



Medieval Literature

W. P. Ker

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The title of Epic, or of "heroic poem," is claimed by historians for a number of works belonging to the earlier Middle Ages, and to the medieval origins of modern literature. "Epic" is a term freely applied to the old school of Germanic narrative poetry, which in different dialects is represented by the poems of Hildebrand, of Beowulf, of Sigurd and Brynhild. "Epic" is the name for the body of old French poems which is headed by the Chanson de Roland. The rank of Epic is assigned by many to the Nibelungenlied, not to speak of other Middle High German poems on themes of German tradition. The title of prose Epic has been claimed for the Sagas of Iceland.

By an equally common consent the name Romance is given to a number of kinds of medieval narrative by which the Epic is succeeded and displaced; most notably in France, but also in other countries which were led, mainly by the example and influence of France, to give up their own "epic" forms and subjects in favour of new manners.

This literary classification corresponds in general history to the difference between the earlier "heroic" age and the age of chivalry. The "epics" of Hildebrand and Beowulf belong, if not wholly to German heathendom, at any rate to the earlier and prefeudal stage of German civilisation. The French epics, in their extant form, belong for the most part in spirit, if not always in date, to an order of things unmodified by the great changes of the twelfth century.

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