

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG

#### I

The only non-tragic poem adapted from an Old Norse source by Morris is The Fostering of Aslaug, one of the tales in The Earthly Paradise. It relates a part of the life of Aslaug, daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, tells how she was saved from the wrath of the Niblungs by Heimir, and how she was fostered by Grima, a kerling; how she grew up to be a beautiful young maiden, and finally became the wife of Ragnar Lodbrok. Morris was acquainted with the story of Aslaug through Thorpe's Northern Mythology,<sup>1</sup> even before he had read the "Volsunga Saga, or the Volsung Lays, where Aslaug first appears, and it is a fairly obvious fact that the poet obtained his material from Thorpe rather than from the "Volsunga Saga, the Edda, or the Ragnar Lodbroks Saga,<sup>2</sup> this last containing the legend which Thorpe paraphrased. Tollef B. Thompson, in his study of the Scandinavian sources of The Earthly Paradise,<sup>3</sup> has shown clearly which parts of the story Morris has included, which he has omitted, and has commented generally upon Morris's narrative contributions. The

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1 Benjamin Thorpe, Northern Mythology, London, 1851.

2 Thorpe took his material not directly from the Saga, but from Afzelius's Sago-Hälder and Müller's Sagabibliothek; see Northern Mythology, I, 108, note 2. The material was "third-hand" when Morris took it up.

3 Tollef B. Thompson, Skandinavischer Einfluss auf William Morris in den ersten Stadien (The Earthly Paradise), Inaugural-Dissertation, Berlin, 1910. See especially: Cap. II, "Umgestaltungen," pp. 92-94; Cap. IV, "Auslassungen," pp. 94-96; Cap. VII, "Zusammenfassung," pp. 102-103.

conclusion. to Dr. Thompson's discussion is almost entirely acceptable to us:

Im allgemeinen kann man das Gedicht als eine freie dichterische Behandlung einiger der wichtigsten Auslagmomente der Völsunga- und Ragnar-Lodbrokssaga bezeichnen, in welcher die durch literarische und stilistische Mittel hervorgerufene Umgestaltung das spezifisch Nordische zum Teil ausgelassen, zum Teil weiter entwickelt und veredelt hat.<sup>4</sup>

Since the story in the original is not tragic, we could hardly expect that Morris would change it in order that it might conform to the pattern of the four other poems which he adapted from Old Norse sources.<sup>5</sup> But we shall find, in our examination of the love element in Morris's Aslaug story, however, that although it does not end tragically, its characters are aware of the tragic forces of love, and the workings of fate, and look upon themselves as being fortunate to escape the fated web which was woven for Sigurd, Brynhild, and Gudrun. Morris treats this little after-piece to the Völsunga Saga as though it belonged to the legendary material which concerns Sigurd's life, although he actually did not believe that it should be considered as a part of the Völsung story. Indeed, Morris and Magnússon had already decided that the Aslaug episode did not belong with the Völsunga Saga when certain critics

4 Thompson, op. cit., p. 103. Regarding Thompson's last phrase, see the discussion below.

5 The Wooing of Swanhild, of course, is not tragic as it stands; but its "Argument," at the beginning, states definitely how Morris intended to conclude it had he not left it uncompleted.

objected to the fact that they did not include the Aslaug matter with their translation of that Saga.<sup>6</sup> But Morris wrote his Aslaug poem before he had seen the Völsunga Saga in the original, so when he begins it with a reference to Sigurd, and mentions the great mythical hero of the North several times we are not surprised at his failure to distinguish between what legitimately belonged to the Völsunga Saga, and what to the Ragnars Saga:

A fair tale might I tell to you  
Of Sigurd, who the dragon slew  
Upon the murder-wasted heath,  
And how love led him unto death,  
Through strange wild ways of joy and pain;<sup>7</sup>

When the poet speaks of Heimir's fostering, he says:

His old lips touched those eyes of hers,  
That Sigurd's hope and Brynhild's tears  
Made sad e'en in her life's first spring;<sup>8</sup>

Although The Fostering of Aslaug was published in the last part of The Earthly Paradise, we may hardly assume that it was inspired by Morris's rediscovery of the Völsunga Saga, in 1870, when he decided that this was "the greatest story ever told." He doubtless took his material for it from the most immediately available source: Thorpe's Northern Mythology; it is quite pos-

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6 See Miss May Morris's comments upon this, The Collected Works of William Morris (New York and London, 1910-1915), VII, Introduction, p. xxxii.

7 "The Fostering of Aslaug," in The Earthly Paradise, IV, in Collected Works, VI, 21. Future references to the poem will be indicated simply by "Aslaug," followed by the page number.

8 Aslaug, p. 25. See also pp. 51, 61, 63, etc.

sible that he wrote it before he met Magnússon.

## II

It is probably in The Fostering of Aslaug and The Wooing of Swanhild that Morris comes least close to approximating the spirit of Old Norse literature. Swanhild is frankly Chaucerian; a third poem, The Wooing of Hallbiorn, written later, imitates the English Popular Ballad,-- but The Fostering of Aslaug, almost a sentimental romance, tells the story, but lacks the spirit of Old Norse almost completely, because its author did not yet understand exactly what that spirit was. The English poet does not overcome the prejudices of his nationality, nor does he cast aside the elements of romance which are so apparent all through The Earthly Paradise: The Fostering of Aslaug, by and large, is an English poem, or, less specifically, a non-Norse poem. That does not mean, however, that we can see none of the real attributes of Old Norse literature in it: but comparatively speaking, it lacks the severe atmosphere of Sigurd the Volsung, and the keen appreciation of Norse life of The Lovers of Gudrun.

The details of romance and sentimentality in Morris's version of the Aslaug story are most apparent in the poet's treatment of the chief characters, Aslaug and Ragnar, and in his attitude toward the love element. Aslaug is a beautiful and noble maiden in the Saga, but Morris makes her an idealized, Wordsworthian heroine: simple, lovely past describing, innocent,-

a child of nature. When she tends her flocks, for instance, she is able to make them understand her by some supernatural power:

In no long time, forsooth, and then  
 Called back her wandering flock again  
 With one strange dumb cry, e'en as though  
 Their hearts and minds she needs must know;  
 For hurrying back with many a bleat  
 They huddled round about her feet.<sup>9</sup>

The ability of man to hold converse with animals, or to understand their speech, is not unknown in Old Norse literature; Aslaug's father, after he ate Fafnir's heart, could comprehend the language of birds. It may be that Morris thought Aslaug should inherit this power from Sigurd.<sup>10</sup> But she does not speak with animals for prophetic purposes, as did Sigurd. She, unloved by her foster-parents, has found friends among the animals, and has identified herself with nature. We are disagreeably reminded of the "impulse from the vernal wood."

When Ragnar, in the Saga, sends his 'kitchen-knives' to Grima's house to bake bread, they are so smitten by the beauty of the maid that they let the bread burn. But in the same part of the story in the Morris poem, we find Aslaug standing in the midst of the Vikings, romanticizing the prosaic business of taking loaves out of the oven:

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9 Aslaug, p. 40.

10 Indeed, see her information from the birds, Ragnar Loðbroks Saga, Chapter IX: "Three birds sat in a tree beside thee, and told me tidings," The Saga of Ragnar Loðbrok, in The Saga of the Volsungs, translated by Margaret Schlauch (New York, 1930), p. 213.

He was happiest of them all  
 Unto whose portion it did fall  
 To take the loaves from out her hand;  
 And gaping often would he stand,  
 And ever he deemed that he could feel  
 A trembling all along the peel  
 Whenas she touched it--sooth to say,  
 Such bread as there was baked that day  
 Was never seen:<sup>11</sup>

When Aslaug descends the bank to Ragnar's ship, the aura of glory about her adds, unfortunately, a romantic cast to a description in which the Saga-man has seen fit to say, simply: "and very fair she was to look upon, for her hair was bright as gold."<sup>12</sup> But Morris writes:

Then slowly 'gan to get her down  
 A steep path in the sea-cliff brown,  
 Till on a sudden did she meet  
 The slant sun cast about its feet,  
 And flashed as in a golden cloud;  
 Since scarcely her poor raiment showed  
 Beneath the glory of her hair,<sup>13</sup>  
 Whose last lock touched her ankles bare.

And yet, this innocent, beautiful maiden, untaught in the ways of love and men, reared among the flocks of Grima, behaves with the artfulness of an accomplished coquette when she first greets Ragnar. In the original, the hero offers her the silken sark of his previous wife, Thora, because Aslaug has apologized for her naked poverty. She has no desire to make an impression upon Ragnar. But in Morris's version, she fears lest the effect of

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<sup>11</sup> Aslaug, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Ragnar Loðbroks Saga, Chapter VI [Miss Schlauch's version, op. cit., p. 202].

<sup>13</sup> Aslaug, p. 46.

her first meeting with him be destroyed by her ugly and scanty clothes. 'Who can tell,' she says,

'But I may love this great lord well?  
An evil thing then should it be  
If he cast loathing eyes on me  
This first time for my vile attire.'<sup>14</sup>

She is aware of her poor condition, and yet she lacks the real fright of the true Aslaug under these circumstances. Her innocence as a shepherdess is too great, yet by some miraculous power she has learned enough of the wiles of woman to go willingly to meet Ragnar. But after his departure, and the later return of the sailors, she is guileless again, and is able to ask Ragnar's men if they have any word from the great hero,

'Who spake last year a pleasant word,  
Hard to believe for a poor maid.'<sup>15</sup>

Morris's Aslaug is <sup>a</sup> too willing Cinderella. The modern elements in her character, naïveté and sophistication, are too paradoxical for English credulity, and too consciously artistic for the literary conventions of Old Norse.

In the treatment of Ragnar's character also, Morris has deviated from the spirit of the Saga. Ragnar is, after all, one of the great Vikings of the mythical sagas, and to put before the English reader only those parts of his life which deal with his love for Aslaug is to misrepresent his essential character. According to the Saga, Ragnar had been married before,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

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to Thora, and the omission in the poem of his conquest over Thora's beasts forces the poet also to omit one of the most interesting of all Ragnarian episodes: the incident which gave him the name, Loðbrok, or 'shaggy-breeks.' Ragnar is too great a 'harrier,' too fierce a Viking, to be presented as a romantic lover only, and as Morris gives us virtually no details of his life as a champion, so he commits the same error as he does to a less damaging degree with Sigurd, in Sigurd the Volsung: He makes of a magnificent hero a mere wooer of women. That alone is sufficient to spoil the Norse character of the Aslaug story.

The idealization of Aslaug and the omission of Ragnar's heroic exploits forced Morris to compose a romantic love story, and we find, consequently, that almost the whole spirit of the love between them is romantic. When we see them on Ragnar's ship, for instance, we do not recognize their words as coming from the Saga. We know that in the original Ragnar Loðbroks Saga they were smitten by each other; but the trance-like love at first sight which comes over Aslaug in Morris's poem does not ring true. We recall, also, from the Saga, that when Ragnar came to Aslaug's land a second time, he invited her to bed with him, but we do not remember any long drawn-out love scenes in

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16 Saxo Grammaticus tells also how Ragnar had two wives; but Aslaug, because she was 'less historical' than Ragnar, is not mentioned by Saxo. See Saxo Grammaticus, The First Nine Books of the Danish History, translated by Oliver Elton (London, 1894), pp. 362-380.



which the pains of love, and the terrors of separation were stressed. We expect the Saga hero to have the normal desires of a stout Viking, and when a beautiful woman comes into his possession, we are not surprized that he should say, as did Erik the Red, Grettir, Sigurd, and a host of other heroes: 'I deem it no wise ill that we should go to bed together.' We are not accustomed, on the other hand, to an uxorious Norseman, nor have we often observed him spending idle time in words of amorousness and unrequited passion. In other words, we cannot quite accept the love of Morris's Ragner and Aslaug as the typical love of real Norse characters.

### III

Morris does not forget that certain characteristics of the Old Norse love stories had been and were to be employed in his other poems in this group. Love, for example, is sensual, physical, in The Fostering of Aslaug, as it is in Sigurd the Volsung and even in Hallbiorn. Ragnar and Aslaug stood "mouth to mouth," until the red blood of passion "burnt in her cheek,"<sup>17</sup> and,

His hand had swept aback her hair,  
And on her shoulder, gleaming bare           18  
From midst her rags, was trembling now;

He gazed on her, and "shook with passion,"<sup>19</sup> But since this

17 Aslaug, p. 48.

18 Ibid., p. 49.

19 Ibid., p. 51.

story, by comparison with the others, is shallow and trivial, the sensual aspect of love does not serve a dramatic purpose (such as heightening a tragedy) as it does in Sigurd. It serves merely a narrative and pictorial purpose. For this reason, we can see no real reason for expanding the descriptive details of the original in this direction. In Sigurd the Volsung, the bald physical facts of love make the triangle of the story more vivid, the jealousy more violent; but in The Fostering of Aslaug, the same facts serve only to over-emphasize a point which the Saga-man expects the reader to take for granted. When Sigurd is "knit together" with Brynhild, for example, we know that terrible deeds to come have been foreshadowed by the poet, but we attach no such importance to the same event in Aslaug:

Therewith the King her body drew  
Nearer to him, if it might be,<sup>20</sup>

Morris apparently attempted to put the love of Aslaug and Ragnar on a level with the other great love stories of the North, before he knew exactly what the natures of the others were. Even though we know there is to be no tragic culmination to the love of Ragnar and Aslaug, we find the poet including one of the doctrines which most accurately shows his appreciation of the Norse spirit. That doctrine is one that is present in all the other poems, early and late, which Morris adapted from the Old Norse:— life is short, the Norns have fated tragedy for each man and woman, love relieves the pain caused by knowing that death ap-

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

proaches,-- live and love until tragedy overtakes you! This, we say has no place in a plot which is not tragic; but it apparently was such an important idea in Morris's conception of the Old Icelandic literature that he could not avoid it. He brings it cleverly into the story by making Aslaug suppose what consequences would follow their love if their lives were destined for tragedy:

Suddenly she rose,  
 And thrust him from her; 'Ah, too close!  
 Too close now, and too far apart  
 Tomorrow!--and a barren heart,  
 And days that ever fall to worse,  
 And blind lives struggling with a curse  
 They cannot grasp! Look on my face,  
 Because I deem me of a race  
 That knoweth such a tale too well.<sup>21</sup>  
 Yet if there be such tale to tell  
 Of us twain, let it e'en be so,  
 Rather than we should fail to know  
 This love--'22

To endure pain rather than "fail to know this love" was a choice which Morris thought the Norse hero and heroine would always make.<sup>23</sup> They were always willing to accept an hour's love for

21 "Of a race," etc.: Aslaug refers to the tragic and fatal love of her parents, Sigurd and Brynhild.

22 Aslaug, pp. 50-51.

23 See also Aslaug, p. 52, where Aslaug says that the loves of most men and women are as foundering ships,

'And leave no trace behind. God wot  
 This heart of mine shall hate thee not  
 Whatso befall; but rather bless  
 Thee and this hour of happiness;  
 And if this tide shall come again  
 After hard longing and great pain,  
 How sweet, how sweet!'

an eternity of unknown misery, so Morris thought of these Norse heroes; and he probably introduced this element of possible tragedy into the happy love story of Aslaug and Ragnar for the same reason that he added to the historical tale of Halbiorn the triangle love motif. It is unnecessary to state, perhaps, that Morris did not find this idea in the Ragnar Loöbroks Saga, which says only of their bridal night that Aslaug did not wish Ragnar to 'have to do with her' until the third night after they were married, but that 'Ragnar nevertheless accomplished his will.'<sup>24</sup> The speculation concerning the tragic possibilities of their union belongs entirely to the English poet.

In passages such as these in The Fostering of Aslaug, Morris most closely approaches the real spirit of the tragic Northern love story, but this pseudo-tragic element, we must admit, does not actually belong to the tale of Aslaug.<sup>25</sup> Whatever virtue there is in the poet's references to the tragedies of the great heroes, is unwittingly counteracted by the romantic treatment of the story in general.

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24 Ragnar Loöbroks Saga, Chapter VI. See Miss Schlauch's version: "But although she said this, Ragnar paid no attention to it; he accomplished his will none the less." Op. cit., p.206.

25 Morris also employs, in this poem, at least one reference to ragna rok:

When Baldur is come back again  
O'er an undying world to reign. Aslaug, p. 32,

but it is no more convincingly Norse than the passages referred to directly above.

## IV

Another aspect of the effect of Morris's changes over his original may be observed in specific narrative details concerning Aslaug. Her foster-parents, Aki and Grima, realize that she is too beautiful to be thought their daughter, so Grima forces her to cover herself with rags, pitch, and filth. When Ragnar's men come to Grima's house, Grima is apprehensive lest Aslaug ['Kraka,' as Grima calls her] appear fair before them, so she forbids her to wash herself. But Aslaug does it regardless of Grima's injunction. This is an incident in the Saga which receives bare mention by the Saga-man,--merely attention enough so the reader will understand that Aslaug is no longer hiding her beauty. This is transformed into a bathing scene in The Fostering of Aslaug, full of sensual detail, a scene which shows the innocent Aslaug admiring her cleansed beauty, Psyche-like, in a pool. It is a tableau which would be less incongruous in one of the classical stories which the poet included in The Earthly Paradise; but it has no right to be a part of this Old Norse tale. The characteristic tone of the poem is struck in the following passage:

While she spake  
 Her hands were busy with her gown,  
 And at the end it slipped adown  
 And left her naked there and white  
 In the unshadowed noontide light.  
 Like Freyia in her house of gold,  
 A while her limbs did she behold  
 Clear mirrored in the lake beneath;<sup>26</sup>

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26 Aslaug, p. 39.

Even the comparison of Aslaug with Freyia does not give these lines a Norse flavor. In the Saga, Aslaug scrubs her body--so that her beauty will not be covered; in Morris's poem, her bath is a sensuous ritual. Other descriptive passages, such as the metaphor for Aslaug: "the happy golden head,"<sup>27</sup> and the beginnings of rapture indicated by: "each other's hands draw<sup>28</sup> lovingly each unto each," are merely unconvincing. The reader, in the light of such expressions, cannot believe The Fostering of Aslaug to be an Old Norse poem.

#### V

In general atmosphere and description, as well as in narrative details, the poem fails to reproduce the spirit of its original. Even when we grant that the Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok is fictitious, and tends more toward romance than do the true Íslendinga Sögur, we are still forced to confess that Morris, in his poetic treatment of it, does not retain its basic, heroic elements. We cannot fail to realize that the poet is dealing with a child of the Volsungs and Budlungs, for he continues to remind us of that fact; but Morris's Aslaug is no true daughter of either Sigurd or Brynhild. In respect to this, one of the least convincing parts of the poem comes at the conclusion, where

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27 Aslaug, p. 61.

28 Ibid., p. 60.

the two lovers exult in their mutual understanding that Aslaug is of noble birth:

Let be--as ancient stories tell  
 Full knowledge upon Ragnar fell  
 In lapse of time, that this was she  
 Begot in the felicity  
 Swift-fleeting, of the wondrous twain,  
 Who afterwards through change and pain  
 Must live apart to meet in death.<sup>29</sup>

The false ring of this genealogy is only too apparent. To speak of Aslaug as "begot in felicity," and of Sigurd and Brynhild as "wondrous twain," is to ridicule a great passion, and to damn with too faint praise the lovers to whom it belonged. It does not seem possible that these lines could have been written for one love story of the North by the same poet who wrote such powerful ones for another:

And she shrieked as the woe gathered on her,  
 and the sun rose over her head  
 'Wake, wake, O men of this house, for Sigurd the  
 Volsung is dead!'

The Fostering of Aslaug is a Northern love story, it must be admitted, but it bears very little resemblance to the great tragedies of the North which Morris adapted in The Lovers of Gudrun and Sigurd the Volsung. It is composed in a meter which is not severe enough for the heroic passions of the Saga and Edda writers; its groundstone is romance; but it is romance of a quite trivial nature. The poem concerns such a small part of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

the original story, that it is actually more like a versified battr than anything else. It does not achieve its effect by use of the grand-scaled passions of the Old Norse, nor should we expect it to do so, since its original is in no way comparable to the genuine tragedies of the North. But on the other hand, the great events of the true sagas, as they survive even in the fictional works, are not present in Morris's poem. If we cannot say The Fostering of Aslaug is a great love poem from the stand-point of the Old Norse, neither can we call it a great English poem; for since it is ostensibly the adaptation of a foreign piece, it should depend chiefly upon its original attributes for its strength and beauty. In the almost complete absence of these attributes, such strength and such beauty cannot be forthcoming.