Imagery of Gold in *Sigurd the Volsung*

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Morris makes very effective use of colour imagery in his poetry: here I intend to discuss only one aspect – his use of colour imagery in *Sigurd the Volsung*, with particular emphasis on the use of imagery of gold. The imagery of gold is especially significant for Morris; it is not simply a colour, but a precious metal, and, especially in *Sigurd the Volsung*, the implication is of gold, the precious metal, as one of the materials of art and craft. The use of imagery relating to gold acquires greater significance in *Sigurd* than any of the other poems. This is perhaps inevitable, given the subject of the poem; but Morris makes much less use of the possibilities for developing the imagery of gold in *Jason*, which is curious, considering that Jason’s quest is for the Golden Fleece. Of course reference is made to gold in *Jason*, but it isn’t embedded in layers of metaphorical significance, as it is in *Sigurd*. What is also worthy of note is that gold is rarely seen as a medium of exchange, a commodity – it is a metaphor for wealth, perhaps, rather than wealth itself. (The point being that Fafnir doesn’t *use* the gold, he hoards it.)

In *Sigurd*, the eponymous hero is associated with day, light and brightness, and there is also a cluster of images which refer to him as “gold”, “golden”. The midwives wrap Sigurd in gold cloth as soon as he is born:

Then lo, in the hall white raiment, as thither the damsels came,
And amid the hands of the foremost was the woven gold aflame.

(Book II; p.63)

Then she with the golden burden to the kingly high-seat stepped ...

(Book II; p.65).

The following lines from the sub-section ‘Of Gripir’s Foretelling’ should also be noted in this context:

... the walls are clear and bright,
For they cast back to each other the golden Sigurd’s light;
Through the echoing ways of the house bright-eyed he wendeth along ...

(Book II; p.97)

As the earliest sun’s uprising o’er the sea-plain 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.

(Book II; p.98)

Gripir, who foretells Sigurd’s future, is also introduced in association with gold – “his gown was of mountain-gold.” This may refer to the gold that is dug from the mountains rather than obtained from the river, and which therefore may not have the evil connotations of Andvari’s gold.
As applied to Sigurd, gold has only positive connotations; it refers to the colour of his hair and of his armour, and is also a metaphor for his innate goodness and heroic stature. In other contexts in the poem, there is a literal level at which gold is a precious metal after which the evil characters lust, and the word gold has several layers of metaphorical meaning. Sigurd himself doesn’t lust after the gold – specifically, he is not greedy for Fafnir’s hoard, and neither does he lust after wealth in more general terms. The evil characters lust after gold, or use the gold they already possess to try to obtain more, or to obtain other sources of wealth and power. Siggeir brings gold to woo Signy, and after the wedding-feast (interrupted by Odin) they all go to “gold-hung beds”. Siggeir tries to buy Odin’s sword from Sigmund with gold and other precious metals; Signy on Siggeir’s ship is seen as “a grief in the heart of the gold”.

Gold is often seen (by Morris himself, by the narrator, by the characters in the poem) as a material for art and craft. Signy prophesies to Sigmund: “As a picture all of gold thy lifedays shalt thou see”. Here, gold is seen as a framing device, turning Sigmund into an image. Her prophecy is fulfilled on the occasion of Sigmund’s last battle, when he is referred to as “an image of gold”. Sigmund, unlike his son, is rarely associated with gold, but, when the association does occur, it is usually within the context of the framing device, except that during his time as an exile he gains a reputation as “a lover of gold and of goods” – the sort of reputation outlaws always get, of course – and he makes himself “a golden sword”.

The Gold - that is, Andvari’s Gold/Fafnir’s Hoard - bears a curse; it is, however, possible that gold itself is neutral, and its value for good or evil depends upon the uses to which it is put. At one point, the narrator refers to Andvari’s gold as “The thrice-cursed burden of greed and the gain from the needy won.” (One wonders if this may be an oblique reference to what Morris would later see as capitalist modes of production). Although he was not yet an active socialist, this could be an indication of the direction in which his ideas were to develop.

Sigurd makes it clear to Regin that he will kill Fafnir and win the gold for him, but for love of adventure, not hope of gain:

And I long to look on the world and the glory of the earth,
And to deal in the dealings of men, and garner the harvest of worth.

(Book II; p.74)

Sigurd is portrayed here on the threshold of adulthood, just beginning to attain his full potential. The reader may later recall these lines with a certain poignancy as Sigurd is caught in Grimhild’s web:

Hither and thither awhile did the heart of Sigurd sway;
For he feared no craft of the Dwarf-kind nor heeded the ways of fate,
But his hand wrought e’en as his heart would; and now was he weary with hate
Of the hatred and scorn of the Gods; and the greed of gold and of gain,
And the weaponless hands of the stripling of the wrath and the rending were fain.

(Book II; p.94)

Just before the ride to the Glittering Heath, Sigurd’s association with gold is strongly emphasised:

And the heavens glowed above him like the bowl of Baldur’s cup,
And a golden man was he waxen; as the heart of the sun he seemed,
While over the feet of the mountains like blood the new light streamed.
(Book II; p.103)

But gold has a negative meaning when associated with Fafnir, who is known as “the
great gold-warden, the overlord of wrong.”

Sigurd takes from Fafnir’s hoard the most valuable items; the Helm of Aweing, the
Golden Hauberk. It may be implied that his goodness (his association with light and
the sun) can enable him to turn the gold to good purpose, as the birds counsel him:

“Bind the red rings, O Sigurd! let the gold shine free and clear!
For what hath the Son of the Volsungs the ancient Curse to fear!

“Bind the red rings, O Sigurd! for thy tale is well begun,
And the world shall be good and gladdened by the Gold lit up by the sun.”
(Book II; p.118)

This again perhaps suggests that gold (precious metal) can be neutral in itself.

Regin laments that the gods have created, or at least made possible, the evil potential
of gold – perhaps not specifically Andvari’s gold, but gold in general:

“And the world began to be such-like as the Gods would have it to be;
In the womb of the woeful Earth had they quickened the grief and the gold”.
(Book II; p.75)

In Morris’s poem, Andvari’s gold is hidden behind a waterfall near a desert of dread
in the uttermost part of the world; gold in a negative environment. Andvari’s greed
for gold has caused him to lose everything, even the wisdom he once had:

And the bleak sun lighteth the wave-vault, and tells of the fruitless plain,
And the showers that nourish nothing, and summer come in vain.
(Book II; p.81)

The description of Andvari’s hoard

And the twain went into the rock-house and on fine gold they trod,
And the walls shone bright and brighter than the sun of the upper air.
How great was that treasure of treasures: and the Helm of Dread was there;
The world but in dreams has seen it; and there was the hauberk of gold;
None other is in the heavens, nor has earth of its fellow told
(Book II; p.83)

is repeated verbatim in the description of Fafnir’s hoard; in other words, Fafnir has
done nothing with the hoard except guard it.

Most of the women, starting with Sigurd’s mother Hjordis, embroider with silk
and gold. Brynhild weaves:

But a web of gold is before her, and therein by her shuttle wrought
The early days of the Volsungs ....
And the golden babe uplifted to the eyes of duke and thrall ...

There Sigurd stood and marvelled, for he saw his deeds that had been,
And his deeds of the days that should be, fair wrought in the golden sheen ...
(Book III; p.145)
She uses golden thread to depict the golden hero.
The Biblical reference is perhaps the crux of the matter:

And he laughs to scorn the treasure where thieves break through and steal,
And the moth and the rust are corrupting ...¹⁰

(Book III; p.160)

Sigurd doesn’t need or covet Andvari’s gold, but its existence is a lure to others.
On the expedition to woo Brynhild for Gunnar, the following ominous reference occurs; “Blood-red is the Helm of Aweing on the golden Sigurd’s head”. Why would Sigurd need to wear the Helm of Aweing on what is supposed to be a peaceful journey? The imagery of the blood-red helm is in striking contrast to the golden Sigurd. When Sigurd changes shapes with Gunnar he sees “himself” – and he sees an “image of gold” – exactly as Sigmund was depicted before his last battle.
Another reminder of the negative associations of the gold occurs when Sigurd gives Andvari’s Ring to Gudrun:

Yea thereof, from the Gold of Andvari, the spark of the waters wan,
Sprang a flame of bitter trouble, and the death of many a man,
And the quenching of the kindreds, and the blood of the broken troth,
And the Grievous Need of the Niblungs and the Sorrow of Odin the Goth.

(Book III; p.196)

Andvari’s gold is thus not only a literal evil in itself, but also a metaphor for evil (or at least the potential for evil).
In his last interview with Brynhild, Sigurd becomes more golden than ever; here there is a clear link between the imagery of gold and the imagery of light/sunlight that is also used in the poem about Sigurd;

Then once again spake Sigurd, once only and no more;
A pillar of light all golden, he stood on the sunlit Aoor;
And his eyes were the eyes of Odin, and his face was the hope of the world,
And his voice was the thunder of even when the bolt o’er the mountains is hurled:
The fairest of all things fashioned he stood ’twixt life and death ...

(Book III, p.223)

Once the “Golden Sigurd” has gone, obviously the emphasis of the imagery shifts, because there is no longer a person who can be referred to as “gold”, certainly not “golden”, reflecting his (or her) innate goodness. The Niblungs acquire Sigurd’s/Andvari’s gold now, and the narrator gives it all possible epithets, reminding the reader of its background and all the deaths and misery it has caused:

They are lords of the Ransom of Odin,¹¹ the uncounted sea-born Gold,
The Grief of the wise Andvari, the Death of the Dwarfs of Old,
The gleaming Load of Greyfell,¹² the ancient Serpent’s Bed,¹³
The store of the days forgotten, by the dead heaped up for the dead.

(Book IV; p.245)

Once Gudrun is married to Atli, she whets his greed with her tales of Sigurd’s treasure; his attitude toward the gold is the antithesis of Sigurd’s attitude, as Gudrun, and through her the reader, gradually becomes aware. Atli possesses gold and desires
more. When Atli’s messenger arrives at Gunnar’s hall, he boasts about Atli’s wealth, while Gunnar and Hogni boast about theirs; but before they leave on what they know will be their last journey, Hogni sinks the gold in the river.14 Perhaps there are some parallels between Atli’s attitude to wealth and Fafnir’s, to the extent that they both hoard gold.

The Niblungs’ first view of Atli’s city is one of gold-encrusted buildings:

So through the silent city by the Norns their feet are brought,
Till lo, on a hill’s uprising a huge house they behold,
And a hall with gates all brazen, and roof of ruddy gold ...
(Book IV; p.276)

It is shown how Atli desires gold and is greedy for gain, but does not emanate the “goldness” of virtue and generosity, as Sigurd did:

Now stand they aback for the trumpet and the merry minstrelsy,
For they tremble before King Atli, and golden-clad is he,
And his golden crown is heavy, and he strides exceeding slow ....

And folk hear the gold gear tinkle and the rings of the Eastland crown,
Folk looked on his rich adornment, on King Atli’s pride they gazed,
And the bright beams wearied their eye, by the glory were they dazed.
(Book IV; p.287)

This is a fine example of Morris’s attention to detail; we are specifically told “by the glory were they dazed”, not “by his glory were they dazed” – Atli himself is insignificant, but he displays his wealth to impress the onlookers; we are also told that the weight of it drags him down; it literally drags him down in this passage, and his greed will finally be the means of his death, when Gudrun kills him and sets fire to his hall.

NOTES

All quotations are taken from the 1994 Thoemmes Press reprinting of the 1911 edition.


2 Use of gold imagery is also found in some of Morris’s shorter poems, suggesting a link between these and the longer, epic poems. Particularly significant is its use in ‘Rapunzel’ and ‘The Eve of Crecy’. ‘Rapunzel’ uses the rather commonplace poetic device of golden hair to stand for the qualities of virtue that emanate from the heroine, who metamorphoses into “Golden Guendolen” when she leaves the witch’s tower; to emphasize the contrast further, the witch who imprisons Guendolen/Rapunzel is black-haired.
Of the shorter poems, ‘The Eve of Crecy’ is most concerned with gold in its literal and metaphorical meanings; we are introduced to a woman dressed in gold, and to the knight who admires her but is prevented by poverty from approaching her; he hopes that the outcome of the battle may change this:

Gold on her head, and gold on her feet,
And gold where the hems of her kirtle meet,
And a gold girdle round my sweet -

Ah, qu’elle est belle, la Marguerite!

This is the poem in which gold is most explicitly seen as a currency, a means of exchange.

The frequent references to “the golden Sigurd” remind the reader of Homeric epithets; the same is true of the frequent references to “the white-armed Gudrun” – goddesses and women in Homer are often “white-armed”.

I am aware of the danger of finding a metaphor where none is intended; Morris may have used “mountain-gold” merely for the sake of the rhythm, although “river-gold” would have the same rhythmic effect. But it is perhaps worth noting that he did not choose a descriptive epithet such as “shining gold”, which would also have fitted the rhythm.

Stephen Sossaman, in ‘William Morris’s “Sigurd the Volsung” and the Pre-Raphaelite Visual Aesthetic’ (Pre-Raphaelite Review, 1/2, 1978, pp.81-90) draws attention to this aspect of the constant association of Sigurd with light and brightness:

“All heroes are presented in an aspect of gold ... most of the evil characters lust after gold, so that the color becomes the identifying mark of the good and the objective of the evil people.” (p.89)

This one must suppose to be a metaphor, or perhaps adopted solely for the sake of the rhyme or the metre, as a golden sword would not actually be much use – Odin’s sword, which Sigmund actually uses in battle, is of course made of steel.

Craft is used here in two senses (and see its later use to refer to Grimhild’s craft). Here, it refers to Regin’s skill as a master-craftsman, and to his cunning nature.

The following lines are also of importance, as they are the most explicit reference to the potential of gold either for good or evil:

How that gold was the seed of gold to the wise and the shapers of things,
The hoarders of hidden treasure, and the unseen glory of rings;
But the seed of woe to the world and the foolish wasters of men,
And grief to the generations that die and spring up again.

It is not placed in a specific location (as Wagner locates the gold in the Rhine); but it is worth observing that there is a scaldic kenning (Kenningar are the elaborate metaphorical/periphrastic expressions used in Old Norse scaldic verse) for gold which refers to it as kafsumna (sun of the deep), and even one in which it is called Rinar sol (Sun of the Rhine). Morris was skilled as a translator of skaldic verse, and it is inconceivable that he was not aware of these kennings.

Matthew 6, 19-21:

Lay not up for yourselves treasure upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal;
But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust do corrupt, and thieves break not through and steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

11 Odin and Loki had to obtain the gold from Andvari to pay wergild to Reidmar; Loki had killed Reidmar’s son, Otter.

12 When Sigurd acquired the gold, he loaded it onto the back of his horse Greyfell.

13 When Fafnir acquired the Gold (for which he killed his father Reidmar) he turned himself into a dragon in order to guard it.

14 This is based on the episode in Das Nibelungenlied in which Hagen arranges for the gold to be thrown in the Rhine, although the motivation is different; he has it thrown away so as to prevent Kriemhild – Siegfried’s widow in this version – from using it to gain adherents to her cause.