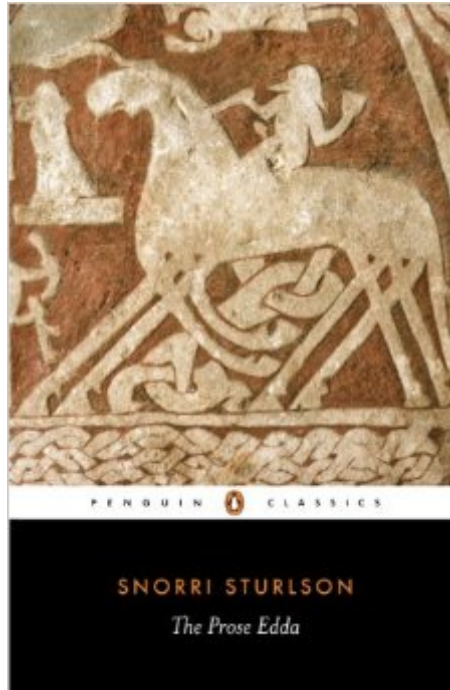


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The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Written in Iceland a century after the close of the Viking Age, The Prose Edda is the source of most of what we know of Norse mythology. Its tales are peopled by giants, dwarves, and elves, superhuman heroes and indomitable warrior queens. Its gods live with the tragic knowledge of their own impending destruction in the cataclysmic battle of Ragnarok. Its time scale spans the eons from the world's creation to its violent end. This robust new translation captures the magisterial sweep and startling psychological complexity of the Old Icelandic original. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

Paperback: 180 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics; 1 edition (January 31, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140447555

ISBN-13: 978-0140447552

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.5 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 5 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars See all reviews (96 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #9,291 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #3 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Regional & Cultural > European > Norse & Icelandic Sagas #4 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Poetry > Ancient, Classical & Medieval > Medieval #17 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Folklore & Mythology

Customer Reviews

Jesse L. Byock, who has written some splendid works on medieval Iceland and the Sagas of the Icelanders, and translated two of the legendary sagas, as "The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer" and "The Saga of Hrolf Kraki," the latter two both available as Penguin Classics, here offers a new translation of the most famous and entertaining parts of another Icelandic work, "The Prose Edda." The prose is lively and clear, and the translations of verse made with attention to the use made of the passages in the surrounding text. There are

helpful notes, and a very useful index, giving proper Icelandic forms, including variants, for the usually Anglicized names. I have to wonder why Penguin waited so long (2005 in Britain, officially January 2006 in the U.S.) to add a translation of this important, and very enjoyable, medieval work to its catalogue, but, given the present result, it was a fortunate lapse. Byock's selection, actually subtitled "Norse Mythology," is comparable in scope to the old (1954) translation by Jean I. Young, "The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology," which has been available from the University of California Press for decades. Byock's rendering is, in my opinion, superior in style, and is not marred by unacknowledged bowdlerization of references to body parts and functions. So Byock's version is probably ideal for the beginner, although perhaps not for general school use -- Young is less likely to provoke outrage from sensitive parents over exactly how Loki got Skadi to laugh! (Note that originally managed to confuse the titles, and attached reviews of Young to Byock, and of Byock to Young.) I would expect serious students to want the new Penguin Classic as well. For the latter, however, Anthony Faulkes' translation, as "Edda," in the Everyman Library paperback series (1987; frequently reprinted), will remain the most desirable translation, as being absolutely complete (minus some passages of dubious authenticity found in some editions), and a very careful rendering of the Icelandic original, which Faulkes has in fact edited. I had no problems with Faulkes' rendering, which seemed to me clearer than some older translations, but some seem to find it difficult. However, for what it is worth, Byock strikes me as easier reading entirely, and less likely to be intimidating for novices in the fields of medieval literature or Scandinavian studies. (The 1916 American-Scandinavian Society version by Arthur G. Brodeur, long out of print, is available on-line at several sites; a bit stilted, not quite complete, and in some ways antiquated, it is still worth consulting. I can't honestly recommend any of the nineteenth-century versions, such as Rasmus B. Anderson's 1869 version, which is available on-line, or George Webbe Dasent's rather mannered 1842 translation, which doesn't seem to be. Some may find them readable, but at any point they may be seriously antiquated in textual or linguistic scholarship.) Now, the "Prose Edda" is also known as "The Younger Edda," "Snorri's Edda," and, more fully, and less commonly, "Snorri Sturluson's Edda" (Edda Snorra Sturlusonar). These names were all coined to distinguish it from what is now known as "The Poetic Edda," or "Elder Edda," and, in an abandoned attribution, "The Edda of Saemund the Wise" (Edda Saemundar hinns frodha). So far as the evidence goes, however, the only surviving work ever called an "edda" in medieval Iceland is in fact this very "Prose Edda." The name was assigned by early modern antiquarians to a separate collection of mythological and heroic poems, with some linking prose, along with its presumed author-editor, based on a vague tradition that "Saemund (also) wrote an Edda." (I'll come back later to what, if

anything, that statement may have meant.)[Additional Note, February 2015: In the years since this review was written, most, if not all, of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translations of the two Eddas have been made available in digital formats, either for Kindle (or other) e-readers or as pdf files from (for example) archive.org.]The "Prose Edda" is a sort of handbook of Norse mythology and poetics, mainly in prose, but citing large amounts of verse, usually to illustrate its points, although one, rarely-translated, section is a long series of verses with prose commentary on the meters and other features. There is a discursive "Prologue" blending Genesis, Greek and Roman legends, and Norse accounts of the past, followed by "The Deluding of Gylfi" (Gylfaginning), stories told by the mysterious trio "High, Just-as-High, and Third" to an inquiring ancient king. This is followed by a similar encounter between a King Hler, also known as Aegir -- the name of a sea god -- and a certain Bragi, apparently the god of poetry (although "Bragi the Old" was a very human poet) blending into seemingly endless catalogues of poetic words for things and concepts, the "Poetic Diction" (Skaldskaparmal).Byock gives the first two parts in their entirety, and the narrative parts of the third, with some samples of its lists. The final part, "Explanation of Verse Forms" (Hattatal), Snorri's long virtuoso praise-poem-with-explications, which is the only part absolutely certainly by him, is not included by Byock, beyond a few quotations -- in fact only one complete English version of it, that included by Faulkes, seems to have been published. It is not for the faint of heart, and is of interest only to those deeply interested in medieval poetry and Germanic languages, so I don't object to Byock following precedent in dropping it. (I would have liked to see a little more of the Skaldskaparmal word-lists, but have to admit that they are an acquired taste; those who really want to consult them can try Brodeur and Faulkes, and then the actual Icelandic text.)Most, although not quite all, of the most famous stories of Odin, Thor, Balder, and the rest of Aesir, along with the cunning Loki (and his children, Fenris-wolf, the world-girdling Midgard Serpent, and Hel herself), and the Frost Giants, come from it, sometimes exclusively, and usually entered European literature through translations of the "Prose Edda," rather than from the handful of other sources. (The non-mythological story of Amlethus -- Hamlet -- came to Shakespeare from the Latin "Gesta Danorum" of Saxo Grammaticus, the most important alternative version of some of the Edda's tales.) Written in a Christian environment, it offers the stories of the old gods as the stuff of traditional poetry, the essential education of an Icelandic gentleman. The sometimes-comic presentation may reflect a distancing from "paganism," but there is some evidence elsewhere that the pre-Christian Norse, like the ancient Greeks, were on "joking terms" with some of their Gods. The elaborate game of "history" and the lies of story-telling magicians may have been another little safeguard against criticism.It doesn't seem to have been a tremendous success in its own time,

although not without influence, but later generations of Icelanders came to cherish it. Although one substantially complete vellum manuscript from the early fourteenth century, and a few others from later in the Middle Ages survive, something like 150 paper manuscripts were copied out in Iceland in later times, right into the nineteenth century. It started to become known outside of Iceland in the seventeenth century, and few writers on the Viking Age or Germanic mythology have avoided quoting, or at least paraphrasing, its concise, extravagant, and ironic descriptions of deities and monsters, with or without acknowledgement. Vague references to "the Vikings used to say" may accompany recognizable quotations from the text (giving the innocent reader an impression of direct knowledge of Viking conversation). There is good reason to quote Snorri (or whoever is responsible for the bulk of the Edda). For example, consider the wry note that concludes the description of how, at Ragnarok (the Fall of the Powers), "The Fenriswolf advances with its mouth gaping: its upper jaw reaches to the heavens, and the lower one drops down to the earth. He would open it still wider, if only there were room." (This is Byock's rendering: for comparison, Faulkes translated it: "But Fenriswolf will go with mouth agape and its upper jaw will be against the sky, and its lower one against the earth. It would gape wider if there was room." Very good; but, given complaints that he is difficult, words like "agape" may be a bit of a challenge for some readers.) There have been some attempts to describe the pagan Norse without Snorri's information; not very satisfactorily, since nineteenth-century German folklore was often dragged in to fill the gaps. There was in fact a vogue in the early twentieth century for discounting Snorri's evidence, and trying to trace almost everything he said about the Norse gods and heroes to his supposedly vast acquaintance with medieval Latin literature -- which now seems a delusion worthy of anything practiced on Gylfi, or the Frost Giant's tricks on the gullible Thor. Although Byock is, perhaps wisely, more cautious, Faulkes has flatly denied that Snorri had any Latin learning worth mentioning. Having read some of his supposed sources, I have to agree that, beyond some probably second-hand knowledge of the Tale of Troy, many of the supposed resemblances look far-fetched. Which raises the question of what we know about the author to whom it is attributed -- part of it with great certainty, the rest with high probability -- Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241). He wrote (or more likely dictated) a long set of saga-style biographies of the Kings of Norway, known as "Heimskringla," which incorporated older accounts, usually rewritten in a sharper, clearer style. Most other Icelandic prose works of the Middle Ages are anonymous; but some of Snorri's literary activities are mentioned in reasonably contemporary sources. He appears in the "Sturlunga Saga," an account of his time in which his family, the Sturlungs, had a leading, if not always admirable role. Having pledged to "help" the Norwegian monarchy pursue its interest in Iceland, he blandly explained that, in his opinion, Icelandic

independence was in the King's best interest, even if the King didn't see it that way. Between these two factors, he is an extremely prominent figure in the cultural history of Iceland; if his shifty dealings with fellow Icelanders hadn't contributed at least as much as royal anger, his murder by ex-sons-in-law suborned by the Norwegian court would probably have made him a political martyr for modern Icelanders, as well. Snorri has been suggested as also the author of one of the greatest of the early Sagas of the Icelanders, "The Saga of Egil Skallagrimson." Now, the first two are assigned to him in medieval manuscripts, not without some ambiguity about "assembling" rather than "composing." The attribution of "Egil's Saga" is based only on arguments from probability. Egil was one of Snorri's ancestors, and a famous skald (court poet); Egil's family and personal history were intertwined with some famous Norwegian kings; and the saga is clearly the work of a genius. So, being a glorification of an ancestor-poet with political implications, it is exactly the sort of thing Snorri would have written, if he had written one of the Sagas of the Icelanders. Unfortunately for this logic, the same set of interests and background were shared by quite a number of other Icelanders in the thirteenth century, and Snorri wasn't the only brilliant writer, just the one we know by name. Still, it is a nice idea. The Old Icelandic word "edda" means great-grandmother; in a poem "Rigsthula," assigned to the "Poetic Edda" although it is not in the main manuscript, a woman named "Edda" is the ancestor of thralls (serfs), a not very elevated role. However, explained as short for such assumed forms as "eddumal" or "eddasaga," meaning "great-grandma's stories," Edda just might be an appropriate (perhaps protectively trivial) title for a book of pagan stories. This appealed to some nineteenth-century sensibilities, although the suggestion that "Edda" here is really some universal Mother Goddess indicates that not everyone was quite happy with it. A favored view more recently has been that this word "edda" is unrelated to dear old great-granny, being instead a declined form of a different Icelandic word. The choices usually offered are that it refers to, Oddi, a place in Iceland -- that is, "[the Book] of Oddi" -- or is derived from "odhr," a word for poetry. Now, Oddi was the home of the almost proverbially learned Icelandic historian Saemund Sigfusson (1056-1133), and the young Snorri later lived there for years. So it could be that "Saemund wrote an Edda (Oddi-book)" is a true, but irrelevant, statement, and Snorri was said to have written a different Edda, a book about "what I learned at Oddi." However, I tend to like "Concerning Poetry" as an economic explanation. Byock points out that fourteenth-century texts use "edduregla" and "eddulist" for the rules and art of poetry; but that may be entirely dependent on the work in question. In any case, "Edda" shouldn't be used as a Germanic equivalent of Sanskrit "Veda," a practice I have seen from time to time, as if it referred to a pre-Christian canon. A distinguished Germanist, Rudolf Simek (in his "Dictionary of Norse Mythology") is willing to consider another derivation, not Norse at all,

from Latin "edo," meaning "I declare," which I find a nicely ironic parallel to "credo," "I believe" -- but, well, I can't quite believe it.[Addendum, February 2015: There is a good article by Jonas Wellendorf, which briefly examines the various versions of the Prose Edda in the main manuscripts, including their internal arrangement, and their differing additional materials, as "Zoroaster, Saturn, and Othinn: The Loss of Language and the Rise of Idolatry." A pdf can be obtained by searching Academia.edu for Wellendorf's page there, and downloading the file from the list of his publications. Wellendorf offers an "ideological" approach to passages often omitted as interpolations in modern editions of the Prose Edda. The article was originally published in "The Performance of Christian and Pagan Storyworlds: Non-Canonical Chapters of the History of Nordic Medieval Legend," edited by Lars Boje Mortensen and Tuomas M.S. Lehtonen, with Alexandra Bergholm, Volume 3 of "Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces," Brepols Publishers, Turnhout, Belgium, 2013.]

Be forewarned! If you plan on purchasing this translation of the Prose Edda, while it is attractive and reasonably priced, it contains mutilated versions of the important books *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*. Therefore, despite the title, you're actually only getting a small portion of the Prose Edda. *Skáldskaparmál* in particular is loaded with unique information about the gods and lore that you don't find elsewhere-crucial for anyone interested in the subject. You're essentially missing around 3/4ths of the Prose Edda when you buy this edition. Otherwise, you do get a very readable and uncensored (well, as uncensored as Snorri gets) translation of Prologue and *Gylfaginning*, conveniently titled and sorted chapters, a could-be-better and simplistic (but accurate enough) little map showing the Nine Worlds and *Yggdrasil*, and some of the figures associated with Norse cosmology, a suitable introduction, acceptable footnotes, some family charts, and a map of the Scandinavian cultural sphere at the time. However, before you get this, know that an edition that is just as good (if not better) that *includes* *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal* is available to you for the same price. It's Anthony Faulkes's translation of the Prose Edda, which he has unfortunately just titled "Edda" (a regrettable decision given the advent of the search engine). You can find it here: [Edda \(Everyman's Library\)](#)

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) was a famous Icelandic author, statesman, and one of Iceland's wealthiest men. During Snorri's time Iceland was increasingly dominated by Norway and Norwegian culture. Snorri's Prose Edda was written in response to these new trends as a handbook for those "aspiring Icelandic skalds [poets] who wanted to master the traditional forms of verse and the older stories essential to the imagery of Old Norse Poetry" (xi). The Prose Edda's stories were based on

the oral tradition from the Viking Golden Age (800-1000). The Edda is divided into four parts (the Prologue, the Gylfaginning, the Skaldskaparmal, and the List of Meters). Sadly, this volume only includes a sample stanza of the List of Meters due to its dense didactic content. For me the Prologue is by far the most interesting part of the entire Edda. Firstly, Snorri might not have been the author which raises some interesting questions about later additions to his text. Secondly, the Prologue consciously attempts to reconcile Norse myth with Christian beliefs. For example, the Prologue states that after the Fall Norse myth was developed in an attempt to understand the world and that they "understood all matters in an earthly way because they had not been granted no spiritual wisdom (ie. of the Christian God's existence)" (4). Also, Graeco-Roman myths are fitted into the Norse mythology and pantheon for the author states that Odin was descended from the Trojans. The second section, the Gylfaginning, consists of a dialogue between King Gylfi and the Aesir (Mysterious God people). King Gylfi asks questions to the three manifestations of Odin about the All Father, The Primeval Cow Audhumla, the origins of the Gods, Ice Giants, the Bifrost bridge to Heaven, etc. This is the core of the Edda and is a virtual encyclopedia of Norse Mythology. The third section, called the Skaldskaparmal, gives background for references and allusions found in Old Norse verse. This section gives thousands of kennings (words substituted for other words - for example, whale road = ocean). However, this the Skaldskaparmal is not simply a list of kennings for poets but also provides the background and stories from which the kennings come from. For example, the story about the origin of poetry (a mead made from a man created from the spittle of the Gods) introduces tens of kennings created from obscure details of each story. This section is a treasure trove of poetic lore as well as important Norse stories. This Penguin edition is absolutely wonderful (besides the lack of the List of Meters). The introduction covers all pertinent information including the historical background about Iceland and Norway, a brief section on Snorri Sturluson, questions of the Edda's authorship, analysis of each section, and the text's Christian influences. Also included are three illuminating Appendixes (about the Norse Cosmos, Kennings, and the sources of the Gylfaginning), a diagram of the World Tree, and a useful map. Although the Prose Edda often seems to didactic and encyclopedic for easy reading the myths are absolutely fascinating and clearly the Prose Edda is not only "Scandinavia's best known work of literature" but also "the most extensive source for Norse Mythology" (ix). A must buy for anyone interested in Norse Mythology and Medieval Icelandic Literature and history.

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