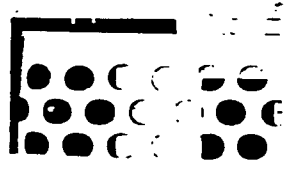


■ Margaret Clunies Ross. *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*. Volume 1: *The Myths*. The Viking Collection. Studies in Northern Civilization 7. Odense: Odense UP, 1994. Pp. 1,325.

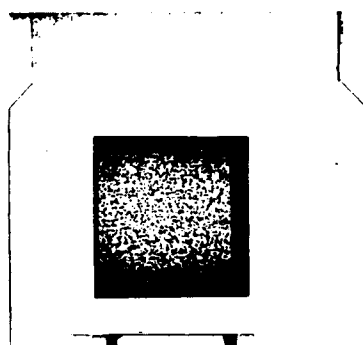
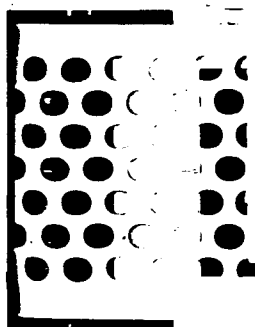
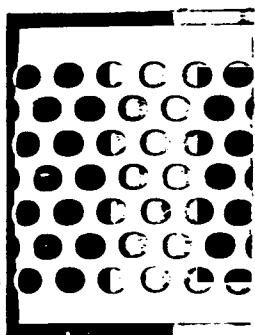
Clunies Ross provides an excellent and stimulating analysis of the Old Norse mythic corpus, adding significantly to our understanding of these texts. In this volume, the first of a proposed two-part work, Clunies Ross addresses the myths themselves, interpreting them against the backdrop of medieval Scandinavian culture. In the second volume, she will apparently concentrate on the actual texts, exploring the resources that the authors had at their disposal in their attempts to recreate the mythological world,



as well as the connections between the mythical corpus and other medieval Scandinavian literary genres. In the current volume, Clunies Ross offers a rigorous overview of all the extant mythological texts from medieval Scandinavia and, in her analyses of these texts, provides a nuanced view of the entire mythological complex. Clunies Ross's work thus marks a substantial, yet welcome, departure from many earlier studies of Scandinavian mythology that often approach the corpus as a survival, frequently interpreting the myths outside of the social context in which they were recorded. At the same time, Clunies Ross resists the downfalls of other studies of Scandinavian myth that either focus exclusively on a small number of the gods or, in the worst cases, are little more than elaborated plot summaries. Instead, the reader is treated to Clunies Ross's attentive interpretations of the relationships between the *Æsir*, the *Vanir*, the giants, humans, and the myriad other figures who populate the mythological world, all within the context of the medieval Scandinavian society that recorded these texts. One of Clunies Ross's strengths is her remarkable facility with anthropological methodology, and she applies this analytic stance with exceptional rigor to the material at hand. Clunies Ross's work, however, is not overly heavy handed, and the volume is exceptionally readable.

In her opening chapter, "How to do things with Old Norse myths," Clunies Ross argues for an approach to the study of mythology that does not treat individual myths as separate from the entire mythological complex, but rather interprets them within the broader spectrum of that system. As a consequence of this approach, the specific aspects of a myth are interpreted in a "larger textual and contextual frame" (17). As an illustration of this approach, she offers the myth of Freyr and Gerðr, stating, "we need to pay attention to other myths with parallel structures and themes.... We need to ask ... how this pattern fits into the general social structure attributed to the supernatural world ... and what general semiotic significance the various categories of beings and their actions carry in the Norse mythic corpus as a whole. Finally, we must discern differing narratorial and authorial voices in the texts...." (18). It is this approach that Clunies Ross initiates with this volume, and one expects that the second volume will take up her final concern of narratorial and authorial voice in these texts.

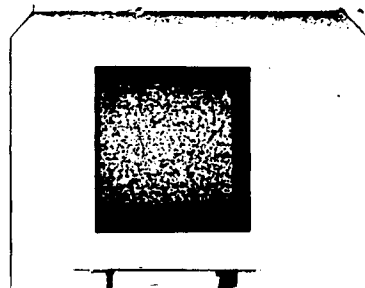
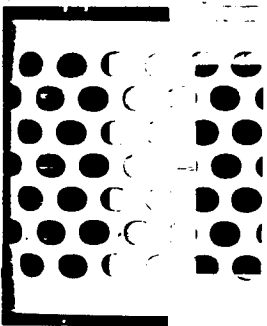
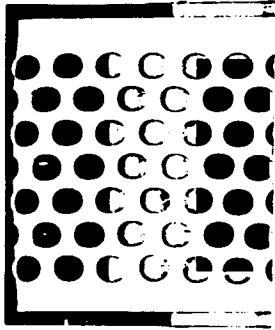
In her second chapter, "Concepts and Ideologies," Clunies Ross provides an excellent analytical overview of the organization of the mythical world and its inhabitants. Her focus on the interactions between gods and giants, first broached in this chapter, informs a great deal of the analyses in the later chapters as well. Clunies Ross makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the relationships between male gods and female



giants in this chapter with her detailed articulation of kinship, descent, and social relationships. Particularly, she demonstrates the association of males with creation and culture and of females with "the natural, the unconfined, the giant and the mortal" (84). In her third chapter, "The Social World of Old Norse Myth," she expands on her investigation of social relationships as portrayed in myth and focuses primarily on marriage. Through thorough considerations of the various marriage relationships and other male-female alliances, both within groups and across groups, she is able to conclude that, in the myths, the Æsir successfully dominate the other groups by depriving outside groups access to their group through marriage and by depriving these same groups of their assets through guile or force. This evaluation of exchange relationships leads to her fourth chapter, "Negative Reciprocity," the title of which is borrowed from Marshall Sahlins's examinations of primitive economies. In it, she provides close readings of myths which emphasize the antagonistic relationship between the Æsir and other groups (primarily the giants), basing these readings on the idea of negative reciprocity.

Her fifth chapter, "Creation as Male Pseudo-Procreation," is perhaps the most intriguing part of the work. Focusing initially on the creation of the mythic universe, she is able to make sense of Ymir's startling procreative abilities offering the idea of male pseudo-procreation, a strategy she sees as designed to cheat death. She then goes on to analyze the creation of other beings as the mythic world comes into being, and concludes that the male-coded pseudo-procreation that characterizes many of these births suggests an ideology of male superiority in the realms of spiritual and cultural creativity, as opposed to the female coded physiological reproduction. Indeed, this differentiation between two dominant metaphors constitutes one of Clunies Ross's greatest contributions to our understanding of Old Norse myth. On the one hand, one finds masculinity, represented best by the actions of the male Æsir, incorporating concepts such as cultural and spiritual creativity, life, work and order. On the other hand, one finds femininity, represented by the actions of giants of both sexes, incorporating concepts such as nature, procreation, sexuality, disorder and death (187).

In her final chapter, Clunies Ross explores the position of sacrifice within and in relation to the myths, proposing that sacrifice, like the concept of pseudo-procreation detailed in the preceding chapter, in Old Norse myth is intended to stave off the threat of disorder. In her final chapter, "Fate and Death," Clunies Ross challenges the notion of irreversible and reversible time operating on the vertical and horizontal spatial axis respectively, showing how a clear sense of progressive time informs the



horizontal as well. Ultimately, she suggests a fundamentally linear conception of time for the Old Norse mythic mind (in contrast to the concept of cyclical time). The only true quibble with Clunies Ross's work is its sudden end; she provides no conclusion, and the reader is left waiting for the appearance of the second volume to tie up any loose ends. An interim conclusion and presentation of problems to be addressed in the second volume would have been a likely and helpful addition to this otherwise excellent volume. Nevertheless, the book is a great resource for comparative mythologists and students of Old Norse mythology alike.

Timothy R. Tangherlini
University of California Los Angeles

