‘Volsungasaga’ and Two Transformations

by Dudley L. Hascall

William Morris’ interest in Icelandic saga (first represented in ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, which is a version of The Laxdaele Saga in The Earthly Paradise, had by 1876 produced two English versions of the Volsungasaga.1 The first, a prose translation, was a joint work of Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon. Entitled The Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and the Niblung,2 it appeared in 1870.3 Two years after Morris’ visit to Iceland in 1873, he began work on The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblung,4 which was published in 1876 (Mackail I, p. 330). The purpose of this paper is to compare Morris’ works to each other and to the Old Icelandic Volsungasaga.5

Icelandic saga, it need hardly be said, is noted for its terseness, and the Volsungasaga is no exception: the prose is spare, moving quickly from incident to incident; the author spends little time on description or characterization, letting the characters reveal themselves in dialogue or action. Not being a ‘family saga,’ Volsungasaga is not encumbered with pages of genealogy (as is

1 As a matter of orthographic simplicity I render ‘o’ ('ö') as ‘o’. Similarly, except in direct quotes from the Icelandic Volsungasaga, I normalize spellings to English orthography.
2 Hereafter cited as Morris, Völsunga Saga. All page number are to vol. VII of the Collected Works (London and New York, 1911).
4 Collected Works, vol. XII. Hereafter cited as Sigurd.
5 Ernst Wilken, ed., Die Prozaische Edda im Auszuge nebstd Völsungasaga und Nornagests-thátr (Paderhorn: Schönnigh, 1877), Theil I, pp. 147-234. As there is no edition of this work with notes and glossary in English, I have used Margaret Schlauch’s translation, The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, together with The Lay of Kraka. (Scandinavian Classics, vol. XXV.) New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation 1930; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949, to follow the Old Icelandic text. Wilken’s edition is hereafter cited as Volsungasaga, the translation as Schlauch.
the otherwise fast-moving *Njâi’s Saga*, for instance), and thus seems especially spare. The narrative is broken only by dialogue and sections of poetry arranged in three to ten line stanzas.

Morris’ prose translation is a close, straight-forward rendering of the original. Magnússon notes the passages where the translation differs from the Icelandic (Morris, *Volsunga Saga*, pp. 483-5); there are but forty instances, of which a number are insignificant. Margaret Schlauch, in the introduction to her translation, pays Morris this tribute: ‘This was the work of a poet and lover of Scandinavian lore; it was reverently done, with acute understanding of the language, and great sensitiveness to the beauty of the original. . . . I have compared his translation with the Icelandic, after making my own, and I am convinced that his work was essentially accurate. . . .’ (Schlauch, pp. 30-31). The order of both the *Volsungasaga* and the translation are roughly chronological. In both are a few instances of a character’s story being told by snatches (e.g. Sinfiotli’s story is interrupted by a chapter which tells the personal history of his companion Helgi Hunding’s-bane – *Volsungasaga*, Chap. IX, pp. 163-7).

Morris’ translation makes use of a very archaic and highly ‘poetic’ vocabulary. This is evident from the first sentence. ‘Her hefr upp ok segir frá þeim mann, er Sigi er nefndr ok kallaðr, at héti son Óðins. Annarr maðr er nefndr til þógnar, er Skáði hét; hann var ríkr ok miðill fyrir sér, en þó var Sigi þeira inn ríkari ok aettstoeri, at því er menn mæltu í þann tíma.’ (*Volsungasaga*, p. 149.) This is rendered, ‘Here begins the tale, and tells of a man who was named Sigi, and called of men the son of Odin; another man withal is told of in the tale, hight Skadi, a great man and mighty of his hands; yet was Sigi the mightier and the higher of kin, according to the speech of the men of that time.’ (Morris, *Volsunga Saga*, p. 291.) This is only a little more diffuse (Icelandic, fifty-one words; English, sixty), but the numerous prepositional phrases, the preference for coordinate constructions, the repetitions, and the archaisms make it seem much more diffuse than it is. For the archaic words and constructions there are probably two reasons: the Old Icelandic is somewhat archaic to a modern Icelander, and Morris wants to preserve this flavour; and the subject matter is heroic, treating the by-gone Germanic heroes of the Middle Age.6

Morris' syntax is also strange at a slightly higher level, in that he wanders freely from the past to the present tense. It quickly becomes obvious that this is a kind of historic present which he is faithfully rendering from the Icelandic, but in English it is rather disconcerting to find sentences like this throughout the work: 'Then he went home at evening tide and says that Bredi had ridden away from him...' (Morris, Volsunga Saga, p. 291). Modern English has no such device for slipping back and forth so freely between the tenses, except in distinctly colloquial speech, and consequently the reader feels a disparity between Morris' formal, archaic diction and his use of tense.

The Preface to Morris' translation states (pp. 284-8) that he correlated the Volsungasaga with the parallel matter in The Elder Edda (The Poetic Edda). Some of this poetry he inserts into the text (e.g. the birds' songs to Sigurd after the slaying of Regin, pp. 332-3). A number of other related poems are appended at the end of the translation.

In considering Morris' poetry, it is necessary to examine two kinds of change: the purely linguistic changes which reflect the transmutation of prose into verse, and the semantic change he worked on his material. Within the semantic changes there are relatively small ones, such as the alteration of plot details, and larger changes which affect viewpoint and theme. The verse is iambic hexameter, with substitutions of anapests and dactyls occurring so frequently as to be almost regular, particularly in the first foot or the fourth (which usually follows a pronounced caesura). After a hundred pages the meter becomes quite wearisome, as there is never any variation in the length of the line.

The lines are usually end-stopped, and are rhymed in couplets. Enjambement is rare, especially in the early part of the poem, but is likely to be found in dialogue. Aside from this, no linguistic variations are found which mark off dialogue from narration or one character's speech from another's. There seems to be no attempt to set up distinctive sound symbolisms for varying emotions, nor varying rhythms or rhymes, nor even vocabulary distinctions between male and female speakers, except for the most obvious necessities (e.g. the men talk more of weapons than the women do).

The stanzas are irregular, ranging from three to over two dozen lines. A couplet sometimes bridges two stanzas (e.g. Sigurd, p. 3, stanzas 3 and 4), which seems awkward because of
the usual extreme regularity of the verse, and because Morris’ stanza breaks usually indicate semantic divisions.

The verse is highly alliterative. As a rule (but with some exceptions) at least two stressed syllables alliterate in the line, usually in the same half-line. There are often three or even four alliterative syllables in the line; frequently the same alliteration will be carried into the next line. Morris no doubt liked the alliteration because of his familiarity with Germanic verse; but instead of its increasing the ruggedness of the verse, it combines with the rhyme and meter to make the poetry seem highly artificial and elaborate. Sometimes the alliteration seems forced, e.g. in ‘gold-rings God-fashioned’ (Sigurd, p. 3, stanza 6, l. 6).

One device which one might have expected Morris to use more in his verse than in his prose is archaic vocabulary; but in Sigurd the archaisms are much scarcer than in the Volsunga Saga. Because they are used sparingly and in highly stressed positions (i.e. stressed metrically and syntactically, e.g. p. 165, stanza 3, l. 1, ‘fain;’ sometimes stressed alliteratively as well, e.g. p. 17, stanza 4, l. 7, ‘wend the way of death’ and p. 19, stanza 3, l. 9, ‘they deemed the story done’), they are much more effective than in the Volsunga Saga.

Images frequently resemble Old Icelandic and Old English kennings, e.g. p. 4, stanza 2, l. 4, ‘fair-stained sea-beast’s tooth;’ p. 4, stanza 3, l. 7, ‘rippling harp-gold’ (i.e. harp-strings); p. 13, stanza 2, l. 2, ‘swan-bath’, et passim, but with more frequent occurrence in the early part of the poem. Occasionally a passage will recall other figures frequent in Germanic poetry, as the resemblance to litotes in p. 17, stanza 1, l. 3, 5.

Morris’ inversions of subject-verb-object sentence syntax are not frequent, and are usually uncomplicated. More frequent are inversions of modifying elements, which pose no real problems of syntactic interpretation and hardly ripple the clear surface of the poetry.

A few small plot-changes and other points more semantic than grammatical may be noted. Morris has the brothers of Signy eaten two by two in Sigurd (p. 18) instead of one by one (‘Henni varð þat fyrrir, at hón bitr einn þeira til bana,’ Volsungasaga, p. 156, l. 6, 7). The reason for the change is fairly obvious: Volsungasaga says merely that they were killed one by one, while Morris deals with the brothers’ deaths in detail; in order not to become repetitive and so interfere with the flow of the narrative Morris has them go in couples. In Sigurd Sigmund
escapes unaided—the great story of Signy and the honey is omitted. The only reason I can suggest for this change is that Morris felt the story to be too improbable, and hence detrimental to his mood.

The story of Signy’s son being sent to Sigmund and found wanting is softened: instead of being killed, he is sent home. There is but one son sent before Sinfiotli. It is consequently not made as explicit in the poem that the first son was not merely a coward, but that Sinfiotli stood above even the sons of kings in courage. On the other hand, Morris shows Sinfiotli fearless in more situations than the saga-maker does.

In Sigurd, Signy sleeps with Sigmund but one night (p. 29) instead of three (Volsungasaga, p. 158). Morris adds the ring of fire around Brynhild on the mountain, following The Elder Edda (and the Nibelungenlied).

Morris makes several semantic changes of much greater import than plot changes. He amplifies the description greatly and expands incidents for their dramatic value, often with effect.

The romantic ideal, the standard of courtly love, is a most important addition to Sigurd. Siggeir’s proposal to Volsung for ‘Signy the fairer than fair’ (Sigurd, p. 2, stanza 2); Signy’s motivation for returning to the burning house and her husband:

I have come to greet thee, Sigmund, then back again I must wend,
For his bed the Goth-king dighteth: I have lain therein, time was,
And loathed the sleep I won there: but lo, how all things pass,
And hearts are changed and softened, for lovely now it seems.

(Sigurd, p. 41, stanza 1, ll. 2-5.)

—these are foreign completely to the tone of Volsungasaga, where Signy returns to the house because now that her revenge is achieved she has nothing to live for (Volsungasaga, p. 162). Similarly, Sigmund’s death is shown as fated (Sigurd, p. 55, stanza 3), where in Volsungasaga (p. 169, ll. 13 ff.) he actively renounces life because his good fortune has left him and his sword is shattered. Yet Morris is not trying to eliminate the heroic ideal, for it is present throughout; rather is he trying to fuse the two. To achieve this fusion, he often presents the two in the same situation, as in Sigurd, p. 14, stanza 1. Volsung says his sons will not hesitate in battle: ‘Would thou have the maidens mock them[?]’ But his reason for going into the unequal contest is for ‘the praise and the glory of folk . . . the deed that dies not and the name that shall ever avail.’
Odin is used more in *Sigurd* than in *Volsungasaga*, and is more frequently dealt with explicitly than allusively. From the time Regin tells of the hoard (*Sigurd*, pp. 72-89), the unifying theme is the wrath of Odin expressed through the curse on the gold. This is missing from the *Volsungasaga* (Chap. XIV, pp. 173-5), where the wrath is Loki's (p. 174, 11. 11-16). Making greater use of Odin as a supernatural force moves the story closer to what Morris' audience was familiar with in classical mythology. Odin's wrath gives *Sigurd* a certain (though not a strongly felt) unity, but it robs the poem of the saga's sense of overhanging doom emanating from the curse on the treasure, which in the *Volsungasaga* is completely impersonal and as much a part of the hoard as the yellow glitter of the gold.

To make full use of the wrath and sorrow of Odin, Morris changes the end, lopping off the whole Swanhild-Jormunrek history. Even in the saga this part seems tied on, and I believe Morris' decision to omit it is artistically justified. He ends *Sigurd* with the death of Atli, and the end of Gudrun, omitting her third marriage.

Finally, I will attempt to evaluate briefly and in general terms what Morris has done to the *Volsungasaga*. He has cast it in a rather pleasant, forceful meter, but one which grows tiresome. Both his meter and his syntax are uncomplicated, which in narrative verse is commendable, but he makes no distinctions of person or situation by controlled variance. He has expanded the saga to at least three times its original length, thereby losing some of its packed emotion through diffusion. He has strengthened motivation, and has brought the story closer to better known literature through adding the romantic elements and subtly shifting the mythological emphasis. The story moves fairly rapidly and is pushed on by the frequent anapestic and dactylic substitutions. Because it lacks the imaginative transmutation and heightening of experience we expect from poetry of the first order, this work does not belong to the 'greatest' poetry; but it is pleasant, well-written narrative verse which accomplishes its purpose of presenting an Icelandic story to Englishmen in a familiar form.