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Women and Water: Icelandic tales and Anglo-Saxon Moorings

Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing

Abstract

This collaborative article offers a multi-disciplinary dialogue about modern and medieval ways of knowing and understanding water as place and process – as source and resource – and in so doing, explores and unsettles habitual disciplinary associations of place with specific times, identities and genders. It brings together medieval and modern ideas about water, women and the monstrous in art, popular culture, poetry and learned texts to demonstrate how the subject of water connects different times, places and media. Beginning in modern Iceland, the essay moves through Icelandic and early medieval British tales of the watery, the fishy and the female, using the work of contemporary American artist, Roni Horn, known for her work on place, identity and Iceland, to focus this criss-crossing of temporalities, cultures and places.

Keywords: water, art, women, medieval, contemporary

Women and Water: Icelandic Tales and Anglo-Saxon Moorings

Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing

How might we bring together medieval and modern ideas about water, women and the monstrous in art, popular culture, poetry and learned texts to demonstrate that the subject of water connects different times, places and media? Our collaborative article offers a multi-disciplinary dialogue where medieval and modern are in conversation, and in so doing, it explores and unsettles habitual disciplinary associations of place with specific times, identities and genders. Such unsettling of disciplinary boundaries brings challenges, and those who work collaboratively over long periods of time often face questions about academic identities and about audience. Are we literary scholars, historians, medievalists, feminists; how can we speak through and across these categories; to whom are we speaking? And as our own field(s) and the Humanities in general undergo sea changes, as Humanities move post-disciplinary, we know that these are shared issues. Challenged and inspired by recent research in the field of creative critical writing (see Benson and Connors 2014), we have sought new ways of developing transdisciplinary and transhistorical conversations. In this essay, then, we aim to clear new spaces where we can talk to one another and to others in the Humanities differently as we explore our collective interest in matters watery and monstrous.

We choose water as a means and mode of communication, one which informs our way of thinking and of writing as we weave creative critical fiction into literary analysis, and navigate passages that connect the medieval with the contemporary. Beginning in modern Iceland, the essay moves through Icelandic and early medieval British tales of the watery, the fishy and the

female, using the work of contemporary American artist, Roni Horn, known for her work on place, identity and Iceland, to focus this criss-crossing of temporalities, cultures and places. Water is essentially connective, always in transit, often unpunctuated. In the overlapping accounts that follow, we offer a dialogue between medieval and modern ways of knowing and seeing by thinking about water and those who live in it or near it.

We start on terra firma and with collaborative scholarship that has focused on place and on landscape, on places to believe in. Inspired by the idea of "living on the *ecg*," by Anglo-Saxon cultural perceptions of water and land informed by the physical environment as explored by Kelley Wickham Crowley (2006), by the saintly Cuthbert's seventh-century island retreat on Inner Farne—that island in the North Sea—and by all the ideas of passage and transition that these have generated for us, we disembark. And we move onto and sometimes into, as will become clear later, the water. We explore what early medieval ideas about water have to say about modes of knowing, seeing and understanding and we ask how might they resonate now (see, e.g., Stock 1993)? The recognition that water is itself a place as much as land is an emerging topic of much recent scholarship: in Anglo-Saxon Studies it figures in explorations of identity and landscape, for example, as well as in translation and animal studies and in explorations of the posthuman (see Lees and Overing 2006; Sobecki 2011; Remein 2012; Klein and Schipper 2014). The connections of women to water have also been explored across a variety of disciplines, from the physics of fluid mechanics on through to the literary, theological and psychoanalytic (see Theweleit 1987, Hayles 1992 and Niemanis 2017). Water is also profoundly material, of critical importance to our environment and to our survival (see, e.g., Grusin 2017). We do not, and cannot engage with these myriad and varied academic histories or

with the urgent politics of water in its global context here. We have found, however, a more modest beginning and inspiration in the work of contemporary artist Roni Horn and its contemplation of the Icelandic environment that helps bring home to us these pressing ecological issues. Horn's work offers a transitional space in the contemporary where we can connect questions about water, place and the medieval past. Indeed, much of Horn's practice addresses profound and unsettling questions about identity, subjectivity and gender, preoccupations we have long shared.

In this essay, therefore, we will engage with a broad spectrum of ideas of place, the arts and with aspects of the ethics of environmentalism. We include collaboration as a central premise of our work as it is in the environmental humanities as well (Bergthaller, et. al, 2014). We have in mind collaborations across time, space and media, and we focus on intersections of medieval watery places, and ideas of those places, with their modern translations, reworkings and reverberations. Borrowing the principles of excavation, layering, continuity and discontinuity from Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, we are interested in the possible variants that an eco-Foucault, (or Foucault-eco?) perspective might open up.[1] The term "archaeo-ecologies," which we borrowed and adapted from the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, resonates for us, pointing both to histories and futures.[2] With this in mind, Gillian starts in Iceland and Clare in England, as we reflect on recent research, both collectively and separately, and meet somewhere in the middle, in that fluid space of intersubjectivity. What follows, in other words, are two sections which are only arbitrarily separate. Water, the sea, both connects and separates. It is a place where identity is fluid, changing, transitional. It is an ideal place to go fishing, whether for water monsters – or a good story.

Three Icelandic Tales

I went to Iceland in search of a female water monster. More on what I actually found will follow, but first some background about the questions I brought with me, and those that emerged in place. After a long incubation period, I had completed a piece on gender in *Beowulf,* focusing on Grendel's Mother, on the tangle of boundary transgressing that comprises her identity and its depth-charge effect on the entire narrative (see Overing 2010). Human/non-human, emplaced/displaced, water/land, male/female—how are these categories imagined and embodied in the world of that poem, that article asked? So, the aims of my personal fishing expedition in Iceland were, and are, to explore ways to connect the monster/monstrous, and the women, and the past, and the landscape, in a thoroughgoing and fluid exchange where the limits and possibilities of identity and cognition are always in play. To inhabit a place where the other is a given. These questions come in tandem with another longstanding one in early medieval studies: what has place, whether watery or solid, to do with self, and what might medieval places tell us about medieval people and their connection to their physical and cultural landscapes?

My search for this particular Icelandic water monster was not a question, or a matter, of reality. Before I left for Iceland, I talked to one of two Icelanders displaced in the small southern town I presently live in. One had grown up in the neighborhood of Lagarfljót in eastern Iceland, home of said water monster. She called it "the Worm," a term widely used by Icelanders both local and otherwise, who apparently opt for a less formal translation of the Icelandic term "ormur" (serpent or snake).[3] This expat Icelander told me in a matter-of-fact, not to say utterly deadpan tone (an Icelandic speciality): "Oh, I have seen it." Walking home from school by the lakeshore with a

group of her teenage peers, she, and they, saw—and were frightened by—the appearance of a large, Nessie-type cryptid out in the glacial lake. End of story. This is one of many sightings continuously recorded since the creature first appeared in medieval Icelandic annals of 1345, and much has been written and hypothesized since.[4]

The legend of the Lagarfljót monster is a familiar folktale. I quote Sveinn Birkir Bjőrnsson (2008) who himself saw the monster at age seven, and who provides a useful summary in the Icelandic magazine *The Reykjavík Grapevine*:

> As the story goes, a young girl living at a farm by the lake received a gold ring as a gift from her mother. She asked what she should do with the ring, and her mother told her to place it in a chest underneath a worm (in some versions it is a slug), and then the gold would grow with the worm. When she checked on the gold a few days later, the worm had grown so much that the chest could barely contain it anymore. Frightened by the sight of the giant worm, she grabbed the chest and hurled it into the lake, where the worm kept on growing. The Worm soon became a menace that terrorized the region. Helpless against the beast, the farmers in the area called on the help of two Finns (Saami shamans) to contain the beast with spells and witchcraft. The Finns battled the Worm in the lake for a long time. When they emerged, they said they could not overpower the beast, but that they had managed to tie its head and its tail to the bottom, where the worm would stay bound to the end of days, incapable of harming anyone. Both of these legends are common urban myths that have been retold in different versions around the

> world at different times. It is easy to trace the origin of these stories to mythological figures, whether it is Sigurd the Volsung fighting the dragon Fáfnir, retold in Wagner's Niebelungen Ring; the mighty Thor fighting the Midgard Serpent; or Beowulf fighting the sea monster.

Which one? I'll note here that while Beowulf fights a variety of sea-monsters, I had had Grendel's mother firmly in mind as I had begun my thinking, and thus had effectively feminized the Lagarfljót Worm in advance, notwithstanding the masculine grammatical gender of "ormur" or the Icelanders' neutral reference to their Worm as "it." Perhaps I had extrapolated from the mother and daughter's entanglement in the genesis of the story. I had also been struck by the many connections and segues to be made from the female to the (sea)-monstrous collated by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson in his exhaustive study ([1940] 2003) which focuses on the earliest medieval sources and annals. Not only do various versions of the seal-maiden myth pervade Icelandic folklore—reportedly attested to by no less a scholar than Martin Luther—these persist in modernity as well, as we shall see (Sveinsson, 102, n.3). There are also some fascinating Icelandic variants to be found in lakes and rivers, occurring in later seventeenth-century sources. These "giant water-beasts" are all notable for their maternity: the "mother of trout," the "mother of salmon," and the "mother of skate" (Sveinsson, 158). Interesting to note here, perhaps, is that Lagarfljót is a "transitional" body of water; it is a glacial river that runs 140 kilometers from Eyjabakkajökull to the Atlantic Ocean. Before it reaches the ocean, the river forms a 53-square kilometer lake, the alleged home of the Worm. What relation might the body of water have to the body of its inhabitants?[5] The contemporary Lagarfljót monster does not appear to be gendered, however, though it does appear to be a full participant in the town's identity. Bjőrnsson goes on

to discuss a variety of points of view about the monster from academic glaciologists and biologists, and from a concerned group of local citizens who call themselves the Brotherhood of the Worm. The Brotherhood seeks “to maintain testimony and preserve the heritage of the Worm,” and “to market it with dignity.” Whether on account of added-value tourism, or from a long and deeply-felt tradition and respect for this creature and its medieval origins, the worm has an ongoing life and reality of its own.

As I have said, my fishing expedition was not a question, or a matter of, reality. I was interested in the long lasting presence of the “monstrous” in the modern landscape. In previous journeys, I had been struck by the powerful particularity of the contemporary Icelandic relationship to the medieval past, the extent to which it continues to create that past, and is in continuity and dialogue with it via the landscape; the extent to which identity and landscape are in ongoing cultural negotiation, in other words. And of course, returning to my core obsession with Grendel’s Mother, I was interested in the collusion and connection of the monstrous with water, women, and treasure.

A few weeks before I left for Iceland, Clare had seen an installation at the Tate Modern Gallery in London by contemporary artist Roni Horn entitled *You Are The Weather*, which prompted much thought in view of the parallel conversations we had been having about women and water. For the past thirty years, this US-born artist has been creating text, photos, and mixed media art works grappling with Icelandic landscapes, and with the idea of Iceland. Her work, and the questions it raises, struck a deep chord of recognition in both of us, and Clare will be exploring it in more detail in the next section. The installation *You Are The Weather* (1994-96) shows a

hundred photos of the same woman's face as it emerges from various bodies of water, the geothermal pools and springs that are to be found all over Iceland. The staging and positioning of the images in relation to the viewer are keys to the kinetic experience of the work. Much of Horn's other work is sculptural and, as in the case of *You Are The Weather*, the aesthetics of her practice may reverberate in important ways with the dynamic emplacement of pre-Viking Ages stone sculpture in the landscape of Britain and Ireland. Indeed, early medieval monuments such as that at Ruthwell spring to mind. In both cases, being there (wherever there happens to be) is central to the experience of the work (for further discussion, see, e.g., Lees 2007). Water in Horn's installation is context and pretext, the face challenges, threatens, changes, ignores or engages, expresses—what? Hélène Cixous, a collaborator of Horn's, writes: "You are the weather. Nothing is more idiomatic and more surprising than this address. You are the Weather plays between the singularity of the individual and the generality of the weather. What is more, the weather changes. Anything can happen. What characterizes the weather is that it is a series of events. The weather is by definition heterogeneous. The address You is undetermined. There is address, but who is You?" (2007, 9). Other work by Horn continues to tackle this ongoing interactive, dialogic continuum of identity, telling a life in terms of its landscapes. *Weather Reports You* (2007) juxtaposes images of Icelandic places and interviews with Icelanders to build an archive of the relation of identity to weather, and to create stories of lives and places, of lives in place. Armed, then, with these powerful contemporary images and my own longstanding preoccupations and questions, I found some more stories that emerged.

1. Seal Maiden

The first image I saw in the Reykjavik Art Museum addressed immediately the point of my fishing expedition. This was a sound and video installation by Ólőf Nordal, entitled *Seal Maiden*, a contemporary translation of the familiar folk tale.[6] Nordal's image is a headless undulating plastic female form, moving constantly underwater; large pointed breasts with nipples as eyes approach the viewer, linger, then conceal themselves and turn away. The "maiden" is in turn threatening, inviting, contemplative, even evoking a touch of humor, as well as the pathos of captivity, and the diminution of fragmentation and reduction to body parts. The figure is insistently female, but of indeterminate species. Well, I've seen my "female water monster," I thought. Mission accomplished. Other exhibits by well-known Icelandic artist Erro, or the haunting humanoid plasticine forms of Guðrún Vera Hjartardóttir suggest a recurrent contemporary emphasis on the fluctuation and tenuousness of the boundaries between human/non-human, and an attendant fluid positioning of identity.

2. More Women, More Water, and Some Treasure.

In Iceland, water often tells a story. This is a tradition that Roni Horn continues not only with her work but with the founding of the Vatnasafn/Library of Water, where water, books and bodies are combined in a dramatic installation.[7] Contemporary Icelandic guidebooks and medieval sagas are full of anecdotes about various bodies of water—and women.[8] In Kirkjubaejarklaustur in Southeast Iceland, a center of early Christianity and site of a Benedictine convent founded in 1186, the waterfall Systrafoss and the lake Systravatn are named for the convent sisters who lived close by. One of the most popular stories is of two nuns who were bathing in the waterfall (always dangerous one would imagine) and were drowned by reaching greedily into the falls to

grab a gold ring that appeared on a mysterious hand which emerged from the water. Women bathing, at odds over a ring? This recalls another famous rivalry, and bathing scene, this time from the medieval saga of the Volsungs. When Brynhild and Gudrun go down to the Rhine to bathe, a dispute arises initially over what might be inferred as personal space. When Brynhild wades further out into the river than is acceptable, for reasons of protocol and precedence (or perhaps who gets to not bathe downriver from whom), Gudrun takes offense. The conflict eventually blossoms into a full-scale argument between the two queens over their rivalry for Sigurd, after Gudrun reveals, while bathing, the Ring Sigurd had taken from Brynhild (Byock 1990, 100).[9] Where had she hidden it, one would like to know? The bathing scene reveals all. Queens and nuns are outed in the water.

The nuns' apparent greed connects to other "monstrous" behaviors; stories of their licentiousness and blasphemous practices, in some cases resulting in being burned at the stake as witches, circulated through the Reformation, but also perhaps provide added tourist value at those sites today. In South Central Iceland "The Drowning Pool" (Drekkingarhylur) was mandated in 1564 to be the means of execution for female criminals of all types (not just witches) in contrast to the usual beheading or hanging for males. Greed, sex and sorcery combine in these scenarios to provide the means of demonizing women and the ingredients for creating monstrosity: European medievalists might detect persistent and familiar forms of medieval misogyny in this tangle of elements, watery, folkloric and historical (see, e.g., Bennett 2012).

Lastly, a more contemporary story, about another woman and a waterfall. Gullfoss is Iceland's biggest and most dramatic waterfall, and star tourist attraction. In the early twentieth century it

was going to be sold to foreigners for hydroelectric development; a local farmer and his daughter Sigríður Tómasdóttir objected. Sigríður walked a distance of 130 kilometers to Reykjavik to protest the decision and threatened to throw herself into the falls. Her protests were eventually successful when the Icelandic government bought the land and dedicated it as a national monument—and erected a monument at the falls to Sigriður after her death in 1957. Women and water; dying in it, dying for it.

3. *Lagarfljót, Home of the Worm*.

I did not see the water monster in Lagarfljót. Nobody talked much about it, and there were few indications of excessive or exploitative tourist marketing. There is a boat named after the Worm which takes daily trips and occasional dinner cruises out on the lake river. And this is the only craft I saw, on a vast expanse of water full of fish. Skuli Gunnarsson, a spokesman for the Brotherhood of the Worm says that marketing the Worm must be approached with caution: "There is a certain fearful respect for the Worm here. Why do people believe that there is little fish in the lake? You could operate a trawler here; there is so much fish. Why do people believe that the waves and the currents on the lake are stronger than anywhere else? Why do people here believe that fish caught in the lake are inedible? People's belief in the Worm is still quite tangible. Many have seen mysterious objects on the lake. Not all of them have been fully explained" (Bjőrnsson 2008). I do not want to generalize about, or to romanticize this low-key approach to tourism. There are major contrasts elsewhere in Iceland to the Lagarfljót locals' mix of laissez-faire and respect. The areas around the great glacier in Skaptafell National Park and Jökulsárlón, the glacial lake, are a nightmare of unruly parking lots and noisy amphibious boat-

trucks cruising the lake every 30 minutes. But I do want to call attention to how the Lagarfljót community lives both casually and respectfully with its monster—whom I had created as female.

I'll close with another quotation from a written text by Horn (1995), "Her, the Water and Me": "Water carries her image from her. It infuses the trees, the clouds, and the shore. She surrounds me. But water is only the half of it—the other half is the moon, the face, or the evergreen. The other half is the friction and the gravity. The other half is us" (54). The other half of this article will be by Clare.

Anglo-Saxon Moorings

The quotation from *Making Being Here Enough*, with which Gillian closes the first section, is a good place for me to begin. Horn offers us a series of perceptions, which are not quite aphoristic and not quite prosaic or poetic either and so we might say that they are deliberately inter-generic. This is distinctively Horn's mode or terrain: allusive and fragmentary, challenging and paradoxical. This particular quotation draws on the imagistic and on the prosaic in order to offer a meditation on reflection as physical phenomenon *and* cognitive process. Water is both condition and reflection. It is part of the environment and its weather (suffusing the "trees, the clouds, and the shore"), but it is also a subject in its own right (it "carries her image from me"). Yet the reflecting subject is still only "the half of it." The rest, Horn points out, is inter-subjective: it is between "us" and the world, "the friction and the gravity." Place, self and other are inter-related, cognitively and materially, through the expressive power of language which makes associative links between each statement and observation. In search of similar

connections (though expressed in a different narrative mode), Gillian went on a fishing expedition in Iceland, and came back with stories of women, water and watery monsters, whose commonalties are just as important as their differing particularities of place and time. What can the other half of this essay offer by way of an Anglo-Saxon mooring, berth, or indeed reflection, with which to extend the map of these archaeo-ecologies of water and words?

Like Iceland, Anglo-Saxon England, indeed the islands of early medieval Britain and Ireland, are famously territories in and of the sea. Gillian has already pointed out how quickly the water creatures of myth, folk-tale and contemporary cultural imagining get gendered female, in spite of their fluidity of shape and the taxonomic problems this presents. There is, after all, something amorphous and alluring (as well as terrifying) about Grendel's mother, which was Gillian's point of departure for the fishing expedition explored in the first section of this article. Mine is that of the Loch Ness monster, Nessie—another example of how long-lasting and often learned are associations of women and the monstrous in the northern, Western, imaginary. The early seventh-century Latin account of *The Life of St Columba* by Adomnán includes the famous story of Columba's defeat of a river beast (the Latin is "bestia") in the River Ness, which runs from Loch Ness to the sea (this is perhaps another "transitional" body of water like Lagarfljót). The story records how the Irish saint of Iona performed a miracle in demonstration of his power over water and its creatures as well as other peoples. Columba is venerated as an apostle of the Picts as well as one of the twelve apostles of Ireland and this story finds Columba off on his travels. Indeed, the holy man is in transit in Pictish territory when he reaches the river and needs to find a crossing. On the banks of the river, however, he encounters the burial of a local person who had been mauled by a water beast while swimming. The local villagers had attempted a rescue by

boat but had only succeeded in hooking the body and dragging it back to shore. To the astonishment of everyone, Columba commands one of his following to get back into the water, swim to the other side and return with a boat. The swimmer disturbs the water, which alerts the water beast, who rises to the surface, open-mouthed (recalling medieval depictions of hell-mouth) to attack, its appetite already whetted by the first killing (Sharpe 1995, II.27; for the Latin, see Reeves 1857, 140–2). Columba then raises his hand, makes the sign of the Cross and, opening his mouth in turn (though to utter words of God rather than to devour His creatures) he commands the water monster to stop at once and to leave.

It is a very practical solution to a hellish situation: if you need to cross a river, first sort out its beast. The *Life of Columba* offers no indication of the shape, form, nationality or gender of the creature, but Richard Sharpe (1995), the most recent scholarly translator of Adomnán's hagiography, follows convention and tradition by gendering it female. Apart from the fact that Adomnán's water monster surfaces in a river (not a lake or loch), this early medieval river beast seems to have been associated with Nessie, and Scottishness, in the popular imagination only many centuries later (see Sharpe, 176, n.271).[10]

Adomnán's *Life of St Columba* does not offer close parallels to the account of that other better-known swimmer in Anglo-Saxon tradition, Beowulf, who engages a number of terrifying water monsters as well as Grendel's mother. Nevertheless, it does suggest how often shifty figures, whether male or female, or indeed perhaps both, who live in or under the water are repositories of fear and terror for those who live on the land. The association between the hellish and the fishy is much more concrete in the whale of the bestiary tradition, a version of which appears in

the later, tenth-century Old English poetic manuscript of The Exeter Book, as well as in Anglo-Saxon accounts of Hell-mouth, the devilish and Leviathan.[11] Columba himself predicts with terrifying accuracy the surfacing of a whale in the sea between Iona and Tiree in the Scottish Hebrides, which is calmed by a priestly blessing, according to Adomnán. [12] Further hints of this association of the hellish and the monstrous seem to surface in the hooks and ropes the sailors use to draw in the body in the Columban story of the river creature in the Ness. We might note too the fact that the saint appears to use the second swimmer, his follower Luigne moccu Min, as bait or lure. The luring of the beast in the Ness might be read as a contrastive counterpart to those medieval accounts of the deceptively sweet smell of ambergris with which the whale attracts its food as in the bestiary tradition, as recounted in the Old English poem, “The Whale”. It may also be informed by the story of how to hook Leviathan familiar from Job 40.20: “an extrahere poteris Leviathan hamo et fune ligabis linguam eius” (“can you draw out Leviathan with a hook or tie his tongue with a cord?”).[13] In echoing these and other associations, Adomnán’s account of Columba’s mastery of hostile terrain and a fishy monster is as much that of Job and Leviathan as it is that of Christ fishing for men (cf. Matthew 4.19). Indeed, the two scriptural analogues thus reflect one another in the account of the river beast in the *Life*. The amorphous shape-shifting quality of this story—its ability to suggest different spiritual interpretations or mappings—is congruent with its emphasis on the particularities of its place on the edge (on the river bank, in the Ness, between the loch and the sea): the story, like the place itself, is one which encourages us to explore transitions, crossings and intersections.

The earliest medieval sources from Britain and Ireland, therefore, can offer parallels to the Icelandic evidence for a long-lasting fear of and fascination with watery places. In the

shimmering reflections of oceans, rivers and lakes lurk many a monster, sea-troll and river beast. But so too are found there the alluring figures of the selkie, the mermaid and mer-man and even that star of the sea, *stella maris*, the Virgin Mary (for further discussion, see Bennett 2012). The boundary between the mythic, the folktale and the learned and Christian is as permeable in the medieval sources as is that between the monstrously appalling and the exceptionally appealing. Indeed, the one reflects the other, as the monstrous reflects, shades into, the marvellous. In understanding this terrain, its contemporary power, and its aesthetic appeal, Roni Horn's *You Are The Weather* (1994–1996), already mentioned by Gillian, can be our guide. This is as much for its awareness of transitions and crossings between women and water as for its more obvious surface attention to the allure of one particular woman in the waters of Iceland.

You Are The Weather appeared as an artist's book, *Haraldsdóttir*, in 1996 as the sixth volume of Horn's ongoing series of books with the collective title of *Ísland: To Place*. The photographs were taken over a period of six weeks in 1994–1995, and the artist's book accompanied their first installation in Munich in 1996. As a whole, the books comprise strong evidence of Horn's recurrent interest in "experience, identity, and place," as Mark Godfrey puts it (2010). The title of the book identifies the woman in the water as Margrét Haraldsdóttir, and the photographs are to hand in a manner which might playfully recall Heidegger's famous formulation of how our orientation in the world comprises perception of things being "ready-to-hand" as well as "present-to-hand."[14] A second book, *You Are The Weather* was published subsequently in 1997. In the installation of the work at the Tate Modern's retrospective in 2009, *Roni Horn aka Roni Horn*, the one hundred photographs, 255 x 205 mm, of the woman's face and wet hair, in a variety of hot springs in Iceland, were hung slightly higher than eye-level, around the four walls

of a single room. The woman's expression is hard to read. Does she return the gaze or not? What's her mood? Sometimes she seems happy; other times slightly irritated, distant. The effect can be oppressive or refreshingly destabilizing—all those women, the same woman, self-contained, remote, comfortable in her otherness, in the water, in her place—and rather beautiful. The effect of destabilization is related to her partial refusal to meet your gaze—she's looking at something but what or who? And perhaps it is also related to the cumulative effect of the photographs, all one hundred of them looking back, looking back from the water, at someone, *somewhere else*.

That *somewhere else* is enriched and complicated by Horn's return to the subject in 2011, when she produced *Haraldsdóttir, Part Two* as the tenth volume of *Ísland: To Place*, and produced *You Are the Weather, Part Two,* a second series of photographs of the same woman in the same locations and settings fifteen years later.[15] The new work, poised between sameness and difference as part of its own strategy as well as in its relation to the earlier photographs, is again a work of reflection, a meditation, perhaps, on the fact that the "other half is us," that "water is only the half of it—the other half is the moon, the face, or the evergreen," to recall the quotation from *Making Being Here Enough*. But the new work also amplifies the associations between the changeability of the weather and the passing of time in the earlier work. Is *Part Two* a work of memorialisation or a new practice, or something in-between, in transition from old to new, part sequence, part free-standing work, the new installation asks? The deliberate troubling of the relations between past and present, subject and object, self and environment, in these two installations stages a complex relation with the viewer, with me, and with you. But who is this "you," asks Hélène Cixous (2007). Is it me? Her? Or you?

To my mind, Roni Horn's *You Are The Weather*, Parts One and Two, is a brilliantly queer response to two of the central erotic myths of classical literature: that of Aphrodite or Venus, best known from Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," where the Goddess of Love emerges from the sea on a scallop shell, and that of Narcissus, the beautiful young son of Liriope and the river god, Cephisus, who falls in love with his own image in a pool of water, a fate accorded him by Venus (or in some versions, Nemesis) after spurning the love of Echo. In combining both myths, and indeed in reduplicating the work itself, Horn offers a meditation on reflection, repetition and desire. The eroticism of the work, its play with the affect and effect of the weather, with time, with sequencing, with questions of where the woman in the water starts her looking and where yours starts or mine ends, recalls both Venus *and* Narcissus, re-orienting myths of the south in the north, in Iceland. At the same time, by insisting on the importance of place, of Iceland in her work, *You Are The Weather, Part One* and *Part Two* participate in and respond to longer-lasting northern mythologies of women and water.

To move back to that much earlier past, then, and to a reflection in words rather than images, an Anglo-Saxon riddle seems appropriate, given that genre's interest in representation, shape-shifting and the making of meanings. And a riddle that centres on the watery and the womanly seems even better. So here is Riddle 74, from the tenth-century anthology of Old English poetry, the Exeter Book (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 234; translation mine):

> Ic wæs fæmne geong,   feaxhar cwene,
>
> ond ænlic rinc   on ane tid;

fleah mid fuglum   ond on flode swom,

deaf under yþe   dead mid fiscum,

ond on foldan stop, hæfde ferðe cwicu.[16]

(I was a young woman, a gray-haired queen

and a warrior without match—all at once.

I flew with the birds and swam in the sea,

Dived under the waves dead among the fishes

and stepped on the shore—I had a living spirit.)

In apparent contrast to the somewhat plain beauty of its poetry, its stable or uniform alliteration and unadorned vocabulary, Riddle 74 is one of those complicated Anglo-Saxon riddles which have yet to be solved in a way that satisfies all the critics. Suggestions have included the siren (Frederick Tupper Jr's preference), cuttlefish (first suggested by Franz Dietrich), water (Moritz Trautmann), ship's figurehead (Craig Williamson), boat (John D. Niles) and barnacle goose (Daniel Donoghue) (see Niles 1998; Donoghue 1998). There is no need to choose between these solutions, however. For one thing, this riddle-creature is a bit of a hybrid, enjoying a range of possible forms, genders and modes of being in the world, in the water and on land. For another, the genre of the riddle overall addresses the pleasures of interpretation, of making meaning: that is to say, even if the riddle had been solved, the solution would not be the end of the interpretive process. The fact that this particular riddle resists a solution only enhances the desire to reflect on all its possibilities.

Indeed, all at once ("on ane tid"), the creature in Riddle 74 is a young woman, a gray-haired queen and a warrior without equal. This creature is female and male, then, given the grammatical gender of "ænlic rinc." She (or is it he?) can fly with the birds, swim with the fishes, dive under the waves, stand on the shore and he (or is it she?) is dead—though moving among the fishes, stepping on the shore—and yet was once alive. All at once, suggesting simultaneity but also convention ("on ane tid" can also mean "at one time" or "on a certain occasion"), and belonging to the past, as the first two words of the Riddle, "Ic wæs," and each of its verb forms indicate. If this is what the creature once was, who, or what or where is she, he, or it, *now*, asks this riddle. This is a riddle-creature in transition: young and old, queenly and warrior-like, in the air and in the sea, alive and dead, on land and in the water.

Tupper was quick to identify the creature of Exeter Book Riddle 74 as a monstrous hybrid; the classical siren or bird-woman who lures with her deathly song or perhaps a she-falcon with fishy tail, a mermaid even. The siren, who is sometimes bearded and depicted with a male face, is a distant relative of Grendel's mother, I think, who is similarly female and male. Grendel's mother is described as a mighty "merewif," a "water-woman," in line 1519 of *Beowulf*. The noun is glossed a little provocatively as "water-witch" by the editors of the revised Klaeber of 2008, and even more so as "tarn-hag" by Seamus Heaney (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008; Heaney 2002). More sober are "mere-wife" (Chickering [1977] 2006) or "lake-wife" (Swanton 1978), to offer just a couple of other well-known options. The noun "merewif" is a hapax legomenon, found only this once in *Beowulf* in the corpus of Old English. It is a term for a watery woman monster as unique, perhaps, as our warrior without equal or match in Riddle 74: a *mere woman*, if Modern English can handle the pun.

Dietrich's solution to Riddle 74 of "cuttlefish" does not seem anything like as interpretively rich as Tupper's "siren," though it does suggest the fishiness of the poem, and there's something a bit fishy about Grendel's mother too, certainly (see Brant 2009). The solution of "water," first suggested by Trautmann, accommodates the riddle's interest in change and flux: now water (the young woman), next snow (the snow queen?) and ice (the warrior?), though it is hard to imagine this happening at once, on a single occasion ("in ane tid"), unless there is some wordplay on this phrase, and I think there may well be. There are other watery riddles, Exeter Book Riddle 33 and Riddle 69, for example. Riddle 33 is usually solved as "iceberg." Like our Riddle 74, the riddle-creature is a warrior as well as a woman, and this riddle, with its own inner riddle, a vernacular variant of a popular Latin enigma, the "*mater et filia*" riddle, plays fast and loose with kin and gender. Ice becomes water, self-generating; the daughter is her mother: "Is min modor mægða cynnes / þæs deorestan, þæt is dohtor min" ("My mother, of the dearest of maiden kind, is my daughter," Exeter Book Riddle 33, lines 9–10; see also Lees and Overing 2001, 136–7). Riddle 69, "ice" or "iceberg," captures the paradox of water, liquid and solid, place and substance, and seems startlingly modern in its punning on the idea of a body of water. It is one of the great single-line riddles of the corpus: "Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane" ("A wonder was on its way—water was as bone")—that is, if it is a one-line riddle. Riddle 69 is preceded in the manuscript by another, Riddle 68, apparently incomplete or unfinished: "Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran; / heo wæs wrætlic wundrum gegierwed" ("I saw a creature travelling on her way; she was artful, marvellously adorned"). Some interpreters, such as Craig Williamson (1977), read both riddles as one:

Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;

heo wæs wrætlic wundrum gegierwed.

Wundor wearð on wege: wæter wearð to bane.

(I saw a creature travelling on her way;

She was artful, wonderfully adorned.

A wonder was on its way—

water was as bone.)

This interpretive flexibility—Riddle 68 or Riddle 69 (Riddle 66 in Williamson); one riddle or two; a creature dressed appropriately as only Anglo-Saxon women are in Old English poetry, ornate or artfully adorned; a wonder-woman, fluid, like water, like a woman, like bone, ice, a water-woman like Roni Horn's *You Are The Weather*—is entirely to my point.

To come back to Riddle 74, the solution of ship's figurehead, proposed by Williamson, or boat, proposed by Niles, both variants on a theme, nicely capture the motion of the riddle creature, grounded on the shore but floating with the waves, holding a (living) cargo and made of a once living, now inert substance, as well as its gender performance, now woman, now warrior. They add, I think, something absent from the other solutions, which is an element of the artefact or created object as a wonder (although shades of the wondrous are evident in Donoghue's solution of the barnacle goose). Whatever this riddle creature is, therefore, it remains a wonder, a marvel, a created and creative subjectivity. Look, it speaks.[17] Now it is this, now that. In time (once), in

place, one with her environment. Or his. Or its. In challenging our modes of perception and cognition, it becomes apparent that this is no *mere* woman whichever way you look at it.

Conclusion

In this essay we have travelled across place and time: we have been to Iceland and to England, we have strayed into the rivers in Pictish territory and crossed over into Anglo-Saxon poetry in order to map what we have been calling an archaeo-ecology of women and other creaturely beings in and of the water. This has been an interpretive process that draws as much on the present as it does the past and that refuses traditional disciplinary boundaries between the worlds of medieval scholarship, modern popular tales and contemporary art. We have tracked the monstrous and the marvellous across landscapes and seascapes as well as soundscapes, alert to their different languages of representation, visual and verbal. Indeed, in registering the wonder, beauty and allure of these shifty beings as well as their otherworldly and therefore often terrifying power, we hope to have begun a process of recognition, of trans-valuing the artistry and craftiness of what is otherwise called the monstrous. By fishing around, by starting with women and water, we begin to experience the fluidity of these states of being, knowing and seeing, and so grasp how they may hold past and present firmly *in process.* Immersion in and acceptance of such process may in turn suggest new ways that medieval studies might collaborate with the other disciplines of the humanities.

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Notes

[1] Foucault (1972), 192-5, remains important, especially for his account of "other" archaeologies, beyond those by-now familiar ones of sexuality and science.

[2] We also used this title for a conference session, "Archaeo-ecologies of the Medieval: Collaborations in Place," (International Medieval Congress, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2010).

[3] The usage is also reflected in English folk myths such as that of the Bamburgh or Laidly Worm of Northumberland, a female serpent or dragon associated with the sea if not living in it.

[4] See *Skálholts annál 1345* in Storm (1977), 211. See also Sveinsson ([1940] 2003) for discussion of the historical Icelandic familiarity with the Lagarfljót "serpent" and its connections to other forms of the monstrous and/or supernatural, 84–5, 156–8, 296

[5] The relation of water to Norse conceptual mythic schema, to cosmological emplacement and to the concept of the "World Serpent" itself all suggest a thoroughgoing and fluid interchange of these places and states of being. As Clunies Ross (1994) notes, "The element of water, in particular, is both a symbol of and a vehicle for the natural forces that cannot be confined. In keeping with its physical properties as a liquid, water in Old Norse myth belongs to both the vertical and horizontal dimensions, for it flows both across and below, wherever containing shapes exist to hold it. The World Serpent's domicile in a watery medium (whatever its precise geographic location) is thus a symbol of the ubiquity and unavoidability of natural forces" (53). For further discussion of beings who cannot be spatially confined, or categorized, see Clunies Ross, 48–56.

[6] There are many variations to this story, even within Icelandic folklore, of a seal woman who comes ashore and sheds her skin. Seeing her naked, a man falls in love with her, and she

becomes his wife and bears his children. Years later, she finds her skin again, leaves him, and returns to the sea.

[7] The Library is both art installation and archival collection of glacial water from all of Iceland's existing and disappearing glaciers. See http://www.libraryofwater.is/ accessed June 2017).

[8] One of the most reliable, I have found, for both literal directions and literary and historical references is Hloðum (1999).

[9] Our gratitude to Ann Marie Rasmussen for recalling the details of this famous bathing scene

[10] For the modern, popular association of Nessie (the Loch Ness monster) with this story, see, e.g., http://www.nessie.co.uk/htm/about_loch_ness/lochnes.html (last accessed 14 June 2017).

[11] For *The Whale* and its linking of the mouth of the sea-beast with hell, see Krapp and Dobbie (1936, 171–5). The Irish associations of this beast, called Fastitocolan in the Old English poem, presumably a corruption of Aspidochelone, have long been pondered (see, e.g., Krapp and Dobbie, 136). There are modern celebrations as well (see, e.g., Borges and Guerrero 1957, 61–2). Thanks to James Paz for drawing attention to this version. For the later, tenth-century water beast encountered by St Brendan, together with other medieval versions of this famous account, see Barron and Burgess (2002). Anglo-Saxon art is credited with its innovative depictions of hell as the mouth of Leviathan, for which see the Tiberius Psalter (BL Cotton Tiberius C VI, fol. 14) and the discussion by Semple (2003).

[12] See Sharpe 1995, I.19. In this account, the monk Berach asks Columba for his blessing for sea-voyage to Tiree. Columba recommends that he change his route and sail close to land in order to avoid a great sea beast ("aliquot monstruoso perterritus prodigio" Reeves, II.19). The monk ignores the saint's advice and the huge whale ("cetus") rises up, open-mouthed, out of the depths, and the sailors turn back. The next day, the prior Baithéne asks for the saint's blessing

for the same voyage, who predicts the surfacing of the whale a second time. On this occasion, however, Baithéne, having been blessed by Columba, blesses the whale when it appears and the sea with it. The whale accordingly disappears.

[13] See, for example, Ælfric's famous account of fishing for, or rather hooking, the devil in his First Series homily for Psalm Sunday in Clemoes 1997, 296–7; lines 187–94, which are taken from Gregory (see Godden 2000, 110).

[14] In this use of phenomenology, Horn anticipates Ahmed (2006).

[15] For details of the installation see http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/1049/roni-horn-recent-work/view/. Last accessed June 2017.For the book, see Horn (2011).

[16] All references to the Exeter Book riddles are to this edition, by number. The riddle is number 72 in Williamson (1977), where the punctuation is slightly different.

[17] It is worth noting in this context that when the terrifying whale in *The Life of Columba* surfaces, the reader is invited to look: "et ecce cetus" ("and lo, a whale") (see Reeves 1857, I. 13).