

TYRFING INTO EXCALIBUR? A NOTE ON WILLIAM
MORRIS'S UNFINISHED POEM, "IN
ARTHUR'S HOUSE."

In the development of William Morris as a poet, his period of experiment may be said to fall between the years 1858 and 1870. In 1858, Arthurian Romance was the poet's prime literary source; in 1870, Old Norse literature had become the wellspring of his poetic inspiration. It is significant, it seems to me, that as Morris grew away from the Arthurian materials toward the Icelandic, he wrote at least one poem which combines elements from both. This is the strange poem, "In Arthur's House," written about 1865. Into this Arthurian tale, Morris introduced the famous Norse sword, *Tyrfing*. An old carle appears, carrying the blade, and concerning it he says to Guenevere:

'Hold this, O Queen,
Thine hand is where Gods' hands have been,
For this is Tyrfing: who knows when
His blade was forged? Belike ere men
Had dwelling on the middle-earth'.¹

Tyrfing was one of the most notable of all mystic swords used by Norse heroes. It was provided for Svafrlami (son of Sigrlami, son of Odin) by two dwarfs, and its particular attributes caused it to kill a man each time it was unsheathed. *Tyrfing* later became the property of Angantyr² who was one of the twelve berserker sons of Angrim and Eyfura (Svafrlami's daughter). Many remarkable and terrible deeds were accomplished with it.

Since the poem, "In Arthur's House," was left uncompleted, one can only make conjectures as to what place Morris intended to give *Tyrfing* in the Arthur story; the possibility of its replacing Excalibur is of course palpable. The two sagas which chiefly

¹ *The Collected Works of William Morris*, With Introductions by His Daughter, May Morris (New York and London, 1910-1915). XXIV, 323.

² Angantyr was called "Angentheow" in certain English versions of Norse poems adapted by George Hickeys, William Herbert, Thomas Percy, and others. See Frank Edgar Farley, *The Scandinavian Influence in the English Romantic Movement*, Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, Vol. IX, Boston, 1903.

concern Angantyr and *Tyrfing* are still untranslated;³ but Morris could have obtained information concerning them from Scott's "On the Fairies of Popular Superstition."⁴ We can postulate that Morris was not acquainted with much of the detailed and interesting information surrounding the *Tyrfing* legend—that he knew anything about it in 1865 is little less than amazing! But he was aware of one important aspect of *Tyrfing*, as his poem incontrovertibly shows, that the sword killed whenever it was taken from its scabbard:

At least a man's life is it worth
To draw it out once . . .
.
. . . the blade . . .
. . . would seldom slide
Back to its sheath unsatisfied.⁵

But the poet's doubts regarding its origin: "Who knows when his blade was forged," do not testify to his having learned that Dvalinn and Dulinn made it for Svafrlami by command.⁶

The date and circumstances of composition of "In Arthur's House" are controversial. Morris may never have seen any translated poem which dealt with *Tyrfing*; he may even have added these lines in a re-worked manuscript long after he had learned to read Old Norse.⁷ This hypothesis would explain the distinctly analogical use of the word "Middle-earth" [*miðgarð*], in the last line of the first quotation above. On the other hand, assuming that the *Tyrfing* matter was added to "In Arthur's House" does not explain why Morris was not more interested in the history of the sword. It seems most likely that he learned about *Tyrfing* from some English abridgement of the whole

³ These are: *Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*, especially Chapters II and XII; and *Órvar-Odds Saga*, XIV, both published in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda*, edited by Valdimar Ásmundarson (Reykjavík, 1891). Vols. I and II respectively.

⁴ See Farley, *op. cit.*, pp. 43, 44, 100 (note), etc., for references to *Tyrfing's* appearance in English poetry.

⁵ *Collected Works*, XXIV, 324.

⁶ *Hervarar Saga*, Chapter II, in *Fornaldar Sögur*, I, 310.

⁷ Miss May Morris mentions only one manuscript. See *Collected Works*, Introduction to Vol. XXIV, *passim*.

legend in which it occurs—perhaps from Percy, Hickes, or Scott.

The importance of so erudite a reference in the poetry of William Morris in 1865 is twofold. First, it is an excellent example of his experimental work in the period between *The Defence of Guenevere* and *The Lovers of Gudrun*, for it shows the poet looking backward toward the Arthur material, and forward toward the Norse. Second, it is another specific proof of the fact that Morris must have had a fairly good acquaintance with general Scandinavian matters before he took up the study of original Norse documents. Still more interesting is the speculation which might be made. When Morris turned to the composition of English poems based upon Old Norse sagas, he did not place a Lancelot beside his Gudrun. Had he finished "In Arthur's House," he might have put a *Tyrfing* into the hands of his Arthur.

KARL LITZENBERG

University of Michigan