

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I

THE HEROIC AGE

	PAGE
Epic and Romance: the two great orders of medieval narrative	3
<i>Epic</i> , of the "heroic age," preceding <i>Romance</i> of the "age of chivalry"	4
The heroic age represented in three kinds of literature—Teutonic Epic, French Epic, and the Icelandic Sagas	7
Conditions of Life in an "heroic age"	7
Homer and the Northern poets	10
Homeric passages in <i>Beowulf</i>	11
and in the <i>Song of Maldon</i>	12
Progress of poetry in the heroic age	15
Growth of Epic, distinct in character, but generally incomplete, among the Teutonic nations	15

II

EPIC AND ROMANCE

The complex nature of Epic	18
No kind or aspect of life that may not be included	19
This freedom due to the dramatic quality of true (<i>e.g.</i> Homeric) Epic	19
as explained by Aristotle	20

	PAGE
Epic does not require a magnificent ideal subject	20
such as those of the artificial epics (<i>Aeneid, Gerusalemme Liberata, Paradise Lost</i>).	21
The <i>Iliad</i> unlike these poems in its treatment of "ideal" motives (patriotism, etc.)	21
True Epic begins with a dramatic plot and characters	22
The Epic of the Northern heroic age is sound in its dramatic conception	23
and does not depend on impersonal ideals (with exceptions, in the <i>Chansons de geste</i>)	24
The German heroes in history and epic (Ermanaric, Attila, Theodoric)	26
Relations of Epic to historical fact	28
The epic poet is free in the conduct of his story	29
but his story and personages must belong to his own people	30
Nature of Epic brought out by contrast with secondary narra- tive poems, where the subject is not national	31
This secondary kind of poem may be excellent, but is always different in character from native Epic	33
Disputes of academic critics about the "Epic Poem"	34
Tasso's defence of Romance. Pedantic attempts to restrict the compass of Epic	35
Bossu on Phaeacia	36
Epic, as the most comprehensive kind of poetry, includes Romance as one of its elements	37
but needs a strong dramatic imagination to keep Romance under control	39

III

ROMANTIC MYTHOLOGY

Mythology not required in the greatest scenes in Homer	40
Myths and popular fancies may be a hindrance to the epic poet but he is compelled to make some use of them	42
He criticises and selects, and allows the characters of the gods to be modified in relation to the human characters	43
Early humanism and reflexion on myth—two processes: (1) rejection of the grosser myths; (2) refinement of myth through poetry	45

	PAGE
Two ways of refining myth in poetry—(1) by turning it into mere fancy, and the more ludicrous things into comedy ; (2) by finding an imaginative or an ethical meaning in it	46
Instances in Icelandic literature— <i>Lokasenna</i>	47
Snorri Sturluson, his ironical method in the <i>Edda</i>	49
The old gods rescued from clerical persecution	49
Imaginative treatment of the graver myths—the death of Balder, the Doom of the Gods	50
Difficulties in the attainment of poetical self-command	51
Medieval confusion and distraction	52
Premature "culture"	53
Depreciation of native work in comparison with ancient literature and with theology	54
An Icelandic gentleman's library	54
The whalebone casket	55
Epic not wholly stifled by "useful knowledge"	57

IV

THE THREE SCHOOLS—TEUTONIC EPIC—FRENCH EPIC—
THE ICELANDIC HISTORIES

Early failure of Epic among the Continental Germans	58
Old English Epic invaded by Romance (Lives of Saints, etc.)	58
Old Northern (Icelandic) poetry full of romantic mythology	59
French Epic and Romance contrasted	59
Feudalism in the old French Epic (<i>Chansons de geste</i>) not unlike the prefeudal "heroic age"	61
But the <i>Chansons de geste</i> are in many ways "romantic"	62
Comparison of the English <i>Song of Byrhtnoth</i> (<i>Maldon</i> , A.D. 991) with the <i>Chanson de Roland</i>	62
Severity and restraint of <i>Byrhtnoth</i>	63
Mystery and pathos of <i>Roland</i>	64
Iceland and the German heroic age	66
The Icelandic paradox—old-fashioned politics together with clear understanding	67
Icelandic prose literature—its subject, the anarchy of the heroic age ; its methods, clear and positive	68
The Icelandic histories, in prose, complete the development of the early Teutonic Epic poetry	70

CHAPTER II

THE TEUTONIC EPIC

I

THE TRAGIC CONCEPTION

	PAGE
Early German poetry	75
One of the first things certain about it is that it knew the meaning of tragic situations	76
The <i>Death of Ermanaric</i> in Jordanes	76
The story of <i>Alboin</i> in Paulus Diaconus	76
Tragic plots in the extant poems	79
The <i>Death of Ermanaric</i> in the "Poetic Edda" (<i>Hamðismál</i>)	81
Some of the Northern poems show the tragic conception modified by romantic motives, yet without loss of the tragic purport— <i>Helgi and Sigrun</i>	83
Similar harmony of motives in the <i>Waking of Angantyr</i>	84
Whatever may be wanting, the heroic poetry had no want of tragic plots—the "fables" are sound	85
Value of the abstract plot (Aristotle)	86

II

SCALE OF THE POEMS

List of extant poems and fragments in one or other of the older Teutonic languages (German, English, and Northern) in unrhymed alliterative verse	88
Small amount of the extant poetry	90
Supplemented in various ways	91
1. The Western Group (German and English)	92
Amount of story contained in the several poems, and scale of treatment	93
<i>Hildebrand</i> a short story	94
<i>Finnesburh</i> , (1) the Lambeth fragment (Hickes); and (2) the abstract of the story in <i>Beowulf</i>	<i>ib.</i>
<i>Finnesburh</i> a story of (1) wrong and (2) vengeance, like the story of the death of Attila, or of the betrayal of Roland	96

	PAGE
Uncertainty as to the compass of the <i>Finnesburh</i> poem (Lambeth) in its original complete form	97
<i>Waldere</i> , two fragments: the story of Walter of Aquitaine preserved in the Latin <i>Waltharius</i>	97
Plot of <i>Waltharius</i>	98
Place of the <i>Waldere</i> fragments in the story, and probable compass of the whole poem	100
Scale of <i>Maldon</i>	102
and of <i>Beowulf</i>	102
General resemblance in the themes of these poems—unity of action	104
Development of style, and not neglect of unity nor multiplication of contents, accounts for the difference of length between earlier and later poems	105
Progress of Epic in England—unlike the history of Icelandic poetry	106
2. The Northern Group	107
The contents of the so-called "Elder Edda" (<i>i.e.</i> <i>Codex Regius</i> 2365, 4to <i>Havn.</i>)	108
to what extent <i>Epic</i>	108
Notes on the contents of the poems, to show their scale; the <i>Lay of Weland</i>	109
Different plan in the <i>Lays of Thor</i> , <i>Þrymskviða</i> and <i>Hymiskviða</i>	110
The <i>Helgi</i> Poems—complications of the text	110
Three separate stories— <i>Helgi Hundingsbane</i> and <i>Sigrun</i>	110
<i>Helgi Hiorvardsson</i> and <i>Swava</i>	113
<i>Helgi</i> and <i>Kara</i> (lost)	114
The story of the <i>Volsungs</i> —the long <i>Lay of Brynhild</i>	115
contains the whole story in abstract	116
giving the chief place to the character of <i>Brynhild</i>	117
The <i>Hell-ride of Brynhild</i>	118
The fragmentary <i>Lay of Brynhild</i> (<i>Brot af Sigurðarkviðu</i>)	119
Poems on the death of <i>Attila</i> —the <i>Lay of Attila</i> (<i>Atlakviða</i>), and the <i>Greenland Poem of Attila</i> (<i>Atlamál</i>)	121
Proportions of the story	121
A third version of the story in the <i>Lament of Oddrun</i> (<i>Oddrúnargrátr</i>)	124
The <i>Death of Ermanaric</i> (<i>Hamðismál</i>)	125
The Northern idylls of the heroines (<i>Oddrun</i> , <i>Gudrun</i>)—the <i>Old Lay of Gudrun</i> , or <i>Gudrun's story to Theodoric</i>	126
The <i>Lay of Gudrun</i> (<i>Gudrúnarkviða</i>)— <i>Gudrun's sorrow for Sigurd</i>	127

	PAGE
The refrain	128
Guðrun's <i>Chain of Woe</i> (<i>Tregrof Guðrúnar</i>)	128
The <i>Ordeal of Guðrun</i> , an episodic lay	128
Poems in dialogue, without narrative—	
(1) Dialogues in the common epic measure— <i>Balder's Doom</i> , Dialogues of <i>Sigurd</i> , <i>Angantyr</i> —explanations in prose, between the dialogues	129
(2) Dialogues in the gnomic or elegiac measure: (a) vitu- perative debates— <i>Lokasenna</i> , <i>Harbarzlióð</i> (in irregular verse), <i>Atli and Rimgerd</i>	130
(b) Dialogues implying action— <i>The Wooing of Frey</i> (<i>Skirnismál</i>) <i>Svipdag and Menglad</i> (<i>Grógaldr</i> , <i>Fiölsvinnsmál</i>)	131
The <i>Volsung</i> dialogues	133
The Western and Northern poems compared, with respect to their scale	134
The old English poems (<i>Beowulf</i> , <i>Waldere</i>), in scale, midway between the Northern poems and Homer	135
Many of the Teutonic epic remains may look like the "short lays" of the agglutinative epic theory; but this is illusion	136
Two kinds of story in Teutonic Epic—(1) episodic, <i>i.e.</i> represent- ing a single action (<i>Hildebrand</i> , etc.); (2) summary, <i>i.e.</i> giving the whole of a long story in abstract, with details of one part of it (<i>Weland</i> , etc.)	137
The second class is unfit for agglutination	138
Also the first, when it is looked into	139
The Teutonic Lays are too individual to be conveniently fused into larger masses of narrative	141

III

EPIC AND BALLAD POETRY

Many of the old epic lays are on the scale of popular ballads	142
Their style is different	143
As may be proved where later ballads have taken up the epic subjects	144
The Danish ballads of <i>Ungen Sveidal</i> (<i>Svipdag and Menglad</i>)	146
and of <i>Sivard</i> (<i>Sigurd and Brynhild</i>)	147
The early epic poetry, unlike the ballads, was ambitious and capable of progress	150

IV

THE STYLE OF THE POEMS

	PAGE
Rhetorical art of the alliterative verse	154
English and Norse	155
Different besetting temptations in England and the North	157
English tameness ; Norse emphasis and false wit (the Scaldic poetry)	159
Narrative poetry undeveloped in the North ; unable to compete with the lyrical forms	159
Lyrical element in Norse narrative	159
<i>Volospá</i> , the greatest of all the Northern poems	161
False heroics ; <i>Krákumál</i> (<i>Death-Song of Ragnar Lodbrok</i>)	162
A fresh start, in prose, with no rhetorical encumbrances	163

V

THE PROGRESS OF EPIC

Various renderings of the same story due (1) to accidents of tradition and impersonal causes ; (2) to calculation and selection of motives by poets, and intentional modification of traditional matter	167
The three versions of the death of Gunnar and Hogni compared— <i>Atlakviða</i> , <i>Atlamál</i> , <i>Oddrúnargrátr</i>	169
Agreement of the three poems in ignoring the German theory of Kriemhild's revenge	172
The incidents of the death of Hogni clear in <i>Atlakviða</i> , apparently confused and ill-recalled in the other two poems	173
But it turns out that these two poems had each a view of its own which made it impossible to use the original story	174
<i>Atlamál</i> , the work of a critical author, making his selection of incidents from heroic tradition	178
the largest epic work in Northern poetry, and the last of its school	179
The "Poetic Edda" a collection of deliberate experiments in poetry, and not of casual popular variants	180

VI

BEOWULF

	PAGE
<i>Beowulf</i> claims to be a single complete work	182
Want of unity : a story and a sequel	184
More unity in <i>Beowulf</i> than in some Greek epics. The first 2200 lines form a complete story, not ill composed	185
Homeric method of episodes and allusions in <i>Beowulf</i> and <i>Waldere</i>	186 187
Triviality of the main plot in both parts of <i>Beowulf</i> —tragic significance in some of the allusions	190
The characters in <i>Beowulf</i> abstract types	191
The adventures and sentiments commonplace, especially in the fight with the dragon	193
Adventure of Grendel not pure fantasy	194
Grendel's mother more romantic	198
<i>Beowulf</i> is able to give epic dignity to a commonplace set of romantic adventures	199

CHAPTER III

THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

I

ICELAND AND THE HEROIC AGE

The close of Teutonic Epic—in Germany the old forms were lost, but not the old stories, in the later Middle Ages	205
England kept the alliterative verse through the Middle Ages	206
Heroic themes in Danish ballads, and elsewhere	207
Place of Iceland in the heroic tradition—a new heroic litera- ture in prose	208

II

MATTER AND FORM

	PAGE
The Sagas are not pure fiction	211
Difficulty of giving form to genealogical details	212
Miscellaneous incidents	214
Literary value of the historical basis—the characters well known and recognisable	215
The coherent Sagas—the tragic motive	217
Plan of <i>Njála</i>	218
of <i>Laxdæla</i>	219
of <i>Egils Saga</i>	220
<i>Vápnfirðinga Saga</i> , a story of two generations	221
<i>Víga Gláms Saga</i> , a biography without tragedy	221
<i>Reykðæla Saga</i>	223
<i>Grettis Saga</i> and <i>Gísla</i> clearly worked out	224
Passages of romance in these histories	226
<i>Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða</i> , a tragic idyll, well proportioned	227
Great differences of scale among the Sagas—analogies with the heroic poems	228

III

THE HEROIC IDEAL

Unheroic matters of fact in the Sagas	230
Heroic characters	232
Heroic rhetoric	233
Danger of exaggeration—Kjartan in <i>Laxdæla</i>	235
The heroic ideal not made too explicit or formal	237

IV

TRAGIC IMAGINATION

Tragic contradictions in the Sagas— <i>Gisli</i> , <i>Njal</i>	238
Fantasy	239
<i>Laxdæla</i> a reduction of the story of Sigurd and Brynhild to the terms of common life	240
Compare Ibsen's <i>Warriors in Helgeland</i>	241
The Sagas are a late stage in the progress of heroic literature	242
The Northern rationalism	244

	PAGE
Self-restraint and irony	246
The elegiac mood infrequent	247
The story of Howard of Icefirth—ironical pathos	248
The conventional Viking	250
The harmonies of <i>Njála</i>	252
and of <i>Laxdæla</i>	255
The two speeches of Gudrun	256

V

COMEDY

The Sagas not bound by solemn conventions	259
Comic humours	261
Bjorn and his wife in <i>Njála</i>	262
<i>Bandamanna Saga</i> : "The Confederates," a Comedy	264
Satirical criticism of the "heroic age"	267
Tragic incidents in <i>Bandamanna Saga</i>	268
Neither the comedy nor tragedy of the Sagas is monotonous or abstract	269

VI

THE ART OF NARRATIVE

Organic unity of the best Sagas	270
Method of representing occurrences as they appear at the time	271
Instance from <i>Dorgils Saga</i>	273
Another method—the death of Kjartan as it appeared to a churl	277
Psychology (not analytical)	279
Impartiality—justice to the hero's adversaries (<i>Færeyinga Saga</i>)	281

VII

EPIC AND HISTORY

Form of Saga used for contemporary history in the thirteenth century	282
The historians, Ari (1067-1148) and Snorri (1178-1241)	284
The <i>Life of King Sverre</i> , by Abbot Karl Jónsson	285
Sturla (c. 1214-1284), his history of Iceland in his own time (<i>Islendinga</i> or <i>Sturlunga Saga</i>)	286
The matter ready to his hand	287

CONTENTS

xvii

	PAGE
Biographies incorporated in <i>Sturlunga</i> : Thorgils and Hafliði	289
<i>Sturlu Saga</i>	290
The midnight raid (A.D. 1171)	291
Lives of Bishop Gudmund, Hrafn, and Aron	294
Sturla's own work (<i>Islendinga Saga</i>)	295
The burning of Flugumyri	297
Traces of the heroic manner	302
The character of this history brought out by contrast with Sturla's other work, the <i>Life of King Hacon of Norway</i>	305
Norwegian and Icelandic politics in the thirteenth century	305
Norway more fortunate than Iceland—the history less interesting	306
Sturla and Joinville contemporaries	307
Their methods of narrative compared	308

VIII

THE NORTHERN PROSE ROMANCES

Romantic interpolations in the Sagas—the ornamental version of <i>Fóstbræðra Saga</i>	315
The secondary romantic Sagas— <i>Frithiof</i>	317
French romance imported (<i>Strengleikar</i> , <i>Tristrams Saga</i> , etc.)	318
Romantic Sagas made out of heroic poems (<i>Volsunga Saga</i> , etc.)	319
and out of authentic Sagas by repetition of common forms and motives	320
Romantic conventions in the original Sagas	321
<i>Laxdæla</i> and <i>Gunnlaugs Saga</i> — <i>Thorstein the White</i>	322
<i>Thorstein Staffsmitten</i>	323
Sagas turned into rhyming romances (<i>Rímur</i>)	324
and into ballads in the Faroes	324

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD FRENCH EPIC

(*CHANSONS DE GESTE*)

Lateness of the extant versions	329
Competition of Epic and Romance in the twelfth century	330

	PAGE
Widespread influence of the <i>Chansons de geste</i> —a contrast to the Sagas	331
Narrative style	332
No obscurities of diction	333
The "heroic age" imperfectly represented	334
but not ignored	336
<i>Roland</i> —heroic idealism—France and Christendom	337
William of Orange— <i>Aliscans</i>	339
Rainouart—exaggeration of heroism	340
Another class of stories in the <i>Chansons de geste</i> , more like the Sagas	341
<i>Raoul de Cambrai</i>	342
Barbarism of style	343
<i>Garin le Loherain</i> —style clarified	344
Problems of character—Fromont	345
The story of the death of Begon	346
unlike contemporary work of the Romantic School	348
The lament for Begon	351
<i>Raoul</i> and <i>Garin</i> contrasted with <i>Roland</i>	353
Comedy in French Epic—"humours" in <i>Garin</i>	355
in the <i>Coronemens Loois</i> , etc.	356
Romantic additions to heroic cycles— <i>la Prise d'Orange</i>	358
<i>Huon de Bordeaux</i> —the original story grave and tragic	359
converted to Romance	363

CHAPTER V

ROMANCE AND THE OLD FRENCH ROMANTIC SCHOOLS

Romance an element in Epic and Tragedy apart from all "romantic schools"	367
The literary movements of the twelfth century	368
A new beginning	369
The Romantic School unromantic in its methods	370
Professional Romance	371
Characteristics of the school—courteous sentiment	375
Decorative passages—descriptions—pedantry	376

	PAGE
Instances from <i>Roman de Troie</i>	377
and from <i>Ider</i> , etc.	379
Romantic adventures—the “matter of Rome” and the “matter of Britain”	381
Blending of classical and Celtic influences— <i>e.g.</i> in Benoit's <i>Medea</i>	382
Methods of narrative—simple, as in the <i>Lay of Guingamor</i> ; overloaded, as in <i>Walewein</i>	385
<i>Guingamor</i>	386
<i>Walewein</i> , a popular tale disguised as a chivalrous romance	388
The different versions of <i>Libeaux Desconus</i> —one of them is sophisticated	392
<i>Tristram</i> —the Anglo-Norman poems comparatively simple and ingenuous	393
French Romance and Provençal Lyric	394
Ovid in the Middle Ages—the <i>Art of Love</i>	395
The Heroines	396
Benoit's <i>Medea</i> again	397
Chrestien of Troyes, his place at the beginning of modern literature	399
“Enlightenment” in the Romantic School	400
The sophists of Romance—the rhetoric of sentiment and passion	401
The progress of Romance from medieval to modern literature	402
Chrestien of Troyes, his inconsistencies—nature and convention	403
Departure from conventional romance; Chrestien's <i>Enid</i>	405
Chrestien's <i>Cliges</i> —“sensibility”	408
<i>Flamenca</i> , a Provençal story of the thirteenth century—the author a follower of Chrestien	410
His acquaintance with romantic literature	411
and rejection of the “machinery” of adventures	412
<i>Flamenca</i> , an appropriation of Ovid—disappearance of romantic mythology	412
The <i>Lady of Vergi</i> , a short tragic story without false rhetoric	414
Use of medieval themes by the great poets of the fourteenth century	415
Boccaccio and Chaucer—the <i>Teseide</i> and the <i>Knight's Tale</i>	416
Variety of Chaucer's methods	417
Want of art in the <i>Man of Law's Tale</i>	417
The abstract point of honour (<i>Clerk's Tale</i> , <i>Franklin's Tale</i>)	418
Pathos in the <i>Legend of Good Women</i>	419
Romantic method perfect in the <i>Knight's Tale</i>	419

	PAGE
<i>Anelida</i> , the abstract form of romance	419
In <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> the form of medieval romance is filled out with strong dramatic imagination	420
Romance obtains the freedom of Epic, without the old local and national limitations of Epic	421
Conclusion	423

APPENDIX

Note A—Rhetoric of the Alliterative Poetry	425
Note B—Kjartan and Olaf Tryggvason	427
Note C—Eyjolf Karsson	433
Note D—Two Catalogues of Romances	436
INDEX	443