

This last symbol, which embodies in static form a miniature epic narrative of Sigurd's heroic career, offers a tempting analogy between Morris' literary work and his interest in visual arts; indeed, Morris is reported to have said that "a chap [who] can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry . . . had better shut up" (Mackail, I, 186). Many similarities do exist between the two endeavors: attention to physical detail, the use of recurring patterns in an overall design, the spatial segmentation of separate actions (for which the metaphor of the triptych has already been used above), and the transformation of fluxional objects to static form. The visual metaphor for literary art can be helpful, however, without excluding the temporal aspect of the reader's encounter with *Sigurd*. Morris' poem, like the Icelandic sagas it in some respects broadly resembles, is both concerned with time and constructed in time. Characters and events which are at first encountered discretely become, through the reader's acquired experience of the history of subsequent generations, assumed into larger figurative patterns: in a typological sense, Signy becomes Gudrun, Siggeir becomes Atli, and Sigmund becomes both Sigurd and Gunnar, while the Volsungs become the slayers of Sigurd, the Niblungs. Viewed from either its visual or its temporal aspects, the structure of *Sigurd* gives the impression of a deliberate artistry on Morris' part which has not yet received adequate recognition. This artistry calls into question E. P. Thompson's assertion that the poem is "a medley of different elements" (p. 189) and provides for *Sigurd* what Carole G. Silver has found in *The Earthly Paradise*, a sense of Morris' "architectonic power."<sup>16</sup>

## Brief Articles and Notes

### MORRIS' RADICAL REVISIONS OF THE LAXDAELA SAGA

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"The Lovers of Gudrun" provides one of the most interesting examples of Morris' reworking of an earlier narrative, for both the *Laxdaela Saga* and "The Lovers of Gudrun" are in their divergent ways impressive literary works. "The Lovers of Gudrun," published in December, 1869, was Morris' first poetic narrative based on an Icelandic saga, and its dramatic qualities may seem to reflect his temperamental identification with medieval Norse literature. In fact, no *Earthly Paradise* tale shows more fidelity to the historical letter of its original, and few more infidelity to its spirit.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Morris rewrote a feud-narrative of property negotiations and family rivalries into an exemplum of doomed friendship and heterosexual love.

Morris once advocated the following use of narrative source material: "Read it through, then shut the book and write in your own way."<sup>2</sup> As he matured, he began more and more consistently to "write in [his] own way" and came to consider one of the central virtues of his narrative method the emotional transformation of classical and medieval legend. It is no accident that the "idle singer" of *The Earthly Paradise* bases his apology on the claim to present a historical palimpsest of human passions: the deeper Morris'

<sup>1</sup>Those familiar with the original have differed over whether Morris improved or distorted the *Laxdaela Saga*. There have been two good discussions of Morris' alterations: Oscar Maurer's "William Morris and *Laxdaela Saga*," *TSSL*, 5 (1963), 422-437, dwells more on the *Saga* text but finds more favor with Morris' choices. Ralph Bellas' "William Morris' Treatment of Sources in *The Earthly Paradise*," Diss. Univ. of Kansas, 1960, pp. 283-302, insightfully analyzes Morris' revisions but seems to prefer the *Saga*; he deprecates Bodli's lament over the dead Kiartan with the remark that "there is nothing in Morris' tale that carries so little of the spirit of the Icelandic original as the piteous mutterings of Bodli over the dead Kiartan" (p. 298). I would agree with the contrast but not the evaluation. Less useful is Dorothy Hoare's *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1937); she finds Morris' *Earthly Paradise* a work filled with "cloying sentiment" and "vague and confused" emotion (p. 41).

<sup>2</sup>*Collected Works*, ed. May Morris (London, 1910-15), III, xxii.

<sup>16</sup>"*The Earthly Paradise: Lost*," *VP*, 13, Nos. 3 & 4 (1975), 28.

feeling for an existing tale, the more radical his changes; and, with few exceptions, the better the result.

The changes in the *Laxdaela Saga* were in fact very deep and may be taken as a prototype of his most independent narrative practice. Morris retains only vestigial elements of the central preoccupation with interfamilial negotiation and the establishment of law in the *Saga*. Kjartan and Guðrun are the most dramatic characters of the *Saga*, but Kjartan's father, Olaf Peacock, is its central figure. His prophecies, counsels of forbearance, and strategic alliances are carefully detailed both in the Kjartan-Bolli-Guðrun subplot and in many parallel episodes (after Olaf's death, Snorri the Priest fulfills a similar function). The *Laxdaela Saga* is essentially a celebration of its principal families' rise to dynastic power.

In particular, the *Saga* is not about the pain of spurned love or the conflict of friends who love the same woman. Some residual inconsistencies of motivation and action in "The Lovers of Gudrun" show the strains of Morris' efforts to graft onto this psychologically stark and penurious framework intricate ambiguities of sexual conflict and emotion. The intense friendship of Morris' male principals Bodli and Kjartan becomes more convincing than its placement in the context of tribal feuds. Morris was an internal realist, however, and here, as elsewhere, was able to make inconsistent behavior follow plausible psychological patterns. Gudrun, Bodli, and Kjartan (Guðrun, Bolli, and Kjartan in the *Saga*), the three principal characters of "The Lovers of Gudrun," are all faithful to their deepest and most "fateful" passions. Gudrun is least scrupulous and suffers least, and Bodli is assigned the worst crime and the most pitiable fate, but Morris maintains roughly equal sympathy for all three. This parity of flaws and virtues recalls the detachment of *The Defence of Guenevere*, but the suffering and guilt are here more complexly shared. Again, the "heroic" plot, not the characters' convoluted psychological anguish, seems peripheral to Morris' poem.

This interpretation seems consistent, at least, with Morris' remark in the 1887 essay, "The Early Literature of the North," that The Lax-dalers' story contains a "very touching and beautiful tale, but it is not done justice to by the detail of the story."<sup>3</sup> As he revised the "beautiful tale," for example, Morris essentially obliterated Guðrun's chief passions: family pride and greed. Guðrun greatly enjoys the wealth of her unloved first husband Thorvald: "In all the Westfjords there were no jewels so costly that Guðrun did not consider them her due, and she repaid Thorvald with animosity if he

<sup>3</sup>Eugene LeMire, ed., *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* (Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 197.

failed to buy them, however expensive they might be" (p. 124).<sup>4</sup> She divorces him after only two years and retains half his estate. Morris gives Gudrun the more sensitive motive of revulsion at Thorvald's physical violence.

Morris also made major changes in the motives of Bodli and Kjartan. The immediate motive of the clash between the *Saga*'s Bolli and Kjartan is a property dispute: Kjartan has extorted the sale of an estate which Guðrun and Bolli had arranged to buy, and *this* is the "humiliation" which most seems to rankle Guðrun, when she rebukes Bolli:

"Kjartan has given you a harsher choice than he offered Thorarin: either that you leave this district with little honour, or else that you confront him and prove yourself rather less faint-hearted than you have been hitherto." (p. 169)

[Y]ou don't have the luck to be able to please everybody; and if you refuse this journey, it will be the end of our marriage." (p. 172)

Morris also omitted completely the earlier account in the *Saga* of Guðrun's ruthless revenge of her second husband, Thord. In the *Saga*, it is Guðrun who conceives the plan to ambush Kjartan, not her loutish brother Ospak. Indeed, she berates the reluctant Ospak: "Men like you have the memory of hogs. . . . You just sit at home pretending to be men, and there are always too many of you about" (p. 172). Morris' Gudrun, by contrast, expresses her (inconsistent) distaste for "those murderous men."

In the *Saga*, Guðrun later plots for twelve years her revenge of Bolli's murder, promises marriage to a potential avenger, and demands that her still-adolescent sons participate in the ambush. Her brief love for Kjartan is simply the most self-defeating of her several struggles for personal and dynastic preeminence.

Other omissions also help sharpen the focus of Morris' tale. In the *Saga* Kjartan is fully satisfied with his wife, who bears him a son, Asgeir. Guðrun eventually has four sons, one by Thord, two by Bolli, and a fourth by her last husband, Thorkel (she also casually relinquishes her eldest son for adoption, another aspect of her character which might blur the image Morris creates).

On the other hand, Morris also represses one of Guðrun's more admirable traits: her physical bravery. As Kjartan's relatives come to murder Bolli, he and Guðrun are alone in a shed:

Bolli recognized Halldor by his voice, and several of his companions. He told [the pregnant] Guðrun to go away from the shieling, saying that this was not an encounter she would be likely to enjoy. Guðrun said she thought that nothing would happen there which she should not be allowed to watch, and added that it could do Bolli no harm to have her by his side. Bolli insisted on having his own way, however, and so Guðrun left. (p.186)

<sup>4</sup>Translations are taken from *Laxdaela Saga*, trans. with intro. by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1969), and will be identified by page number.

This Guðrun would have been unlikely to throw herself weeping on her bed to lament "Bodli's" departure to murder "Kiartan."

Kjartan and Bolli are also more straightforward and less reflective than their Morrisian counterparts. Kiartan's refusal of Gudrun's offer to accompany him to Norway is relatively wistful and "romantic":

So fought love in him with the craving vain  
The love of all the wondering world to gain.

"thou a word or twain of me shalt hear  
E'en if the birds must bear them o'er the sea." (III, pp. 284, 280)

In contrast, Kjartan remarks mundanely that "That's out of the question . . . Your brothers haven't settled down yet and your father is an old man, and they wouldn't have anyone to look after them if you leave the country. So wait for me instead for three years" (p. 142).

Nor does Kjartan send any message to Guðrun to accompany Bolli's return to Iceland, as does Kiartan in Morris' tale. While they are in Norway, the more hotheaded and ill-tempered Kjartan had also plotted to burn the King's house but was narrowly dissuaded by the more temperate Bolli. Kjartan's later marriage in Iceland to Hrefna (Refna in Morris) is motivated not by pity but by her father's standing as one of the leading landowners of northern Iceland.

The *Saga* Bolli is less handsome and admired than Kjartan, but he is "courteous and very warrior-like" for all that and has a "taste for the ornate" (p. 110). He is also a calm and essentially consistent man, who acts for the most part to defend his interests. When he chooses to leave Norway, he does not, unlike Bodli, propose immediately to Guðrun on his return. Nor is his offer diffident and self-effacing, as is Bodli's. Bolli does not attack Kjartan before the final fight, and when he is accused of theft, he addresses Kjartan with dignity: "We are not guilty of the charges you make against us, Kjartan. We would have expected anything of you but to accuse us of theft" (p. 166). Ultimately, Bolli does not attack Kjartan to placate Guðrun but because he takes seriously a warning by Gudrun's father, Oswif, that Kjartan will have to take revenge on Bolli as Ospak's relative.

In the *Saga*, neither Kjartan nor Bolli mentions Guðrun during their final combat, and Kjartan surrenders from physical fatigue, not despair. In "The Lovers of Gudrun," by contrast, the emotionally charged confrontation between Kiartan and Bodli becomes virtually a suicide pact. The *Saga*'s Bolli is bitterly angry when he returns:

"This luckless deed will live long enough in my mind without you reminding me of it."  
"I do not think it luckless," said Guðrun. "It seems to me that you had more prestige the year that Kjartan was in Norway than now when he has ridden roughshod over you since he came back to Iceland. But last of all, what I like best is that Hrefna will not go laughing to bed tonight."

Then Bolli said, in sudden fury, "I doubt if she will turn any paler at the news than you, and I suspect you would have been less shocked if I had been left lying on the field of battle and Kjartan had lived to tell the tale." (p. 176)

In Morris' tale, *Gudrun* berates *Bodli*. The *Saga*'s Guðrun is actually intimidated by Bolli's rage:

"Don't say such things, for I am deeply grateful to you for what you have done." (p. 176)

Bolli's death in the *Saga* is one of Morris' more pointed omissions. After a brave effort at self-defense, Bolli is both eviscerated and decapitated:

Bolli said, "It's safe now for you brothers to come a little closer than you have done so far." And he said he did not think his defence would last very long now.

It was Thorgerd who answered him, and said there was no need to shrink from dealing with Bolli thoroughly; she told them to finish off their work. Bolli was still standing up against the wall of the shieling, clutching his tunic tightly to stop his entrails falling out. Steinthor Olafsson now sprang at him and swung a great axe at his neck just above the shoulders, and the head flew off at once.

"May your hands prosper," said Thorgerd, and added that Guðrun would now have some red hairs to comb for Bolli.

With that they left the shieling. (pp. 187-188)

In summary, the Bolli of the *Laxdaela Saga* is a sturdy farmer, who calmly protects his pregnant wife and stoically confronts his sordid death.

In "The Lovers of Gudrun," the initial dichotomy of character between Kiartan and Bodli actually diminishes as Morris' tale progresses. In the end, the two friends are complementary figures in a kind of intricate rite of immolation. Bodli, the most affectionate of the three protagonists, is the one most blamed for harming the others. Morris' intricate casuistry creates sympathy for his greater suffering and remorse, and Bodli assumes he will resume his friendship with Kiartan in heaven (he is noticeably less certain of his relationship there with Gudrun). Kiartan, the man of action, is the most "heroic" and least comprehensible of the three.

Rossetti particularly praised this tale, and biographical parallels to the complex rivalry between Morris and Rossetti can readily be adduced;<sup>5</sup> several of Bodli's expressions of helpless longing seem to reach beyond conventional poetic expressions of frustrated desire. Nevertheless, the "biographical" motif of fidelity-in-rejection had always been an attractive one to Morris: it appears in *The Defence of Guenevere*, the early prose romances, and even his juvenilia. In 1856, Morris wrote a "Nordic" prose romance, "Gertha's Lovers," about two men who love the same woman. The introspective, dark-haired Leuchnar expiates one brief flash of envy for his light-haired friend King Olaf with a lifetime of devotion and serves Olaf's Queen after his friend's death. In effect, "The Lovers of Gudrun" superimposes such motifs on the revenge plot of the *Laxdaela Saga*. In both "Gertha's Lovers" and "The Lovers of Gudrun," the friendship suggests

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Mauer, pp. 435-437.

division within a single composite character, but the plot of the *Laxdaela Saga* sharpens the division to one in which each half mortally wounds the other and thus itself.

In conclusion, then, "The Lovers of Gudrun," the most successful tragedy of *The Earthly Paradise*, does not derive its brooding power from darkly tragic qualities of a Nordic original. The ominous conflicts and psychological complexities of the tale are Morris' own creation, and its bleak insights sometimes work against the harsher but more straightforward grain of the *Laxdaela Saga*. Here, too, as in others of his twice-told tales, Morris created a thoroughly individual catharsis of pity, fear, and respect for his characters' emotions.

## A NOTE ON THE LAST STANZA OF "SOLILOQUY OF THE SPANISH CLOISTER"

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Most interpretations of the "Soliloquy" present Browning's monk as nothing more than a vicious petty hypocrite, whose schemes against the saintly Brother Lawrence are comic and inconsequential. However, a close examination of the final stanza suggests that there is a serious, even tragic, undercurrent to the poem: the monk's hatred does not threaten Brother Lawrence (he is "Sure of heaven as sure can be"); the threat is to the speaker's own soul. This danger is conveyed by the religious and monastic associations which gather round the central images and acts of the last verse: the garden, the rose-acacia, and the disrupted prayer to the Virgin.

The garden image has been used throughout literature as a symbol of the order or disorder of man and of his society: an obvious example is to be found in *Richard II*. In "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," however, the garden setting draws not so much on general literary traditions as on specific Biblical or religious associations. In the Bible a beautiful and well-tended garden is continually used as an analogy for spiritual well-being and closeness to God. For example, in Isaiah (58. 11) and Jeremiah (31. 12) those favored by God are likened to a "watered garden." More particularly, it is the rose which is used to symbolize God's love: "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose" (Isaiah, 35. 1). In the Song of Solomon the speaker (taken to be the bride) says: "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (2. 1). The monk in Browning's poem obviously stands in sharp contrast to these garden images. The opening stanza finds him choosing dryness and hate instead of water and love: "Needs [that rose's] leaden vase filled brimming? / Hell dry you up with its flames!"

Browning's garden seems particularly associated with the Garden of Eden:

And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. (Genesis, 2. 15-17)