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Titel: Udrag fra History of the Northmen, or Danes and Normans, from the Earliest Times to the Conquest of England by William of Normandy

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Passing on to the poetry of the North, it is obvious, that where the mythology has a universal historic character, the poetry will principally be national-historic, and twine itself, not as a chaplet of roses around the beauties of nature, but as a laurel-wreath round the brow of the hero, and if it approaches beauty with its myrtle garland, it will be when beauty becomes linked to valour.

It would here be out of place to discuss the peculiar distinctions, or to weigh one against another, the separate merits of natural and historic poetry. We are here on the domains of taste, where the praise should be according to the pleasure; but if it cannot be denied that heroic achievements, and passionate and faithful love, are naturally calculated to produce poetical inspirations, the Skalds of the North deserve to be listened to by those who desire to be acquainted with, not merely one, but all the regions of the wonderful creation which poetry has called into existence; and who would not wish to be every where at home in a world, where the human mind excited by the deepest emotions, strives in all directions to elicit whatever it is able—if not to satisfy, at least to calm or sweeten or dignify them?

In this part of the field, Mr. Wheaton has not quite done all we could have wished. It is, indeed, a theme not easily to be handled; and we are not sure that poets themselves have said much about poetry that is worthy to be heard and remembered. Mr. Wheaton's account of the Skalds in general, and of the historical songs of the Edda, are however very interesting, if not quite complete; but he should not have passed so slightly over Beowulf's *Drapa*, one of the very brightest monuments of ancient Northern poetry, a mirror in which so much light is reflected from the days of old. He has referred to it, and is certainly not unacquainted with it. In Denmark, it is well known through Grundtvig's admirable translation—in England, it has hitherto excited attention wholly disproportioned to its high merits. We are surprised that Mr. Wheaton should deem the *Rigs-mal* worthy of comparison with Beowulf's poem; and yet more so, that on the authority of Thorkelin, whom he does not name, and if he did the authority would not be of much value, he deems Beowulf's great work to be "probably a translation or rifacimento of some older lay, originally written in the ancient language of Denmark." [p. 130]. We are a little tender, be it owned, of Beowulf's reputation, and unwilling that the original merit of one of the most remarkable, if not the most remarkable, literary production of our Anglo-Saxon progenitors, should, without good evidence, be snatched away. Of Beowulf other occasions will be found to speak. A version into English, and accompanied with a preface.

from the Danish translator, is far advanced, and the accessibility of the work, will soon give it the place in public opinion to which it is intitled.*

That the historic poems of the Edda, or the songs concerning the exploits and downfall of those mighty hero-races, the Volsungs, Budlungs, and the Giukungs or Nibelungs, form a highly remarkable relic of ancient Northern song, doubly alluring to the inquirer, both on account of their deviation from, and their resemblance to, the Germans' Lay of the Niebelungs, is indisputable; but they all look so like translations, and are so wanting in the completeness, clearness, and compactness, which distinguish Beowulf's "Drapa," that it would be doing the Skalds of the North a great wrong, to take this wreck of a bark stranded on Iceland, for Skibbladner (Odin's ship) itself. Mr. Wheaton has made an excellent choice in the specimen he has given of the first lay of Gudruna [p. 83] which likewise, in regard to form, belongs to the noblest, and depicts in few, but powerful and masterly strokes, the deep-toned pathos of the warrior-maid of the North; who, as it sounds in the old song, does not beat her bosom and wring her hands over the corse of the beloved hero, but is turned to stone, like Niobe, till she sees the spear-pierced eye, and then melts as snow would melt before Afric's sun, under the mere recollection of what formerly glistened beneath the vaulted arches of the heroic skull.†

The poetical merit of the songs of the Edda has, perhaps, been commonly over-estimated; but, on the other hand, a standard has been sometimes applied to them which would sink them far beneath their real value. It is certain, that at a time anterior to the colonization of Iceland, a race of Norse poets existed whose writings were natural, vivid, and popular. The few fragments that remain, and especially the elegy of Eivird Skalderspilder upon

* Mr. Wheaton states, erroneously [p. 131] that Beowulf has been translated, or rather paraphrased, in English verse, by the late ingenious Mr. Conybeare. Mr. Conybeare, in fact, translated only a few fragments. The adventure related in Beowulf's "Drapa," is no doubt fabulous; but the historic relations, which are introduced as Episodes, deserve every attention—that relating the expedition of Fligelar to Friesland, and his fall in a conflict with the Franks and Frieslanders, is literally corroborated by history.

† Mr. Wheaton is in error when he says [p. 83] that Celenschläger has enriched his works from these songs. Grundtvig has dramatized the story in his *View of Northern Heroic Life*.* In Germany, also, De la Motte has attempted the same thing with a part of the tale, and at least produced a poetic work which deserves to be known.†

* *Optin af Norners og Asers Kamp*, Klvn, 1811.

† *Sigurd der Schlangentöchter*.