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Graeco-Latina Brunensia. 2019, vol. 24, iss. 2, pp. 125-141

ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2019-2-9
Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/141758

Graeco-Latina Brunensia 24 / 2019 / 2
https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2019-2-9

When Óðinn Meets Pompey. Norse and Classical Elements in English Literature at the Turn of the 18th and 19th Century

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Abstract

According to Snorri Sturluson (died 1241), the Icelandic chieftain, historian, poet, and mythographer, the chief Norse god Óðinn was originally a mighty Oriental chieftain who was forced to abandon Asia under the Roman pressure and later became deified by his people. The typically medieval approach to the myth based on a euhemeristic interpretation and historicization of the pagan deities found a surprisingly keen response among the learned circles of the late 18th century Europe as it enabled the authors to confront the Norse and Classical civilization directly. In this paper, I focus on three English works that deal with this topic, namely two poems by one of the major Romantic poets Robert Southey (*The Race of Odin* and *The Death of Odin*, 1795) and the drama *Odin* (1804) by Anglican priest and poet George Richards. The form of the latter one is of a special interest as it is – as the author himself states – "intended as an imitation of the manner of Æschylus." I will examine the function of the Norse and Classical elements in these works and analyse the bulk of ideas and values that are attributed to the respective cultures. Moreover, the flexibility with which the myth is actualized and used for mediating different political and ideological messages, will be discussed.

Keywords

reception studies; English literature; Robert Southey; George Richards; liberty; republicanism; French Revolution; Roman republic; Óðinn

If any direct connection between the Roman history and the world of the Nordic mythology may sound unlikely for a modern reader, it was not the case for the 18th century scholars and poets. In this study, I would like to examine one particular episode that recurrently appeared in both scholarly and literary works at the early stage of the English reception of Old Norse culture, namely an alleged military conflict between Óðinn,[1] a mighty mortal who was to become a Norse god, and the Roman general and statesman Pompey the Great. The tradition, which formed a core of the prevalent reading of Óðinn's figure roughly up to the end of the 18th century, is based on the medieval euhemeristic interpretation of his figure claiming that he was originally a mighty Asiatic chieftain who was driven to Scandinavia by Pompey's military campaigns in the East. In this article, I briefly discuss medieval sources of this tradition and their reception in the antiquarian works, which were consulted by the authors of literary adaptations of this tradition. I focus on three works: poems *The Death of Odin* (1792/1795) and *The Race of Odin* (1795) by Robert Southey and play *Odin* (1804) by George Richards. I intend to analyse these adaptations and address the following questions: Why was this tradition so popular? How was it adapted in different political contexts and how do the adaptations correspond with the contemporary concepts of liberty? What kind of role does Rome play in these texts?

Sources of the tradition

The tradition linking the migration of Óðinn's people from Asia to the North with the Roman expansion can be traced back to two medieval sources attributed to the Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). The first one is *Ynglinga saga* that deals with the legendary origins of the Swedish royal dynasty and forms the first section of Snorri's monumental historical work called *Heimskringla* (ca. 1230). The second source is one of the later interpolations into Snorri's Prologue to his work, traditionally called the *Younger Edda*, a textbook of Old Norse poetics composed around 1220.[2] Both works share the standard medieval view on pagan deities based on the euhemeristic theory.[3] Accordingly, Óðinn is presented as a historical figure, a chieftain who is later deified by the people of Scandinavia.[4] Based on a medieval etymology, the Norse deities, *Æsir* in Old Norse, are connected with Asia, as well as with the prestigious Trojan origin.[5] How-

1 Generally, I use the Old Norse form of Óðinn's name. Only when referring to him as a literary character in the modern adaptations, I use the transcription "Odin" common at that time.

2 Óðinn's Asiatic origin is mentioned also in the Latin translation of the nowadays lost *Skjǫldunga saga* made by the Icelandic scholar Arngrímur Jónsson and found in his work *Rerum Danicarum fragmenta* (Lassen 2001: pp. 159–161), nevertheless the reasons for his migrations are not given.

3 According to this theory, named after the Greek mythographer Euhemerus (late 4th century BC), mythological accounts originate in historical events and personages who became deified.

4 As Faulkes underlines (Faulkes 2005: p. xxiii), this tradition has appeared in several medieval sources starting with Iceland's first historian writing in vernacular, Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148). The most wholesome survey of Óðinn's occurrence in medieval Latin and Old Norse sources is given by Lassen (2001).

5 This tradition compared with continental and insular parallels is examined by Faulkes (1983).

ever, what can be said about the attempts to harmonize the dating of Óðinn's journey with the events in the times of Pompey's conquest of the East?

As already mentioned, Snorri Sturluson recorded the tradition in the *Ynglinga saga*. In chapter 5, he states:

> There [= in Tyrkland] Óðinn had large possessions. At that time the rulers of the Rúmverjar (the Romans) travelled widely around the world and conquered all nations, and many rulers fled their lands because of this aggression. And because Óðinn had prophetic and magical powers, he knew that his descendants would inhabit the northern region of the world.[6]

In this case, the Roman expansion seems to form rather a mere chronological background for Óðinn's migration. While other rulers may have "fled their lands because of this aggression", in Óðinn's case this reason is not explicitly stated. The focus lies rather on his own prophetic force.

The textual situation of the other source is more complicated. The work in question is the *Younger Edda*.[7] In the standard version of Prologue to the work, based on two of the four main medieval MSS, *Codex Regius* (GkS 2367 4to) and *Codex Trajectinus* (Utrecht MS no. 1374, a paper copy of a lost medieval MS), Snorri mentions Óðinn's Asiatic origin and gives an account of his migration that is more or less in accord with his later narrative in the *Ynglinga saga*, only leaving the Romans out:

> Odin had the gift of prophecy and so did his wife, and from this science he discovered that his name would be remembered in the northern part of the world and honoured above all kings. From this reason he became eager to set off from Turkey.[8]

Less detailed version omitting Óðinn's motivation, is found in *Codex Upsaliensis* (DG 11).[9] However, the fourth manuscript, so called *Codex Wormianus* (AM 242 fol, ca. 1350), contains a slightly different and more developed tradition. This manuscript includes a longer version of the Prologue from the 14th century, which – apart from the previous passage – contains also the following narrative:

> And so much power accompanied these men [= the Romans] for many ages after, that when Pompey, a Roman chieftain, harried in the east region, Odin fled out of Asia and hither to the north country.[10]

6 Snorri Sturluson (2011: p. 8).

7 The transmission and textual situation of Prologue to the *Younger Edda* is surveyed by Faulkes (1979, p. 204–213). It should be noted that all four main medieval MSS are in a way problematic – either incomplete (*Codex Regius*, *Codex Trajectinus*), abridged (*Codex Upsaliensis*) or interpolated (*Codex Wormianus*).

8 Snorri Sturluson (1995: p. 3).

9 Snorri Sturluson (2012: p. 8).

10 Snorri Sturluson (1880: p. 43).

Most editors dismissed the additions in the manuscript as a late interpolation of no greater value and as such were not included in the modern editions of the *Younger Edda.*[11] Nonetheless, for the purpose of this study it is important that it is exactly this most detailed version of the Prologue (the only one to mention Pompey, for example), which was crucial for the development of the later historiographic tradition. It was exactly this manuscript that was used for the early 17th century redaction of *Edda*, so-called *Laufás-Edda* compiled in 1608–1609 by a learned Icelandic priest Magnús Ólafsson, which was in 1665 published as the first printed edition of *Edda* by the Danish scholar Peder Hansen Resen together with a Latin and a Danish translation (Lassen 2001: p. 26). Resen's *Edda* became for a long time the standard edition of this text.

In Resen's edition, there can be also observed an early ideological manipulation with the passage in question. The Latin translation claims:

> *Tanta inerat generositas illius stirpis hominibus, ut multis post seculis (Quum Pompejus quidam princeps Romanorum expeditionem in Orientem susciperet) ut Odinus ex Asia in regiones septentrionis profugeret, ne peregrino imperio parere cogeretur.*[12]

The author of the Latin translation is most presumably aforementioned Magnús Ólafsson (Faulkes 1977: p. 23). The underlined sentence is his own editorial addition to the original, but it is not marked as such. Accordingly, the added reason of the flight – "that they did not want to bear a foreign rule" – has from this moment onwards started to form an integral part of the narrative for most of its European recipients who were not able to consult the Old Norse original or the Danish translation. An attempt to make an explicit association of Óðinn's migration with the questions of independence and liberty can be thus traced already at this early stage of the text's reception.

The tradition in the 18th century antiquarian and historiographical works

Resen's edition was still widely used in the 18th century, among others by the Swiss historian Paul Henri Mallet (1730–1807) whose work *Introduction à L'histoire du Danemarch* (1755) was crucial for spreading the knowledge of the medieval Scandinavian history and literature across the Europe. In Britain, Mallet's work was known especially in the English Thomas Percy's translation who published the work together with his own lengthy commentary under the title *Northern Antiquities* (1770).

Mallet built his interpretation of Óðinn's figure closely on the version provided by the interpolated Prologue to *Edda*, but he enriched the tradition with one important innovation. With a reference to several unidentified authorities, he presented a theory that Odin, after his flight to the North, sought a revenge for his defeat and therefore he

11 A closer attention to this version has been paid by Wellendorf (2018: pp. 100–108) and Lassen (2001: pp. 282–283).

12 Snorri Sturluson (1665: Chapter III, s. p., underlining – MK).

encouraged the Scandinavian nations to hate the Romans – "the enemies of universal liberty" – and to avenge his defeat in a proper time:

> Several learned men have supposed that a desire of being revenged on the Romans was the ruling principle of his [= Odin's] whole conduct. Driven from his country by those enemies of universal liberty...[13]

The revenge is finally fulfilled when the Roman Empire is overthrown by the Goths – who according to Jordanes come from Scandinavia and can thus be associated with the descendants of Odin's people:

> This leven, which he left in the bosoms of the northern people, fermented a long time in secret; but the signal, they add, once given, they all fell as it were by common consent upon this unhappy empire; and after many repeated shocks, intirely overturned it; thereby revenging the affront offered so many ages before to their founder. I cannot prevail on myself to raise objections against so ingenious a supposition. It gives so much importance to the history of the North, it renders that of all Europe so interesting, and, if I may use the expression, so poetical, that I cannot but admit these advantages as so many proofs in its favour.[14]

The theory presented by Mallet has found its way into several English scholarly works. Even when we consult such a ground-breaking historiographical work as Edward Gibbon's *The History Of The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire*, we may find its echoes:

> It is supposed that Odin was the chief of a tribe of barbarians which dwelt on the banks of the lake Maetois, till the fall of Mithridates and the arms of Pompey menaced the north with servitude. That Odin, yielding with indignant fury to a power which he was unable to resist, conducted his tribe from the frontiers of the Asiatic Sarmatia into Sweden with the great design of forming, in that inaccessible retreat of freedom, a religion and a people which, in some remote age, might be, subservient to his immortal revenge; when his invincible Goths, armed with martial fanaticism, should issue in numerous swarms from the neighbourhood of the Polar circle, to chastise the oppressors of mankind.[15]

Gibbon is admittedly rather sceptical to this construct, which he characterizes as "so pleasing a conjecture that we could almost wish to persuade ourselves of its truth" (Gibbon 1776: p. 246). It is, however, worth noting that he stresses the motif of revenge of Óðinn's descendants to the Roman oppressors as well. He also recognizes the poetical potential of this tension between the Norsemen / Goths and Romans: "This wonderful expedition of Odin, which, by deducing the enmity of the Goths and Romans from so

13 Mallet & Percy (1770: p. 67). This theory, however, cannot be found in any of the most widely used antiquarian authorities (O. Worm, S. Stephanius, T. Bartholin).

14 Mallet & Percy (1770: p. 68).

15 Gibbon (1776: p. 246).

memorable a cause, might supply the noble groundwork of an epic poem, cannot safely be received as authentic history" (Gibbon 1776: p. xxxvi).

Gibbon directly echoes Mallet's depiction of the Romans as the "enemies of universal liberty" (in Gibbon's words "the oppressors of mankind"), and albeit his account is rather reserved in this aspect, it nevertheless illustrates the context in which the episode was evoked. The idea of the Goths as Óðinn's descendants and of Sweden as the "inaccessible retreat of freedom" anchored this episode in the context of contemporary debates on the supposed Germanic or "Gothic"[16] character of the British liberty.[17] The idea of the narrow connection between the Germanic tribes and liberty has been popular in the British thought since the rediscovery of Tacitus' *Germania* (O'Donoghue 2014: pp. 28–29). It received particular attention by those who supported the idea of British parliamentarism who tended to see the Germanic popular assemblies as some kind of proto-parliaments, guaranteeing the liberty of the Germanic tribes similarly as the modern parliament guarantees the British one (Kliger 1952: pp. 107–108). As Jordanes attributed the Goths a Scandinavian origin and as the ancestors of the British, Anglo-Saxons, were commonly considered a branch of the Gothic people by the English scholars of the 17th and early 18th century (Kliger 1952: pp. 107–108), a Northern connection has been established as well. Montesquieu's climatic theory later just corroborated the association of the North with the freedom.[18] He characterizes Scandinavia as "the source of the liberties of Europe, that is, of almost all the freedom which at present subsists among mankind" (Montesquieu 1777: p. 355).

The "Gothic" / Northern concept of British liberty nevertheless coexisted with other influential modes of interpreting the British liberty, those drawing on the classical models.[19] Meehan (1986: pp 64–78) identifies two of them, an "Augustan" and a "Grecian" one and examines their coexistence with the Gothic alternative. Moreover, as Ayres (2009: pp. 1–47) pointed out, there existed a significant tendency among the representatives of the English political and cultural elites to identify themselves with the Roman republic and its ideals of virtue and liberty. As the analysis in the following section of the study reveals, the concept of liberty is one of the central motifs also in the literary adaptations of the conflict between Óðinn and the Romans and the above-mentioned models of its interpretation will be crucial in this context as well.

Gibbon returns to Mallet's theory in the last book of the work published in 1788 where he definitively rejects it:

16 For the use of word "Gothic" in a broader sense of "Germanic" cf. Kliger (1952: pp. 107–108).

17 As Meehan (1986: p. 13) stresses out the term "liberty" is extraordinary flexible in the English thought throughout the 17th and 18th century. For different definitions of this term cf. *ibid.*, pp. 13–19.

18 Examples of this association in English poetry can be found in Omberg (1976: pp. 88–98). J. Zernack (2018, pp. 255–266) provides a broader overview of the political idea of liberty associated with the Norse culture and religion throughout different European countries up to the 19th century. The purported Asiatic origin of the Æsir secured their place also in the context of the Oriental Renaissance – for more details see Rix (2010: pp. 47–60) who nevertheless omits Southey's and Richards's adaptations of the tradition of Óðinn's migration from Asia.

19 Particularly influential since the Glorious revolution in 1688 (Ayres 2009: p. 1).

> Our fancy may create, or adopt, a pleasing romance, that the Goths and Vandals sallied from Scandinavia, ardent to avenge the flight of Odin, to break the chains, and to chastise the oppressors, of mankind; that they wished to burn the records of classic literature and to found their national architecture on the broken members of the Tuscan and Corinthian orders. But, in simple truth, the Northern conquerors were neither sufficiently savage nor sufficiently refined to entertain such aspiring ideas of destruction and revenge.[20]

Nevertheless, while this construct became gradually outdated in the scholarly discourse towards the end of the century, it gained popularity as a subject matter among the poets and playwrights, exactly as Gibbon had proposed.

The tradition in the literary adaptations

The historicising reading of the figure of Óðinn and its association with the Roman history has inspired several literary works – besides the above-mentioned works of Southey and Richards, William Drummond composed the epic poem *Odin* (1817). However, since the work is slightly younger (published in 1817) and Drummond did not complete it, I exclude his *Odin* from my analysis. Moreover, one of the prominent representatives of British Romanticism, William Wordsworth, seemed to have intended to elaborate on the subject, yet he never realised the plan.[21] Another play about Óðinn's fight with Pompey called *Oden, eller Asarnas utvandring* (1790) was created by Carl Gustav af Leopold at that time in Sweden.

Robert Southey (1774–1843) is one of the major figures of the English Romanticism belonging to the so-called Lake Poets. During his lifetime, he underwent a fundamental change in his political and religious views – from a young political radical he became a representative of the official regime as Poet Laureate (from 1813 to his death) and a devoted adherent of the conservative Tory politics. He had a lifelong interest in Scandinavian literature and history and was also a close friend of the first translator of the *Poetic Edda* into English, Amos Simon Cottle.[22]

The two poems on Odin, *The Death of Odin* and *The Race of Odin*, published in the first collection of Southey's poetry in 1794 (Southey & Lovell 1795: pp. 97–110),[23] belong to his "radical" period and it seems that they were rather embarrassing for him in the later

20 Gibbon (1788: pp. 626–627).

21 Wordsworth identifies Odin with Mithridates VI of Pontus (Wordsworth 1850: p. 11), while Drummond with his son Pharnaces (Drummond 1817: p. iii).

22 Wright (1932) thoroughly surveyed Southey's Scandinavian studies and inspirations. Interestingly enough, both Southey's poems on Odin escaped his notice. Recently, Mortensen (2000: pp. 225–229) and O'Donoghue (2014: pp. 110–111) discussed the poems.

23 The collection bears imprint from 1795. Southey's correspondence, however, implies that the volume was published already towards the end of 1794 (Pratt 2009; Coleridge 1895: p. 107). Biographies of the co-author of this collection, Robert Lovell, identify two editions, the first one published in 1794 in Bristol, the second one in 1795 in Bath (Garnett 1901: p. 111). This is apparently a mistake caused by the above-mentioned discrepancy.

years as they were never reprinted during his lifetime. His "radical" period contains the years of his studies in the 1790s and terminates approximately in 1797 (see Raimond 1989: p. 186). During this period, he started a friendship with the radical circles supporting the French Revolution and sympathizing with the ideas of republicanism and social egalitarianism.[24] The 1790s were years of a growing tension in the English society with supporters of the French Revolution seeking to organise a National Convention after the French example on one side, and the government and its loyalist adherents striving to supress any radical excesses on the other.[25] These tensions escalated in October 1795 into an attack on the king's coach and consequent introduction of so-called *Two Acts* by which the government tightened the treason statute and banned large political meetings. Although Southey's poetry predates these events, it should be read in the context of this tense political atmosphere.

The Death of Odin appeared already in Southey's letter to Thomas Phillipps Lamb dated in June 1792 (Southey 1792). In this poem, rendered as Odin's pre-death monologue, Odin urges his men to avenge themselves on the Romans, describing both the joys of Valhalla that await the fallen warriors (including the quaffing of hydromel from the Roman skulls)[26] and the miseries of Hela's realm awaiting the cowards and those who die of sickness. The exact date of composition of the second poem, *The Race of Odin*, in which the political accent seems to be even more stressed out, cannot be securely determined. As it is not mentioned in the letter to Thomas Phillipps Lamb, nor in Southey's letter to Grosvenor Charles Bedford from November 1793, in which he discusses the former poem (Southey 1793b), we may assume that the latter is slightly younger. The poem takes place after Odin's defeat by Pompey and its central motif is the vision of the future revenge on the Romans, as inherited from Mallet:

> Such was the will of fate!
> From the cold regions of the North,
> At length, on raven wings, shall vengeance come,
> And justice pour the urn of bitterness on Rome.[27]

The climatic aspect of these verses underlines Odin's monologue, which immediately follows and makes the association of freedom with the North (in compliance with Montesquieu's climatic theory) even more explicit:

> "Roman! ('twas thus the chief of ASGARD cry'd)
> Ambitious Roman! triumph for a while' [...]

24 In June 1794, he met Samuel T. Coleridge, together they planned to establish a "Pantisocracy", an egalitarian community in America based on communal property (Raimond 1989: p. 186).

25 A detailed list of literature concerning British attitudes towards the revolution provides and discusses Macleod (2007).

26 Southey & Lovell (1795: p. 108). The motif of skull goblets, immensely popular among the 18th century writers, is a result of a misread *kenning* (O'Donoghue 2014: pp. 39–40).

27 Southey & Lovell (1795: p. 97).

ODIN will never live a shameful slave;
Some region will he yet explore,
Beyond the reach of Rome;
Where, upon some colder shore,
Freedom yet thy force shall brave,
Freedom yet shall find a home:
There, where the eagle dares not soar,
Soon shall the raven find a safe retreat."[28]

The contrast between Odin's freedom-loving spirit and the ambitious Roman slavers (on the metaphorical level effectively reduced on the contrast between symbols associated with both nations: the raven and the eagle) is, however, not as simple as it might seem at first sight. The corrupted character should not be attributed to the Romans in general as the closing image of Rome's fall indicates:

The destin'd hour at length is come,
And vengeful heaven decrees the queen of cities' doom,
No longer heaven withholds the avenging blow
From those proud domes whence BRUTUS fled;
Where just CHEREA bow'd his head,
And proud oppression laid the GRACCHI low:
In vain the timid slaves oppose,
For freedom led their sinewy foes,
For valour fled with liberty:
Rome bows her lofty walls,
The imperial city falls,
"She falls—and lo, the world again is free!"[29]

These lines evidently indicate that the success of the northern tribes is conditioned – Rome can be defeated only when its inner liberty is completely supressed. It is only then the revenge of Odin's descendants can be fulfilled. When asking the question what kind of liberty Southey had on his mind, the answer is clear: the republican one. Southey provides here a list of heroes of the Roman republic, more precisely of the Roman republicanism: Brutus (presumably the Younger), Cassius Chaerea and the Gracchi brothers. Only when these heroes are destroyed, "the *imperial* city falls" (cursive – MK).

We can accept Mortensen's observation that links the republican heroes, chosen by Southey, to the republican pantheon of the French Revolution:

By contrasting the Gothicism and Classicism, by celebrating Odin's ingrained hostility towards imperial might, and by conflating northern freedom with the spirit of republicanism

28 Southey & Lovell (1795: p. 98).

29 Southey & Lovell (1795: pp. 101–102).

> (Brutus, Cherea and the Gracchi were all republican heroes, admired by the French insurgents), Southey constructs a transparent set of references that invite (or even constrain) his readers to recognise analogies between what happened then and what happens now. He forces them to see Rome as the equivalent of the *ancien régime* in England and France, and to view the northern invaders as historical parallel to the apocalyptic forces of the modern revolutionary movement currently spreading throughout the European Continent. Rome has fallen once, and now is about to fall again.[30]

There is more evidence in Southey's contemporary writings that supports Mortensen's view. Among others, Southey even identified himself with the republican heroes writing under the pseudonym "Caius Gracchus",[31] thus linking himself with another of his idols, the French revolutionary journalist François-Noël Babeuf who adopted the nickname of "Gracchus" as well.[32] It should be underlined that Southey's choice of these republican heroes included rather ambivalent figures – the choice of Brutus and especially Cassius Chaerea, both tyrannicides *par excellence*, may seem bold considering the fact that the poem was published shortly after the execution of Louis XVI. The politics of the Gracchi was at least problematic as well – strongly criticised in the part of the Roman historiographical canon as unconstitutional, it was viewed as such also by many historians of that time.[33]

Nevertheless, there is also another aspect that I intend to point out. While Mortensen's association of the heroes of Roman republicanism with the French republican movement is perfectly agreeable, it should be also noted that at least some members of British elites of the previous generations, especially the Whigs, also admired exactly the same heroes. As Philip Ayres (2009, pp. 1–47) asserted, many British political representatives during the most part of the 18th century cherished the idea according which they were with all their liberties successors of the Roman republic. Two of Southey's heroes, Brutus and even the more ambivalent Gracchi, are for example depicted in a positive light in the poem *Liberty* (published in 1735–1736), composed by James Thomson, one of the whiggish poets. Thomson portrayed the Gracchi as the first victims of the baneful discord and fury seizing the condemned republic (Thomson 1736: p. 35), while Brutus' death as "the completion of the loss of liberty in Rome" (Thomson 1736: p. 8). Southey, thus, seems to have deliberatively relabelled the pantheon of Republican heroes, venerated by his whiggish predecessors, for his own radical agenda.

However, it is not this only similarity that is interesting here – the poem also follows a similar pattern in the depiction of the Rome's fall. Here, it is also vengeance that

30 Mortensen (2000: p. 228).

31 Used in his poem *To the Exiled Patriots* (Southey 1794).

32 Babeuf's execution in 1797 was one of the turning points for Southey's attitude to the developments in France. He expresses his disappointment in his correspondence, again with a classical echo: "France has disappointed me in her internal conduct, and if it be true that Babeuf be put to death – she has now no man left whom we may compare with the Gracchi" (Southey 1797).

33 A mixed view can be found for example in popular Rollin's *Roman History*, a French work translated into English in 1739 and frequently reprinted until the 1780s. Admiring the personal qualities of the brothers, he criticises their steps against the Senate (Rollin 1744: p. 73).

destroys the Eternal City, only not instigated by Odin, but by the personified Spirit of Liberty itself. As in Southey the Liberty leaves the Romans after the defeat of republicanism and flees to the North directly after the death of "the last of the Romans", Brutus the Younger:

> And from *Philippi's* Field, from where in Dust
> The last of *Romans*, matchless BRUTUS! lay,
> Spread to the North untam'd a rapid Wing.[34]

– where:

> Long in the barbarous Heart the bury'd Seeds
> Of Freedom lay, for many a wintry Age.[35]

It thus seems that Mallet's theory of Odin's "northern" revenge entered a milieu sharing a similar paradigm, represented for example in Thomson's poem. I do not claim that Southey modelled his verses directly on Thomson's *Liberty*,[36] but he might have identified this resemblance and consequently appropriated and reemployed the existing pattern for his own ideological purposes.

George Richards (1767–1837) belonged to less famous poets of his generation, yet as a winner of several literary awards, he was not completely unknown to his contemporaries.[37] His literary reputation is probably best characterized by one of the reviewers who placed him „very high among writers of second order" (Anonymous Reviewer 1804: p. 343). During the 1790's Richards stood on the opposite side than Southey – he was a dedicated loyalist.[38]

His drama *Odin* was published roughly ten years after Southey's Odin poems, in 1804 and in a different political situation. In May 1803, Britain entered the Napoleonic wars and year 1804 was marked by preparations of Napoleon's imperial coronation. We do not know when exactly Richards composed his drama, but I will try to demonstrate that at least the changing political atmosphere is reflected in the text.

Another question is whether Richards was familiar with Southey's poems. Since there is no evidence of any clear intertextual reference in the drama and as they were published only in Southey's juvenile collection, moreover rather on a periphery of the cultural life, in Bath, I will work with the hypothesis that the works are independent.[39]

34 Thomson (1736: p. 41).

35 Thomson (1736: p. 46).

36 Interestingly enough, an unidentified person allegedly compared Southey's *Poems* from 1795 to Thomson's poetry, but Southey reveals no more details (Southey 1795: "a gooseberry eyed Scotch methodist schoolmaster <ranks> me the next to Thomson!").

37 Especially his awarded poem *The Aboriginal Britons* (1791) received a great deal of attention, later admired among others by Byron (1819: p. 65). Contemporary reviews of *Odin*, however, were at best reserved (Anonymous Reviewer 1804: pp. 337–343; Anonymous Reviewer 1805: pp. 188–192).

38 He actively demonstrated his political opinions, e.g. his 1793 poem *Modern France*, which can be characterized as an anti-revolutionary pamphlet, was publicly performed (Richards 1793: p. 19).

39 Southey, however, knew at least Richards's earlier writings which he strongly disapproved (Southey 1793a).

Richards's play is a curious example of mixing the classical, Norse and Oriental elements. The form is inspired by the classical Greek drama, including chorus and passages closely echoing Aeschylus' plays.[40] The storyline is once again based on the tradition of Odin's fight with the Romans with *Northern Antiquities* as its source.[41] The play begins before Odin's final battle with Pompey and depicts the defeat of Odin's tribe. The intention of Odin and all survivors to avoid the Roman yoke by committing a mass suicide interrupts the apparition of Gondula, one of Valkyries who reveals Odin his predestined journey to Scandinavia and the role of his descendants in the final defeat of Rome.

Richards repeats both the conventional motif of the Northern liberty speaking of "the stormy north, the land of winter, nurse of frost and snows; [...] yet there in freedom shalt thou [= Odin] roam" (Richards 1804: p. 100) and the motif of vengeance:

> I will know no joy,
> But in the means of vengeance, of a vengeance,
> Not rash, intemperate, prematurely rous'd,
> But steady and deep laid, the work of ages,
> When I shall sleep in earth. Be my last words
> Utter'd in cursing Rome; be my last act
> Some deed to aid in making sure her ruin.[42]

Like Southey, Richards's evokes a vision of destruction of Rome's liberty, but he uses a different set of symbols. He consistently avoids mentioning any specific heroes of Roman liberty, his only reference to republic is through the consular institution (cf. the symbol of the consular chair):

> Hear, God of battles, hear: I do not pray,
> That thou shouldst instant arm our North, and pour
> All her fierce sons in vengeance from their mountains,
> To crush this Rome at once. No; let her stand
> Awhile, and know a tyrant's iron sway.
> Let monsters, bred in her own hideous womb,
> And sent by nature forth for vengeance, bear
> Rule o'er her. Let them spread destruction dire,
> And sport the while in mockery of her wrongs.
> Let wanton insult, foul indignities
> Shame her proud consular chair: so be she sunk
> Ev'n to the lowest state: then in her sons
> To the last spark put out all nobleness,

40 For example, the siege of Asgard bears many motivic and verbal resemblances to the siege of Thebes in *Seven against Thebes* (Richards 1804: pp. 20–27).

41 His dependence on Mallet is evident for example in the geographic account of Odin's migration (cf. Richards 1804: pp. 101–102; Mallet & Percy 1770: pp. 60–64).

42 Richards (1804: pp. 105–106).

That they may tamely linger on in shame,
Nor dare to die as we do.[43]

The shift in symbolic is mild, but in my opinion rather significant – by evoking the highest office of the Roman republic instead of the immanently ambivalent historical figures, Richards avoids any possible link to the pantheon of the republican heroes associated with the radical circles. However, it is not the only instance where the play refers to Rome. When Gondula announces Odin his destiny, she claims:

Know thou art destin'd by the God of battles
To crush imperial Rome.[44]

At first sight, this line can remind us of Southey's vision of the fall of "the *imperial* city", but if we read the lines along with the following passage, a different effect emerges:

Thou flourishing shalt view thy gallant sons,
Founders of mighty kingdoms, round thee rise,
Imperial progeny! their name shall live
Eternal, and their deathless race extend
Wherever ocean rolls, or day appears,
Lords of the West, and Conquerors of Rome.[45]

Gondula states that Odin's destiny is also to become – paradoxically – an ancestor of an "*imperial* progeny" (cursive – MK). The conflict between the tyranny and liberty thus seems to take place not between an empire and a freedom-loving barbaric tribe like in Southey's poems, but between a "corrupted" and a "rightful" empire. Although the characteristics of Odin's descendants' empire (wherever ocean rolls, Lords of the West) can be read historically as the characteristics of the Norse medieval realm, I think it won't be a mistake to assume that Richards tries to identify Odin's descendants' empire rather pragmatically with the British Empire itself. The very last verses of the drama corroborate this notion:

Remember, gallant chiefs,
To the cold regions of the north we go
To keep the charter of our being, freedom:
To plan the fall of Rome: to form a race
Able to master her, and ages hence
Avenge the insult, which their fathers feel.[46]

43 Richards (1804: pp. 80–81).
44 Richards (1804: p. 99).
45 Richards (1804: p. 102).
46 Richards (1804: p. 112).

The phrase: "the charter of our being, freedom" works here metaphorically, but the reference to the symbol of British liberty, *Magna Charta*, is in my opinion not accidental. A similar line can be found in Richards's older poem *Modern France* in which the poet employs the motif in the connection with liberty again, this time in an unambiguous sense:

> High from these cliffs, when Julius fled the plain,
> She [= the Liberty] dash'd th' imperial eagle to the main:
> My Barons bold she rang'd on Thames's strand,
> And wrench'd my charter from the tyrant's hand.[47]

Richards's earlier poems can probably shed light on the problem of what kind of empire he imagines as "the rightful one" and to what kind of liberty he refers. It is the northern, British liberty as described in *The Aboriginal Britons*:

> In Albion's ancient days, midst northern snows,
> Hardy and bold, immortal FREEDOM rose.[48]

A liberty abhorring all radical excesses: "she blush'd, O Cromwell, blush'd at Charles's doom" (Richards 1791: p. 26). A liberty flourishing in the British Empire and comprising science, laws, patriotism and trade:

> But now reviv'd she boasts a purer cause,
> Refin'd by science, form'd by generous laws [...]
> With secret joy and conscious pride admires
> The patriot spirit, which herself inspires [...]
> Trade swells her sails, wherever ocean rolls,
> Glows at the line, and freezes at the poles.[49]

As in the case of the "charter" motif, a phrase found in *Odin* to characterize the extant of the realm of his descendants ("wherever ocean rolls") is a word-to-word rendering of Richards's earlier characteristics of the realm of British liberty. A liberty that is fundamentally different from the one of French radicals who martyred their king at whose grave Freedom weeps (Richards 1793: p. 12). The revolutionary freedom Southey invoked, according to Richards "in Seine's sequester'd vale lies wounded Freedom, sickly, faint, and pale" (Richards 1793: p. 17).

47 Richards (1793: p. 14).

48 Richards (1791: p. 23).

49 Richards (1791: p. 25).

Conclusions

The medieval euhemeristic tradition describing Óðinn's fight with Pompey received rather keen reception in the late 18th century England. Entwining the concepts of the northern, "Gothic" liberty with the dramatic revenge motif, the English poets discovered not only its poetical potential, but also the political dimension. The possibility to link the tradition to existing ideological patterns concerning the role of the northern liberty in the fall of the Roman Empire might have paved the way for its reception. Moreover, this association to Rome's fall enabled the authors to explore the character of the Roman liberty as well as to contrast it with its northern counterpart. The narrow connection between the tradition and the fluid concept of liberty caused its extreme political flexibility. Hence, it could appeal – probably independently – to a radical writer like Southey, as well as to a loyalist poet such as George Richards. The latter, with a patriotic zeal, set a corrupted, tyrannical empire (most probably post-revolutionary France) against the British Empire as a warrantor of the true, British liberty, whereas Southey rendered the conflict between Rome and Odin's progeny as the conflict between *ancien régime* and the revolutionary forces of modern republicanism.

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