

**An 18th Century Norwegian Reception of Old Nordic Myths:
Hans Jacob Wille's 'Extract of Nordic Mythology' (1787).**

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The reception of ideas expressed in literature from the past and their influence upon the literary traditions of later periods depend, of course, at any time very much on the quality of scholarly editions of texts, as well as translations whenever necessary and the mediation of relevant additional knowledge about the period to which a particular text or corpus of texts belong. This is a banal fact which has also been focussed upon when dealing in retrospect with the revived interest in the Nordic past in 18th century Scandinavia, the century of Nordic Renaissance as it has been labelled among other things (cf. Blanck 1911: 236ff).

When trying to chart the influence of myth and sagas in general on cultural life in 18th century Scandinavia we must, in consequence, take into consideration the kind of historical and philological work which had been produced at the time - which were the texts and what did these texts mediate? A bibliographical survey by Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen (mimeo 1979) provides a useful point of departure for consideration along the lines of thought just mentioned. His survey also includes the piece of work which we want to single out for a somewhat closer study here. The purpose of the present paper, then, is merely to focus upon one particular detail in the larger picture of 18th century historical and philological work because it might, at least indirectly, shed some light upon the theme which has been set for this particular section of the conference.

The reason I have chosen to concentrate on Hans Jacob Wille's short 'Extract of Nordic Mythology', printed in Copenhagen 1787, (Wille 1787) is quite simply that this booklet is something which undisputably may be looked upon as a Norwegian contribution in this context - a fact which might be of some interest within the framework of reception of Nordic myths which we are trying to explore here, as such early contributions are scarce and far between and this one in particular seems to have been overlooked and much forgotten. This Norwegian 'something' seems to deserve some attention as its purpose is an attempt at a presentation or rather a mediation of Nordic mythology to a general public. As a consequence of this Wille does not focus exclusively on the mediating of one medieval text in particular. His pronounced interest in texts like Snorri's Edda, then, seems to be conditioned by an overall goal for the project he has undertaken, rather than by a primary interest in Snorri's work *per se*. As such Wille's contribution is by no means unique in 18th century Denmark-Norway, but even such aspects of a 'combined reception' so to

speak, also of Snorri, should be considered even by those of us whose object it is to investigate in more detail what the influence of the Edda is all about at different times.

Even if it is listed in larger bibliographies such as Ehrencron-Müller (1932), Wille's 'Extract' has more or less the status of non-existence in historiographical work on Norse mythology and literature. It can naturally be argued that there may be good reasons for this. However, if the vantage point is established in order to view the history of learning it is perhaps not quite fair.

Let us, therefore, initially have some essential facts about Hans Jacob Wille's biography. He was born in 1756 and grew up in Seljord, Telemark, where his Danish-born father, Hans Amundssen Wille, was a vicar. Hans Jacob became a student at the University of Copenhagen in August 1775, passed his degree in theology in January 1779 after which he went back home and served as a curate in his father's parish. In 1786 he moved into the service of the well known vicar of Eiker, professor Hans Strøm, again as a curate. Shortly after that, in the same year, Strøm arranged for Wille to travel round the county of Telemark to collect Old Norse charters and other source material for antiquarian studies, as it was phrased. There is evidence that Hans Jacob Wille by that time had acquired a certain knowledge of the Old Norse language, a skill which had enabled him to use charters as source material for his own historical investigations (Hagland 1974 and 1975b). A prominent result of this research was a historic-topographic treatise on Seljord, published in Copenhagen 1786 (Wille 1786). This treatise was well received in its time, and even pointed out as a model for the genre by the Topographical Society in Christiania (Hagland 1975a: 3). By 1787, then, Hans Jacob Wille was, at least to some extent, a scholar of Old Norse and a writer with some experience in addressing a general public.

His 'Extract' is divided in two main chapters. In Chapter One he initially gives an account of how the old religion conceived of the beginning of the world, mainly by retelling the myth as we know it from *Völuspá*. This myth of creation is followed by a presentation of the most important deities, the main emphasis, of course, being placed on Odin, listing a number of his different names and many of his deeds. An account of Odin's sons and wives, as Wille puts it, is also included in this chapter. Chapter Two is devoted to the gods and goddesses which Wille conceived of as next to Odin in the hierarchy of gods, the first of which were Freyr and Niord. This chapter also includes some characters known only from the corpus of *fornaldarsögur* such as king Guthmund of 'Glæsisvoll', Norna-Gestur, Herraud and Bose. Chapter Two is rounded off by a retelling of *Völuspá*'s myth about the end of the world. The entire 'Extract', then, is framed in by the myths of the world's creation and its destruction according to *Völuspá*.

Wille is explicit about his sources, which he describes in a short introduction. Most likely he does not mention them all, however. The main source, he claims, has

been the "Edda Resenii", i. e. the *Edda Islandorum* which was published by Johannis Resenius in 1665 (Resen 1665). As this edition of Snorri's Edda also includes the *Völuspá* and the *Hávamál* it is evident from where he has taken the myths of *Völuspá*. From Snorri's Edda itself the *Gylfaginning* naturally was an important source, the most extensive part of which being the stories about Balder's death as retold in Chapter One of the 'Extract'. But also the *Skáldskaparmál* has been used to some extent, especially as a source for the many names attributed to Odin.

In addition to the "Edda Resenii" Wille gives reference to "Snorri" and "Saxo", and finally to P. F. Suhm's treatise on Odin (Suhm 1771). The latter Wille states, rather subserviently, in his introduction had provided him with more information than any of the other sources, as "it is compiled from so many mythological sagas and tales". The texts by Snorri and Saxo to which Wille refers are, most probably, Johan Peringskiöld's *Heimskringla* from 1697 (Peringskiöld 1697) and the 1752 edition of *Saxonis Grammatici Historia Danica* (in Danish). As for the text of *Heimskringla* he may also have had access to the Arnmagæan edition which had its three first volumes published from 1777 to 1783 by Jón Ólafsson. In addition there is reason to believe that some of the accounts from the fornaldarsögur such as *Hervarar saga* (Verelius (ed.) 1672) and *Herrauds och Bosa Saga* (Verelius (ed.) 1666) may have been used directly and not merely indirectly through the sources mentioned. However, here is not the time nor the place for a detailed analysis of the textual history of this little compilatory exposé of the old Nordic religion and its myths.

The important point to be made here is the fact that the introduction to the old myths, as the booklet may well be called, is to a large extent in itself a reception also of Snorri's Edda and as such it may have contributed to the direction which the interest in this part of Snorri's work took in pre-romantic Denmark-Norway. The main emphasis of this interest, especially in Norway, was to be placed on the kings' sagas, as we all know. This will not be developed any further here. The other main focusing point was to be placed on Norse mythology or the history of religion. This interest had, by the time Wille's book was published in 1787, been explicitly pronounced by Peter Fredrik Suhm's voluminous treatise on Odin to which Wille refers, as we have just seen. Suhm had intended his work to be part of a larger scheme, a historical project about "The origin of the Nordic People" ("Om de nordiske Folks ældste Oprindelse") which had been published in 1770 (Suhm 1770, cf. also Paludan-Müller 1883-84: 162ff). The reception of Suhm's treatise on Odin by contemporary critics was, however, not unanimously positive. It was accused of being a boring compilation which only could catch the interest of "those who, in the future, might want to provide us with a reasoned system of our forefathers' mythology".¹

¹ Det meeste bestaaer i vidløftige Extracter af gamle Sager, som kunde blive gode for dem, der engang ville skaffe os et raisonneret System over vore Forfædres Mythologie; men saaledes som de her ligge, have de lidet Tiltrækkende for den

The nature of Suhm's compilation and its reception might be one motive behind Wille's attempts in the same field. No wonder that he is defensive when he makes his excuses in his introduction for the shortcomings of his work, which, he admits, might be accused of rashness and impetuousness ("Autor-Syge"). The reason, he says, that he, in spite of this, had dared to publish it was that "Conferanseraad Erichsen" had encouraged him to do so. Conferanseraad Erichsen, of course, is the well known Jon Erichsen, who had also helped Suhm with passages from the old Norse texts (*Lærde Eft. No 28, July 11th 1771, p. 444*). Erichsen's encouragement of Wille may indicate that even he had been disappointed with Suhm's work and had welcomed further advances in the study of the old religion.

A very likely subsidiary motive for writing a booklet on this very subject may also have been the idea that it might contribute to providing its author with a permanent position in the service of the church, a position which he had not yet obtained. This may account for the somewhat pedestrian introductory statements about the advantage of mythological knowledge for the appreciation of Christianity as the sensible religion to believe in.²

There are, however, in Wille's introduction some additional remarks which indicate a genuine urge to be engaged in popular education through the kind of project which he had undertaken. Learning to know the mythology of the old times, he says, enables us to understand the kind of literature ("de Skrifter") in which these things occur. This may be taken to imply that Wille had seen it a meaningful task to provide the reading public with a key to tendencies which he had himself observed in contemporary literature - or at least to provide a certain amount of more systematic knowledge about the old religion than was currently at hand, and which had been called for by the reception of Suhm's work in the early 1770s, as we have seen. Suhm's contribution had, apparently, not worked in that respect. Even the myths themselves, as they had been mediated by Snorri through his Edda, were not easily accessible at the time. Resen's Edda would, most certainly, be difficult to sort out for the non-specialist, and a translation for a wider audience did not appear till 1808

største Deel Læsere. Og deri er ikke allene deres Indhold, som har lidet fødende for Forstanden, men ogsaa den tørre Maade hvorpaa Hr. Forf. ekstraherer, Skyld." (*Krit. Journ. No 46-47 1772, p. 368.*)

² "At kiende vore Forfædres Gude-Lære, saaledes som den var i disse Lande, for Christendommens Indførsel, synes at være baade nyttigt og fornøieligt; thi derved indsee vi vore Forfædres Vildfarelse, og vi takke Forsynet for en fornøftigere Religion".

The effort seems to have served its purpose in this respect. Shortly after the book had been published Wille went to Copenhagen to sollicite for a position and was appointed vicar of Grytten in Romsdal the year after.

(Nyerup and Rask 1808).

Compared to what existed before, then, Wille's contribution to the knowledge about Nordic mythology may be looked upon as a substantial step forward along the path of pedagogical adjustment toward accessibility for the interested non-specialist. Wille himself, in the introduction to his book, claims that Jon Erichsen had nourished plans about recommending its use in schools. For political reasons this seems never to have happened and the claim can hardly be proved. It cannot, however, be dismissed on suspicion alone and even if it existed only in Wille's own mind, such an idea in itself underlines the educational character of his undertaking. To what extent his effort succeed and did prepare for a wider reception of the myths and of Snorri's Edda than had earlier been the case is, on the other hand, difficult to measure. We know next to nothing about its distribution. Possibly its definite leaning towards popular education was somewhat premature in the late 1780s in Norway as well as in Denmark.

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Norse mythology, a subset of Germanic mythology, is the overall term for the myths, legends and beliefs about supernatural beings of Norse pagans. It flourished prior to the Christianization of Scandinavia, during the Early Middle Ages, and passed into Nordic folklore, with some aspects surviving to the modern day.Â Most of the existing records on Norse mythology date from the 11th to 18th century, having gone through more than two centuries of oral preservation in what was at least officially a Pagan society. At this point scholars started recording it, particularly in the Eddas and the Heimskringla by Snorri Sturluson, who believed that pre-Christian deities trace real historical people.