Norse myth in English poetry

Herford C H
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NORSE MYTH
IN
ENGLISH POETRY

BY

C. H. HERFORD, M.A., LITT.D.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE UNIVERSITY, MANCHESTER

Reprinted from "The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library"
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NORSE MYTH IN ENGLISH POETRY.*

BY C. H. HERFORD, M.A., LITT.D.,
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER.

I.

Tale teller, who twixt fire and snow
Had heart to turn about and show
With faint half smile things great and small
That in thy fearful land did fall,
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain
That thing for which I long in vain,
The spell, whereby the mist of fear
Was melted, and your ears might hear
Earth's voices as they are indeed.

W. MORRIS, Prefixed to his Translation of the *Eyrbyggja Saga.*

So wrote William Morris, in the preface to his English version of
one of the finest sagas of the "fearful land". And his words
may serve as a clue to guide us to the heart of our present
theme. For no other English poet has felt so keenly the power of
Norse myth; none has done so much to restore its terrible beauty, its
heroism, its earth-shaking humour, and its heights of tragic passion and
pathos, to a place in our memories, and a home in our hearts.

I say to *restore*; for it will not be in truth a new gift, but in some
sort the recovery of a vanished and forgotten possession. The mythic
stories which we call Norse were in great part a common heritage of
the Germanic peoples; and the tale of the Volsungs, which Morris
told the other day, had been sung twelve or thirteen hundred years
before in the old English epic of *Beowulf.* But between the day

*Based upon a lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on
13 March, 1918.
when these tales were last chanted at English feasts, perhaps on the
eve of the Conquest, and that on which they were first deciphered
again by English antiquaries, lie fully six centuries during most of
which they were utterly unknown. We are like kindred parted in
infancy to meet again, as perfect strangers, in advanced age. The
whole Scandinavian world passed, during those centuries, for almost
all literary and even cultural purposes, beyond our ken. Our faces
were turned the other way, to France, to Italy; and the vast arc of
northern lands sweeping from Denmark to Iceland, beyond the broad
spaces of estranging sea, lay in every sense beyond our horizon. No
one dreamed that a poetry and a prose, unsurpassed in their kind in
Europe, had grown up in the lonely fastness of the great Atlantic
island. A single northern legend did, indeed, towards the end of the
period, find its way into our literature, and with such effect that Den-
mark and Elsinore became points of dazzling brilliance and import in the
permanent culture of the world. 2 But the triumphant intrusion of the
Hamlet story stands absolutely alone; and even this solitary though
glorious waif of Scandinavia came to us with its Scandinavian char-
acter overlaid, if not obliterated, by alien romance elements which
certainly helped to commend it to European taste. It is a far cry from
the Norse sea-giant Amloth to the mediaeval emulator of Livy’s Brutus
who spoke to the Elizabethans through the ambitious Latinity of Saxo,
or the polished French of Belleforest.

But before the beginning of these centuries of complete literary and
cultural estrangement, there was at least a lively intercourse between
the Northern and the English stems. Some of it was disastrously
intimate. The Vikings who swept away the lettered and devout cul-
ture of Northumbria in the ninth century were not persuasive herals
of the richer and stronger but still unshaped cosmos of the poetry of
the North. But from the time of Alfred onwards, with the perman-
ent settlement of a large tract of England by Scandinavians, more
humane relations diversify their encounters. The Old English found
that the Norsemen could make a song as well as fight, and that those
formidable galleys of theirs were sometimes launched, like the bark of
the aged Ulysses, for voyages of exploration not of plunder. We have
made analogous discoveries in our own time; and it is easier to parallel
the Norwegian enthusiasms of the later nineteenth century in the tenth
than at any intervening date. Just a thousand years before Nansen