

Epic and Romance Essays on Medieval Literature, W. P. Ker

p. 147 The "Elder Edda" shows that contamination was possible. It shows that there might be frequent independent variations on the same theme, and that, apart from any editorial work, these versions might occasionally be shuffled and jumbled by mere accidents of recollection.

Thus there is nothing contrary to the evidence in the theory that a redactor of Beowulf may have had before him different versions of different parts of the poem, corresponding to one another, more or less, as Atlamal corresponds ~~xi~~ to the Atlakviða. This hypothesis, however, does not account for the difference in form between the English and the Northern poems. No handling of the Atlamal or the Atlakviða could produce anything like the appearance of Beowulf. The contaminating editor may be useful as an hypothesis in certain particular cases. But the heroic poetry got on very well without him, generally speaking. It grew by a free and natural growth into a variety of forms, through the ambitions and experiments of poets.

p. 156 The variety of the three poems of Attila, ending in the careful rhetoric of the Atlamal, is proof sufficient of the labour bestowed by different poets in their use of the epic inheritance. Great part of the history of the North is misread, unless account is taken of the artistic study, the invention, the ingenuity, that went to the making of those poems. This variety is not the confusion of barbarous tradition, or the shifts and experiments of improvisers. The prosody and the rhetorical furniture of the poems might prevent that misinterpretation. It might be prevented also by an observation of the way the matter is dealt with, even apart from the details of the language and the style. The proof from these two quarters, from the matter and from the style, is not easily impugned.

Beowulf

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The poem Beowulf has been sorely tried; critics have long been at work on the body of it, to discover how it is made. It gives many openings for theories of agglutination and adulteration. Many things in it are plainly incongruous. . . . These difficulties and contradictions have to be explained; the composition of the poem has to be analyzed; . . . With all this, however, the poem continues to possess at least an apparent and external unity. It is an extant book, whatever the history of its composition may have been; the book of the adventures of Beowulf, written out fair by two scribes in the tenth century; an epic poem, . . .; a single book, considered as such by its transcribers, and making a claim to be so considered.

Before any process of disintegration is begun, this claim should be taken into account; the poem deserves to be appreciated as it stands. Whatever may be the secrets of its authorship, it exists as a single continuous narrative poem; . . . It has a meaning and value apart from the questions of its origin and its mode of production. Its present value as a poem is not affected by proofs or arguments regarding the way in which it may have been patched or edited. The patchwork theory has no power to make new faults in the poem; it can only point out what faults exist, and draw inferences from them. It does not take away from any dignity the book may possess in its present form, that it has been subjected to the same kind of examination as the Iliad.