

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Module code: HPCA7028 Module title: Sacred Skies	Student ID number: 2430008	Educational support needs: Yes/No
Assignment title: A critical comparison of two secondary sources		
Assignment due date: Apr 7, 2026		
This assignment is for the module of the degree 1 st ☐ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐		
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast “What Do the Gods Call the Sky? Naming the Celestial in Old Norse.” by Signe Cohen, and “Altair & Vega, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth.” by Morag Feeney Beaton. These two essays examine the associations of specific cultures with various celestial phenomena and the inherent fluidity of humanity’s understanding of them. In this essay, each essay will be examined by introducing the author and their background, the subject matter of the paper, the paper’s resources and their validity, the paper’s arguments and conclusion, and general strengths and weaknesses before examining the synchronicities and differences of the two papers and what they reflect about cosmology in various cultures.

OVERVIEW OF ESSAYS

What Do the Gods Call the Sky? Naming the Celestial in Old Norse.

The author of the first essay, Signe Cohen, is a professor of religious studies with an extensive academic history studying Sanskrit. Her main research interests are Hinduism and South Asian Buddhism. Much of her work has focused on the classical Upanisad, which according to Cohen, is “a genre of Hindu philosophical and religious texts composed in Sanskrit from around the 8th century BCE onwards. The Upanisads are linguistically and conceptually complicated texts, but they are key to understanding the most foundational ideas of Hinduism, such as karma, reincarnation, and salvation through knowledge.”¹ As discussed later in this paper, Cohen draws on her expertise in ancient spiritual texts to inform her analysis of the linguistic nuances of the *Alvissmal*. *What Do the Gods Call the Sky*, is one such article where Cohen embeds deities, myths, and motifs from Sanskrit literature with their ancient Indo-European counterparts to expand academic conversation.²

In Cohen’s words, “this paper argues that the various sets of non-human worlds for celestial features in *Alvissmál* hint at an underlying awareness that the celestial world does not necessarily carry a fixed meaning, but can be imbued with a range of different interpretations based on the observer’s culture and environment.”³ Cohen’s paper primarily illustrates the

¹ Signe Cohen - Classics, Archaeology, and Religion. n.d. Missouri.edu <<https://car.missouri.edu/people/cohen-s>> [accessed March 16, 2026]

² Ibid.

³ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky? Naming the Celestial in Old Norse." *Culture and Cosmos: The Talking Sky* 24, no. 1 and 2 (2020), p. 27.

linguistic description and diverse vocabulary of the celestial world in Old Norse, rather than offering a direct comparison with Sanskrit. In terms of comparative messaging, Cohen notes that “the idea that gods, humans, dwarves, giants, and other beings have different words for the same phenomena is not unique to this Old Norse text.”⁴ She goes on to cite “in the sacred text *Avesta* from Iran, dating to around 1000 BCE, the gods (*ahura*) and demons (*daeva*) use different words for the same concepts and objects.”⁵

Cohen’s paper goes on to focus on comparing the lexicons amongst Old Norse texts, noting commonalities such as “the world ascribed to humans in Old Norse texts, *jord*, is a common Old Norse word for ‘earth’, attested both in prose texts such as Snorri’s *Edda* and *Egil’s Saga*, and in the verses of the *Volsupa*.”⁶ To support her arguments, Cohen analyzes each stanza of the poem to provide a narrative understanding of Old Norse language and mythology. In this analysis, she draws on various texts and translations of other Old Norse literature to support her academic arguments, which center on the varied words for celestial phenomena used by human and non-human beings. Ultimately, Cohen’s paper focuses on linguistic choices affiliated with various human and non-human beings through a poetic narrative to argue a fluid meaning of cosmos.

When looking at the structure of the paper, it follows a general structure that aligns closely, but not exactly, with the parameters of a research paper set out by Hennink, et. al. According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, research papers are often structured using a variety of headings, such as title, abstract, aims & purpose, review of literature, analysis & discussion, and summary and conclusion.⁷ Cohen first introduces the paper with an abstract and explains the rationale behind choosing *Alvíssmál* as the main focus. The paper goes on to explore each stanza of the poem, expanding on the essay's goal to illustrate that there is no fixed meaning to the words used to describe the celestial world, before offering a conclusion. Where the paper structurally falls short is the lack of headers and subheadings. Cohen's paper follows a structure similar to that of Hennink et. al. suggest, however, the absence of these headings gives the ability to follow where Cohen is at in her analysis.

Throughout the essay, Cohen uses a range of academic sources to support her arguments which are all scholarly in nature. The footnotes throughout the essay reveal she has used essays

⁴ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?" p.28.

⁵Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", 28.

⁶Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p. 30.

⁷ Hennink, Monique, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey. 2020. *Qualitative Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (SAGE Publications) p.296

on the historical implications of Old Norse poetry & translations, Old Norse mythology, Indo-European linguistics, complementary Norse poems to illustrate linguistic parallels, and text analyzing *Alvissmal* written by other academics. Cohen's use of texts that relate directly to her topic from academic institutions give validity to her arguments and claims. Each of the sources Cohen uses is either a translation of *Alvissmal*,⁸ a study on Indo-European mythology,⁹ an Old-Norse text that uses similar language to *Alvissmal*,¹⁰ or a paper on Indo-European lexicon that can be found in poems like *Alvissmal*. By focusing her primary and secondary sources on text that directly relate to her research question, Cohen is able to supplement her arguments effectively and according to academic standards.¹¹

With these references in mind, Cohen concludes by arguing the notion that the poem *Alvissmal* supports the idea that the interpretation of the cosmos is reflective of the observer's experiences.¹² Cohen goes on to say that the varying names used to describe the world, and the rare word choices found in *Alvissmal* "help destabilize the notion that the cosmos has a fixed inherent meaning of any kind."¹³ This statement is supported by other literature, namely that of John McKinnell. McKinnell argues that "learning the names given to natural and other phenomena by the various mythological races is not merely a waste of time, but actively damaging to anyone who engages in it."¹⁴ McKinnell highlights the irony of the poem's narrative structure with this statement, and goes on to argue that the poem would have resulted in ambiguous understandings from the original audience of this poem: which again supports Cohen's claim that the cosmos has no fixed meaning.¹⁵

Additionally, Cohen's conclusion could be a direct reference to the work of Lennart Moberg, which Cohen cited as footnote 7, and 16.¹⁶ The last paragraph of Cohen's essay states, "Taken together, these different visions of the world, conveyed through the rare words of *Alvissmal*, help destabilize the notion that the cosmos has a fixed inherent meaning of any kind."¹⁷

In Moberg's essay they note

⁸ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p. 28.

⁹ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p.30.

¹⁰ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p.31.

¹¹ Bell, J., Waters, S., & Johnson, H. (2018). Doing your research project (8th ed.). Open University Press. p. 141

¹² Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p. 35.

¹³ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p. 36.

¹⁴ McKinnell, John, 'Useless Knowledge? The Paradox of *Alvissmal*', *Saga-Book*, 41, (2017). p.79

¹⁵ McKinnell, John, 'Useless Knowledge?' p.80

¹⁶ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", p. 30 & 34.

¹⁷ Cohen, Signe. "What Do the Gods Call the Sky?", 27–36.

“The poem's most important and interesting aspect remains obvious enough, i.e. that the poem hinges on the notion of separate languages for gods and other supernatural beings (giants, dwarves, etc.). Parallels-principally the notion of a divine language, divorced from that of men - have been found elsewhere: in Greek (Homer), Old Indian and Celtic.”¹⁸

Moberg goes on to say that “the words of men are throughout the common prosaic names that are still used today” and “the words of the gods and supernatural powers for the most part belong higher up the stylistic scale.”¹⁹ Both Cohen and Moberg’s note of the stylistic differences between the words used by humans, gods, and other supernaturals highlights the individualized expression of natural and celestial phenomena.

One strength of Cohen’s paper is her specific use of sources that aid in a colloquial understanding of Old Norse language and mythology. Her focus on the primary source *Alvissmal* is well supported throughout the essay by sources that compliment her understanding of and subsequent arguments of the poem’s implications on the meaning of the celestial world. Additionally, using complementary poems from similar time periods help to support arguments surrounding the meaning of the Old Norse translations, while adding credibility to her own arguments in her conclusion. Conversely, Cohen could have benefitted from exploring secondary sources that refer to the cultural implications of the time period in which *Alvissmal* was written, or current nordic culture. She often refers to said gods, and other non-human entities, but doesn’t expand on how colloquial these figures were to the greater Old Norse culture. Additionally, by offering up some references to the ways in which the modern day understands or uses this languages could have provided for a unique insight into the evolution of this cosmological lexicon.

Altair and Vega, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth.

The author of the second essay, Morag Feeney Beaton, is a graduate of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, receiving a distinction in the Master’s of Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. She brings her background in costume and theatre into her research, focusing on textiles and the cosmology of creation textiles. Her research is directed to “what she calls ‘the anthropology of the everyday’, about how ritual and symbolic elements are manifested within

¹⁸ Moberg, Lennart, ‘The Languages of Alvissmal’, *Saga-Book*, Vol. 18 (1970-1973), p.301

¹⁹ Moberg, Lennart, ‘The Languages of Alvissmal’, p.301

daily life.”²⁰ Presumably to support her own personal interests and experience with textiles, the subject matter of this paper are the elements of the ancient Chinese myth of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*.

The primary argument of Feeney Beaton’s paper is that “the legend can be considered a living myth, in that it gives rise to contemporary festivals in several cultures in East Asia, which are inspired by folklore and traditional customs.”²¹ The paper focuses on the position of the stars Altair and Vega and their direct congruence to the myth of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*. Using secondary sources, she retells the story of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, while discussing the symbolic ties to East Asian culture and festivals. Feeney Beaton explains that, in the myth, the sky princess, Zhih Nu, is responsible for “weaving the heavens.”²² As Feeney Beaton describes, she falls in love with a mortal upon leaving the sky and abandons her responsibilities, she and her lover are punished and transformed into the two stars, Altair and Vega, forced to be separated by the Milky Way.²³

Feeney Beaton explains a variety of myths to supplement the importance of the weaver in ancient mythology. Bringing her connection to textiles forward, Feeney Beaton offers the perspective that the “weaver girl” or “sky princess” is found across multiple cultures, each practicing roles and activities similar to those of a goddess or divine being.²⁴ The paper focuses on a variety of mythological, cultural, and experiential details that add nuance to its argument. By explaining the significance of each character in Chinese culture, the inherent characteristic of multiplicity in Chinese mythology, the impact of oral retelling, and enrichment of localized variations, Feeney Beaton is able to weave a narrative that explains and rationalizes her understanding of her chosen myth as a living one. Through a structural analysis of the story, Feeney Beaton delves deeper into the specifics of the cultural, cosmological, and material influences revealed in the myth, focusing on Stage 1. The Sky, Stage 2. The Earth, and Stage 3. The Return: exile and reunion.²⁵

Feeney Beaton follows a clear and logical structure. The paper is formatted with headers, and subheaders throughout allowing a typical structure of an academic report. The use of headers

²⁰ Speakers - Sophia Centre Conference 2017. n.d. Sophia-project.net

<<https://sophia-project.net/conferences/The-Talking-Sky/speaker-feeney-beaton.php>> [accessed March 30, 2026]

²¹ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, an Analysis of a Living Sky-Myth." *Culture and Cosmos: The Talking Sky* 24, no. 1 and 2 (2020): p.55

²² Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.56

²³ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.56

²⁴ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.58

²⁵ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.61-63

such as “the cosmology within weaving,” “Zhih Nu and Chinese Mythology,” and others makes it clear to the reader when the essay is making transitions from one topic to another. Organizing the main components of her academic report in this way clearly illustrates Feeney Beaton’s academic rationale, procedural detail, and academic rigor.²⁶ As mentioned earlier, the paper relies heavily on secondary sources to present and support her argument. That said, Feeney Beaton has used a variety of academic and peer-reviewed essays to supplement the arguments in her paper. Primarily, her essay uses other academic papers from notable universities, such as University of Chicago, Columbia University, John Hopkins, etc.²⁷ The use of peer reviewed articles from other academic institutions helps to add to the validity of her paper, and having used a high volume of references provides ample evidence that her arguments can be cross-examined by the works of others.²⁸

The conclusion of the essay is a clear reaffirmation of Feeney Beaton’s aim at analyzing the living sky-myth of The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. As previously stated, her paper uses a sufficient number of primary and secondary sources to support her arguments throughout. In her conclusion, she recaps the general themes of the information presented while offering additional insights into the fluidity of contemporary festivals, all of which tie back to the same myth: that of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*.

One significant support to Feeney Beaton’s argument is the notion that mythological adaptation could, in theory, all be derived from the same ancient myths. According to Julien d’Huy, the adaptation of myths is something that can be traced back to the Paleolithic period.²⁹ Throughout history, celestial phenomena have inspired a multitude of cultures’ understandings of the universe and the stories associated with them have changed over time, but often revert back to the same fixed positions of the stars. d’Huy notes that many tales tied to the cosmos origins can be traced back by “by linking oral stories and legends passed down from generation to generation to motifs that appear in Paleolithic rock art images.”³⁰ This notion of all myths dating back to a pre-historic time would support the claims made by Feeney Beaton that because of

²⁶ Hennink, et. al. *Qualitative Research Methods*, p.296.

²⁷ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.57

²⁸ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.72

²⁹ d’Huy, Julien, “The Evolution of Myths” *Scientific American*, Vol. 315, No. 6 (2016), p. 62

³⁰ d’Huy, Julien, “The Evolution of Myths”, p. 62

nature of how myths are passed down in East Asian cultures, which is primarily oral in nature, has created a richly localized understanding of *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*.³¹

Feeney Beaton's paper is arguably incredibly strong. Between the significant support from rigorous referencing, and a clear academic structure, the paper has few places for criticism. Each section builds upon the last, offering an increasingly refined understanding of how the story of The Cowherd and The Weaver Girl have provided a rich cultural history that is constantly evolving. The paper's greatest strength would be its critical analysis of nuanced facets of East Asian culture, mythology, and contemporary festivals to support her arguments. Feeney Beaton relies heavily on developing a theoretical framework grounded in a deep understanding of the intricacies of how myths have influenced East Asia at both the cosmological and practical levels.

In terms of weakness, the most significant would be the lack of primary sources, particularly around the myth itself. While this is specifically mentioned within the essay, adding to the precision of Feeney Beaton's argument, a specific story to refer back to, the reader may question what themes and facets of the myth are truly integrated into East Asian culture, and which are derivative of theoretical academic analysis.³² This issue, however, is raised in Feeney Beaton's paper, which questions the lack of a primary source for the myth. According to Feeney Beaton, upon sampling a group of English-speaking Chinese & Japanese individuals, she found that issues of translation, inconsistencies in the main characters, and alternative narrative accessories were the clearest points creating inconsistencies in a single translation of the myth itself. That said, the informants drew on the festival's astronomical significance, which ultimately creates a central theme of Altair & Vega more than of The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.³³

COMPARISON OF ESSAYS

With the understanding that cosmology is a place where the philosophical notions associated with both science and theology interact,³⁴ it is important to consider what both these papers are trying to say about the cosmos. Upon review of both texts, it is apparent that the central theme that binds these two papers is a cosmological fluidity that exists uniquely for each persona and culture. Each paper represents how individuals and cultures experience the same

³¹ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.59

³² Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.59

³³ Feeney Beaton, Morag. "Altair and Vega" p.71

³⁴ Drees, Willem B. "Cosmology as Contact between Science and Theology." *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 63, no. 1/3 (2007): p. 533

celestial phenomena, while deriving subtle differences from their own lived experiences in interpreting them. With cosmology as an extension of natural history,³⁵ the retelling of these stories constitutes historical documentation of ancient cultures, lived experiences, and understandings of the universe.

Both of the essays touch on the importance and prevalence of oral retelling in how cultures understand the fixed phenomena of the universe. For Cohen, focusing on the linguistic fluidity of Old Norse “serve a very specific literary function and hint at an underlying idea that the cosmos does not carry a fixed meaning.”³⁶ Cohen recognizes the importance of the common and uncommon Old Norse language being used to describe the same experiences because it reveals the world through the eye of the beholder, and expands our understanding of how the universe can be perceived. For Feeney Beaton, using *The Cowherd and The Weaver Girl* as the basis for exploring East Asian mythology associated with the fixed stars Altair & Vega helps to illuminate the “numerous forms and disparate elements” of each localized community's variation of said myth because of the significance of oral retelling as opposed to written text to support the mythic lineage.³⁷ Ultimately, each essay reinforces the notion that every culture and individual within that culture's understanding of the cosmos is going to have variation based on their vocabulary, how stories were told to them, and the evolution of myth-based events celebrated by them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these essays, while focusing on different aspects of mythological storytelling, create a joint narrative that interprets the cosmos and celestial phenomena as a living embodiment of the human experience. One could argue that interpreting celestial phenomena through a cosmological lens is akin to interpreting art. Each experience will lead the viewer to understand themselves and the world around them more deeply by deriving symbolic meaning and creating personal narratives of what is presented by the heavens or by the artist.

Both Cohen and Feeney Beaton chose to discuss various historical cosmological stories and the interpretations of those narratives as reflections of the person viewing them and of the culture carrying forth the mythological lineage. Even with a fixed text, both papers argue that

³⁵ Drees, Willem B. “Cosmology as Contact between Science and Theology.” p. 534

³⁶ Cohen, Signe. “What Do the Gods Call the Sky?” p. 27–36.

³⁷ Feeney Beaton, Morag. “Altair and Vega” p.60

one's understanding of the universe is going to waver contingent on what they have experienced and how they perceive the world. This has allowed for myths like *The Cowherd and The Weavergirl* to exist for centuries, taking on new nuances as time passes and oral retelling naturally adapts to where the story is being told, **and** for the characters within poems, like *Alvissmal*, to be able to hold their own unique language for the world around them while simultaneously living in that world.

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