The Forces of Destiny and of Doom: William Morris, “The Story of Kormak” and the Heroic Ethic

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Morris accompanied his manuscript of translation of the Eyrbyggja Saga with this stanza:

Tale-teller, who 'twixt fire and snow
Had heart to turn about and show
With faint half-smile things great and small
That in thy fearful land did fall,
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain
That thing for which I long in vain,
The spell, whereby the mist of fear
Was melted, and your ears might hear
Earth’s voices as they are indeed.
Well ye have helped me at my need. 1

Cited approvingly by Mackail and similarly by subsequent critics, it unfolds the thoughts embodying Morris’s response in general to the Saga writers and their products. Thus may it be applied to “The Story of Kormak”.

Morris translated “The Story of Kormak” around 1870 but it was not published until a hundred years later. However, he did produce, around 1871, a fine manuscript of the work. Roderick Marshall believed that “the delicate beauty of the painted books bears practically no relation to the domestic turmoil and bloodshed of the text. . . . I think that Morris decorated the margins of such tales, however inappropriately, . . . to keep Georgiana’s mind and perhaps his own, off the gory details.” Yet it is with allayed tone that Thord Arndis-son successfully counsels Bersi and Vali: “An ill matter folk deem it if brave men must needs smite each other down causeless; so now I offer myself to come and go between you.” 3 As Morris perceived, “self-restraint was a virtue sure to be thought much of among a people whose religion was practically courage . . . self-restraint of all kinds is a necessary virtue before a man can claim any respect in the Northern stories.” 4

And is there not “delicate beauty” of “things . . . small” in the verbal painting (with faint half-smile) by Skeggi of the unsheathing of Skafnung:

... “a pouch goeth with him, which thou shalt leave in peace: the sun must not shine on the upper hilts of him; neither mayst thou raise him aloft till thou art arrayed for the battle: but when thou comest to the lists, sit thee down apart, and draw him out; then stretch forth the brand, and blow on him, and there shall creep from under the hilts a little worm; slope thou the sword, making it easiest for the said wormling to creep under the hilts.” 5
Morris was also able to show “with faint half-smile things … small” in relation to himself:

I shall be glad enough to get back to the dye-house at Leek tomorrow. I daresay you will notice how bad my writing is; my hand is so shaky with doing journey-man’s work the last few days: delightful work, hard for the body and easy for the mind. For a great heap of skein-wool has come for me and more is coming: and yesterday evening we set our blue-vat … I should have liked you to see the charm work on it: … I have been dyeing in her all the afternoon, and my hands are a woeful spectacle in consequence: she appears to be all that could be wished, but I must say I should like not to look such a beast, and not to feel as if I wanted pegs to keep my fingers one from the other. I lost my temper in the dye-house for the first time this afternoon: they had been very trying: but I wish I hadn’t been such a fool; perhaps they will turn me out tomorrow morning, or put me in the blue-vat. …

Morris saw the Sagas as relating “not mere private war and revenge and consequent confusion but simply a different system to our politico-territorial system, … based … on the equal personal rights of all freedmen.” Marshall summarised them as stories that “consist for the most part of family histories coolly told but suggesting adequately enough the passion overriding reason, the treacheries, jealous murders, bloody ambushes known as battles, etc, which made up much of the domestic life of Iceland’s early settlers.” Yet, in defence, referring to the Volsunga Saga, Morris wrote:

... there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, ... 

One of the great strengths of the Sagas is the manner in which they were written. Rhythm and sound were of prime importance, for it is often forgotten that the Sagas initially were recited, not read. The “drottkvaett” form may seem grave for translation; however its fluency and sonority suited Icelandic oration. Thus, the Sagas were not “coolly told”. The authors were aware that they might be relating eminent deeds, but they did not lose sight of the fact that they were deeds of ordinary men bound by a code of honour, not deeds of “superhuman” men. Accepting the mediocrity of ordinary men, the Saga writers submitted all the facts necessary for the reader (listener) to form a total picture of those presented, regardless of any derogation. So we learn of Kormak’s bathing habits when staying at Gnupsdale and his wall-building skills. Morris saw “the manners of these early settlers” as being “naturally exceedingly simple, yet not lacking in dignity: contrary to the absurd feeling of the feudal or hierarchical period manual labour was far from being considered a disgrace.” For his own part, he cherished his “freedom of work: which is a dear delight to me.”

It is through these insights into mankind’s “ordinariness” that the Saga writers were able to present “Earth’s voices as they are indeed”.

... Tosti … had heed of the sheep-fetching; with him went Kormak, and they fares on till they came to Gnupsdale, whereat they abode for the night: for there was a great hall there, wherein were fires made for folk.

... said Steingerd: “Now should we go seek our horses.” But Kormak said there was little to trouble about that; yet he looked about, and saw not the horses, which were gotten into the hollow of a brook, a little way from where they were sitting. Morris understood the Icelandic landscape – “beautiful to a man with eyes and heart, and
perhaps on the whole the healthiest spot in the world.”

The principal codes whereby Icelanders lived encompassed destiny, family, honour and retribution. Destiny controlled matter, the destruction of which was accepted indisputably: in a physically harsh world the hero strove rather against deprivation of the free spirit.

...I work pretty hard, and on the whole very cheerfully, not altogether I hope for mere pudding, still less for praise; and while I work I have the cause always in mind, and yet I know that the cause for which I specially work is doomed to fail, at least in seeming: ... I don't know if I explain what I'm driving at, but it does sometimes seem to me a strange thing indeed that a man should be driven to work with energy and even with pleasure and enthusiasm at work which he knows will serve no end but amusing himself; am I doing nothing but make-believe then, ...? There, I don't pretend to say that the conundrum is a very interesting one, as it certainly has not any practical importance as far as I am concerned, since I shall without doubt go on with my work, useful or useless, till I demit ...

Destiny ordained death – it was inescapable; how one should meet physical extinction was what mattered. When Kormak’s uncle Steinar challenges Bersi to holmgang the latter claims:

"... it is well seen ... that ye kinsmen are minded to overcome me: and good it is that ye should wot the worth of my good-will, and abate your overbearing."

Steinar replies:

"Nay we compass not thy death, but we deem it good that thou learn to account of thyself duly."

And in challenging Thorvald, Kormak sings:

These mockers shall not make me
A silent man at least,
Though, caught in law-craft’s meshes
I give them up my case.
Surely these faint-heart fighters
My deeds of fame shall hearken,
Unless by wiles they work
To win the dear life from me.

The heroic challenge embraced a struggle for liberation of the will from the necessarily attendant bodily and mental suffering:

... I entreat you (however trite the words may be) to think that life is not empty nor made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit one into another in some way; and that the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful ...

Yet often destiny seemed to present as an intricate tapestry of allegiances to self and kin which tried sorely the strength of the boundless spirit:

... I am ashamed of myself for these strange waves of unreasonable passion: it seems so unmanly: yet indeed I have a good deal to bear considering how hopeful my earlier youth was, and what overweening ideas I had of the joys of life.

Ideally the Icelander was to possess frank, liberal qualities, be steadfast and just yet capable of emotion, and be strong of body without ruffianism: according to Morris, “they are kind, hospitable, and honest, and have no class of degradation at any rate, and don’t take kindly to bullying: they are quick-witted, very talkative when they get over
their first shyness, and mostly well-educated as things go: a friendly and refined people in short". But often obligation and passion enmeshed the Northerner, causing a mental anguish which was not permitted to override an honourable outcome: “their morality is simple enough: strive to win fair fame is the one precept: says Havamal.

Waneth wealth, and fadeth friend
And we ourselves shall die
But fair fame dieth nevermore
If well ye come thereby.”

Spiritual triumph over physical misfortune would prevail if the hero’s free will continued masterfully: thus would be shown the “spell, whereby the mist of fear was melted”.

There bide men forbidding
My love of one beloved:
Hard work have they to win through
Who hold me from my darling.
For still as grows their grudging
Of our goodly lovesome meetings
So groweth more and more
My dear love for my maiden. 24

Kormak believed his strength of spirit would vanquish any material threat. Yet he was a fallible mortal. At Narfi’s tidings of Steingerd’s marriage to Bersi, loss of temper causes Kormak to strike out. 25 (This aberration, like others of Kormak’s, is keenly highlighted by the sagacity of Thorgils.) Morris also allowed his “mortal fallibility” to show:

When I said there was no cause for my feeling low, I meant that my friends had not changed … and that there had been no quarrelling: and indeed I am afraid it comes from some cowardice or unmanliness in me. One thing wanting ought not to go for so much: nor indeed does it spoil my enjoyment of life always, …: to have real friends and some sort of an aim in life is so much, that I ought still to think myself lucky: and often in my better moods I wonder what it is in me that throws me into such rage and despair at other times … 26

Kormak’s subsequent seeking out of Steingerd and Bersi is an unbridled surrender to his emotions:

… Thorgils, withal, bade Kormak turn back; saying that they would get but little honour; yet Kormak said he must needs see Steingerd. 27 Likewise were the letters of Morris to Aglaia Coronio:

…There, dear Aglaia, see how I am showing you my pettinesses! Please don’t encourage me in them; but you have always been so kind to me that they will come out. O how I long to keep the world from narrowing on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly! 28

When Kormak challenges Bersi to holmgang, the latter, in accepting, rightly recognises that Kormak “had chosen the way on which went the lesser honour”. 29 Kormak seeks to borrow Midfirth-Skeggi’s sword Skagfnung. At this occasion Skeggi perhaps portrays Kormak best:

“Ye twain are of unlike mind; for Skafnung is but joyless, and thou art eager-hearted and headstrong.” 30

And Morris was to write from Kelmscott to Georgiana Burne-Jones:

I don’t quite agree with you in condemning grumbling against follies and ills that
oppress the world at large, even among friends; for you see it is but now and then that one has a chance of speaking about the thing in public, and meantime one's heart is hot with it, and some expression of it is like to quicken the flame even in those one loves and respects most, and it is good to feel the air laden with the coming storm even as we go about our daily work or while away time in light matters. To do nothing but grumble and not to act—that is throwing away one's life: but I don't think that words on our cause that we have at heart do nothing but wound the air, even when spoken among friends: 'tis at worst like the music to which men go to battle...\textsuperscript{31}

Kormak's mother Dalla admonishes him as "too heedless of council".\textsuperscript{32} The reason for his attitude might be suggested in his answer to Bersi when the latter proposes a single fight rather than a holmgang, because Kormak is "young and untried".\textsuperscript{33} Kormak replies:

"I shall fight no better in a single fight; I will even risk this play, and hold myself equal to thee in all matters."

And Morris?

I hope I am not quite unhumble, or want to be the only person in the world untroubled; but I have been ever loth to think that there were no people going through life, not without pain indeed, but simplicity and free from blinding entanglements. Such an one I want to be, and my faith is that it is possible for most men to be no worse ... to stand up for oneself ... is the only cure; and indeed I try it at whiles ...\textsuperscript{35}

It is in the last portions of the saga that Kormak seems to somewhat temper his unbridled emotional responses. His final speeches indicate well the true heroic struggle:

\texttt{Fair sea-maid, I once famous}
\texttt{In fight might not so rule it}
\texttt{That the sword's edge should bring me}
\texttt{The last unholpen sickness.}
\texttt{Witch-folk I shunned, as knowing}
\texttt{That many a death waylayeth}
\texttt{Men's dear lives for destruction—}
\texttt{The deep wounds' dew fell splashing}
\texttt{Beneath the dint of edges}
\texttt{And I bore a sword made bloody}
\texttt{Mid brave men on the island.}
\texttt{Broad blades the gods of battle}
\texttt{Aloft that day were bearing,}
\texttt{Yet lo, O wrist-fires' lady,}
\texttt{Straw-dead I lie before thee.}\textsuperscript{36}

Some fourteen months before his death, Morris wrote to Georgiana from his beloved Kelmscott:

I was thinking just now, how I have wasted the many times when I have been "hurt" and (especially of late years) have made no sign, but swallowed down my sorrow and anger, and nothing done! ...

...Now that I am grown old and see that nothing is to be done, I half wish that I had not been born with a sense of romance and beauty in this accursed age ...\textsuperscript{37}

For Morris, the "spell" would remain a vain longing.
NOTES
5 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 94.
7 Lemire, p. 184.
8 Marshall, p. 165.
9 Henderson, p. 32.
10 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 79.
12 Lemire, p. 184.
13 Henderson, p. 53.
14 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 77.
18 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 102.
20 Henderson, p. 78.
22 Lemire, p. 181.
24 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 85.
26 Henderson, p. 50.
27 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 92.
28 Henderson, p. 51.
29 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 93.
31 Henderson, p. 151.
32 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 94.
36 *The Story of Kormak*, p. 134.
37 Henderson, p. 374.