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REVIEW

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William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung: A Re-appraisal

The critical fortunes of William Morris's *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblung* (1877) have undergone considerable variation. The poem was initially received with qualified approval by its reviewers, and it has never been so popular with the general reader as *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70). George Bernard Shaw, however, was much attracted by it; 'that is the stuff for me', he told Morris when the poet recited some of it, 'there is nothing like it': he even went so far as to value it as 'the greatest epic since Homer'. Furthermore, several critics of fifty and sixty years ago gave the poem very high, indeed extravagant praise. Alfred Noyes (1908) designated it 'a great epic story told in magnificent chant which sweeps over and through the whole universe'; the Drinkwater (1912) rated it 'the supreme achievement of a great poet, and one of the very great poems of the modern world'; while C. H. Herford (1919) wrote of it as a great and splendid poem, the one adequate presentment today in English of the story which Wagner has so magnificently clothed for the world in the universal language of music. On the other hand, later critics have been more concerned to point out what they take to be the poem's serious shortcomings, than to discuss its merits. Dorothy M. Hoare (1937) sees a fundamental difference between the bias of Morris's mind towards fable and romance, and the realistic spirit of the Norse sagas; this leads him to turn the passion and tragedy of the *Volsunga Saga*, his principal source, into 'sentiment and romance' in *Sigurd*. Graham Hough (1949) contrasts with *Sigurd* not only the primary epic *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*, which are 'interpretations of the heroic age, not for the age itself, but for a world in which much of the heroic ethos survived', but also the secondary epic, the *Aeneid*, which 'uses old themes, but relates to its time by political purpose'. Whereas in his view, Morris in *Sigurd*, 'takes a heroic theme and states it in his own words, but only as an example of a world which no longer exists, and values which have passed away.' E. P. Thompson (1953) believes that the poem never reaches epic stature in its own right, but merely 'suggests heroic values, as it were at second remove—in order to mind the qualities of other epic literature of other times'. A very recent critic, however, Paul Thompson (1967) admits 'a special sympathy for *Sigurd*', and declares that 'unless prolonged research has dimmed the drama of the story itself and led to...


excessive pre-occupation with hints and details, criticism must yield to admiration. I too believe Sigurd to be a fine, and at present unjustly neglected work, which can yield much poetic pleasure, and which deserves to win more readers. This leads me to the following re-examination and reappraisal.

Morris himself held Sigurd to be his central poetic achievement. 'It is', wrote his daughter May Morris, 'the work that, first and last—putting aside the eagerness of the moment which sometimes gives all precedence to the work in hand—he held most high and wished to be remembered by. All his Icelandic study and travel, all his feeling for the North, led up to this and his satisfaction with it did not waver nor change to the last.' Like many Victorians, Morris regarded the Teutonic past of the English people with the greatest affection and veneration, and the Volsung story itself held a special place in his esteem. We read in the Translator's Preface to the English version of the Volsunga Saga which he prepared with the aid of the Icelandic Eiríkr Magnússon (1889) that he considered it to be 'the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our first, and afterwords, when the changes of the world have made our race nothing more then a name of what has been—a story too—that should be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.'10 Morris was fully aware of the manner in which the Volsung story is told in the saga, and he has a lively appreciation of the saga-man's art. In a letter to Charles Eliot Norton (1869), he wrote of the last interview between Sigurd and Brynhild in the Volsunga Saga: 'It touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature; there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstated; all terrors shown without a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without ornament.' However, he believed that to write a living poem based on an ancient saga story, it was necessary, as he told his daughter, to 'shut the book, and write in your own way.' Sigurd is his attempt to re-tell the Volsung story in verse 'in his own way', using the Volsunga Saga as his main source, with minor borrowings from the Old Norse poem Nibelungenlied. The result is an original work of art which deserves to be considered in its own right, and not merely in relation to its sources—although of course such comparison is bound to be part of a total appreciation, as in the case of Hebbel's dramatic trilogy Die Nibelungen (1862) or Wagner's music-drama Der Ring des Nibelungen (first performed as a unity at Bayreuth, 1876). I shall, then, discuss Morris's achievement in Sigurd from the following points of view: structure, versification and diction, the use of description, imagery, the portrayal of character and the expression of emotion, moral values and philosophy of life. This will lead to a re-appraisal of the poem's stature.

II

The structure which Morris gives to his narrative is firm and well-proportioned. He does not recreate and remould the story in his own manner from diverse sources, as does Wagner: he is content to follow the broad outline of the incidents as recounted in the Volsunga Saga, (borrowing the main motivation of the final catastrophe from the Nibelungenlied); but by the judicious pruning of episodes and by emphasizing the main divisions in the story, he gives greater symmetry to the action than is found in the saga. The Volsunga Saga (compiled in the late thirteenth century) stitches together into a continuous prose narrative the incidents of the Volsung story found in earlier poems, some of which have survived in the elder Edda, and some of which have been lost, but are presumed to lie behind certain portions of the narrative. As a result the saga has

4 May Morris, I, p. 472.
5 Ibid.
amplification also. Here he is highly successful. The metre, evolved from that of the old ballads and in effect not unlike that of the Nibelungenlied, consists of rhymed couplets of basic anapaestic rhythm, having six beats in the line, with a medial pause. Morris himself delighted in this metre; Shaw tells us that he would recite from Sigurd, 'marking its swing by rocking from one foot to another like an elephant'. The diction, less mannered than that of his later prose romances, accentuates without pedantry the Anglo-Saxon element in English vocabulary, and employs occasional archaisms. This is appropriate to the remote and noble Northern world which he seeks to create in his poem and it is sufficiently flexible as a means of verbal expression. The excellence of metre and diction can be illustrated initially by the following passage presenting action: the defeat of Sigmund in his last battle, after Odin's intervention:

But lo, through the hedge of the war-shafts a mighty man there came,
One-eyed and seeming ancient, but his visage shone like flame:
Glemming-grey was his kirtle, and his'mood was cloudy blue;
And he bore a mighty twi-bill, as he waded the light-sheaves through,
And stood face to face with Sigmund, and upheaved the bill to smite.

One was a man from the head of the Vo frightened and shivered; Sigmund's light,
The Sword that came from Odin; and Sigmund's cry once more
Rang out to the very heavens above the din of war.

Then clashed the meeting edges with Sigmund's latest stroke,
And in shivering shards fell earthward that fear of worldly folk.
But changed were the eyes of Sigmund, and the war-wrath left his face;
For that grey-clad mighty helper was gone, and in his place
Drave on the unbroken spear-wood 'gainst the Volung's empty hands:
And there they smote down Sigmund, the wonder of all lands,
On the foemen, on the death-heap his deeds had piled that day.

(p. 54)

The aptness of this metre and diction for description, for the expression of emotion, and for moral reflection will be illustrated by the quotations in the following sections, dealing with these topics.

IV

Morris seeks to create a vividly described poetic world in which the events of the story take place, and from this his poem gains its distinctive aura. The period is not that of a definite historical era, but rather that of an idealized past, which fuses together elements from the heroic Teutonic age and from the middle ages. The natural scenery is that of ideal landscapes, although some of these seem to be suggested by Morris's memories of Iceland, and others by the parts of rural England nearest to him: Oxfordshire, near Kelmscott Manor, and Epping Forest in Essex. He presents this poetic world not merely as a place of imaginative escape from the contemporary Victorian environment, although this is clearly part of his intention; he criticizes by implication the sordid and mean aspects of that environment, which he so much hated. The Volunga Saga supplies at times a few hints which Morris can expand, but the memorable description in Sigurd are almost entirely the product of his own imagination.

The atmosphere of a remote, unspoilt, yet dignified early world is created at the outset by the description of Volunga's hall:

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wights that wrought it and silver nailed its doors;
Earls' wives were the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors,
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.

(p. 1)

14 May Morris, II, p. xxxvii.
at his wedding feast Gjuki's hall is richly decorated:
  ... the bench-cloths be strown with gold;
  And the walls are strange and wondrous with the noble stories told
  For new hung is the ancient dwelling with the golden spoils of the south ...

while after his death, Brynhild stands long gazing at his body, by a 'carven pillar' in
the hall (p. 237).

The descriptions of natural scenery are of key importance in the creation of the
imaginative ambience of the poem. They range from the rich peacefulness of the last of
the Helper:
  ... fair-fruited, many-peopled, it lies a goodly strip,
  Twixt the mountains cloudy-headed and the seaford's surging lip.

and the many-rivered pastoral land of Lyrdale, with its game-filled forests (perhaps
suggested by Epping):
  Where the level sun comes dancing down the oaks in the early morn:

to the awesome grandeur of landscapes inspired by Morris's recollection of Iceland
the waterfall of Andvari:
  ... where the glittering foam-bow glows,

the pass leading to the Glittering Heath:
  ... high-walled on either side

or the mountain of Hindfell, seen through Sigurd's eyes as he approaches it:
  So he rideth higher and higher, and the light grows great for ever,

and forth from the clouds it flickers, till at noon they gather and change,
And settle thick on the mountain, and hide its head from sight;
But the winds in a while are awakened, and day betwixthere the night,
And, lifted a measureless mass o'er the desert crag-walls high,
Cloudless the mountain riseth against the sunset sky,
The sea of the sun grown golden, as it ebbs from the day's desire;
And the light that afar was a torch is grown a river of fire,
And the mountain is black above it, and below it is dark and dun;
And there is the head of Hindfell as an island in the sun.

Further richness is given to Morris's poetic world by his habit of referring to the
seasons, sometimes simply to indicate the passage of time, but at other times to
harmonize with the mood of the action. The early hope attached to Sigurd is associated
with Spring; his birth occurs in April, and he parts from Regin on an April evening after
having asked him to forge a sword anew from the broken shards of Sigmund's blade:
  the tide was an even of gold,

And sweet in the April even were the foul-kind singing their best;
And the light of life smote Sigurd, and the joy that knows no rest,
And the fond unnameable desire, and the hope of hidden things,
And he wended fair and lovely to the house of the feasting King.

He comes to the city of the Niblungs in summer (p. 156-7), and in the 'stark mid-winter'
joins them in their wars (p. 157). It is in the autumn that he declares his ill-fated love
for Gudrun, seeking her in the garden:
  ... mild the yellowing leafage, and the golden blossoms spent.

and it is in this sad season that he wedds her (p. 177).

There are too scattered throughout the poem many references to the passage of day
and night, to the sun and the moon. Usually these merely mark the smaller divisions in
its narrative, but at times they too blend with the mood of a particular moment in
the story. For example, Sigurd awakens Brynhild on Hindfell at the dawn, and their
new love and hope spring up in the new day:
  But therewith the sun rose upward and lightened all the earth,
  And the light flashed up to the heavens from the rims of the glorious girth;

and the many-rivered pastoral land of Lyrdale, with its game-filled forests (perhaps
suggested by Epping):
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Similarly the emotional power of the events preceding Sigurd's death is enhanced by the
description of the moonlight in his bed-chamber: lighting up his staring eyes during
Gudrun's first two unsuccessful visits to kill him, and by that of the dawn which
shapes his slaying:
Now dieth moon and candle, and though the day be nigh
The roof of the hall fair-built seems far aloof as the sky
But a glimmer glows on the pavement and the embers on the roof-ridge stir...

There is little imagery in Sigurd, but Morris occasionally uses apt similes, drawn from
nature or from the life of that ideal past in which the poem is set. These not only
illustrate the matter in hand, but serve to give further richness to the 'world' of the poem.
Sigmund is often compared to a tree; when he draws Odin's sword from Branstock:

A little while he stood there mid the glory of the hall,
Like the best of the trees of the garden, when the April sunbeams fall
On its blossomed boughs in the morning, and tell of its days to be.

In the fight in Sigurd's hall to avenge the death of Volsung:

... firm in the midst of the onset Sigmund the Volsung stood,
And stirred no more for the sword-strokes than the oldest oak of the wood
Shall shake to the herd-boys' whistles...

After his death the Volsung house seems overthrown:

Lo, the noble oak of the forest with its feet in the flowers and grass,
How the winds that bear the summer o'er its topmost branches pass,
And the wood-deer dwell beneath it, and the fowl in its fair twigs sing,
And there it stands in the forest, an exceeding glorious thing:
Then come the axes of men, and low it lies on the ground,
And the crane comes out of the southland, and its nest is nowhere found,
And bare and shorn of its blossoms is the house of the deer of the wood.

However the house will live again in Sigurd:
But the tree is a golden dragon; and fair it floats on the flood,
And beareth the kings and the earl-folk, and is shield-hung all without:
And it saith the blaze of the beacon, and beareth the war-God's shout.
There are tides wherever it cometh, and the tale of its time shall be told.
A dear name it hath got like a King, and a fame that growth not old.

Following the generally agreed opinion that Sigurd was originally a sun-god, Morris
most frequently compares him to the sun. King Elfc in cannot hope to keep the young
Sigurd with him for ever:

"Forsworn no more may he hold thee than the hazel cope may hold
The sun of the early dawning, that turneth all into gold."

When Sigurd visits Gripiir, before going out into the world:

... there stood the mighty Volsung, and lean on the hidden Wrath;
As the earliest sun's uprising o'er the sea-plains draws a path
Whereby men sail to the Eastward and the dawn of another day,
So the image of King Sigurd on the gleaming pavement lay.

In the house of the Niblung, 'the cloudy people' his brightness is dimmed; Grinhild
comes between him and Brynhild:

... e'en as a rainless cloud
Ere the first of the tempest ariseth the latter sun doth shroud,
And men look round and shudder...

Images from nature are used further, to illustrate how the glee of the feast submerges
Sigyn's warning that her marriage to Siggeir will bring disaster:
... the speech and the song and the laughter
Went over the words of boding as the tide of the norland main
Swifts over the hidden skerry, the home of the shipman's bane.

To express the beauty of Gudrun at her wedding:
... her face is a rose of the morning by the night tide framed about,

To show how the Huns fall before Hogni in the last battle at Atli's hall:
... but lo, have ye seen the corn,
While yet men grind the sickle, by the windstreak overborne
When the sudden rain sweeps downward, and summer groweth black,
And the drenched wood-side roareth 'neath the driving thunder-wrack?

The group of similes drawn from human life and pursuits is smaller than that drawn
from nature, but it contains some equally felicitous images. For example, the councillors
and warriors of the Huns wait with apprehension for Atli to speak, after the defeat of
the Niblung:
As they of the merchant-city behold the shield-hung ships
Sweep slow through the windless haven with their gaping heads of gold,
And they know not their nation and names, nor hath aught of their errand been told.

Then again, human activity and nature are combined in a memorable extended simile to
illustrate the change in Sigurd's face, when under the influence of Grinhild's magic
sought, he forgets Brynhild:

As folk of the summer feasters, who have fallen to feast in the morn,
And have wreathed their brows with roses ere the first of the clouds was born;
Beneath the boughs were they sitting, and the long leaves twinkled about,
And the wind with their laughter was mingled, nor held back from their shout;
Amidst of their harp it lingered, from the mouth of their horn went up,
Round the heel of their seat was it breathing, o'er the flickering face of their cup—
—Lo now, why sit they so heavy, and why is their joy-speech dead,
Why are the long leaves drooping, and the fair wind hushed o'erhead?—
Look out from the sunless boughs to the yellow-mirky east,
How the clouds are woven together o'er that afternoon of feast;
There are heavier clouds above them, and the sun is a hidden wonder,
It rains in the nether heaven, and the world is afraid with the thunder;
E'en so in the hall of the Niblings, and the holy joyous place,
Set the earls on the marvel gazing, and the sorrow of Sigurd's face.

To tell a tale well, to delight the sensibility by descriptions and imagery, and to do
more, may have satisfied Morris in The Life and Death of Jason and in some of
these tales of The Earthly Paradise, but this fails to content him in Sigurd. H. H. Sparling
sees in Morris particularly prized the Volsung story 'because it seemed to him to
verse and confront all the dominant passions and forces of life.' In his retelling of
the story in Sigurd, he wishes to involve the reader in the thoughts and feelings of his
characters and to stir profoundly his emotions. The characters are recognizable based
on their original in the Volsunga Saga, but they are made conformable to the ideal
poetic world which they inhabit. Some primitive and savage behaviour is omitted or
bowed down. In the saga Sigmund bites out the tongue of the sly-wolf which comes to
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