I Dreamt Last Night of the Three Weird Sisters: Fate as Depicted Through Textiles

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Fate has long occupied a central role in humanity's imagination, belief, and sense of self. It is fascinating, mystifying, and often frustrating. Fate, fortune, destiny: all seem to be apportioned arbitrarily, sometimes unfairly. To many Indo-European cultures, this pointed to a divine agency predetermining their longevity and prosperity. Specifically, they pointed to supernatural women meting out fate at the birth of every child, often determined through spinning and weaving. This tripartite imagery—that of otherworldly women controlling the destiny of Man through the production of textiles—has worked its way into the imaginations of the general population as well as those in academia. It would be reasonable, then, to assume that there is a vast amount of textual references representing these three core images, however there is only a small body of evidence linking all three. Simply because there is an absence of historical evidence for it in no way means that it is absent from history. The persistence of this metaphor alone merits its consideration, and the imagery of textile arts is so well suited to the metaphysical idea of fate that it is no large logical leap to connect all three.

In order to fully grasp the idea of spinning or weaving as metaphor for fate, a basic understanding of their functions and terminology is important as the "metaphor fate-as weaving...operates predominantly in relation to the making of textile, that is it focuses on the process rather than on the finished product" (Bek-Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 32). The simpler of the two commonly referenced methods, spinning, is the making of threads from a raw material, often flax or wool. Spinning "creates order out of chaos by structuring and organizing the random fibres into coherent threads and, once

it has been spun, it is very difficult to unmake a thread" (32). Prior to starting the spinning process, the spinner must decide what type of thread they wish to make; some fibers lend themselves better to some types of thread or yarn. The thread produced is dictated heavily by the type of fiber fed into the spindle: fine fibers can make very thin, fine yarn; coarser fibers can make thicker, more robust yarn; longer fibers can make smoother yarn. To a large degree, "the end result is partly apparent from the very nature of the raw material" (32-33). These unspun fibers "constitute a mass of potential waiting to be turned into whatever they are supposed to become—almost like an unborn child whose life is waiting to be lived" (32).

A more complicated form of textile art is weaving, of which there are several types that require different looms, different techniques, and produce different results. All of these types of weaving—tablet, tapestry, and cloth—work within the fate-as-textile metaphor; however, for the sake of simplicity this paper will just address cloth weaving (33). Cloth weaving utilizes an upright, or warp-weighted, loom. This type of loom was used in "Scandinavia during the Viking period and into the Middle Ages; in some remote areas even up until the nineteenth century" (34). Woven cloth is composed of fibers going in two directions, vertically and horizontally, called the warp and the weft. The vertical fibers, the warp, are attached to the loom itself as well as sticks called heddles. The heddles "allow the weaver to lift one set of warp threads away from the rest so that the weft can be passed through" (34). It is the weft that is actively woven, though it is in the warp the pattern emerges. "The order in which the warp threads are drawn through the heddles forms the basis of the pattern on the finished cloth…The pattern laid down in the warp, in fact, significantly limits the options for what the weaver can do with the weft because, once the warp has been set up, it cannot be changed" (34-5). Any mistakes made

in setting up the warp threads will carry through into the finished textile, however to some degree the weft can be altered to correct mistakes made along the way. Before the warp is established, there is an immense amount of choice and numerous options at the weaver's disposal. After the warp is established and threaded through the heddles, however, far fewer options are available. A warp cannot be blank, it cannot contain no pattern at all. The warp pattern may be very simple and plain, resulting in an equally simple weft, but it cannot be entirely absent of pattern. Essentially,

> this means that the basic structure of the pattern is already laid out in the warp alone, but it cannot be seen and therefore seems not to exist at all. Until weaving begins, it is all in the mind of the weaver and in the, as yet uninterpreted, threading of the heddles. The weaver has made a decision regarding the pattern, but the effects of that decision cannot yet be detected. Even so, its impact on the finished result is immense (35).

Once the warp is set in place, the options for each pattern are immediately limited, but not restricted to a single choice. It is these choices overlaid onto the warp laid out by the weaver that result in the final woven design.

The Indo-European concept of fate and destiny is not how modern Western cultures conceptualize it, and it is "rare that two separate cultures have the exact same idea about what is covered by their roughly equivalent terms" (25). Fate in a modern, Western sense is more that of belief, or the idea that one's decisions, good or bad, can be blamed on fate, leaving the doer absolved of responsibility. It is often viewed in direct opposition to the concept of free will and personal choice; this is the belief of determinism. In many Indo-European mythologies—Old Norse, Greek, Roman, Celtic

are simply a few—fate is more subtle than that. For these cultures, fate is concerned with what happens, not when or why, simply that the event occurs. It is not that one cannot choose; it is instead what one chooses that is their fate. The difference is almost nominal, yet critical. A determinist view of fate would say that the choice is already made and laid out, the doer functions "merely as a puppet in the hands of some greater power" (27). This is also referred to as fatalism.

A compatibilist view, one more in keeping with these Indo-European mythologies, says that "one can have choices, and with them responsibility, as well as being subject to fate" (26). It is essentially the difference of passive submission to and active acceptance of what fate may bring. "Moral responsibility is the opposite of fatalism and no one can read the Greek dramas in their entirety without feeling that whatever outside forces are at work, whatever the inheritance may be, still after all man is a free agent and makes his choice for weal or woe" (Leach 387). This active acceptance is seen throughout the Old Norse sagas and Greek epics:

> [The] outcome of a battle, the moment of death, are fated to occur when they do occur. Yet the heart of the warrior remains independent of fate, his bravery enables him to face death rejoicing in the fame that is certain to survive him (Winterbourne 119).

In these mythologies, fate is part of the ideas surrounding a person's reputation and integrity; Heraclitus writes that "A man's character is his destiny" (Leach 381). Fate "is presented as a process of actualization, as an interplay between what one is given to work with and what one does with it…fate [is] something that comes from deep inside of people and is lived out as an integrated part of the individual's personality" (Bek-

Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 37). It is this integration that allows for personal responsibility instead of passive surrender.

> [Fate] does not provide the individual with easy solutions or with someone or something other than themselves to blame for what they do; instead, it makes demands on them and provides plenty of opportunity for them to reflect on what they do and what their actions say about them (32).

There are basic truths encoded in each person, and it is these truths that inform the decisions each person will make in their lifetime. These basic truths are not so limiting, however, as to completely remove choice, as one would expect with determinism. Rather, it simply makes one "predisposed to lean towards certain types of choices" (Bek-Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 28). This fate is merely one's "own self recoiling upon him for good or evil" (Leach 381). Through choices, these basic truths are revealed and become actualized. These truths are at the core of all beings, and indicate that "what is true is true, whether past or future, whether you know about it or not—whether you are willing to admit it to yourself or not" (Bek-Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 28). In this manner, fate "comes to be regarded as an invitation to action, a challenge to live up to, even a potential to fulfill" (Bek-Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 28) and "anything bordering on patient and unquestioning submission to the fixed and unalterable decrees of fate" (Leach 401) is diametrically opposed to these cultures' thoughts on destiny.

The third aspect of this tripartite imagery surrounding fate are those that wield fate itself. They are the Old Norse Norns, the Greek Moirai, the Roman Parcae, the Celtic Matres, and the Hittite Gulses, to name a few (West 380). Though they may go by different names, this concept of divine women

spinning fate is found "over such a large part of the Indo-European area, which makes it likely that it goes back to the deepest level of Indo-European" (380). References to these women are found across these cultures and throughout their literature. The Greeks called their spinning women the Moirai, whose individual names expressed their individual aspects: "Klotho 'Spinner', Lachesis 'Apportioner', and Atropos 'Inflexible'" (381). They were depicted as spinners, "one carries a distaff, the second a spindle and the eldest scissors" (Mencej 71).

In Homer's works, the Moirai are thrice pictured as spinning a person's fate. (Dietrich 86) In *The Odyssey*, 7.196, "Alcinous says that once Odysseus has been brought home to Ithaca, he will experience whatever Aisa and the Spinners spun for him with their flax at his birth" (West 380). In *The Iliad*, 24.209, Hecuba says that at the birth of her son, Hector, Moira spun his fate: that he should be "devoured by dogs far from his parents" (Dietrich 86). Again, in *The Iliad*, 20.127, Hera offers to save Achilles once, but "afterwards he may suffer whatever Aisa spun for him at birth" (86). The same expressions and ideas are "used with Aisa or Moira as the subject: both words mean 'share, portion', and the goddess is at the same time the personification of what is allotted to one in life and the agent that allots it" (West 380-1). It is apparent that the common thread running throughout these passages is the fate of each is spun at the moment of their birth. It is also interesting that Homer uses Moira and Aisa interchangeably in his works, though "Aisa had no place in popular belief as an independent figure honored by cult and tended to be assimilated in later literature to the usage of the impersonal Moira" (Dietrich 87). In fact, "an examination…reveals that apart from the two instances in which Aisa is said to spin a fate, the word nowhere possesses personal force" (87). The use of Aisa in Greek literature more often than not implies an impersonal force, that is, not one wielded by any one

individual or group of individuals, but rather by a force of nature. While there is evidence of cults in honor of the Moirai, there is still "no evidence to suggest that these figures were connected in popular belief with the spinning of a general fate for men" (88). The language used in Homer indicates no particular deity responsible for this spinning of fate.

What, then, should be made of the clearly formulaic use of the act of spinning referenced in Homer? These usages "suggest that the Homeric poets might well have taken over from early belief the image of spinning and applied it to their idea of the workings of fate. That is to say, that here we have perhaps a kind of syncretism between Homeric and popular belief" (88). If in Greek popular belief there existed the idea of a woman who spun particular experiences in the life of a person, Homer and the other Greek poets may very well have echoed this belief, and there is in fact some evidence of a magical association with spinning and weaving.

Pliny writes that "in Italy women were forbidden to spin as they walked on the high roads; nor were they allowed to carry spindles openly" (91). This reflects a belief in "homeopathic magic: the twirling of the spindle was thought to turn the corn ripening on the fields, or even the unborn baby in the womb" as well as a number of customs found throughout Europe "which involve the winding of thread on a spindle as a symbolic rite at the time of sowing; often, too, the motion alone of spinning a variety of objects was believed to induce or promote fertility of the fields" (91). There was magic associated with the material being spun, often wool or flax. Wool was used extensively in many Greek rites, often in connection to the fertility of the fields as well as in the home, both in its raw form as well as spun. Flax, while not as widely used as wool due to its later introduction to Greece as well as its relative cost, was also believed to have special powers and was frequently used for medicinal purposes and as a cure for

infertility (92). Though there is limited evidence in Greek practices for these rituals, "what evidence there is from other sources describes a ritual spinning at the birth of a person, which was originally perhaps thought to facilitate birth or ensure fertility" (93). It is these rituals surrounding birth and fertility where Homer's involvement of Moira becomes apparent. Within popular belief and within the associated cult, Moira was closely connected with birth, so closely in fact that Moira may have originally been a deity of birth. On the occasion of a birth, Moira is said to have appeared; often Moira brings luck or gifts for the infant, though in some tales her presence had a more sinister implication (94-5). In a variant of the Meleager myth, "the Moirae visited Althaia seven days after her son's birth and told her that he would live until a brand then on the fire should have burned away" (95). In this version of popular belief, the Moirai mark out a person's death at the moment of their birth, aligning with the images found in Homeric poetry. Thus, while there did not exist in Greek popular belief a fully formed concept of a divine being spinning a general fate as Homer may lead one to believe, there does exist evidence that the Greeks possessed knowledge of a popular rite of spinning at the time of birth that in some way was believed to have exerted influence over the life of that person. It is this popular belief that Homer likely would have drawn from, integrating it with his understanding of the workings of fate to bring about the commonly recognized depiction of the Moirai.

This depiction is seen in later works such as Plato's Republic:

> …there is another band, three in number, each sitting upon her throne: these are the Fates, daughters of Necessity, who are clothed in white robes and have chaplets upon their heads, Lachesis and Clotho and Atropos, who

> accompany with their voices the harmony of the sirens --Lachesis singing of the past, Clotho of the present, Atropos of the future; Clotho from time to time assisting with a touch of her right hand the revolution of the outer circle of the whorl or spindle, and Atropos with her left hand touching and guiding the inner ones, and Lachesis laying hold of either in turn, first with one hand and then with the other. (Plato 617c-d)

Plato provides the most detailed and commonly recognized depiction of the Moirai, and one most akin to the Old Norse concept of the Norns as well. There is the same "relation to past, present and future the Norns have, though the Greek proper names do not themselves express it. Kotho spins, Lachesis allots, Atropos, the unturnable, cuts the thread" (Grimm 414). This is a far more developed portrayal of the Moirai than seen in Homeric poetry, which stands to reason if Homer truly originated the modern concept of the Moirai from his syncretism of popular ancient Greek beliefs.

Rome, as with many things, likely borrowed their Fates from the Greeks. Their corresponding divinities are called the Parcae, their name marking them as goddesses who attend at birth. Individually, their names are Nōna, Decima, and Morta (381). Their names suggest time or numbers, and their traditional interpretation "refers to times of pregnancy, with the result that one of these 'fates' will preside over an individual's birth: Nōna (from nōnus 'a ninth') for a mature birth, Decima 'a tenth' for a postmature birth, or Morta (from mors 'death') for a stillbirth" (Bauschatz 10). Similar to their Greek cousins, the Parcae spin the threads of fate. Latin poet Catullus writes,

> In the meantime, with shaking bodies and infirm gesture the Parcae began to intone their truth-

> naming chant… their hands pursued their never-ending toil, as is the custom. The left hand bore the distaff wrapped in soft wool, the right hand lightly withdrawing the threads with upturned fingers shaped them, then twisting them with the prone thumb it turned the balanced spindle with a well-polished whirl. And then with a pluck of their tooth the work was always made even, and the bitten wool-shreds adhered to their dried lips, which shreds at first had stood out from the fine thread… receive what the sisters make known to you on this happy day, a truth-naming oracle! But run, you spindles, drawing the thread which the fates follow, run, spindles! (Catallus 64.306-327)

Catullus provides one of the most complete and recognizable depictions portrayals of women spinning fate. He wrote his epyllion right before the turn of the first millennium, nearly 300 years after Plato penned his Republic. Very likely the syncretism begun by Homer and developed by Plato came into its full form by this time and thus filtered into Catallus' work.

In Nordic mythology, the mistresses of fate sit at the foot of Yggdrasil by the well of Urð. Individually, they are known as Urðr, Verðandi, and Skuld. Collectively, they are the Norns. Like the Moirai, they "give both good and ill" as well as "attend the birth of children and shape their lives" (382). The Norns "represent a powerful, continuing, regenerative force in the universe" (Bauschatz 7). Wyrd is the Old Norse concept of fate and is significant in its etymology as well as being "at least by association, if not inherently, notionally feminine" (Pollack 646). "It is related to German werden, 'become', 'come about'. But in Latin the same verb means 'to turn', uertere; and in Vedic the middle form vártate has both

senses, 'turns' or 'comes about', 'turns out' in such and such way…" (West 383). This same word is also the etymological source of the Middle High German word wirtel, meaning distaff wheel, or spindle (Bauschatz 21). There is a very close semantic relationship between these concepts; the connection between "turning and eventuating is surely relevant to the image of the goddesses' spindle that spins round as it twists the loose wool into a firm thread" (383). This turning, revolving motion also can be seen in the well of Urð that the Nornir maintain and in the names of the Norns themselves. The parent root of the names Urðr and Verðandi is the verb verða, a derivative of the Indo-European root *uert-, which "denotes the kind of motion common to 'turn, spin, rotate'" and is of the same linguistic parentage as Wyrd, discussed previously (Bauschatz 13). The motion inherent in the root "probably represents some kind of change of location or reorientation in space. Its meaning develops logically from 'turn (from one place or position to another)' > 'turn (in to)'> 'become'…Additionally, the motion of 'turning' or 'changing position' found in *uert- implies revolution or motion about an axis" (Bauschatz 13-4). The motion about an axis implies a return to the starting point, a complete revolution. Semantically, then, Verðandi comes to mean "that which is in process of 'turning' or 'becoming'" and Urðr meaning "that which has 'turned' or 'become'" (14). Skuld stands slightly apart from her sisters, with a meaning akin to "what is, of necessity" or that which is felt to be obligatory (12), but together the three represent "the total range of verbal action" (14). It is here we see spinning is woven directly into the very fabric of the Norns; it is in their actions, their language, and their very being.

The imagery of weaving, of laying down strata to build a continually evolving work, is seen in the relationship between the Norns, the well of Urð, and Yggdrasil. The well, true to

its linguistic roots, is the well of past and present action. The roots of Yggdrasil extend down into the well;

> As the Norns daily bring their nurture to the tree, they express the power of this sequence of pattern of the past up and out into and upon the world of men; as these 'past' events sustain and feed the tree, they bring into being the events of the here and now; as 'present-day' events occur, they fall from the tree back into the well and join themselves into the ever-increasing complexities of the past, restructuring it, reinterpreting it, continually expressing more and more about the interrelations of all actions. (21)

This continual growing and stratification of past and present suggests the act of weaving; the "level-versus-perpendicular order clearly suggests the warp and woof [weft] of a loom with the daily saying of the ørlög [often translated as fate, but more accurately defined as laws set in regard to all that happens with respect to all that has happened already] moving among the actions like a shuttle whose weaving unfolds the pattern of events" (21).

As with the Moirai, apart from etymological and semantic significance, there are few clear-cut references to the Nornir as spinners or weavers. In Prose Edda's Voluspa 20, the three maidens are named and their roles laid out:

> Thence come the maidens mighty in wisdom,
> Three from the dwelling down 'neath the tree;
> Urðr is one named, Verðandi the next,--
> On the wood they scored,-- and Skuld the third.
> Laws they made there, and life allotted

> To the sons of men, and set their fates, (Bellows 9)

This role is further solidified in Snorri Sturlson's Poetic Edda in the *Gylfaginning*:

> A hall stands there, fair, under the ash by the well, and out of that hall come three maids, who are called thus: Urðr, Verðandi, Skuld; these maids determine the period of men's lives: we call them Norns; but there are many norns: those who come to each child that is born, to appoint his life; these are of the race of the gods. (Sturlson 28-9)

These two passages clearly establish the Norns as three women of the race of the gods who make laws and set fate in place. Conspicuously absent, however, is any mention of spinning or weaving. In fact, "of all the appearances of nornir and related beings in the Poetic Edda, Snorra Edda [Prose Edda], and skaldic poetry there is one mention of weaving valkyrjur [Valkyries] (Darraðarljóð), one of spinning women (Vǫlundarkviða), and one of nornir working with threads (Helgakviða Hundingsbana I)" (Bek Pedersen, Just a Yarn, 2). Of these three references, only two involve metaphors for fate and only one directly links the nornir with threads. The Helgakviða Hundingsbane IN details the circumstances of Helgi Hundingbane's birth, and is the sole text to explicitly mention the Norns and threads:

> 1 In olden days, when eagles screamed,
> And holy streams from heaven's crags fell,
> Was Helgi then, the hero-hearted,
> Borghild's son, in Bralund born.

2 'Twas night in the dwelling, and Norns there came,
Who shaped the life of the lofty one;
They bade him most famed of fighters all
And best of princes ever to be.
3 Mightily wove they the web of fate,
While Bralund's towns were trembling all;
And there the golden threads they wove,
And in the moon's hall fast they made them.
4 East and west the ends they hid,
In the middle the hero should have his land;
And Neri's kinswoman northward cast
A chain, and bade it firm ever to be. (Bellows 291-2)

Here is a clear reference to the Norns, their hand in the fate of a newborn child, and a clear reference to textiles. While not explicitly named as a female triad, "their number…is to be gathered from the threefold action" (Grimm 408). Different translations also give different nuances to the third stanza in particular, some using "wove" as above, some like Nickel's translation uses the term "twisted" instead. The verb in the first line of the third stanza is snúa or "turning" and the verb used in the third line of the third stanza is greiðia or "arranging, combing out." (Bek-Pedersen, Just a Yarn, 3) Looking at these meanings, weaving may not be the most accurate depiction, but spinning does not fully fit either. Weaving fits with greiðia, and the directionality of the cast threads mirrors the vertical and horizontal directionality of a loom, but spinning fits more accurately with snúa. Neither metaphor forms a cohesive picture across the whole of the poem. "The text specifically mentions three threads, to the east, west, and north— too many for spinning and too few for weaving" (4). Bek-Pedersen suggests that "the nornir are playing three separate strands together into one, which fits

with both of the verbs" (4). Plying is quite different from weaving and spinning, though it still falls within the textile arts and still presents the Norns as participating in creating fate and threads simultaneously.

Apart from these more common sources of fate-weaving goddesses, there are also instances found in other parts of the world, though with fewer textual references available. In early Irish writings, the hymn of Fer Fio Macc Fabri begins, "I call on the seven daughters of the sea/ who fashion the threads of the sons of long life" (West 384). Though here it is seven goddesses, there still remains evidence of a group of women spinning life and fate. Similarly, in Lithuanian mythology, a verpeya [spinneress] "begins to spin the thread of the new-born on the sky, and each thread ends in a star; when a man is dying, his thread snaps, and the star turns pale and drops" (Grimm 722). This seems to echo some of the imagery in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I, where the Norns were said to have hung the threads they spun for Helgi's life and hung them "in the moon's hall" (Bellows 292). The Latvian Láimas appear in scores of folk songs; they too come to a newborn child's cradle and set the child's fate in motion. One particular stanza from these folk songs mentions spinning imagery:

> Laima, Laima for the boy
> who is born to the world!
> For him Laima twisted the flaxen thread,
> steeping it in silver. (384)

This same textile imagery is also found throughout Slavic folklore. While a figure of fairytale but not known in folk belief, Baba Yaga is said to reside in a hut that continually spins around its vertical axis. The hut rests on a bird's foot, often with a spindle as its heel. Inside her hut, Baba Yaga spins long threads of silk, and often "carries the implements used for the fabrication of cloth which relate to divination

through the 'spinning of fate' practiced by her and her sisters" (Mencej 57). From the Ohrid area of Macedonia comes a legend of the fates, called narečnice, "depicted as three women sitting in front of the fireplace and spinning the thread of life: the first and the second one spin, and the third one cuts the thread with her scissors after the three of them jointly have made their prediction" (73). Similar motifs are found in countless other folk beliefs and mythologies, all with similar aspects and language surrounding the spinners.

The traditional domestic activities of weaving and spinning as well as the product of these activities have taken on great symbolic meaning in relation to the core aspects of human experiences—birth, fate, and death. Fate "has so much to do with men's notions about birth, and more especially those about death" (Grimm 856). Though there is a dearth of evidence tying together a divine triad, the setting of fate at birth, and textiles, "the wealth of legend that grew up around this belief would make mockery of any attempt to regard it as a mere figure of speech" (Dietrich 93). Indo-European ideas of fate and destiny are perfectly positioned to be translated into spinning and weaving; fate "as that inescapable truth that already exists within a person before they act, can be likened to the pattern that is present in the warp already before weaving commences" (Bek-Pedersen, Fate and Weaving, 36). In this framework, choice is never absent, but our choices are also not limitless, "they are, instead, concrete expressions of who we are— and we can only be ourselves" (36). Like the warp of a loom, fate is not all-determining or predestining. There exists choice in the weft, and it is in those decisions, though limited, that one is able to manifest their fate and inner truths.

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