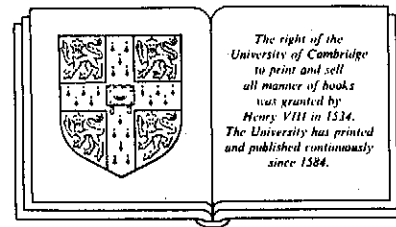


THE ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Amanda Hodgson



Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

unit of community is a group of friends, not a political system. Morris no longer uses his fiction to present specific patterns of behaviour to be copied by Socialists. Through the events of a romance narrative he is content to suggest relationships between the individual and the community which may have a Socialist application. In a sense the later romances are increasingly self-referential, without overtly requiring us to draw parallels with the world beyond the fiction. They function as concentrations, distillations, of Morris's thought – his final assertion of his belief that art becomes relevant to life not by a naturalistic reflection of reality but by achieving a delicate metaphorical equivalence with it. We do not find in Morris a blueprint for Socialist systems of government. We do discover an image of the essence of Socialism, presented through the highly formalized patterning of romance.

II

The metaphorical relationship between the romances and the everyday experience of their readers is achieved not only by strangeness of setting and event within the story but also by idiosyncrasies of language. Morris had always sought a style related to medieval rather than contemporary models, in language as in everything else. In the romances he achieves a highly formalized and predominantly archaic diction. Critical response to the stories has to confront the question of their linguistic success.

The prose aims specifically to reproduce a language as far as possible undamaged by the intrusion of Latin and French influences, closer to the pre-Conquest English which Morris admired. Building on the stylistic foundations laid down in his previous work, especially in *Sigurd*, he employed two main techniques to give his writing a medieval flavour: the choice of archaic vocabulary and the use of a very simple, not to say simplistic, syntax. The combination of these two characteristics gives rise to the special quality of Morris's prose. Here is a passage from *The Well at the World's End*:

On the morrow early they all fared on together, and thereafter they went for two days more till they came into a valley amidst of the mountains, which was fair and lovely, and therein was the dwelling or

town of this Folk of the Fells. It was indeed no stronghold, save that it was not easy to find, and that the way thither was well defensible were foemen to try it. The houses thereof were artless, the chiefest of them like to the great barn of an abbey in our land, the others low and small; but the people, both men and women, haunted mostly the big house. As for the folk, they were for the more part like those whom they had met afore: strong men, but not high of stature, black-haired, with blue or grey eyes, cheerful of countenance, and of many words. Their women were mostly somewhat more than comely, smiling, kind of speech, but not suffering the caresses of aliens. They saw no thralls amongst them, and when Ralph asked hereof, how that might be, since they were men-catchers, they told him that when they took men and women, as oft they did, they always sold them for what they would bring to the plain-dwellers, or else slew them, or held them to ransom, but never brought them home to their stead. Howbeit, when they took children, as whiles befell, they sometimes brought them home, and made them very children of their Folk with many uncouth prayers and worship of their Gods, who were indeed, as they deemed, but forefathers of the Folk. (XIX. 128-9)

Many of Morris's favourite devices may be seen in this extract. He habitually uses 'deemed' for 'thought', 'thrall' for 'slave', 'stead' for 'dwelling-place'. Common also in Morris's writing are the archaic conjunctions ('howbeit'), adverbs ('oft', 'whiles') and adverbial compounds ('therein', 'thereof'); the deployment of words in their old or literal meaning ('very' for 'true', 'artless' indicating lack of architectural decoration); and the coining of hyphenated synonyms in imitation of Icelandic and Old English diction, so that the folk become 'men-catchers' instead of the more likely (and more perjorative) Latinate 'bandits'.⁶ With this goes a tendency to alter the order of words from what would have been expected in modern English; for example, the reversing of adverb and verb ('haunted mostly') and the biblical cadence of 'Ralph asked hereof, how that might be'. And it is all too common for Morris to use circumlocutionary phrases such as 'high of stature' in place of the simple adjective 'tall'. Yet this persistent wrenching of language into an unexpected form in terms of vocabulary and structure does not disguise the unsophisticated (even banal, basic pattern of the sentences. Morris writes a very shapeless prose.) Neither within individual sentences nor in paragraphs as a whole is there any sense of movement to and from a specific telling phrase; instead the sentences characteristically fall away into a series of statements

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each less arresting than the preceding one. This occurs in the two sentences describing the men and women of the Folk and in the final sentence – the major impression given by this kind of writing is one of lingering anti-climax.

These infelicitous qualities of language are repeated more or less precisely through all the romances. At its worst the writing is overwhelmingly bland and repetitive. The rambling, sequential sentences lack incisiveness or tension, reducing every event or description to monotony. Although the romances, as befits the genre, are full of potentially stirring incident, there is little heightening of language to convey excitement. Here is Ralph, the hero of *The Well at the World's End*, in deadly combat:

There and then had the tale ended, but Ralph, who was wary, though he were young, and had Falcon well in hand, turned his wrist and made the horse swerve, so that the man-at-arms missed his attaint, but could not draw rein speedily enough to stay his horse . . . the sword caught the foeman on the neck betwixt sallet and jack, and nought held before it, neither leather nor ring-mail, so that the man's head was nigh smitten off. (XVIII. 49–50)

Morris is more concerned with the technical details of the encounter than with evoking its violent, swift and bloody nature. Similarly, when Ralph is suffering extreme grief the language remains undistorted:

his breast arose and his face was wryed, and he wept loud and long, and as if he should never make an end of it. (XVIII. 202)

The measured progression of the prose precludes involvement on the part of the reader. We are observers of the events and emotions portrayed, always distanced from them by the cool sameness of the language. There is also a lack of distinctiveness in the characters' speech. All the people in Morris's romances, whether queens or slaves, civilized or barbarian, talk in almost exactly the same way. Again this fact ensures detachment in the reader, a consciousness of the artificial nature of the world he is entering which is a typical requirement of romance – but it can make for less than enthralling writing.

Morris, moreover, was always subject to the temptations of prolixity. Perhaps it was a wish to transfer to fiction something of the quality of pattern designing, which satisfies by repetition, that led him to construct stories in which, for instance, outward

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journeys must be reversed almost step by step at the end of the book. This occurs in both *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*; and while the changes in the various places along the route may be instructive, the moral design of the romance does not justify the lengthy recapitulations that such a construction inevitably entails. When aligned with the flatness already identified as one of the problematic aspects of Morris's prose, this expansiveness contributes to the failure of the romances always to hold the attention even of a committed reader. It is revealing to compare the longest romances with Morris's early short stories; the vivid imagery and startling oddities of syntax in the earlier works point clearly the degree to which the romances are vague in description and over-extended in plot.

To look at the romances in this way may, however, be to fail in response. Some moments of grief, anger or excitement are compelling – when Ralph and Ursula complete their quest for the Well the language achieves a moving simplicity and control. And the irritating qualities of diction and construction may, if only slightly differently perceived, become bearable, even positively valuable, as the requisite style for romance. Repetition in romance is natural, particularly in medieval romance where events evolve in apparently endless series. And a lack of distinctiveness in character or description may occur because in romance individuals and specific actions must be subordinate to the accretions of the plot as a whole. If we compare Morris's language to that of Malory, for example, some of the same 'problems' may be identified. Here is an extract from 'The Tale of King Arthur':

Now turne we unto Accalon of Gaule, that whan he awoke he founde hymself by a depe welles syde within half a foote, in grete perell of deth. And there com oute of that fountayne a pype of sylver, and oute of that pype ran water all on hyghe in a stone of marbil. Whan sir Accolon sawe this he blyssed hym and seyde, 'Jesu, save my lorde kynge Arthure and kynge Uryence, for thes damysels in this shippe hath betrayed us. They were fendis and no women. And if I may ascape this mysadventure I shall distroye them, all that I may fynde of thes false damysels that faryth thus with their inchauntementes.'

And ryght with that there com a dwarf with a grete mowthe and a flatte nose, and salewed sir Accalon and tolde hym how he cam fromme quene Morgan le Fay.⁷

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Accalon's deadly peril is mentioned with the same matter-of-fact flatness with which, in the next sentence, the dangerous well is described. The arrival of the deformed dwarf causes no detectable surprise in Accalon and therefore raises none in the reader; it is simply the next event in a sequence, neither more nor less disturbing than the danger to Accalon or the appearance of the fountain. This prose lacks climaxes just as Morris's does. Even in Accalon's denunciation of the treacherous damsels no attempt is made to represent the anguished state of mind of the speaker. In true romance fashion, Malory depicts but does not imitate the strong emotions of his characters.

Of course Malory also writes in a more modern style, when, for example, he seeks to express the pathos of Launcelot and Guinevere's farewell. At such moments he attains a rhythmic power that is beyond Morris's capacity. Yet Malory's example suggests that by seeking in Morris's stories for language that is in itself exciting or stimulating we are searching in the wrong place for the tales' centre of interest. The power of Morris's writing is not in the diction. It is to be found in the symbols and thematic patterns which structure each romance. Here the metaphorical relationship between the literary work and reality exists in its most potent form. Each story is organized around a number of symbolic phenomena: places, people, events. Often the central symbol is indicated in the title: the Wood beyond the world, the Well at the World's End. Within the romance the symbols do not have their meaning blurred by emotive or even particularly descriptive language. They are presented with as much clarity of outline as Morris can achieve. We 'read' the romances by setting one symbol against another, looking always for pattern, for repetition and diversity, for subtle variation and unexpected similarity. We must follow the line of the adventure through space and time, finding in the forward moves and setbacks of the quest the significance of the story. Morris does not wish us to pause over the elegance of a sentence but to retain clearly the organization of the whole lengthy narrative. In the subsequent analysis of some of the romances' symbols, we shall not linger to regret flatness of character or imprecision of statement. We shall focus on the images which are at the heart of the romances and to which we are required to pay scrupulous attention. Sometimes they are familiar and powerful because

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we recognize them and respond to them with knowledge of their force in other fiction or in mythology: solar imagery will operate in this way. Sometimes we must discover their force by careful examination of the patterns in which they occur.

This symbolic technique stresses static representation, the series of pictures or motifs. There is indeed a consequent loss of tension as compared with Morris's early prose. But it may be that this newly reassuring style reflects Morris's emphasis on integration and confidence, without which he could not write romance at all. The most profound moments in romance are those of recognition, when we respond to an expected but delayed reaffirmation that all is ultimately well. In *Pericles* the divine harmony, the music of the spheres, is Shakespeare's image for the clarity and control which may be perceived beneath the apparent disorder of things. We have seen Morris approach a conviction that harmony was, or would be, attainable. His political propaganda basically involved a projection of the coming 'epoch of rest', the Nowhere of all men's dreams where all discords are resolved. His romances have this quality of rest as their major structural imperative. Battles, sorrow and death certainly occur, but their disruptive effect is mitigated by the reassurance of the prose, which is not dislocated by the disturbing events it describes. And the slow but inexorable progression of the plot towards the successful end of the quest images the process of benevolent time in which Morris had come to trust.

III

Integration between the present and the past, hardly attainable in Morris's early prose works, is a secure achievement in the last romances. In *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains* this integration was suggested by the implied relationship between the historical setting and the reader's present experience. In the later works the unity is achieved on a more personal level. Indeed, in some cases Morris seems to be conducting a psychological enquiry, using the symbols and motifs of romance, into his hero's personality.

An example of the romance protagonists' need to come to terms with their own past occurs in *The Water of the Wondrous*