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***THE INFLUENCE
OF OLD NORSE
LITERATURE
ON ENGLISH
LITERATURE***

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The Influence of Old Norse Literature on English Literature

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INTRODUCTORY.

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It should not be hard for the general reader to understand that the influence which is the theme of this dissertation is real and explicable. If he will but call the roll of his favorite heroes, he will find Sigurd there. In his gallery of wondrous women, he certainly cherishes Brynhild. These poetic creations belong to the English-speaking race, because they belong to the world. And if one will but recall the close kinship of the Icelandic and the Anglo-Saxon languages, he will not find it strange that the spirit of the old Norse sagas lives again in our English song and story.

The survey that this essay takes begins with Thomas Gray (1716-1771), and comes down to the present day. It finds the fullest measure of the old Norse poetic spirit in William Morris (1834-1896), and an increasing interest and delight in it as we come toward our own time. The enterprise of learned societies and enlightened book publishers has spread a knowledge of Icelandic literature among the reading classes of the present day; but the taste for it is not to be accounted for in the same way. That is of nobler birth than of erudition or commercial pride. Is it not another expression of that changed feeling for the things that pertain to the common people, which distinguishes our century from the last? The historian no longer limits his study to camp and court; the poet deigns to leave the drawing-room and library for humbler scenes. Folk-lore is now dignified into a science. The touch of nature has made

the whole world kin, and our highly civilized century is moved by the records of the passions of the earlier society.

This change in taste was long in coming, and the emotional phase of it has preceded the intellectual. It is interesting to note that Gray and Morris both failed to carry their public with them all the way. Gray, the most cultured man of his time, produced art forms totally different from those in vogue, and Walpole ^[1] said of these forms: "Gray has added to his poems three ancient odes from Norway and Wales ... they are not interesting, and do not, like his other poems, touch any passion.... Who can care through what horrors a Runic savage arrived at all the joys and glories they could conceive—the supreme felicity of boozing ale out of the skull of an enemy in Odin's Hall?"

Morris, the most versatile man of his time, found plenty of praise for his art work, until he preached social reform to Englishmen. Thereafter the art of William Morris was not so highly esteemed, and the best poet in England failed to attain the laurel on the death of Tennyson.

Of this change of taste more will be said as this essay is developed. These introductory words must not be left, however, without an explanation of the word "Influence," as it is used in the subject-title. This paper will not undertake to prove that the course of English literature was diverted into new channels by the introduction of Old Norse elements, or that its nature was materially changed thereby. We find an expression and a justification of our present purpose in Richard Price's Preface to the 1824 edition of Warton's "History of English Poetry" (p. 15): "It was of importance to notice the successive acquisitions, in the shape of

translation or imitation, from the more polished productions of Greece and Rome; and to mark the dawn of that æra, which, by directing the human mind to the study of classical antiquity, was to give a new impetus to science and literature, and by the changes it introduced to effect a total revolution in the laws which had previously governed them." Were Warton writing his history to-day, he would have to account for later eras as well as for the Elizabethan, and the method would be the same. How far the Old Norse literature has helped to form these later eras it is not easy to say, but the contributions may be counted up, and their literary value noted. These are the commission of the present essay. When the record is finished, we shall be in possession of information that may account for certain considerable writers of our day, and certain tendencies of thought.

I.

THE BODY OF OLD NORSE LITERATURE.

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First, let us understand what the Old Norse literature was that has been sending out this constantly increasing influence into the world of poetry.

It was in the last four decades of the ninth century of our era that Norsemen began to leave their own country and set up new homes in Iceland. The sixty years ending with 930 A.D. were devoted to taking up the land, and the hundred years that ensued after that date were devoted to quarreling about that land. These quarrels were the origin of the Icelandic family sagas. The year 1000 brought Christianity to the island, and the period from 1030 to 1120 were years of peace in which stories of the former time passed from mouth to mouth. The next century saw these stories take written form, and the period from 1220 to 1260 was the golden age of this literature. In 1264, Iceland passed under the rule of Norway, and a decline of literature began, extending until 1400, the end of literary production in Iceland. In the main, the authors of Iceland are unknown [2].

There are several well-marked periods, therefore, in Icelandic literary production. The earliest was devoted to poetry, Icelandic being no different from most other languages in the precedence of that form. Before the settlement of Iceland, the Norse lands were acquainted with songs about gods and champions, written in a simple verse form. The first settlers wrote down some of these, and forgot others. In the *Codex Regius*, preserved in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, we have a collection of these songs. This material was published in the seventeenth century as the *Sæmundar Edda*, and came to be known as the *Elder* or *Poetic Edda*. Both titles are misnomers, for Sæmund had nothing to do with the making of the book, and *Edda* is a

name belonging to a book of later date and different purpose.

This work—not a product of the soil as folk-songs are—is the fountain head of Old Norse mythology, and of Old Norse heroic legends. *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* are in this collection, and other songs that tell of Odin and Baldur and Loki. The Helgi poems and the Völsung poems in their earliest forms are also here.

A second class of poetry in this ancient literature is that called "Skaldic." Some of this deals with mythical material, and some with historical material. A few of the skalds are known to us by name, because their lives were written down in later sagas. Egill Skallagrímsson, known to all readers of English and Scotch antiquities, Eyvind Skáldaspillir and Sigvat are of this group.

Poetic material that is very rich is found in Snorri Sturluson's work on Old Norse poetics, entitled *The Edda*, and often referred to as the *Younger* or *Prose Edda*.

More valuable than the poetry is the prose of this literature, especially the *Sagas*. The saga is a prose epic, characteristic of the Norse countries. It records the life of a hero, told according to fixed rules. As we have said, the sagas were based upon careers run in Iceland's stormy time. They are both mythical and historical. In the mythical group are, among others, the *Völsunga Saga*, the *Hervarar Saga*, *Friðthjófs Saga* and *Ragnar Loðbróks Saga*. In the historical group, the flowering time of which was 1200-1270, we find, for example, *Egils Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, *Grettis Saga*, *Njáls Saga*. A branch of the historic sagas is

the Kings' Sagas, in which we find *Heimskringla*, the *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, the *Fletey Book*, and others.

This sketch does not pretend to indicate the quantity of Old Norse literature. An idea of that is obtained by considering the fact that eleven columns of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* are devoted to recording the works of that body of writings.

II.

THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF LATIN.

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THOMAS GRAY (1716-1771).

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In the eighteenth century, Old Norse literature was the lore of antiquarians. That it is not so to-day among English readers is due to a line of writers, first of whom was Thomas Gray. In the thin volume of his poetry, two pieces bear the sub-title: "An Ode. From the Norse Tongue." These are "The Fatal Sisters," and "The Descent of Odin," both written in 1761, though not published until 1768. These poems are

among the latest that Gray gave to the world, and are interesting aside from our present purpose because they mark the limit of Gray's progress toward Romanticism.

We are not accustomed to think of Gray as a Romantic poet, although we know well that the movement away from the so-called Classicism was begun long before he died. The Romantic element in his poetry is not obvious; only the close observer detects it, and then only in a few of the poems. The Pindaric odes exhibit a treatment that is Romantic, and the Norse and Welsh adaptations are on subjects that are Romantic. But we must go to his letters to find proof positive of his sympathy with the breaking away from Classicism. Here are records of a love of outdoors that revealed in mountain-climbing and the buffeting of storms. Here are appreciations of Shakespeare and of Milton, the like of which were not often proclaimed in his generation. Here is ecstatic admiration of ballads and of the Ossian imitations, all so unfashionable in the literary culture of the day. While dates disprove Lowell's statement in his essay on Gray that "those anti-classical yearnings of Gray began after he had ceased producing," it is certain that very little of his poetic work expressed these yearnings. "Elegance, sweetness, pathos, or even majesty he could achieve, but never that force which vibrates in every verse of larger moulded men." Change Lowell's word "could" to "did," and this sentence will serve our purpose here.

Our interest in Gray's Romanticism must confine itself to the two odes from the Old Norse. It is to be noted that the first transplanting to English poetry of Old Norse song came about through the scholar's agency, not the poet's. It was

Gray, the scholar, that made "The Descent of Odin" and "The Fatal Sisters." They were intended to serve as specimens of a forgotten literature in a history of English poetry. In the "Advertisement" to "The Fatal Sisters" he tells how he came to give up the plan: "The Author has long since drop'd his design, especially after he heard, that it was already in the hands of a Person well qualified to do it justice, both by his taste, and his researches into antiquity." Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* was the execution of this design, but in that book no place was found for these poems.

In his absurd *Life of Gray*, Dr. Johnson said: "His translations of Northern and Welsh Poetry deserve praise: the imagery is preserved, perhaps often improved, but the language is unlike the language of other poets." There are more correct statements in this sentence, perhaps, than in any other in the essay, but this is because ignorance sometimes hits the truth. It is not likely that the poems would have been understood without the preface and the explanatory notes, and these, in a measure, made the reader interested in the literature from which they were drawn. Gray called the pieces "dreadful songs," and so in very truth they are. Strength is the dominant note, rude, barbaric strength, and only the art of Gray saved it from condemnation. To-day, with so many imitations from Old Norse to draw upon, we cannot point to a single poem which preserves spirit and form as well as those of Gray. Take the stanza:

Horror covers all the heath,
Clouds of carnage blot the sun,