The role of Grimhild in Sigurd the Volsung

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I intend here to examine in some detail the role of Grimhild in Sigurd the Volsung. The way Morris treats this character and the vocabulary he uses give rise to some reflections on his use of the vocabulary of craft and textiles, which seems not to have been noticed before. It is not, for instance, entirely fortuitous that Grimhild is the only woman in Sigurd who spins - the others weave and embroider, but they don’t spin. There seem to be deep-rooted associations of spinning with witchcraft, and it is in witchcraft that Grimhild excels. This can probably be traced back to the Fates in Greek mythology, who spin the thread that controls people’s lives.

In considering the characterisation of Grimhild and the association of spinning with witchcraft we shall have occasion to observe that, though the Norns in Morris’s poem never spin, Grimhild does, and her spinning is what makes her witchcraft effective: there are references to her belief that she can defy the decrees of the Norns, or of Fate.

She is given by Morris a role of vital importance which is hinted at in the source – Völsunga Saga – but which is only developed to its full potential in Morris’s poem. It is Grimhild who has some claim to be considered the villain of the piece; it is she who drugs Sigurd into forgetting Brynhild, and she who forces the reluctant Gudrun into a second marriage with Atli.

Grimhild is characterised in negative terms in Völsunga Saga from the first mention of her, where she is referred to as ‘fjölkunnga’, which Morris translates as ‘wise-wife’.

In his translation, Morris renders the sentence

Gjúki átti Grimhildi ina fjölkunngu

as

But Giuki had married Grimhild the Wise-wife.

The sentence in the original does not begin with ‘but’ – by inserting this, Morris is able to indicate to the reader that everything is going well for Giuki’s family, except for the fact that he has married Grimhild. The contemporary audience of Völsunga Saga would have realised that the fact that Giuki was married to a ‘fjölkunnga’ was in any case likely to lead to no good.

‘Wise-wife’ is more or less obsolete now, and was fairly archaic even when Morris used it. Certainly it no longer has any negative connotations, but it in fact implies, not merely a woman who possesses wisdom, but a woman skilled in witchcraft: Brynhild would never be referred to as a wise-wife.
Witchcraft/sorcery was a very real force for evil in the world of the family sagas, and the same attitude is apparent in Völsunga Saga Grimhild is referred to as ‘grimmhuga kona’, which Morris translates as ‘fierce-hearted woman’, Finch as ‘of an evil disposition’. Finch’s translation is perhaps clearer, as ‘fierce-hearted’ can under certain circumstances have positive as well as negative connotations – that is, it could just mean ‘brave’ or ‘fearless’. It would perhaps have been better to translate it as ‘evil-hearted’.

Based on the hints given in Völsunga Saga Morris creates a woman of formidable power and ambition, who in fact plays a central role in Books III and IV of his poem. Her chief characteristic is her ambition for her family; everything she does is undertaken with the aim of gaining greater glory for her children, but what she does in fact achieve is their destruction; her belief that she can defy the decrees of Fate is shown to be false.

The vocabulary associated with Grimhild in Morris’s poem is invariably negative. She is introduced as;

The woman overwise,
Grimhild the kin of the God-folk, the wife of the glittering eyes.

(References to Grimhild’s ‘glittering eyes’ recur quite frequently – it is a negative rather than a positive epithet, whereas, curiously enough, something like ‘sparkling eyes’ would be positive. It is possible that the association here is with the eyes of snakes, that glitter as they seize their prey.)

One of the most interesting aspects of Morris’s poem is the way in which the personality of Grimhild is gradually and subtly built up, from the first reference to her as ‘overwise’. Her life is a constant striving after achievement, but in the end she loses everything.

Gudrun doesn’t trust her mother, knowing her to be over-ambitious, and she is reluctant to ask Grimhild to interpret her dreams:

Wise too is my mother Grimhild, but I fear her guileful mood,
Lest she love me overmuch, and fashion all dreams to ill.
Not that Grimhild will interpret the dreams unfavourably, but that she will go too far in interpreting them favourably, probably looking for material advantage rather than love in Gudrun’s marriage. In this situation, Brynhild’s wisdom is more highly prized than Grimhild’s.

Morris seems to indicate that Grimhild thinks of Sigurd as a possible husband for Gudrun as soon as she sees him:

So Grimhild greeted the guest, and she deemed him fair and sweet,
And she deemed him mighty of men, and a king for the queen-folk meet.

When Grimhild gives Sigurd the potion to make him fall in love with Gudrun, this is described in entirely negative terms:

He laughed and took the cup: But therein with the blood of the earth
Earth's hidden might was mingled, and deeds of the cold sea's birth,
And things that the high Gods turn from, and a tangle of strange love,
Deep guile, and strong compelling, that whoso drank thereof
Should remember not his longing, should cast his love away.
After Sigurd has drunk the potion, there occurs the first mention of Grimhild’s belief in her ability to defy the decrees of Fate:

But Grimhild looked and was merry; and she deemed her life was great,
And her hand a wonder of wonders to withstand the deeds of Fate;
For she saw by the face of Sigurd and the token of his eyes,
That her will had abased the valiant, and filled the faithful with lies.

It is clear enough therefore, that Grimhild is proud of her achievement in somehow diminishing Sigurd – she has won him as a husband for her daughter, but he is less of a radiant hero than he was before he drank her potion. She has subdued Sigurd, and feels this to be a sign that she can subdue Fate:

But all this was a token unto her, and great pride within her grew.

She seems not to have acted with negative intent, but out of pride, the idea that she can do better than the gods:

... she thought: I will heal the smitten, I will raise up the smitten and slain,
And take heed where the Gods were heedless, and build on where they began,
And frame hope for the unborn children and the coming days of man.

Acting in defiance of the Gods’ indifference is something we have met with before, in Brynhild, although this is clearer in the passage Morris excised from the finished version, which is quoted in Vol. I of William Morris. Artist, Writer, Socialist. So it may be correct to conclude that it is not in itself a negative attitude, or it wasn’t negative in Brynhild, but is turned into something negative by Grimhild.

Once Grimhild has gained Sigurd as a husband for her daughter, she turns her attention to gaining Brynhild as a wife for her son. To bring this about, she has to enlist the aid of Sigurd, and so we must assume that she knows of the prior betrothal between Sigurd and Brynhild. (This is not made explicit in Morris’s poem, though it is clear in Völsunga Saga). She therefore finds it necessary to practise more witchcraft, in particular, to teach Sigurd and Gunnar the craft of shape-changing, as she knows – or at least suspects – that it will be necessary.

... ‘Be mighty and wise, as the kings that came before!
For they knew of the ways of the Gods, and the craft of the Gods they bore:
And they knew how the shapes of man-folk are the very images
Of the hearts that abide within them, and they knew of the shaping of these.
Be wise and mighty, O Kings, and look in mine heart and behold
The craft that prevails o’er semblance, and the treasured wisdom of old!
I hallow you thus for the day, and I hallow you thus for the night,
And I hallow you thus for the dawning with my fathers’ hidden might.
Go now, for ye bear my will while I sit in the hall and spin;
And tonight shall be the weaving, and tomorrow the web shall ye win.’

There are several layers of meaning in this passage, which deserve closer examination. In this context, *craft* doesn’t imply handcraft or needlework, or any of the textile arts in which Morris was skilled; it implies rather witchcraft or sorcery – shape-changing, after all, is something unnatural, involves disturbing the balance of nature.
Among the definitions of *craft* given by the *O.E.D.*, the following are the most relevant to our purposes:

I. Strength, power, might, force. (Obsolete).
II. Intellectual power, skill, art.
2. Skill, skillfulness, art, ability in planning or performing, ingenuity in constructing dexterity.
Occult art, magic. (obsolete)
3(b). A magical device, a spell or enchantment.
4. In a bad sense, skill or art applied to deceive or overreach; deceit, guile, fraud, cunning.
IV. A branch of skilled work.
b. An art, trade or profession requiring special skill and knowledge; esp. a manual art, a handicraft.

Morris uses the term *craft* in his poem both in the sense of *handicraft* and in the sense of *occult art, magic*. And Grimhild practises both the *craft of magic* and the *craft of spinning*.

I have already drawn attention to the fact that Grimhild is the only woman in *Sigurd* who spins, and I suggest that, given Morris’s own work as a professional craftsman, this can hardly be fortuitous. It is also significant that the cluster of references to Grimhild’s spinning occurs at the point at which she is preparing a spell to enable Gunnar and Sigurd to deceive Brynhild; the reader is reminded of the age-old association of spinning and witchcraft.

It will be useful to turn here again to the *O.E.D.*, in which the following definitions of spinning are the most relevant to our purposes:

1. To draw and twist the fibres of some suitable material, such as wool or flax, so as to form a continuous thread; to be engaged in or to follow his occupation.
2. In figurative contexts.
   To spin a yarn (To tell a story)
   4.(fig.) a Of the Fates or other powers. To devise or appoint (One’s destiny or fortune.)

The *O.E.D.* also contains the following definition of *weave*:

1b. In figurative context
   In many languages, the equivalent vb. is used in metaphorical expressions relating to the contriving of plots or deception.

In other words, Morris is here employing the idea of spinning and weaving as metaphors for deception.

I have already quoted the first reference to Grimhild’s spinning, which occurs at the point when she finds it necessary to teach Gunnar and Sigurd the craft of shape-changing. A second reference occurs as Gunnar is unable to cross Brynhild’s fire, even though he is riding Sigurd’s horse; he exclaims:

‘Who mocketh the King of the Niblungs in the desert land forlorn?
Is it thou, O Sigurd the Stranger? Is it thou, o younger-born?
Dost thou laugh in the hall, O Mother? dost thou spin, and laugh at the tale
That has drawn thy son and thine eldest to the sword and the blaze of the bale?’
Sigurd replies,

‘... Nay, strengthen thine hand for the work, for the gift that thy manhood awaits,
For I give thee a gift, O Niblung, that shall overload the Fates;
And how may a King sustain it? but forbear with the dark to strive;
For thy mother spinneth and worketh, and her craft is awake and alive.’

The poem continues:

Then Hogni spake from the saddle; ‘The time, and the time is come
To gather the might of our mother, and of her that spinneth at home.’

Hogni then advises Sigurd and Gunnar to change shapes, as Grimhild has taught them, and the poem informs us;

But the *craft* of the kings of aforetime on those kings of the battle lay.

A final reference to Grimhild’s spinning occurs as Sigurd, Gunnar and Hogni return from the wooing expedition:

O’er heath and holt they hie them, o’er hill and dale they ride,
Till they come to the Burg of the Niblungs and the war-gate of their pride;
And there is Grimhild the Wise-wife, and she sits and spins in the hall.
‘Rejoice, O mother,’ saith Gunnar, ‘for thy guest hath holpen all
And this eve shall thy sons be merry ...’

There is perhaps a literal level at which Grimhild can be seen as fulfilling her domestic duties, spinning wool to make clothes for her family – which would in mediaeval society in fact have been one of her chief duties, a fact of which Morris was well aware – but the metaphor of spinning as a means of deception is here far more important.

Grimhild does no more spinning once she has achieved her aim of winning Brynhild as a wife for her son, but her ambition for her family is by no means sated; she drives them on to what she sees as greater honours, greater achievements, but in fact brings about the destruction of the Niblung race.

She plays a negative role at the wedding of Gunnar and Brynhild. She steps between Sigurd and Brynhild, and the simile is striking:

... but e’en as the rainless cloud
Ere the first of the tempest ariseth the latter sun doth shroud,
And men look round and shudder, so Grimhild came between
The silent golden Sigurd and the eyes of the mighty Queen.

This is not in fact the first time that Grimhild has been associated with storm and tempest, with blotting out the sun; in the above case, extinguishing the light from Brynhild’s life, as she had previously done to Sigurd, when she gave him the cup of
evil drink; the rather lengthy simile Morris employs at this point indicates, not only that Sigurd's life is blighted, but also that his sorrow somehow communicates itself to all the others present:

As folk of the summer feasters, who have fallen to feast in the morn,
And have wreathed their brows with roses ere the first of the clouds was born;
Beneath the boughs were they sitting, and the long leaves twinkled about,
And the wind with their laughter was mingled, nor held aback from their shout,
Amidst of their harp it lingered, from the mouth of their horn went up,
Round the reek of their roast was it breathing, o'er the flickering face of their Cup
– Lo now, why sit thy so heavy, and why is their joy-speech dead,
Why are the long leaves drooping, and the fair wind hushed over overhead?
Look out from the sunless boughs to the yellow-mirky east,
How the clouds are woven togeth'er that afternoon of feast;
There are heavier clouds above them, and the sun is a hidden wonder,
It rains in the nether heaven, and the world is afraid with the thunder;
E'en so in the hall of the Niblungs, and the holy joyous place,
Sat the earls on the marvel gazing, and the sorrow of Sigurd's face.

Grimhild, then, is not only seen as overwise and skilled in witchcraft and deception, but is also associated with clouding the brightness of the sun – which seems to be a metaphor for blighting peoples' lives.

Brynhild, in her greeting to Grimhild, seems to be perfectly well aware that she has been brought to the Niblungs' hall as a result of the older woman's ambitions;

O mother of the Niblungs, such hap be on thy head,
As thy love for me, the stranger, was past the pain of words!
Mayst thou see thy son's sons glorious in the meeting of the swords!
Mayst thou sleep and doubt thee nothing of the fortunes of thy race!
Mayst thou hear folk call yon high-seat the earth's most happy place!

Could one be correct in assuming that that next line –

Then the Wise-wife hushed before her, and a little fell aside

implies that even Grimhild is somewhat abashed before Brynhild? That she can't think of anything to say in response to Brynhild's greeting, which is, on the surface, courteous, but indicates suspicion of Grimhild's motives? The reader is reminded again that Grimhild is a wise-wife, i.e. a witch, and this negative attribute is emphasised here in order to draw attention to the contrast with Brynhild.

It is interesting – perhaps curious – to note than, when Sigurd and Brynhild finally came face to face and he recognises her, the poem tells us that

The will of the Norns is accomplished, and, lo, they wend on their ways,
And leave the mighty Sigurd to deal with the latter days –
The reader had been led to suppose that it was the will of Grimhild that had been accomplished, and that she thought that she could defy the will of the Norns. Perhaps, then, this should be interpreted as implying that ultimately Grimhild will *not* succeed in defying the will of the Norns.

Grimhild now turns her attention to inspiring Gunnar with envy of Sigurd’s wealth;

He hearkens to Grimhild, moreover, and he deems she is driving him on,
He knoweth not whither nor wherefore; but she tells of the measureless gold,
And the flame of the uttermost Waters, and the Hoard of the Kings of old;
And she tells of kings’ supplanters, and the leaders of the war,
Who take the crown of song-craft, and the tale when all is o’er.

It is *not* suggested in *Völsunga Saga* that Grimhild is the one who inspires Gunnar with envy of Sigurd’s wealth; this is in any case a secondary motive in the Saga. In the Saga, it is Brynhild who is the chief instigator, Gunnar who insists on the murder being carried out, while Grimhild plays a very minor role:

Gunnar ... was bound to Sigurd by oath, and this way and that swung the heart within him; but at the last he bethought him of the measureless shame if his wife went from him, and he said within himself, ‘Brynhild is better to me than all things else, and the fairest woman of all women, and I will lay down my life rather than lose the love of her.’ And herewith he called to him his brother and spake:

‘Trouble is heavy on me,’ and he tells him that he must needs slay Sigurd, for that he has failed him where in he trusted him; ‘so let us be lords of the gold and the realm withal.’

Hogni answers, ‘Ill it behoves us to break our oaths with wrack and wrong, and withal great aid we have in him; ... such another brother-in-law never may we get again ... But well I see how things stand, for this has Brynhild stirred thee up to, and surely shall her counsel drag us into huge shame and scathe.’

Gunnar says, ‘Yet shall it be brought about ... let us egg our brother Guttorm to the deed; he is young, and of little knowledge, and is clean out of all the oaths moreover.’

... So the brothers fall to talk, and Gunnar says that it is a deed well worthy of death, that taking of Brynhild’s maidenhead; ‘so come now, let us prick on Guttorm to do the deed.’

Therewith they call him to them ... and they took a certain worm and somewhat of wolf’s flesh and let seethe them together, and gave him to eat of the same, even as the singer sings:

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Fish of the wild-wood,
Worm smooth crawling,
With wolf-meat mingled,
They minced for Guttorm;
Then in the beaker,
In the wine his mouth knew,
They set it, still doing
More deeds of wizards.
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Wherefore with the eating of this meat he grew so wild and eager, and with all things about him, and with the heavy words of Grimhild, that he gave his word to do the deed; and mighty honour they promised him in reward thereof.

In Morris's poem, Grimhild sees Sigurd merely as a means to an end, the aggrandisement of her family. This is not really the case in Völsunga Saga, in which she decides to obtain Sigurd as a husband for Gudrun, but the marriage is an end in itself; as far as she is concerned, it is not then necessary to get rid of Sigurd in order to obtain his wealth. This motive is first suggested by Gunnar, but his main motive is that he is driven to plan the murder of Sigurd by Brynhild; Hogni speaks against the plan, and Grimhild is not concerned in it.

The poem does not precisely suggest, when Grimhild first sees Sigurd, that she sees him as a means to an end - I have already drawn attention to the fact that Grimhild deemed him mighty of men, and a king for the queen-folk meet,

in other words, that she saw him as a suitable husband for her daughter. But we have also noted that she was pleased that the effect of her potion was to diminish Sigurd in some way, to make him less of a radiant hero than he was before:

But Grimhild looked and was merry: and she deemed her life was great,  
And her hand a wonder of wonders to withstand the deeds of Fate;  
For she saw by the face of Sigurd and the token of his eyes  
That her will had abased the valiant, and filled the faithful with lies …

Perhaps this does indicate that Grimhild merely sees Sigurd as a means to an end; if this is so, this gives the poem an internal consistency which Völsunga Saga lacks. It would be possible to interpret Book IV of Sigurd as the tragedy of Grimhild, as it in this final book of the poem that she sees all her ambitions destroyed.

We should, then, take careful note of the fact that it is Grimhild who first sows the seeds of suspicion and envy in Gunnar's mind, and inspires him with 'measureless pride'. During the quarrel with Gudrun, Brynhild curses Grimhild, reveals that she knows (and presumably has always suspected) that Grimhild drugged Sigurd into forgetting her, and foretells that she will one day drug Gudrun in the same way:

'O Niblung child,' said Brynhild, 'what bitterer curse may be  
Than the curse of Grimhild thy mother, and the womb that carried thee?'  
'Ah Fool!' said the wife of Sigurd, 'wilt thou curse thy very friend?  
But the bitter love bewrays thee, and thy pride that naught shall end.'  
'Do I curse the accursed?' said Brynhild, 'but yet the day shall come,  
When thy word shall scarce be better on the threshold of thine home;  
When thine heart shall be dulled and chilly with e'en such a mingling of might,  
As in Sigurd's cup she mingled, and thou shalt not remember aright.'

This reminds us that Brynhild has the gift of prophecy; she is not a wise-wife like Grimhild, but a woman gifted with wisdom.
It is Grimhild’s suggestion that Guttorm, the youngest brother, should carry out the planned murder of Sigurd:

Again spake Grimhild the wise-wife; ‘Where then is Guttorm the brave?
For he blent not his blood with the Volsung’s, nor his oath to Sigurd gave,
Nor called on Earth to witness, nor went beneath the yoke;
And now is he Sigurd’s foeman; and who may curse his stroke?’

In Völsunga Saga it is originally Gunnar’s idea that Guttorm should be the murderer. Now Grimhild, in order to inspire Guttorm to the deed, brews an even nastier drink than the one she gave to Sigurd:

Then uprose Grimhild the wise-wife, and took the cup again;
Night-long had she brewed that witch-drink and laboured not in vain.
For therein was the creeping venom, and hearts of things that prey
On the hidden lives of ocean, and never look on day;
And the heart of the ravening wood-wolf and the hunger-blinded beast
And the spent slaked heart of the wild-fire the gleeful cup increased;
But huge words of ancient evil about its rim were scored,
The curse and the eyeless craving of the first that fashioned sword.

Morris did not base this on Völsunga Saga, but on his own view of Grimhild as a central figure in the plot.

Book IV of Sigurd the Volsung, although entitled ‘Gudrun’ might with almost equal justification be entitled ‘Grimhild’, as I indicated above, the final book of the poem is in many ways her tragedy: she believes that she is going to see the culmination of all her hopes, but instead she experiences their extinction:

And the years have made her glorious, and the days have swollen her pride;
She looketh down on the people, from on high she looketh down,
And her days have become a wonder, and her redes are wisdom’s crown,
She saith; ‘Where then are the Gods? what things have they shapen and made
More of might than the days I have shapen? of whom shall our hearts be afraid?’

Although this passage seems to indicate that Grimhild despises the Gods, in a later conversation with Gunnar, she is more circumspect. She is here telling him how she will persuade – or force, if persuasion will not serve – Gudrun to accept Atli’s wooing:

‘But now is the day of our deeds, and no longer durst I refrain,
Lest I put the Gods’ hands from me, and make their gifts but vain.
Yea, the woman is of the Niblungs, and often I knew her of old,
How her heart would burn within her when the tale of their glory was told.
With wisdom and craft shall I work, with the gifts that Odin hath given;
Wherewith my fathers of old, and the ancient mothers have striven.’
'Ancient mothers' may be a reference to the Norns or to a concept closer to the Fates of Greek mythology.

Grimhild here is not defying the Gods, or claims, at any rate, that she isn’t; she is making the best of their gifts, or perhaps improving on what they have given. She has previously indicated that she is motivated by a desire to defy the indifference of the Gods, as was Brynhild. It is now Grimhild who reproaches Hogni with attempting to fight against Fate;

'O wise-heart Hogni', said Grimhild, 'wilt thou strive with the hand of Fate, And thrust back the hand of Odin that the Niblung glory will crown?'

It will transpire, however, that Grimhild has misinterpreted the omens, or that she has interpreted them according to her own desires, still thinking that she is in control of Fate, or that she is manipulating the Gods, rather than being subject to their decrees like anyone else.

This will become clearer if we jump ahead to Grimhild’s last utterance; she knows that her sons have gone on their last journey, and they know it too, although no-one is prepared to admit it, and when they have left, she curse the gods and dies:

'O ye – whom then shall I cry on, ye that hunt my sons unto death, And overthrow our glory, and bring our labour to nought – Ye Gods, ye had fashioned the greatest, and to make them greater I wrought, And to strengthen your hands for the battle, and uplift your hearts for the end; But ye, ye have fashioned confusion, and the great with the little ye blend, Till no more on the earth shall be living the mighty that mock at your death, Till like the leaves men tremble, like the dry leaves quake at breath. I have wrought for your lives and your glory, and for this have I strengthened my guile, That the earth your hands uplifted might endure, nor pass in a while Like the clouds of latter morning that melt in the first of the night.'

She rose up great and dreadful, and stood on the floor upright, And cast up her hands to the roof-tree, and cried aloud and said:

'Woe to you that have made me for nothing! for the house of the Niblungs is dead, Empty and dead as the desert, where the sun is idle and vain, And no hope hath the dew to cherish, and no deed abideth the rain.'

Before concluding this discussion, let us return to Grimhild’s potions once more. She gives Gudrun a potion to make her agree to marry Atli, and in this instance, it is specifically stated that Gudrun does not forget Sigurd:

Nought changed the eyes of Gudrun, but she reached her hand to the cup And drank before her kindred, and the blood from her heart went up, And was blent with the guile of the serpent, and many a thing she forget, But never the day of her sorrow, and of how o’er Sigurd she sat.
This differs to some extent from Völsunga Saga, in which

They were fain to choose good gifts for their sister, and spake softly to her, but in none of them would she trow. Then Gunnar brought unto her a drink mingled with hurtful things, and this she must needs drink, and with the drinking thereof she had no more memory of their guilt against her.

But, in the Saga as in the poem, it is to Grimhild's persuasion and guile that Gudrun finally yields. After this, Grimhild plays no further part in the Saga, whereas in Morris's poem she does not fade out of the story, but continues to occupy a central role until, as we have already observed, she curses the gods and dies, after her sons have gone on what they know, and she knows, to be their last journey.

To sum up: Morris was evidently fascinated by the figure of Grimhild, and advanced her to a role of centrality, based on the hints given in Völsunga Saga. In doing so, he has in fact given Books III and IV of the poem an internal consistency which is lacking in the Saga. In Morris's poem, the downfall of the Niblungs could be interpreted as the tragedy of Grimhild, as all her scheming for the sake of her family leads to their destruction, not to the greater glory she desired for them.

NOTE
The Völsunga Saga, translated by Morris and Magnusson, was published in 1870. It appears in Volume VII of The Collected Works.
Sigurd the Volsung was published in 1876. It is in Volume XII of The Collected Works.