

Jón Karl Helgason. 2017. *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*. London: Reaktion Books. 240 pages. ISBN: 9781780237152.

Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas is the most recent product of Jón Karl Helgason's extended exploration of the myriad ways medieval Icelandic literature has influenced modern culture and has become an important part of our shared, global cultural experience. The book comprises six chapters, each bearing as its main title a prominent figure from Old Norse-Icelandic literature; these are collectively enclosed by a Prologue and an Epilogue. In the book's Prologue, Helgason introduces the main topic of his study, which he terms "the contemporary afterlife of the medieval eddas and sagas" (9), and describes the diverse range of his source materials, which include comic books, plays, pilgrimage and travel writing, music, and films. In contrast to more traditional scholarly approaches to the subject—which commonly focus only on Britain, Germany, and Scandinavia—the author finally anticipates that his book will contribute to an ongoing shift towards a more widely comparative and cross-cultural approach to the study of the post-medieval reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

The Norse god Thor headlines the first chapter of Helgason's book, which mostly concerns comic-book manifestations of the "god of thunder" and his mythological cohorts. Helgason focuses mainly on various Marvel Comics' series and the Danish comic book series *Valhalla* (1979–2009), though he also briefly discusses a remarkable intersection of Norse myth and the Japanese comic series *Saibōgu Zero-Zero-Nain* (1964–81) [Cyborg 009]. Helgason notes that in some such instances "the medieval influences seem to be operating at second or even third hand" (18), identifying a thread that frames much of the book's subsequent analysis. Indeed, while exploring to some degree how these works reflect their medieval sources, the author expresses greater interest in identifying the influence of certain cultural, social, and political factors, and also in understanding how such adaptations variously influence and inspire one another.

The second chapter is headlined by the thirteenth-century Icelander Snorri Sturluson. Helgason invokes Snorri's name and reputation to enter into a discussion of the concept of authorship with respect to works specifically attributed to Snorri and to medieval Icelandic literature more generally. He concludes that when discussing with Old Norse-Icelandic literature we are dealing with texts "that generations of witnesses, story-tellers, historians, writers, editors and scribes have helped to shape" (63). He therefore claims that Snorri's role and that of any others involved in the production of these texts mainly consisted of compiling and gathering information, while also adapting it to a new form. Thus, for Helgason, there is arguably no significant difference between the producers of these medieval works and the creators of modern adaptations of medieval Icelandic literature.

The third chapter, Hallgerd, concerns the work of several playwrights who drew inspiration from certain provocative heroines from the medieval sagas, its title referring to Hallgerd Long-legs [*langbrók*] of *Njáls saga*-fame. Helgason first discusses Henrik Ibsen's *Hærmændene paa Helgeland* (1858) [Vikings at Helgeland], the story of two foster-brothers in tenth-century Norway. He demonstrates the myriad ways in which Ibsen made use of the medieval sagas in composing the play, which has no single, direct medieval source. The chapter continues with an examination of works authored by two lesser-known playwrights: *The Riding to Lithend* (1909) by Gordon Bottomley and Thit Jensen's *Nial den Vise* (1934) [Njal the wise], each inspired by the medieval *Njáls saga*. Helgason explains that Bottomley's play, which centres on Hallger's heroic husband Gunnar's famous last stand, was largely based on Dasent's English translation of the saga from 1861. Helgason then describes how Jensen's play significantly deviates from the original saga narrative, both in the staging and sequencing of events and the relationships shared amongst its central figures. He explains how the play was inspired by Jensen's time living in Iceland, perhaps including her romantic involvement with several admirers there, but also by her participation in the women's rights movement in Denmark.

The above-mentioned Gunnar heads the book's fourth chapter, wherein Helgason examines various published accounts of traveller's visits to Iceland. He first explores the roots of this phenomenon within early British travel books, in which the medieval sagas often figure prominently. He next discusses an instance in which the genres of travel writing and the modern novel appear to overlap, namely in Dorothy James Roberts' *Fire in the Ice* (1961). Helgason concludes this chapter with a discussion of the Danish writer and art critic Poul Vad's *Nord for Vatnajökkel* (1994) [North of the Vatnajökull Glacier] where Vad traces the landscapes associated with the medieval *Hrafnkels saga*. Helgason describes the work as something of a "postmodern travel story," which emphasizes the ways texts shape our sense of reality.

The fifth chapter adopts the Norse god Odin's name for its title and explores "the musical afterlife of the eddas" (134). Helgason describes several early examples of this tradition before discussing Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1877) and several other significant contributions that followed Wagner's landmark work. The author next examines the mythological roots of Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" (1970) and the band's subsequent influence on the development of the popular subgenre of heavy metal music known as Viking metal, including for example the Mexican band "Mighty Thor." Helgason argues that Led Zeppelin, and the band's "Immigrant Song," can be regarded as a link between the classical and operatic "musical afterlife of the eddas" and the modern phenomenon of Viking metal.

In the book's sixth chapter, Leif, referring to the Norse explorer and missionary Leif Eiriksson, Helgason traces the character's journey from the

medieval sagas, through the works of American novelist Otilie A. Liljencrantz, and onto the silent cinema screen. The chapter concludes with a lengthy discussion of Richard Fleisher's *The Vikings*, a loose film adaptation of the medieval *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*. Helgason emphasizes how the film reflects the typical, savage traits often associated with "Vikings" and their culture, which he reveals are not altogether absent from the medieval sources. He concludes by suggesting that, while commonly drawing inspiration from various medieval sources, subsequent entries into the "Viking" film genre, which has seen a recent growth in popularity, also always respond in some way to the familiar tropes expressed in Fleisher's film and other early efforts in the "Viking" film genre.

In the book's Epilogue, spurred by several of his own personal recollections, Helgason briefly discusses the "afterlife of eddas and sagas" in modern Icelandic culture. Citing only a small fragment of the possible examples, he explains that while the phenomenon may be "more intense in Iceland than in any other part of our global village, it is essentially not that different" (194). In the book's acknowledgements Helgason notes that much of its material is in fact based on several earlier publications, much of which had only previously appeared in Icelandic. This clarifies the detail that Jane Victoria Appleton, who Helgason explains was responsible for most of the translated material, is credited as the book's translator on its title page, though the work as a whole has no exact equivalent in Icelandic.

Echoes of Valhalla is an engaging, readable work and an important contribution to the study of the post-medieval reception of medieval Icelandic literature, both accessible for general readers and useful for scholars. Helgason's persistent attention to the notion that "adaptations become pre-texts of further adaptations" (196) provides a cohesive thematic principle to the work as a whole and offers an important reminder that, paraphrasing Umberto Eco, modern adaptations of the eddas and sagas speak not only of their medieval Icelandic sources but also always speak of other modern adaptations. Furthermore, using the example of Snorri Sturluson, the author interestingly suggests that this principle closely parallels a fundamental aspect of medieval Icelandic textual production. While not establishing an entirely new field or methodology, the author's atypical cross-cultural approach and the scope of his analysis are refreshingly informative, providing ample and diverse evidence to suggest that medieval Icelandic literature has and continues to be an important part of our shared, global cultural experience.

Christopher Crocker
University of Iceland