Havelok the Dane Short Guide

Havelok the Dane by Ian Serraillier

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Overview

Serraillier's Havelok the Dane is a prose adaptation of an anonymous thirteenth-century romance poem. The work chronicles the struggles of a young Danish boy (Havelok) and a young English girl (Goldborough) to regain the thrones of the kingdoms that have been seized from them by a pair of malevolent noblemen. The narrative is filled with action and excitement. In addition to its appealing plot, Havelok the Dane reflects a major concern with social and political values. Written during a time when there was a great gulf between the two main classes of society—the nobles and the commoners—the narrative serves to narrow this gap by its frequent portrayal of the praiseworthy deeds of the lower classes and the ignoble actions of the aristocrats. Although the tale is not a plea for democracy—the concept of democracy was virtually unheard of during the Middle Ages—it stresses the fact that courage, perseverance, and innate goodness exist as often among members of the lower social classes as among members of the nobility. It also stresses the fact that good rulers treat their subjects with fairness and compassion.

About the Author

The literary career of English writer Ian Serraillier has been long and varied. Serraillier's works include poems for adults, adventure novels for young adults, verse narratives for young adults based on classical and medieval sources, radio verse plays, picture books for younger readers, and a nonfiction introduction to Chaucer for high school and college students. Several of Serraillier's poems have been broadcast in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere, and his novel The Silver Sword was serialized on British television.

Serraillier was born in London on September 24, 1912. He attended a private boarding school in Sussex and then Brighton College, where he developed a life-long fascination with classical mythology. From 1931 to 1935 Serraillier studied at Oxford University where he earned a degree in English language and literature. During college he developed a special interest in medieval literature, which inspired several of his most important later writings.

Although Serraillier had always hoped to become a writer, during the first half of his adult life writing was only an avocation. From 1936 to 1961 he held a series of teaching positions. Throughout much of this time he devoted his vacations to writing. His first published works were poems intended for adults that appeared in the 1942 collection Three New Poets: Roy McFadden, Alex Comfort, Ian Serraillier. Soon two volumes of his poetry for younger readers appeared—The Weaver Birds (1944) and Thomas and the Sparrow (1946). In 1946 Serraillier also published They Raced for Treasure (later abridged and reissued as Treasure Ahead), the first of several adventure novels for young adults. Most of these early novels now seem rather dated and cliche-ridden, with the exception of The Silver Sword.

This novel (later reissued as Escape from Warsaw), is based on the lives of four Polish refugee children who traveled through Europe during World War II in search of their parents. It is Serraillier's most acclaimed work.

During the 1950s a central concern began to emerge in Serraillier's writings: the celebration of, heroic human achievement. He wrote two narrative poems on events which had captured the public imagination, Thor Heyerdahl's perilous voyage across the Pacific on Kon-Tiki, and Sir Edmund Hillary's conquest of Mt. Everest. It was also in this period that Serraillier published Beowulf the Warrior, the first and perhaps best of his reworkings of medieval literary materials.

Serraillier's most important works in the 1960s and 1970s are narrative-verse renditions of classical and medieval myths and legends: the stories of Perseus, Theseus, Jason, Daedalus, and Heracles from the classical age; The Song of Roland from Old French literature; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Robin Hood ballads, and Havelok the Dane from Middle English literature. In The Enchanted Island Serraillier recounts some of Shakespeare's plays.

His interest in Geoffrey Chaucer is reflected in his major nonfiction work, Chaucer and His World, and in his Road to Canterbury (1979), which retells selections from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. More recently he has written primarily for younger readers.

Setting

The story takes place in England and Denmark during the early Middle Ages.

While each country is equally important to the story, more detailed attention is given to the English settings than the Danish ones. The action in England takes place mostly in the city of Lincoln and the town of Grimsby, places which the medieval poet obviously knew well.

The coastal town of Grimsby, in fact, traces its founding to the legendary figure of Grim, Havelok's foster father.

Some of the specific features and places in Lincoln mentioned in the work can still be identified today. The descriptions of Denmark, however, do not convey a sense of personal familiarity, and it is unlikely that the medieval English writer had any direct knowledge of Denmark. His biases, too, are strongly English. The narrative ends, for example, with Havelok and Goldborough remaining in England to rule that country jointly, while Denmark is placed under the rule of a nobleman selected by Havelok.

Social Sensitivity

A story of this kind necessarily involves a certain amount of violent action, and in the original poem this violence is described fairly graphically.

Serraillier reduces the violence but without sapping the narrative of its necessary vigor. The most violent scene occurs when Havelok and his companions, spending the night at the home of Bernard Brun, must fend off the attack of a large band of ruffians. In the original version this gory scene is described in some detail, but in Serraillier's version the description is limited to little more than cracked skulls and broken ribs.

Literary Qualities

The original version of the Havelok story is a thirteenth-century verse narrative written in Middle English.

Serraillier's adaptation of the Middle English romance is too free to be considered a translation, yet it is quite faithful to the substance and spirit of the original. In its spirit Havelok the Dane differs significantly from other medieval romances, which usually possess an aura of wonder and have a substantial element of the supernatural. Havelok the Dane is located very much in the realm of everyday reality. It is filled with realistic details, usually pertaining to events in the lives of ordinary people.

The story isn't totally without elements of the supernatural. For example, a strange light shines from Havelok's mouth while he sleeps and serves to identify his high-born status. For the most part, however, the narrative depicts events free from magic and the supernatural. This has led some scholars to believe that the medieval poet was probably a member of the lower social classes—possibly even a minstrel—and that he wrote for commoners who might have listened to him performing in a village square.

One of the most striking literary qualities of Havelok the Dane is its pattern of doubles. When two good kings of different countries die, both of their children are too young to assume the throne, and both are soon displaced by the noblemen assigned as temporary rulers and guardians. The writer's concern with balancing these two events extends even to the names of the usurping tyrants, Godard in Denmark and Godric in England. In the handling of these two strands of the plot, the narrator first describes the predicament of Goldborough in England, then the similar plight of Havelok in Denmark. He then traces Havelok's adventures over a period of several years, up to the point at which Havelok, now a menial laborer in England, is identified by Godric as a suitable husband for Goldborough.

From that point on Havelok's and Goldborough's adventures are shared.

Themes and Characters

Medieval romances typically examine a code of conduct by which members of the nobility are expected to govern their lives. Havelok the Dane reflects such a code, but one which falls somewhere between the older heroic code of the epic and saga (as found in Beowulf] and the chivalric code of the pure medieval romance (as found in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight). While the epic hero may be somewhat uncouth or even barbaric at times, the chivalric hero is expected to be more civilized and refined in his behavior. Havelok's feats of physical prowess (such as his victory in the stone-heaving contest and his fending off attackers with a wooden door-bar) stem from his great size and strength and reflect the older concept of the hero.

Yet Havelok is also described as being kind to children, courteous to women, modest and generous—characteristics of the chivalric hero.

At the heart of the chivalric code is the integrity of one's word. It is especially telling in this work that both of the wicked earls violate their sworn oaths to the dying kings. In the case of Earl Godric of England, his malicious attempt to fulfill the letter of his promise but not its intent ironically initiates the chain of events that leads to his destruction.

The work is also very much concerned with the theme of kingship. In fact, many scholars view Havelok as a kind of handbook for rulers because of its several illustrations of good and bad kings. In the depiction of King Athelwold of England (Goldborough's father) at the outset of the narrative, an ideal of kingship is suggested: There was a King of England named Athelwold, a God-fearing man who made good laws and saw that they were kept. During his reign England was so safe that a man could travel the length of the land with fifty pounds of gold on his back and no risk of being robbed. If a beggar knocked at his door, he gave him the finest roast meat and the choicest dishes from his table.

Anyone caught harming an orphan or a widow he bound in chains and threw into prison. Outlaws and thieves he hanged on the gallows, and neither silver nor gold could save them. In battle against his enemies he was like the spark of fire that leaps from the living coal. They threw up their hands and howled for mercy, or crept into corners to hide.

No wonder he was loved by good men everywhere.

A good king, such as Goldborough's father or Havelok, protected all members of society and was swift to punish those who violated the law. On the other hand, the good king had to guard against exacting justice that was overly harsh—a vice that characterizes Earl Godric's period of rule. Havelok, it should be noted, insists on providing fair trials for both of the evil earls. They receive complete justice within the law, even though the punishments that they receive in the end are severe.

Havelok represents a blending of the character traits of the epic hero and the romance hero. He also demonstrates a pragmatism that contrasts with the usual idealism of the chivalric knight.

For example, when as a young boy he faces imminent death, Havelok has no qualms about pleading and bargaining with his oppressor in an attempt to save his life. Rather than reflecting cowardice and a lack of true nobility, these actions show an innate intelligence and a strong instinct for survival, qualities that will serve him well in the hostile world which he must confront.

Goldborough does not receive the degree of characterization given to Havelok. She is closer to the stereotypical figure of the pale, beautiful heroine of medieval romance. Initially she treats Havelok with disdain, until she realizes he is not truly her social inferior. As the narrative progresses Goldborough becomes more humane and compassionate toward ordinary members of society.

The medieval author of Havelok the Dane, in contrast to most authors of medieval romances, also pays particular attention to members of the lower classes. For example, Bertram the Cook, who hires Havelok to be his serving boy, epitomizes the goodness and vitality that exists among the commoners.

Especially notable in this regard are the three sons of Grim—Red Robert, William Wendut, and Hugh Raven. Although they are treated more as a unit rather than as three distinct individuals, they offer Havelok their unwavering support.

Without their courage, loyalty, and fighting abilities, Havelok would not have succeeded in reclaiming the two thrones.

Topics for Discussion

1. What are Havelok's chief virtues as a hero? Which of these virtues link Havelok to the heroic code? Which link him to the chivalric code? Does Havelok have any identifiable weaknesses?

2. What promises are made in the work? Who keeps his or her word and who does not? How does Earl Godric attempt to "keep his promise"?

3. How important is the matter of justice in the work? What are the king's responsibilities in regard to upholding the laws of the land?

4. What aspects of the work contribute to its realism? Which particular scenes seem most realistic?

5. How apparent is the element of magic or the supernatural in the work?

How does this element function?

6. What is the writer's attitude toward ordinary people? What is his attitude toward members of the upper classes?

7. Consider the double or parallel nature of the work's structure. What are some of the elements of the plot which contribute to this doubleness?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and report on the geographical information contained in Havelok the Dane. Determine the locations of all of the specific places mentioned in the story within England—e.g.

Winchester, London, Dover, Roxburgh, Cornwall, the Humber River, Lincoln, and Grimsby—and draw your own map of the country as it appeared in medieval times.

2. Make a comparative study of Havelok, Beowulf, and Sir Gawain as heroic figures. (All three have been the subject of adaptations of medieval poems made by Ian Serraillier.)

3. Generosity is an important virtue in the chivalric code. Consider its importance to this work. Which characters extend their generosity to others appropriately, and which do not?

4. Trace the descriptive images used throughout the story to describe Goldborough. What kinds of comparisons does the writer use to establish the nature of her beauty?

5. Make a study of all the descriptions of food and of eating that occur in the work. You might also compare these descriptions to those that occur in works such as Beowulf or Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

For Further Reference

Mehl, Dieter. The English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967. This scholarly study is valuable for placing Havelok into a broad literary context and for pointing out many of the subtler characteristics of the poet's literary artistry.

Montagu, Robert, ed. and trans. Havelok and Sir Orfeo. Leicester, England: Edmun d Ward, 1954. Montagu provides a close literal translation of Havelok into modern English; his translation provides an interesting contrast to Serraillier's work, which is a much freer adaptation. Montagu's book belongs to the Golden Legend Series, which also includes translations of several other medieval romances.

Smithers, G. V., ed. Havelok. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. This is the most definitive scholarly treatment of the Middle English version of the poem. It contains an excellent introduction to the poem, complete with critical commentary and bibliography.

It also has some useful appendixes.

Related Titles

Several of Serraillier's other writings relate the exploits of a famous epic hero.

Beowulf the Warrior focuses on the great adventures of the Scandinavian hero Beowulf, as depicted in the most famous poem from the Old English period. The Ivory Horn, an adaptation of the Old French epic The Song of Roland, depicts the actions and death of Roland, the most preeminent of Charlemagne's knights. In The Challenge of the Green Knight, which is adapted from the Middle English romance Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Serraillier recounts the adventures of Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's most valued knights. Robin in the Greenwood and Robin and His Merry Men tell the story of this quasi-historical figure, celebrated in so many English ballads.

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