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Review: Ármann Jakobsson. *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*. punctum books: 2017.

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I believe it is fair to say that, for the past two decades, Ármann Jakobsson's many publications on all aspects paranormal, monstrous, and deviant — in short, trollish — have revolutionised the field of Old Norse-Icelandic studies. He was among the forefront of scholars who first turned to investigate these neglected features of saga literature, and especially of the *Íslendingasögur*, by approaching these texts as literary works that can be read through the lens of literary theory. Over the course of those 20 years, Ármann produced a number of articles on topics ranging from magic to the undead, from concepts like *ergi* to the way we categorise the paranormal, and from children to old people in the sagas, thus essentially covering all those topics and characters that are marginal(ised) and 'Other' in medieval Icelandic literature. All of these topics are also addressed in the present monograph, which thus brings together much of Ármann's previous work, and for this reason, many of its chapters contain information that will not be new or surprising to those of us who have been following his work in the past. However, by combining all this information in one volume, and with the addition of connections that have not previously been made as well as new material, *The Troll Inside You* becomes the foundational monograph for all trollologists, aspiring or professional.

The book is divided into 30 short chapters that seamlessly lead into one another, and whose titles reveal that the author is just as well-versed in the fields of contemporary popular culture and pun-making as in the worlds of the sagas;

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some personal favourites that highlight these tendencies are “The Truth Is Out There,” “Goði as Exorcist,” and “Troll and Control.” This tendency to draw equally on critical theory and contemporary culture runs through the volume, serving as a “kind of defamiliarization” (172, n. 17) that is supposed to aid the audience in drawing out new connections and looking at things long thought familiar with new eyes.

Thus, in addition to *The Troll Inside You* being a very cleverly and entertainingly written book that is very much addressed to a contemporary audience, the author is also constantly concerned with defamiliarising those aspects of the sagas that have perhaps become overly familiar. One excellent and sadly rather hidden example of this is note 3 (166–67) in which he calls into question the long-held belief that the ‘classical’ *Íslendingasögur* are products of the thirteenth century, arguing instead that, since most of the manuscripts originate in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *Íslendingasögur* themselves should be read more as a late-medieval genre than earlier readings, influenced by nationalism, allowed for. Similarly, this study of trolls is not just concerned with what they are, and with who encounters them, but also with the language used to describe them, and Ármann adds important nuance to the debate of what to call the paranormal ‘Others’ we encounter in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Thus, challenging and ultimately breaking with previous taxonomic approaches to the paranormal emerges as one of the monograph’s major themes. However, there are places in which clearer terminological definitions would have been useful. For example, the revenants at Fróðá are not demons (81), and if one wants to read them as such, an explanation for this choice of word should probably be given.

The volume’s main strength and my main criticism of the author’s approach go hand in hand. On the one hand, Ármann Jakobsson shifts the focus of trollological research from the paranormal beings themselves to the humans who encounter them — a shift in attention that runs not only through his previous work but also formed the basis of the research project *Paranormal*

Encounters in Iceland 1150–1400 that Ármann directed from 2012 to 2016.² This shift is a necessary one: as another prominent teratologist stated, “a monster is not really known through observation; how could it be? How could the viewer distinguish between ‘normally’ terrifying phenomena and abnormally terrifying monstrosity? Rather, I submit, the monster is known through its *effect*, its impact,”³ and the same can, as Ármann argues persuasively, be said about trolls. Taking as a starting point the idea that “the paranormal is primarily located within the human psyche,” (21), he investigates the idea of the troll as a double or mirror of the human, an exploration of human consciousness, concluding that “troll narratives are primarily concerned with the human condition” (51). In this investigation, Ármann utilises psychoanalytic readings, among others, and I will leave it to the individual reader to decide what to make of this. And while I very much support approaching trolls through the humans who encounter them, I am not fully convinced by reading them purely as metaphors, since this seems to rob the monsters that appear within the story-world of the sagas of some of their narrative reality. For regardless of how one interprets them, they are first and foremost part of the world the sagas depict and therefore ought to be approached as such. A more useful method seems to me the one suggested in the context of magic: “The good of society is the ultimate yardstick” (106), but this does of course not mean that only anti-social magic is in fact magic, as the author suggests in this context.

However, in shifting the centre of attention thus from the paranormal beings themselves to the humans who encounter them, Ármann establishes a binary of “the known, the human, life, safety, civilization, and the audience itself” versus “the occult, the inhuman, death, danger, wilderness, and the extraneous other” (17) that he occasionally questions but never fully challenges. He does of course draw attention to the fact that the term “troll” is an imprecise one, a concept that lacks definition and cohesion, but he does not use this

² An anthology of the same title based on research done as part of or in connection with the project is forthcoming in 2019.

³ Asa Simon Mittman, “Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies.” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, edited by Asa Simon Mittman, with Peter J. Dendle, 1–14. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012; 6; emphasis original.

important caveat, nor the observation that trolls can be located very close to home and the humans who dwell in it, as a starting point for an interrogation of the supposed dichotomy between troll and human, paranormal and ordinary. Although the closeness, the dynamic, between the monstrous and the human is then perhaps contradictorily addressed at several points (e.g. 58, 63, 83, 119, 141), those trolls who would be the clearest example of the lack of a clear break or binary between human and non-human are only discussed superficially. Thus, an exploration of living human characters that are not magic-users (such as *berserkir*) is almost completely absent, and the caveat that the volume is not a list of all paranormal encounters, and that readers therefore should not miss their “favourite scenes or characters” (xiii) does not remedy this absence. Even Grettir, the saga protagonist who most clearly embodies the unstable continuum of monstrosity, is only dealt with rather briefly; instead, the misreading first put forward in an article in 2009 that Glámr was hired as more than a shepherd is repeated (136),⁴ and Þuríðr — in keeping with the importance of magic-users throughout the volume — assumes a prominent place.

That this binary is therefore occasionally interrogated but not conclusively challenged may well be a result of the strong, and important, focus on the troll’s pastness that runs through the volume as a whole: the past itself, in the author’s view, is alien and ‘Other,’ and it is the space from which all paranormal alterity originates. In the figure of the troll, this alterity is given haunting shape that reminds us of the fact that we are surrounded by uncontrollable forces.

Ultimately, *The Troll Inside You* is thus a volume that inspires rather than precludes debate, and despite its thorough overview of the paranormal beings encountered in the *Íslendingasögur* — covering all kinds of trolls from revenants to magic-users, from demons to divine beings — as well as the scholarly attitudes towards them that have dominated the field, I am certain that this volume will do one thing above all: it will stimulate new readings and responses to the ideas

⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, “The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic *Draugr* and Demonic Contamination in *Grettis Saga*”, *Folklore*, 120 (2009), 307–16

presented in it, and I look forward to seeing in which direction these will go. I am certain of another thing: that everyone who is interested in the paranormal, be it a specialist of medieval Icelandic or other (medieval) literatures or a newcomer to the field, will find something in it that will speak to them. Because trolls, regardless of whether one reads them as mirrors of the individual human psyche or as reflections of a collective culture's anxieties, always profoundly impact those who encounter them.

