

of that spirit and temper are, no doubt, permanently and universally exemplary. Unrepining obedience to the inflexible, and steadfast trust in the wise ordinances of the Highest Power, endurance of pain and contempt of death, are noble and inspiring virtues for all time. But, in some vital and essential elements, public and private morality has undergone a complete and, it may be believed, a lasting change. One need not seek far for proof of it. This story is a prolonged illustration of the predominance of revenge above every other motive of human action—of the practical working of a social system based upon the fundamental principle that wrong must be requited by wrong. Handed down from father to child, generation by generation, the memory of a mortal offence done to a Scandinavian family or tribe was tenaciously and persistently cherished until the debt of death had been exacted to the uttermost. In their thirst for blood-vengeance the women were, if possible, more keen and relentless than the men. Maidenly shame, wifely duty, motherly instinct, and sisterly affection must alike give way before the imperious necessity of expiation. The annals and literature of Norway and Iceland attest how rigorously this theory of life was carried into practice, and supply chapter and verse for many a trait of manners illustrated in the fiction before us. Whether the change which the social system of the Gothic races has undergone be due to the supersession of Odinism by a religious creed and moral code of which love and forgiveness are fundamental principles, or to some other cause, may be matter for dispute; but no one disputes that the change exists. If there be one point upon which, in this age of discordant opinion and unsettled belief, moralists of all schools—Christian, Positivist, and Agnostic—are found to agree, it is in accepting love as the noblest, and denouncing revenge as the meanest, of human motives. And, to say nothing of the prevalence of just and humane laws which are the best expression of public conscience, it is unquestionable that, in their dealings with one another, the majority of cultivated men and women, whatever be their creed, act up to a standard of self-restraint and forbearance that approximates not very remotely to the Christian ideal. A poem, therefore, which, like *Sigurd*, reflects, with hard, uncompromising realism, an obsolete code of ethics, and a barbarous condition of society, finds itself irreconcilably at discord with the key of nineteenth-century feeling. Deprived of its strongest claim to interest, a sympathetic response in the moral and religious sentiment of its readers, it can only appeal to the intellect as a work of art, or as a more or less successful attempt at antiquarian

restoration. It may be admired and applauded by the lettered few; but it will not be taken to the nation's heart, nor its language incorporated in the common speech. The greatest poets of our time who have been fascinated by the attraction of similar themes, have perceived their unfitness for realistic treatment, and that the only practicable method of inspiring interest in them is by some allegorising or spiritualising process of adjustment to the modern standpoint. To preserve the external verisimilitude of the symbol while changing its inner meaning, and bringing this into harmony with a new sphere of thought, is the special function of the artist. Age after age, as our race grows, and modifications take place in its religious, moral, and social systems, the myths and legends upon which its youth has been nursed can thus be accommodated to the current order of belief, and their dry bones be made to live. The opportunity of employing a great racial, pre-historic myth as a potent engine of modern ideas is one that might have tempted a less ambitious poet than Mr. Morris. His artistic aims are, however, different from these, and he has chosen not to avail himself of the occasion.

44. Unsigned review, *International Review*

September 1877, iv, 696-9

A New York review of the American edition of *Sigurd* (1877), under the heading 'Recent American Books'.

It may be that in this century of diplomacy and over-conscious civilization the writing of a truly national epos has become an impossibility; but with this reservation it is safe to admit that Mr. Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* possesses as much of the heroic quality as the unepic character of the age will allow. To call him a Gothic Homer would perhaps be a little hyperbolic, but we have little doubt that, had he lived a

thousand years earlier, when the Odinic mythology was still a vital element in the life of the Gothic nations, he would have created a Gothic epos which would have occupied a position in the Germanic literature corresponding to that which the *Iliad* now occupies in the Greek. As it is, his poem impresses us rather as an achievement (and as such a great one), than as a strong and spontaneous outburst of primitive emotion. Its underlying, inspiring force is enthusiasm, which is a comparatively superficial quality, rather than faith, without which no epos is possible. Of course, it would be unreasonable to demand of a modern poet that he should have faith in a defunct pagan mythology, which is the same as to say that it would be unreasonable to expect of him that he could write an epic. For even Christianity is at the present day too much a matter of argument to furnish the inspiring force necessary for the creation of a Christian world-epos; and since the age of the Crusades has passed by without producing any such poem, we fear the opportunity has been irrevocably lost. The Catholic Church, which is the only surviving monument of medievalism in religion, being the only church which has not stripped itself of its mythological encumbrances, possesses indeed as yet some of the more external conditions for such an achievement, but even if a great bard should arise within its pale, he would find himself too hopelessly out of sympathy with the spirit of the century to fathom the full meaning of its struggles, and doubts, and dim aspirations. The inevitable conclusion, then, is that the epic age, if it be not irrevocably past, can only reappear in a distant future, when all the tremendous moral and intellectual forces, which now bewilder us by their chaotic magnificence, shall have crystallized into a clearer and wider system, from which the lost faith may rise again in a nobler and more enduring form.

In the development of his plot Mr. Morris has not followed entirely either the Icelandic or the medieval version of the Nibelung legend, but has made a free and judicious use of both, according as his purpose required. In the two first books, relating the early history of the Volsungs, concerning which the *Nibelungen Lied* is silent, the saga tale is rendered with but slight modifications. The most wildly grotesque features are eliminated, and the characters of the heroes sufficiently humanized to reach the sympathies of modern men. And still the barbaric magnificence of that age, as the saga describes it, is in no way softened, while at the same time the joys and sorrows of King Volsung and his sons have a power to move us which in the Icelandic tale is utterly wanting. We might quote a dozen passages where Mr. Morris

has evidently felt the pressure of his modern audience, and adapted his narrative to their refined ears; in the scene, for instance, where Sigmund slays the she-wolf who had eaten his nine brothers, he does not (as in the saga), anoint his mouth and face with honey and bite the wolf's tongue, pulling it out with his teeth, but he simply breaks his bonds and kills the beast with his fetters. Again, when his sister sends her and Siggeir's son to him in the forest, he sends the lad back to his mother instead of slaying him.

At the beginning of the third book, however, the spiritual atmosphere of the poem undergoes some subtle change, which is felt more easily than it is defined. The poet here begins to draw his material from the old German epic. The grim simplicity of Norse paganism which pervades the opening cantos is momentarily lost sight of, and the glitter and pomp of medieval chivalry with 'horse and hawk and hound' take its place. In this there is to our minds an implied anachronism—an anachronism of sentiment rather than of fact. The whole description of the court of the Nibelungs is redolent with medieval feeling, which is indeed not to be wondered at, as it is directly borrowed from the medieval *Nibelungen Lied*, without any strong effort to tune it into accord with the more Norse elements of the poem.

But criticisms like these are after all of minor importance when compared with the really great and enduring qualities which *Sigurd the Volsung* possesses in such an eminent degree. First, the genuinely Gothic spirit which breathes from every verse, and stirs the hidden Gothic fibres in our own nature. We know no other poet, modern or ancient, who has fathomed so fully and expressed so finely the old Germanic sentiment for the sword, the fateful magic of gold, and the other distinct elements of Gothic civilization.

We have hardly space to analyze in detail the many beauties of this singularly beautiful poem. From the very first the reader's ear is captivated by the simple stateliness and purity of the verse, which flows on with a calm majestic movement, like that of a broad river reflecting the deeds of the successive generations that toil, struggle, and die on its shores. In the very vocabulary there is a Saxon muscularity and strength which accord well with the primitive grandeur of the theme. Even Homer is said occasionally to nod; but Mr. Morris never for a moment yields to drowsiness or fatigue. He retains from beginning to end the same firm grip on his subject, and the manly directness with which he describes even situations to which squeamish ears might take exception, immediately wins the reader's heart and disarms the

critic. Where all is so excellent, it is difficult to choose any passage especially adapted for quotation; we select, however, at random the scene where Sigurd, after having ridden through the wall of flame, awakes Brynhild, the sleeping valkyrie:

Then he looked on his bare bright blade, and he said: 'Thou—what wilt thou do?'

For indeed as I came by the war-garth thy voice of desire I knew,
Bright burnt the pale blue edges, for the sunrise drew anear,
And the ruins of the Shield-burg glittered, and the east was exceeding clear;
So the eager edges he setteth to the Dwarf-wrought battle-coat,
Where the hammered ring-knit collar constraineth the woman's throat;
But the sharp Wrath biteth and rendeth, and before it fail the rings,
And, lo, the gleam of linen and the light of golden things;
Then he driveth the blue steel onward, and through the skirt and out,
Till nought but the rippling linen is wrapping her about;
Then he deems her breath comes quicker and her breast begins to heave,
So he turns about the War-Flame and rends down either sleeve,
Till her arms lie white in her raiment, and a river of sun-bright hair
Flows free o'er bosom and shoulder and floods the desert bare.
Then a flush cometh over her visage and a sigh upheaveth her breast,
And her eyelids quiver and open, and she wakeneth into rest.

Outside of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, we know no poem in the whole range of English literature which illustrates so strikingly the strength and beauty of Saxon speech; and in single lines we venture to think (with all due admiration for the laureate's marvelous work) that Mr. Morris has surpassed him. What can, for instance, be finer than this?—

Ah! my love shall fare as a banner in the hand of thy renown.

And the spears in the hall were tossing as the rye in a windy plain.

—and the wild hawks overhead

Soughed 'neath the naked heavens as at last he spake and said.

Again, as a substitute for the Homeric interludes, with their sonorous, polysyllabic splendor, it is hard to imagine any thing more felicitous than the plain vigorous Saxon of lines like the following:

And the morn and the noon and the even built up another day.

In single, oft-recurring epithets like 'the white-armed Gudrun,' 'the bright-eyed Brynhild,' 'the wise-heart Hagin,' Mr. Morris naturally

recalls the Homeric *λευχόλενος*, *γλανχῶπις*, and *πολύμητις*,¹ but the reminder is rather a pleasant one, and somehow seems to add to the epic strength and dignity of the poem.

In his characterization Mr. Morris never departs from the simple and direct methods of the sagas, leaving the action to speak for itself, and never disturbing the narrative by any attempt at analysis or personal reflections. He has indeed shown before now that he has studied the Old Norse literature to good purpose, but his former experiments with Icelandic themes always seemed to us unnecessarily fragmentary and incomplete, and hardly seemed to justify us in expecting any thing truly great from him in this direction. Viewed, however, in the light of preparatory studies, these early labors, no doubt, have their value, and we would no more think of quarreling with the poet for having published them than we would blame a Raphael or a Rubens for exhibiting the contents of his portfolio. *Sigurd the Volsung* will always remain the crowning achievement of Mr. Morris's life, and we are none the less willing to accord to him the praise which is his due, because he has taken us and all the world by surprise. He has produced a work whose grandeur and beauty will make it for all time to come monumental in the annals of English literature.

¹ White-armed, bright-eyed, and many-counselled