

N.F.S. Grundtvig [Anmeldelse af] “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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ART. X.—*History of the Northmen, or Danes and Normans, from the Earliest Times to the Conquest of England by William of Normandy*. By Henry Wheaton. John Murray. 8vo. pp. 367. 1831.

IT has been said that Americans have no ancestry; and yet here is an American, with enough of Gothic blood and Gothic affection to induce him to enter into a field of research, which Englishmen have too much neglected. “Smit with the love of” Scandinavian story, and availing himself of his residence in a Scandinavian court, where its best sources were accessible to him, Mr. Wheaton has produced a volume which will give much information to others, and bring considerable renown to himself. We welcome the book as a most acceptable offering to literature, and the writer as worthy of “golden opinions.” His style is correct and flowing—his knowledge extensive, if not always profound—of his industry, every page gives evidence; and the tone and temper of the volume are generous and

benevolent throughout—dwelling with complacency on every thing that betokens goodness, gentleness, or genius; though, perhaps, he is sometimes a little dazzled and misled, while surrounded by those mists which hang over the events of a distant time—events which come down to us with many striking associations—a grand and imposing mythology—the records of historians rocked in the icy cradle of the ancient north—the songs of Skalds, which have in them the rudeness of an heroic, and the wildness of a romantic age; and above all, influenced by that undefined but sympathizing feeling, that the history is the history of our forefathers—the progenitors of our own blood—the history of one great branch, and that the most adventurous, of our renowned Gothic race.

The ancients asserted—and it was scarcely a fable, that Chronos had buried his treasures in the regions of the North. And strange it is, that they should have been so little sought for there. Strange it is, though we know full well whence came the Goths, the Angles and the Normans, that we should have done so little to track them back to their ancient abodes. Their fatherland is wrapped for us in a darkness nearly as thick as JA:443surrounded it ere they burst out upon the fairer and richer lands of the South. Formerly, indeed, the remoter Northern world, was a world given up to the imagination of dreamers, who peopled it with prodigies and all mysterious things;—in later times, when men have learnt that man every where is man—with common hopes and fears—modified somewhat by climate, and much by civilization; even in later times, a cold and frozen barrier seems to have girdled the ancient Scandinavia—a barrier which few have been willing to burst, lest nothing should be found to repay the labour of the adventurers.

Yet it is most true, as Mr. Wheaton says in his preface, that the written monuments of the North “throw a strong and clear light upon the affairs of Europe during the middle ages, and illustrate the formation of the great monarchies now constituting some of its leading states;” and strange would it be, if such records, while they instruct and guide the inquirer who follows a brave and hardy people in their migrations and settlements in other lands—should not, at the same time, have a charm when they tell the domestic story of those who remained at home. If energy of thought and will distinguished those who went forth to encounter the perils of the stormy deep—scarcely less are the same qualities discernible in those who lingered in their native abodes. Mr. Wheaton's eye of observation is occupied with the whole field; and in every part of it he has done for our instruction, far more than any English writer that has preceded him. May he find all encouragement to proceed with his labours! It will be most gratifying to find that the topic so interesting in itself, is felt generally to be interesting; but it is easier to nourish a curiosity that does exist, than to call that curiosity into

existence. On England the subject has a very especial claim—for in England, these men, whom the father of northern history calls “the Kingly Scyldings,” not only pitched their camps, but raised their castles, and built their palaces—not only looked in as visitors, but fixed themselves as inhabitants;—where they introduced a new language, literature, and social existence, creating one of the great epochs in the history of the human race. To claim thus much for the Northern men, may seem presumption. Let those who would gainsay the statement, assist the inquiry; there is much to be done; the subject has the freshness, the bloom of novelty upon it; and if able pens will give it the literary charm, no doubt an interest will be awakened, whose long long slumbers it is not very easy to excuse or to explain.

It may, indeed, be said, that those who have hitherto wandered into the septentrional regions of literature, have been wanting in JA:444qualities which would have enabled them to bring to us materials likely to attract attention, and invite examination. They have written of an age long vanished, coldly and drily; and have brought from their researches only a few dull fragments, the mere bricks of an ancient temple, of whose pristine form they themselves have had a most dull conception. Among them has been no restorer of the Northern Parthenon. They have talked to us of the dead; and have presented to us their ragged garments, a shield and a sword, a broken lyre, perhaps some mouldering bones; and, above all, the lapidary inscriptions upon the antique tombs. But in their hands, the soul that animated the living men has wholly evaporated; the sparks that sprung up from those “hearts of fire,” they have not known how to preserve. A time may yet arrive when, invoked by some master spirit, the ancient Northmen will come forth from their graves, and speak in words of life to us, their children. Our sympathies, hitherto almost barren as respects the past, might then become fruitful both for the past and for the future. There are within us, strings that would respond with exquisite vibration to the touch of a hand nerved with the power of ancient lore. Sir Walter made an experiment in his *Ivanhoe*. That was an appeal to what remains in us of Saxon feelings; and the appeal has been strongly felt—more strongly, perhaps, than any other he has made. Yet even that appeal was wanting in the great essential: *Ivanhoe* is an admirable picture of external manners—a happy, and for the most part, a judicious contrast between Saxon and Norman; but how little does the author portray of the inner man—of the characteristic of thought and expression which naturally grew out of the traditional history of these different races. True, this may not have been his object, nor, where so much has been done is it quite fair to complain that all has not been done. He has enticed, as it were, the reading world, not only of England, but of Europe—aye, and of the other hemisphere,

into the domain of popular history. Into the portals that he has unlocked, the kempions of the North will one day enter. The vast theatre over which the ancient Goths walked, will again be opened; and their noble race will, in recreated living semblances, re-appear. Their old saying about "immortality on earth" is not yet proved to be a delusion. The privilege which mythology conferred upon poets alone, of plucking out of Hades that which they love, may be hereafter shared by historians. And for the true poet, a yet higher destiny may be reserved: he will still create, where the historian only records. He, as of old, will divide his soul with the dead; and vibrate from time that was, to time that is to be, careering in light and eloquence.

**JA:445**As a pioneer leading to the ancient Northern lands, as one who has travelled so far, and gathered up so much, and recorded his observations so well, Mr. Wheaton is highly praiseworthy. It is to be hoped, as what he tells us is told so agreeably, that it will excite a strong desire to hear more. We are glad of an opportunity of pointing out some of the topics on which the North is capable of affording instruction to the literary inquirer; and in doing so, we shall make frequent reference to Mr. Wheaton's book, remarking on what appear to us some of its defects and errors—not in a temper of reprehension certainly—but in friendly suggestion.

The ancient literature of the North may be grouped under three distinct heads, mythological, poetical, and historical. Every one of these deserves special notice; and it might be shown in vast detail what a rich harvest each would afford, even to the gleaner. Under each particular head, however, we shall make a few observations, both for the purpose of communicating a somewhat more comprehensive idea of the whole subject than is current among our writers; and of correcting misconceptions into which Mr. Wheaton has sometimes fallen, though, be it said, almost always in company with some authority or other. The principal source of the imperfections of Mr. Wheaton's volume is the want of a correct estimate of the comparative value of different authorities; his affections not unfrequently betray his judgment—that which interests him—that which decorates his story—he receives on slight and insufficient evidence. There is an intimate alliance between benevolence and credulity. Credulous, Mr. Wheaton cannot be called, but he is too willing to be satisfied with imperfect testimony.

For instance, he should have swept away, as unworthy of credence—or at all events he should have spoken more doubtfully on the subject, unless far better support could be found for the theory than any hitherto given—all those tales of the expeditions of the ancient Northmen to America, which are very current indeed among Icelandic historians, but which, if traced to their sources, will

be discovered to be without authority. But does not Snorro Sturleson, the father of northern history, does he not record these American expeditions? Not he; though Mr. Wheaton quotes him; the fact being, that the passage which is printed in the Copenhagen edition, from the very faulty and almost worthless Swedish edition, and which records the visits of the Northmen to America (Vinland), is not, we believe, to be found in any existing ancient MS. And the accounts given of the natural productions, natural appearances, and aboriginal inhabitants of the discovered land, prove that they **JA:446** cannot refer to the American continent. The length of the days would, as Mr. Wheaton says, give the latitude of Boston, in the United States; yet the Icelandic chronicles tell us, the land was occupied by a race of squalid and diminutive dwarfs, and produced a quantity of grapes, and that the language of the natives was "something like the Irish tongue." The internal evidence of the story, is enough to show that it is wholly unworthy of credit, and it should have been mentioned to be refuted. The same tale is told in the life of Rollo (Rolf Rögnvaldsen) the progenitor of William the Conqueror; but the Norman historians seem, in his case, to have been especially busy in inventing all sorts of spurious adventures to give *éclat* to the ancestral history of the man who founded in England a dynasty of kings. It is not from any disposition to lessen the interest of the past, that we desire to sweep away the rubbish and the weeds that have gathered round its authentic records. On the contrary, the true chronicles of the Northern-men are pregnant with all the charms of heroic adventure; and rise up in the midst of a mythology, bold, characteristic, and poetical. The eye of inquiry turns with eagerness proportioned to its knowledge, on the literary Aurora Borealis of the middle ages; those northern lights that throw so wondrous an illumination on the night of the past.

A very faint and feeble notion of the Scandinavian mythology can, however, be gathered out of a mere catalogue of names, or out of the Table of Contents of the Edda: even were those contents rightly and minutely described, they would only serve to distract the attention of the inquirer, until he had obtained, by previous study, a tolerably accurate notion of the persons and character of the Scandinavian divinities. To illustrate our knowledge of the mythology of the North, the Edda is highly valuable; but it is not alone sufficient to communicate that knowledge. The list of its contents, given in considerable detail by Mr. Wheaton, is not however correct; it occupies sixteen pages of his volume, and is, for the most part, a translation of lists frequently published. The particulars of some of the chapters, those of the *Hyndlu-Liod*, and the *Hymisquida*, for example, are incorrectly given. The *Hyndlu-Liod* does contain some heroic genealogies, but for the most part, only *Völu-Spá*, or mythological illustration, and the *Hymisquida* is no

description of a banquet at Ægir's, but of Thor's visit to Jotun Hymer, and his fishing for Midgaard's serpents, which is a remarkable scene in the Asa-drama.

There are, however, many passages in which Mr. Wheaton has seized the true character of the Scandinavian poetry, and writes as if he were imbued with its spirit.

**JA:447**'The Völu-Spá gives a short account of the creation of the universe, and of the gods and men by whom it is inhabited, according to the cosmogony of the Eddas, and the death of Odin's son, Balder, the god of day, who is lamented by all the deities, whose tears and prayers could not avert his doom. His body is burnt on the funeral pile, with that of Nanna, his lovely bride, who had died of a broken heart, and with his horse and arms, like those of the ancient heroes of the North. His funeral obsequies are to be followed by the destruction of the universe by fire, typified in the god Sotur, the Northern Pluto.

'The sun all black shall be,  
The earth sink in the sea,  
And ev'ry starry ray,  
From heav'n fade away;  
While vapours hot shall fill  
The air round Ygdrasil,  
And flaming as they rise,  
Play towering to the skies.'

After which a new heaven and a new earth shall appear, whilst two individuals of the human race, saved from the general destruction, shall perpetuate their species in the world thus renovated. Balder shall return again from the dark abodes of Hela, and reign triumphant in the mansion of the gods, once more restored to its ancient magnificence and splendor. This beautiful mythos is doubtless an image of the life of the seasons, and has reference to the celebration of the ancient festival called *Midsumers-blót* in the ancient language of the North, when the days, having reached their extreme length, begin to shorten, soon bring in their train the dog-star's burning ray, and are followed in these Northern climates, in a short transition, by the winter's cold, when all nature is wrapt in a death-like sleep, which is again succeeded by the renovating spring. But, at the same time, it probably carries with it another, a more remote and a higher signification, being, to use the words of the eloquent historian of Sweden, "a symbol of all Time, of the changes of the great Year of the World, representing the general dissolution of all things as a consequence of the first God's Death—the death of Goodness and Justice in the world. Balder returns, followed by reward and punishment, by a new heaven and a new earth. Through the truth thus inculcated, and at the same time the inviolable sanctity which the Northern mythology attaches to an oath, it rises above mere Nature and acquires a moral value for mankind."—pp. 65, 66.

In this track Mr. Wheaton might very advantageously have proceeded farther, and by gathering up the characteristics of the ancient mythology, which are to be found in so many Danish and Swedish sources, have brought the Edda to illustrate the whole.

The truth is, that the death of Balder, independent of all arbitrary explanation, is the great pivot in the conflict between the Aser and Jotuns, upon which the principal matter of the **JA:448**Northern mythology turns. For the distinctive peculiarity of the mythic fiction of the North consists in this, that it is a representation of the conflict which at all times is carried on in our mortal history, between the spiritual and intellectual energies (the Aser), and the

un-spiritual or mere animal powers, (the Jotuns, or Thyrser), between high-minded wisdom (Balder) and that unholy sagacity (Loke), which is but heartless craft and cunning. Now this conflict, which by the death of Balder seems decided in favour of the Jotuns, is arranged under the guidance of a Providence (the Noonies), which causes Loke's captivity (resembling that of Prometheus) to follow close upon the death of Balder, and never loses sight of its great end, which is the purification of the noble, and the destruction of the wicked; hence, the drama closes with the return of Balder and the renovation of the earth.<sup>1</sup> Such a work, the result of the poetical imagination of the North, is well worthy of being brought out of the dim distance of antiquity, opening as it does, a new gold mine, both for the poet and his auditors, and affording a lively symbol of human existence, under the great influences which act upon it.

We mean not to assert, that the idea of the great conflict is the exclusive property of the North; on the contrary, it is to be traced in all the remoter popular mythologies,<sup>2</sup> as it necessarily must, since it arises from the observation of the profound observer, in every clime and in every age; but in the North alone it has developed itself in a universal historic character, and seems to have taken possession of the whole field of thought and action, and to have stamped the general idiosyncrasy of the ancient Scandinavian race. That which was the father, became the son; and as earth on its varied surface brings forth upon the same spot a succession of similar fruits and flowers, so among men, the children resemble the sires that beget them; the mind creates a mind like itself; ideas are pregnant with their own natural offspring, and "the stream of tendency" rolls on for many ages its continuous waves. On some other occasion, we may perhaps develop the beautiful apotheosis of human life, which is described by the myths of the North—of human life, evincing **JA:449**the struggle between its greatness and its littleness, its lowering passions, and its elevating spirituality: at present we can only refer to two or three characteristics of Scandinavian mythology, and show their influences on the ancient Scandinavians.

The inhabitant of the North, a warrior by habit, almost by necessity, was, by the guidance of his religious belief, trained to hope for something of repose and peace, beyond and above the conflict and the joy of victory: his first glory might be the Warrior-hall (Valhal), but a higher object was pointed out to him, when Valhal should sink into the dust, and all the gods of battle (the Aser), have expiated by their death the misuse of power, and arise glorified in the house of peace, in the golden-roofed Gimle. Thus was bravery to be released from its impurities, to be emancipated from that thralldom to which even the noble are subjected from the wicked. The first stage of the spirit's happiness was victory; the second, Valhal, where the spirit is still but half emancipated; the third, Gimle,

with its eternal, uninterrupted tranquillity and power.

Again, Loke, who may be considered as a personification of the reasoning power, is placed upon the confines of the world of Aser and Jotuns, as if his services were at the disposal of either. Although of Jotun birth, he is the foster-brother of Odin from the beginning, and seems to be in alliance with the Aser, until, by compassing the death of Balder, he betrays his deep and dark design to destroy the divine life, and stands the convicted representative of a reasoning sophistry, and in prominent contrast to a spiritualized and virtuous intellect.

The third and last singularity which we will point out, is the manner of Balder's death. It is recorded in the Myth, that when the gods, through distressing dreams, had become filled with fear for the life of Balder, his mother Frigga extorted an oath from all the Vætter (spirits of nature with which it was imagined the things of the world were animated), that they would do no injury to Balder, which made the Aser so confident, that they daily, for diversion's sake, shot at Balder, whom no weapon could wound. Frigga, in the mean time, had neglected to take the oath from a creeping-plant, called misletoe, because it was so tender a twig; and Loke having discovered this, took the twig, and forcing it into the hands of one of the Aser, the blind Hodur, said, do you also have a fling at Balder; whereupon Hodur shot, and gave Balder his death-wound. This may be deemed an emphatic symbol of the destiny which has often stricken even the noblest of the self-created divinities of humanity, overwhelmed by the paltriest weapons. So truth itself may suffer for a time from scorn and mockery—the intellectual misletoe.

**JA:450** 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 rifaccimento 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 JA:451 from the Danish translator, is far advanced, and the accessibleness of the work, will soon give it the place in public opinion to which it is intitled.<sup>3</sup>

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 Nibelungs, 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 corpse 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 scull.<sup>4</sup>

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 **JA:452**Hakon, the foster-son of Athelstane, are indisputable evidence of this. Of the Edda songs, the descriptions of battle are the most remarkable passages.

There is, however, a source, which has not been referred to by Mr. Wheaton, whence very valuable relics of ancient Northern poetry may be derived. Though what is there recorded is only in the shape of translation, there can be no doubt of its authenticity, and as little of its poetical recommendations. We refer to those Latin imitations of the ancient Northern songs which are to be found in the writings of Saxo-Grammaticus. These, collected by him in the twelfth century, and immediately referred to those who might have impugned their genuineness had there been any grounds for doubt, we cannot but deem of the highest value; and of literary debts, long owing and still unpaid, we think the debt to Saxo among the strongest. In his living pages will be found a moving picture of the past, which, though sometimes verging into too fanciful a world, does notwithstanding present a striking portraiture of things that were. Here may be traced the original of that master-piece of Shakspeare, his Hamlet; and here might also be followed to their sources, what Æhenschlâger and many inferior minds have made the topics of their songs.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Wheaton supposes that Hamlet (Saxo's Amlet) assisted the Saxons against the Franks in the sixth century. Where Mr. Wheaton discovered any authority for this theory, we know not, unless in that wilderness of Suhm, which the author calls a "Critical History of Denmark," and of which it has been somewhat bitterly, but not altogether undeservedly said, that every thing is to be found there, but truth.

Proceeding now to the history of the North, let the reader allow his interest to be excited, and he will find how much the events of the middle ages in general, and of the British isles in particular, will receive of light from the sources to which we are now directing his attention; he will see, that in the North there was formed an historic style in the mother-tongue, so pure, so simple, and so lively, that it might serve as a pattern even now. He will discover that one kingdom at least in the North, has an eventful history thus written, with the pencil of a Walter Scott, and will feel that it has some claim upon the attention of civilized man. Now it is really the fact, that Snorro Sturleson's "Heimskringla," or history of Norway, written in

the thirteenth century, is, beyond any other, a book such as here described, which, al|A:453though it has only yet been translated into Danish, Swedish, and Latin, deserves to be rendered into all languages, since it would be an ornament to the literature of any land, and become a favourite book with old and young, with all who enjoy the union of simplicity and grandeur. More or less resemblance to this master-work have all the Historic Sagas of Iceland, but even where Snorro's rank makes his tone and his style questionable, as in Knytlinga-Saga (a history of the Danish kings, from Canute the Great, to the son of Valdemar the Great) and in Nials saga, (an Icelandic domestic history) his work is still highly valuable. It represents a continually renewed conflict for the regal throne on Dovre, and it excites so lively an interest, that it is impossible for the reader to remain neutral, but he is hurried away by the stream with the hero who pleases him, and sorrows by his grave till he once more arises in a renovated form.

These are some of the motives which ought to direct the attention of literary men to the North, and it is clear, that this attention should naturally be strong and fervent, in the degree in which nations are allied to the old Northmen, and consequently likely to participate in their character, and able to enter into their feelings. Now, that no nation beyond the bounds of the North is so nearly akin to it in spirit as the English, has been generally imagined through so many centuries, and is indeed so manifest, that we should have presumed it to be a decided matter, did not the book which we announce so expressly remind us, that we live in an age, wherein not merely every thing may be called in doubt, but wherein doubt may become, before one is aware of it, even an article of faith.

Mr. Wheaton says,

'In the latter part of the fifth century of the Christian æra, the island of Britain, deserted by its Roman masters, was invaded and subdued by three different tribes of barbarians who dwell between the Elbe and the Baltic sea, —the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. The history of the Anglo-Saxon nation, which was formed by the blending of these tribes, is intimately connected with that of the Scandinavians, and it has for us an interest lively and enduring, since from it we trace the origin of the English name and nation. But the race of the Anglo-Saxons belongs to the Teutonic, not the Scandinavian family; and though they participated in the widely diffused worship of Odin, the language spoken by them is perfectly distinct from the ancient Northern, or Icelandic tongue. The Jutes, who came from the northern parts of the Cimbric Chersonesus, were the least numerous of these emigrating tribes. The Angles dwelt in the present duchy of Sleswick, which they entirely abandoned, leaving the country a perfect desert. The Saxons were of that tribe of the Saxon confederation |A:454who inhabited Nordalbingia, or the territory between the Elbe and the Eyder.'—pp. 10, 11.

The authority referred to here, is that of professor Rask, who quotes as his authority the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Yet it may well be doubted if there be any the slightest ground for these refined and

closely drawn distinctions. The proof has not yet been produced that, either in Denmark or in England, a people speaking Icelandic ever existed; and as little is it proved that the Anglo-Saxon language, as we find it in books, is a mixed language sprung up in England, produced by the amalgamation of the Vikings, whom history calls Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, and by local circumstances with which we are unacquainted. It would, indeed, be much too rash to decide from this book-language on the German origin of the Anglo-Saxons, even if it had much more of a German character than it really possesses. Without inquiring into grammatical niceties, the argument which, by means of the language, is brought against the *Northernity* of the Anglo-Saxons, may be combated by these three facts; that modern English, which has still most in common with ancient English, is far more nearly allied to Norse than it is to German; that Danes and Icelanders have found it much less difficult than Germans to make themselves acquainted with Anglo-Saxon; and lastly, that the ancient Icelanders reckoned the language as well of England as of Denmark, but never that of Germany, under what they called Danish. If, in the meanwhile, other positive proof of the preponderance of the northern spirit amongst the Anglo-Saxons is required, than that which springs forth visibly from their whole history and literature, the "Drapa" of Beowulf might well serve for such; since we there not only find Hengist as a fief-holder of the Danish king, but discover the clearest northern tradition, and are continually occupied with Denmark and Gothland, without hearing one particle about Germany. To meet this irresistible fact, by declaring, like Thorkelin, that Beowulf's "Drapa" is a translation from the Icelandic, is certainly easy enough, but if it be merely remembered that the Icelandic literature first commences at the termination of the eleventh century, just when the Anglo-Saxon, through the Norman invasion, ceases, there will be little disposition to select so desperate an outlet, instead of following the track of history, and coming to this reasonable conclusion; that in the North of England, which in particular continued to maintain a close alliance with the North, and which was the principal seat of Anglo-Saxon poetry, the Northern legends were preserved, from the middle of the sixth century, to the beginning of the eighth, when Beowulf's "Drapa" must have been written.

**JA:455** Far, then, from being our duty to seek in Anglo-Saxon for translations from the Icelandic, it is quite in harmony with the natural course of things to suppose that the Icelanders, who became in Northern literature the immediate successors of the Anglo-Saxons, translated or imitated the most popular of their writings, and that thus the entire poetic Edda, or, at least, the greatest portion thereof, may have been of an Anglo-Saxon origin. This, at least, is what Grundtvig firmly maintains in the introduction to his Danish

Translation of Beowulf, and we have not seen any strong argument against the weighty reasons he adduces, as well from the language and versification, as from the spirit of the book. It is quite certain that the right of claim to the Edda may well be urged on behalf of the Anglo-Saxons; and if they can, with reason, make a claim thereto, it is obvious that a near relationship between them and the inhabitants of the North, is incontestably proved, and this is, indeed, the grand affair; for if it is clear, that the Anglo-Saxon poetry is substantially the same as we find in the Edda, and trace in Saxo, in the Hervarar Saga, and in many other monuments of the North, it is a very subordinate question as to the land or dialect in which the poem or the legend first arose.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding these observations, and slight differences of opinion, we are assured of Mr. Wheaton's cheerful recognition of us as fellow-labourers in the field he has been so advantageously exploring; and in which we are equally desirous of planting friendship, and of gathering truth. The few inaccuracies we have discovered, we speak of without hesitation; for they are few indeed, and most insignificant, compared with the errors, not only of French and English, but even of German historians, who have been occupied by the same subject. If Mr. Wheaton is misled, it is under the guidance of some literary name. He has followed Suhm and Munter, where they have led him astray, and if he had sought *their* leaders, they would nowhere have been found, except in some ancient legend, some old woman's tales, which pleased their fancy and occupied their pen. Thus when Munter speaks, as quoted by Mr. Wheaton, of the "female skalds, or poetesses, whose lays sometimes breathed the harsh notes of war, and celebrated the achievements of conquering heroes, and at others sang the prophetic mysteries of religion," he merely pours forth fancies, without the least historic foundation, unless we call it a foundation that Snorro cites a pair of unmeaning lines of a single skaldic maid, and that the Völuspá of the ancient skald is placed in the mouth of a spæ-woman. Such again is the relation of Suhm [p. 51] of a skald, who was raised to the vacant Juttish throne, on the decease of Frode III, in the fourth century of the Christian æra; for however exact all this may sound, it is quite certain that it refers to nothing but the old Hiarne skald, who, according to a popular legend in Saxo, was immediately after the birth of Christ, made king over the whole of Denmark, as a reward for his elegy on the celebrated and beloved Frode Fredegod. Somewhat similar is the relation [p. 174] respecting Thorkild Adelfar, who, about the year 730, embraced the Christian belief, "and whose conversion was probably attended with the less difficulty, as he already belonged to a heathen sect which adhered to the gods or demons, enemies of the Aser;" for this Thorkild is neither more nor less than the hero of a beautiful fiction

in Saxo, derived probably from an Anglo-Saxon skald, who cared so little about chronology, that he made Thorkild an Icelander long before Iceland had any inhabitants, so that all the historian can say about the matter is, that he is well paired with Holger the Dane (the hero of Norman Romance), whose conversion is also confidently related [p. 175].

There are some other errors which should be corrected. Nissa (where the conflict took place between Svend Estrithson and Harald Haardraade) is placed on the Norwegian coast [p. 346], instead of on the Danish (now Swedish), off Halland; the battle between the Jomsvikinger and Hakon Jarl [p. 295], is represented to have taken place in the Bay of Bergen (Bergens Vaug), instead of Hiorung Vaug, by Sul-oe. If our memory do not deceive us, the words also about the position of the skalds during the battle which are attributed [p. 31] to Oluf Trygvason, confound him with Saint Oluf, whose words they were, and used at the battle on Stiklestad, where he, as is rightly observed [p. 53] "assigned to his skalds a conspicuous post, where they might be able distinctly to see and hear, and afterwards relate the events of the day." So again when Mr. Wheaton says of Saint Oluf, that his zeal against the pagan religion induced him to include the songs of the skalds among the other inventions of the demon, and that Sighvat Skald said of him, "he was unwilling to listen to any lay." The story which is here not correctly represented, is to be found in Snorro, to the following effect: That when Sighvat Skald came first to king Oluf, and wished **JA:457** to obtain a hearing, the king said, that he would not hear such things as he could not understand (namely, such dark cramped verse as the skalds of Iceland were in the habit of producing), but when Sighvat assured him, that his verse was intelligible enough, the king immediately lent him ear, and retained him ever afterwards as his skald. This is the old account, and it is a natural one; but the story of an ancient Northern king, who considered poetry as an invention of the demon, is a mere fiction.

Again, Mr. Wheaton says of Higelak, "he is supposed to have been a petty king, who reigned in the island of Fionia;" and in the note [p. 156], is a reference to the Introduction to Grundtvig's translation of Beowulf, whence it would seem that the Gothic king Higelak is made into a petty king of Fyen, which is far from being the case. Grundtvig has, on the contrary, shown that Higelak in Beowulf's "Drapa," is the same person as the Danish king Cochilac, whose fall in a battle with the Frank king, is related by Gregory of Tours. These are slight defects, but, perhaps, not unworthy of notice; and having suggested them to the attention of the reader, we can very sincerely recommend Mr. Wheaton's volumes.

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Consult Norden's *Mythologie eller Udsigt over Edda-Leeren* af N. F. S. Grundtvig, Khvn 1808. *Mythology of the North, or view of the doctrine of the Edda*, by N. F. S. Grundtvig. Copenhagen, 1808. Of this work there is a Swedish translation.

2

To give every thing an Indian origin is now very much in fashion amongst the learned upon the Continent, which has occasioned some Icelanders to endeavour to obtain for the *Völu-Spá*, and various other Eddaic songs, an Asiatic authority and origin. The fancy seems a very idle one.

3

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 Higelac to Friesland, and his fall in a conflict with the Franks and Frieslanders, is literally corroborated by history.

4

Mr. Wheaton is in error when he says [p.88] that *Ælenschlâger* has enriched his works from these songs. Grundtvig has dramatized the story in his *View of Northern Heroic life*.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

5

*Optrin af Norners og Asers Kamp*. Khvn, 1811.

6

*Sigurd der Schlangentödter*.

7

Ewald's "*Balder*" and "*Rolf Krage*" are among the first results of the study; *Ælenschlâger's* "*Steerkodder*" followed; and Grundtvig's translation of the whole of Saxo, is a very important contribution to the subject.

8

In the Exeter Manuscript, as Conybeare has already observed, [*Illustration of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, p. 235-41.] are to be found clear traces of an Anglo-Saxon poem, which corresponded with the *Volundar Quida* in the Edda. The name is, however, written *Veland* by Mr. Conybeare, and so it is commonly spelt in Anglo-Saxon books; but in the Exeter Manuscript it stands clearly *Velund*, being thus exactly like the *Völund* of the Edda.

