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## INTRODUCTION

When *The House of the Wolfings* first appeared in 1888 it had no introduction, and readers and critics alike were startled by it. The reviewer for *The Athenaeum* admitted at the time that William Morris had devised "a form of art so new that new canons of criticism have to be formulated and applied to it," and the reading public, accustomed to the familiar worlds of Dickens and Trollope, struggled to come to terms with a form of fiction which had both a futuristic and an antiquated sound. Like the world of fantasy itself, the story-telling was at once strange and familiar, epic and personal. Using a unique vocabulary and a mixture of poetry and prose, Morris takes us into an heroic world completely foreign to our experience—and perhaps this is one reason the book has remained popular. He depicts the story of the early life of his Teutonic ancestors, but from the other side, the side we never hear about: he shows us the strong and good quality of tribal life among the people the Romans called "barbarians." In the words of the poem on his title page, Morris helps us to see "the ancient glimmer burn/Across the waste" of years that separate us, as the so-called "civilized" inheritors of the Romans, from the more equal and communal life of the people they conquered.

This book depicts the struggle of two wolves battling at the door of man's early consciousness. One is the primitive wolf of Egyptian or Nordic mythology, symbol of strength, valor, and instinctive power; the other is the savage Roman wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, thus aiding indirectly in the founding of Rome, but only after brutality, bitter warfare, and the slaying of brother by brother (Remus by Romulus). In Morris's tale, as in the Roman myth, the wolf plays its role in child-rearing, for the Hall-Sun, who tends the flame of the tribe's eternal light, is raised by a she-wolf. But in marked contrast to the Roman wolf, both the Hall-Sun and her wolf-mother are gentle, far-seeing women, not short-tempered warrior men. In the tribal valleys, the Wolfings cloister their wolves close to home and use them as guardians of the house. The only threatening wolf is the one outside their door, a creature of the mountains (the seven-hilled city of Rome), a lone wolf on the prowl and eager to attack.

Unlike the origins of Rome, shadowed by the slaying of brother by brother, the House of the Wolfings has its origins close to Mother Earth and affirms her kinship. The physical description which opens the book makes the earth itself visible as a female body: "Swellings-up of the earth here and there" are "cleft amidmost by a river" and subject to a "yearly flood." The Wolfings lead a peaceful, agrarian existence; the Roman enemy lives not by the ploughshare, but by the sword. Their ravenous wolf-appetite is emphasized in their password, "No limit." They are clearly the type of modern men "who eat the meadows desert, and burn the desert bare," and who are responsible for the "waste" of land and human resources Morris alludes to in his title-page poem. Geography and landscape become an index by which to contrast culture and lifestyle. The struggle is a symbolic confrontation between an urban mythology, dominated by masculine, rational divinities (Rome, with its sun god, the male Apollo), and a more agrarian mythology relying on the great feminine natural or intuitive principles (the Wolfings, with their sun goddesses the Hall-Sun and Wood-Sun). Morris made the difference clear in more analytical terms in an 1884 lecture on "The Gothic Revival," when he spoke of the spread of Rome's influence as the spread of "the religion whose real aim was the worship of the great city as the visible embodiment of irresistible authority."

Morris detested the tyranny of rule by the rich and powerful, and from 1887 to 1896 he wrote and delivered about a hundred different public lectures on social and political reform, advocating a new art which could lead the way to a more just society. As a young man he had won fame for his poetry, and then had extended his reputation as an artist-designer of furniture, wallpapers, fabrics, and stained-glass, in the process of improving the unimaginative Victorian urban environment. All this time he continued his literary development, forming his own standards for heroic ideals from an intimate knowledge of world literature and a political imperative to foster equality and commonwealth. The literary backgrounds most important to the *Wolfings* are the great sagas of Northern Europe and Iceland and the more familiar epics of Southern Europe, the Greek *Odyssey* and the Roman *Aeneid*. The *Wolfings* clearly shows Morris's preference for the Northern mode, though his knowledge of all three traditions was considerable. He pub-

lished his translation of Vergil's *Aeneid* in 1875, and his verse version of the *Odyssey* appeared in 1887, just a year before the *Wolfings*.

Both of the familiar classical epics have a common point of reference in the background of the Trojan War. Each traces the victorious quest of a single hero after the fall of Troy, and they share many assumptions about the nature of heroic action. Homer's *Odyssey* presents a hero with a great desire for fame and emphasizes his rational powers, his cleverness at escaping and surviving (often by trickery), and his rational skill in choosing the proper golden means between excesses (Scylla and Charybdis, for example). Apart from fame and survival, Odysseus' primary goal is to return home and reclaim his wife and kingdom. He perseveres in his long travels and finally does return to his own land, throwing out the would-be usurpers and assuming his old authority. Vergil's account of the travels of Aeneas shows him to be, like Odysseus, fame-seeking and survival-prone. The Trojan prince escapes the destruction of Troy by fleeing to Carthage, where he meets and loves the Queen Dido. He leaves his love, however, to continue his single-minded determination to found a New Troy and carries on his travels to Italy, where his descendants fulfill his fame in the founding of Rome.

Saga literature is much more difficult to sum up than the clearly-focused epics of Homer and Vergil, but it clearly portrays a different kind of hero. Though the various saga stories were not shaped into a single whole by one poet's hand, the central characters in nearly all the tales, both gods and heroes, are doomed to ultimate defeat. The gods contend strongly against evil, but they know that in the end goodness is a lost cause; one day they will meet evil head-on and be destroyed. But they will fight until the end anyway, knowing all the time that they will ultimately fail. A man, subject to the same universal principles, becomes a hero by championing a lost cause. Morris says in the introduction to his translation of *The Story of the Völsungs and the Niblungs* that "this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks." This stern heroic ethic demands that we place value on the goodness of the cause and the valor of the struggle, not on the mental cleverness which may allow us to survive or the mere will and power

which may make us famous and victorious. In Morris's *Völungsung* translation, love, not fame, is the prime mover; the tale tells "Of utter love defeated utterly, / Of Grief too strong to give Love time to die!" We see something of this strength of grief and the immortality of courage in the song sung of Thiodolf at the end of the *Wolfings*. Edith Hamilton reminds us that this is our own mythic background, when she explains in her *Mythology*, "The poets of the Norse mythology, who saw that victory was possible in death and that courage was never defeated, are the only spokesmen for the belief of the whole great Teutonic race—of which England is a part, and ourselves through the first settlers in America. Everywhere else in northwestern Europe the early records, the traditions, the songs and stories, were obliterated by the priests of Christianity."

Thiodolf differs in heroic quality from both Odysseus and Aeneas. Morris depicts him as a Gothic leader doomed to die at the hands of the approaching Roman army. His lover-goddess tempts him by promising to assure his survival if he will wear magic armor. By doing this, he would forsake his merely human role and attempt the extended life of the gods. Both knowledge and emotion incline him to follow her advice, but he ultimately decides to enact his real existence as mortal fighter and to fall in battle for a cause he knows to be good. He does not scheme like Odysseus to return to this home, nor set out like Aeneas to escape defeat and establish a new home. Morris shows us a defeated hero. In giving his life, Thiodolf affirms the continuity of natural process and dies as a part of his people, rather than gain immortality through magic or unmanly means.

Thiodolf clearly becomes a type of pagan Christ figure, but one stemming from the Great Mother or Mother Earth rather than an eternal father-ruler on high. His tribe is agrarian and close to the earth, and his death will make him one with the earth. As he gains understanding of the mysterious power of the "Dwarf-wrought Hauberk" (the mantle the goddess Wood-Sun uses to protect him), he realizes it assures his existence only in terms of worldly temporality, and does not reflect his own courageous goodness or his identity as a transpersonal tribal of cultural reality. Instead, it singles him out and isolates him from the very community which defines his purpose and

identity. He is able to reject the protection of the Hauberk because it will diminish his stature as a man; he affirms the simple human faith and courage which identify him as a man and a Wolfing. He is the kind of unnamed hero the Romans later delighted in throwing to the lions, but the kind of hero who stands head and shoulders above those men who possess merely the powers of command, conquest, and survival. He dies not in the service of divinity or personal glory, nor for the lady he loves, but in fulfilling courage and goodness beyond himself, his destiny as a member of the human community: "To live for the House of the Wolfings, and at last to die for their need. . . with them is my joy and sorrow, and my life, and my death in the end."

The image of the Wolf which gives its name to the tribe and to the book is an image of collective experience: wolves run in packs; the lone wolf is an aberration. Morris's story is close to the experience of the "barbaric" people, considered uncivilized by the Romans because they did not read and write. Modern scholars have observed that in the process of reading and writing the individual becomes increasingly aware of his separate, isolated existence. The oral traditions of the Wolfings preserve mutuality in their story-telling process. Tribal culture immortalized the lives of good men in spoken tales and songs they shared together, while the literate Romans, like the later Christians, destroyed the spoken tales of conquered peoples and handed down their own written laws to be obeyed. Thiodolf's resurrection occurs in the end through his story, shared in a Wolfing song, retold by Morris: "All men's hearts rose high as he sang. . . for in sooth at that moment they saw Thiodolf, their champion, sitting among the gods on his golden chair, sweet savours around him, and sweet sound of singing, and he himself brightfaced and merry as no man on earth had seen him, for as joyous a man as he was."

*The House of the Wolfings* may seem as startling and puzzling today as it did to its first readers ninety years ago. It is still unlike the easily familiar literature we take in stride. The style, with its mixture of poetry and prose, asks us to accept the realm of the imagination as something quite apart from the familiar language of ordinary conversational speech in unrhymed sentences. The language rejects a Roman-based vocabulary in favor of more northern and Gothic roots,

words which may seem as odd to us as a hero in defeat. The critics are still puzzled, though one of the best, Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, has taken steps toward those "new canons of criticism" the *Athenaeum* reviewer called for. Frye asks us to look at Morris's novels as examples of "revolutionary form," and in this sense it is easy to see that Morris's vision strikes out to overthrow many of our basic social, political, individual, and literary assumptions.

Today we are the inheritors of the Greek and Roman ways, far more than the Gothic communal life depicted in the *Wolfings*. The Romans were avid road builders, and we carry on their work. As Morris says in his title-page verse, we can do no more than catch a glimmer of the alternative, "as still the dark road drives us on." Unfortunately, we *are* driven, rather than decisively in control of the driving, and the Roman motto "No limit" seems close to being our own. In *The House of the Wolfings* and the rich fantasy novels which followed it, Morris sought to revolutionize our thinking in a non-material direction, through imagination rather than physical force. Reading Thiodolf's story, we may come to see the beauty of a joyous man who embraces his limits for the common welfare and good fellowship which one shares as a fellow man but loses as a ruler, road-builder, city-founder, or super-hero. "You must be a man first," Morris says in another of his lectures, "before you are a great man."

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Gulfport, Florida  
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