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The Echo of Odin: Norse Mythology and Human Consciousness by Edward W.L. Smith

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Abstract

This review briefly describes and assesses the chapter by chapter content of the book and the author's argument regarding the content of Norse mythology as representing a map of human consciousness.

Additional Keywords

Norse Mythology; Runes; Jung; Campbell

collections of criticism that explore Lovecraft's writings and influences. The first half of this section—"Criticism"—collects six essays by both influential Lovecraft researchers and emerging scholars; while Butts reprints contributions by Joshi and Robert M. Price—both mainstays of Lovecraft scholarship for decades—it is two previously unpublished works that will be the most beneficial to instructors. Shannon N. Gilstrap's exploration of Lovecraft's engagement with the writings and ideas of the Victorian Period is particularly useful as a companion to "Supernatural Horror in Literature," as it provides context for the works that Lovecraft identifies as influential to his own writings. Similarly, Tracy Bealer's exploration of the author's troubled relationship with Modernist writings and ideas serves as a fascinating epilogue to the concepts that Lovecraft sets forth in his essay. Viewed together, these two essays promise to be particularly useful in situating Lovecraft into the context of a wider-reaching survey class and helping students to understand how the literary works that Butts collects relate to the larger literary landscape.

While much of the criticism Butts collects aims to help students understand Lovecraft's relationship with the literary canon, the volume's final section—"Reflections"—explores Lovecraft's influence on present-day horror authors such as T.E.D Klein and Richard Monaco. While brief, these reflections help to support Butts' argument that Lovecraft is worthy of classroom study.

While Butts's collection offers little that is new for those outside of the education profession, the clarifying annotations, the emendations to "Supernatural Horror in Literature," and the well-selected critical essays make *H.P. Lovecraft: Selected Works, Critical Perspectives and Interviews on His Influence* a valuable tool for any instructor seeking to bring Lovecraft into an undergraduate classroom.

—Perry Neil Harrison



THE ECHO OF ODIN: NORSE MYTHOLOGY AND HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS. Edward W.L. Smith. McFarland, 2018. 211 pp. Bibliography and index. pISBN 978-1-4766-7509-1 eISBN 978-4766-3402-9. \$55.00.

The Echo of Odin caught my attention at McFarland's table at the 2019 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference, probably because I had recently been working with Nancy-Lou Patterson's illustrations for Douglas Rossman's *The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse*

Mythology (1983) and have long been fascinated by the recycling of Norse mythology in such shows as *Stargate SG-1* and the *Thor* films. Where most academic books inspire browsing and a quick shuffle to the bibliography, I found myself reading steadily—while standing—for about an hour. It was immediately apparent that Smith was not only inspired to write his book by Ralph Metzner's *Maps of Consciousness: I Ching, Tantra, Tarot, Alchemy, Astrology, Actualism*, which is dedicated to demonstrating that the I Ching, Tantra, Tarot, etc., are literally maps of human consciousness, he nurtured an ambition to show that Norse mythology is a worthy addition to this set. Smith has worked and published extensively in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, and, as an Emeritus Professor, "he reckons with multiple muses, writing poetry and mystery, essays and books, painting, and playing tenor saxophone" (Linked-in profile). Whichever muse was responsible for *The Echo of Odin*, s/he was certainly a steady and intelligent guide, as Smith's handling of the subject is thorough and precise. He has studied the primary sources—*The Poetic Edda* and Snorri's *The Prose Edda*—as closely as he has the primary scholarship dedicated to that material (including Rossman), and provides generous quotations from the recorded myths that both substantiate and increase accessibility to them for the specialist and non-specialist alike. (The effectiveness of this presentation leaves no doubt at all in my mind that Smith is an excellent professor.)

In Chapter 1, "The Nature of Myth," Smith works up a number of terms of reference, notably the fable, fairytale, and myth as variants of folktales. He discusses the importance of metaphor to the understanding of myth, and the particular importance of kennings to understanding Norse mythology (19). He considers some explanations of why so many mythologies share so many common motifs and themes, including Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. Jung and Joseph Campbell are among his favored interlocutors, but even critics of these two popular authors are likely to be impressed by Smith's extensive grasp and adept representation of relevant aspects of mythology, psychology, and science throughout this and all of the chapters. Although Smith offers only a nod or two to Tolkien, readers of *Mythlore* will be delighted by the perspectives this chapter and those that follow offer on some of the characters and creatures in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Chapter 2, "Norse Mythology as Cynosure," begins the detailing of the "map" laid out in Norse mythology. The nine realms of Norse myth—three levels with three worlds on each—are connected by the ash tree Yggdrasil, or the world tree familiar to shamanistic cultures. Smith argues that each of these realms is a metaphor for some aspect of consciousness, that the realms and their associated beings represent possibilities of human behavior and aspiration, with increasingly complex levels of consciousness being associated with the upper reaches of the tree. Almost all of these discussions include references to the

importance of Loki, the trickster god whose often unpleasant antics play an important role in keeping the cycles of time moving forward.

Chapter 3 deals with the lower realm, which encompasses two regions, one cold, dark, quiet, and tending toward entropy, and the other hot and full of fire, or an excess of energy. Smith believes this realm is representative of the reptilian brain and the unconscious, and notes that, even here, the principle of balance is definitive, as it is throughout Norse mythology. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the middle world occupied by humans; dark elves, who represent lust and greed, as well extraordinary craftsmanship; and giants, who represent destruction and chaos, but are also architects and builders. Chapter 5 addresses the tripartite upper world where the gods and goddesses live, including the warrior Odin, who rules Asgaard and also sacrificed much to receive knowledge of the runes; Freyja, who rules over Vanaheim, and represents fertility, inclusive of divination; and also the light elves who occupy Alfheim.

In Chapter 6, which I found the most fascinating, Smith argues that Yggdrasil lends the dimension of space (up, down, north, south, east, west, and so forth) to the Norse map; the three “Norns” (beings that preside over past, present, and future) add the dimension of time; and the runes add the presence of consciousness and awareness. All of these dimensions are regularly identified with the numbers three and/or nine. Norse myth presents time, such that, of the past, present, and future, the most important is the past, as it is always expanding, as a spiral that is always wider at its base (the past) than at its tip (the present leading into the future).

Chapter 7 elaborates on Odin’s sayings as they establish the heroic code of behavior, emphasizing courage, revenge where it is called for, self-reliance, wariness, wit, and inclusivity. This code is compared at length with that of Christianity, with its far more succinct ten commandments emphasizing obedience and exclusivity. I found the section on Christian directives a little long, but it was clearly intended as a complete foil for the ways in which the ancient Norse understood and created their world.

This entire book was written as a cover-to-cover read, though it may well serve as a reference book and guide to the complexities and inconsistencies of Norse mythology. Definitely a must-read for any and all students of mythology and mythopoeic literature.

—Emily E. Auger

