

Zeitschrift:	Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band:	59 (2017)
Artikel:	Conan and the north : the reception history of a short story and the definition of the canon
Autor:	Di Filippo, Laurent
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858104

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Conan and the North

The Reception History of a Short Story and the Definition of the Canon

LAURENT DI FILIPPO (LORRAINE/BASEL)

The sound of clanging swords in a far north snowy wasteland, two men in armor wearing horned helmets facing each other, and a promise from one opponent to send the other to Valhalla. This is not the set of a Viking film, but the introduction of *The Frost-Giant's Daughter*. For people who are interested in the study of the reception of Norse medieval texts, this piece of work is one of the most interesting short stories about Conan, the famous barbarian invented by the Texan author Robert E. Howard.

Even if this text was not published as a Conan story during REH's lifetime, it became part of the canonical series after several decades. The picture that has been chosen is taken from a video game manual dedicated to the game *Conan* issued on XBOX 360 and Playstation 3 in 2007. In this manual, *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* is divided into a series of eleven parts disseminated within the book and illustrated with pictures from the recent Dark Horse comic books adaptation of the short story.

The Hyborian Age, a fictional setting for Old Norse elements

Conan's adventures take place in a pre-cataclysmic age called 'The Hyborian Age' that Howard himself presents as a "fictional background for a series of fiction stories" (Howard, 2015: 1). Jeffrey Shanks qualifies it as "a fictional world set in the dim prehistoric past before the dawn of recorded history" (2013: 13). In other words, this period presents an alternative version of the past of our own world in a fictional fashion. As other works of the fantasy genre, it conveys familiar "Eurocentric" patterns presenting Nordic countries as cold and snowy areas inhabited by barbarians (DiTommaso, 2006: 113).

The first Conan story, *The Phoenix on the Sword* was published in 1932. At the beginning of this story, Conan draws a map of the northern lands where he has spent some times. These territories are called *Asgard* and *Vanaheim* and his friend and advisor Prospero is surprised, because he thought that those two lands were fabulous. He asks Conan about the manners of the northern folks. The latter answers that the people of the north are "tall and fair and blue-eyed. Their god is Ymir, the frost-giant, and each tribe has its own king. They are wayward and fierce. They

Health jugs are great for restoring health, but it takes Conan a long time to pick a jug up and consume the nectar within. During fights it's better to smash small rune bearing objects like the crates scattered around the pirate camp when Conan needs a little health to keep fighting.

If you desperately need to use a jug, make sure you draw the opponent(s) away before you run over and use the nectar vase.

Slice through the vines beyond the camp and continue to follow the trail. Corsair Archers are introduced here. They fire arrows at Conan from a safe distance. Conan slowly bleeds to death whenever he's punctured with an arrow. Press the action button to remove it to stop the bleeding. Arrows can only be deflected with a shield, but can be avoided or used to shoot Conan's enemies. Archers are weak and easily dispatched with thrown objects or a Body Slam. Watch for the silvery white trails left by flying arrows and roll away to avoid them while fighting.

There are more archers further up the trail and a small group of Corsairs closer to Conan. Either quickly evade the pirates and eliminate the archers, or fight behind the wall on the left or right to shelter Conan from the rain of arrows while dealing with the sword-wielders. There's also a rack of shields on the right side of the trail, which allow Conan to block arrows.



The Frost-Giant's Daughter



The clangor of the swords had died away, the shouting of the slaughter was hushed; silence lay on the red-stained snow. The bleak pale sun that glittered so blindingly from the ice-fields and the snow-covered plains struck sheens of silver from the rent corselet and broken blade, where the dead lay as they had fallen. The nerveless hand yet gripped the broken hilt; helmeted heads back-drawn in the death-throes, tilted red beards and golden beards grimly upward, as if in last invocation to Ymir the frost-giant, god of a warrior-race.

Across the red drifts and mail-clad forms, two figures glared at each other. In that utter desolation only they moved. The frosty sky was over them, the white illimitable plain around them, the dead men at their feet. Slowly through the corpses they came, as ghosts might come to a tryst through the shambles of a dead world. In the brooding silence they stood face to face.

Both were tall mean, built like tigers. Their shields were gone, their corselets battered and dented. Blood dried on their mail; their swords were stained red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes. One was beardless and black-maned. The locks and beard of the other were red as the blood on the sunlit snow.

"Man," said he, "tell me your name, so that my brothers in Vanaheim may know who was the last of Wulfhere's band to fall before the sword of Heimdal."

"Not in Vanaheim," growled the black-haired warrior, "but in Valhalla will you tell your brothers that you met Conan of Cimmeria."

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fight all day and drink ale and roar their wild songs all night" (Howard, 2006a: 29). This description is almost similar to the description of Germanic barbarians in Tacitus's *De Germania* (29) and evokes common stereotypes of barbarians. It also makes a reference to the dead warriors called *Einherjar*, who fight all day and drink and eat all night, and start again the next day until the *Ragnarökr* (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 33-34). Through this description, the first short story already announces the following one that Howard will write, *The Frost-Giant's Daughter*, in which Conan fights among the Northern people.

An adventure among northern Gods and Heroes

At the beginning of *The Frost-Giant's Daughter*, Conan fights against a man called Heimdul, whose name refers to *Heimdal* in the Norse mythology (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, 25). No precise geographical indication is given but one may guess from the action and the landscape covered with snow that the scene takes place somewhere between *Asgard* and *Vanaheim*. From the first dialog between the two men, the reader learns that Conan is on the side of the *Aesir* and is fighting against a *Vanir*. Once Conan has defeated Heimdul, a woman appears near him. She is half naked and has a hair color between the typical red of the *Vanir* and the blond of the *Aesir*. Conan cannot say if she comes from one or the other people. She tries to attract him and leads him into a trap: two frost giants appear and Atali asks them, by calling them "Brothers!", to kill Conan so that she can put his heart still smoking on her father's altar. Atali can be seen as a rewriting of the myth of the Valkyrie.¹ Here, the best warrior is not the one that is dead on the battlefield, but the last man standing. Gods in the world of Conan are presented in a much darker way than in the Old Norse sources; they try to trick humans. At the end, Conan manages to catch Atali, but she calls her father Ymir for help and disappears in a flash of light without leaving a trace. When Conan wakes up, other *Aesir* have found him and tell him that he had traveled very far north and that there were no other traces than his. The only proof that remains is the veil that Conan took from Ymir's daughter. This can be interpreted as a reference to the illusion used by the king of giants *Útgardaloki* against Thor, Loki, Thjálf and Roska. Among the various references to Old Norse sources, one can also find:

- Valhalla: Conan names death as a way to Valhalla;
- Niord: one of the *Aesir* who find Conan at the end of the story. In the medieval sources, he is one of the *Vanir* that was exchanged with the *Aesir* in order to make peace;
- Bragi: his name is cited as a chief among the *Vanir* in Conan's story, despite the fact that he is one of the *Aesir* in Snorri's *Edda*;

¹ Contrary to Brian Leno's interpretation who thinks that it is not a reference to the Valkyries (Leno, 2011).

- Ymir: he is the god of the Aesir and the Vanir. In the Norse sources, he is often considered as the first being and the father of frost-giants;
- Frost-giants: they are the children of Ymir and brothers of Atali in the story.

The reader of the short story can also recognize some references to other sources. For example, Horsa and Wulfhere's names come from Venerable Bede's text and the Old Gorm of Howard's short story may have been inspired by the name of Gorm the Old (Gorm den gamle), a Danish king cited in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus.

But Howard wasn't only inspired by ancient sources. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who played an important role in the reception of Old Norse sources in the United States (Hilen, 1947), was among his favorite writers. Patrice Louinet (2003) proposed that Atali's name and the narrative structure of the text may have been inspired by the Greek tales of Atalanta's race and the story of Daphne and Apollo. According to Brian Leno (2011), Howard could also have been inspired by Leonard Cline's short story *Sweetheart of the Snows*, published in the pulp magazine *Ghost Stories* in 1928 using the pen name Alan Forsyth. Al Harron (2012) argues that it is close to Algernon Blackwood's *The Glamour of the Snow* from 1912.

Building the canon: A history of reception

Written in 1932, *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* was rejected by Farnsworth Wright, the editor of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, in which *The Phoenix on the Sword* was published. Later, in 1934, Howard changed the name of the hero to Amra (a nickname of Conan) and the title to *The Frost King's Daughter* and sent it to the magazine *The Fantasy Fan*. The editors published it under the title *The Gods of the North*.

In 1953, this short story appears in an anthology of Howard's Conan writings edited by Lyon Sprague de Camp who rewrote parts of the text (Louinet, 2015: 255-258). It appears in its original form only in 1976 (Jones, 2006: 919). In some recent anthologies, it is often presented as part of the canonical adventures of Conan. The version of 1934 published in *The Fantasy Fan* was recently republished in an anthology called *Swords of the North* (2014), under the title *The Frost King's Daughter*.

The short story was adapted in several comic books and an episode of the animated TV series. It also inspired one of Frank Frazetta's picture of Conan fighting Atali's brothers, called *Snow Giants*. Many elements of the story are used in the Massively Multi-player Online Roleplaying Game *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (Funcom, 2008). And, as mentioned in the introduction, this story was selected as a representative example of Conan's adventure for a video game manual and was illustrated with artworks from recent comic books adaptation of the same story.

This last example shows a commercial strategy which has consequences when defining a canon: first, it builds a link with Howard's literature, helps to give legitimacy to the video game and it helps to advertise other products of the franchise. In return, it legitimizes *The Frost-Giant's Daughter* as part in the official Conan stories.

From the point of view of sociology of literature and the “Art Worlds” (Becker, 1982: 351), one can see that the ‘reputation’ of a piece of art as literature must be considered as a social construct evolving through time. What Becker (2013, 119-125) calls the “upstream” and the “downstream” of a piece of art fluctuates depending on the version that one chooses to study. These reception processes then affect the history of reception of Norse elements through time.

Conclusion

The Frost-Giant’s Daughter is the only story written by Robert E. Howard in which Conan wanders the northern landscape of the Hyborian Age among Aesir and Vanir, maybe because of Wright’s rejection. But many of the Texan author’s followers will use this background to write their own Conan stories, spreading the representation of the harsh and barbaric North of the era of one of the most popular hero of Fantasy literature.

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