CHAPTER 9

"Life Was a State in Which a War Was On": A.S. Byatt's Portrayal of War and Norse Mythology in *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*

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A thin child was exiled while her world exploded. Giants were reduced to rubble and gods played games with the lives of mortals. As the war raged, the thin child found refuge in the English countryside. She was sustained by the stories and illustrations of Norse mythology in the book given to her by her mother. They gave her a way of understanding war, and, later, an imaginative language through which to depict it. A.S. Byatt's 2011 novel *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*[1] is an experimental semi-autobiographical historical novel, exploring the story of the Second World War and its impact on Britain through the perspective of a young girl, but expanding the genres of the war novel and the historical novel through a re-casting of Norse mythology. As part of a series of works published by Canongate, Byatt's *Ragnarok* enhances intertextual connections between the past and the present forged by myths and fairy tales, material in which Byatt has a long-standing interest.[2] Byatt's engagement with Norse mythology in *Ragnarok* echoes the current cultural interest in Scandinavian culture and literature in

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Britain, evident in the interest in Nordic Noir crime drama[3] and the popularity of Scandinavian design, food and fashion.[4] *Ragnarok* presents a complex and affective creative examination of Norse mythology and war. It deserves wider scholarly discussion than it has garnered thus far.

Ragnarok examines gendered identity and Byatt's own experiences of the Second World War, reflected and transformed through fiction and drawing on the imagery, motifs and narratives of Norse mythology.[5] My discussion in this chapter centres on *Ragnarok* as an example of how literary representations add to studies of war and trauma in ways that historical representations are not always able to do. Such literary representations may offer new and engaging dimensions to the ways we look at war. I argue that *Ragnarok* presents an exemplary demonstration of the ways in which contemporary readerships can gain unique insights from fictions that are historically informed, yet use imaginative means to illuminate aspects of historical experience. Through a critical analysis of the novel and its cultural contexts, informed by perspectives from war studies and gender critics, I examine the ways in which Byatt's novel draws attention to the role and presence of myth in culture, and examine how it foregrounds the vital role literature plays in processing historical trauma and war. *Ragnarok* thus highlights the imaginative function of myth in helping to process and communicate experiences of war and trauma in historical fiction.

The phrase "life was a state in which a war was on"[6] is the key to the Second World War experience of the thin child, the young female protagonist of *Ragnarok*, who goes by no other name and whose family life is disrupted by conflict. Her father goes off to fight, and she and her mother are evacuated to the countryside. In order to make sense of her experience, the thin child turns to the world of books and becomes fascinated by a book of Norse myth re-tellings given to her by her mother. The depiction of Ragnarok, the apocalyptic end of the world in Norse myth, speaks to the thin child's fears and helps her to mediate the trauma of war, by showing her how to creatively transform this trauma through the art of storytelling. In re-telling Norse myth through the vessel of the reading habits of the thin child in a time of unimaginable upheaval, Byatt employs a form of narrative "polyphony." My examination places Byatt's work within the context of current scholarly preoccupations with war that acknowledge the inordinate complexity of the topic and explore the problems and questions raised by its representation. In their examination of the impact of war studies in relation to contemporary literature, the critics Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson argue that

> War studies is now one of the leading, core approaches to the twentieth-century literary-historical record, determining new modes of engagement with key research areas such as modernism and postmodernism.[7]

Critic Tim S. Gauthier also examines what he sees as the "near-obsession with history in contemporary fiction"[8] and as a reflection of a growing scholarly interest in the representation of war in literature and popular culture. Literature has a profound role in portraying and problematising suffering and destruction in history. However, this relationship is fluid, and history and literature continue to permeate each other's membranes, according to Anne Whitehead, who argues that "fiction itself has been marked or changed by its encounter with trauma."[9] *Ragnarok*'s portrayal of war through myth furthermore presents an innovation in and expansion of the genre of the historical novel. It also draws attention to the significance of the historical novel in the area of war studies.

A central strategy for *Ragnarok's* challenge to the portrayal of war and myth is its use of formal experimentation and narrative disruption. In their examination of war in literature and the use of genre, Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson assert that

> War tends to alter the genres it inhabits, like a cuckoo in the nest. It stretches and distorts the normal obligations and expectations, and gives the genre a special ethical edge, as well as menace and dark intention.[10]

Ragnarok is an impressive example of this "stretching" of genres, with its allusions to myth and fairy tale structures, and its attempt to view war through the eyes of those whose experiences have been sorely neglected historically—children. *Ragnarok* is an experimental text, divided into several sections of varying length, style and texture that serve different functions within the narrative fabric, which stretches the vellum not only between historical and literary representations, but between literary genres as well, enabling us to weigh up the significance of myth through its contemporary re-imaginings. As Elizabeth Wanning Harries reminds us, "Byatt is part self-conscious realist, part postmodern writer, and part storyteller."[11] Byatt herself has noted the distinction between fairy tales and myth and her determination to examine the functions of the latter in *Ragnarok*, stating that "The fairy stories were in my head like little bright necklaces of intricately carved stones […] The myths were cavernous spaces, lit in extreme colours, gloomy, or dazzling."[12] Commenting

on Byatt's use of fairy tale and myth material, Wanning Harries argues that "For Byatt, the subterranean work of fairy tales and myths in their 'crystalline' forms continues. Far from being a 'dead language', they provide an alphabet and a grammar that both link us to a living past and help us see the present more clearly."[13] The suggestion of myth providing an "alphabet" or a "language" through which history and fantasy can be unlocked is central to my discussion in the present chapter.

The first two chapters of Byatt's novel, entitled "A Thin Child in Wartime" and "The End of the World," focus on the thin child and her experiences of living through the Second World War. In these chapters she is introduced to Norse mythology, and those myths inform the rest of her experience. It is important to note that the thin child receives the book that transports her mind while her body is undergoing the physical dislocation of evacuation, thus helping to anchor her. Byatt's use of the narrative strategy of a book within the book gives a sense of the play with genre boundaries, and functions as a central motif to illustrate that war itself has no clear boundaries. The third chapter, in fact, entitled "The Thin Child in Time," re-tells the story of the world's destruction in Ragnarok. The fourth chapter, "The Thin Child in Peacetime," returns its focus to the thin child and her homecoming to the suburbs in the city with her parents, recounting her ambivalent feelings at the post-war landscape she encounters and the pressure towards conformity that it embodies. *Ragnarok*'s final chapter, "Thoughts on Myths," is a self-reflexive postscript, which presents the author's reflections on the meanings of myth, conveying the complexity of war and the role of myth in saying the unsayable.

My examination of war and myth in *Ragnarok* facilitates a critical conversation about, and reflection on, these various elements of Byatt's narrative. In examining the representation and meanings of war in Byatt's *Ragnarok*, this chapter investigates two distinctive yet interconnected strands of critical enquiry. Firstly, it looks at the connections between myth and storytelling and the role of myth in contemporary literature, relating these considerations to recent critical debates around historical fiction and its functions. These discussions facilitate a further investigation of the depiction of war through myth in *Ragnarok*. They also offer comment on the utilisation of literary language, and the functions of articulating trauma through myth. The second strand of my enquiry examines Byatt's representation of life after war through the lens of the thin child and her mother, and argues that, rather than defining war as a linear, finite event, *Ragnarok*

explores the multi-faceted and complex ways in which war goes on and continues into the post-war period, refusing to be neatly encapsulated.

Writing War through Myth

Byatt is eminent but not alone in her focus on the role of war in British history and the aesthetic and psychological problems of its representation. According to Tim S. Gauthier, "Britain's relationship to its past" is a topic widely examined by contemporary British writers.[14] Many of these writers also have something personal at stake in writing about history, and Byatt is no exception. Parts of *Ragnarok* have a significant autobiographical element, as Paul Binding explains:

> Born 1936, Byatt was three at the outset of a war feared likely to end in total world devastation and the assertion of Chaos. Her father was fighting in North Africa; she never expected to see him again. The notion of Ragnarök[15] thus had more authenticity for her than Christian eschatology as purveyed in church and schoolroom. In fact, her father did return; there was life after the war, though its menacing shadow could never be wholly dispelled.[16]

Byatt's narrative approach in *Ragnarok* is central to her creative exploration of Britain's historical war experience—and her own. However, her storytelling methods also highlight the difficulty of conveying this material, foregrounding the problems of relying on language to accurately describe truth, and problematising the subjective and selective nature of memory in documenting historical experience. Byatt's strategy reflects another point made by Tim S. Gauthier, that

> Fiction […] opens up a number of possibilities unavailable to the monological gaze of the historian. Through such techniques as shifts in narrative voice, play with chronological or linear presentation, the inclusion of different versions of the same event, or the absence of closure, novelists offer a means both to question and to examine the historical past.[17]

In the preface to *Ragnarok*, called "A Note on Names," Byatt alludes to the complexity of language and the problems of language accurately conveying experience, stating that "Myths change in the mind depending on the telling—there is no overall correct version."[18] Her insistence on the

provisional nature of truth and the deferment of closure is underlined in the novel's portrayal of life after the war, in which the conventional understanding of war as a finite event is challenged.

The characters and stories of Norse mythology are instrumental to Byatt's re-imagining of the Second World War in *Ragnarok*. The narrative is enriched through its portrayals of tales and characters such as Loki, the trickster god; Jörmundgandr, the enormous snake that encircles the earth; and the murder of the blind god Baldur, an event that precedes the apocalyptic destruction of Ragnarok. The appeal of Norse mythology over other narrative vehicles, with all its incandescent destruction, was evident from the beginning of this project for Byatt. She said that she knew immediately when Canongate invited her to write a myth that "It should be Ragnarok, the myth to end all myths, the myth in which the gods themselves were all destroyed."[19] Byatt further discusses her choice of myth and its particular appeal in "Thoughts on Myth," which stands as a self-reflexive postscript to the novel. Here, she explains: "I was writing for my childhood self, and the way I had found the myths and thought about the world when I first read *Asgard and the Gods*."[20] These dimensions are crucial to her textual approach in *Ragnarok*. In her re-telling of the Norse myth, Byatt draws on an acknowledged tradition of intertextual representations of both fairy tale and myth in her own work, as is apparent from her assertion that "The novel in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always incorporated forms of myths and fairy tales, working both with and against them."[21] The overlapping of literary genres in Byatt's *Ragnarok*—autobiographical dimensions, historical fiction, myth and critical essay—invites reflection on the nature of the creative process and the role of storytelling in mythologising both the self and war experience.[22] In her discussion of Byatt's use of genre in *Ragnarok*, Ana Raquel Fernandes argues that the novel creates the "link between creation myths and creative acts,"[23] and that it highlights the "juxtaposition of the 'mythical' time of the narrative and the 'real' time of the child, who has been evacuated to the countryside because of war."[24] Thus, for Byatt, myth, autobiography, realism and reflective prose are employed in a post-modern experimental mix of genres, which serves the purpose of foregrounding the complexity of storytelling and the subjective perception of war and time.

Ragnarok contains a number of references to literary and artistic intertexts, which situate its twenty-first-century re-telling within a wider cultural landscape. These include a number of engravings by the German artist Friedrich Wilhelm Heine, "a war artist during the Franco-Prussian

War."[25] Heine's drawings are significant, for they contribute an additional visual dimension to the book's textual representation of Norse myth, yet at the same time they are situated within a specific historical moment in terms of their representation of war and conflict.[26] In "Thoughts on Myth," the closing section of *Ragnarok*, Byatt provides a critical discussion of the manner of her re-telling and the approaches to Norse myth that inspired her own re-appraisal both of the stories she uses and how they have changed over time, and of her own experiences. In this part of the novel, Byatt examines intertextual connections between her own re-telling of Ragnarok and earlier texts, including illustrations, drawing attention to the changing emphases and values informing the textual and thematic priorities of re-imagining myth. She contextualises her own re-telling of the Norse myth by placing it alongside the nationally and culturally specific traditions of the German scholar W. Wägner, who in 1880 authored the re-telling of Norse myth entitled *Asgard and the Gods*, the version that Byatt used for *Ragnarok* as the thin child's reading material. Furthermore, Byatt references the influence of nineteenth-century Danish scholar, author and theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig, and praises Danish author Villy Sørensen and his 1982 re-telling called *Ragnarok: En Gudefortælling* (English title: *The Downfall of the Gods*).[27] Byatt acknowledges the revisionary quality of Sørensen's portrayal of the gods, which equips them with "feelings, doubts, psychological problems."[28] This creative move by Sørensen, in Byatt's opinion, is particularly useful because it contributes to "rescuing and retelling the Norse myth [by humanising] it as a battlefield between power and love."[29] Byatt's own interpretation of Norse myth acknowledges these intertextual debts, while building on and extending their insights in her own portrayals of the Norse gods in *Ragnarok*.

The main body of Byatt's novel focuses on the description of natural phenomena and the gods of Ragnarok. It closes with an extended depiction of Ragnarok itself, the apocalyptic war and the destruction of the world at the end of time. The novel employs Norse myth to explore the role of creativity in conveying the transgressive dimensions of war and its all-encompassing destruction. Byatt's preoccupation with the problems of representing war reflects a more widespread literary and cultural attempt to process trauma, but as we have seen, it is also deeply personal.[30] Commenting on the alienating effect of the trauma that war causes, Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson observe that "The Second World War saw mass death become a bureaucracy and factory of suffering and persecution."[31]

It is precisely this trauma of mass death and destruction that mythology can help to process. The preoccupation with "war and its effects" that so dominated Byatt's life is a crucial part of her fictionalised life as portrayed in *Ragnarok*. Through her reading, the thin child experiences war through the unique and dynamic imagery and language of the Norse myths. At the same time, the reader also gets the sense that mythology is part of her everyday life, much like war is, as reflected in the phrase "life was a state in which a war was on."

Through myth, the thin child furthermore gains insight into the complexity of different cultures and traditions. She comes to feel a sense of fellowship with the Nordic people to whom the myths pertain, engendered though their shared histories of war, as she recalls that "these stories belonged to 'Nordic' peoples, Norwegians, Danes and Icelanders. The thin child was, in England, a Northerner. The family came from land invaded and settled by Vikings. These were her stories."[32] This important passage also foregrounds the thin child's realisation that she herself is somehow a product or part of this ancient war, not detached from it. The thin child associates the descriptions of noise and violence in the myth with her own disjointed experience of war: "At night, in her blacked-out bedroom, the thin child heard sounds in the sky […] Odin was the god of death and battle."[33] Byatt's use of language foregrounds the thin child's sense of uncertainty, adding to the sense of danger and chaos she experiences. In so doing, Byatt's portrayals of the violence and destruction of war are more deeply entrenched in the consciousness of the child (and the reader) and their powerful effects enhanced through the narrative structures of myth.

The thin child sees mythological narratives not as an escape from, but as a vital acknowledgement of, war and its ultimate consequence. Byatt presents the apocalyptic destruction of the world in Norse mythology as the most extreme and transgressive spectacle of war, a monumental imaginary event, which enables the thin child to process the violent and catastrophic dimensions of the war she is living through. Commenting on the use of the apocalypse motif in twenty-first-century literature and art, Steven Walker calls it "a magnificent evocation of cosmic destruction leading to world renewal."[34] It is, however, precisely the idea of renewal that Byatt's novel challenges.

According to Tim S. Gauthier, the realities of war challenge notions of historical progress and the way war is recorded as historically relevant. He asserts that the reality of atrocity and other extreme forms of what he

terms "cultural violence" in the recent past has complicated the telling of history:

> Enlightenment concepts of a progressive history have also shown themselves to be ill-founded, primarily by the violent and traumatic nature of the century through which we have just passed. Whatever dream we may have been fostering […] was dashed on the rocks of the Nazi concentration camps, the Stalinist gulags, Hiroshima, and many other instances of cultural violence throughout the twentieth century.[35]

The rejection of a "progressive history" is reflected in *Ragnarok* in the triggering of the final battle of all-encompassing destruction by the murder of the blind god Baldur, which signals the death of innocence and goodness. Baldur's murder, through Loki's betrayal, constitutes the ultimate transgression that leads to the apocalyptic war. Knowing how narratives are shaped, the thin child already suspected that the trust would be betrayed before the event itself: "The goddess called *everything*, everything, to promise not to harm her son. Yet the shape of the story means that he must be harmed."[36] Understanding that plot drives the stories she reads, the thin child questions the absolute authority of gods and myth: "It is not given, even to gods, to take complete, foolproof, *perfect* precautions."[37] The thin child understands myth's allusion to war and environmental destruction,[38] which in the Norse mythology she reads is symbolised by an enormous wolf:

> Moongarm […] would fill himself with the lifeblood of everyone that dies, would swallow the heavenly bodies and spatter the heaven and all the skies with blood. And this would disturb and derange the heat and light of the sun, and give rise to violent winds, which would rage everywhere and destroy forests, and human habitations, and fields and plains. Coasts would be lashed and crumbling, and the stable order of things would shiver.[39]

The Ragnarok narrative of the world's end gives structure to depictions of violence and trauma, as the thin child realises.[40] Through the structures of mythical narrative, Byatt thus exposes the destructive and seemingly inevitable mechanisms of transgression and revenge that create war, and which are also intrinsic to the dynamic of myth.

In its narration of apocalypse, Byatt's *Ragnarok* fills the gap left in the version of *Asgard and the Gods*, where closure seemed to follow too swiftly and seamlessly after the binding of Loki. In contrast, the thin child strives

to imagine that absent phase through an ecological disaster narrative. She conjures up words to the silence, filling the gap by envisioning the details of the Fimbulwinter, the ominous three-year-long winter of the "thin, bitter wind,"[41] as a harbinger of worse disasters: "Wind Time, Wolf Time, before the World breaks up."[42] The thin child imagines the predictably grim responses of the humans in the myth to this climatic disaster, as self-preservation leads to cannibalism and other transgressions and taboos are broken. The prediction in myth of the Fimbulwinter suggests the capacity of myth to articulate human fears about the future and the attempts by humans to control or predict that future, by imagining how it will be through narrative. The thin child reflects on this: "This, they thought, was how it would be when the Fimbulwinter came."[43] The monumental and final war between the gods and the giants represents finality, the end of everything. Although the gods are armed with "swords, shields, spears, hauberks, glimmering gold,"[44] they are also always already lost.[45] The thin child understands that the gods were complicit in their own destruction and therefore doomed: "There are two ways, in stories, of winning battles—to be supremely strong, or to be a gallantly forlorn hope. The Ases were neither. They were brave and tarnished."[46] In her representation of Ragnarok, Byatt depicts apocalypse through a series of duels or power struggles, of gods taking on monsters one-on-one and losing their battles: "The gods and the warriors of Valhall advanced like berserkers onto the battle plain. They roared defiance—this is what they knew how to do."[47] Odin takes on the Fenris-Wolf in battle and loses as he is devoured. Thor takes on the giant snake Jörmungandr[48] but succumbs to the poison she spews out. Finally Loki dies too, "as the battlefield began to settle into a welter of bloody slime."[49]

The idea of the gods' inherent and inevitable doom is mirrored by the awful spectacle of the ship Naglfar. Launched by Loki at Ragnarok, the ship Naglfar is built from dead men's nails, a monstrous image of mortality. The uproar of the sea and the all-encompassing destruction of Ragnarok are reminiscent of a dystopian narrative of environmental devastation:

> As the crust of the earth boiled and spat, the skin of the sea began to dance madly, with geysirs blowing onto the waves, which were full of floating death […] all boiling up and torn apart by heat and cold and raw force.[50] The giant snake Jörmungander, the Midgardsomr which has been holding the world together with her body, rising up out of the ocean at the end, making purposefully for the battlefield.[51]

As a result of disaster, the untying of all bonds, the entire world is flooded and all previous life extinguished at Ragnarok.[52] This depiction further foregrounds Byatt's rejection of the pattern of destruction followed by renewal and rebirth so often seen in traditional war narratives, arguing instead that war is not regenerative.[53] The environmental destruction and possible extinction caused by war nullifies the possibility of the world's rebirth. The thin child concludes that the narrative closure to Ragnarok, which she prefers, is the one that refuses the possibility of resurrection and rebirth. Using myth as a method of countering the finality of war, "She had stored Ragnarök against the time when it would become clear that her father would not come back."[54] Paradoxically, the father does return, but he is weakened and changed by his wartime experience.[55] However, as the latter part of Byatt's novel shows, although the father returns from the war and the family return to their home in the suburbs, this return does not mean regeneration, but a compromised, diminished existence.

Gender and Post-War Suburban Femininity

Ragnarok represents a significant shift in perspective in relation to the gender politics inherent in the depiction of war. The view point of a young girl, the thin child, is one of a marginalised individual in society, and this feature is central to the novel's effect. Using a young female protagonist to portray perspectives of war, which are usually associated with male heroics in myth and fairy tale, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, matters. Through the thin child, Byatt departs from the stereotypical perception of war as male-identified and driven by the establishing of male agency through battle. The importance of Byatt's gender-political challenge is highlighted by Lynne Hanley, who argues that "Historically, war has always been a patriarchal project."[56] Hanley also asserts that "unless we undermine the soldier's monopoly on representing himself at war, our memories of war will overtly or covertly serve his interests."[57] Furthermore, by portraying the aftermath of war—the paradoxical return to home after the global destruction of the Second World War—*Ragnarok* invites an investigation and re-appraisal of the gendered meanings of both war and myth. The novel achieves this through its consideration of the changing construction of femininity and the effect and implications of upheaval of post-war suburban existence for both the thin child and her mother.

The first parts of *Ragnarok*, the chapters "A Thin Child in Wartime" and "The End of the World," initiate a disentangling of myth. This

process involves a combing and carding of personal and individual myths, myths of childhood and English countryside idylls, and myths of war and nation. Another significant allusion to the *Bildungsroman* and quest narrative takes place through Byatt's use of the developmental structure of the thin child's coming-of-age story. The coming-of-age plot is a frequent feature of war narratives, according to Tobey C. Herzog. In discussing war and subjectivity in works such as Homer's *Iliad*, Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*, Herzog states that

> All of these works portray an individual's education and maturation as he or she acquires insight about self, knowledge about the world, and a philosophy for living. Underlying this chronological, emotional, and psychological progression is the central character's movement from innocence through experience to consideration and understanding.[58]

Byatt's novel portrays a crucially important perspective on war and coming-of-age through her employment of a female protagonist who is also a young child, thereby highlighting questions and issues of identity formation specific to females. M. John Harrison also perceives *Ragnarok* as a coming-of-age narrative, suggesting that the universal and timeless patterns of conflict and creativity in Norse myth translate through Byatt's modern language and narrative form into a war novel and female quest story for the twenty-first century. He states that "This sense of eternal conflict acts as an anchor; while interweaving the stories of the Norse gods with the story of how she first read about them makes a kind of *bildungsroman*. The story becomes as much hers as theirs."[59]

In Byatt's novel, the narrative device of depicting the protagonist's maturation process is complicated by her young age and the fact that she is vulnerable in youth and physical stature. Byatt's use of fairy tale-like language links the opening of *Ragnarok* to long-standing, and well-recognised, narrative traditions: "There was a thin child, who was three years old when the world war began."[60] However, several words in this sentence also directly serve to distort the narrative convention and thereby disrupt the reader's expectations of both protagonist and literary genre. The word "thin" alludes to vulnerability and lack of physical power, drawing attention to the child's body and physicality. Following this ambiguous opening, the subsequent sentence in the novel specifically mentions the thin child's gender, by connecting her with her mother and

the latter's memories of life before the war. The vagueness of the opening sentence reveals the lack of heroic narrative thrust, suggesting instead a contrast between a "thin" and somewhat vulnerable child character and the onslaught of a monumental, all-encompassing conflict.

The figure of the thin child is employed to foreground and negotiate the tension between biblical and Christian narratives about war, trauma and gender. These cultural narratives are interwoven with the child character's own sense of reality, with stories playing a central role in making sense of the world around her and of the war itself. This negotiation is central to her coming-of-age story, in which the discovery and articulation of self is inextricably linked to the trauma of war. The thin child is an avid reader, and her reading takes place late at night, the darkness and imaginative dimension of that time connecting with the fantasy realm of the myths she reads. What attracts the thin child to the Norse mythology book is the fact that it rejects "a clear message and meaning"[61] and resists monolithic and uniform explanations, while providing finality in its emphatic closure. *Asgard and the Gods* "was an account of a mystery, of how a world came together, was filled with magical and powerful beings, and then came to an end. A real End."[62] The thin child finds inspiration to write from myth and its "stone giants,"[63] and their ability to transform the world and change everyday phenomena into a powerful and extreme reality reflecting a rich imaginary world. The Christian and traditional English narratives do not seem adequate or real to the thin child, and do not provide an adequate explanation or rationalisation of war; nor do their accounts of war and trauma seem realistic. Equally, Jesus' sacrifice appears to have been for nothing. She reflects how "This death did not seem to have done much good. There was a war on. Possibly there would always be a war on."[64] Furthermore, God does not inspire awe or creativity in her; rather, he appears "grandfatherly"[65] and smug in his certain knowledge that humans will break the prohibitions he has placed on them. In contrast, to the thin child, Norse myth provides a much more powerful and convincing narrative of war.

Byatt's *Ragnarok* re-tells the Norse myth of the world's end as a means of portraying the Second World War and the thin child's fears of growing up. However, the end of the war does not bring closure. Rather, *Ragnarok* recognises that the impact of war is not finite, and cannot be limited to the artificial boundaries illustrated by beginning and end dates. The thin child's narrative continues beyond the war itself, in the chapter entitled "The Thin Child in Peacetime." Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson

comment on this fluidity of the affective landscape engendered by the portrayal of war, stating: "War occupies and corrals and kills, transforming peacetime space into death's uncanny zone,"[66] a sensitivity to temporality also echoed in Byatt's novel and its rejection of closure.

The locus of the suburban home in this chapter serves several narrative purposes when placed alongside war and its myths.[67] The restrictive suburban setting starkly contrasts with the book's earlier depiction of the thin child's existence as an evacuee, in which she was given the freedom to find her own way through the rural landscapes. In the suburban home, the child's longing for the "bright, black world"[68] of the Norse myths competes with the quest for a new sense of being. The suburban part of *Ragnarok* thus adds another dimension to the representation of myth and war in contemporary literature, highlighting the gender politics of any story situated within narratives of war and violence, and placing the stories of girls and women at the centre of the narrative. Commenting on the impact of the war on the lives of women and children in urban areas, Maggie Andrews and Sallie MacNamara explain how "The Second World War involved […] an unparalleled degree of disruption and interference in women's everyday lives."[69] They further state that "The evacuation of young children and many of their mothers, rationing, the blitz and the conscription of women in 1942 meant that the disruption of war was strongly felt on the home front."[70] For the thin child and her mother, however, evacuation does not only mean disruption—it also means freedom from previous conventions and restrictions. The return to the suburban home means a return to conventional gender roles and constraints. Commenting on literary portrayals of suburban settings, Dominic Head asserts that they have contributed to "establishing suburbia as an object of ridicule."[71] However, whereas Head suggests that suburban settings inspire mainly derision and scorn from contemporary authors, Byatt's portrayal in *Ragnarok* paints a much more complex and emotionally nuanced picture of post-war suburban life for girls and women.

Through her perceptive depictions of the thin child and her family as they return to suburban life and negotiate the process of settling back into this setting, *Ragnarok* alludes to the ways boundaries between war- and peacetime overlap and inform each other through landscape, from suburb to countryside and back again. *Ragnarok* begins with the journey into the countryside. The thin child's life there enables and enhances her encounter with Norse myth; a journey forced by war and danger, lyrically described by Byatt in the following way: "her people left the sulphurous

air of a steel city, full of smoking chimneys, for a country town, of no interest to enemy bombers. She grew up in the ordinary paradise of the English countryside."[72] The end of the novel sees the thin child's return to the suburban realm, stifling both physically and imaginatively. The symbolic constricting of the thin child's lungs on her family's return to their suburban home is indicative of the narrowing of her horizon as a female in the post-war period. Her asthmatic condition reflects the lack of breathing space for women, the prohibition on individuality and subjective expression reflected in monochromatic post-war suburban housing: "Home was a large grey house with a precipitous garden in the steel city."[73] The city, with "its own atmosphere which could be perceived as a wall of opaque sulphurous cloud," shuts out the rich imaginary universe and overblown literary and symbolic language of the Norse myth previously re-told, instead being enveloped in a separate microclimate of its own, filled with toxic air.[74] This physical and mental shift of the "coming in" "from the countryside to which they had been evacuated"[75] transports the thin child to another temporal dimension or symbolic location, which seems suffocating and oppressive, and which paradoxically needs war to invigorate it.

The mother–daughter relationship becomes a critical focus in this part of the novel, serving as a means of highlighting the complexity of female identity and drawing attention to patriarchal and cultural restrictions. The thin child shares her mother's love of language, reading and storytelling. However, her realisation of the negative effect suburban living had on her mother is retrospective and reported as having taken place "many years later,"[76] as she merely observes that "The long-awaited return took the life out of the thin child's mother."[77] This sense of post-war female disappointment and despondency reflects a more widespread sentiment in which "the post-war peace did not necessarily live up to the dreams and expectations which had helped to sustain the population during wartime."[78] For the thin child's mother, it was the monotony and lack of agency as a post-war suburban housewife that were soul-destroying: "She made herself lonely and slept in the afternoons, saying she was suffering from neuralgia and sick headaches […] The thin child came to associate the word 'housewife' with 'prisoner'."[79] "Dailiness defeated her,"[80] states the thin child simply. The imaginative intensity of myth and its language and landscapes is lacking in the suburban setting. The thin child's observation of her mother's gradual disappearance in post-war peacetime suburban London contrasted starkly, both with the relative freedom experienced in the countryside during evacuation and with the images of female goddesses represented in

Norse myths she and her mother had so loved sharing, which had helped her to negotiate the traumas of wartime helplessness.

In Norse myth, Baldur's mother Frigg is described as "tall, stately, imperious, crowned,"[81] willing to travel the earth to make everything and everyone swear not to hurt Baldur. The thin child imagines the powerful Frigg riding in a chariot across the skies and walking the ends of the earth, wielding her authority. In contrast, the thin child's mother is only able to pursue her career aspirations and mix with professional peers during the war, when teaching for women was made "legally possible [but] before the war had been forbidden to married women."[82] Furthermore, the isolation of the suburban setting and the nature of the housewife role deprive the thin child's mother of pursuing the friendships with other women that she had enjoyed during the war years when she was teaching.[83] As part of its engagement with both war and post-war periods, *Ragnarok* thus examines the debilitating effect of oppression on the thin child's mother, echoing Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows' discussion of suburban women in the post-war period: "the confinement of women to the home rendered them isolated, powerless and crucially, lacking a sense of identity."[84] The continuous conflict confronted in the suburban section of *Ragnarok* is the oppression of female power and agency, the war between the genders, and the tyranny of the post-war pressure towards conventionality, identified with stereotypical femininity and masculinity and suburban settings.[85]

The opposition between nature and culture is a central theme in *Ragnarok*, and is used to foreground the contrast between the benevolent wilderness of the English countryside during war evacuation and the thin child's liberated imagination, and the controlled landscapes and paranoia of post-war suburban streets. Norse myth, to the thin child, presents an organic tale, its starting-point an enormous, self-renewing, all-encompassing tree,[86] "a world in itself."[87] This image coheres more accurately with the thin child's connection with the natural world. The description of the thin child's walk to school through country meadows during the time she is evacuated to the countryside re-iterates the jarring contrast between pastoral surface and dark turmoil, and between countryside idyll and the horrors of war. On the surface, her walk to school through flowery meadows echoes or emulates nostalgic pastoral narratives: "meadows covered with cowslips, buttercups, daisies, vetch, rimmed by hedges full of blossom and then berries, blackthorn, hawthorn, dog-roses."[88] However, the image of

> the odd ash tree with its sooty buds disrupts and distorts the pastoral vision, serving as a reminder that the complicated and traumatic reality of war is never too far away from the surface, thereby refusing sentimentality and naive nostalgia: 'Her mother […] always said 'black as ash-buds in the front of March.'[89]

This darkness and complexity are also evident in the thin child's imaginative and intense re-creation of the myth, through imagery such as "The created world was inside the skull" and "the wolves in the mind."[90] Inspired by myth, these imaginative landscapes and yearnings inform the thin child's narrative of the war and her life afterwards. For the thin child, the structures and layout of her suburban surroundings reinforce the sense of orderliness and predictability that characterises her post-war life: "In the midst of Meadow Bank Avenue was a large oval patch of grass which was the Green […] It must once have been a village green, where Blake's children were heard at play. Modern children still played on it, but it has been immured in the spread of suburb."[91]

Upon returning from the war, the thin child's father is described as suffering from trauma, but seeks refuge in building a garden reminiscent of the countryside, an attempt to introduce an element or dimension of tranquillity and beauty into the predictability of suburban life. But even in this act, the returned soldier is seeking control through his garden, just as is the nation through ordered streets. Even in transporting ideals about the countryside, the father exerts dominion over his environment as he fells the wild ash tree that has planted itself in the family's garden. The wild ash tree makes fantastical patterns at night on the walls of the thin child's bedroom through the window. Because it is a self-planted ash tree, the lack of human control and design condemns it to destruction: "The thin child's father said it must come down. It was a wild tree, out of place in a suburban garden."[92]

Through this representation of contrasting loci, the open spaces of countryside versus the restrictions of the suburbs, Byatt foregrounds the importance of myth in representing the affective complexities of experiencing war and retaining a sense of connection to that alternative realm. Through her memories of the landscapes of her childhood, the thin child retains an open window of access to the past and to the mythical landscape of the Norse gods and their universe. She recalls "The outdoor spaces of her wartime," associating these with myth, "a small world, into which

she had been exiled or evacuated."[93] In a striking parallel to the narrative of the death of Yggdrasil, the tree of life in Norse myth, the thin child's world changes when her father fells the wild tree in their suburban garden: "A gate closed in her head. She must learn to live in dailiness, she told herself, in a house, in a garden, at home […] She must savour peacetime."[94] Instead, the thin child is left with an all-encompassing fracture in her life, an emotional dimension facilitated by myth from which she has been cut off: "on the other side of the closed gate was the bright black world into which she had walked in the time of her evacuation."[95] Paradoxically, following the extremes of Ragnarok, "the end" is not the end, but is followed by the denouement of suburban post-war conformity. The thin child's continued resistance to conformity suggests that the self and sensibility remain forever altered by myth and the experience of war.

Conclusion: Byatt's Re-telling of Norse Myth and War

A.S. Byatt's novel *Ragnarok* challenges us to revise our understanding of both myth and war, and of their depiction, through the employment of apocalyptic imagery in its re-casting of Norse mythology and endeavour to imagine beyond the war. *Ragnarok* investigates compelling questions of violence and warfare, authority and power, moral questions and gender, through the employment of motifs and stories from myth. We have seen how, for the thin child and for the reader, the language and imagery of myth open up new and more complex ways of thinking about and representing history and conflict. In critiquing the identification of war literature as a "patriarchal project," which is exclusively male-identified, Lynne Hanley argues that women writers (and feminist critics) "can challenge this monopoly only by redefining what war literature is about."[96] The critical examination in this chapter has included a consideration of Byatt's use of genre and the various distinct sections in *Ragnarok*, written in different narrative voices and fulfilling different purposes. Such varied use of textual techniques is a prominent feature of all Byatt's writing, but importantly, such breaking of narrative and stylistic boundaries is key to her nuanced approach to re-imagining war in this novel.

The theme of environmental destruction is central to Byatt's *Ragnarok* and her employment of Norse myth. In his review of *Ragnarok* and commentary on Byatt's work, Paul Binding suggests that weaving this contemporary environmental awareness into the ancient myth is central to Byatt's

project, stating that "for the 21st century Ragnarök suggests possibilities for our civilisation, indeed our planet, as terrifying as all-out war: the demise of multifarious life-forms through human inability to control mind and energies."[97] This observation is echoed by Holly Kyte, who also discusses Byatt's interpretation of Ragnarok and its contemporary currency in terms of its environmental message.[98] The urgency and currency of Byatt's novel remind us that, as Gauthier puts it, "[H]istorical narratives, both fictional and documentary, are often dictated by the concerns and needs of the present."[99] This sense of purpose is reflected in *Ragnarok*, both in the novel's thematic content and in the variety of narrative voices and styles it employs, which draw attention to the complexity of storytelling. As Conrad argues, "The three voices match Byatt's belief that writing a book is a three-dimensional activity, an exercise, as she once said, in 'making a thing'."[100] Byatt employs the vibrancy and creative potential of Norse myth in order to revitalise our culture and suggest ways of re-thinking war and the way it is conventionally depicted in novels. Commenting on the vitality and diversity of myth, Byatt herself offers the following assessment of the material in her essay collection: "Myths, like organic life, are shapeshifters, metamorphic, endlessly reconstituted and reformed."[101] If, as Piette and Rawlinson argue, "the spectacle and imagining of the death of others in state-sponsored conflicts demands writing that pays due witness to that suffering,"[102] then it is vital that this writing pays attention to hitherto unheard or overlooked perspectives by "reconstituting and reforming" conventional perspectives. Byatt's linking of the wars of Gods and the lives of children illustrates the complexities of bearing witness to war and narrating trauma of various kinds, and underlines the importance of calling attention to the perspectives of those who are marginalised or silenced in traditional war narratives. In *Ragnarok*, Byatt thus retells Norse myth in order to confront death and finality, by pitting the imaginative powers of her thin child protagonist against the destruction of the Second World War, in order to throw light on those perspectives.

Notes

1. A.S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* (London: Canongate, 2011), 3.
2. See, for example, the discussions of this dimension in Byatt's work in Elizabeth Wanning Harries, "'Ancient Forms': Myth, Fairy Tale and Narrative in A. S. Byatt's Fiction," in *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, ed. Stephen Benson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 74–97; Ana Raquel

Fernandes, "Recasting Myths in Contemporary Short Fiction: British and Portuguese Women Authors," in *The Power of Form: Recycling Myths*, eds Ana Raquel Fernandes, Serra José Pedro and Rui Carlos Fonseca (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 134–147; Tim S. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire and Historical Reparations: A. S. Byatt, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006).

3. Stuart Jeffries, "*The Bridge*'s Kim Bodnia: 'Darkness, Misery, Evil: We Do Them Best,'" *The Guardian*, 31 January 2014, accessed 17 March 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/jan/31/the-bridge-kim-bodnia-darkness-misery.
4. See the archived articles in the specialist section, "Scandinavian Food and Drink," *The Guardian*, accessed 17 March 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/scandinavian-food-and-drink.
5. Byatt's novel forms a part of the Canongate series of contemporary re-tellings of myth, which also includes Margaret Atwood, *Penelopiad* (London: Canongate, 2005) and Jeannette Winterson, *Weight* (London: Canongate, 2005).
6. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 3.
7. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson, "Introduction: The Wars of the Twentieth Century," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, eds Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1. See also David Bevan, "Introduction," in *Literature and War*, ed. David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 3.
8. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire*, 9.
9. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.
10. Piette and Rawlinson, "Introduction," 6.
11. Harries, "Ancient Forms," 90.
12. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 161.
13. Harries, "Ancient Forms," 90.
14. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire,* 3. Although Gauthier addresses late twentieth-century British literature in his assessment, his discussion is also applicable and relevant to Byatt's project in *Ragnarok*.
15. The novel is not consistent in its spelling of the word Ragnarok and other words and terms relating to Norse myth. The decision to include different spellings is a deliberate move by Byatt. She explains her reasons in her preface, "A Note on Names," in which she emphasises the importance of acknowledging these different spellings, rather than forcing what she calls "an artificial consistency."
16. Paul Binding, "Ragnarok: The End of the Gods by AS Byatt," *The Independent*, 1 September 2011, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/ragnarok-the-end-of-the-gods-by-as-byatt-2347501.html.

17. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire*, 3.
18. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, prefatory section.
19. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 163.
20. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 166.
21. A.S. Byatt, "Old Tales, New Forms," in A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 130.
22. This experimental dimension is a prominent feature of Byatt's later work, as noted by Elizabeth Wanning Harries: "she more and more often juxtaposes, sometimes, combines, the self-contained forms of fantasy and the messier structures of the 'real'. The interplay of fairytale and fact, of made-up worlds and fragments of history, has become characteristic of her work" ("Ancient Forms," 76).
23. Fernandes, "Recasting Myths," 139.
24. Fernandes, "Recasting Myths," 139.
25. Peter C. Merrill, *German-American Urban Culture: Writers and Theaters in Early Milwaukee* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2000), 113.
26. Fernandes, "Recasting Myths," 139.
27. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 164–1655.
28. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 165.
29. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 165.
30. Adam Piette and Mark Rawlinson argue that "war dominated the twentieth century. It dominated it not only in the incontrovertible fact of its impact on history, predominantly through the two World Wars […] but also in the effects mass-industrialisation had on institutions, on economies, on technologies, and, more intimately and subversively, on the ways citizens lived their lives, dreamt their fantasies" ("Introduction," 2).
31. Piette and Rawlinson, "Introduction," 3.
32. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 8.
33. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 40–41.
34. Steven Walker, "Apocalypse, Transformation and Scapegoating: Moving Myth into the Twenty-First Century," in *Myth, Literature and the Unconscious*, eds Leon Burnett, Sanja Bahun and Roserick Main (London: Karnac Books, 2013), 3.
35. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire*, 1.
36. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 89.
37. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 89.
38. Paul Binding comments on the theme of environmental destruction in his review of the novel ("Ragnarok").
39. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 58.
40. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 127.
41. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 131.
42. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 135.
43. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 133.

44. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 137.
45. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 138.
46. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 138.
47. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 142.
48. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 74–75.
49. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 143.
50. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 139–140.
51. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 140.
52. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 140–141.
53. Byatt's portrayal resists the notion of "regeneration through violence," a phrase coined by Richard Slotkin in his debunking of the "myths of the West" that inform the myths of war and foreign policy in the USA. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).
54. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 149.
55. Piette and Rawlinson, "Introduction," 6.
56. Lynne Hanley, *Writing War: Fiction, Gender, and Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 124.
57. Hanley, *Writing War*, 124. The quotation is also cited in Barbara Foley, "Writing War: Fiction, Gender, & Memory," and "The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature (review)," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 38: 4 (Winter 1992): 989–991.
58. Tobey C. Herzog, *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (London: Routledge, 2003), 59.
59. M. John Harrison, "Ragnarok: The End of the Gods by A. S. Byatt—Review," *The Guardian*, 9 September 2011, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/09/ragnarok-as-byatt-review.
60. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 3.
61. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 9.
62. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 9.
63. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 10.
64. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 11–12.
65. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 22.
66. Piette and Rawlinson, "Introduction," 6.
67. The suburbs as a symbolic literary setting are the focus of much contemporary literature. I discuss representations of the suburbs and femininity (specifically the figure of the housewife) in crime narratives in Charlotte Beyer, "'She Decided to Kill Her Husband': Housewives in Contemporary American Fictions of Crime," in *Violence in American Popular Culture*, ed. David Schmid (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Press, 2015), 71–94.
68. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 154.

69. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara, "Introduction to Part II," in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present*, eds Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 63.
70. Andrews and McNamara, "Introduction to Part II," 63.
71. Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 213.
72. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 3.
73. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 148.
74. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 148.
75. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 148.
76. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 152.
77. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 152.
78. Andrews and McNamara, "Introduction to Part II," 64.
79. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 152.
80. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 152.
81. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 83.
82. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 4.
83. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 131.
84. Stacey Gillis and Joanne Hollows, "Introduction," in *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*, edited by Stacey Gillis and Joanne Hollows (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 6.
85. See also Beyer, "She Decided to Kill Her Husband" for an examination of violence, gender and the suburban.
86. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 15–16.
87. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 16.
88. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 3.
89. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 40.
90. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 28.
91. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 149.
92. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 153.
93. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 152–153.
94. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 154.
95. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 154.
96. Hanley, "Writing War," 124.
97. Binding, "Ragnarok."
98. Holly Kyte, "Ragnarok by A. S. Byatt: Review," *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2011, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8706231/Ragnarok-by-AS-Byatt-review.html.
99. Gauthier, *Narrative Desire*, 4.
100. Peter Conrad, "*Ragnarok: The End of the Gods* by A. S. Byatt—Review," *The Guardian*, 4 September 2011, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/04/ragnarok-canongate-as-byatt-review.

101. Byatt, *Ragnarok*, 125. Byatt's words echo the statement made by Karen Armstrong, who argues that myths, "Like poetry and music […] should awaken us to rapture, even in the face of death and the despair we may feel at the prospect of annihilation" (*A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 8.
102. Piette and Rawlinson, "Introduction," 2.

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