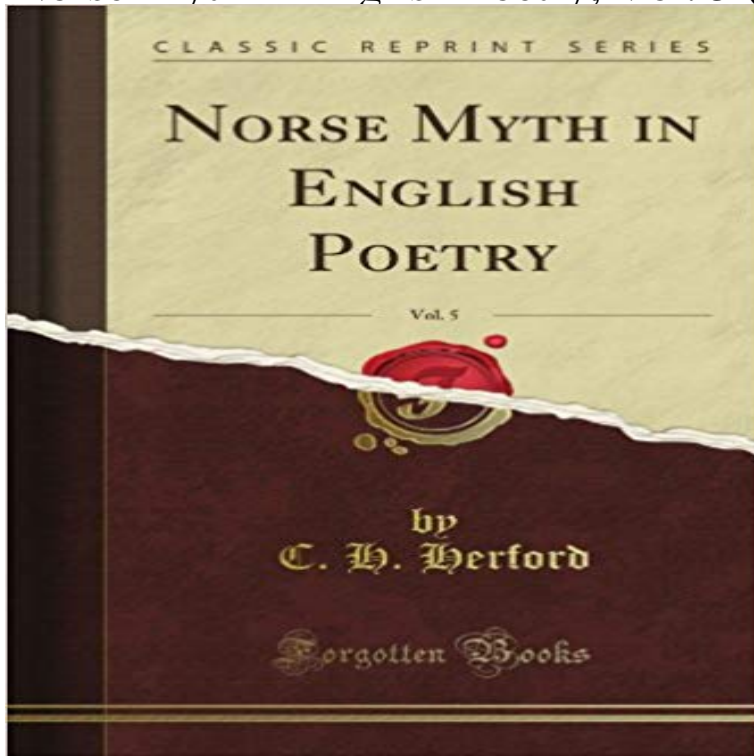


Norse Myth in English Poetry, Vol. 5 (Classic Reprint)



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 Denmark and Elsinore became points of dazzling brilliance and import in the permanent culture of the world. 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 character 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 Amlóth 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 culture of Northumbria in the ninth century were not persuasive heralds of the richer and stronger but still unshaped cosmos

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