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Laxdaela Saga and “The Lovers of Gudrun”: Morris’ Poetic Vision

LINDA JULIAN

THE LOVERS OF GUDRUN,” MORRIS’ RETELLING OF THE SECOND HALF OF THE *Laxdaela saga*, contributed significantly in several ways to Morris’ development as a writer. First, it was Morris’ initial attempt to create an original, interpretive work—rather than a translation—from an Icelandic work. Second, Morris sensed his own artistic development in this poem, as his letters show (*Letters*, 1:82, 98, 100), a development which led to a different style in later poetry and prose. Finally, the process of creating “Gudrun” and the satisfaction he felt from its success no doubt gave him the incentive to attempt the same kind of re-creation of the *Volsunga saga*, resulting in *Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Fall of the Niblungs*.¹

Morris’ recognition of the relative merits of the poems in Part Three of *The Earthly Paradise* shows clearly in a letter to Swinburne in December 1869: “I am delighted to have pleased you with the Gudrun; for the rest I am rather painfully conscious myself that the book would have done me more credit if there had been nothing in it but the Gudrun, though I don’t think the others quite the worst things I have done—yet they are all too long and flabby—damn it!” (*Letters*, 1:100).² Another letter, written about the same time, also reveals Morris’ deep sense of the greatness of “Gudrun.” He wrote to Charles Eliot Norton that “*Gudrun* I feel sure is the best thing I have done” (*Letters*, 1:98). An even earlier letter to Norton, written when he had finished “Gudrun,” records Morris’ feeling that “the story . . . I think on the whole the most important thing I have written; the deeper I got into the old tale the more interested I found myself, and now it is finished, I feel somewhat used up, and rather cold to subjects with less of life and nature in them” (*Kelvin* 1:82). At the time, Rossetti, too, considered “Gudrun” Morris’ finest poem,³ and he wrote to Norton in 1870 that “the ‘Gudrun’ is surely on the whole one of the finest poems in the English language” (Faulkner, p. 195).

Not everyone, however, shared Morris’ and Rossetti’s opinion. John Buchan commented that “the figures are scarcely human; they have not even the illusions of three dimensions which painting gives; they are flat, like the details in a tapestry.”⁴ An unsigned review in the *New Englander* for October 1871 observed that “Gudrun,” like many of the other tales, was too pictorial (Faulkner, p. 176). Two twentieth-century critics who disparage

the poem, Dorothy Hoare and John Robert Wahl, argue that Morris softened the tragic story of the saga into one of “the languor and weakness of sentiment” in which “self-pity is the dominant mood.”⁵ However, modern critics, for the most part, have found the poem beautiful and carefully wrought.

Much modern criticism of the poem has focused on Morris’ use of his Icelandic sources and the ways in which “The Lovers of Gudrun” fits into the overall design of *The Earthly Paradise*. Ralph Bellas, who has analyzed Morris’ use of sources in *The Earthly Paradise*, finds it difficult to agree with those who see “The Lovers of Gudrun” as dramatically breaking with Morris’ romanticism in the earlier works. Bellas says that although the poem “does possess some of the tragic force and the epic scale of the original . . . if a glimmer of the Northern starkness still shines through, it is made very faint indeed by the romantic sentimentality of Morris’ poem.”⁶ Florence Boos, who has examined Morris’ revisions of *Laxdaela saga* (“Morris’ Radical Revisions”) and Morris’ design in *The Earthly Paradise*, concluded that “The Lovers of Gudrun” “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*.”⁷ Boos also points out that while many critics have seen similarities between the complexity of the relationship of Kiartan and Bodli in “The Lovers of Gudrun” and the complexity of the relationship between Morris and Rossetti, this kind of theme opposing rivalry and loyalty had appeared in *The Defence of Guenevere* and other earlier works (*The Design*, p. 293).

Other recent criticism has focused on the character Gudrun. Carole Silver claims that Gudrun is like Jane Morris in being a type “of fatal beauty who personif[ies] the destructive aspects of earthly love.”⁸ She argues that Morris’ Gudrun is “painted less as a living woman than as a powerful force which destroys all who desire her” (p. 75). Florence Boos has seen Gudrun as revealing “the tenderness and beauty of language which Morris infused into his most interesting poetic women.”⁹ On a microcosmic level, “The Lovers of Gudrun” has provoked much discussion of the characters and their relationships; on a macrocosmic level, it has elicited intense study in terms of its design and its place in *The Earthly Paradise*.

In her careful and insightful analysis of Morris’ growth as a poet, Jessie Kocmanová points out what must be the central consideration of any criticism of “The Lovers of Gudrun”: that Morris was not trying to translate the saga but was using the saga as a source for a northern tale that might have been told at the end of the fourteenth century, the temporal setting for the frame of *The Earthly Paradise*. She is right when she argues that “it would be absurd to criticise Morris in this case for not reproducing exactly the tone and method of the saga.”¹⁰ In

addition to modifying the saga to suit its larger context, Morris also changed it because he found structural flaws in the original.

Morris rarely commented negatively about Icelandic literature, and thus his comments criticizing the narrative structure of this saga, a saga today generally considered one of the most outstanding,¹¹ suggest that he did not fully understand the sagaman's methods of achieving unity. In February 1870, Morris commented in a letter:

The saga itself is full of interesting incident, but has no pretensions to artistic unity, being indeed what it calls itself, a chronicle of the dwellers in Laxdale: it is disjointed even for that withal, and in some important places very bald, much more so than in any of the good translated sagas:¹² with that too were coarseness both of manners and character that seemed alien to other parts of the characters therein, and wh: I thought I had a right to soften or disregard: All these things, to my mind, joining with the magnificent story made it the better subject for a poem as one could fairly say that that story had never been properly told— Gudrun I should say is much more the stock “stirring woman” of the north than I thought fit to make her. (*Letters*, 1:109-110)

May Morris justified her father's added, and fairly extensive, explanations of motive, claiming that modern readers needed these additions to understand what would have been apparent to a thirteenth-century audience (*CW*, 5:xxxii). Morris, of course, did not know what is generally accepted today, that many of the family sagas were not really chronicles at all but were rather fictional works with a high level of historical content (Arent, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii). Morris clearly aimed to make the unity more apparent and to clarify the characters' motives, and thus to create a better story—for his purposes—than the sagaman had told. As Oscar Maurer points out in “William Morris and Laxdoela saga,”¹³ Morris' shaping of the material was determined by artistic purposes, not ignorance of the details of the saga, since he drew on Magnusson's literal prose translation of it in creating his 5,000-line poem and thus obviously knew the saga well (p. 424). The result is a restrained, exquisite poem which preserves both the tone and the emotional effect of the original material.

Morris' method in “Gudrun,” unlike that in the other stories of *The Earthly Paradise*, emphasizes the characters of Gudrun, Kiartan, and Bolli¹⁴ at the expense of plot and description. Morris' extensive descriptions of the characters' feelings—not stated in the saga but largely apparent in the restrained statements about the characters' actions and in their terse and sparse direct statements—do not make the characters differ much from the doomed Gudrun and her lovers portrayed by the sagaman. In choosing to devote a great many lines to the emotional states of his characters, Morris, of course, violated the form of the saga, for as E. R. Eddison, in an introduction to *Egil's Saga*, says, “the saga is never analytic. The novelist is often introspective; the saga never” (p. xxxi).

Morris clearly knew that he had softened Gudrun somewhat (*Letters*, 1:110), but that “Kiartan & Bolli I am sure are pretty much the men that were in

the old story-tellers mind" (*Letters*, 1:110). Morris wanted to limit the story to the characters' reactions to the doomed friendship and love entanglements predicted for Gudrun by Guest as he interprets Gudrun's four dreams.

Morris discards the first half of the saga, which describes the settlement of the Laxardal and the history of the major families who lived there, and begins his poem with Guest's revelations of the dreams (Chapter 32 of the saga's 78 chapters). Morris ends his poem at almost the point at which the sagaman ends the saga: Gudrun's statement that "I did the worst to him I loved the most" (*CW*, 5:395) ends Morris' version while the saga follows this line with a lengthy final paragraph that ends in the traditional way, "And here the saga ends" (Arent, p. 195). Morris, however, omits much of the detail in the second half of the saga which does not directly concern Gudrun, Kjartan, and Bodli and their suffering (he omits Chapters 52-77).¹⁶ Having found the original "disjointed," Morris omits, as one might expect, the events relating to peripheral characters. Morris also leaves out the lengthy discussion of Bolli's death and of Gudrun's sons' avenging his death, events which would have been of paramount importance to the original audience. Further, he passes over the complex negotiations surrounding Gudrun's fourth marriage, saying simply that "Bodli died / Manlike amidst his foes" and "when Bodli's sons were men / And many things had happened, she [Gudrun] wed again" (*CW*, 5:391-392). Perhaps Morris thought that the saga's grim description of such actions as Bolli's "standing up against the wall of the hut holding his kirtle tight to keep his viscera from running out" and his suffering "a blow with a great axe at the base of the neck" so that "his head flew off" would intrude too much into his character-dominated poem as would the grim humor of the type expressed by Thorgerd, who said, referring to Bolli's severed head, "that Gudrun would have something to busy herself with for a while—combing Bolli's bloody locks" (Arent, p. 145). Obviously Morris' concern with "coarseness," which he mentions in the February 1870 letter cited above, would also have helped shape his decision to omit such scenes.

To focus the poem more narrowly on the three main characters, Morris also omits the lengthy episode of Aud's revenge on Thord, who had divorced her and married Gudrun, and the details of the contract for Gudrun's and Thorvald's marriage. Morris records neither the birth of Gudrun's and Thord's son, Thord, nor the birth of Hrefna's and Kjartan's son, Aesgeir. In addition, because he is more concerned with producing a well-unified story than recording history, he omits details from the saga which have to do with the growth of Christianity in Iceland, namely that Kjartan was the first Christian in Iceland to observe a "dry-fast"¹⁷ during Lent, that he had to lie in state in a tent because there was no church, that he was buried finally at Berg when a church was built, and that Gudrun became the first nun and anchoress in Iceland. Of course, another motive for these omissions may be that Morris did not want to dilute his paganism with Christianity any more than the later events in Norway, which are

critical to the story, force him to do.

Magic, which appears in several episodes of the saga, does not figure in Morris' account, perhaps because he does not want to blur the focus of the story and because he does not want to soften the fatalism with fairy-tale elements. He omits Kotkel's and his Kin's revenge on Thord, which was brought about through witchcraft, and he skips the episode about the miraculous resurrection of Kjartan's comrade An-the-Black, who sat up, healed, at his own wake, as well as the earlier episode in which An-the-Black has urged Kjartan, on the basis of a dream, not to take the trip on which Kjartan ultimately meets his death. In the saga King Olaf Tryggvason gives Kjartan a sword with magical properties: "You will never feel a weapon's fatal sting so long as you bear this sword" (Arent, p. 114). In Morris' version the king also gives Kiartan a sword "'Which if thou dost according to my word, / Shall never leave thy side; for who can know / Ere all is o'er, how madly things may go?'" (CW, 5:318). Kiartan's father breaks the sword after Kiartan's murder, saying, "'In good will wert thou given, O blade, / But not to save my son's heart wert thou made'" (CW, 5:388). Morris' lines suggest a fatalism that is much less evident in the saga.

Omitting the saga's references to magic also shifts the story's focus from external forces to internal ones, making the psychological motives of the characters the dominant focus. Contributing to this focus is Morris' omission of two important scenes which emphasize Kjartan's physical prowess. In the saga, when Kjartan's ship arrives in Norway, Kjartan challenges a townsman swimming in the River Nid to a swimming match. After the match, which ends in a draw, Kjartan learns that he has swum against King Olaf Tryggvason, who says that Kjartan is "an accomplished fellow, but also puffed-up" (Arent, p. 103). This passage is significant because it recalls the earlier scene in which Gest sees Bolli and Kjartan swimming as he vaguely predicts Kjartan's future to Kjartan's father, Olaf. The parallelism of these two swimming scenes adds to the unity of the saga. Since Morris complained about the lack of unity in the saga, his decision to omit the swimming match episode suggests that shifting attention from Kjartan's physical strength took precedence over sustaining the story's unity.

Morris also omits another major scene highlighting Kjartan's agility and strength, the scene at Asbjarnarnes where Kjartan competes in the games and where "not a man there had the strength or agile skill to equal Kjartan's" (Arent, p. 117). These omissions enable Morris to emphasize character rather than action, and to equalize the physical capacities of the protagonist and antagonist, Kjartan and Bodli.

In omitting these episodes, Morris simplifies the plot, with the evident intention of making it more coherent. But two other significant omissions in "The Lovers of Gudrun" seem based on subtler motives. Although, to streamline the plot, Morris understandably omits much detail in the saga describing Kjartan's wooing of Hrefna, he also leaves out a very important statement in the

saga: “Kjartan and Hrefna came to love one another dearly” (Arent, p. 119). Indeed, Morris goes to great lengths to deny what is clear in the saga—that Kjartan did, in fact, love Hrefna. Morris adds a delicate, heartrending scene in which Refna tells Kiartan that she had hoped

Thou wouldst not grudge to show me what a bliss
Thy whole love was, by giving unto me
As unto one who loved thee silently,
Now and again the broken crumbs thereof. (CW, 5:355)

Kiartan responds that “long may we / Live upon earth, till lover and beloved / Each is to each, by one desire moved,” and he assures her that if he could “die now, and be born again / To give my whole heart up to ease thy pain, / A short while would I choose to live indeed” (CW, 5:356). Morris’ change significantly alters the characterization of Kiartan and gives the plot a more overtly fatalistic shape. Kiartan, in Morris’ version, is controlled by circumstances to a much greater degree than in the saga.

Another important omission is the scene in the saga in which Gudrun goads her brothers into taking revenge on Kjartan for the humiliation they have suffered at his hands. After Gudrun’s brothers have planned the ambush, she asks Bolli to accompany them, threatening that his failure to do so will end their marriage. Bolli, who at first argues that he doesn’t want to fight against Kjartan because of their kinship, finally agrees to do so. Morris’ version transforms Gudrun’s arguments to her brothers into an internal debate about the inevitability of Kiartan’s death and the effect his death will have on her life. In Morris’ version, Gudrun’s brothers have bullied Bodli into leading the ambush. Morris makes Bodli’s reluctance clear, as the saga does, but Morris portrays him as a sufferer who is glad only that the end is in sight.

Bodli says to Gudrun, “And yet at least the end shall be to-day” (CW, 5:370). Morris intensifies the interpretation of Bodli as victim with Bodli’s last words to Gudrun before he kills Kiartan: “Oh, Gudrun, thou hast lost, / But look on me for I have never won!” (CW, 5:371). The last interview between Bodli and Gudrun before Kiartan’s murder—a scene added by Morris—transforms Gudrun into something more than a spiteful, vengeful woman. Morris makes her naked in this scene. Her nakedness suggests the peeling away of half-truths, leaving Gudrun with the brutal vision of the end to come. Morris creates a Gudrun of great psychological complexity, a woman caught in the coils of Fate.

Morris not only focused the story and deepened the characters by omitting details from the saga, he also changed details to suit his artistic purposes. Obviously he made some of the changes because he did not wish to offend the large audience of *The Earthly Paradise* (see *Letters*, 1:109-110). For example, in the saga Kjartan takes revenge for the missing scabbard and coif by surrounding Laugar and guarding the doors with his men for three days so that no one could

go outside to the privy and "so that they had to relieve themselves indoors for three days and nights" (Arent, p. 124). Instead of this crude revenge, in Morris' version Kiartan's vengeance takes the form of going to Bathstead to drive all of the cattle home as a gift for the wronged Refna. Perhaps a concern for his readers' reactions also softened Morris' version of Kiartan's plan to destroy King Olaf Tryggvison in Trondheim. In the saga Kjartan threatens to burn him alive in his house; in Morris' story Kiartan plans to attack the king and his men with swords.

Concern for his readers' sensibilities may also account for Morris' alteration of the events surrounding Gudrun's divorce from Thorvald. The saga says that after Gudrun's marriage to Thorvald, there was talk of an affair between her and Thord Ingunnarson. Thord advises Gudrun to divorce Thorvald after the episode in which Thorvald publicly humiliates Gudrun by slapping her face. Although Morris does not suppress the rumors about the affair, he does not mention the rumor until after the divorce, and even then he makes his first-person narrative intrusion almost a disclaimer:

Now wise ones tell
That there was one who used to note her well
Within her husband's hall, and many say
That talk of love they had before the day
That she went back to Bathstead; how that was
I know not surely. (CW, 5:272)

Thus the rumored "love affair" of the saga becomes, in Morris, the less offensive "talk of love," and the reader is led to dismiss the rumor since the narrator, who has become by this point in the poem an authority for the most intimate details elsewhere in the tale, says that he does not know for certain "how that was."

Most of the substitutions Morris made sharpen the plot and add to the complexity of the characters, making them more realistic. For example, the saga says that Gudrun and Kjartan began to run into each other at the baths and that they came to enjoy each other's company. In Morris, however, knowing Kiartan only by his great reputation, Gudrun meets Kiartan in an extremely dramatic banquet scene wholly invented by Morris:

then did strange joy surprise
Her listless heart, and changed her old world was;
Ere she had time to think, all woe did pass
Away from her, and all her life grew sweet,
And scarce she felt the ground beneath her feet,
Or knew who stood around, or in what place
Of heaven or earth she was; soft grew her face;
In tears that fell not yet, her eyes did swim,
As, trembling, she reached forth her hand to him,
And with the shame of love her smooth cheeks burned,

And her lips quivered, as if sore they yearned
 For words they had not learned, and might not know
 Till night and loneliness their form should show. (CW, 5:275-276)

This passage indicates the emotional state of the recently bereaved Gudrun. It also foreshadows the end of the tale. Phrases like “changed her old world was” and “Till night and loneliness their form should show” presage the fatalism that Morris layers onto the saga. The saga’s leisurely way of having Gudrun and Kjartan come to like each other does not offer the tragic overtones of Morris’ dramatic scene. In Morris Gudrun and Kiartan meet not only as individuals attracted to each other, but also, under their fathers’ eyes, as pawns in a game played out by the two households, a game ordained by Fate.

A significant substitution occurs in Morris’ treatment of Kiartan’s decision to go to Norway. In forty-five lines of prose, the saga says that Kjartan, who has bought a share in a ship because he is eager to go abroad and win fame, tells Gudrun that she cannot come with him—which she wants to do—because she is needed at home to care for her brothers and father. When Kjartan asks her to wait for him for three years, Gudrun refuses. This small episode in the saga becomes 314 lines of Morris’ poem, lines which alter the motivation for the trip and Gudrun’s reaction to it. Morris has Gudrun suggest that Kiartan, Bodli, and she go abroad since “biding here is little gain, / Cooped up in this cold corner of the world” (CW, 5:280), the kind of comment that a bored young person eager for fame and fortune would, in fact, make. Bodli, joking about going abroad to win a bride, mentions Olaf Tryggvison’s war with Hacon in Norway, and Morris subsequently makes the later news of Olaf Tryggvison’s victory over Hacon a reason for Kiartan’s eagerness to go to Norway, though the saga does not, in fact, mention Olaf’s ascent to the throne until after Kjartan has arrived in Trondheim.

Morris also alters the saga’s version of Gudrun’s reaction to Kjartan’s decision to go abroad. The saga states simply that Gudrun wants to go with him but that Kjartan refuses to take her on the grounds that her father and brothers need her care, and he asks her to wait for him for three years. To this “Gudrun said she would make no such promise, and each would only see it his way. With that they parted and Kjartan rode home” (Arent, p. 101). In Morris, when Kiartan tells Gudrun that he is going away, she offers to go, but Kiartan, torn between his love for her and the desire to win fame, refuses. Then Gudrun tearfully exhorts Kiartan to win fame for them both, somewhat ashamed of her selfish love for him and her rash display of it. Recovering her composure, while Kiartan weeps, Gudrun says:

“Go forth, my love, and be thou not beguiled
 By woman’s tears, I spake but as a fool,

We of the north wrap not our men in wool,
 Lest they should die at last; nay, be not moved,
 To think that thou a faint-heart fool hast loved!" (CW, 5:285)

The same suffering by Gudrun emerges from the pages of the saga, but there the reader must infer the psychological subtleties which Morris adds to his version.

Other substitutions, although they do not affect the plot, deepen the reader's understanding of the characters. Morris was attuned to the emotional turmoil lying beneath the conventional restraint of the sagas. He attempted to make accessible to his modern audience what might have been clear to the medieval Icelanders.

Morris does more, however, than simply expand scenes that expose the emotions of the actors; he substantially alters emotional reactions in several places. For example, not only does he make Ingibjorg more overtly emotional, he also makes her almost saint-like in her love for Kiartan. On the other hand, at the time of Kjartan's and Ingibjorg's parting, the saga reveals Ingibjorg as bitter and uncommunicative to Kjartan, though it does say that "people thought it hard for them to part" (Arent, p. 113). Morris portrays her as a woman bereft of love who, behind a facade of joy, "to this and that thing turned / With heart that ever for the long rest yearned" (CW, 5:317). The reader expects the bitterness shown by Ingibjorg in the saga, but not the complexity of grief revealed by Morris' Ingibjorg.

Morris also fleshes out the character of Hrefna, especially in rendering her reactions to the theft of the coif. In the saga Kjartan's pride motivates him to take revenge on the inhabitants of Laugar for the missing scabbard and coif. When Kjartan returns to Hjarðarholt, Hrefna taunts him with the rumor that he has spoken with Gudrun there and that Gudrun was reportedly wearing the missing headdress. Denying this, Kjartan says, "Besides Gudrun would not need to deck herself out in the headdress in order to look lovelier than all other women," after which "Hrefna broke off talking" (Arent, p. 124). No such scene appears in Morris. Instead, Morris makes Refna the great motivator of Kiartan's revenge at Bathstead. In a touching, dramatic scene, when Refna tells Kiartan that she does not feel any love from him, he coaxes from her, amid her sobs, a confession that she has heard servants, washing linen at the brookside, talking about how Kiartan has done nothing to avenge the theft of the scabbard and headdress and how everyone thinks that Gudrun and Kiartan would be glad if she and Bodli were dead (CW, 5:355-358). As in this episode, throughout his tale Morris makes Refna more sympathetic because he makes her more believable as a victim.

Another revealing substitution Morris makes has to do with Kiartan's reaction to the news of Gudrun's marriage to Bodli. The saga says that when Kjartan learned of the marriage (and it does not say who told him), "contrary to what many had feared, it did not seem to bother him" (Arent, p. 114). Morris has

Kiartan's sister Thurid tell him, and when she does, Kiartan "turned and staggered wildly from the place, / Crying aloud, 'O blind, O blind, O blind!'" (CW, 5:320). Morris brings to the surface the emotions that the saga reader perhaps would have sensed beneath the "did not seem" of the saga's statement.

The saga says that Kjartan's body was taken from the scene of the ambush to his home at Saelingsdale Tongue, but Morris has the body moved first to Bathstead, Gudrun's home, and then to Kiartan's home. Morris obviously makes this change to allow Gudrun to see her beloved dead. The lengthy scene (three and a half pages) made possible by this substitution, one of the most moving in the poem, shows the grief-stricken Gudrun in psychological shades very much like those of Morris' Guenevere. The reader of the saga must infer the depth of her grief when Gudrun is told of Kjartan's death. Also altered is the interview between Bodli and Gudrun after Bodli has killed Kjartan. In the saga Gudrun taunts Bolli in striking litotes: "The seeds of discontent have certainly borne great fruit—I have spun twelve ells of yarn, and you have killed Kjartan" (Arent, p. 131). Hiding her grief beneath a facade of bitterness, Gudrun says that the best part about Kjartan's death is that "Hrefna will not be laughing when she goes to bed tonight," and in response to Bolli's anger at her remarks, Gudrun adds, "I am grateful for what you have done. I think you have shown me now that there's nothing you wouldn't do for me" (Arent, pp. 131-132). Morris' version of the interview differs considerably. Morris has Bodli tell Gudrun that he has killed Kiartan for her, and, with the kind of ambiguity typical of Gudrun, Morris has her hold out her hand toward him in a dramatic gesture that confuses Bodli:

never did he know
If she had mind some pity then to show
Unto him, or if rather more apart
She fain had thrust him from her raging heart. (CW, 5:383)

Like Bodli, the reader cannot be certain what Gudrun means by the gesture. This dramatic scene, which pictures the grey-faced Gudrun as hollow with grief and the "Half-dead" Bodli shrinking against the wall, moves the reader into a world of emotional exhaustion only barely discernible in the saga.

More than these substitutions, however, the numerous additions Morris made to the story show his artistic goals, preeminently the transformation of the story into drama. The most important scene invented by Morris, in fact, does much more than heighten the drama: it forces the reader to recall that this narrative is a story, not reality. Morris frames Kiartan's death in a tale told by two shepherds who have witnessed the slaying. He effectively distances the reader from this critical scene by having the events recited in retrospect by the shepherds, and more important, Morris emphasizes the "storiness" of this account by framing it neatly with references to the fact that they are telling, in fact, a tale:

they “Lurked by the road, and thus they tell their tale” (CW, 5:373). Their account ends with “So told the herd, time long ago, the tale / Of that sad fight within the grey-sloped vale” (CW, 5:380). The idea that the slaying of Kiartan is a tale within a tale is emphasized by the phrase “time long ago,” which creates further distancing between reader and action. Ironically, though throughout the poem Morris adds material which makes the characters more complex and more immediate to the reader than the saga does, he does the opposite here: he removes the reader from the action and reminds the reader of the artifice at work.

Although this scene shows most strikingly Morris’ achievement in using drama to reinforce for his reader the importance of “the tale”—by calling attention at a critical point to the narration as art—he uses other methods to emphasize the importance of the narrative art, methods which distance the reader from the characters and action. The most obvious of these methods is his repeated use of the words tale and story—more than twenty times.¹⁸

In addition, references to poetry and to the heroes of Norse myth link Morris’ poem to a realm of artifice which the reader is not allowed to forget. One of Morris’ lengthy elaborations on the saga shows him probably drawing on Snorri’s *Prose Edda*. Early in “Gudrun” (pp. 262-266) Morris adds 121 lines that elaborately describe the paintings of Norse gods that grace the newly built hall of Olaf Peacock. The part of the saga Morris followed does not mention any details about Olaf’s house—it says simply that Gest went there briefly to see the house—but an early chapter in the saga, in the section Morris does not use for “Gudrun,” states that “Olaf had a guesthouse built at Hjardarholt, bigger and better than anyone had ever seen. There were famous tales depicted on the wainscot and on the ceiling” (Arent, p. 69). That same early chapter (Chap. 29) states that the poet Ulf Uggason “had made a poem about Olaf Hoskuldsson and about those tales that were depicted on the walls of the hall” (Arent, p. 70). This poem by Ulf, parts of which survive in the *Prose Edda*, exemplifies the genre of Old Norse verse which “describes visual representations of myths and heroic legends” (Magnusson and Pálsson, pp. 112-113).

References to proverbs and to the Volsunga saga also emphasize artifice. In restraining Kiartan from killing King Olaf Tryggvison, Bodli tells him that the Icelanders should seek peace, but if peace fails, they should die heroically:

“as in Atli’s Hall
The Niblungs fell; nor worser will it sound
That thus it was, when we are underground,
And over there our Gudrun hears the tale.” (CW, 5:295)

The reference to “the tale” that Gudrun would hear also stresses the importance

of narrative. Similarly Morris relates the tale to other oral lore by including three proverbs that are not in the saga: "The wise saves blow by blow" (CW, 5:292), "Old friends are last to sever" (CW, 5:358), and "Bettered is bale by bale that follows it" (CW, 5:394). The inclusion of the proverbs may have been suggested by Morris' translation of Grettir's saga, which was published only a month before "Gudrun" was complete. Grettir's saga contains forty-nine proverbs.

This attention to artifice is also emphasized in the passage early in the story where Morris has Guest say to Gudrun that the events he is predicting are about to be played out as part of a tale. After hearing her dreams, he says:

"scarce may I now withhold
The tale of what mine eyes have seen therein;
Yet little from my foresight shall thou win,
Since both the blind, and they who see full well,
Go the same road, and leave a tale to tell
Of interwoven miseries, but they
Who after them a while on earth must stay,
Shall have no pleasure in the winter night,
When this man's pain is made that man's delight." (CW, 5:258)

This statement, original in "Gudrun," suggests that life becomes a tale to entertain those who survive, an idea Guest articulates again at the end of his conversation with Gudrun:

"Woe worth the while! forget it, and be blind!
Look not before thee! the road left behind,
Let that be to thee as a tale well told
To make thee merry when thou growest old!" (CW, 5:270)

This sense of artifice is further suggested by the reference to the acting out of Fate when Kiartan says to Refna, "Come, open-handed let us play our parts" (CW, 5:351); and it is suggested by the narrator's question that begins the verse chapter in which the ambush of Kiartan is planned: "What should the next move in the strange game be?" (CW, 5:366). These passages do more, however, than remind the reader of the artifice of the narrative and of the sense of role-playing by the characters; they also help Morris create the unity which he thought the saga lacked.

Morris unified "Gudrun" with three kinds of addition to the original saga. Apart from his numerous references to "the tale," he achieves unity by repeated uses of some images that do not appear in the saga, layering onto the saga material numerous allusions to Fate. One effective image repeated early in "Gudrun" is that of a veil, a symbol of the human inability to see. As she hears Guest's predictions, Gudrun sits "As one who sees the corner of the veil, / That hideth strange things, lifted for a while" (CW, 5:260). A few pages later, as action replaces prediction, Morris echoes Guest's foresight, describing the growing love between Gudrun and Kiartan:

Yea, even most sweet the minute they must part,
 Because the veil, that so oft time must draw
 Before them, fell, and clear without a flaw
 Their hearts saw love, that moment they did stand
 Ere lip left lip, or hand fell down from hand. (CW, 5:278)

This image of the veil appears again in Morris' description of Bodli as he confronts Kiartan for the first time after Bodli has married Gudrun. The poem says that Bodli

still must fear,
 Lest from the feast's noise he a shriek should hear,
 When the thin dream-veil, torn across, should show
 That in the very hell he lay alow. (CW, 5:334)

Similarly Morris uses the same word, "blind," to describe the reactions of Bodli and Kiartan and Gudrun at nine critical points (see pp. 277, 306, 309, 324, 330, 337, 342, 370, and 390). Blindness is one of the dominant images of the poem, and like veiledness, is a related motif of sight. When Bodli tells Gudrun that Kiartan is not coming back, "his sad eyes did beseech / Some look from hers, so blind to him, so blind!" (CW, 5:306). When Gudrun, who has never given up her love for Kiartan, hears of his marriage to Refna, she is described as one "Deaf, dumb, and blind" (CW, 5:342), but it is only when she has become physically blind (CW, 5:393) that she can see that by forsaking Kiartan she has treated him the worst.

Images drawn from nature also help unify the poem. In addition to the images of growth and harvesting which run through "Gudrun," Morris uses nature to mirror the state of his characters. One of his most striking unifying devices is the double use of the same natural objects, first to describe Eden-like innocence, then to describe the situation after the fall. The first occurrence, near the beginning of the poem, describes the natural world on the day when Olaf Peacock and Guest meet:

into the dale they came,
 And saw the gilt roof-ridge of Herdholt flame
 In the bright sunlight over the fresh grass,
 O'er which the restless white-woolled lambs did pass,
 And querulous grey ewes; and wide around,
 Near and far up the dale, they heard the sound
 Of lowing kine, and the blithe neat-herd's voice,
 For in those days did all things there rejoice. (CW, 5:262)

After his sister has told him about Gudrun's marriage, Kiartan turns to nature for consolation. But now he finds no sense of community there:

he turned about,
 And far away he heard the shipmen's shout
 And beat of the sea, and from the down there came

The bleat of ewes; and all these, and his name,
 And the sights too, the green down 'neath the sun,
 The white strand and the far-off hillsides dun,
 And white birds wheeling, well-known things did seem,
 But pictures now or figures in a dream,
 With all their meaning lost. (CW, 5:321)

The hopelessness of her love for Kiartan leads Gudrun to think of nature as perverted and brutal: she thinks of the “backward rush of pain and bitter blame / Unanswerable, cold, blighting, as the sea, / Let in o'er flowers” (CW, 5:336). Elsewhere, in Gudrun's mind, Kiartan has been fused with nature:

still everywhere
 Did Kiartan's image meet her; the warm air
 Of summer seemed but sent her from his hand,
 The sea that beat the borders of the land
 Still seemed to bear his fame unto her feet;
 All summer sights and sounds, and odours sweet,
 Were heavy with his memory. (CW, 5:367)

Morris' most obvious devices to achieve unity are foreshadowing and frequent references to Fate. Foreshadowing appears in the predictions of Guest, but a more subtle occurrence appears in an insertion Morris himself makes. In Chapter Thirty of the saga, two chapters before the point at which Morris begins his retelling of the Gudrun story, the reader learns about the theft of the sword “Leg-Biter” by Olaf's daughter Thurid. This theft calls down a curse on the sword from its owner, Geirmund the Noisy, Thurid's husband: “May the sword cause the death of that man in your family who would be the greatest loss, and may his death come about in a way most befitting” (Arent, p. 72). Morris puts this curse, along with the history of the sword and its curse, into the mouth of Olaf Peacock, who tells Guest

“Some call that sword accursed;
 Bodli now bears it, which the Eastlander
 Gerimund, my daughter's husband, once did wear.
 Hast thou not heard the tale? he won the maid
 By my wife's word, wherefor with gold he paid,
 Or so I deemed; but whereas of good kin
 The man was, and the woman hot herein,
 I stood not in the way; well, but his love,
 Whate'er it was, quenched not his will to rove;
 He left her, but would nowise leave the sword,
 And so she helped herself, and for reward
 Got that, and a curse with it, blabbers say.
 —Let see if it prevail 'gainst my good day!” (CW, 5:268)

Although Morris does not specify what the curse is, as the saga does, his use of

Olaf Peacock to give this synopsis is ironic: the curse does “prevail ’gainst my good day,” killing the child who is the greatest loss to the family. The irony is enhanced by the context. Olaf and Guest are watching the young Bodli and Kiartan innocently play with the sword. The synopsis also prefigures what happens to Gudrun: Kiartan is not content to love Gudrun, but loves Ingibiorg as well. When Gudrun takes matters into her own hands, marrying Bodli, she sets in motion the fated events.

Another unifying device employed by Morris is his use of Fate as a kind of motif. He uses the term Fate over and over again, and he has Gudrun remember Guest’s prophecy at significant moments (see *CW*, 5:273, 278, for example). In the saga there are many fewer references to Fate, and once Gest has given his prophecy neither he nor the prophecy is mentioned again.

Guest’s prophecy is more somber in Morris’ version than in the saga, and it is more ambiguous. In the saga Gudrun abruptly brings up the dreams and asks Gest to help, saying that no one has been able to interpret them satisfactorily. Morris’ Gudrun, however, more passive, even evasive, admits only when questioned that she has had dreams. Then she abruptly changes the subject, insisting that Guest “tell me merry tales” (*CW*, 5:255). Gudrun’s response to Guest’s interpretation of her dreams also differs from that of her counterpart in the saga. In both versions she thanks Guest for his interpretation, but in Morris’ tale, Gudrun doubts Guest’s ability somewhat: “yet wise as thou mayst be, / Mayst thou not dimly through these tangles see?” (*CW*, 5:260). Not only does she doubt Guest, but she does so in an ambiguous line. The line may mean that Guest can see “dimly” and thus better than most men, or it may mean that Guest can see only “dirlly” and thus offers no real vision of the future.

The techniques Morris used to alter his source range from major omissions and additions, which add psychological realism, drama, visual richness, and clarity, to subtle uses of language, which create irony and ambiguity, and a more complex texture than is apparent in the saga. Through all of these techniques, Morris unified the work, not having perceived the unity implicit in the part of the *Laxdaela* saga that he used. But rather than writing a poem which distorts the saga’s major theme of revenge into themes of “self-pity and frustrated love,” as Wahl suggests (p. 3), Morris has used the central episodes of a family saga as the inspiration for an original poem whose theme is heroic perseverance in the face of doom. This theme, inherent in the source, along with the idea that fame—the story of one’s behavior in adversity—is all that endures, drew Morris to the sagas. Of equal importance to Morris was the theme implicit in the sagas: that art plays an important role in everyday life, especially when it records heroic acts. Morris makes this theme explicit in a central passage in “The Lovers of Gudrun”:

still thrall and serving-man
Came home from fold and hayfield to the hall,

And still did Olaf's cheery deep voice call
 Over the mead-horns; danced the fiddle-bow,
 And twanged the harp-strings, and still sweet enow
 Were measured words, as some one skilled in song
 Told olden tales of war, and love, and wrong. (CW, 5:323)

This passage emphasizes the participation of the common man ("thrall and serving man") in the music and poetry of the hall, arts which, like life, go on regardless of immediate crises. The theme of art as an integral part of day-to-day life was a major element of Morris' socialism, even, arguably, the dominant belief that led him into socialism. Morris' transformation from a romantic writer to a socialist writer seems to have begun, at least, with his transformation of his Icelandic source into "The Lovers of Gudrun."

Notes

- 1 Morris apparently did not read *Volsunga saga* until he had completed "Gudrun." His letters show that around August 5, 1869, he had completed "Gudrun" and that Magnusson did not send him the *Volsunga saga* until August 15 (*Letters*, 1:82, 88).
- 2 Peter Faulkner suggests that Morris' "involvement with Icelandic literature was an attempt to cope with this 'flabbiness,'" but his theory seems to confuse the cause with the effect (*William Morris: The Critical Heritage* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973], p. 11).
- 3 Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 458-459. Doughty, like others, points out that "Gudrun," like Morris' incomplete novel, reflects the love of two men, closely related, for one woman, a love triangle being played out by Morris, Jane Morris, and Rossetti at this time at Kelmscott Manor. Oscar Maurer says that in "Gudrun," Morris "was adapting the saga material in a direction that reflected his own trouble" and that "his treatment of the 'triangle' situation in *Laxdaela saga* may well indicate his own identification with Bodli, who needed affection, who admired and felt inferior to Kiartan, who loved Gudrun only to find, after the marriage, that Kiartan still had her heart ("William Morris and Laxdoela Saga," *TSLI* 5 [1963]: 436). See also Roderick Marshall, *William Morris and His Earthly Paradise* (Tisbury, Wiltshire: Compton Press, 1979); and John Robert Wahl, "The Mood of Energy and the Mood of Idleness: A Note on *The Earthly Paradise*," *English Studies in Africa* 2, no. 1 (1959): 90-97.
- 4 John Buchan, "Morris and Rossetti," *Homilies and Recreations*, Essay Index Reprint Series (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries, 1969), p. 275.
- 5 Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and of Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1937), p. 65; Wahl, p. 4.
- 6 Ralph A. Bellas, "William Morris' Treatment of Sources in 'The Earthly Paradise,'" Diss., University of Kansas, 1960, p. 302.

- 7 See Florence S. Boos, "Morris' Radical Revisions of the *Laxdaela* saga," *VP* 21 (1983): 415-420; and *The Design of William Morris' The Earthly Paradise* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1991), p. 301.
- 8 Carole G. Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 75-76.
- 9 Florence S. Boos, "Narrative Design in *The Pilgrims of Hope*," *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, ed. Florence S. Boos and Carole G. Silver (Columbia: Univ. Press of Missouri, 1990), p. 154.
- 10 Jessie Kocmanová, *The Poetic Maturing of William Morris: From The Earthly Paradise to The Pilgrims of Hope* (n.p.: Folcroft, 1970), p. 84.
- 11 See A. Margaret Arent, trans., *The Laxdaela Saga* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1964), pp. xx-xxi; W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover, 1957), p. 185; and Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, introduction, *The Laxdaela Saga*, trans. Magnusson and Pálsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 9.
- 12 CW, 5:xxxii. Morris' "Gudrun" was the first exposure that English readers had to *Laxdaela* saga, the first published translation not appearing until 1899 (Maurer, p. 424).
- 13 *Laxdaela* is spelled *Laxdoela* by Maurer and others.
- 14 Morris spells the name *Bodli* in the tale and *Bolli* in the letter. Arent's translation of *Laxdaela* renders it *Bolli*. Other spellings which differ are *Kiartan*, *Refna*, *Guest*, *Ingibiorg*, *Hakon*, and *Tryggvason* in Arent. Also *Hjardarholt* and *Laugar* in the saga are translated as *Herdholt* and *Bathstead*, respectively, in Morris. I use Morris' spellings when referring to Morris' work and Arent's spellings when referring to the saga.
- 15 E. R. Eddison, *Egils' Saga Done Into English out of the Icelandic with an Introduction, Notes, and an Essay on Some Principles of Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1930), p. xxxi.
- 16 The episodes after *Kjartan*'s death were apparently grafted onto the saga afterwards (Maurer, p. 426).
- 17 A "dry fast," *burr matr*, prohibited dairy products and allowed fish, bread, vegetables, fruit, and nuts (Arent, p. 207 n. 2; Magnusson and Pálsson, p. 162).
- 18 See, for example, CW, 5:255, 258, 270, 272, 273, 274, 277, 298, 300, 311, 321, 331, 335, 341, 349, 354, 366. See also Blue Calhoun's discussion of Morris' use of the concept of tale-telling (*The Pastoral Vision of William Morris: The Earthly Paradise* [Athens: Univ. Press of Georgia, 1975], p. 185).