



## Compare the depictions of Vikings in at least two different periods of English literature.

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Our conception of the Vikings is shaped by more than purely material and archaeological evidence; these may offer hints as to how the Vikings lived, but not how they thought. For this, we must turn to the literature. It is in the stories and poetry of a people that we find, for want of a better word, the ‘spirit’ of that people. This ‘spirit’ is particularly important to the English: Vikings have long held a prominent role in our cultural memory. Much of the time this ‘spirit’ is falsified, and the Vikings have been perceived solely as brutal, vicious raiders — savages, in fact — but a study of their literary heritage will quickly put an end to this calumnious reputation. This heritage comes to us mainly through the Icelandic Sagas, written after the Viking Age but with the Vikings as their subject, being ‘fictionalized accounts of events that took place in Iceland during the time of the Vikings’.<sup>1</sup> In today’s terms, they would perhaps occupy a middle ground between ‘narrative history’ and ‘historical fiction’. Some of England’s greatest writers of the last few centuries, on finding the rich aesthetic and historical value in the Icelandic sagas, have attempted to communicate it to the readers of their own generation. I will be examining alongside each other the attempts, separated by over a hundred years, of two of these authors: one of Thomas Gray’s ‘Odes from the Norse Tongue’, *The Fatal Sisters*; and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, William Morris’s verse rendition of *Volsungasaga*.

Awareness of Viking history and literature came upon Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century through Paul Mallet’s historical works on Scandinavia (1755-56 and 1763), translated by Thomas Percy and published in England in 1770 as *Northern Antiquities*. Percy had seven years earlier published *Five pieces of Runic Poetry*,<sup>2</sup> translations of Norse poetry which he had encountered in Mallet’s work. Percy was more of a scholar than a poet, however, and his literal translations satisfied the historical impulse rather than the imaginative. Thomas Gray, a poet as well as a scholar, took a different approach to translating the poems. Where Percy was presenting the Northern literature in itself, Gray was presenting it in relation to our own history. In the advertisement to *The Fatal Sisters* he writes of previous intentions ‘of giving *the History of English Poetry*,’ for which he ‘meant to have produced some specimens of the Style that reigned in ancient times among the neighbouring nations, or those who had subdued the greater part of this Island, and were our Progenitors’.<sup>3</sup> Gray had a vested interest, then, in demonstrating the kinship between the poetry of antiquity and the English poetry of his day: he could not allow the Norse specimens to appear too remote. This already brings attention to the difficulty that translation raises; the need to render the poetry intelligible to the modern reader may be at the expense of faithfulness to the

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kellogg, ‘Introduction’, *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Books 2001), p. xviii

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Percy, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Islandic Language* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1763)

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gray, ‘Advertisement’, *The Fatal Sisters: An Ode, Gray and Collins: Poetical Works*, ed. Austin Lane Poole (London: OUP, 1966), p. 67

original. Morris's motives were similar to Gray's, although on a grander scale. Six years before his *Sigurd*, Morris had co-authored with Eiríkr Magnússon a prose translation of the same saga. In the preface to this translation he expresses his oft-quoted sentiments that

this is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks — to all our race first, and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been — a story too — then it should be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us.<sup>4</sup>

No loftier claim for a literary work could be made; Morris's translation of the saga into an epic poem perhaps constitutes the most ambitious translation ever produced, in terms of the impact he intended. The difference in the size of Gray's and Morris's translations should be noted, for it is representative of the treatment of Norse poetry in their respective centuries: in the nineteenth, Carolyne Larrington informs us, the shorter eddic poems were used 'primarily as source material for a number of larger projects'.<sup>5</sup> Where the eighteenth-century translators kept faithfulness to the original work in its actual form as their ideal, those of the nineteenth-century tended to synthesise whatever work was available in an attempt to give England a national mythology to reflect upon. We must turn a closer eye to the works themselves if we are to assess how successful Gray and Morris were in their endeavours.

Gray's purpose of ensuring that the poems are absorbed as part of the English literary heritage is made immediately manifest in *The Fatal Sisters*, in which the first stanza is his own addition rather than a translation from the original source:

Now the storm begins to lower,  
(Haste, the loom of Hell prepare,)  
Iron-sleet of arrowy shower  
Hurtles in the darken'd air.<sup>6</sup>

The third and fourth lines both contain phrases lifted from Shakespeare and Milton,<sup>7</sup> a fact which Gray takes pains to ensure that the reader knows by appending a footnote to each of the lines, showing the phrase in its original context. Nor have the poets been chosen at random, as Milton and Shakespeare are the English poets *par excellence*, but neither citation, in itself, has anything to do with Old Norse poetry. Alison Finlay writes that Gray here 'perfectly illustrates... his ambitions of transforming [the 'spirit' of northern literature] into an idiom recognizable from — and by implication, related to — the English poetic canon',<sup>8</sup> but I think Finlay gives Gray too much credit in this case. In my view it was simply an attempt to show a connection between the two poetic traditions — ancient and modern — in order to make the poem seem less remote; the attempt is laboured, the connection appears tenuous and forced rather than natural, as if Gray were trying to forge the relation between the two literatures rather than demonstrating it. This is a good example, though, of the relationship between Gray's scholarly and poetic impulses. In such a task as he set himself, both needed to be in full force but also in full cooperation. With this in mind, Gray gives a preface to put the poem in context — the poem appears in *Njal's Saga* — but the preface is

<sup>4</sup>'Preface', *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*, trans. William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon (London: F. S. Ellis, 1870), p. xi

<sup>5</sup> Carolyne Larrington, 'Introduction', *The Poetic Edda*, trans. Carolyne Larrington (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. xxiii

<sup>6</sup> Gray, *The Fatal Sisters: An Ode, Gray and Collins: Poetical Works*, ed. Austin Lane Poole (London: OUP, 1966), ll. 1-4

<sup>7</sup>'...and flying behind them shot/ Sharp sleet of arrowy showers at the face/ Of their pursuers.' John Milton, *Paradise Regained* iii. 322-24

<sup>8</sup>'The noise of battle hurtled in the air.' William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II.ii.22

<sup>8</sup> Alison Finlay, 'Thomas Gray's Translations of Old Norse Poetry', *Old Norse Made New: Essays on the Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse Literature and Culture* (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd, 2007), p. 13

singularly unsatisfying; although it gives the poem an immediate context, it is so brief that it begs to be put into context itself, and thus demonstrates the danger of extracting from a work so vast as a saga. As a poem in itself, Gray's rendition may be excellent, but loses more than it gains by being given as a lyric. As it stands, it is an inadequate reflection of the richness of the literature Gray is drawing from. Admittedly, Gray absolves himself from his obligation to reflect *the History of English Poetry* in the advertisement to the poem, and so may be more concerned with the poetic than the historical impact, but in translating poetry there is a duty to do justice to the wider tradition from which it came; this, in *The Fatal Sisters*, Gray fails to do.

As poetry, though, *The Fatal Sisters* stands strong, the technical problems in translation well grappled with. Gray uses sixteen stanzas for the original's eleven, and employs the metre and rhyme scheme of the 'Horatian Ode'.<sup>9</sup> The form is an appropriate one for the translation, its constraints — shorter stanzas — reflecting the intensely concentrated nature of the Old Norse metre. He also bravely attempts to echo the alliterative style which the Norse poets developed to such complexity:

Glitt'ring lances are the loom,  
Where the dusky warp we strain,  
Weaving many a Soldier's doom,  
*Orkney's woe, and Randver's bane.*<sup>10</sup>

Such detail makes the poem a model of compression, and Gray manipulates the brevity of his metre in such a way that lends a feeling of sturdiness to every image he details, while simultaneously creating the tensest of atmospheres. Of the forthcoming battle:

Ere the ruddy sun be set,  
Pikes must shiver, javelins sing,  
Blade with clattering buckler meet,  
Hauberk crash, and helmet ring.<sup>11</sup>

That Gray can present a battle so vividly before it actually occurs is itself a marvel — we can almost hear the clanging metal — but the full power of Gray's language becomes apparent when we remember who is singing: the Valkyries, who 'in the throng of battle selected such as were destined to slaughter'.<sup>12</sup> The battle and the resulting deaths are inevitable and unavoidable, and those who are going to die have already had their fate decided; there is a sense of bleak resignation in this, but the resignation takes the form of intensity rather than apathy. This is precisely the atmosphere evoked when reading the Icelandic sagas, precisely the 'northern spirit' that one looks for in Viking literature. Fate was so important to the Vikings that, as Terry Gunnell notes, 'Norse people would not travel or go to war without checking up on the likely fate that might befall them';<sup>13</sup> combined with the fact that the sagas are historical in nature and intention anyway, the prevailing atmosphere of the sagas is that of inevitability. The intensity mentioned above comes from the heroes of the sagas and their courage in the face of the inevitable. Thomas Carlyle, perhaps unsurprisingly, was particularly receptive to this, and held it 'the soul of the whole Norse belief'. On the

<sup>9</sup> Finlay, p. 14

<sup>10</sup> Gray, *The Fatal Sisters*, ll. 5-8

<sup>11</sup> Gray, ll. 21-24

<sup>12</sup> Gray, 'Advertisement'

<sup>13</sup> Terry Gunnell, 'Viking Religion: Old Norse Mythology', *Beowulf and Other Stories: A New Introduction to Old English, Old Icelandic and Anglo-Norman Literatures*, eds. Richard North and Joe Allard (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), p. 368

significance of the Valkyries he gives a poetic summary which captures their fundamental importance to the Vikings brilliantly: ‘The *Valkyrs* are Choosers of the slain: a Destiny inexorable, which it is useless trying to bend or soften, has appointed who is to be slain; this was a fundamental point for the Norse believer... it is the woof out of which his whole system of thought is woven’. The heroes of the sagas have accepted that their death will not be in their own control, yet still they fight on, knowing that ‘the one thing needful for a man was *to be brave*’.<sup>14</sup> Thence the intensity, thence the heroism, thence the ‘northern spirit’: it is found in the ‘sublime uncomplaining melancholy traceable in these old hearts’,<sup>15</sup> the hearts of the heroes of the sagas who are also, it must be remembered, human. In the sagas, the sublime stems not from divinities but from the human characters and their stoical courage. That Gray has managed to give a sense of this in such a short poem is to his everlasting credit, for none but a true poet could have done so. The twofold purpose of translation is made evident; Gray may not have educated his readers as to the scale of the literature he was drawing from, but in rendering the atmosphere as closely as possible to the original he gave English readers an invaluable insight into their cultural heritage, and established the North on the map as a literary tradition worth exploring.

William Morris could never be accused of underappreciating the grandeur of ancient literature. In his lifetime he published verse translations of several ancient epics, including Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. His translation of *Volsungasaga*, however, was a little different to the others, all of which were verse epics to begin with: here he was translating into verse from a prose narrative. Although more difficult, this worked to Morris’s advantage — because the tale had not been told in such a form before, he could decide on his own constraints rather than being confined by any already existing ones. He decided on the hexameter, a metre already associated with epic, having been the metre employed by Homer and Virgil in their own, and therefore in accordance with Morris’s ambition for the saga as quoted above; and Morris’s verse, in *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, lives up to the grandeur befitting its subject. The famous opening sets the scene magnificently, but the fact that he is setting the scene at all is an immediate break from saga tradition, which is more austere in its descriptions, if it gives descriptions at all. In the *Volsungasaga*, for example, the tree Barnstock is described thus: ‘a huge tree stood with its trunk in the hall and its branches, with fair blossoms, stretched out through the roof. They called the tree Barnstock’.<sup>16</sup> Morris, on the same object, is more expansive:

For amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang up a mighty tree,  
That reared its blessings roofward, and wreathed the roof-tree dear  
With the glory of the summer and the garland of the year...  
So there was the throne of Volsung beneath its blossoming bower,  
But high o’er the roof crest red it rose ‘twixt tower and tower,  
And therein were the wild hawks dwelling, abiding the dole of their lord;  
And they wailed high over the wine, and laughed to the waking sword.  
Still were its boughs but for them...<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that this is no mere ‘translation’, rather a complete refashioning of the saga. But Morris is unique in his approach; although refashioning the saga for a modern readership, he is far from refashioning it in a modern manner, instead employing an archaic style

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Hero as Divinity’, *Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd. [No year given]), p. 208

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212

<sup>16</sup> *The Saga of the Volsungs*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), p. 37

<sup>17</sup> William Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1887), p. 2

throughout. This was not to everyone's taste, but most could see the idea behind it; Morris wanted to ensure that readers appreciated its antiquity, and did not see it simply as one of his poetic ventures.

One contemporary reviewer, though, writes that Morris's 'imitation of the archaic style is, indeed, carried to excess, as if to cover the lack of the antique spirit'.<sup>18</sup> This seems a strange assertion, but it proves that Morris was running the risk of his notion of the past being thought artificial and therefore false. Refashioning a work of the past — and translating is always refashioning to some extent — leaves one open to the charge that the work is no longer of the past, but just a modern poem that happens to be based on an old one. Morris, having embellished the saga so extensively, could perhaps be accused of this with some validity. The bareness of the saga prose style was one of the reasons for its power, allowing the events to be felt in their full force; with Morris, the language dominates proceedings. The description quoted above, compared to its counterpart in the original, is far closer in tone to his later prose romances that instigated the genre of the heroic fantasy than it is to the tone of his source; it carries the sense of a created world rather than the portrayal of a past. What the reviewer fails to recognise is that the bareness of the saga goes some way towards vindicating Morris's approach. In the saga, we see only the characters; in Morris's rendition, the world of the characters is given shape. Morris's ambition for the story of the Volsungs to become the national myth made this necessary, for this was the reason he chose to refashion the saga as an epic poem, a form requires one quality perhaps before all others: a grand scale. To achieve this he had to remove the saga's inherent remoteness and replace it with a sense of grandeur. A false grandeur this may have been, but it cannot be called insincere, and Morris's *Sigurd*, among several of his other works, constitutes the noblest attempt by one of our poets to discover the 'spirit of the North'; he did not quite clinch it, perhaps putting too much of himself into his work, but for such an intangible thing as the 'spirit' of a literature, attempting is as far as one can go.

Reading Morris's epic or Gray's poem is no match for reading the original sources, nor would the authors have wished their work to be; but the sources, and the knowledge required to read them, are all but inaccessible to the common reader. It is, to a large extent, due to writers such as Morris and Gray that we can have an appreciation of Old Norse literature at all. The fact that their attempts to transmit it resulted in the translations becoming great literature by their own right may be behind the excessive romanticism with which Vikings are sometimes viewed, as if they hailed from the province of literature rather than history. This unfortunate legacy can certainly be excused by the more positive one: no readers, in either century, could deny the appeal of the literature that Gray and Morris were drawing from, and in providing evidence of a sophisticated literary heritage the slanderous accusations towards the Vikings as being merely primitive and savage immediately fall away.

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<sup>18</sup> Unsigned review, *North American Review*, March 1877, cxxiv, 323-25; collected in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1973), pp. 246-48

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