We need to talk about Óðinn: Taika Waititi's subversive handling of Norse myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Kevin FYLAN
University College Cork
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8439-4979
122120645@umail.ucc.ie, kfylan@yahoo.com

Abstract: This article examines Taika Waititi's subversive handling of the character Odin and subsequent exploration of ways in which received narratives function across time in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), the two films he directed as part of Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Earlier MCU films, following Marvel Comics and nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings, present Odin as a benign and highly Christianised figure aligned with humanity. Waititi briefly but decisively disrupts this tradition. In *Ragnarok*, Hela's revelation of Odin's hidden past reframes him as a conqueror whose empire was built on bloodshed and slavery, recalling the more troubling Óðinn of medieval sources. In *Love and Thunder*, this destabilisation extends into postmodern territory, as Waititi highlights the unreliability of narrative itself: New Asgard becomes a hyperreal simulacrum, theatre troupes re-perform recent history as entertainment, and personal memories diverge in contradictory ways. Viewed through postcolonial and neomedieval lenses, Waititi's films use Norse myth not to reinforce stable authority but to interrogate how histories are layered, concealed, and contested.

Keywords: Medievalism, Marvel, film, TV, postmodernism, post-colonialism.

Received: 22/08/2025

Accepted: 11/11/2025

How to cite: Fylan, Kevin. We need to talk about Óðinn: Taika Waititi's subversive handling of Norse myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Neomedieval*, 4, 2025, pp. 61-82. https://doi.org/10.33732/nmv.4.116

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el tratamiento subversivo que Taika Waititi hace del personaje de Odín y la consiguiente exploración de los modos en que los relatos heredados funcionan a lo largo del tiempo en *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) y *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), las dos películas que Waititi dirigió dentro del Universo Cinematográfico de Marvel (MCU) de Disney. Las películas anteriores del MCU, siguiendo tanto a Marvel Comics como a las recreaciones de los siglos XIX y XX, presentan a Odín como una figura benigna y fuertemente cristianizada, alineada con la humanidad. Waititi interrumpe esta tradición de forma breve pero decisiva. En *Ragnarok*, la revelación por parte de Hela del pasado oculto de Odín lo reconfigura como un conquistador cuyo imperio se edificó sobre el derramamiento de sangre y la esclavitud, evocando al más inquietante Óðinn de las fuentes medievales. En *Love and Thunder*, esta desestabilización se adentra en un terreno posmoderno, ya que Waititi pone de relieve la falta de fiabilidad del propio relato: Nuevo Asgard se convierte en un simulacro hiperreal, compañías teatrales reescenifican la historia reciente como entretenimiento y los recuerdos personales divergen de manera contradictoria. Analizadas desde perspectivas poscoloniales y neomedievales, las películas de Waititi emplean el mito nórdico no para reforzar una autoridad estable, sino para interrogar cómo las historias se estratifican, se ocultan y se disputan.

Palabras clave: Medievalismo, Marvel, cine, televisión, postmodernidad, poscolonialismo.

Postcolonial, postmodern, and neomedieval are not terms commonly associated with Disney, but they offer useful critical frames for understanding Taika Waititi's adaptation of Norse myth in the two *Thor* films he has directed for Marvel Studios as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)[1]. In movies that together have grossed over $1.5 billion ("Top Lifetime Grosses"), Waititi first introduces a powerful challenge to the culturally familiar *imaginary* of the Norse gods – a pantheon of deities headed by Odin, all firmly on the side of humanity, apart from resident mischief-maker Loki – before going on to ask, and perhaps even answer, what truth in storytelling might mean for a contemporary audience.

1 In 2009 The Walt Disney Company announced a $4 billion acquisition of Marvel Entertainment. The deal closed on 31 Dec. 2009, bringing Marvel Studios and the fledgling MCU under Disney's full control (The Walt Disney Company 2009).

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

In examining Waititi's contribution to the MCU, in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), this article examines the figure of Odin already familiar to audiences from earlier MCU films – a character defined by a kind of fading paternalism. The analysis that follows traces a path backwards through comic-book iterations within the Marvel world, and the longer tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century English-language retellings of the Norse myths on which the comics drew for inspiration. After situating Marvel's Odin within this broader history of reception and adaptation, the discussion turns to a sequence in *Thor: Ragnarok* that sends a shockwave through the familiar tableau, calling into question the moral clarity of earlier portrayals and casting Odin in a disturbing new light. Waititi's act of disruption initiates a wider interrogation, not only of mythic authority, but of how received narratives function across time: as legend, as history, and as contested sites where personal and cultural meanings are negotiated. To fully understand Waititi's reassessment of Odin, however, we need to talk about *Óðinn* – that is, the god as he appears in the medieval sources, where his character is far more ambiguous, and often far more troubling, than later retellings have allowed.

Óðinn is a central figure in the two interconnected sources from thirteenth-century Iceland that preserve the bulk of what we know of as Norse mythology: Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* and the anonymous poems, many of them preserved in the Codex Regius manuscript (GKS 2365 4to), that are conventionally collected as the *Poetic Edda*. Snorri clearly knew versions of at least some of these Eddic poems and drew on them when composing his prose narrative (Clunies Ross 26–28). As portrayed in the *Edda*s, Óðinn is a complex and contradictory figure. For Snorri, he is *Alföðr* (All-father), revered by and superior to the other gods regardless of their rank or power (*Gylfaginning* 21, ch. 20). He is described as the son of Borr and one of the first gods to exist, along with his brothers Vili and Vé. Together they create the first humans from two tree trunks found on the shore, with Óðinn's role being to endow them with breath and life (*Gylfaginning* 11, 13; chs 6, 9)[2]. He is the god of the skalds, bringing the Mead of Poetry to

2 The same myth is recounted in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, although Óðinn's brothers here are said to be Hoenir and Loðurr (*Völuspá* sts. 17–18).

Ásgarðr (*Skáldskaparmál* 3–6, ch. G57–58; *Hávamál* sts 104–110), and he is obsessively driven to acquire knowledge. To that end, he possesses two ravens who fly across the world and report to him each morning (*Gylfaginning* 32–33, ch. 38; *Grímnismál* st. 20), and he famously sacrifices one of his eyes in exchange for a drink from Mímir's well, and the gift of wisdom (*Gylfaginning* 17, ch. 15; *Völuspá* st. 29). Yet this pursuit of knowledge is also marked by more morally ambiguous behaviour. In *Hávamál* (sts. 138–139), Óðinn describes sacrificing himself to himself, hanging from a tree for nine nights in an ecstatic vision to gain runic knowledge. In the same poem, he boasts of knowing magical songs, including spells that manipulate others or cause harm (sts. 146–163). He sends Valkyries to select those who will die in battle and welcomes these chosen warriors to Valhöll so they may fight on his behalf at Ragnarök (*Gylfaginning* 31, 32–34, 49–53; chs 36, 38–41, 51). He employs deception to seduce women, as we see in the Mead of Poetry story and are told elsewhere (*Hávamál* sts. 96–102; *Skáldskaparmál* 4–5; ch. G58). In *Vafþrúðnismál*, he rigs a high-stakes wisdom contest with the eponymous giant by asking an unanswerable question; in *Grímnismál*, he is captured and tortured, before inflicting a cruel act of revenge. Outside the *Eddas*, there is further evidence of this side of his character. In Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, a Latin history of Denmark from the early thirteenth century, Óðinn is presented in matter-of-fact terms as a rapist (Ellis Davidson and Fisher 77–78; Book 3). One of the most vivid portraits of Óðinn is offered in the *Heimskringla* narrative entitled *Ynglinga Saga*, also composed by Snorri (10–11, chs 6–7). Here, we are told he is a handsome, eloquent, and charismatic leader who introduces useful skills, founds poetic tradition, and wields great political and magical power. But he is also a practitioner of the sorcery *seiðr*, said to be perverted and shameful when practised by males, and he is capable of blinding, deafening, or terrifying his enemies, causing weapons to fail, and leading warriors in berserker rage. He is the lord of ghosts, or lord of the hanged, who communicates with the dead and commands spirits[3].

3 For an incisive discussion of this passage as a reflection of Óðinn's complex, morally ambivalent character, see Jens Peter Schjødt 2020, pp. 1123–1194.

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

1. Marvel's meek introduction of Odin

Odin's introduction to the MCU comes in *Thor* (2011), the fourth film in Phase One of the *Infinity Saga*, and the first to feature characters and settings from Norse myth[4]. Under the direction of Kenneth Branagh, Odin is presented as an avuncular figure – prone to irascibility, but a loving husband to Frigga, an attentive father to his sons, a benevolent ruler of the Nine Realms from his seat on the planetoid Asgard and a white knight for humanity in the war against the Frost Giants. In a flashback presented near the start of the first film, we hear Odin explaining to Thor and Loki, then just children, that a good king should never seek out war, although he must always be ready for it – and as we move into the narrative present of the movies, he is in the process of meekly handing over the crown to Thor (*Thor* 2011, 00:07:20–00:10:47). Later in the film, his temper is on display when Thor's ill-judged revenge attack on the Frost Giants threatens an uneasy truce with Jotunheim, but this is an Odin who has lost his appetite for war. When Thor calls on Odin to fight with him as father and son, and finish the enemy once and for all, the old king refuses, and casts Thor down to Earth to learn humility (*Thor* 2011, 00:29:30). Almost immediately, the film's screenwriters consign Odin to the 'Odinsleep', a device borrowed from the comic books that serves as a means to recharge his powers and, for the plot of the movie, to get him out of the way and hand the spotlight to Chris Hemsworth's Thor and Tom Hiddleston's manoeuvring Loki. He does emerge from the Odinsleep in time to save Thor and Loki on the Bifrost but his screen time is limited, and this diminishes further as the series continues. Once we get to the sequel, *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) directed by Alan Taylor, we briefly see Odin roused into military action and once again wielding his chief weapon Gungnir, but he is remarkably ineffectual for someone who possesses what is here figured as a spear that fires energy blasts that cannot miss, and he is not present when

4 As of November 2025, there have been 37 films in the MCU. Four of these feature Thor as eponymous hero: *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2013), *Thor: Ragnarok* (dir. Taika Waititi, 2017), and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (dir. Taika Waititi, 2022). In addition, Thor appears in four ensemble films in the *Avengers* series: *The Avengers* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2015), *Avengers: Infinity War* (dir. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (dir. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2019). Collectively, MCU films have earned more than $30 billion at the global box office, making the franchise the most commercially successful in cinema history (Rubin).

Malekith kills his wife, Frigga. At the end of the film, he is usurped by Loki, who has shape-shifted to take on Odin's appearance and rule in his stead.

Clearly this is Odin refracted through what was, at the time, 50 years of appearances in Marvel Comics. Marvel's visionary Editor-in-Chief Stan Lee had the idea to make Thor the publisher's latest superhero in 1962 and called on his artist collaborator Jack Kirby to draw the strip for a hitherto struggling title, *Journey Into Mystery*. Lee's brother, Larry Lieber, wrote the dialogue for the first few issues, before Lee took over scripting duties himself in a collaboration with Kirby that lasted, with only occasional interruptions, until 1970. Odin was introduced as a character in issue number 86 in November 1962, four issues after Thor's own debut[5]. As in the films, the Odin of the comics often expresses anger or frustration towards Thor – usually because of his love for the mortal, Jane Foster, whom Odin regards as unworthy for his son. However, Odin is defined by his status as protector of Asgard and the other realms and is clearly written as a force for good. Jón Karl Helgason has described Marvel's long engagement with the Eddic stories as the creation of a discrete mythological sphere (Jón Karl Helgason 430–31) around the Norse myths, that allows them to do pretty much whatever they want. Even so, it would be a mistake to treat Marvel's Odin as the product of free invention. The MCU's early take on Odin is not only in keeping with Lee and Kirby's version of the character, but with most of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century popular retellings of the myths. Annie and Eliza Keary's *The Gods of Asgard and the Giants of Jotunheim*; *Or, the Week and its Story* (1857) was the first full-length book in English to separate out episodes from the Norse myths into a discrete narrative cycle aimed at the popular market, in this case, specifically for children[6].

5 Thor made his debut in *Journey Into Mystery*, issue 83, cover dated August 1962. The comic would be renamed *The Mighty Thor* from issue 126, cover dated March 1966.

6 Although Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable* (1855) had provided a survey of mythology, it treated the Norse material as one strand within a wider comparative framework, and did little more than tell abridged versions of some of the myths told in Blackwell's 1847 revision of *Northern Antiquities*. Annie and Eliza Keary's *The Gods of Asgard and the Giants of Jotunheim; Or, the Week and its Story* (1857) was the first work in English to present the Norse myths as a self-contained sequence of tales, written and published as a standalone volume. The first edition seems to have been released to little notice, but Macmillan acquired the rights and released a version in 1870 with the new title *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from Scandinavian Mythology*, new illustrations, some changes to the text and with the peculiar framing device of the original removed. It was this version that helped kick-start the trend for English-language retellings.

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

Their pioneering format was soon built upon by a succession of writers in Britain and America, including Julia Goddard (1871), Hamilton Wright Mabie (1882), Helen Zimmern (1882), Annette L. Davey (1886), Hélène A. Guerber (1895) and on into the twentieth century via authors like the Massachusetts schoolteachers Mary H. Foster and Mabel H. Cummings with their *Asgard Stories, Tales from Norse Mythology* (1901). Between 1857 and 1962, at least 46 full-length English-language retellings of Norse myths were published in Britain and America[7]. While many authors initially cited translations of the *Edda*s as their source material, or scholarly books about them[8], from the 1880s onward there is growing evidence that they began relying on previous retellings instead of returning directly to the medieval material. This is apparent not just in similar choices of the stories told, and their handling, but in the markedly consistent characterisation that emerges. Óðinn, already given a sympathetic treatment by Snorri, writing 200 years after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, was given a kind of hagiography by these early compilers. To provide a flavour, Keary and Keary relate that in his journeyings, Odin 'mixed freely with the people of the countries through which he passed; shared with them toil and pleasure, war and grief [...] and exalted them by his example.' In the evenings, he taught young villagers 'how that fight was not yet over,' and urged them to 'do battle bravely, and be heroes and Æsir of the earth' (Keary and Keary 1857, 40–41). One by one, other retellers followed suit. For Goddard, Odin leads the rest of the gods in what sounds like a Christianised ritual: 'The king and queen and all the Asi were gathered together. And Odin spoke: "Oh Asi, will you swear to do no harm to Balder?" And the voices of the gods sounded like a burst of glorious music as they answered, 'We swear!'" (Goddard 19). Foster and Cummings repeatedly refer to him as 'Father Odin' and describe how he carries around a book containing sayings in runes, which he uses to deliver homilies to others (Foster and Cummings 63–64). By the start of the twentieth century, the image of Óðinn as a Christianised God-the-Father, as opposed to a morally ambiguous pagan All-Father, had become firmly entrenched, with no serious challenges from contemporary

7 This is based on my own doctoral research into the vogue for popular retellings, as yet unpublished.
8 The most commonly used were Benjamin Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* Volume 1 (1851) and Rasmus B. Anderson's *Norse Mythology* (1875).

retellers. It is this version of Óðinn that filtered into the comic book tradition and, subsequently, into the MCU. In both cases, he is portrayed in consistent terms: imposing, at times stern, but ultimately aligned with humanity and positioned as a force for good.

2. Challenging the Óðinn myth

This Old Norse mythological *imaginary* that the MCU first tapped into is shattered by the arrival of Hela, the goddess of death, and Odin's first-born child in Waititi's *Thor: Ragnarok*. The film begins with Thor in search of information that might ward off Ragnarok, the final battle between the gods and giants. He escapes the fire-demon Surtur before returning to Asgard to find Odin watching a play commemorating Loki's death. Thor soon discovers that this Odin is in fact Loki in disguise – a Loki who has packed Odin off to the 'Shady Acres Care Home' in New York City. The two foster brothers eventually find him in Tønsberg, Norway, where he dies of old age, prefacing his final moment by saying that he loves his two sons, something that resonates especially with Loki, and that his murdered wife, Frigga, is calling to him. Just before he turns into stardust and disappears – and note here, again, the instinct of film makers to get this anaemic version of the character off screen as soon as possible – he warns them that his death will release Hela, whose power will become unstoppable. Up to this point, neither Thor nor Loki have been aware of her existence. Hela duly appears and shocks Thor by destroying his hammer, and after arriving back on Asgard she goes on to defeat the entirety of Odin's royal guard and take the throne.

As she installs herself in the palace, she notices a fresco painted on the ceiling, depicting Asgard's shining influence on the Nine Realms. Amid the panels we see Asgard as a beacon, along with the Rainbow Bridge, and a scene depicting a truce between Odin and Laufey, King of the Frost Giants. There is also a highly Christianised image of Thor and Loki lit by golden circles, their heads slightly bowed, in front of Odin and Frigga, who are on a raised platform behind them, looking on like devoted parents. We see Thor with his head bowed again, seemingly about to sip from a type of chalice proffered by his fellow warriors Hogun and Fandral, in another pose with sacramental overtones. Odin and Thor are present in a final scene at

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

a garden party, perhaps with the warrior Sif[9], as serving girls offer them grapes and apples, and a musician plays a golden harp at their feet.

Hela furiously destroys the fresco and makes clear the reason for her disgust: "Does no one remember me? Has no one been taught our history? Look at these lies. Goblets and garden parties? Peace treaties? Odin… proud to have it… ashamed of how he got it" (*Thor: Ragnarok* 00:42:55). In doing so, she reveals an earlier fresco, far more sinister, that has until now been hidden. Her act of unlayering reveals a scene featuring Odin flanked by Hela riding the wolf Fenris[10] at the head of an army, and a multitude of slaves building the palace. Odin wears a horned helmet shaped very much like Hela's and is seen riding his eight-legged horse Sleipnir next to her in another visual representation of their status as equals. We may note, that in Norse mythology, though not in the MCU, Fenris, Sleipnir, and indeed Hela are all Loki's children. In a third parallel, Hela holds aloft Mjolnir, the hammer of Thor, while Odin carries Gungnir. "We were unstoppable," Hela continues. "I was his weapon in the conquest that built Asgard's empire. One by one, the realms became ours. But then, simply because my ambition outgrew his, he banished me, caged me, locked me away like an animal. Before that, Asgard's warriors were honored, their bodies buried as heroes beneath this very palace" (*Thor: Ragnarok* 00:43:40). She then revives those warriors, along with Fenris, to create her own version of Odin's *Einherjar*. At the climax of the movie, when Thor returns to confront her, she is even more graphic in her description of her reign of terror alongside the All-father: "It seems our father's solution to everything was to cover it up. […] Odin and I drowned entire civilisations in blood and tears. Where do you think all this gold came from? And then one day he decided to become a benevolent king: to foster peace, to protect life, to have you" (*Thor: Ragnarok* 01:41:20).

Although *Thor: Ragnarok* bears Waititi's unmistakable sensibility, its authorship was, as in all Marvel productions, collective. The initial screenplay

9 In the MCU, Sif is not married to Thor, but is one of his fellow warriors.

10 Throughout, I use the forms given in the official credits and production notes – hence *Fenris* (Marvel) rather than the Old Norse *Fenrir*. The same principle applies to other proper nouns such as *Mjolnir*, *Bifrost*, and *Ragnarok*, which are cited in their MCU spellings within the context of the films.

had been developed by the writing team of Craig Kyle & Christopher Yost, and Eric Pearson contributed further drafts, while Waititi brought in Stephany Folsom to do what was in the end uncredited work to change the tone. Other moments emerged spontaneously during filming – notably the often-quoted line, "He's a friend from work!", which was famously suggested by a child visiting the set (Robinson, Gonzales & Edwards 2023, 505–507). Yet within that collaborative framework, *Ragnarok* remains unmistakably personal to Waititi. A New Zealander of Russian-Jewish and Māori descent, he has confirmed that he used these scenes to interrogate inherited myths of heroism and empire. As he notes in his director's commentary, his aim was to disrupt the prevailing image of Odin as a benevolent monarch and to expose a history of imperial conquest concealed beneath Asgard's official mythology. It is worth quoting this explanation in full:

> We wanted to show that all societies have histories and Asgard is no exception. Odin and Hela used to be the great conquerors of the cosmos. They would go around and conquer and take over these worlds and take a lot of the resources. They came back to Asgard. That's how they built the palace. That's where all the gold came from. Through one reason or another, Odin changed his ways and realised that peace was a way better thing to strive for, but Hela was brought up on the battlefield, was basically raised as a conqueror, couldn't let that go, and wanted to keep spreading their empire, and keep conquering and keep taking worlds. One of the criticisms that Hela has about Odin is that his secrets, and the shame he felt over her and the conquering that they used to do, he would keep covering things up, like the mural – he would cover it up with the saccharine paintings with tea parties and garden parties and peace treaties whereas the real Asgard lies beneath. This is where he stored her old army, which she now brings back to life with the eternal flame (Waititi 2018).

The myth of divine benevolence is thus replaced with a history of violence, concealment, and moral revision. Hela is eventually destroyed along with Asgard itself, after Thor realises that there is no way to stave off Ragnarok and instead hatches a plan to set it in motion. It is true too that Odin's status is never again called into question – indeed, he is awarded the equivalent of the fantasy film industry's hagiography when he is given

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

a voice after death, from where is able to speak to and guide Thor[11]. But the power of Waititi's re-framing of the history of Asgard in exactly the terms he mentions is that it invites a reassessment of some of what has been seen in early films. Viewers of this earlier material may here recall that our only evidence for Asgard being a force for good has been the voiceovers at the start of the previous films – both delivered by Odin himself. Here is how he introduced Asgard in *Thor*:

> Once, mankind accepted a simple truth, that they were not alone in this universe. Some worlds, man believed to be home to their gods; others, they knew to fear. From a realm of cold and darkness came the Frost Giants, threatening to plunge the mortal world into a new ice age. But humanity would not face this threat alone. Our armies drove the Frost Giants back into the heart of their own world. The cost was great. In the end, their king fell, and the source of their power was taken from them. With the last great war ended, we withdrew from the other worlds and returned home, to the realm eternal, Asgard. Here, we remain as the beacon of hope, shining out across the stars. And though we have fallen into man's myths and legends, it was Asgard, and its warriors, that brought peace to the universe (*Thor* 00:03:36).

Yet even in the first film, it is clear that this speech, which describes Asgard using language that is heavily reminiscent of descriptions of America by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama (McSweeney 29) is only one side of the story. Branagh, while setting up Odin as the benevolent ruler, was careful to give Laufey a voice too, and when confronted by Thor in the battle of Jotunheim he shows that there is another perspective to the Æsir-Frost Giant war. Laufey shouts: "Your father is a murderer and a thief" (*Thor* 00:19:58). This hint that Odin may be untrustworthy is reinforced when it turns out that he has been lying to Loki his whole life, leading him to believe that he was his son, when in fact he was a foundling, whose true father is Laufey. Loki himself highlights this mis-match between Odin's deeds as a warrior and his claim to have taken in Loki for altruistic reasons,

11 Other famous examples of this trope include Obi Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*, Mufasa in *The Lion King*, and Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*.

as he challenges his foster-father's version of events. "Why? You were knee-deep in Jotun blood. Why would you take me?" (*Thor* 00:40:44). It's a good question, and one Odin can only answer by admitting that he took him in the hope that it would help unify their kingdoms, effectively making Loki a pawn in a game of détente. Similarly, Odin's claim in the first film that Thor was his first born is shown to be a lie by the arrival of Hela.

In another example of the powerful effect of Waititi's reframing of Odin though a post-colonialist lens, what appears to be a throwaway comment at the start of the second film, *Thor: The Dark World*, turns out, retrospectively, to carry real menace. Thor has been attempting to quell an outbreak of violence across the Nine Realms after Loki's destruction of the Bifrost in the first film had allowed off-planet marauders free reign. Praising Thor's work, Odin says: "For the first time since the Bifrost was destroyed the Nine Realms are at peace. *They're well reminded of our strength* and you have earned their respect." (*Thor: The Dark World*; 00:10:26; emphasis added). Later in that second film, Odin makes his contempt for humanity quite clear, by telling Thor that he had no right to bring his girlfriend Jane Foster to Asgard. "She does not belong here in Asgard any more than a goat belongs at a banquet table," he says (*Thor: The Dark World* 00:30:45). If that is Odin's view of humanity – a people he says he went to war to protect – we can only guess at his views of the indigenous races in the rest of the realms.

Waititi's intervention in *Thor: Ragnarok* puts him in a tradition of medievalist authors reclaiming and repurposing medieval tropes to subvert dominant historical narratives (Davis and Altschul 6). By exposing Odin's imperial violence – literally hidden behind a golden facade – Waititi reorients the narrative towards an acknowledgement of silenced histories, if not an actual reckoning. While he opts out of this direct challenge to Odin – as noted above, he is allowed to retain his status as one of the good guys – Waititi succeeds in offering a counter-myth that aligns with postcolonial critiques of how empires mythologise their pasts to legitimise present power. What is striking is that, deliberately or not, previous directors Branagh and Taylor had laid a trail for the interpretation of Odin in a light that has much more in common with the Óðinn from the surviving medieval sources. Waititi began laying his own trail near the start of *Thor: Ragnarok*, with an overt piece of theatre on Asgard, where Loki (in his Odin disguise)

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

watches on in delight as actors play out his death as a tragedy. This functions as exposition, a device intended to remind audiences of the events of *Thor: The Dark World*, released almost five years previously, but it also serves to give us our first clue that stories in Waititi's world may be untrustworthy. This is reinforced late in the film when Valkyrie explains why she stopped believing in the gods as a force for good, saying: "That's what's wrong with Asgard. The throne, the secrets, the whole golden sham." (*Thor: Ragnarok* 01:12:50). This shifting, illusory nature of stories becomes the central theme of Waititi's follow-up, *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022).

3. Unmasking the gods

Waititi's second film for the MCU takes place following the long sequence of films known as the *Infinity Saga*, in the aftermath of a cosmic crisis in which the mad Titan Thanos acquired all six of the Infinity Stones, elemental particles that allowed him to annihilate half of all life in the universe. Thor and the other Avengers eventually managed to reverse this act through a complex process involving time travel, and restore those who were lost five years earlier to the present day. However, the initial erasure of half the life in the universe and the subsequent reversal of this, the latter event known in the MCU as "the Blip," has left lasting consequences that provide an uncomfortable context to the sequel's narrative. *Thor: Love and Thunder* was less well regarded by critics. Waititi's tendency to pepper his movies with jokes – a style that helped revitalise the franchise in 2017 – does not work quite as well here, and Christian Bale, playing the villain Gorr 'The God Butcher', is under-used, appearing on screen for a total of only around 10 minutes. Fans decried the film's reliance on what was generally seen as unconvincing CGI and even its star, Chris Hemsworth, admitted that the film makers had allowed themselves to be just "too silly" in their attitude towards the material (Yee 2023). The film performed slightly worse at the box office – taking 760 million dollars against 854 million for *Ragnarok* ("Top Lifetime Grosses"), although its release in July 2022 during an ongoing phase of the Covid-19 pandemic must have been at least partially responsible for this drop. But beneath the surface of what is clearly a somewhat disjointed sequel, there is a powerful meditation on truth and meaning, fate and death, as Waititi's approach evolves from postcolonial critique to post-modern reflection, and ultimately a neomedievalist engagement with myth.

The film is framed by the narration of Korg – a character played by Waititi himself, who since his introduction in *Thor: Ragnarok* has struggled to understand exactly what is going on around him. Waititi emphasises this confusion comedically: Korg twice misremembers the name of Thor's former girlfriend Jane Foster, calling her "Jane Fonda" and "Jodie Foster". In a voiceover near the start of the movie, Korg urges the audience: "Come, come, gather round, and listen to the legend of the Space Viking. AKA the God of Thunder. AKA Thor Odinson" (Waititi 00:07:20). The choice of the word 'legend', as well as the reference to Thor's different identities, set the scene for a layered narrative that invites us to question the reliability of the story even as it unfolds.

The basic set up is as follows. Survivors from the destruction of Asgard have created a new home in Midgard (Earth) on the site of Odin's death in Norway. It is here that Waititi constructs a New Asgard that is not so much a rebuilding or copy of the original but a self-contained simulacrum – a site that presents itself as authentic while severing any real connection to the original. In this hyper-real environment (Baudrillard, pp. 1–3), visitors experience what seems to them to be the genuine world of Asgard, even though what they encounter is barely more than an arrangement of symbols and surfaces. As such, following Lauren S. Mayer's definition, the simulacrum deliberately subverts the participant's ability to distinguish between the original and the copy (Mayer, 223–30). To viewers of the MCU, however, the illusion is transparent. New Asgard, it turns out, is nothing at all like the Asgard that we, as viewers, know from the earlier films. There is none of the grandiose, shimmering gold aesthetic of the Asgard of *Thor*, where the high-fantasy, futuristic stylings are complemented by ornate, Norse-inspired detailing. Nor do we see the grittier world of *Thor: The Dark World*, where director Taylor, perhaps influenced by his work on *Game of Thrones*, creates a less pristine but nevertheless monumental take on Asgard. However, to the visitors within the film's diegesis, who have not had our privileged access to this extra-terrestrial world, it is presented as authentic – not so much a theme park as a kind of tourable model village. Here in New Asgard, tourists are invited to soar in flying Viking longboats and inspect the broken and immovable pieces of Thor's hammer, covered under a Perspex dome, before tasting some "real" Asgardian mead in The

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

Black Raven tavern. Following Baudrillard's schema, this is an example of a fourth-order simulacrum, with the symbols on display – the hammer, the mead, the longboats – functioning as signifiers of the Old Norse/Viking *imaginary*, rather than any particular reality. Of the (old) Asgard itself – the *real* Asgard as we viewers know it from the first three films – virtually nothing remains and no attempt has been made to recreate it. Even the flying longboats of the type once used in the fight against the Dark Elves are fitted out with safety harnesses for those having their turn on the ride. Thus, while Branagh and Taylor sought to add 'authentic' medieval details to their scenes on Asgard – warriors celebrating victory over flagons of ale, Odin flanked by ravens – Waititi places this kind of detail within the hyper-reality of a rootless New Asgard. In this sense, his representation of the home of the gods has become neo-medievalistic, in David W. Marshall's definition of the term as a "self-conscious, ahistorical, non-nostalgic" reconstruction, whose goal is to disrupt traditional medieval depictions rather than to recreate them (Marshall 22).

This tension between different versions of reality becomes the defining theme of the film, and Waititi repeatedly nudges the viewer towards such an interpretation. When Jane seeks information about Thor's hammer she consults a two-volume work on the Norse myths by authors who do not exist[12]. When she reaches New Asgard, Waititi shows us the world not from her point of view, but through the eyes of an audience watching another play, this time telling the story of Thor losing the hammer to Hela in *Ragnarok*, in another example of the director providing unreliable layers of storytelling. After the children of New Asgard are abducted by Gorr, members of the same theatre group immediately plan a dramatisation of the night's events. They ask Valkyrie, who has taken over as leader of New Asgard with Thor's blessing: "Majesty, should we start working on a performance of this entire debacle? The people need entertainment. Particularly now, in times of crisis" (*Thor: Love and Thunder* 00:38:54). Waititi plays this for laughs, but it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what type of

12 In the film, the invented 'prop' book is given the title *Viking Myths: Norse Sagas and Myths of the Eddas* by M. S. Onstad and Prof. G. J. Jørgensen.

humour we are being presented with. On the surface, the exchange is comic because it exposes the troupe's oblivious self-importance – the idea that they might re-stage a communal trauma even as frantic parents seek information and Valkyrie issues instructions for injured survivors to be taken to the infirmary. Yet beneath the absurdity lies something more unsettling: the reflex to turn catastrophe into spectacle. The theatre troupe can be seen as serving a double function. Within the story, they are comic relief, puncturing the solemnity of the scene and momentarily relieving tension. At a meta-level, their instinct to "stage the debacle" mirrors New Asgard's tourist theatre and embodies the film's scepticism toward storytelling itself.

As the film goes on, the same Waititi who focused on the literal chipping away of Asgard's official fresco chips away at the notion of truth itself. One subtle but telling example comes when Thor and Jane Foster meet again after their separation. Korg, our unreliable narrator, recounts the story of their break-up for the audience, framing it through their conflicting perspectives. He introduces the story as "The Legend of Thor and Jane", and concludes that, in the end, their "legend suddenly became myth". The lingering tension around their break-up becomes who left whom, with neither able to agree on even a basic chronology. Jane thinks it has been "three or four years" since their split, while Thor counters with the precise figure of "eight years, seven months, and six days" (*Thor: Love and Thunder* 00:38:01). Though played for humour – Thor's heartbreak is so intense he has counted every day – the discrepancy is striking. The only plausible explanation for such a gap is that Jane was among those erased in "The Snap," and reappeared five years later with no memory of the vanished time. This moment draws attention to the constructedness of memory and narrative in the post-Blip world.

Two further revelations about Jane emerge as the film progresses: first, that she is undergoing treatment for stage 4 breast cancer; and second, that she has taken up the mantle of The Mighty Thor, having been summoned by the fragments of Mjolnir, which unbeknown to her, Thor has enchanted to protect her. While wielding the reconstituted hammer grants her strength and power, it also renders her chemotherapy ineffective, thereby hastening her physical decline. Jane thus exists in a kind of liminal state, paradoxically possessed of limitless strength, yet dying because of it;

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

granted the powers of a godlike being, but one whose mortality is inescapable. What appears to be an uncertain grasp of time becomes emblematic not only of trauma and illness but also of the larger narrative fractures in the post-Blip world.

The unreliability of mythic authority is mirrored in Thor's disappointment when visiting a council of the universe's deities at Omnipotent City. Hoping to rally the gods against Gorr, he anticipates the arrival of Zeus with reverence, describing him as "the man, the myth, the legend" (*Thor: Love and Thunder* 00:54:59), only to discover that his childhood idol is a decadent, self-indulgent figure, more interested in hedonism than heroism. Zeus's refusal to help in the fight against Gorr leaves the heroes isolated, further exposing the moral decay in what is literally the centre of divine power.

Back on Earth, in New Asgard, the incongruity becomes visual. Crowds gather for the grand opening of a tourist-friendly ice cream parlour named 'Infinity Conez' (*Thor: Love and Thunder* 00:18:40), complete with a giant representation of the gauntlet the dwarf Eitri was forced to make, before Thanos slaughtered the rest of the dwarves on Nidavellir and then maimed him for life (*Avengers: Infinity War* 01:15:45). Waititi offers no explicit commentary on a joke that turns the icon of the universe's greatest atrocity into a logo but the sight itself functions as satire, inviting viewers to register the commercialisation of trauma in a world still struggling to cope with its aftermath. The popularity of the newly opened Infinity Conez also raises interesting questions of just how people affected by the Snap/Blip would have processed their trauma. For those who were removed, the entire event is, after all, just a story they have been told: half the world vanished, and five years later, they returned, to be informed that an alien warlord had caused it all with a snap of his fingers. In such circumstances, perhaps even a catastrophe on this kind of scale would have become a contested truth, one that would eventually lose some of its power and become ripe for re-appropriation, and even merchandising. This post-truth atmosphere had already been highlighted elsewhere in the Marvel universe. In the TV series *Hawkeye* (2021), the world-weary Avenger Clint Barton, who made his MCU debut in *Thor* (2011), is shown drinking from a mug that reads "Thanos was right" (Episode 4, "Partners, Am I Right?" 00:19:40). Such moments point to a cultural environment in which competing narratives vie for legitimacy, and

history itself becomes open to negotiation. Jane's confusion about time, then, reflects the wider thematic concern of *Thor: Love and Thunder* – the fragility of memory and the malleability of myth.

4. Conclusion: salvaging truth

In two films, Waititi first explores the myth of Odin as a benevolent god, warning us that the accepted cultural view of history cannot be taken as fact – a reading that is supported by details from the previous films that were plainly visible, but were nevertheless easy to overlook. He underlines this interpretation in *Love and Thunder* by exposing the god that Thor worshipped as being far less than his reputation, and allowing us to explore the Disneyfied hyper-reality of New Asgard. Finally, he shows us that even personal truths and recent history are open to challenge via conflicting memories (in Thor and Jane's different recollections of the same event), reinterpretation (the theatre group), and even what appears to be a case of collective, or semi-collective denial (in the appropriation of 'Infinity Conez' and the associated image as part of a marketing strategy). But while it would be tempting to see in Waititi's vision a nihilistic rejection of truth, the director pulls back from the idea that everything is open to interpretation. Ultimately, Waititi accepts that there are, in fact, twin non-negotiables in life in the form of fate and death. In *Thor: Ragnarok,* Thor is only able to prevail against Hela once he realises that the destruction of Asgard cannot be stopped – something that the Óðinn of the *Edda*s also reluctantly accepted. And in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, Jane is left with the starkest of choices once she realises that Mjolnir is preventing the chemotherapy from working – to stop wearing the costume and leave Thor alone to fight Gorr, or move willingly towards her own destiny. She ultimately decides that the only thing she can do in good conscience is to fight on. The unflinching way she faces death secures her reputation and a place in Valhalla, which is confirmed when she is welcomed by Heimdall in the post-credits scene at the end of the movie. Her decision seems to bear out one of the lessons of *Hávamál*, a poem presented as a collection of sayings of Óðinn:

> Deyr fé,
>
> deyja frændr,

Universidad Rey Juan Carlos - *Neomedieval* n. 4, 61-82 / ISSN: 3020-6146 / DOI: 10.33732/nmv.4.116

deyr sjálfr it sama;
en orðstírr
deyr aldregi
hveim er sér góðan getr.

Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
deyr sjálfr it sama;
ek veit einn
at aldri deyr:
dómr um dauðan hvern.

Hávamál, sts 76–77

Cattle die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die;
but the glory of reputation never dies,
for the man who can get himself a good one.

Cattle die, kinsmen die, kinsmen die,
the self must also die;
I know one thing which never dies:
the reputation of each dead man.

Hávamál 76–77, trans. Larrington

Thus, at the end of what is a fearlessly revisionist take on the Norse myths – and more than four hours of CGI-powered narrative explicitly based on the Marvel Comics, but revealing deeper mythic roots – what Waititi leaves us with is a message that is simple, stark, and emphatic, close both in tone and in meaning to the medieval Icelandic stories that provide his ultimate source material. Fate, your enduring reputation, and the hope of an afterlife: these all must have been very familiar concepts to audiences when these myths were circulating, and, as Marvel has shown, they continue to resonate with audiences now.

Bibliography

Anderson, Rasmus B. *Norse Mythology; or, The Religion of Our Forefathers, Containing All the Myths of the Eddas, Systematized and Interpreted with an Introduction, Vocabulary and Index*. Chicago, SC, Griggs and Company, 1875.

Avengers: Endgame. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, Marvel Studios, 2019.

Avengers: Infinity War. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, Marvel Studios, 2018.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Bulfinch, Thomas. *The Age of Fable; Or, Stories of Gods and Heroes*. Boston, Sanborn, Carter, and Bazin, 1855.

Clunies Ross, Margaret. "The Transmission and Preservation of Eddic Poetry." *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, edited by Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 12-32.

Davey, Annette L. *Old Tales and Legends for Young People*. London, London Literary Society, 1886.

Davis, Kathleen, & Nadia Altschul. "The Idea of 'the Middle Ages' Outside Europe." *Medievalisms in the Postcolonial World: The Idea of 'the Middle Ages' Outside Europe*, edited by Kathleen Davis and Nadia Altschul. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, pp. 1–24.

Foster, Mary H. & Mabel H. Cummings. *Asgard Stories: Tales from Norse Mythology*. New York, Silver, Burdett and Co., 1901.

Ellis Davidson, Hilda (ed.) & Peter Fisher (trans.). *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, v. 1. Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1979.

Goddard, Julia. *Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands*. London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871.

Guerber, H. A. *Myths of Northern Lands*. New York, American Book Company, 1895.

Hawkeye. "Partners, Am I Right?" Episode 4. Directed by Bert & Bertie; written by Heather Quinn and Erin Cancino. Disney+, 8 December 2021.

Jón Karl Helgason. "Nordic Gods and Popular Culture". Translated by Jane Victoria Appleton. *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception. Volume II: From c. 1830 to the Present*, edited by Margaret Clunies Ross. Turnhout, Brepols, 2019, pp. 419-453.

Keary, Annie & Eliza Keary. *The Heroes of Asgard and the Giants of Jötunheim; or the Week and Its Story*. London, David Bogue, 1857.

Keary, Annie & Eliza Keary. *The Heroes of Asgard: Tales from Scandinavian Mythology*. London, Macmillan, 1870.

Larrington, Carolyne, trans. *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

Mabie, Hamilton Wright. *Norse Stories, Retold from the Eddas*. Boston, Roberts Brothers, 1882.

Marshall, David W. "Neomedievalism, Identification, and the Haze of Medievalisms." *Studies in Medievalism*, n. 20, 2011, pp. 149-168.

Mayer, Lauren S. "Simulacrum." *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, edited by Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz. Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2014, pp. 223–30.

McSweeney, Terence. *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. New York, Wallflower Press, 2018.

Robinson, Joanna, Dave Gonzales & Gavin Edwards. *MCU: The Reign of Marvel Studios.* New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2023.

Rubin, Rebecca. "With 'Deadpool & Wolverine,' the Marvel Cinematic Universe Becomes First Film Franchise in History to Cross $30 Billion at Global Box Office." *Variety*. 27 July 2024. https://variety.com/2024/film/news/marvel-cinematic-universe-30-billion-global-box-office-1236083709/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2025.

Schjødt, Jens Peter. "Óðinn." *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: History and Structures*, v. 1, edited by Jens Peter Schjødt, John Lindow, and Anders Andrén. Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, pp. 1123–1194.

Snorri Sturluson. *Edda*. Translated by Anthony Faulkes. London, Everyman, 1995.

Snorri Sturluson. "Skáldskaparmál." *Edda: Skáldskaparmál. I: Introduction, Text and Notes*, edited by Anthony Faulkes. London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998.

Snorri Sturluson. "Gylfaginning." *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, edited by Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005.

Snorri Sturluson. "Ynglinga saga." *Heimskringla: Volume I, The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*. Translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes. London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011, pp. 6–47.

The Walt Disney Company. "Disney Completes Marvel Acquisition." 31 Dec. 2009, https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-completes-marvel-acquisition. Accessed 22 Aug. 2025.

Thor. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, Marvel Studios, 2011.

Thor: Ragnarok. Directed by Taika Waititi, Marvel Studios, 2017.

Thor: The Dark World. Directed by Alan Taylor, Marvel Studios, 2013.

Thor: Love and Thunder. Directed by Taika Waititi, Marvel Studios, 2022.

Thorpe, Benjamin. *Northern Mythology: Comprising the Principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, and the Netherlands*, v. 1. London, Edward Lumley, 1851.

"Top Lifetime Grosses." *Box Office Mojo,* https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW. Accessed 22 Aug. 2025.

Waititi, Taika. Audio commentary. *Thor: Ragnarok.* Marvel Studios, 2018.

Zimmern, Helen. *Tales from the Edda*. London, W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1882.

Yee, Hannah-Rose. "Chris Hemsworth Crests the Wave." *British GQ,* 14 June 2023. https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/chris-hemsworth-interview-2023