OSCAR MAURER

William Morris and Laxdæla Saga

I

"THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN," LONGEST AND BEST OF THE MEDIAEVAL tales in The Earthly Paradise, was the first substantial result of Morris' reading Old Norse literature in the original. He had long been familiar with the few available English versions, such as they were. At Oxford he had read the then recently published Northern Mythology and Yule-tide Stories of Benjamin Thorpe,¹ and later enjoyed George Webbe Dasent's translations of Njáls Saga and Gisli Saga, as well as Thorpe's translation of the Elder Edda.² He also became familiar with Mallet's Northern Antiquities in the edition of 1859, which contained a translation of the Prose Edda and Sir Walter Scott's version of Eyrbyggja Saga.³ Before beginning the study of Icelandic, in short, Morris had acquired an extensive knowledge of Old Norse life and literature, sufficient to impress the Icelander who was to become his teacher and collaborator.

This was Eiríkr Magnússon, who has left an account of his meeting with Morris in the summer of 1868 and their beginning lessons in October of that year: "His first taste of Icelandic literature was the story of Gunnlaug the Snaketongue. I suggested we had better start with some grammar. 'No, I can't be bothered with grammar; have no time for it. You be my grammar as we translate. I want the literature,

¹ Benjamin Thorpe, Northern Mythology, Comprising the Principal Popular Traditions and Superstitions of Scandinavia, North Germany, and the Netherlands. Compiled from Original and Other Sources. 3 volumes (London, 1851). This work is based largely on the Asalære of the Danish philologist N. M. Petersen, and contains abstracts and translations from both Eddas and from some important sagas. See also Benjamin Thorpe, ed., Yule-tide Stories, A Collection of Scandinavian and North German Popular Tales and Traditions (London, 1853).

² G. W. Dasent, The Story of Burnt Njal; or, Life in Iceland at the End of the Tenth Century (Edinburgh, 1863); The Story of Gisti the Outlaw (Edinburgh, 1866). Benjamin Thorpe, Edda Sæmundar kíns Froda: The Edda of Sæmund the Learned. From the Old Norse or Icelandic (London, 1866).

I must have the story.'" In this fashion, Magnússon recalls, Morris plunged boldly ahead. Daily three-hour sessions with the sagas, continued almost without interruption until Magnússon went to Cambridge as lecturer in Icelandic in 1871, soon began to show results. In January 1869 Morris and Magnússon’s version of Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu was published in the Fortnightly Review as “The Saga of Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Rafn the Skald, as the priest Ari Thorgilson has told it, who of all men of Iceland has been the deepest in knowledge of tales of land-settling and olden lore.” Three month’s later appeared the collaborators’ first book, Grettis Saga: The Story of Grettir the Strong.

Immediately after completing their translation of Grettis Saga, Morris and Magnússon began work on Laxdœla Saga. Magnússon has thus described their method of collaboration:

We went together over the day’s task as carefully as the eager-mindedness of the pupil to acquire the story would allow. I afterwards wrote out at home a literal translation of it and handed it to him at our next lesson. With this before him Morris wrote down at his leisure his own version in his own style, which ultimately did service as printer’s copy when the Saga was published.

This statement refers to the tale of Grettir. But Magnússon made a literal translation of Laxdœla Saga as well. Morris did not rewrite it in prose and it was never published. When the two collaborators began their formal series of translations in 1890 under the title of The Saga Library, Thorstein Veblen (whose name has since become known in other contexts) wrote to Magnússon offering his own translation of Laxdœla Saga for use in the series. Magnússon declined the offer on the ground that his version of the work was still in existence, “now over 18 years old as the first edition of Morris’s ‘Lovers of Gudrun’ testifies, being based on that translation.”

After Morris’ death Magnússon took some credit for the genesis not only of “The Lovers of Gudrun” but of Sigurd the Volsung as well. His recollection perhaps exaggerated the effect of his hints, but is worth citing for the light it throws on the origin of Morris’ two best long poems:

When we had done the “Story of the men of Salmon-River-dale” (Lax-

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6 Einarsson, op. cit., p. 25.
dœla), and when the lays of the Volsungs and Gjukungs were finished, I
gave it him as my impression, that the life of Gudrun Osvißr's daughter, and
the life of Sigurd Fafner's slayer were dealt with, in the old records, so frag-
mentarily and, at the same time, so suggestively, as to leave a poet like him-
self, steeped in the lore of the Middle Ages and possessed, at first hand, of a
full mastery of these subjects, a wide field open for poetical treatment after
the manner of the tales of the Earthly Paradise. He was then too full of first
impressions to entertain the idea. He even went so far as to say that these
matters were too sacred, too venerable, to be touched by a modern hand.
The matter dropped in each case, after some argument on either side, by my
suggesting that he might think it over. After a month, or perhaps more, in
either case, I had the pleasure of finding the poet, one day, unexpectedly, in
a state of fervid enthusiasm, declaring that he had made up his mind to
write a new poem: "The Lovers of Gudrun"—"Sigurd the Volsungs." In
each case the subject matter had taken such a clearly definite shape in his
mind, as he told me, that it only remained to write it down. 7

Whether or not Magnússon's hints were operative, Morris' statement
about the shaping of the story must have been true of "The Lovers of
Gudrun." For Morris wrote this poem of five thousand lines in a little
over a month. On one occasion, Theodore Watts-Dunton recalled that
"he worked on it from four in the morning till four in the afternoon,
and when he rose from the table he had produced seven hundred and
fifty lines." 8

In the light of these statements it is possible to appreciate the inti-
macy of Morris' contact with the text of Laxdœla Saga. He read it with
a sound philologist who took care to explain the syntax and the idiom,
and he had before him a literal translation which, judging by Magnú-
sson's English style, was stiff and clumsy but clear and painstakingly
accurate. His first acquaintance with the saga was thus made in detail,
not in general outline. The alterations and omissions in his poetic ver-

tion, "The Lovers of Gudrun," were deliberate; they were not due to
an imperfect knowledge of the original.

II

Laxdœla Saga, which was first introduced to English readers in
Morris' poem at the end of 1869 (the first published English transla-
tion was that of Muriel Press in 1899) is one of the great family chron-
icles of Iceland, composed in the thirteenth century from earlier sources.
It is a mixture of history, legend, and fiction which shows traces of de-

7 Magnússon, op. cit., p. 110.
8 T. Gordon Hake and A. Compton-Rickett, The Life and Letters of Theodore
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liberate literary treatment.9 The saga follows the fortunes of the race of Ketill Flatnefr, whose sons were among the Norwegian chieftains that settled Iceland in the ninth century, fleeing from the autocratic reign of Haraldr Hárfagri. Ketill’s sons and daughter established a colony on Hvammfirth in the west of Iceland, in a valley which took its name from the Salmon (Lax) River. The lives and adventures of the settlers and their descendants are the material of Laxdœla Saga, which covers a period of about 150 years (c. 875–1025 A.D.) and seven or eight generations. The relation of the chief characters in Morris’ poem to the course of the saga may be seen from the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ketill Flatnefr</th>
<th>Bjorn</th>
<th>Unnr</th>
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<tr>
<td>Øttar</td>
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<td>Helgi</td>
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<td>Óswif</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guðrún</td>
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Koll — Þorgerð
Hǫskuld — Melkorka

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Þorleik</th>
<th>Olaf Pá — Þorgerð</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolli</td>
<td>Kjártan</td>
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</table>

It should be noted that Morris altered the names of the characters in the saga: Kjártan to Kiartan, Bolli to Bodli, Guðrún to Gudrun, Hrefna to Refna. Place names were also changed: Hjarðarholt to Herdholt and Laugar to Bathstead. To avoid confusion, I use Morris’ forms throughout this discussion.

Though written as a chronological history, the saga actually falls into two main divisions. The first, which forms about a third of the whole, is introductory: it contains an episodic and partly fictional account of Ketill’s descendants during their first hundred years in Iceland. The second, the main body of the saga, begins with the birth of Kiartan and is largely concerned with his adventures, his relations with Bodli, Gudrun, and Olaf of Norway, his death, and the unhappy deeds of vengeance and countervengeance which followed. Since the saga ends with the death of Gudrun, this large second section may be regarded as a complete whole.

Its anonymous author was clearly aware of the shape of this part of the story. Using historical and genealogical records, he worked his material into a structure far more skillful than one would have expected

after the rambling and episodic style of the first part. The character of Kiartan is gracefully introduced: "He was greater in deeds of valor than other men; he was gentler than any man, and friendly, so that every child loved him." Bodli is "next to Kiartan in all deeds of valor," and the love of the foster brothers is stressed. The actual structure of the tale begins with the prophecy of Guest after the characters have been introduced; it proceeds through the fulfilment of the prophecy, reaches its tragic high point with the death of Kiartan, and closes with Gudrun's retrospective summary of her four husbands. The story thus assumes a certain integrity of form: the rising of the narrative is prepared for by the prophecy (Guest's interpretation of Gudrun's dreams), and the falling action is brought quietly to an end in the calm of Gudrun's old age with her pensive reminiscence of Kiartan: "þa mælti Guðrún, þeim var ek verst, er ek unna mest." (Morris' line "I did the worst to him I loved the most" is almost a literal translation.) The remainder of the saga, containing an account of the deeds of Gudrun's son Bodli, is generally considered to be a late addition: structurally it is irrelevant to the central story.

The source of "The Lovers of Gudrun" thus furnished Morris with a narrative pattern far too effective to be altered. An examination of his treatment of the plot—the bare outline of events—clearly shows that Morris adopted this structure in his poem without important modifications. The order of events in the saga is preserved. Following Chapters 28 and 32 of the saga, Morris' opening section, "Of Herdholt and Bathstead," introduces the chief characters of the tale. "The Prophecy of Guest the Wise" begins the actual history of Gudrun's stormy career; Morris knew the dramatic value of the seer's forebodings expressed during his visits to the two homesteads, and included the whole of Chapter 33 in his poem. Next comes the account of Gudrun's first two husbands, Thorvald and Thord. (Chapters 34–38 in the saga) Morris, while observing the sequence of events, compresses this account; his chief concern is with Kiartan and Bodli. He therefore omits the details of Gudrun's divorce from Thorvald. And the elaborate account of the death of Thord by witchcraft, which takes twenty pages in the saga, is dismissed by Morris in two lines:

Drowned was he, says my tale,
By wizard's spells amidst a summer gale.

The central episodes of the plot now follow. Kiartan begins to admire

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Gudrun, and visits her frequently; he and Bodli depart for Norway, where they become Christians and enter the service of Olaf Tryggvason; Bodli returns with the news that Kiartan seems determined to stay with the king, and is expected to marry Ingibiorg, the king's sister. On hearing these tidings, Gudrun is persuaded to accept Bodli in marriage. Kiartan comes back to Iceland and learns of Gudrun's marriage to his foster brother; urged by his sister, he marries the beautiful Refna. The two families attempt to keep up the appearance of friendship, but a series of unforgivable insults shows the resentment that persists between the younger members of the two households. Kiartan's death at the hands of Bodli and of Gudrun's brothers is the culmination of the feud.

In this rapid development of the tragedy Morris follows the saga in the sequence of events. Chapters 39–49 of the saga correspond exactly to Sections 4–16 of "The Lovers of Gudrun," with but one notable exception. In Laxdœla Saga, after the winter feast at Bathstead during which Gudrun steals Refna's coif, Kiartan avenges the insult in two ways. First he surrounds the house at Bathstead and prevents all egress for three days and nights: "Kjártan let þar taka dýrr allar á húsum ok banna í ðllum monnum útþongu ok dreitti þau inni þrjár nætr." This deliberate creation of a sanitary problem in a populous household was a deadly affront. After this he maliciously outbids Bodli for the purchase of a piece of land which Bodli is anxious to buy. These two acts are not included in "The Lovers of Gudrun." They are not on the heroic level: Morris substitutes a kind of vengeance better suited to the tone of his own poem. In his version, Kiartan and his men ride to Bathstead and "fetch the price of the coif" by driving off a large herd of cattle. It is this injury that provokes Gudrun's brothers to kill him.

Three final sections conclude the poem, after the death of Kiartan. The first, "Kiartan brought dead to Bathstead," represents a change from the original. In the saga Kiartan's body is taken to Tunga, to the homestead which he had bought to spite Bodli; later Olaf Peacock sends for the corpse of his son and it is taken back to Herdholt. Morris, in order to introduce a highly dramatic scene between Gudrun and Bodli over the body of Kiartan, has the hero's remains carried to Bathstead. "What Folk did at Herdholt after the Slaying" is a compression of several chapters of the saga. Osvif finds that he can expect no help from his sons, Gudrun's brothers, from Snorri (Chapter 50) and from Audun (Chapter 51). Thorgerd, Kiartan's mother, urges her sons to avenge the murder; she is particularly bitter against Bodli, but Olaf refuses to let his foster son suffer. (Chapters 50–53) The last section of the poem, "Gudrun's deeming of the Men who loved her," includes a brief summary of the remaining twenty-five chapters of the saga. The
death of Bodli at the hands of Olaf's sons, which took place as soon as Olaf died; the death of Refna, of a broken heart; Gudrun's last marriage, and her old age passed in the odor of sanctity, all described at length in the saga, fill only about eighty lines in the last section of "The Lovers of Gudrun." Morris omits all reference to the transactions between Gudrun and Thorgils (Chapters 57–67) in which the heroine appears in an unfavorable light: she eggs Thorgils on to avenge Bodli, encouraging him by a promise of marriage, which she later escapes by a verbal trick (having sworn to marry none but Thorgils, of all the men in Iceland, she suddenly announced that she would marry Thorkell, who was then in Norway). The last scene in the poem, Gudrun's final reminiscence of the five men with whom she had to do, is taken directly from Chapter 78, which ends the main body of the saga.

Morris' treatment of the structure of Laxdæla Saga was thus mainly a matter of judicious excision and compression. The result is a complete justification of his art. The Íslendinga Sögur, of which Laxdæla Saga is a fair example, are historical-genealogical chronicles in which the author must furnish detailed family histories, explanations of place names, accounts of lawsuits: in short, nothing may be omitted, and like the editor of a small-town paper the compiler of the saga must mention as many names as possible. Thus even the author of Laxdæla Saga, who clearly had an eye for form and a feeling for tragedy in structure as well as in situation, found it necessary to introduce masses of supplementary detail into his story. This was inevitable in the convention of the chronicler style. Such detail was vastly significant to the family pride of the Icelander in the thirteenth century; it is highly interesting to the antiquarian today. But Morris had no need to flatter the tastes of either of these audiences. By concentrating his attention on Kiartan, Gudrun, and Bodli, he restored the significant shape of the story. The outline exists in the saga, obscured and distorted by genealogical gossip. In "The Lovers of Gudrun" the outline is bold and hard, irrelevance is discarded, the tragic triangle takes its rightful place in the center. In his management of the plot, if only for this reason, Morris was justified in regarding it as his best work to date. Soon after the poem was published (in Part III of The Earthly Paradise), he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton:

I don't know if you have my book by this time, or have begun to deal with its somewhat elephantine bulk, which I should feel penitent about only it is principally caused by the length of "Gudrun" which I feel sure is the best thing I have done.11

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III

In his treatment of the characters, Morris made a more problematic change in his original. His structure is an improvement on that of the saga. But the study of motive and analysis of individual conduct, which are no less Morris’ own in “The Lovers of Gudrun” than are the economy of action and concentration of interest, fill in the bare outline of narrative and introduce the poet’s characteristic modifications of emphasis.

In the saga the indication of character is reduced to its lowest terms. Laconic and restrained comment, often expressed in terms of common knowledge, suffices the chronicler in dealing with crucial scenes in the tale: “Men said that Kiartan and Ingibiorg were moved at parting... Gudrun [on hearing of Kiartan’s return] said little about this matter, but it was easy to see that she took it ill, so that most men thought she had great longing for Kiartan, though she would have concealed it.” The author of the saga claims no intimate knowledge of the inner workings of his characters’ minds or emotions. His business is to set down the events of the tale, leaving analysis and speculation to the reader. The effect of Morris’ treatment of character in his poem is to add the personal and emotional development which the saga omits. In doing so he refashions the personalities of his principal characters, making the story his own.

Of the three main characters in the saga, Kiartan emerges in “The Lovers of Gudrun” with the least modification. He is essentially a man of action,

such a man
As through all turns of fortune never can
Hold truce with fear or sorrow.

Undoubtedly faithful to Gudrun, he is yet not unwilling to be associated with Ingibiorg in the court gossip, and admires the Norwegian king so ingenuously that he probably would not have returned to Iceland, even if his position as hostage had not kept him at Olaf’s court. Thus far the poem follows the saga. The first indication of change appears on Kiartan’s return to Iceland, when he discovers that Bodli has betrayed him. The saga says: “He had now heard of Gudrun’s marriage and was not moved at that; this had formerly been a matter of anxiety to many.” This restraint is gone in Morris’ version. Kiartan breaks out into a wild cry of grief:

O blind, O blind, O blind!
Where is the love I used to deem so kind,
So loving to me? O Gudrun, Gudrun,
Here I come back with all the honour won
We talked of, that thou saidst thou knewest well
Was but for thee—to whom then shall I tell
The tale of that well-doing? And thou, friend,
How might I deem that aught but death should end
Our love together?

Again, of Kiartan's relations with Refna the saga explicitly states that they were affectionate in the extreme: "Kiartan and Refna loved each other very dearly." He is merry at the wedding, and looks upon his bride as one of the noblest of women. Kiartan's sister has brought about the match as a matter of policy. Morris assigns a different motive: Kiartan in the poem marries Refna after his sister has appealed to his chivalry, telling him that the girl will die of love for him. His feeling for her was pity, his marriage an unsuccessful attempt to forget Gudrun:

This was a man some shreds of joy to save
From out a wreck, if so he might, to win
Some garden from the waste, and dwell therein.

His attitude toward Bodli, after the insults offered by the people of Bathstead, shows further evidence that Morris has made the hero more chivalrous, with less directly human resentment toward the man who wronged him. When the sword and the coif are stolen, the Kiartan of the saga addresses Bodli before the whole company: "I say this to you, kinsman Bodli, that you should be willing to act more manfully toward us henceforth than you have hitherto; I shall not set this forth in a whisper." He proceeds to proclaim the theft, demanding the return of the stolen articles. In Morris' version Kiartan acts the part of a considerate gentleman. He takes Bodli aside, asks and offers forgiveness, and attempts to preserve the old ties of friendship between them, blaming Gudrun's brothers for the ill feeling between the families:

What say'st thou? are the days to come forgiven,
Shall folk remember less that we have striven
Than that we loved, when all the tale is told?

A final significant alteration in Kiartan's character is introduced in the hero's dying speech. The original Icelandic version follows the Norse tradition of heroic death: when a man is overpowered he drops his weapon and dies without flinching, for he scorns to offer useless resistance. The motive of friendship and blood-loyalty enters the saga as well.
Kiartan and Bodli had been foster brothers, and Kiartan feels himself bound by the code:

Then Kiartan said to Bodli, “It is plain, kinsman, that you mean to do a shameful thing now, but it seems much better to me, kinsman, that I take my death-wound from you, than that I give it to you.” Then Kiartan cast down his weapons, and would not defend himself; though he was not much wounded, he was weary with fighting. Bodli gave no answer to Kiartan’s speech, but gave him his death-wound.

There is no mention of Gudrun; Kiartan is outnumbered and chooses to die at his foster brother’s hands. Morris’ hero surrenders for the sake of his friend’s love:

Then draw thy sword and thrust from off the earth
The fool that so hath spoilt thy days of mirth,
Win long lone days of love by Gudrun’s side.

He dies, not in grim silence as a Norse hero should, but like a knight of chivalry, with his lady’s name on his lips:

Farewell, thou joyous life beneath the sun,
Thou foolish wasted gift—farewell, Gudrun!

The ambiguity of these lines (“foolish wasted gift” applying to “joyous life” or to Gudrun, whom he might have married) is neither Norse nor romantic, but modern.

Thus Kiartan, like Ragnar in “The Fostering of Aslaug,” loses something of the grimness of the Norse original, and takes on attributes which we associate with the heroes of the French and Celtic romances, and also something of the nineteenth-century mal de siècle. The character of Bodli undergoes a more elaborate modification. The chief agent in the tragedy, he is subjected to a severe inner struggle between his love for Gudrun and his friendship for Kiartan. Of the three chief characters which emerge in Morris’ poem, Bodli is the most significant; his personal qualities are largely original with Morris, and he comes to life more successfully, and gains more of the reader’s sympathy, I think, than either Kiartan or Gudrun. The chronicler, perhaps intentionally, twice mentions Bodli immediately after praising Kiartan, implying that Bodli must play second fiddle: “Olaf loved Kiartan best of all his children. Bodli, his foster brother, was a great man; he came next to Kiartan in all deeds of strength and prowess.” Again, the Norwegians appear to make the same distinction: “Everyone said that there had never before come from Iceland such a man as Kiartan. Bodli was also one of the bravest of men.” Acting upon this hint, Morris makes Bodli
into a sensitive and reserved man, with perhaps some unconscious re-
sentment at Kiartan's innate superiority:

Of Bodli Thorleikson the story says
That he, o'ershadowed still by Kiartan's praise,
Was second but to him; although, indeed,
He who perchance the love of men did need
More than his fellow, less their hearts might move;
Yet fair to all men seemed the trust and love
Between the friends.

The Bodli of the saga moves through the tale in a straightforward
manner. He sees that Kiartan will probably remain in Norway: he
tells Gudrun so, and woos her without subtlety. The chronicler gives no
hint which might show that Bodli is deliberately betraying his friend.
Gudrun consents to the match, after being repeatedly urged by her
brothers, but “there was not much love between Gudrun and Bodli as
far as Gudrun was concerned.” Bodli remains loyal to his friend after
committing the one unforgivable act. When the feud has reached its
height, he refuses to hear Kiartan insulted: “Bodli behaved as if he did
not hear, as he always did when Kiartan was spoken ill of, for his wont
was either to hold his peace or to contradict them.” He finally joins the
ambush against Kiartan only after Gudrun has threatened to divorce
him; after the slaying he immediately repents, and reproaches Gudrun
for her pleasure at the tidings of Kiartan's death.

Bodli in the “Lovers of Gudrun” assumes the proportions of a tragic
hero. He has fallen in love with Gudrun before the voyage to Norway,
but has hardly dared to admit this to himself. Unlike Kiartan, he is a
man of moods. During their sojourn in Norway the conflict is raging in
his mind, and it makes him desperate. When Kiartan defies Olaf, Bodli
expects certain death for the Icelanders, but remarks,

Yet doubtless shall our names be bruited far
When we are dead—then, too, no longings are
For what we may not have.

News of Gudrun from Iceland finally leads him to face up to his passion
and to try to win her for himself:

That word or two,
That name, wrought in him, that at last he knew
His longing, and intent; and desolate
The passing of the days did he await,
Torn by remorse, tortured by fear.

His wooing of Gudrun, in which his personal desire is continually
struggling with his friendship for Kiartan, is far different from the direct, acquisitive, businesslike frankness of the original. Bodli's tragic fate is to be crushed between the opposing forces which are too strong for him. He is denied even the brief enjoyment of happiness. When at last his situation, in which suffering can find no vent in action, becomes intolerable, he joins Gudrun's wicked brothers in the attack on Kiartan, still undecided whether to kill or be killed. His words to Gudrun before leaving on the expedition sum up his personal tragedy:

Wildly he cried, "O Gudrun, thou has lost,
But look on me, for I have never won!"

Thus Bodli too, in assuming fuller and more poignant tragic qualities, loses the hardness and reticence characteristic of the Norse hero, and gains in sensitive emotional interest. He is Morris' most successful transformation from *Laxdœla Saga*.

Gudrun herself shows the most complete alteration in character as she is set forth in Morris' poem. The fierce, vindictive, bloodthirsty woman of the Norse tradition seems likely to appear merely grotesque to the modern reader. In *Laxdœla Saga* the ferocious Thorgerd, Kiartan's mother, actually assists at the murder of Bodli, applauding the assailants and bidding them "walk between head and trunk." The Gudrun of the saga is hardly less grim. As we have seen, she effects her divorce from her first husband and procures a divorce for her lover, Thord, by trickery; she also persuades her kinsman Snorri to avenge Thord's death. As is evident from her statement in old age, she loves and admires Kiartan. But once the tragedy has begun, her pride, resentment, and jealousy of Refna transcend all affection: she is the leading spirit in the insults which the house of Oswif puts upon Kiartan, "Think what you like of what has happened to the coif," she tells Kiartan, "but it does not seem ill to me, though it happen that Refna will have little chance to make herself fair with the coif." In three ironical speeches, after Kiartan's siege of Bathstead, Gudrun eggs Bodli on to slay his friend, finally threatening to divorce him. She meets the remorseful Bodli after the murder with a hard irony:

Gudrun went to meet him and asked what time it was. Bodli said it was near noon. Then said Gudrun, "Mighty things have been done today. I have spun yarn for twelve ells, and you have killed Kiartan."

Her real motive is frankly revealed in this dialogue: not only concern for her husband's prestige, but a dog-in-the-manger hatred of Refna:

Bodli answered, "This mishap may well linger in my mind, even if you do not remind me of it." Gudrun said, "I count not such things among mis-
haps. It seems to me that you had more popularity during that winter that Kiartan was in Norway, than you have had lately while he has been treading you under foot, after his return to Iceland. But I speak of that last which to me is of most worth: Refna will not go to bed laughing tonight."

Morris’ treatment of the meeting between Bodli and Gudrun after the slaying of Kiartan is typical of Morris’ modification of his heroine’s character. In the first place his Gudrun is only passively guilty. The motives for revenge are in her mind—

She thought of Refna’s longing eyes,
And to her face a dreadful smile did rise,
That died amidst its birth—

but her crime consists in making no move to stop Bodli in his desperate purpose. In leaving out Gudrun’s fierce insistence that Kiartan be killed, Morris found it necessary to shift the blame to her brother Ospak, who is consequently represented as a heartless villain. On Bodli’s return Gudrun greets him in anguish: silence; her grief becomes articulate over Kiartan’s dead body, when Olaf’s party arrive to carry it home:

Alas, what do ye? have ye come to bear
My love a second time from me, O men?
Do ye not know he is come back again
After a long time? Ah, but evil heart
Must be in you such love as ours to part!

Morris’ defense against the charge that his poem, and more especially his alteration of Gudrun’s character, is foreign to the spirit of the saga, must lie in the consistency of his alteration. Grimness and bloodthirstiness, the implacable woman of Norse tradition, would lend themselves rather to burlesque than to serious and sympathetic treatment in the emotional context of the poem.

Morris has been condemned sharply for his treatment. A distinguished Icelandic scholar, F. York Powell, thus commented in a preface to a later more literal rendering of the tale:

Morris is sentimental in Tennysonian fashion. For once he does not dare to face the direct truth, he softens away the facts, he writes in the genteel spirit of the Idylls, misled by his master apparently; he makes a real mistake in his story-telling, a rare thing with him, and a thing almost incredible in his later work.12

If by “his master” York Powell meant Magnússon, he was mistaken, as we have seen. “Sentimental,” “Tennysonian,” “genteel”? To the author of The Defence of Guenevere such terms hardly apply. If Morris made Gudrun more complex and less ferocious than her prototype in Laxdæla Saga, he was not attempting a literal transcript of the chronicle but a poem of his own.

It is worth noting, moreover, that when “The Lovers of Gudrun” was published it seemed conspicuous among the dreamlike supernaturalism and legend of The Earthly Paradise. It was too strong for some contemporaries, as the Edinburgh Review critique demonstrates:

In the poem which tells the story of Gudrun and her lovers we have the working only of human passions; but of the result we are bound to say plainly that it is more repulsive and shocking to our moral sense than any incidents of the stories which professedly carry us out of the region of human ethics.13

IV

One further explanation for Morris’ treatment of the material of Laxdæla Saga may well be biographical. The Earthly Paradise, as J. W. Mackail remarked cryptically in his “official” biography of Morris, contains in its intermediary lyrics “an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself.”14 The same might be said, as to emotional tone and manipulation of incident, of the tales themselves. The love of Rossetti and Jane Morris, first publicly considered by Violet Hunt (The Wife of Rossetti, 1932) and more recently and authoritatively by Oswald Doughty (A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1949; second edition, 1960), was at its height during the late 1860’s. At this time (1867–1870) Mrs. Morris was sitting for Rossetti almost daily; as Mr. Doughty has shown, their passion inspired many of the sonnets in “The House of Life.”15 Morris’ pain and disillusionment can be seen in such poems as the lyric for November which introduces “The Lovers of Gudrun”:

Are thine eyes weary? is thy heart too sick
To struggle any more with doubt and thought,
Whose formless veil draws darkening now and thick
Across thee, e’en as smoked-tinged mist-wreaths brought
Down a fair dale to make it blind and nought?

13 Edinburgh Review, CXXXIII (1871), 258.
Art thou so weary that no world there seems
Beyond these four walls, hung with pain and dreams?

Look out upon the real world, where the moon,
Half-way 'twixt root and crown of these high trees,
Turns the dead midnight into dreamy noon,
Silent and full of wonders, for the breeze
Died at the sunset, and no images
No hopes of day, are left in sky or earth—
Is it not fair, and of most wondrous worth?

Yea, I have looked and seen November there;
The changeless seal of change it seemed to be,
Fair death of things that, living once, were fair;
Bright sign of loneliness too great for me,
Strange image of the dread eternity,
In whose void patience how can these have part,
These outstretched feverish hands, this restless heart?

They can also be seen in his retellings of old tales, in Jason and The Earthly Paradise, where incidents are shaped to accentuate a mood of regret, sometimes of despair.

It seems plausible to suggest, therefore, that Morris in “The Lovers of Gudrun” was adapting the saga material in a direction that reflected his own trouble. One cannot of course be categorical here: there is no need, for example, to identify Ingibiorg with Elizabeth Siddal or to label the death of Kiartan a wish-fulfilment. But Rossetti had apparently been in love with Jane Burden before her marriage. Morris, who at the time admired Rossetti intensely, married her. His treatment of the “triangle” situation in Laxdœla Saga may well indicate his own identification with Bodli, who needed affection, who admired and felt inferior to Kiartan, who loved Gudrun only to find, after their marriage, that Kiartan still had her heart. His despairing cry takes on an ironical intensity if taken as coming from the author of The Earthly Paradise:

Alas! I speak of heaven who am in hell!
I speak of change of days, who know full well
How hopeless now is change from misery:
I speak of time destroyed, when unto me
Shall the world’s minutes be as lapse of years.

Regarded in this light, the modification of Gudrun’s character from grim bloodthirstiness to guilt and grief is understandable. The nature of Jane Morris remains enigmatic (“an apparition of fearful and wonderful intensity,” in Henry James’s phrase), but if regarded as the
original of Morris' Gudrun she could hardly have been endowed by the poet with the ferocious implacability of the Icelandic heroine.

It is impossible to be precise in considering this biographical hypothesis, since both the Rossetti and the Morris families have been naturally reticent about the matter. But it may well be that Morris found some relief in his veiled treatment of deeply personal suffering. Shortly after completing *The Earthly Paradise*, he wrote to a friend:

I don't think people really want to die because of mental pain, that is, if they are imaginative people. They want to live to see the play played out fairly.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) Mackail, *op. cit.*, I, 217. Rossetti’s letters to Jane Morris, in the British Museum, will become available to scholars in 1964.