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The Sight of the Seeress: Norse Prophecies in 18th and 19th Century Art

So-called vödur (sing. vödur; seeresses or prophetesses) can be found in a number of medieval Icelandic texts, in which mythological tales are told. When Norse myths began to become popular among artists in the second half of the eighteenth century, these figures were the first to be depicted. This interest was kindled by Thomas Gray, who published an English translation of the eddic lay Baldrs draumar (Baldr's Dreams) under the title *The Descent of Odin* (1762), in which a vödur appears. Many artists struggled to transform the figure of the vödur from the textual to the visual medium, as can be seen in the drawings of Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli). In the period around the year 1800, it was common for artists to represent vödur as speaking figures wearing long flowing robes. Other vödur attributes found in art history include veils and naked breasts. The latter is especially true for representations of Velleda, a Germanic seeress who was a subject in Tacitus' writings as well as many artistic renderings in France. Other attributes of seeresses, such as a rod, can be traced back to Old Norse sources. In addition to Velleda and the prophetess from Baldrs draumar - on which Richard Wagner's Erda is based in *The Ring of the Nibelung* and who also became a pictorial motif for several of Wagner's followers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century - the seeress who prophesies the fate of the Norse gods in Völuspá (The Prophecy of the Seeress) has also been portrayed in a great number of paintings. In book illustrations, vödur are also preferred figures in the frontispiece, thereby functioning as pictorial narrators of the succeeding texts (quite often translations of the *Poetic Edda*).