The Academy.

[August 13, 1870.]

The Society of the Icelandic sagas, for it was more complex and more regular. These Icelandic compositions are largely influenced by a spirit of historicity, a desire to get as quickly as possible through all that is remembered of the traditional facts. This tendency is not without its value; it excludes inartistic loitering, and sobriety is always impressive. But a literature of this kind is not suggestive, it does not germinate; it begins and ends in bulk, and the complications that come between are scarcely epic—even in dimensions. Volunga Saga is constructed like all Icelandic stories on the principal of beginning the Trojan War with Ida's Egg and the Return of Druad with the Death of the eldest, yet it is the length and elaboration, and the complication of the plot, that makes up the rest of the work, except chapter 22, which together with a few phrases elsewhere is taken, with little variation, from Willek Saga. The translators of Sigur's Saga, quoted by old writers—and the clumsy paraphrases of lays which make up the rest of the work, except chapter 22, which together with a few phrases elsewhere is taken, with little variation, from Willek Saga. The translators of the work of the thirteenth century and one which they assign to the twelfth; but they give no explanation of this point, and no grounds for the date they assign. We have reason to be grateful to the translators of the compiler for making the poetical phrases to crop up in his prose, so that they can sometimes without trouble be turned back into verse, for the original of chapters 23-30 belongs to the last leaves of our only MS. of Skemund Edda; but this circumstance, which is an attention to the student, is a difficult, perhaps an irksome, and the like.
real meaning is "it is ill to rush headlong before (a man's) 
head," which coincides admirably with the precepts of cheer-
ful prudence just before. The notion is, the headlong fool 
rushes into destruction, leaving his luck behind him; while 
the wise man is wary and gives good luck time to go before 
and prepare his way. In the same spirit we are told that a 
"foe's man's cough or "fetch" follows behind, whereas the 
"flying of a man in health and wealth walks before him and 
heralds his coming.

The translators have not been able to efface the gaps and 
discrepancies of their story as completely as they have effaced 
its inequalities of style. The ballad which the compiler 
tried, or did not try, to work into his narrative, were written 
at different times and places; they sometimes represent 
incompatible traditions, and to appreciate them we ought 
to remember that, for the most part, they were intended to 
stand alone. The old poets are responsible for the 
difference of taste between the scenes where Brynhild and 
Gudrun are contrasted as heroes and lamb, and those where 
Gudrun outdoes the ferocity of Medea, first in defence 
and then in revenge of her brother. They are not responsible 
for the way in which Sigurd's son disappears from the story, 
leaving his murder, among so many, to be a matter of 
inference, alluded to, but never stated. They are not respon-
sible either for the omission of the love passages between 
Gunnar and Oddrun, which would be some excuse for the 
trdouble of Alli, or for the identification of Sigrdrifa, the 
companions of Odin and the goddess of victory, with Bryn-
hild. This last identification gives a thoroughly sophistc 
look to the commandments of the goddess, and makes 
the portion of the lay, which the translators have called 
Sigrdrifa Mai, appear a mere marvel of science and courtesy 
for Norse gentlemen; a rhetorical exercise of the same order 
as Nestor's advice to Neoptolemus, composed by Hippias.

The translators have asked the identification of omitting 
Sigrdrifa, which is given as the name of the sleeping shield-
maid in the birds' song. We notice, by the way, that the 
exiguities of alliteration have produced a fresh variation of 
every stanza of Sigrdrifa's song of the formula ("Thou shalt 
know such and such "ruses," which opens all. Nor are 
the old poets to blame for the astonishing chronological con-
fusion of the story as we have it, where Sigurd's wife marries 
a king of the fifth century, her daughter marries 
Jormunrek or Ermanrik, a king of the third, while his 
other daughter marries Ragnar, a king of the eighth or 
ninth. The legend lived on in many lays, and it fitted itself 
to many historical names; but while it was alive it never 
fitted itself to all at once. It is hard to see why the transla-
tors have omitted the story of Helimir and Asklaug, Bryn-
hild's daughter, which has as much to do with the main story 
as the tale of Erp and Hamild, and serves, besides the beau-
tiful legend of the harp child, to connect the cycles of Sigrud 
and Ragnar. But unanswerable questions were sure to mul-
tiply when the translators decided to use the lays as a sup-
plement to the compilation, instead of using the compilation 
as a key to them. The [next consequence of the main 
question is, that as we read the Saga continuously, the principal inci-
dents are all anticipated before the birth of Sigurd. Sigri 
is betrayed like Sigurd by his brothers-in-law, Atli like Siggir 
begets, and Sigurd's vengeance is an anticipation of Gudrun's, 
both in its cruelty and its ferocity of self-sacrifice. Sigur-
run's invocation to Helgi is just like Gudrun's invocation of 
Sigurd.

Still, with all its defects even the prose Saga abounds with 
beauties which justify the praise of Mr. Morris's lovely Pre-
face to Verre. There are touches of poetic elevation, like 
the last words of Sigurf: "All these things have I done 
that vengeance might fall on him, and that I too might not 
live long; and merciful will I die with King Siggeir, though 
I was not wont merely to live with him." And all the situations 
of the lays, where Brynhild is the heroine, are too lofty to 
be spoilt by paraphrase. Where she expounds Gudrun's dream, 
which is a prophecy of all that is to pass between 
them, where she meets Sigurd for the last time, and sacri-
fices her love to duty and revenge, and refuses his offer to 
undo what has been done by mistake; where she forbids 
any to be driven by hand or word to follow her to her wed-
ding with Sigurd on the funeral pile, while she offers wealth 
to be enjoyed beyond the grave to all who will follow her 
with their own accord. "How long?" is the highest level of 
artistic tragedy. Gudrun's lament is later and more liter-
ary; it turns like Mr. Tennyson's well known lines, "Home 
they brought her warrior dead," on the difficulty of winning 
tears. Each of her women in turn recons her own greatest 
soor, till the woman in her own throat, and bids her embrace him once more. Then the tears come, 
and the words; and it is an unapproachable testimony to 
the power that they gain from the situation that St. Gertrude 
sang the Low Dutch version of Gudrun's lament daily as a 
lamentation for her brother's death. The story falls where the story 
of the Niebelungenlied rises, when it comes to the death of 
the Godung. The way in which Gunnar receives the tokens, 
selected and true, of Hogn's death, is of course very lofty; 
but the effect is marred by the motionless self-distrust with 
which he provokes the companions of Odin, the companion of 
Odin and the goddess of victory, with Brynhild. This last 
identification gives a thoroughly sophistc 
look to the commandments of the goddess, and makes 
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* The philological criticism in this article are due to Mr. G. Vignaison.