Chapter Six

"The Worship of Courage": William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung and Victorian Medievalism

Richard Frith

"It is the central work of my father's life," wrote William Morris's daughter and editor May in 1911, referring to his epic poem The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs (1876). "It is the work that, first and last—putting aside the eagerness of the moment which sometimes gives all precedence to the work in hand—he held most highly and wished to be remembered by."¹ Today William Morris is remembered for many things, but Sigurd is rarely one of the foremost of them. The poem's very title is apt to engender amused smiles, even among Victorianists: the Story of Who the What? Such reactions reflect, first of all, a scholarly indifference to Victorian interest in the Old North. Yet, as Andrew Wawn's groundbreaking study The Vikings and the Victorians (2000) has demonstrated, this interest was surprisingly widespread, and constitutes an important element of the many-sided phenomenon that is the Medieval Revival.² English people's fascination with medieval Scandinavia spawned novels, plays, poems, and scholarly works, and became a remarkably popular movement, with antiquarian societies all over the country facilitating and encouraging the study of the Viking past. Their preoccupation was founded to a significant extent on contemporary racial theory, and the idea, frequently reiterated in nineteenth-century works on the subject, that the Saxon and Nordic peoples belonged to the same Germanic family, that the Odin of the Norsemen was essentially identical with the Woden of the English, and that the modern Englishman therefore had a kind of hereditary claim on the literature and mythology of the Old North. Sigurd is the most important literary result of this Norse medievalism, and stands in relation to it essentially as does Tennyson's Idylls
of the King to Arthurian medievalism, or Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* to the Italian. On this basis alone the poem demands careful consideration. However, as “the central work of [Morris’s] life,” and the one that he himself considered to be his greatest achievement, the poem is also a crucial text for the insight that it affords into the relationship between the different, sometimes apparently contradictory, aspects of Morris’s fascination with the Middle Ages, which in turn reflect important, broader tendencies within Victorian medievalism.

When Morris is discussed in the context of the literary Medieval Revival, it is usually Morris the lecturer and Socialist agitator, author of *A Dream of John Ball* (1886–1887) and *News from Nowhere* (1890). The key to Morris’s vision in these later works is his conviction of the medieval artisan’s pleasure in his daily labor, a pleasure that gave everything he produced the status of art. This view of the Middle Ages is essentially a Ruskinian one, with roots reaching back to the famous chapter of *The Stones of Venice* titled “The Nature of Gothic,” which Morris regarded as “one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century.”

Morris, like Ruskin, is concerned with the social basis of art and with its social usefulness. In spite of his Socialist allegiances and revolutionary aspirations, therefore, Morris can be situated relatively easily in a basically conservative medievalist tradition, originating in the novels of Scott and including such figures as Cobbett, Southey, and Carlyle, as well as Ruskin. (With the exception of Southey, all of these writers were important influences on Morris.) The defining feature of this tradition is a tendency to idealize the Middle Ages as “a period of faith, order, joy, munificence, and creativity.”

Morris’s praise of the medieval period is more qualified than most of his predecessors’, but is clearly indebted to them.

Morris’s poetry, by contrast, appears to belong to a very different mode of medievalism, one usually referred to as “Pre-Raphaelite” or “Aesthetic” (the two labels were frequently used interchangeably in the later nineteenth century). This kind of medievalism tends to emphasize the subversively erotic elements in medieval literature and art. Its most important exponents, apart from Morris, were Rossetti and Swinburne in poetry, and Rossetti and Burne-Jones in painting. Morris’s earliest volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858), was the first book of “Pre-Raphaelite” verse to be published, and remains one of the clearest expressions of the group’s medieval vision. In the title poem, for example, Morris gives a vivid and sympathetic portrayal of King Arthur’s adulterous queen as she defends her love for Launcelot both to the knights of the Round Table and (by implication) to the Victorian reading public. (It will thus be clear that poetry referred to as “Aesthetic” is often far from lacking in ideological commitment.)

*The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870), Morris’s
huge collection of verse tales from medieval and classical sources, also emphasizes anti-ascetic elements of the medieval inheritance and shares a broad ideological basis with two other major documents of Aesthetic medievalism published at around the same time: Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Rossetti’s *Poems* (1870). When Robert Buchanan identified a “Fleshy School of Poetry” in 1871, he spared Morris the abuse meted out to Rossetti and Swinburne, but clearly numbered him among the “School’s” members.\(^6\)

These, then, are the two faces of Morris’s medievalism with which the literary scholar must deal. It is not possible to explain the discrepancy in simple terms of Morris’s development from “Romantic to Revolutionary,” in E. P. Thompson’s famous phrase: on the one hand, Morris read and was captivated by Ruskin as an undergraduate at Oxford, and his admiration of medieval craftsmanship is evident in his many activities for the Firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. (later Morris and Co.), which occupied him throughout virtually the whole span of his career; on the other hand, he never gave up loving stories for their own sake, as is testified abundantly by the voluminous prose romances of his last years. It is in attempting to relate these two facets of Morris’s love of the Middle Ages that the centrality of *Sigurd the Volsung* becomes apparent.

Morris’s Norse epic occupied him during a pivotal period of his life. He was first introduced to its principal source, the thirteenth-century Icelandic *Völsunga saga*, in 1869. This was during what was probably his most intense period of depression, caused in part by the failure of his marriage and his wife’s sexual involvement with Rossetti, but also by obscure fears of mortality and futility. The finished poem was finally published in 1876, the year that saw Morris’s entry into public affairs as treasurer of the Eastern Question Association. The period in which he had the project in mind (if not in hand: it was apparently not begun on paper until October 1875 [CW, 12: xxiii]) was therefore one of recovery of hope and purpose, a process to which Iceland and the medieval literature of the North contributed in no small measure.

Morris began to learn Icelandic in 1868 under the tutelage of the Icelandic scholar Eiríkur Magnússon. He had been an admirer of medieval Scandinavian literature in translation since his undergraduate days: his early prose romances contributed to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856) testify to his enjoyment of Benjamin Thorpe’s two collections of Nordic material, *Northern Mythology* (1851–1852) and *Yule-Tide Stories* (1853).\(^7\)

Sometime in the mid-1860s, he took up the matter of the Old North again and began to read whatever he could find in English. Magnússon later recalled (CW, 7: xv–xvi) being impressed by Morris’s knowledge of the available English works on the subject, including Percy’s *Northern Antiquities*
(1770, a translation of Paul-Henri Mallet’s *Introduction à l’Histoire de Dannemarc* of 1755), Thorpe’s translation of the *Elder Edda* (1866), and George Dasent’s versions of *Njáls saga* (*The Story of Burnt Njal*, 1861) and *Gísla saga súrssonar* (*The Story of Gisli the Outlaw*, 1866). In fact, the amount of Northern literature available in English was quite considerable: Morris might also have read George Stephens’s translation of *Friðþjófs saga* (1839) or Samuel Laing’s of the *Heimskringla* (1844). Thanks largely to Andrew Wawn’s recent work, we can now see that Morris’s foray into the Old North was less pioneering than it might previously have appeared. Nevertheless, when Morris discovered the sagas in their original language, they seem to have come upon him with the force of a revelation.

The first work which Morris and Magnússon tackled together was the short *Gunnlaugs saga*, their translation of which, *The Story of Gunnilaug the Worm-Tongue*, appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* in January 1869; then followed *Grettis saga* (published as *The Story of Grettir the Strong* in June 1869), and the *Laxdela saga*. This last translation was unfinished, but provided the basis for “The Lovers of Gudrun,” published in the third part of *The Earthly Paradise* in November 1869 and often regarded as the most successful tale of the entire work. By the time this was published, however, Morris was being bowled over by the *Völsunga saga*. Writing to Charles Eliot Norton on December 21, 1869, he describes it as “to the full meaning of the word inspired”; while in another letter written on the same day to Swinburne, he avers that it “quite throws all the other stories into the shade.” His and Magnússon’s translation was published in 1870 as *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs* with a preface announcing it as “the Great Story of the North” (CW, 7:286). These translations, together with *The Earthly Paradise*, make the period 1868–1870 one of almost astonishing literary productivity for Morris.

What initially struck Morris most forcibly about the *Völsunga saga* seems to have been its combination of a tragic love story with the qualities of reticence and stoicism, which govern both the characters and the narrative. In his letter to Norton, Morris immediately seizes on the scene in which these two elements combine to greatest effect, namely, the final meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild, in which Brynhild rejects Sigurd’s offer to abandon Gudrun and marry her:

> The scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than any thing I have ever met with in literature[:] there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in 2 pages of moderate print.
The themes of blighted love and the need for stoicism were not new ones for Morris: they had been preoccupying him increasingly throughout the years of *The Earthly Paradise*. What was different about the sagas was that they enacted that stoicism (something Morris's poetry had hitherto largely failed to do) without sacrificing human feeling. But at this stage, it was the love interest that principally interested him. This focus is shown clearly by the "Prologue in Verse" that Morris wrote for the translation, in which he calls on his fellow Englishmen to listen "unto the best tale pity ever wrought," a story "of utter love defeated utterly, / Of Grief too strong to give Love time to die!" (CW, 7:290). These lines belong very much to the emotional register of *The Earthly Paradise*; in its initial stages, then, the quality of Morris's enthusiasm for the *Volsunga saga* was essentially consistent with the tone of his poetry of the time.

By the mid-1870s, however, the focus of Morris's admiration had shifted significantly. From this time on, and consistently until the end of his life, his recorded comments on Icelandic literature center on the Norse heroic code, the essence of which lay for Morris in striving to perform deeds that will live forever in story and then accepting death unflinchingly. Morris's enthusiasm for "the religion of the Northmen" can be judged from the concluding sentences of a summary of Northern mythology that he wrote, according to his first biographer, at about the time of *Sigurd*:

> Think of the joy we have in praising great men, and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy: and this also we ourselves may give to the world.
>
> This seems to me pretty much the religion of the Northmen. I think one would be a happy man if one could hold it, in spite of the wild dreams and dreadful imaginings that hung about it here and there.\(^{11}\)

As Morris wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones in January 1877, "What a glorious outcome of the worship of Courage these stories are."\(^{12}\)

To a certain extent, Morris's changed understanding of the sagas must simply reflect a deeper familiarity with them, a response to what a recent critic has called their "underlying ethical principle" of heroism.\(^{13}\) However, there were also other, extra-literary factors at work. In 1871, Morris made the first of two visits to Iceland. As several critics have pointed out, this journey seems to have been for him a declaration of independence from Rossetti and a shaking-off of Pre-Raphaelitism (although it was not, as Wawn again makes clear, quite such a singular venture as we might be inclined to think).\(^{14}\) On this expedition, Morris began to discover a new courage with which to face life. This was partly a matter of the resources he needed to find in order to meet the physical challenges of pony-trekking
through the Icelandic terrain, fording rivers, and crossing lava fields of jagged rock. However, it was also a result of the transformation that Morris's travels wrought on his understanding of the sagas. Seeing for himself the land in which the writers and (in the case of the *Islingenda sögur* or “sagas of Icelanders”) protagonists of the old stories had lived impressed him deeply with the heroism that seemed necessary to survive under such conditions and helped to purge him of his tendency to romanticize the sagas; visiting the lair of the outlaw Grettir, Morris found that hero, whom he had previously embraced as “another friend to me, life’s void to fill,” “transfigured . . . into an awful and monstrous being, like one of the early giants of the world” (*CW*, 7:x:xxxvi; 8:149). The awestruck sense of the otherness of Iceland and its early inhabitants suggested here was to affect Morris profoundly. It was this new understanding of land and people that ultimately transformed his view of the sagas. He now found them, as he wrote in later years, “a good corrective to the maundering side of mediaevalism”;¹⁵ and when he came to write his epic poem of the Icelanders’ greatest tale, it was this new kind of medievalism, “the worship of Courage,” that he was concerned to impart to his English readers.

By “the maundering side of mediaevalism,” Morris presumably meant courtly literature and modern poetry inspired by it, including that of Rossetti and Swinburne. Yet Sigurd shares significant elements with Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic medievalism, most importantly its concern with medieval sexuality. The tragic love of Sigurd and Brynhild that engaged Morris most deeply occupies the central, focal section of the poem. Throughout, he strives to do justice to the dignity of the saga characters and to present their passion as supremely noble, free, and indeed equal. This is perhaps most evident in his treatment of their first meeting on Hindfell, the shield-burg surrounded by a ring of fire where Odin has placed the valkyrie following her attempt to save a doomed warrior from death. By this stage in his career, Sigurd has already established his preeminence by slaying the serpent Fafnir and winning the gold; he has been hailed by Gripir as the “hope of the Kings first fashioned” and the “blossom of the morn” (*CW*, 12:99). Morris takes care to make his Brynhild a similarly impressive figure. He does this first by emphasizing the majesty of the shield-burg; he also, like Wagner, retains the saga’s detail of Sigurd taking the mailed, sleeping figure for a man. Although she leaves her warlike bearing behind her with the dwarf-wrought hauberk from which she must cut her free, the love of Brynhild and Sigurd is stamped indelibly by the strange, other-worldly manner of their meeting and by Brynhild’s past life as Odin’s “Victory-Wafted” (*CW*, 12:125). Her feminine beauty is moreover as awesome as her previous martial aspect, and the love between her and Sigurd is completely natural and spontaneous. As soon as Sigurd beholds “the smooth unfurrowed
cheeks, and the wise lips breathing light,” he “loveth her sore, and he longeth her spirit to move” (CW, 12:123); but not until the hauberker has been cut away does the valkyrie awake. When she finally stirs, suddenly “the sun rose upward and lightened all the earth,” and Brynhild breaks forth into a passionate invocation of nature and the gods:

“All hail, O Day and thy Sons, and thy kin of the coloured things! Hail, following Night, and thy Daughter that leadeth thy wakening wings! Look down with unangry eyes on us today alive, And give us the hearts victorious, and the gain for which we strive! All hail, ye Lords of God-home, and ye Queens of the House of Gold! Hail, thou dear Earth that bearest, and thou Wealth of field and fold! Give us, your noble children, the glory of wisdom and speech, And the hearts and the hands of healing, and the mouths and hands that teach!”

Then they turned and were knit together; and oft and o’er again They craved, and kissed rejoicing, and their hearts were full and fain.
(CW, 12:124)

Brynhild returns Sigurd’s love freely and independently; her speech, like the simultaneous sunrise, shows their mutual passion to be in total harmony with the natural order of the universe while the final couplet cited above indicates the (implicitly right and natural) result of their passion, an embrace that is almost certainly intended to be understood as coital.

Morris is even more explicit about this physicality in his treatment of Sigurd and Brynhild’s second meeting at Lyndale. On this, their final encounter before Sigurd’s fateful journey to the Niblung burg, Morris dwells touchingly on the solicitousness and tenderness of the lovers’ conversation, before describing how

forth she stepped from the high-seat, and forth from the threshold he came, Till both their bodies mingling seemed one glory and the same, And far o’er all fulfilment did the souls within them long, As at breast and at lips of the faithful the early love strained strong.
(CW, 12:147)

By contrast with the relative explicitness of Morris’s descriptions, the saga writer simply refers to Sigurd and Brynhild as plighting troth on each of their two encounters, though he does later have Brynhild direct her fosterfather Heimir to take care of Aslaug, her daughter by Sigurd. (No such child is mentioned by Morris.) It is in these scenes that Sigurd’s relatedness to Morris’s earlier poetry, and to that of Rossetti and Swinburne, is most apparent. Like them, Morris not only implies that sexual love unrestricted by religious dogma is natural and desirable, but also that major medieval
works share this subversive idea. Thus, whereas the saga-writer introduces the physical love of Sigurd and Brynhild in an offhand, casual way, Morris sees that physicality as important, even central, to the nobility of the saga’s conception of the lovers and amplifies it accordingly. His approach is in this respect similar to that of Swinburne in the latter’s treatment of another important medieval legend, *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882). In this poem, Swinburne describes the lovemaking of his hero and heroine in quite graphic terms, as part of his attempt to reassert the pagan, anti-ascetic (and specifically anti-Christian) bias that he found in the Tristram story. Thus, in his sexual–ideological response to medieval texts, Morris continues to align himself with literary aestheticism.

However, set alongside these familiar Morrisian concerns are important new ones. Most obvious among these is the poem’s constant emphasis on the Norse heroic code, on courage and stoicism, and on “striv[ing] to win fair fame.” All of Sigurd’s positive figures, and many of its more ambiguous ones, are governed in their actions by this code. The often wearying emotionality of *The Earthly Paradise* is almost entirely eliminated. King Volsung goes to meet his death in the hall of Siggeir in spite of the warnings of his daughter Signy because his “word is given, it is done like the spring-tide ships” (*CW*, 12:11). Sigmund, the only one of Volsung’s sons to survive the slaughter, lives alone is Siggeir’s forest for many years awaiting his chance for revenge; he rejects the son whom Signy sends him to foster when the boy refuses to take corn from a meal-sack in which there is an adder (although he is not, as in the saga, instructed by Signy to kill the “cowardly” youth). When Sigmund’s revenge is accomplished, Signy goes back into Siggeir’s blazing hall to die with the husband who has murdered her family. In the second book, Sigurd, having only just reached manhood, rides out without hesitation to slay the serpent and then rides through the ring of fire to wake Brynhild. Later, after Sigurd has been killed and the Niblungs have assumed the mantle of heroism in the poem, Gunnar and Hogni go knowingly to meet their doom in Atli’s hall just as did Volsung. Hogni laughs as Atli’s men cut out his heart, and, finally, Gunnar plays his harp and sings as he waits for death in Atli’s snake pit.

This unremitting Norse heroicism has a significant effect on the kind of reading experience Sigurd offers. In a recent and insightful reading, Herbert F. Tucker has described the poem as “the least forthcoming of the many nineteenth-century epics, the most remote in its presentation and least accommodated to contemporary interests.” Tucker’s comments are corroborated by some contemporary reviews, such as that of Henry Hewlett in *Fraser’s*. According to Hewlett, a poem, which, like Sigurd, “reflects, with hard, uncompromising realism, an obsolete code of ethics, and a barbarous condition of society, finds itself irreconcilably at discord with the key of
nineteenth-century feeling." From one perspective, such verdicts may seem somewhat surprising. Morris was hardly the only Victorian to be preoccupied with ideas of heroism or even with Norse ideas of heroism. Almost all of the many nineteenth-century novels to draw on the Old North, from Scott's The Pirate (1822) to H. Rider Haggard's Eric Brighteyes (1891), emphasize Norse hardihood. More pointedly, Thomas Carlyle devoted the first of his lectures On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History (1840) to "The Hero as Divinity," focusing on the figure of Odin. Carlyle's interpretation of Norse paganism as a "Consecration of Valour" is in some respects strikingly similar to Morris's. Furthermore, it is by no means the case that Morris did nothing to enhance the appeal of the story for a Victorian audience. To give a greater measure of unity to his poem, he omitted the beginning of the saga, which deals with the shadowy ancestors of the Volsungs, and its end, which relates the final extinction of the Niblung line; and he excised episodes that would disrupt the direction of the narrative, such as the digressive account of the conflict between Sigmund's son Helgi and King Hodbrod. He made extensive use of Max Müller's solar myth theory in order to stress the timelessness of the Volsung story. He developed the saga's hints concerning character and motive with his impressive, and very modern, grasp of human psychology—"modern amplification and sentiment" as he later called it—and even modified the character of Sigurd to some extent, making him more altruistic and less revenge-driven than his saga counterpart. Relatedly, he actually softened the Norse heroic code as he saw it, removing some of the more barbaric incidents such as that of Signy sewing gloves onto the hands of her sons in order to test their endurance. But Sigurd remains remote because the conception of courage that is at the center of its "code of ethics" is indeed, as Hewlett argued, "obsolete," and nonetheless so for Morris's ultimately cosmetic surgery: in the world of the poem, greatness subsists in the observance of a rigid, almost stylized heroic code with which a nineteenth-century audience could not reasonably be expected to identify. Thus, although Morris takes pains to explain the heroic ethos to the reader, with frequent references to the necessity of doing deeds to win everlasting fame, these attempts at mediation generally fail to engender empathy. To take one particularly striking example, Hogni greets the news of his impending death with the remark: "Take heed now! deeds are doing for the fashioners of tales" (CW, 12:292). Unlike Carlyle, whose aims and methods are openly didactic, Morris is not really concerned with helping his readers make Norse ideas of heroism relevant to their own lives as he himself had succeeded in doing. His idea seems to have been that the story, suitably "amplified" for a modern audience, should speak for itself.

Morris's treatment of the Norse gods represents a similarly ambivalent attempt at mediation. In 1876, the Æsir were by no means a closed book to
the British public: interest in Northern mythology was, as I have indicated, quite widespread, and Wagner’s use of it in the Ring cycle had begun to be discussed in the journals. But neither were they a fully assimilated part of the national consciousness, as centuries of familiarity had made the classical gods. Morris realized this and attempted to weave in explanations of the gods and of Norse cosmology (particularly the concept of Ragnarök, the impending death of the gods) at opportune moments in the story. Yet Morris’s divinities remain resolutely alien. The main reason for this is that Morris, unlike Wagner, does not significantly develop the characters of the gods or cause them to act in a way that is readily comprehensible. Neither does he really attempt to give them metaphysical significance as Wagner does, although he does develop the Ragnarök motif to suggest the idea of a heroic age under threat. To interfere with the gods would have involved compromising the story, to which, as Tucker points out, Morris subjugates all other considerations. Thus Morris’s Odin appears periodically throughout the first half of the narrative, but there seems to be no reason or plan governing his actions. He usually helps the Volsungs, thrusting the sword into the Branstock tree so that Sigmund can win it and advising Sigurd on how best to tackle Fafnir; but he also intervenes in Sigmund’s final battle to shatter the sword and thereby ensure the hero’s defeat and death. Nor does Morris supply a reason for Odin’s disappearance from the story following the slaying of the serpent. The result is that the gods achieve no real significance in the poem other than a purely narrative one.

Then there is the prosody itself. Sigurd’s divided hexameter line is a brilliant invention of Morris’s. Derived primarily from the meter of the Middle High German Nibelungenlied (one of the secondary sources of the poem), its use of alliteration and mixture of iambics and anapests also suggest some of the qualities of Anglo-Saxon and Eddic verse; but the result is completely Morris’s own and proves surprisingly capable of modulation to deal with the varied materials of the story. It also serves, however, to emphasize the antiquity and strangeness of the poem’s subject matter. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the wonderful opening lines in which the primitive, organic splendor of King Volsung’s hall seems almost an image of the similar qualities that Morris wishes to emphasize in the old story:

There was a dwelling of kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, & the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors;
Earls’ wives were the weaving-women, queens’ daughters strewed its floors,
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast. (CW, 12:1)
It is terrific verse, but the effect of the long, swinging couplets and of Morris's Germanic diction can be forbidding. It may even appear less accessible than the saga itself, which opens in a prosy but engaging manner: "Here begins the tale, and tells of a man who was named Sigi" (CW, 7:291). The epic is also more than three times longer than the saga on which it is based.

It is clear, then, that although Morris did much to mediate the Volsung story for a nineteenth-century audience, he could have done much more had he not felt that in doing so he would compromise the Old Northern qualities for which he valued it and which he desired to communicate to the British public (who were, of course, the cousins of the Nordic race). So whereas Wagner in the Ring cycle, or indeed Tennyson in his Idylls of the King (1842–1885), was interested primarily in creating a new myth for his own times out of old materials, Morris was concerned above all to retain the integrity of the legend, while making its wider significance as intelligible as this aim would allow for his contemporaries. He wanted simultaneously to universalize the tale and to retain its cultural specificity.  

Morris's interest in that cultural specificity leads him to emphasize the close connection between the Norse heroic code and the Norse cosmos. Several times within the poem, heroes sing of the gods' work of creation. The climactic instance of this is Gunnar's song in Atli's snake pit, which constitutes a final summary of "the religion of the Northmen." Gunnar first recounts the Norse creation myth: he sings of "the World of Aforetime, unshapen, void of lands" (CW, 12:297), then of the creation of the sun, moon, and stars, of dwarves and of men. He describes the cyclical nature of human life:

they wrought, and rejoiced in their bodies, and saw their sons and were glad:
And they changed their lives and departed, and came back as the leaves of the trees
Come back and increase in the summer:—and I, I, I am of these.
(CW, 12:298)

Gunnar emphatically places himself ("I, I, I am of these") among the race of men who live, work deeds, and die. Here "these" seems to refer to the whole of the human race. But our understanding is modified when Gunnar goes on finally to sing of Valhall, his anticipated home beyond death, where Odin gathers warriors for the final battle of Ragnarök:

for I see the spring of the day
Round the doors of the golden Valhall, and I see the mighty arise,
And I hearken the voice of Odin, and his mouth on Gunnar cries,
And he nameth the son of Giuki, and cries on deeds long done,
And the fathers of my fathers, and the sons of yore agone. (CW, 12:299)
This final section of the song reminds us that heroism like Gunnar’s is inseparable from Norse cosmology and pagan religion; that it is a strictly historical phenomenon, the “glorious outcome” of a certain set of cultural circumstances. These beliefs may unite Gunnar with “the fathers of [his] fathers,” but any modern reader with less temperamental empathy for the Old North than Morris possessed is likely to remain forever alienated from them.

Ever since Morris first discovered the Volsunga saga, he had associated its greatness with that of the society that produced it. In the 1869 letter to Norton already cited, he follows his enthusiastic praise of the saga by remarking: “touching too though hardly wonderful to think of the probable author; some 12 century Icelander, living the hardest and rudest of lives, seeing few people and pretty much the same day after day, with his old religion taken from him and his new one hardly gained.”[23] Although the roots of the story lie far to the east of Scandinavia, Morris always identified it with the Norse people, and more specifically with the Icelandic people, who were the producers of the definitive version.[24] There is evidence within the poem to suggest that, in retelling the story, he sought to strengthen the identification of the tale with its medieval Icelandic tellers. J. M. S. Tompkins has pointed out that Morris “snapp[ed] the twisted and eroded links which still hold the Volsungsaga to the history and topography of the North.”[25] In the saga, we encounter Goths, Danes, Saxons, and Franks; the kingdom of the Niblungs is south of the Rhine. Morris excises all of these tribal references except for “Goth,” which becomes a much more general term, encompassing all of the characters except Atli and his Eastlanders. The effect of this is to make Sigurd’s settings seem much more Northern than those of the saga. This suggestion is strengthened by the fact that Morris’s natural descriptions often appear to draw on his memories of Iceland. The description of the rocky desert though which Sigurd rides to encounter Fafnir on the Glittering Heath is the clearest example of this; but the entire poem is saturated in the sublime otherness of the Icelandic landscape.

For Morris, the sagas were “folk art”:[26] stories that had been handed down orally for centuries before being committed to writing and that were, therefore, the property of the folk and a reflection of its virtues. (By contrast, modern scholarship tends to view the best sagas, and the Eddic poems, as highly conscious literary works.) In a letter of 1894, he describes the Volsung story as a “curious entanglement of the ages,” a series of accretions in which successive centuries have added their own contributions to the tale to produce “something of wonderful imagination and clearnesss [sic] of outline, without disturbance of the huge and vague figures of the earlier times.”[27] Though Morris does not make it, the comparison with a Gothic cathedral is clearly begged. Like those monuments, the Volsung
story was for Morris a manifestation of the medieval workman’s pleasure in his labor, and, thus, a symbol of the nobility of one particular medieval people, its great virtues of fortitude and courage and its love of freedom. This greatness is an important part of what Morris wanted to communicate to his readers through the retelling of that people’s greatest tale. His purpose, thus, resembles that of Ruskin in “The Nature of Gothic,” for, like Ruskin, Morris wishes to celebrate and mediate the glorious artistic product of a savage yet noble society. Morris’s epic version of the “Great Story of the North” retains some of the tool-marks of the people who first fashioned it. In this sense, *Sigurd* clearly foreshadows Morris’s Socialist-period insistence on the social basis of art, and even anticipates his work for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.

The poem furthermore suggests that Morris regarded the love of Sigurd and Brynhild, which was for him the crux of the story, as being closely connected with the Norse heroic code and thus with medieval Iceland. The qualities that characterize their relationship in *Sigurd*, of freedom, dignity, and naturalness, are ones that Morris ascribed to medieval Norse, and particularly Icelandic, society. In addition, he worked hard at preserving the reticence and stoicism of the saga characters, these also being, of course, defining values of the Norse warrior. Morris’s treatment of the final meeting of the estranged lovers, which was revised extensively before he was happy with it (see *CW*, 12:xxiv–xxix), has a reserve and a terse power unapproached elsewhere in his work. When Sigurd confesses to Brynhild that “no tongue may tell of the sorrow that I had for thy wedded love,” Brynhild’s reply simply reiterates the inexorability of fate: “All was and today it is not—And the Oath to Gunnar is sworn, / Shall I live the days twice over, and the life thou hast made forlorn?” (*CW*, 12:223); and to his final, desperate offer to abandon Gudrun and marry Brynhild she replies with the shortest, bleakest line of the poem: “I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive” (*CW*, 12:224). Thus, “The worship of Courage” encompasses love as well as war. As though to underline this, Morris concludes the eulogy of the two lovers that follows their funeral with one more allusion to the mythology of the North:

They are gone—the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:  
It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:  
It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,  
And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead:  
It shall yearn, and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more,  
Till the new sun beams on Baldur, and the happy sealess shore.  

(*CW*, 12:244)
We are reminded finally that Sigurd and Brynhild were products of the old Norse religion and its cult of heroism, and that their “deeds” must be understood as speeding the day of Ragnarök. Which of Brynhild’s deeds are here being referred to—her actions as a valkyrie or as a mortal woman—remains uncertain; but the context of the passage, following the culmination of the lovers’ tragedy, suggests the latter. The capacity to imagine sexual love in such exalted terms is for Morris an important part of the greatness of the Old North.

In Sigurd, then, Morris is using sexuality as part of an essentially historicist argument: that medieval Iceland was an admirable society, and that its greatness was manifested primarily in the great stories that it produced and the “worship of Courage” that they embodied. In this sense, as I suggested earlier, the poem brings together two distinct strands of medievalism, the “Pre-Raphaelite” and the “Ruskinian,” in Morris’s work. Sigurd thus casts an interesting light on the relationship between the movement known as “Pre-Raphaelitism” or “Aestheticism” and the broader Medieval Revival, and I wish to highlight this briefly in closing. It has often been seen as a paradox that Morris, the disciple of Ruskin and virtual founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, should have been regarded by many of his contemporaries as being in the vanguard of Aestheticism. Such views tend to be based on the suggestion, now increasingly discredited among scholars of Aestheticism but present in the most influential accounts of the literary Medieval Revival, that Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic writers were not really serious about the Middle Ages, and that their uses of the medieval period were, if not exactly superficial, then at least “aesthetic” rather than historicist.  

Sigurd shows this to have been far from the case and argues strongly that “Aesthetic” medievalism, with its emphasis on eroticism in a medieval context, could be the vehicle for a vision of the Middle Ages, which fully deserves to be called historicist. This is true not only of Sigurd, however, but also of many of Morris’s other poems (particularly those from the Defence of Guenevere volume), and of those of Swinburne and, to a lesser extent, of Rossetti. What is particularly fascinating about Sigurd is that it shows how closely this Aesthetic medieval vision could be made to cohere with the seemingly opposed, conservative medievalism of the Carlyle—Ruskin tradition; for, once the social basis of art is accepted, any work of art that embodies a fully desirable conception of sexuality must imply a healthy, admirable, “natural” society. Sigurd the Volsung, poised on the cusp of Morris’s political involvements, allows us to see this because in it the themes of his earlier, “Aesthetic” poetry are held uniquely in balance with those of his later, more sociopolitically oriented works. Sigurd is thus in a real sense the central work of Morris’s life, and also (since Morris’s concerns so often reflect those of the Medieval Revival itself), a truly important document of Victorian medievalism.
Notes


2. I draw on Wawn’s work for details of “Old Northernism” throughout my essay.


7. “Lindenborg Pool” and “Gertha’s Lovers” are the two stories of Morris’s that show Thorpe’s influence most clearly.


9. In referring to the saga characters (as opposed to those of *Sigurd*), I have used the anglicized names employed by Morris and Magnússon in their translation; these are in most cases the same as the forms used in *Sigurd*. All citations of the saga refer to Morris and Magnússon’s version.


21. Tucker, “All for the Tale,” 375. The question of whether Morris was deliberately writing against the Ring, as Jane Suzanna Ennis has argued, is a murky one, owing to the difficulty of determining the degree of Morris’s awareness of Wagner’s text. In 1873 he is known to have received a copy of Alfred W. Forman’s translation of the libretto of *Die Walküre*, but, as he told Forman’s brother Henry Buxton Forman in November of that year, “I have not had time to read it yet; nor to say the truth am I much interested in anything Wagner
does, as his theories on musical matters seem to me . . . perfectly abominable [sic].” He then goes on to deplore the idea of “a sandy-haired German tenor tweedledeeing over the unspeakable woes of Sigurd” (Collected Letters, 1:205). It is possible that Morris’s strong emphasis on the Norse heroic code is to some extent a response to Wagner’s undercutting of it in his characterization of Siegfried. Jane Suzanna Ennis, “A Comparison of Richard Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen and William Morris’s Sigurd the Volsung,” Phd diss., University of Leeds, 1993.

22. It is worth noting that this kind of sensitivity to the textures of medieval works is a frequent characteristic of Aesthetic medievalism. Swinburne, for example, insisted that his aim in writing Tristam of Lyonesse was “simply to present that story, not diluted and debased as it had been in our own time by other hands, but undefaced by improvement and undeformed by transformation, as it was known to the age of Dante.” (Algernon Swinburne, “Dedicatory Epistle,” in Swinburne Replies, ed. Clyde Kenneth Hyder (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), 99.


24. In his lecture on “The Early Literature of the North—Iceland” Morris suggests, incorrectly, that the Nibelungenlied is derived from the Eddic poems (see Unpublished Lectures, 192).


