foam Frosty-Mane makes from chewing his bit falls to the earth and makes the morning dew."

"Yuck," said Gylfi, and promised he would never walk barefoot in the morning grass ever again.

Third giggled, and Just-as-High thumped him in the chest.

"Day rides behind in his chariot with his horse called Shining-Mane. His glowing mane sheds light over the air and Earth." High-One finished.

Gylfi was then wondering about the gods of Sun and the Moon, and how they fit in with all of the horses and chariots and embers and things.

High-One answered again, "A certain man who was called Mundilfari had two children. They were fair and beautiful. He called them Moon and Sun. The gods were angry with Mundilfari because he called his children after the names Odinn had given to the ember chariots! As punishment, the gods took Muldilfari's children and made them work in the sky. Sun was made to drive the speedy horses of the Sun chariot, which was very difficult, since the chariot was very hot, filled with embers! So the gods kept the horses, named Early-Waker and All-Strong, cool by putting bellows underneath them. Poor Moon was made to steer the Moon's course across the sky and control its shape."

Gylfi wondered about poor Sun driving those horses, keeping them so cool at the same time. He knew the Sun could move very fast across the sky. He was so curious, he finally asked, "Why does the Sun move so fast?"

Third and Just-as-High seemed alarmed at this question. High-One laughed, and said, a bit sarcastically, "Well, it is not surprising she goes so fast, considering who is following her so closely! She has no way out except to run away!"

Gylfi felt very very stupid, but he had to know, "Who is it that makes her this trouble?"

Third fell off of his seat laughing and excused himself. Just-as-High sighed deeply.

"Ahem, Gangleri, everyone knows that there are two wolves surrounding her. The one who is behind her is Skoll. He frightens her and he will eventually catch her, when the world ends. The one in front of her is Hati Hrodvitnisson, and he is running after the moon. He will catch it, of

course, when the world ends. It is so in the Great Poem, Gangleri."

Gylfi was so very nervous. He knew about the wolves, really. He didn't realize that they were chasing Sun and Moon all of this time. He thought they only showed up at the end of the world, when they eat Sun and Moon. He looked down at his feet and shivered a bit, thinking about the end of the world always made him cold. Cold....winter was coming soon to his kingdom, and the people would ask him again why it was so very cold.

Third returned from wherever he had wandered off, and sat back down, wiping his eyes a bit and coughing. Just-as-High nudged him a bit.

Gylfi swallowed very hard and thought about all he had learned. There was a lot of warmth coming from the embers, so much that the horses carrying the chariot had to be cooled! So why should it get so cold on Earth in the winter with all of that heat driving about in the sky? He had to ask this last question of the Aesir. He had to know not just for his people.

Gylfi took a deep breath, closed his eyes so he could not see them smile, and asked, "Why is there such a great difference that summer should be hot but winter cold?"

When they heard this, the Aesir were very surprised. Third laughed so hard he nearly choked to death. Just-as-High sat in his chair with his mouth open so wide that Gylfi could see all of his teeth. Even the High-One seemed annoyed and shocked.

Gylfi felt about 3 inches tall and slumped. He wanted to crawl away and leave this place. To Gylfi these gods seemed to find his lack of knowledge amusing. But how is one ever to know a thing if one does not search for the answer or ask for one?

However, eventually High-One said to Gylfi, "A well-informed man would not ask this, because this is known by everyone. But if you alone have come so lacking in knowledge that you have never ever heard this, then I think it is better that you ask just this once than forever not know this."

Gylfi shook his head in agreement, that's why he was here: to learn not to be tested. He listened carefully.

"Summer's father, named Agreeable, is so fortunate in life that his name is used to describe everything in the world which is nice and pleasant. So Summer grew up to be this way. But Winter's father is grim and mean, and he is called Wind-Bringer or Cold-Wind. That's why Winter himself is so nasty and grim."

Gylfi didn't think this really answered his question. He was about to open his mouth, but High-One said, "If you can ask anything more, then I do not know from where an answer will come. I have never heard any man tell more about the universe than I just have. Go, Gangleri, and use this as you can."

Third made shoo-shoo gestures towards Gylfi, and Just-as-High still sat with his mouth gaping. High-One waved cheerily to Glyfi, and the three Aesir disappeared. Gylfi was left in an empty room. He found the door and headed back home to his people with all of the new information he had found. It all sounded so fantastic, so many fathers and children and horses and things. But at least he had decided to seek answers, and he would have lots to tell his people when next they asked.