Waldere: Fragments of a Lost and Forgotten Epic

Vaughn Feuer

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Recommended Citation
http://opus.ipfw.edu/stu_symp2016/45
The Waldere fragments are an under-studied and under-represented piece of literature within the corpus of medieval English texts, despite their significance as one of the only pieces of secular poetry alongside the more well-known Beowulf. My research analyzes and contextualizes the content of the fragments within the corpus of Old English secular poetry, and Old English literature as a whole. Through careful examination of digital facsimiles of the fragments provided on the website of the National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library, I examined the content of the piece and analyzed its position within the larger body of work outside of Old English concerned with the legend of Walter of Aquitaine, the central figure of the fragments. These fragments, which were incorporated into the binding of an Elizabethan prayer book sometime in the 16th century, are further indication of the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as proof of the popularity of legends like that of Walter. I also argue that the fragments’ fate, that of being used as binding for a religious tome, displays the shift that occurred within the culture of the British Isles between the creation of the manuscript sometime around the year 1000 C.E. and its destruction for alternate use sometime in the 16th century. The shift from a culture connected deeply to its roots in warrior culture, while simultaneously devoutly Christian, to one of less violent piety, is apparent through the fate of such artifacts like Waldere.

ORIGINS

~700 C.E. — Approximate date of composition, though it could have been composed anytime up to the production of the manuscript. 1000 C.E. — Handwriting analysis places the manuscript around the year 1000 C.E. which makes this poem a contemporary work of Beowulf. The language used is West Saxon, though there are Northumbrian influences and forms.

CONTENTS

Fragment A: Tells of Hildegyð trying to convince Waldere to do battle. Fragment B: Fragment B is less clear in its content, especially as to who is speaking the lines. It is clear, however, that lines 11-14 of this fragment are spoken by Waldere himself, as he defies Guthhere to attack him without the help of Hagena.

There are also multiple references throughout to other Germanic figures and heroes, as well as a reference to a legendary sword, Mimming, which appears to belong to Waldere.

ABSTRACT

The Waldere fragments are an under-studied and under-represented piece of literature within the corpus of medieval English texts, despite their significance as one of the only pieces of secular poetry alongside the more well-known Beowulf. My research analyzes and contextualizes the content of the fragments within the corpus of Old English secular poetry, and Old English literature as a whole. Through careful examination of digital facsimiles of the fragments provided on the website of the National Library of Denmark and Copenhagen University Library, I examined the content of the piece and analyzed its position within the larger body of work outside of Old English concerned with the legend of Walter of Aquitaine, the central figure of the fragments. These fragments, which were incorporated into the binding of an Elizabethan prayer book sometime in the 16th century, are further indication of the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as proof of the popularity of legends like that of Walter. I also argue that the fragments’ fate, that of being used as binding for a religious tome, displays the shift that occurred within the culture of the British Isles between the creation of the manuscript sometime around the year 1000 C.E. and its destruction for alternate use sometime in the 16th century. The shift from a culture connected deeply to its roots in warrior culture, while simultaneously devoutly Christian, to one of less violent piety, is apparent through the fate of such artifacts like Waldere.

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ISSUES AND THEMES

The poem itself was most likely an impressive epic around 1000 lines long, and possibly as long as Beowulf. However, only these two small fragments remain of the larger work. The leaves comprise a small part of the much larger legend of Walter of Aquitaine, though the contents of these two leaves are difficult to place within the legend itself. The legend of Waldere is a part of the warrior culture of the Germanic people of that era, evidenced through the language and themes of these fragments, such as Figures 1 & 2.

CONTEXT

The Waldere fragments existed within a body of works concerning the legend of Waldere of Aquitaine. Waldere, his betrothed Hildegyð, and his sworn brother Hagena, are sent as hostages to Attila the Hun. They are raised as sons and daughter by Attila, until Hagena flees. Attila promises Walter to another, and so Walter and Hildegyð flee with two chests of treasure. Hagena’s lord, Guthhere decides to go after the treasure, commanding Hagena to come along. In the ensuing battle, Walter kills eleven of Guthhere’s men. During a final battle between Waldere, Hagena, and Guthhere, the three severely injure each other, and end the fight drinking and reconciling, while Hildegyð sees to their wounds.