

Publisher's Notes

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*THE*  
*AFTER-SUMMER SEED*

*RECONSIDERATIONS OF WILLIAM MORRIS'S*  
*The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*

*Edited, with an Introduction, by*  
JOHN HOLLOW

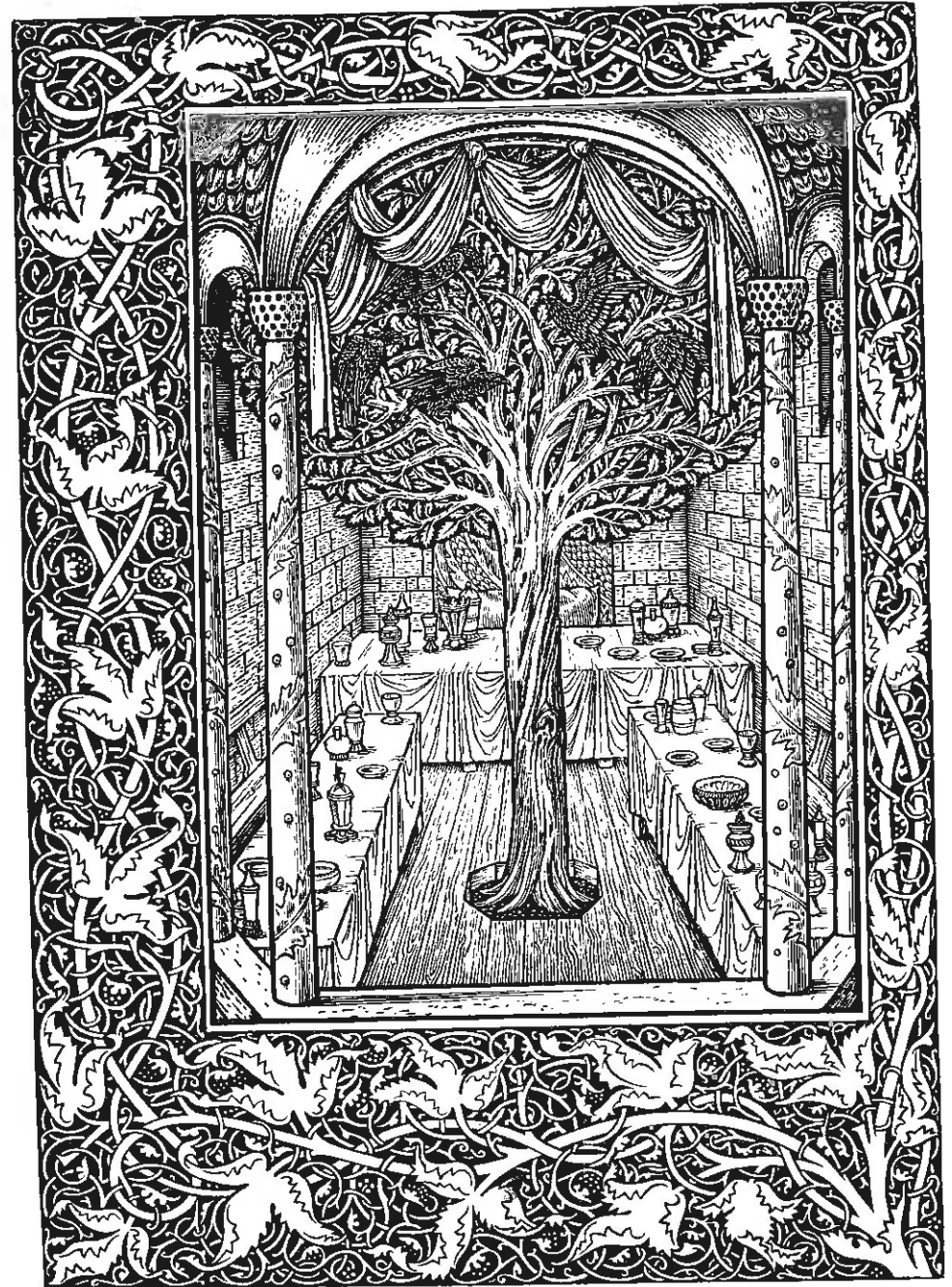
*Papers read at the Annual Meeting*  
*of the Modern Language Association*  
*December, 1976*

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This illustration was drawn by  
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### BRANSTOCK

So therein withal was a marvel and a glorious  
thing to see,  
For amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang  
up a mighty tree,  
That reared its blessings roofward, and  
wreathed the roof-tree dear  
With the glory of the summer and the garland  
of the year.

For this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks--to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too--then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.

William Morris. From the Preface to  
The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, 1870.

AN INTRODUCTION: SINFIOTLI

John Hollow

When I look back at the first book of Sigurd the Volsung, I see Sigmund standing there with the sword that is suddenly his; I see Signy wending her way one last time to the raging fire her marriage-bed has always been; and I see Sigmund dead, his eyes bathed by the light of the rising sun. What I also see, however--and the sight colors my reading of at least Book I, if not of the whole poem--is Sinfiotli's thrice-repeated meditation over his wine-cup: his conclusion that life is intermingled wrong, "wrong that amendeth wrong" and "wrong that beareth wrong" (47).

I used to think that Book I was organized by Sigmund's doubt whether the gods do in fact mean well for men. After the deaths of his father and brothers, Sigmund says that he is "wroth with the Gods" because they "made the Volsungs for nought." "In the Day of their Doom," he continues, "a man's help shall they miss; / I will be as a wolf of the forest, if their kings must come to this" (21). To which disillusioned threat, as I used to see it, Signy is right to reply that on the Day of Doom Sigmund will still find himself on the side of the gods, because "the foul shall still seem foul, and the fair shall still seem fair." "But thy wit shall then be awakened," she promises, "and thou shalt know indeed / Why the brave man's spear is broken, and his war-shield fails at need; / Why the loving is unbeloved; why the just man falls from his state; / Why the liar gains in a day what the soothfast strives for late" (22). Or to put it another way by quoting a non-Norse parallel: what we now see as through a glass, darkly, we will one day see face to face.

But standing athwart any such easy reading, as he stands athwart the door of Siggeir's flaming hall, is Sinfiotli, that brand for the burning, that son of a Volsung daughter and son of a Volsung son. And what Sinfiotli forces us to confront is that in the poem--as in the hall on that terrible morning--to death each doorway opens, and death is in the hall.

The truth of the matter is that once the task for which he was begotten is complete, Sinfiotli has little to live for. As his mother points out, he would never even have been born had not the murder of a mighty king demanded the shame of a great queen. What he learns for himself--after the slaying of Siggeir--is that the world is a tight-fitting place for a professional warrior; not only is he bored by peace, by "the swordless lying down," "the deedless day's uprising," and even "the ungirt golden gown" (43), but the nature of the world and of his fellow men is such that it is very easy for him to get into fights less worthy than that he was born for. Moreover, what Borghild's desire for revenge shows him is that in this life not only does it take a wrong to amend a wrong, but wrongs breed further wrongs in seemingly endless chains. And so, rather than continue to live in such a world, a world in which even the cup of joy has death at the bottom, Sinfiotli answers Borghild's question about whether he wants to live forever by drinking off the poisoned cup as eagerly as he once kneaded the poisoned dough. Like his mother before him, Sinfiotli commits suicide. And these two self-chosen deaths make the first book of Sigurd something more complicated than the simple question and response of Sigmund's doubt and Signy's promise.

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When I can manage to look away from Sinfiotli's final quaffing of life's most certain cure, I see him as he is when he and Sigmund are hiding in the storeroom, waiting for the hush of midnight and King Siggeir's sleep. I see him gnawing on his shield-rim with impatience, his face haggard and white; much as he enjoys killing, "the bale-fires' light" and "the bickering blood-reeds' tangle" (32), life holds so little else for him that his face is dreadful to behold before the consummation of his life's work, and dreadful after.

Before, he at least has a certain enthusiasm for life: he wades into war as he wades across the river to join his father; he accepts the poisonous potential of life as he bakes the bread with the asp in it; "I am the sword of the Gods," he exclaims to Sigmund, "and thine hand shall hold the hilt" (35). Afterwards, as we have seen, he has nothing else to live for.

That dreadful face, empty-eyed like a theatrical mask, stares at me throughout Sigmund's opening scene. Under its influence I see Sigmund take his place between the two mighty kings--with the longed-for sword in his hand--but I hear neither the shout in the hall nor Siggeir's petty attempt to buy; what I hear instead is Sigmund's self-asked question: "Yea, I am the hired of Odin, his workday will to speed, / And the harvest-tide shall be heavy. --What then, were it come and past / And I laid by the last of the sheaves with my wages earned at last?" (8). When Sigmund has given his whole life to do the will of the gods, as Sinfiotli gives his whole life to do the will of the gods, what then?

Signy's answer is that on the Day of Doom Sigmund will help to fashion even further tales "to be told / In the hall of happy Baldur" (22-23). But the poem itself comes closer to coping with the problem of Sigmund's forfeited life when it offers--in answer to the question

of whether "the Gods have fashioned a folk who have fashioned a house in vain"--the analogy of "the noble oak of the forest" which becomes "a golden dragon, " a shield-hung warship which wins "fame that groweth not old" (58). Unfortunately, the last image we have of the dead hero does not celebrate this happy parallel; it is instead a picture as bleak as Sinfiotli's dreadful face: Sigmund "lies with swordless hand / In the realm that the foe hath conquered on the edge of a stranger-land" (58). And so Morris' retelling of the Icelandic saga really offers in answer to Sigmund's "What then?" neither the last battle, nor Baldur's Day, nor even the immortality of fame; what it offers is what Odin offers when he strikes the sword deep into Branstock: death as rest. "O Volsung Sons be wise," says the All-father, "And reap the battle-acre that ripening for you lies: / For they told me in the wild wood, I heard on the mountain side, / That the shining house of heaven is wrought exceeding wide, / And that there the Early-comers shall have abundant rest / While the Earth grows scant of great ones, and fadeth from its best" (5).

As Odin points out, such knowledge of the future requires no divine revelation; that life is hard in the world of Sigmund the Volsung is suggested, not only by Sinfiotli's haggard face, but by every wild wood and mountain side. Siggeir, for example, finds that even a long and seemingly successful life turns to ashes in the end. Hiordis too, young as she is, testifies to harshness of the world when she chooses to marry fame--which endures--rather than young love--which does not. In fact, in the world of the poem, life is either a feast or a fight; and the wild hawks which dwell atop Branstock wail over the wine, but laugh when the swords come out. When the bard at Signy's wedding sings of the making of earth, of the lighting of the stars, and of "the gleam of the first of summers on the yet untrodden grass" (4),

his vision of such a pastoral paradise is interrupted by thunder, then by laughter, and finally by Odin, who reminds the gathered warriors that life is a struggle, that the "battle-acre" (5) is ripening, and that a Valhalla of rest awaits.

One may win a little love in the world of this poem, a little joy, even much fame; but the only real certainty is that life is so hard that one will finally long for death as rest. Volsung himself, surrounded by his enemies both living and dead, says that his feet are old, "And if I wend on further there is nought more to behold / Than this that I see about me" (15). "Farewell, my brother," says Signy, "for the earls my candles light, / And I must wend me bedward lest I lose the flower of night" (41). "Indeed I am waxen weary," says the dying Sigmund; "but who heedeth weariness / That hath been day-long on the mountain in winter weather's stress, / And now stands in the lighted doorway and seeth the king draw nigh, / And heareth menighting the banquet, and the bed wherein he shall lie?" (55-56).

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Just as Sinfiotli's suicide calls attention to those moments in the first book of Sigurd when various characters confess that they are ready to die, so his eagerness to fight calls attention to each character's singularity of purpose. Siggeir, for example, is the perfect coward, caring only for a long and happy life; Sigmund is the best of men, careful always to be no more of a wolf than he absolutely has to be; and Signy is the totally dedicated, willing to sacrifice heart, fame, and body so that Volsung may be avenged.

Siggeir's desire to live forever, his care about when he sails the sea, his refusal to risk his life in a fight, all are undercut rather neatly by the abrupt description of his wedding night. In just two lines, the night is over, dawn already brightens on the mountain, and soft on the

breast of Signy--his passion already spent--King Siggeir lies asleep. What we have here is not Victorian reticence, but a comment about the brevity of joy. It becomes ridiculous that Siggeir should cling so desperately to a life in which he will never be as loved or as powerful as he wants to be.

In the case of Sigmund the question is always how much of a wolf he must become. He did not expect his god-given mission--the hand with which he drew the sword was only casually extended--but, once he has his task, his concern is how far in the direction of the animal, of the violent, of Fenrir's Wolf, he may go without becoming something other than himself. He has to become wolfish to escape from his bonds; but later--when he dons the skin of the werewolf--he stops well short of Sinfiotli's all-encompassing violence. Similarly, although he can use the boy he thinks is Siggeir's son to help him kill that king, still he cannot bring himself to murder Siggeir's youngest children when they find him in the hall. He is, in other words, as his sister says of him, a man for whom the foul and fair are never finally confused. He realizes that he is no longer a child on his father's knees, that he can no longer refrain from all violence, but he retains to the end the attractive Hamlet-like reluctance suggested by his outcry to Signy: "And didst thou think, my sister, when we sat in our summer bliss / Beneath the boughs of the Branstock, that the world was like to this?" (22).

The character whose singularity of purpose Sinfiotli's eagerness to fight most clearly highlights is Signy. Unlike her brother, she has from the first some "deeming" of the drama within which she will have to play. When she looks on the earl who has brought Siggeir's proposal of marriage, his heart grows heavy and cold, "As one that half remembers a tale that the elders have told, / A story of weird and woe" (2). Even if

Volsung were not to will this marriage, she says, "Yet should I will it and wed him, and rue my life and my lot" (3). It would not be too much to suggest, in fact, that she actually embraces her fate, just as she embraces, first, Siggeir, and then Sigmund, and then finally "death," "rest," and "deliverance from the yoke."

The key scene for understanding Signy, at least as her son calls attention to her, is the moment when she and the witch-wife exchange shapes. Signy looks at herself in the mirror and shrinks from what she sees; she shudders and sickens at the eyes that are beckoning lamps, the light feet that long for the dance, the lips that are for laughter and lies. She much prefers her own face, with its "steadfast eyes of grey, that so many a grief had seen" (28). She could, after all, be like Borghild, who claims to love Sinfiotli even as she poisons his cup; but Signy prefers constancy: she is steadfast in her love of her father and brothers, and she is awesomely steadfast in her hatred of her husband. It is true that like Sinfiotli she has but one object in life, that like him--when that object is accomplished--she has nothing else to live for. But it is even more true that it is her vision of herself as being in all things faithful--even in hatred--that makes her return to her husband's flaming hall.

Such consistency of character does not in Morris' poem ever become the tragic over-indulgence of a single trait that is so much a part of an Oedipus, say, or an Othello. Instead, such consistency calls our attention to the essential uncertainty about the meaning of life that is so much a part of this first book of Sigurd. In spite of the appearances of Odin, in spite of Signy's dream of Baldur's Day, the only certainty in the poem as sure as the observable fact that death is rest is the equally observable fact that fate is to a very large extent

a function of character. For example, when the father of Hiordis is understandably discouraged by having to go to war over his daughter's choice of groom, Sigmund tried to encourage him by saying that "the lives of mighty kings / Are not cast away, nor drifted like the down before the wind" (52). But a careful reading of what Sigmund actually says shows that the only comfort he can really offer the isle-king is the assurance that "never would Hiordis' mind / Have been turned to wed King Lyngi or aught but the Volsung seed" (52). It may be that Sigmund knows why even mighty kings must die, but what Morris' poem shows him knowing is that people will act according to their natures. As Volsung himself says when he has been informed that Siggeir plans to murder him, "Let him do after his fashion, and I will do no less" (12).

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We are told by the narrator of Sigurd the Volsung that his story is set in a time before the worsening of the world. The gods were unforgotten then, yea Odin sometimes walked with men, and so "in hope exceeding great" men "Met the good days and the evil as they went the way of fate" (1). But Sinfiotli's eagerness to fight and eagerness to die remind us that the narrator's day is later, that Odin no longer shows himself to men, that the only certainties are personality and death.

While it certainly seems as if Morris meant to underscore the senses in which Branstock is a miniature of the World-Tree, and the fire in Siggeir's hall of the Day of Doom, still there is nothing particularly Norse about the themes of wrong leading to further wrong, of seemingly meaningless death, of consistency of self. Neither the reluctant hero, nor the professional killer, nor the dedicated woman is peculiar to the literature of the North. What Morris has written is another Victorian narrative in which "he works his work, I mine"; "man

comes and tills the soil and lies beneath"; "man's word is god in man"; and "from the great deep to the great deep he goes."

Not only does Sigmund, like Arthur, draw forth his mission with his sword, but near the end of Sigurd's first book, in a strange half-echo of "The Passing of Arthur," Sigmund carries his dead son to the edge of the sea. "Now whither away, King Sigmund?" asks the one-eyed and seemingly ancient boatman. "I would cross this water," the hero answers, "for my life hath lost its light" (48).

What the reader--perhaps too conscious of the suicides of Signy and Sinfiotli--sees in this scene is Sigmund's own attempt to quit this vale of tears as did his sister and son before him. But when the no-longer-young hero tries to enter the boat, having first placed on board Sinfiotli's body, suddenly there is "neither ship nor man, / Nor aught but his empty bosom beside that water wan." Frustrated, he stands a long time gazing out to sea; but "ere the sun of the noon-tide across the meadows shone / Sigmund the King of the Volsungs was set in his father's throne, / And he hearkened and doomed and portioned, and did all the deeds of a king" (49). Refused suicide, Sigmund must live on; and as the next line makes clear, he must endure the cycles of kingship as the world endures the year: "So the autumn waned and perished, and winter brought the spring" (49).

In fact, as in The Earthly Paradise, the characters of Sigurd's first book are subordinate to the seasons, to the passage of time. When Signy discovers that Sigmund has escaped the wild wolves and still lives, her mood is echoed by a beautiful morning. But the very next line hastens to say that "the morn and the noon and the even built up another day" (23). Not only does Sigmund have to spend long years in the woods, more than Odysseus' twenty to be exact, each important section of the book



ends as does the whole book with a reminder of the passage of time: "So passeth the summer season, and the harvest of the year, / And the latter days of the winter on toward the springtide wear" (61).

When such subordination of man to time is seen under the influence of Sinfiotli's dreadful face, the other son Sigmund lives to sire becomes just another hero, just another cycle, just another man born to live and lose. As Hartley Spatt points out in one of the following essays, the sun which lights up Sigmund's dead eyes is not the sign of a new sun god but just the dawn of another day.

To put it another way, the sea, which in the poem is always dangerous, becomes the sea of time which sweeps over all, as does the ocean over Gudrun in the poem's last scene.

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All of which is a roundabout way of introducing the following papers. It is time--a hundred years after its publication--that Sigurd be the subject of fresh reading. The original versions of these papers were presented at the MLA meeting in New York in December, 1976--a hundred years and a month after the poem's first publication. The wide range of these papers--their differing critical philosophies as well as their common admiration for the poem--seems to me to testify to the strength of Morris' retelling of the North's great story. Certainly the papers offer a preface to the fresh reading of the nineteenth-century's least appreciated long narrative poem.

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THE CRAFT OF REVISION:  
Morris and Sigurd the Volsung

Stuart Blersch