



BOOK REVIEW:

*Steel as the Answer? Viking Bodies, Power,
and Masculinity in Anglophone Fantasy
Literature 2006–2016*

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Persson, Anna Bark. *Steel as the Answer? Viking Bodies, Power, and Masculinity in Anglophone Fantasy Literature 2006–2016*. Södertörn University, 2023.

Anna Bark Persson’s doctoral dissertation in the field of gender studies explores the popular Viking motif as it appears in contemporary fantasy fiction and the various ideas of masculinity that this motif embodies. Vikings and Northmen abound in 21st-century anglophone fantasy storytelling as the dissertation’s wide array of source material – 18 fantasy novels across five series by five authors – readily demonstrates. This invasion of spectacularly muscular, hypermasculine berserker warriors is by no means a new development in the genre. However, as Persson notes, usage of the Viking motif is implicated in various heated debates about the state of men and masculinity in today’s allegedly “postfeminist” society as well as in outright racist and white supremacist discourses. In the current media-cultural climate, where the popular image of the imposing, blonde Viking is commonly appropriated to glorify a violent, male-dominated and supposedly white European past, Persson’s nuanced take on the various meanings of the Viking in contemporary fantasy constitutes a welcome intervention.

While the Viking motif has received some prior scholarly attention, Persson argues that “previous research has focused on these images as aimed at and relating foremost to men” and “has not sufficiently taken these narratives or images into account as a wider commentary on power and embodiment – nor understood them as also possibly relevant to something beyond men” (40). To remedy this narrow focus, the dissertation presents queer-theoretical

readings of the Viking motif in Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* (2006–) and *Shattered Sea* (2014–2015) series, Richard K. Morgan's *Land Fit for Heroes* series (2008–2016), Mark Lawrence's *The Red Queen's War* series (2014–2016), and Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette's *The Iskryne Saga* (2007–2015).

In her comparative analyses, Persson points out various significances of the Viking motif beyond male power fantasy. These include ideas of the North and Northerners as a contrast to ostensibly more “civilized” pseudo-medieval fantasy lands, and the bodily and moral self-sufficiency of the Viking as a “fantasy of sovereignty” against the web of insidious, invisible power structures that characterize the modern, capitalist world order. Persson also explores the potential of the Viking body as an erotic object for both the straight and queer gaze, a subject of gendered and sexual violence, and as a site “to safely play out” feminist anxieties regarding bodily vulnerabilities and sexual autonomy. The “extreme masculinity of the Viking body,” she concludes, enables “these discussions of gendered power and powerlessness because it is constructed as not ‘weighed down’ by gendered, sexualized, or racialized discourses of constraint, bodily vulnerability, subjection, and dependence” (110).

As the choice of wording demonstrates here, Persson approaches the popular-cultural Viking motif as a constructed thing – a literary device rather than a (however unrealistic) representation of historical North European peoples. She rightly acknowledges that this “(post)modern” character archetype has been constituted and influenced just as much, or even more, by fantasy literature than by any actual historical knowledge. This framing of the Viking as a device allows for a fine-grained analysis of not only what the motif represents or signifies, but also – and more interestingly – to which uses it is put in contemporary fantasy literature. What I find particularly appealing in Persson's exploration of the device is the way she intertwines her analysis of the Viking *in* fantasy with several approaches to the Viking *as* a fantasy. Whether the “hardbody masculinity” of the Viking comes across as a fantasy of simpler, precapitalist times (and, by implication, a world beyond capitalism), of bodily and moral autonomy, of sexual desire, or something else entirely, the thesis demonstrates the potential of this surprisingly versatile literary device to serve as a means for various forms of individual, social, and political dreaming.

Biography: Elise Kraatila, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Tampere Institute for Advanced Study, Tampere University, currently working on a project titled “Age of Uncertainty: Speculative Narratives in 21st-century Fiction and Nonfiction” (2023–2025). Her present research interests include the roles speculative fiction has to play in contemporary society, storytelling as a heuristic practice, and future speculations in narrative nonfiction. She will start as an editor-in-chief for *Fafnir* in 2024.