# YALE STUDIES IN ENGLISH. XI. A STUDY IN EPIC DEVELOPMENT

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649532919

Yale Studies in English. XI. A Study in Epic Development by Irene T. Myers

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IRENE T. MYERS

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Trieste

TO

ELISABETH WOODBRIDGE MORRIS

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## PREFACE

It is hoped that the title of the thesis here presented—A Study *in* Epic Development—will suggest, what the pages which follow make clear, that a very small portion has been examined of what is implied in a study *of* epic development. I have dealt only with certain of the popular, or semi-popular, epic manifestations, and have tried to correlate and to bring under one view dissociated facts that have to do with early epic production; and, since the people who were evolving certain forms in their orally transmitted narrative were at the same time evolving certain forms in their government, the relation existing between the literature and the contemporary political organization has been emphasized. The material which has been brought together as illustrative has been selected because of its representative character, and in the greater number of cases may be indefinitely supplemented.

It is not necessary, I know, to call attention to the fact that the result attained has been in many ways unsatisfactory; the variety of the material demands a practised hand for its arrangement, and I hope that a deeper philosophy than mine will yet show the informing spirit which makes the epic throughout its development essentially one. The work has been done only by way of beginning a study of the epic; it is the result of my effort to find a starting place; and notwithstanding its deficiencies, it may simplify the struggles of the student who would see this form of literature as a whole. Whether or not this is the case must be left for others to determine.

I. T. M.

Boston, October, 1901.

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# INTRODUCTION

## I. The Theory of Epic Poetry.

### *Greek.*

In the fragmentary discussion of the epic which Aristotle left in his *Poetics* he defines it as 'that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single metre'; he tells us that 'it should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end';[1] that 'the beginning and the end must be capable of being brought within a single view';[2] that the characters celebrated should be of a lofty type,[3] and consistently presented;[4] that in the development both of the plot and of the characters the poem should present permanent truths rather than actual realities;[5] and that its subject matter should deal with probable impossibilities rather than improbable possibilities.[6]

These statements are, for the most part, broad in application; they demand, primarily, unity in the plan of the poem and consistency in its development, and at the same time make clear that it is to be no mere reproduction of facts; Aristotle recognizes a difference between nature's actual product and the ideal for which she strives; he believes that the ideal, while frequently transcending the actual, is but the completion of nature's intention, and that, as an expression of the real truth of things, it constitutes the material with which the poet should deal. The critic is not necessarily, because of these principles, to be considered

[1] *Poetics*, xxiii. [2] *Ib.*, xxiv. [3] *Ib.*, v.
[4] *Ib.*, xv. [5] *Ib.*, ix, xv. [6] *Ib.*, xxiv.

an advocate of idealism as opposed to realism, for his real and his ideal may be one, but the conclusion is justifiable that, in his opinion, whenever the real becomes anomalous it ceases to be in the highest sense artistic.

Aristotle based his judgment of poetry upon aesthetic grounds alone; he censured and praised with an eye to the artistic character of a work, and not to its ethical teaching. By so doing he gave substance to a theory that was directly opposed to the prevailing Greek conception, according to which the poet was an inspired teacher whose song held in solution a code of morals. It was the ethical idea alone which had been recognized by Plato,[1] who, when he reasoned that the influence of poetry was hurtful, considered that he took away from it its only excuse for existence; he thought of it as a vehicle for the transmission of morality, but not as an artistic product which accomplished its object by arousing pleasure through its exquisite form.

Both the aesthetic and the ethical conceptions of poetry were transmitted to the later generations of Greeks; thus, according to Strabo (1st century B. C.), Eratosthenes (3d century B. C.) had held that 'the aim of the poet always is to charm the mind, not to instruct';[2] but Strabo himself maintains that poetry is a kind of 'elementary philosophy' designed for 'pleasurable instruction'; and Plutarch,[3] in the same century, emphasizes its ethical purpose. He questions whether young men should not be debarred altogether from reading it, and, since this seems impossible, he contends that every precaution shall be taken to derive from it whatever 'wholesome nourishment' it affords, in order to counteract its disturbing influence. The ethical conception seems, however, to have been the stronger, and in the course of time to have been combined with the principles of Aristotle which deal with poetic structure.

[1] *Rep.*, ii, 377 C, D.

[2] Strabo, i, 2, 3. Cited in Butcher's *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry*, etc., p. 214.

[3] *Morals*, ii, pp. 43 ff.