

Crawford, Jackson, trans. 2015. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 392 pages. ISBN: 978-1-62466-356-7.

The *Poetic Edda*, which is one of the two primary sources for the mythology of Viking Age (ca. 800-1100) Scandinavians, has many English translations. Perhaps the most well-known and widely printed are those by Lee M. Hollander (1962) and Carolyne Larrington (1996), the latter of which is a staple in undergraduate classes on the Vikings and their mythology (including my own). However, as the author of the present translation, Jackson Crawford, notes on his website, “none has yet been done in a truly readable, contemporary style” (<http://tattuinarerdoelasaga.wordpress.com>). Indeed, when I teach undergraduate courses on Norse mythology, legends, and the Viking Age, my students consistently find the poems of the *Poetic Edda* the most difficult to read. They tend to rely heavily on summaries in other sources (print or, more commonly, online), or worse, avoid reading the poems altogether. Crawford had a similar experience when he taught the poems of the *Poetic Edda* at UCLA and, as such, began providing students with his own more approachable English translations. These formed the basis of the translations presented in the book, which is geared primarily towards students and everyday readers.

In his introduction to the translation, Crawford provides a brief summary of the worldview, belief systems, and values of Viking Age Scandinavians, according to the available sources. He highlights in a straightforward manner the critical concepts and structures that inform the mythology, including honour, revenge, oath keeping, social class, and fate. Next is a brief introduction to the Norse pantheon, the cosmos, and the heroes on whom the poems in the latter part of the *Poetic Edda* focus. Some nuance is missing in the description of certain characters; for example, in *Thrymskvitha* it is said that Heimdall had the gift of foresight “as one of the Vanir” (118), but the possibility he is among this tribe of gods is not mentioned in the introduction. Also, Thor’s mother, Earth [Jord], is described as a giantess in some sources; this lends important insight into the hierarchical relationship between the races of gods and giants, which is often reflected in the practice of concubinage. However, this level of detail may not be well-suited to a very basic introduction for those otherwise unversed in the genre and for that reason was omitted.

Crawford breaks with tradition in the Anglicization of Old Norse names—a move he explains and justifies in the very helpful section of the introduction on pronunciation and spelling. Specifically, he replaces the Old Norse letters *ð*, *þ*, *œ*, *ø*, and *ø* with “their closest equivalents from the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet,” and moreover “inserted an *e* between another consonant and *r* in characters’ names” (xx). As such, rather than Baldr, Gudrun, and Sigurd (as most

English translations have used) we are presented with Balder, Guthrun, and Sigurth. Exceptions are made only for those names whose Anglicized spellings are “widespread and popular” (xx), such as Odin (as opposed to Othin) or Valhalla (as opposed to Valholl). Although it does take some adjustment as a reader accustomed to the Anglicized spellings used in other translations of the *Poetic Edda* as well as Snorri’s *Edda* and the sagas, this method would likely result in a more authentic pronunciation from students and general readers otherwise unfamiliar with Old Norse orthography. The introduction ends with a brief list of recommended further reading.

The translated poems are presented in the order in which they appear in the Codex Regius, with several important exceptions: *Atlamal* [The Lay of Atli] is not included, since, as Crawford notes, “its story is redundant with the superior, and much older, *Atlakvitha*” (xxiii). Crawford also follows suit with other translations of the *Poetic Edda* by including four poems that are not found in the Codex Regius, but are similar in terms of metre and content: *Baldrs draumar* [Balder’s Dreams], *Rigsthula* [The Tale of Rig], *Voluspa en skamma* [The Short Prophecy of Ragnarok], and *Grottasongr* [The Song of Grotti]. Finally, Crawford repositions *Atlakvitha* in chronological sequence “for those who wish to read the *Edda* from start to finish” (294). Indeed, the poems read fluently, and it is not at all a difficult task reading them all together in one sitting.

Each poem has a preface, which varies in length depending on the amount of explanation deemed necessary. For example, the Helgi poems (particularly *Helgakvitha Hjorvarthssonar*) are highly complex and require substantially more introduction and context than, for example, the comparably straightforward *Thrymskvitha*. In some cases, it would have been helpful to recall the key concepts outlined in the introduction; one example of this is in *Gripisspa*, in whose preface Crawford writes “[m]odern readers should be warned that the medieval attitude towards ‘spoilors’ was more accepting than that of modern audiences; much of the action of Sigurth’s later life (as related in the following poems) is revealed here” (220). This seems to me an ideal place to remind the reader about the concept of fate and characters’ attitudes towards it, which is beautifully epitomized in st. 53, when Sigurd—whose tragic fate has been foretold by his uncle—states: “I part from you in friendship. / My fate will be what it will. / You have done / what I asked you to do, / and I think you would have / happily told me / I would have a better fate, / if that had been my true destiny” (233).

An appendix contains a charming addition of Crawford’s own creation: “The Cowboy *Havamal*,” a modern adaptation of the *Gestathattr* section of the Odinnic wisdom poem, retold in somewhat condensed form and in Western American English dialect. It is highly enjoyable and speaks to the universality and timelessness of the advice given in certain stanzas of this section of the poem—particularly those having to do with moderation, friendship, and reputation. The book concludes with a glossary of names, which includes short

descriptions of the major gods, mythological beings (giants, dwarves, etc.), heroes, places, objects, and events.

Overall, I found this to be an excellent and entertaining work that succeeded in achieving its intended purpose: to create an accessible and readable English translation of the *Poetic Edda*. Crawford's knowledge of and passion for the topic is clear throughout, and he strikes an excellent balance between approachability and authenticity. I will most certainly be using this translation when I teach Norse mythology in the future and will recommend it to anyone looking for an approachable introduction to the subject.

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