

THE NIBELUNGENLIED

A HISTORY OF GERMAN LITERATURE by J. G. ROBERTSON, Professor of German Language and Literature in the University of London, 1903-1933
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Page 66

Such is the final form in which the nameless Austrian poet of the first years of the thirteenth century has welded the old legend of Siegfried and the Nibelungs. With a master-hand he has created an epic unity out of the most disparate elements...

The Nibelungenlied has often been called the Iliad of the Germans, and the comparison, although perhaps irrelevant enough, is suggestive. The German poem represents at once an earlier and a later stage of epic development than the Homeric epic. On the one hand, in story and motive it is cruder and more primitive; its feelings and passions are simple and fundamental. Siegfried and Hagen, Brunhild and Kriemhild, are without the subtler attributes of Homer's heroes; their motives are always naively transparent. On the other hand, in literary art and beauty of language, in wealth of poetic imagery, in balance and proportion, the Nibelungenlied belongs to a less advanced stage of epic poetry than the Iliad. But its development has, as it were, proceeded further than that of the Greek epic; and the course of that development is more apparent, for the German poem is at the same time a Christian epic and epic of chivalry, while the events and personages it describes belong to an age alike ignorant of Christianity and chivalry.

The Nibelungenlied is the national epic of the German people of the Middle Ages; it is representative in so far as it mirrors not the ideas of a single poet, but of the entire race. Its theme was a common possession; its ideas of loyalty, of nobility, of kingly virtue, its scorn of treason and deceit and its firm faith in the implacableness of rightful vengeance--all this is flesh and blood of its time and people. The Nibelungenlied may in such respects be primitive, but it is not barbaric; nor is it, as we have seen, without pathos and lyric beauty.