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*Modern and Contemporary Representations of the Medieval North:  
Northern Paganism and Identity in British Literature*

This paper looks at the engagement of British writers with the northern pagan strand of their heritage: Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, Viking, Gothic, Danish and related real and fictional identities. It moves from the earliest poems and historical writings on the northern invasions of the early Middle Ages through the antiquarian rediscovery of northernness, to Romantic Gothic and Victorian reinventions of the northern pagan, and ends with a discussion of the literatures of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the modern and contemporary – where northern paganism mixes with Wicca and shamanism. Throughout, its theme is the exploration of what northern paganism has meant for British identities.

The paper argues that debates about northern-focused national and racial identity, conducted through fiction, have often incorporated a highly personalised reflection on what northern paganism means for the individual, especially in the realm of sexual politics. Ambiguity of geographical and religious identity has been accompanied by a sexual ambiguity that was once troubling to antiquarians but can now be celebrated in modern and contemporary literature.

Some genres that are examined – runic odes and their Gothic ilk in the eighteenth century, for example – are happy to celebrate a hyper-masculine set of warrior gods unproblematically. These are of interest in the paper, as is their growing unpopularity in Victorian texts which were family-oriented and domesticated the Vikings and other northerners. But the more detailed literary treatments of northern paganism are interested in ideas of duality of gender, and in feminism, and these form the central argumentative strand of the paper. They can all be traced back through modern writers such as Kathleen Herbert and Gerald Gardner to the seventeenth century. Early modern writers such as William Camden and Richard Verstegan's statements about northern pantheons included ambiguously gendered and even hermaphrodite deities such as Nerthus and Frigo.

In modern fictions focused on pagan beliefs, and drawing on this long heritage, there is therefore often a concern about the nature and role of femininity, masculinity and the place of sex and gender in northern-focused religion. Debates about whether Britain is Germanic, Nordic, Saxon, Danish, or all of these, resurface in other kinds of debate about the politics of gendered identity and its ambiguities. Modern and contemporary fictions about paganism, and contemporary practices of it, thus can be seen to owe a good deal to ideas about political and personal liberty worked out through engagements with the northern pantheons up to the present day. Here we have seen a notion of a pan-northern-European religion which, although it is very hazy and unstable in its ethnic labels and specific deities, often promotes political liberty, empowers female deities but does not disempower male ones, tolerates departure from traditional sexual categories and behaviours and accepts that deities, like people, are limited in their power and lifespan. There is a pattern of multiple ambiguities, in the spaces of which a surprisingly attractive paganism was imagined alongside a shared northern identity.

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