

Ragnarøk: An Elegy

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In a world where names of cosmic significance are daily degraded to the level of mere lexis, *Ragnarøk* long remained above the fray. Now, it too has lost its onomastic grandeur as meaning ‘the fall of the gods and civilization after an all-inclusive battle between the Jætter and the Æsir’ and has been brought down to mundane lexical use as ‘really big mess’ by a Danish detective novel and its English translation. Could the fall of *Ragnarøk* signal the Twilight of End of Times terminology? Will *Gotterdamerung* be the next mighty name to fall? All things — even our names for them — finally pass.

KEYWORDS Ragnarøk, religious and mythological names, lexicalization of names, libfixing, *The Elder Edda*, *Kvinden i Buret*, *The Keeper of Lost Causes*, Jussi Adler-Olsen

Occasionally, names shift functionally to become lexical items, but not often. As one estimate has it, grammatical shifting or conversion accounts for only 6 percent of neologisms (Algeo, 1991: 14/a), and shifting from name to noun is only a fraction of that. So, the seventeenth-century executioner Derrick gave his name up to the common noun for ‘gallows’ (*OED* s.v. **derrick** in sense 1), which was later extended to ‘machine used to move heavy things’ (*OED* s.v. **derrick** in sense 2); the proprietary name *Google* finds itself unable to resist nonproprietary usage as a verb meaning ‘use a search engine,’ the search engine in question usually being Google, but not, as the *OED* definitions suggest, always. The etymologies are explained in the *OED* and many another dictionary.

Such lexical repurposing of names is perhaps unsurprising, for the names mean little except to the bearers and owners of the names; for the rest of us, they are simply material of the language, to be employed as speakers see fit. Some names, however, are especially powerful, mythically or theologically significant, and are therefore — or so we think — less likely to suffer everyday lexicality. *Yom Kippur* and *Easter*, for instance, or *Gotterdamerung*, the *Apocalypse*, and *Ragnarøk* should remain names for exactly what they have always and only denoted. If everything tends towards everyday use, if no name is sacrosanct, these ought to be among the last so debased. Once they are, the end is near.

Even names restricted originally to a single event have become generalized, especially in twentieth- and twenty-first-century usage. The *OED* (s.v. **apocalypse** in sense 1) records fully naturalized *Apocalypse* ‘outcome of St. John of Patmos’ revelation’ as early as 1400, and by extension as “Any revelation or disclosure” at about the same time, in 1384 (s.v. **apocalypse** in sense 2), but later from 1894–1994 in the sense ‘cataclysm,’ which occurs “Also in weakened use,” as the *OED* puts it (s.v. **apocalypse** in sense 3.b). So, a character in Jane Gardam’s novel *Last Friends* can reflect, “Edward would have had an apocalyptic fit if he’d thought that Betty had ever embraced a woman” (Gardam, 2013: 127). The adjective *apocalyptic* weakens *Apocalypse* or even *apocalypse* enough — as Anderson (2007: 2000) notes, conversion from name to noun “involves a grammatically unsystematic selection of ‘attributes’” — but *apocalyptic* as a confused substitution for *apoplectic* — literally, a joke — is weaker still.

Similarly, *Armageddon* refers to “The place of the last decisive battle at the Day of Judgement,” according to the *OED* (s.v. **armageddon**), but is “hence used allusively for any ‘final’ conflict on a great scale,” the extended sense illustrated by six quotations from 1811–1928. The last two of these, from a letter of Ford Maddox Ford (1917) and Warwick Deeping’s novel *Old Pybus* (1928) pertain to World War I. Richard Hannay, in John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, predicts that context:

They were full of the row in the Near East, and there was an article about Karolides, the Greek Premier. I rather fancied the chap. From all accounts he seemed the one big man in the show; and he played a straight game too, which was more than could be said for most of them. I gathered that they hated him pretty blackly in Berlin and Vienna, but that we were going to stick by him, and one paper said that he was the only barrier between Europe and Armageddon. (Buchan, 1988 [1915]: 9)

Luckily, that war was not final, nor was the next. But *Armageddon* loses some of its significance if it is proposed as a term for war after war.

Names for the End of Time or the Final Battle, whether *Apocalypse* or *Armageddon* or *Twilight of the Gods*, derive a certain dignity from the gravity of the thing to which they refer, but contemporary habits of word formation strip that dignity further than commonplace conversion, to its very bark and rind. Arnold Zwicky (2010) identifies one habit as “libfixing,” in which “the ‘liberation’ of parts of words [...] to yield word-forming elements that are semantically like the elements of compounds but are affix-like in that they are typically bound.” Libfixing yields items like *Obamageddon*, by which Robert Stein on his blog *The Moderate Voice* (December 6 2012) referred to Barack Obama’s re-election as President of the United States: “A month after Obamageddon, survivors of the ruins start makeovers for another presidential faceoff” (Zimmer and Carson, 2012: 503).

Libfixing has received a fair amount of attention among linguists. Mark Liberman (June 21 2011), for example, collects a number of *-pocalypse* forms in a post on *Language Log*, beginning with the infrequent but well attested item *sportspocalypse* ‘catastrophic event in the world of sports’. He quotes Owen Good (February 26 2011) on synonyms in “Your Guide to Video Gaming’s Sportspocalypse 2011”: “Sportspocalypse. Sportsmageddon. Spörtsnarök? Whatever you want to call it, the coming month is packed with sports video game releases — a seven-way showdown

of licensed sports titles in a month that normally sees only two baseball games.” It seems unlikely that when John of Patmos forecast the final battle for dominion over all creation he had any sport in mind, least of all sports-themed videogames. Nevertheless, great events have been reduced to quotidian scope by means of everyday lexical use and creativity.

From American experience, heavily laden as it is with Biblical language, *-pocalypse* and *-mageddon* libfixing are plausible enough, but *-narök* from *Ragnarök*, the name of the final, cataclysmic battle in Norse mythology, strikes one as incredible. Barely an American has heard of *Ragnarök*, let alone used *Ragnarök* in a sentence. The foreignness of it is emphasized by the no doubt humorously proposed extra diacritical mark in *Spört-*, which follows in a long tradition of what some linguists have come to call the heavy metal umlaut or rök döt (Spitzmüller, 2012: 270–272). *Ragnarök* seems least likely of all the grand end-time names to be humbled by ordinary lexical conversion, except perhaps for German *Götterdämmerung*, in which the umlauts are authentic.

Yet humbled it has been, for in Jussi Adler-Olsen’s Danish detective novel, the first in the Department Q series, *Kvinden i Buret* [= *The Woman in the Cage*] (2008: 14), Detective Carl Mørck’s office is described as follows: “Det var kun i situationer som lige før, hvor lokalet havde været stuvende fuldt af nære og stærkt observerende medarbejdere, der måtte kante sig omkring slidte rulleborde og dynger af sagsmateriale, at han betragtede sit kontors ragnarok med en vis ærgrelse.” For those who do not read Danish, Lisa Hartford has provided an English translation, in *The Keeper of Lost Causes* (2011: 8), the English version of Adler-Olsen’s novel: “It was only in situations like the one that had just occurred, when the room was crammed with superattentive colleagues who had been forced to sidle around worn-out document carts and heaps of case materials, that he regarded the ragnarok of his office with a certain dismay.”

This general sense of *ragnarok* “mess” appears to be a fairly recent innovation in Danish. *Den Danske Ordbog* (2005), a standard dictionary, defines *ragnarok* first, as expected, in the onomastic sense: “gudernes og menneskeverdenens undergang efter en altomfattende kamp mellem jætter og aser” [= ‘the fall of the gods and civilization after an all-inclusive battle between the Jætter and the Æsir’] and more transparently as “apocalypse, dommedag, eskatologi.” The second sense is more general — “voldsom tumult” [= ‘violent tumult’], but not as general or as semantically weakened as to mean simply ‘mess.’ Bilingual dictionaries do not include *ragnarok* among the equivalents of *mess* (see, for instance, Nielsen, 1998). In the case of Carl Mørck’s office, *ragnarok* seems to mean something like ‘really big, almost inconceivable mess.’

Ragnarok ‘really big mess’ may be Adler-Olsen’s innovation, but Carl Mørck’s office — however messy — is not the end of the world. If using *ragnarok* ‘really big mess’ diminishes *Ragnarök* in Danish, consider how debased the term has become when used to mean ‘really big mess’ in English. In America, next to no one worships the Norse gods, though readers are more likely, I suppose, to learn about *Ragnarök* and reflect on last things when they try to look *ragnarok* up in a dictionary. Will they appreciate the incongruity between name and word, or will they barely register the conversion and its semantic implications? After all, though rare relative to other

word-formative processes, name to noun conversion is familiar enough, and many readers of the detective novel will care little about the mythological resonance of the name, only a whisper of which remains in Adler-Olsen's usage.

In the *Elder* (or *Poetic*) *Edda*, Ragnarøk is grim, indeed.

Gól um ásom	Gullinkambi,
sá vecr hqlða	at Heriafqrðrs;
enn annarr gelr	fyr iqrð neðan,
sótrauðr hani,	at sqlom Heliar.
[...]	
Bræðr muno beriaz	oc at bqnom verðaz,
muno systrungar	sífiom spilla;
hart er í heimi,	hórdómr mikill,
sceggqld, scálmqld,	scildir ro klofnir
vindqld, vargqld,	áðr verold steypiz;
mun engi maðr	qðrom þyrma.
[...]	
Sól tér sortna,	sígr fold í mar,
hverfa af himni	heiðar stiqrnor;
geisar eimi	við aldrnara,
leicr hár hiti	við himin síalfan. (Kuhn, 1962: 10–11, 13–14)

Or, in English translation,

Over the Æsir, there crowed Golden-comb,
 Who wakes the warriors at Host-father's home;
 another crows beneath the earth,
 a soot-red cock in the halls of Hel.
 [...]
 Brothers will struggle and slaughter each other,
 and sisters' sons spoil kinship's bonds.
 It's hard on earth: great whoredom;
 axe-age, blade-age, shields are split;
 wind-age, wolf-age, before the world crumbles:
 no one shall spare another.
 [...]
 The sun turns black, land sinks into sea;
 the bright stars scatter from the sky.
 Flame flickers up against the world tree;
 fire flies high against heaven itself. (Orchard, 2011: 11 and 13)

The cocks crow, and all hell breaks loose. The Seeress foretells the conflagration at the end of time, as the Norse understood it; she does not notice Carl Mørck's office in twenty-first-century Copenhagen, nor does she comment on it in her prophecy.

But the descent from *fornyrðislag* or 'old poetry meter' to the cadences of police procedural is, if disappointing, cosmically instructive. We learn from it that this is the way the world ends: not with an onomastic bang, but a lexical whimper.

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