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## ***The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok,*** **translated by Jackson Crawford**

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok is a treat. Both compositions in the volume contain larger than life heroes and heroines who engage in adventures and who fight for the survival and wealth of their clans. They are also consumed--generation after generation--by the blood-feud and by the compulsion to fulfill, to the letter-of-the-word, their unwise vows, and executing them to their last logical and bitter consequences. The stories consist of heart wrenching episodes of treachery, violence, incest, and infanticide. But, both sagas can grow on a reader. They are also tales about an action-oriented people who compete against other families for the scarce resources of the harsh Icelandic natural environment. The reader sees intense love and equally intense hatred. In either case, the stories are not dull and their cumulative effect is to leave the reader with a sense of the tragedy and inevitability of a never-ending fight for survival, love, and the vengeance of the blood-feud. The reader can also see, especially in The Saga of the Volsungs, a source of the inspiration of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, The Silmarillion, and the other works of his legendarium.

### Additional Keywords

Mythlore; The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok, translated by Jackson Crawford; Phillip Fitzsimmons

the host on Lucy's forehead, burns her, is quite intriguing, and the discussion of biblical references in Stoker's text is equally interesting.

Chapter 13, "Holy Terrors: The Mystical Gothic of Arthur Machen, Evelyn Underhill, and Charles Williams," is perhaps the most significant chapter in the book for the Inklings scholar, and not only for its coverage of Charles Williams. Here Milbank considers three writers of the Christian faith who also had strong interests in the new mysticism: "at some point in their lives all took membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn" (270). Unfortunately, I wish that this chapter could have been much longer, for the coverage of each author's work is too selective. The Machen section concentrates on *The Three Impostors* (1895); the section on Underhill cursorily mentions her three early novels (and doesn't even mention her admittedly rarely-seen short stories), but analyzes only one, *The Column of Dust* (1909); and the section on Charles Williams centers on *Descent into Hell* (1937), "his most Gothic novel" and "his most successful combination of realist and supernatural elements" (281). One feels that much is missing that could have been illuminating.

The final chapter covers M.R. James, and the lesser-known J. Meade Falkner, who in terms of fiction wrote only three short novels and a couple of short stories, though Milbank discusses primarily only *The Nebuly Coat* (1903), which I've always thought much less interesting than, say, *The Lost Stradivarius* (1896). Milbank is quite interesting on James, but again, I wish she could have covered more of his relevant writings.

*God and the Gothic* is not always an easy read, but it is always thoughtful, and it makes the reader think and question previous interpretations of the literature discussed. And I should note here that Milbank's arguments are more complex and nuanced than I am able to represent in a mere book review.

—Douglas A. Anderson



**THE SAGA OF THE VOLSUNGS: WITH THE SAGA OF RAGNAR LOTHBROK.** Translated by Jackson Crawford. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2017. 184p. 978-1624666339. \$15.00.

*The SAGA OF THE VOLSUNGS: With the SAGA OF RAGNAR LOTHBROK* is a treat. Both compositions in the volume contain larger than life heroes and heroines who engage in adventures and who fight for the survival and wealth of their clans. They are also consumed—generation after generation—by the blood-feud and by the compulsion to fulfill, to the letter-of-the-word, their unwise vows, and executing them to their last logical and bitter consequences.

The stories consist of heart wrenching episodes of treachery, violence, incest, and infanticide. But both sagas can grow on a reader. They are also tales about an action-oriented people who compete against other families for the scarce resources of the harsh Icelandic natural environment. The reader sees intense love and equally intense hatred. In either case, the stories are not dull and their cumulative effect is to leave the reader with a sense of the tragedy and inevitability of a never-ending fight for survival, love, and the vengeance of the blood-feud. The reader can also see, especially in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, a source of the inspiration of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and the other works of his legendarium.

The book is translated from the Icelandic language into contemporary English. For context, the back cover says that Jackson Crawford, the translator, earned his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, his M.A. at the University of Georgia and, at the time of publication, was teaching at the University of Colorado Boulder. The book is a gift, especially to beginning readers of the northern mythological literature. It makes its two texts approachable through the use of easy to read contemporary language. It also provides useful tools for the reader to get an overview of the stories through its explanatory matter. The book has a straightforward introduction that provides a nutshell of the sagas, a cast of characters, historical information about the origin of the tales, a brief outline of the chapters, a pronunciation guide, and there is an excellent and useful *Glossary of Names and Terms* at the end of the book. Crawford also includes notes throughout the text, including recommendations to see relevant passages of his translation of *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. My minor criticism is that specific episodes would be easier to find, when returning to them, if the title of each chapter were included in the table of contents.

I requested to review *The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* because I have read the William Morris translation (1870) a few times throughout the scattered years and I wanted to see what a contemporary translation would look like. I wasn't disappointed. It resonated the memory of my teenaged discovery of and first reading of William Morris's *The Story of the Volsungs*. I hope and expect that the Crawford translation will introduce many new readers to the pleasures of its two pieces of world literature. With that said, I would be loath to dissuade any readers from the William Morris translation. Both the Crawford and Morris translations have their virtues. The Crawford translation is easy to understand for today's reader by telling the stories in contemporary, and to my ear, American English. However, the Morris translation has the flavor of the language, that we love so much, used by J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*.

The new translation smooths the way for today's readers in assisting them through a difficult text, bringing them to a place where they can see its many influences upon the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, among other things. An example of this influence is that *The Saga of the Volsungs* has the same feel in its presentation of the world as we find in *The Silmarillion*. Both are dark places made dangerous and miserable by the powerful influences of the god Óðin in one case and the Vala Morgoth in the other. Crawford explains in his introduction that in *The Saga of the Volsungs* the god Óðin makes appearances, at the right time and place, to stir up the kind of trouble that will turn long-standing enemies and loved ones against one another. His actions, and sometimes only taunts, result in cascades of down-stream effects, resulting in both the early deaths of warriors, at the height of their prowesses, and a cycle of hatred that goes on for seven generations. Crawford explains that Óðin does this so he can have the dead warriors in Valhalla to fight on his side when the events of the prophesied Ragnarök occurs. Neither Valhalla nor Ragnarök are mentioned in the saga. But Crawford's explanation of Óðin's actions show the reader a world in which the never ending machinations of a god result in the tragedies of violence that make up the pages of the book. Likewise, in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* the Vala Morgoth spreads his influence and uses machinations that result in similar tragedies of violence throughout the pages of Tolkien's legendarium. A prime example is the story from *The Silmarillion: Of Túrin Turanbar*. Its hero Túrin is a remarkable young warrior and leader, but things always go badly for him and he feels that the world is against him. In this instance his perception is correct. Morgoth sets him up throughout his life to be used as a small piece within a larger strategy of dominion of the kingdoms of Middle-earth. The reader can see similarities between Óðin's and Morgoth's oppressive and destructive influences upon their story worlds.

Another similarity between the two stories are episodes in which the hero—Sigurd and Turin, in their respective tales—slays a dragon by hiding in a hole he dug in order to stab the dragon when it passes overhead. Each digs a trench away from the hole so that the dragon's blood will flow away from the hole and the hero is not burned. Also, each has a conversation with the dragon while it is dying. Both heroes eventually come to a bad end despite their many accomplishments and talents. These are only two of the similarities between *The Saga of the Volsungs* and *Of Túrin Turanbar*. I could go on to discuss more similarities and to broaden the scope of the discussion to include the rest of *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and all of Tolkien's legendarium. But, this is a book review of Jackson Crawford's translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, not a study of literary influences upon the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Still, seeing these similarities is one of the pleasures of reading Crawford's translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs*, the contemporary language

makes the text more approachable than what is found in an older translation. The reader will see Sigurd having the broken sword Gram re-forged, his selection of the previously unriden and the unequaled horse Grani, and his meeting and falling in love with the shield maiden Brynhild. All are elements found in *The Lord of the Rings*. My point is that Crawford's translation has a lot to offer, especially to new Tolkien enthusiasts, because the combination of his use of contemporary language along with his introductory matter help the reader to enjoy the text and to be in a position to see the gems that I have listed here.

On a related note, I can also recommend the audio versions of Crawford's translations of *The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok* and *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Both recordings use Crawford as the voice talent and are produced by Blackstone Audio, Inc. He has a pleasant voice; and the audiobooks are the performances of a talent who knows his material. Plus, having the translator to do the recordings means there is no question that words and names are pronounced correctly.

In conclusion, I recommend *The Saga of the Volsungs: With the Saga of Ragnar Lothbrok*, translated by Jackson Crawford, especially to literature students and Tolkien enthusiasts. The book is appropriate for all public, college, and university libraries. Educators need to be aware of the violence, incest, and infanticide throughout the book if considering it for junior high or high school libraries. However, a case can be made for the book as world literature and as a significant influence upon the publication of fantasy up to the present time. Finally, I recommend it as pleasure reading for the general reader. And, as stated earlier, I hope and expect this translation to smooth the way for many new readers to experience the thrill of discovering and enjoying the *Völsunga* saga and *Ragnar Lothbrok* through this new translation.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



**TOLKIEN THE PAGAN?: READING MIDDLE-EARTH THROUGH A SPIRITUAL LENS: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 2018.** Edited by Anna Milon. Luna Press Publishing; Tolkien Society: 2019. 98p. ISBN-13: 978-1-911143-79-6. £8.

THIS VOLUME OFFERS A VARIED AND NUANCED DISCUSSION of spirituality in Tolkien, though it is important to note the distinction between spirituality and religion indicated in the title. As Tolkien himself did not include defined religion (with all the ceremony and institution that may entail) in Middle-earth,