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The Nibelungenlied. Translation by William Nanson Lettson with a special introduction by William H. Carpenter, Prof. of Germanic Philology in Columbia University. Revised edition, 1901

p. v This story in its origin is not narrowly German, but is Germanic property. The earliest versions of the story . . . have come down to us . . . from the Scandinavian North . . . although the principle scene of action is on the Rhine/

The very first of these Northern versions is that contained in the "Elder Edda" a collection of . . . legendary poems in the Old Norse language, of unknown authorship. . . . These poems and fragments of poems . . . do not make in any sense a connected story. Their unknown collector arranged them as well as might be in connected sequence, but even then their action is not consecutive; they overlap each other, parts of the story are told and retold and not seldom with an inconsistency of detail. There is, accordingly, in the "Elder Edda" no thought of an epic . . .

p.vi The story as contained in the Old Norse poems is by no means identical with the "Nibelungenlied"

p. vii Next to the Eddic songs the most important of the Northern versions . . is the long "Volsunga Saga" from the second half of the 13th century.

p. xvi The author of the Nibelunglied is unknown.

p.xvii Karl Lachman, one of the most astute, if not one of the most mistaken, critics of the poem, taking Wolf's Prolegomena to Homer for his model, set up the theory that has since played an important part in the discussion of the genesis of the "Nibelungenlied."

20 lays

According to the Lachmann theory, the poem consists of no less than 20 distinct lays, each differing inherently from the rest, and each, with the exception of the Eighth and Ninth, by different authors. To arrive at this result, more than a third of the entire number of stanzas has, for one reason or another, been rejected as not genuine. As Lettson has cleverly put it in the original preface of his translation 'He (Lachmann) has in fact put every stanza and every verse on its trial. Some have been condemned by him to italics, as interpolations; others to brackets, as continuations by different hands; others again, which he supposes to be the latest additions, so far from being pitied for their youth, have been visited with both kinds of punishment. He has not, however, sentenced any of the delinquents to transportation from the text; or, perhaps it would be more correct to say that he has sentenced them, but has not carried the sentence into execution. . . . The twenty lays which had already suffered from the interpolations and corruptions incident to oral tradition, were first collected, committed to writing, and patched together into one poem about the year 1210 by some unknown compiler, whose handiwork was afterward corrected or depraved by two separate but equally unknown revisers. It is his opinion that scarcely a stanza of what we possess is older than 1190, while even the latest additions are not more recent than 1225. The whole poem . . according to Prof. Lachman is the work of contemporary authors, whether we call their compositions spurious or genuine; and the task undertaken is neither more nor less than to distribute a mass of unowned literary property among nineteen or twenty poets and an indefinite number of poetasters, of whom nothing, not even their existence, is known except by conjecture, and of whose distinguishing characteristics we are of course completely ignorant, except as far as we may guess at them from the internal evidence, real or imagined, or the poem itself.