



BOOK REVIEW:
*The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We
Think*

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Larrington, Carolyne. *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think*. Thames & Hudson, 2023. ISBN 978-0-500-25234-5.

Carolyne Larrington, Professor of Medieval European Literature at the University of Oxford, demonstrates persuasively in *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* that “the Norse gods and heroes ... are certainly having a moment, but it is a moment that has lasted a good 300 years” (287). In doing so, Larrington puts current literary, ludic, and cinematic adaptations of Norse mythology into a nuanced historical framework. Well organized and clearly written with many illustrations, a pronunciation guide, a useful index, and an annotated list of further reading in lieu of footnotes, *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* models how an academic can engage a broader public. Larrington wears her vast erudition lightly, ranges widely, and shares her excitement about the novels, games, and movies she discusses. Larrington expands here the scope of inquiry she began with *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of “Game of Thrones”* (2015) and *All Men Must Die: Power and Passion in Game of Thrones* (2021), adding her thoughts to those proposed by other scholars of Norse myth adaptation, such as Neil Price, Heather O'Donoghue, Jón Karl Helgason, Tom Shippey, Tom Birkett, and Roderick Dale (all referenced by Larrington). While I will discuss the book's relevance for scholars of fantasy literature and films, I note that *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* will also interest mythographers, and folklorists more generally; historians of ideas (especially those analyzing “medievalism,” “a usable past,” and “fakelore” / “folkloresque”); and researchers within media studies, genre and translation studies, and literary reception theory.

The book's ten chapters each focus on one theme from Norse mythology and/or actual Viking history, presenting the original tales and histories and then analyzing their modern reception and interpretations. Larrington deploys the concept of myth both as a historical belief-system and as modern understandings based on spurious premises or misguided readings. As a result, the chapters focus on Yggdrasil ("A Green Myth"), Valhalla ("The Myth of Undying Fame"), Odin ("The Wanderer in Search of Wisdom"), Thor ("The Myth of the Superhero"), Loki ("The Monstrous Brood"), Vikings and Berserkers ("Myths of Masculinity"), Sigurd ("The Myth of the Monster-Killer"), Ragnarr Shaggy-Breeches ("The Myth of Viking Conquest"), Vinland ("The Myth of American Colonization"), and Ragnarök ("The Myth of the End"). Larrington has a gift for condensing complex material without sacrificing necessary detail and documentation. She deftly describes how the Norse myths and legends were transmitted to the present-day, beginning with Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus, and Snorri Sturluson. She is especially insightful describing the European 18th century's interest in "the Gothic" (e.g., Paul-Henri Mallet's two works in French on Danish history and Scandinavian myth, Thomas Percy's translation of these into English, and Anna Seward's paraphrase of *Hervör's Saga*) and the 19th century's European and American attempts to restore an imagined, pre-industrial past (prominent among many others Larrington discusses Esaias Tegnér, George Webbe Dasent, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Richard Wagner, H. Rider Haggard, and William Morris). Larrington makes similarly salient points in her overview of how the Nazis misappropriated Norse mythology and in her suggestions on how best to contest its current misinterpretation and misuse. In each chapter, Larrington delves into several fantasy and/or historical novels, games, and films, analyzing how their authors reimagine Norse myths and how the myths play with or against modern sensibilities. She focuses on work by George R. R. Martin, Neil Gaiman, Joanne Harris, Melvin Burgess, A. S. Byatt, Diana Wynne Jones, Genevieve Gornichec, Francesca Simon, Amanda Knox, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Douglas Adams, as well as Marvel comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). In addition to these, she refers also to authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Alan Garner, K. L. Armstrong and M. A. Marr, Rick Riordan, and H. P. Lovecraft – and even brings in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and music by Sigur Rós, Led Zeppelin, and Wardruna.

Students of the fantastic will value Larrington's many critical insights, especially those that highlight the meta-historical and the formation of identity. For instance, Byatt's *Ragnarok: The End of the World* (2011) is "a complex meditation on memory, the natural world and environmental collapse, communicated through her adult revisiting of the book that awakened and shaped ...a strongly northern identity" (47). In another chapter, Larrington devotes 12 pages to Valkyries and shield maidens, cautioning against rash interpretations based on suggestive but still inconclusive archaeological evidence of women as warriors: "we now understand enough about the complicated social roles operational in Viking Age society to realize that social identities were not necessarily stable and fixed throughout a lifetime" (77). "For Gaiman and for the Marvel writers," asserts Larrington, "Óðinn lingers as a relic from a time before men turned irrevocably to new gods...Óðinn speaks now to a patriarchal order that is played out, to a model of heroic masculinity...that no longer convinces" (103). As another example of this, she points out that "as a

director of Maori heritage, [Taika] Waititi was acutely aware of the symbolism of the hammer in contemporary ‘cosmic right’ circles and thus removed it from Thor’s arsenal” (120). Larrington supports her thesis that Loki “has become [i.e., in the past 40 years] a figure of sympathetic interest, capable of being imagined with an unusual suppleness” (127), with astute analyses of the MCU and of novels by Simon, Harris, Jones, and Gornichec, concluding that “Loki’s antihero status [and gender-fluidity], particularly as characterized against Thor’s brand of traditional masculinity, has generated an enthusiastic fandom that is deeply interested in gender identity and sexual difference” (146).

Most importantly, Larrington foregrounds how and why the claims upon Norse mythology made by racists and authoritarians are false. Throughout the book, she deconstructs the twisting of the myths to illiberal and misbegotten ends – and spotlights recent political misuse with a particularly effective section on the “Q Anon Shaman,” who was foremost among the January 6th, 2021, insurrectionists in Washington DC. She emphasizes that the “historically specific nature of various schools of thought about the corpus of Old Norse myths and legends” (26) reveals much more about present-day concerns and prejudices than about whatever the original mythmakers intended. As part of awareness for these instances of misuse, Larrington exhorts modern readers to avoid anachronism and ideological purpose:

The Norse myths have been used in both past and present to lend support to ideologies of racism, toxic masculinity and white entitlement. Those of us who love and study the myths must counter this by reminding those coming to them afresh that the myths are historically contingent They are supple, strange, radically different, and yet they engage ... with far larger questions than the limited and self-serving obsessions of far-right politics, nationalism and the ravings of conspiracy theorists. (287–288)

Larrington’s analysis would carry even more weight had she engaged with the work of more fantasy authors and with the robust body of scholarship on the fantastical. To be clear: she does not intend her work to be encyclopedic, and, as a scholar addressing modern fantasy from a medievalist’s perspective, she can hardly be expected to be fully conversant with fantasy research. Nevertheless, her history of the way myths have been transmitted to contemporary times lacks some of the most important English-language fantasy writers and texts that draw explicitly on the Norse legendarium, including E. R. Eddison, L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt, Poul Anderson, Fritz Leiber, Jo Walton with Ada Palmer, Gene Wolfe, Guy Gavriel Kay, and Michael Moorcock (who makes a cameo appearance, but as a musician with his Hawkwind colleagues). For the same reason, her discussion of Burgess’ *Volsunga Saga* books would have benefited from comparison with similar ventures by Michael Swanwick and by China Miéville. Perhaps most surprising is the omission of Robert E. Howard, whose enormously influential Conan and Kull are thinly veiled Vikings, and who advocated fiercely for the Norse myths as possibly the most vital source materials for fantasy writing. Indeed, we have good reason to believe he read the sagas as translated by Dasent and by George Ainslie Hight since he refers in letters to *Njals Saga*, *Grettir’s Saga*, and *Heimskringla*. Along similar lines, in explaining the boom in Norse myth over the past several decades, Larrington understates the key role that new retellings

for children played, particularly those by Roger Lancelyn Green (1960) and by Norwegian Ingri d'Aulaire with her husband Edgar (1967; reissued in 2005 with an enthusiastic foreword by Michael Chabon). More generally, Larrington's reception history would have been bolstered by reference to similar histories laid out by scholars of fantasy genres such as Moorcock, Marina Warner, John Clute and John Grant, Terri Windling, Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, and Brian Attebery.

Similarly, Larrington would have made *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* even stronger by connecting its important arguments against racist and authoritarian appropriation of Norse myths to the sophisticated and powerful critiques of said appropriation by fantasy writers and scholars. Over the past two decades, leading fantasy authors, such as N.K. Jemisin, P. Djèli Clark, Sofia Samatar, and Nnedi Okorafor, have made essentially the same points as have scholars such as Dimitra Fimi (in *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, 2008), Helen Young (in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, 2016), Paul B. Sturtevant (in "Race: The Original Sin of the Fantasy Genre," 2017), and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (in *The Dark Fantastic*, 2019).

Observing that Larrington would benefit by further immersion in fantasy literature and criticism is a hope that she will do so, given her formidable expertise and ability to translate between the academic and the vernacular. Equally, fantasy genres will be the richer for Larrington's continued involvement. Fantasy authors, critics, and general readers should welcome *The Norse Myths That Shape the Way We Think* as an expert guide to both the myths and especially to the contingent ways in which the myths have been interpreted.

Biography: Daniel A. Rabuzzi (he / his) earned his BA in Scandinavian folklore at Harvard, was a post-graduate research fellow at the Institute for Folklore Studies at the University of Oslo, and earned his PhD in European history at Johns Hopkins. He has had two novels, five short stories, 30 poems, and nearly 50 essays / articles published (www.danielarabuzzi.com). He lives in New York City with his artistic partner & spouse, the woodcarver Deborah A. Mills (www.deborahmillswoodcarving.com).

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