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Tales Newly Told

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Abstract

Paxson, Diana. *The Wolf and the Raven*.

Tales Newly Told

A COLUMN ON CURRENT MODERN FANTASY BY ALEXEI KONDRATIEV

Some mythological tales, handed down over centuries in a variety of literary forms, come to receive one particular artistic treatment that is so powerful and influential that it is felt to be definitive, the medium through which the myth will be known to all future generations. Thus the body of Germanic legend expressed in Norse as the *Volsunga Saga* and in Middle High German as the *Nibelungenlied* was a curiosity known primarily to Medievalists and philologists until Richard Wagner made it the basis of his famous operatic cycle, *The Ring of the Nibelung*. The work struck such a profound chord in the psyche of nineteenth-century Europe that it determined the way most people would thereafter perceive not only the specific legend of the Nibelungs, but the entire realm of Teutonic mythology — the “Northern thing,” as C.S. Lewis called it. Lewis has himself recounted at length how important a role Wagner’s music and Wagner’s literary approach to the legend played in the early development of his own mythopoetic imagination; and Tolkien, of course, modeled the baleful powers of his One Ring on the equally sinister effects of Alberich’s cursed ring as it was portrayed in Wagner’s work, and developed Wagner’s original theme of the destructiveness of “power without love.”

Myths, however, are not a harmless epiphenomenon of literature, but powerful archetypal structures that can motivate human behavior, for both good and ill. And the mythical dimensions of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle were, as we know all too well, applied to devastatingly negative political ends in the course of the twentieth century. It is difficult for us today, after the shockingly amoral cruelties of World War II, to forget how much Wagner’s unbridled passion, his strong nationalist feeling, his suggestions of *Urbarmenschen* and inferior races appealed to Hitler and the Nazi movement, and how much impetus it gave to their propaganda. Although their interpretation of Wagner’s work certainly oversimplified and distorted his original meaning, the aesthetic and philosophical links between them remain evident, and have led many commentators to think of the Nibelung legend — and sometimes, by extension, the entire realm of Teutonic mythology — as “tainted,” too obviously associated with socially harmful ideologies to be granted consideration as a valid artistic theme. With the resurgence of Nazism and neo-fascist movements in many parts of Europe, there has been even more reluctance to give the myth any new literary expression.

It is thus an extraordinary daring project that Diana L. Paxson has undertaken with her new trilogy, of which *The Wolf and the Raven* (Morrow, 1993) is the first volume. Her aim is to re-examine the Nibelung legend from a completely

fresh perspective, and to restore its original potency by presenting it in a purer, more profoundly mythopoetic form. That she has (on the strength of this first installment) succeeded is all the more remarkable in that her re-telling preserves, by and large, most of Wagner’s story line, and even many of the symbolic themes that recur in the course of his work. Yet they are completely transfigured by Paxson’s very different narrative note and her extremely different philosophical concerns.

While modifying Wagner’s plot with insights from the Mediaeval versions of the legend, she has also placed the story in a precise historical setting: the early-fifth-century *Volkswanderung* period in which the legend had its source. As the civic and military institutions of the Western Roman Empire crumbled, Germanic tribes from beyond the Rhine were increasingly tempted to fill the resulting void. Some, like the Burgundians, were above all interested in comfort and security, and in exchange for them were willing to adopt Christianity and Roman social ideology. Others, like the Alamans, remained contemptuous of Roman customs, but were nonetheless avid for the wealth of the Roman lands. It is in the context of the major cultural conflict (which would, by the end of the fifth century, lay the bases of Mediaeval society) that Paxson’s characters live out their lives. They are not, however, mere pawns of historical forces, but well-drawn individuals with emotional needs that we can instantly relate to.

The relations between the main characters are determined by two symbolic pairings. The first (following a pattern already well-established in Paxson’s previous works) involves two women, one “light” and one “dark,” who love each other and complement each other’s actions even after circumstances have forced them into conflict. Here the (light) Burgundian princess Gudrun is paired with the (dark) Hunnish princess Brunahild. Gudrun is (to use a term for popular psychology) Other-motivated: devoted to her brother Gundohar, eager to please and make friends, concerned for the well-being of her people. By contrast, Brunahild — who has grown up without any stable family ties — is highly self-motivated, and despite her loneliness refuses to let mere human ties impede her deepening relationship with the god Wodan, which gives her life meaning. Chosen by the god, she becomes one of the Walkyriun, warrior-priestesses of Wodan, who are also expert in runecraft and herblore.

The other pairing links Brunahild to Sigfrid, who like her has never had support of kin. In his years as an apprentice to the Earthfolk-smith Ragan in the forest, he has observed the social customs of wolves, and has come to

identify with them, learning from them all that he knows about interpersonal relations. The identification becomes even deeper when he discovers that he is "skin-strong," i.e., that he can change his shape to that of animals. The development of this talent leads him to experiences that clearly separate him from the common run of mortals, and force him, quite against his will, onto a heroic path. But he is saved from what would have been a life of unbearable isolation by Brunahild's gift to him of her magical powers as a Walkyrie. They find in each other, at long last, the counterpart their unique gifts require; and joined together in a mutually reinforcing union, like god and goddess, they can face the destiny that links them to Wodan.

The Walkyryn who train Brunahild are an invention of the author's, since we have no evidence that initiatory colleges of warrior priestesses existed in Germany at that time; yet their presence is not implausible, and does not violate anything we know about the cultural environment of the period. Paxson has obviously invested her description of their practices with her own ideals of magical and spiritual training. Yet, like any religious organization, the

Walkyriun can be corrupted by greed and personal animosities, as we see in their treatment of Brunahild. Although they cast her out because of her supposed failings, it is in fact they who have failed her, since she is more purely attuned to Wodan's will than they are, and fulfills the god's commands even when they do not conform to the priestesses' pre-ordained strategies. One can foresee that, in future episodes of the story, the god will make them pay for their failure.

The most innovative element in Paxson's re-telling of the legend, however, is her treatment of the Land, which emerges as one of the story's main characters. There was already a Romantic appreciation of nature in Wagner's "forest murmurs," of course, but here the sense of communion with the Land is taken much farther. It becomes a spiritual imperative, and the only way to true stability and peace: genuine love of the physical land one lives on, untainted by claims of exclusive ownership, can unite people with diverse cultural and political allegiances. This sensitivity to the Land is, in the story, reinforced by Brunahild's and Sigfrid's constant awareness of features in the natural world around them — from awe-inspiring glimpses of the great Rhine to the calls of birds and minute seasonal changes in trees and shrubs (although it is, amusingly, an American squirrel and American nuthatches that appear in some of the forest scenes!). In general, one of Paxson's greatest strengths in her ability — more powerfully evident here, perhaps, than in any of her previous works — to depict pre-Christian *piety*, with all of its theological, moral and emotional aspects, convincingly and movingly.

What of the Ring, the central element of the story in its best-known form? Paxson has made it a Celtic neck-ring, stolen from an ancient sacrificial hoard dedicated to a goddess in a sacred pool. It is imbued with the magic of the gods of fertility, and can thus draw wealth to itself. In the hands of an upright person like Sigfrid it will be a harmless instrument for achieving a perfectly appropriate prosperity and well-being, but individuals without moral scruples could apply it to far more destructive ends — as we shall no doubt discover.

The remaining two volumes will continue to trace the destiny of Sigfrid and Brunahild as it becomes linked with that of the Burgundians, who are struggling, against very great odds, to make a transition from the old tribal world to a new world of Church and State. We can be certain, on the strength of this first volume, that it will be a story worth following. And we must be grateful to Diana Paxson for restoring to us some of the primal magic that so impressed Lewis and Tolkien when they first came into contact with the legend of the Nibelings.



MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. To be a general help, the following might be considered a core reading list, with the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1965; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967, *The Silmarillion* 1977.

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadow of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Tales from Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars*

1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).

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