

Tennyson does in 'Maud,' and as Mr. Swinburne does in 'Hesperia,'  
e.g.:—

Comes back to me, stays by me, lulls me with touch of forgotten caresses,  
One warm dream clad about with a fire as of life that endures;  
*The delight of thy face, and the sound of thy feet, and the wind of thy tresses,*  
And all of a man that regrets, and all of a maid that allures.

Note the splendid effect of the third line. But to get this one must,  
no doubt, write in quatrains.

That this is a noble poem there can be no doubt; but whether it  
will meet with ready appreciation and sympathy in this country is  
a question not so easily disposed of. Dr. Hueffer is no doubt right in  
saying that the story of the Niblungs is the epic of all the Teutonic  
peoples; but are we of these? There has of late been a great deal of talk  
about our 'Teutonic forefathers,' and our close kinship with the Ger-  
mans of to-day. Of such a close kinship we should be quite willing to  
be proud, if it could be proved to exist. It does not follow that because  
we speak a German tongue we must be a German people. Language  
is not a final and absolute test of race, and almost everything else but  
language—almost everything that denotes the temperament of a people  
—seems to point to the conclusion that the basis of the population did  
not cease, after the arrival of the shadowy White Horse, to be Celtic,  
as it had been. One proof, perhaps, of this is that, although the very  
names of the days of the week are the names of the Northern gods,  
there is scarcely a tittle of folk-lore derived from Odin, or Freir, or  
Thor, or Loki, whose doings are not much more familiar to our non-  
reading classes than those of the gods of Polynesia. And a people cannot  
read itself into a folk-lore. A great novelist used to say that he believed  
no tales that were not told him by his great-grandmother. To the  
Scandinavian, the Edda was literally, as the word imports, a 'great-  
grandmother' telling her tales. And the truth is that we in this country  
have, properly speaking, no great-grandmother's tales older than the  
legends about Robin Hood. Even Arthur has no more real vitality than  
Jack the Giant-killer and Cormoran. Not Blackmore, nor Bulwer,  
nor even Mr. Tennyson, can ever galvanize him into the hero of a  
popular epic. What with Saxon upon Celt, and Norman upon Saxon,  
we have lost both 'Sigurd the Golden' and the 'Blameless King.'

### 38. Edmund Gosse, review, *Academy*

9 December 1876, x, 557-8

Gosse (1849-1928) was one of the most prolific reviewers and  
literary journalists of his time.

The opening account of the story is omitted.

So familiar is the story to our readers that we need hardly retell it.  
Suffice it to say that Mr. Morris has treated it in a manner fully worthy  
of the heroic plan. The style he has adopted is more exalted and less  
idyllic, more rapturous and less luxurious—in a word, more spirited  
and more virile than that of any of his earlier works. His first small  
volume was full of colour and quaint form; it reproduced with un-  
equalled brilliance the strange romantic beauty of minute mediæval  
architecture and ornament. But there seemed more of art than of  
nature, more of culture than of inspiration. In *Jason* the whole field of  
vision was enlarged and humanized; there was less attention paid to  
detail but more to composition; there was manifest for the first time  
a power of poetic narrative unrivalled in our time. In the *Earthly  
Paradise* the same delightful qualities were continued and ripened, but  
the chord of melancholy languor was dwelt upon almost to excess. In  
*Love is Enough* higher places of the imagination were reached, and the  
mystical sadness had a nobler bearing. In the *Story of Sigurd*, however,  
for the first time, Mr. Morris is no longer 'the idle singer of an empty  
day,' but the interpreter of high desires and ancient heroic hopes as  
fresh as the dawn of the world and as momentous. The atmosphere of  
this poem is sharp and cold; a strong sense of the primal virtues, of  
honour, physical courage, duty to the gods and the kings, tender  
homage to women, interpenetrates the entire theme and gives it  
a solemn and archaic air. No lesser genius would have succeeded in  
winging a level flight through so many thousand lines without sinking  
to the plane of common men and common thoughts. In this poem, so  
steeped is the author in the records of the heroic past, so intimately  
are his sympathies connected with those of the mythical age of which

he writes, that we walk with demigods to the close, and have no need to be told of the stature of our companions. In the presence of so much simplicity, and so much art that conceals its art, it is well to point out how supreme is the triumph of the poet in this respect. It is perhaps on this very account, and because the ordinary tone of the poem is so elevated and so heroic, that the passages which allow of pastoral and emotional treatment seem of unequalled charm and delicacy. Where so much is noble, but where all is rapidly-progressing narrative, it is not easy to select a passage for quotation which will not lose its peculiar excellence by being separated from its context. Perhaps the first meeting of Gudrun and Brynhild will bear extraction as well as any other:—

So they make the yoke-beasts ready, and dight the wains for the way,  
 And the maidens gather together, and their bodies they array,  
 And gird the laps of the linen, and do on the dark blue gear,  
 And bind with the leaves of summer the wandering of their hair:  
 Then they drive by dale and acre, o'er heath andholt they wend,  
 Till they come to the land of the waters, and the lea by the woodland's end;  
 And there is the burg of Brynhild, the white-walled house and long,  
 And the garth her fathers fashioned before the days of wrong.

[quotes next 24 lines]

The versification will be noted as in some respects peculiar; it depends on accents and not on syllables, each line containing as many cadences as the ordinary alexandrine, but being irregularly anapaestic instead of regularly iambic. There are always six feet in every line, but these are of very varying value, the earlier ones being generally amphimacers, that truly heroic foot which Coleridge compared to the thundering hoofs of a race-horse. Speaking less technically, the measure is a lax ballad-metre, capable of very considerable variety.

While, however, commending the style of this poem, we cannot help feeling that it will present in many places grave difficulties to the general reader. In no previous work has Mr. Morris adopted so consistent an archaism in language and phrase. The long study of Icelandic literature, too, has enamoured him of the periphrases for the gods, gold, the sea, and other objects of constant reference, which are so curious a feature of that language. To meet with the same peculiarities in a volume totally unannotated will, we are afraid, give *The Story of Sigurd* an air of pedantry from which its substance is wholly free. For instance, when we read that Volsung and his sons

Ran swift o'er Aegir's acre,

it is not every one of us that may happen to remember that Aegir was the husband of the giantess Ran, goddess of the sea. It is quite another thing for a poet to say that his heroes rushed over the fields of Poseidon, for long custom has made an acquaintance with the elements of Greek mythology a necessity of ordinary culture; we are not as yet so well instructed about the deities of our own forefathers. So much for phrases; the language of Mr. Morris is hardly less learned. He uses 'eyen' for 'eyes,' 'fowl' for 'birds,' and 'learn' in the awkward, old-fashioned transitive sense of 'teach,' and this not once or twice, but constantly. Mr. Morris seems to maintain much the same attitude towards ancient speech that Spenser did when he was writing the *Shepherd's Calendar* and the *Faery Queen*. It is an attitude worthy of a master of language, and not for a moment to be confounded with the mock-archaism of a Chatterton or a Shenstone, but it is distinctly a position of danger.

We have no space left to dwell on the points in which Mr. Morris has seen fit to deviate slightly from the original narrative. The most important seems to be the omission of that relationship which connected Atli with his victims, the Niblungs. In the poem before us Atli's rage is an almost purposeless greed of gold; in the Edda, on the other hand, he is represented as being a son of Budli, and therefore brother to Brynhild. In the short prose story of the 'Drap Niflunga' it is distinctly represented that dissension arose because Atli charged the Niblungs with having caused Brynhild's death. The hand of Gudrun is, according to this version, used as a means of reconciliation, and she stirs up Atli to fresh vengeance that her own wrongs may be revenged. We are inclined to think that Mr. Morris, by casting aside this account, has deprived himself of a valuable connecting link in the chain of retribution.