CHILD CHRISTOPHER AND GOLDILIND THE FAIR

BY

WILLIAM MORRIS

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INTRODUCTION

You are about to read a comfortably familiar, startlingly new story. It is a story as old as English literature and as contemporary as the latest best-seller. It manages to achieve remarkable forward and backward movements through time because it inhabits the transcendent world of the imagination. And you are among the very select few who have ever had a chance to glimpse this delicate and perceptive vision. Until this Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy edition, in the eighty-odd years since it was written, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* has existed in only about 2,000 copies, scattered in various small editions around the world. Though it has been little known, the book is intriguing and important. It provides access to the literary and mythic roots of fantasy writing; it shows us, more simply and directly than any of his other novels, the influences and ideals which led its author, William Morris, to discover a new mode of fiction.

William Morris illuminates the nineteenth century as the man who created the English fantasy novel. In doing so he transformed the older forms of literature he most admired—epic, romance, saga, and folk-tale—into the widely read format of novelistic fiction. Morris radically departed from the conventions of social and psychological realism which dominated the mainstream Victorian novel. His first major biographer, J. W. Mackail, accurately observed in 1899 that "On the imaginative side he was far behind, and far before, his own time: he belongs partly to the earlier Middle Ages, and partly to an age still far in the future." We are now far enough into that future to begin to recognize the magnitude of his literary invention. He appreciated and created a literature which revealed itself in action rather than introspection, and one in which symbols were vital parts of the action and setting, not artificially contrived literary devices. He wrote of a nobler and better world, hoping to appeal to the highest motives of men to live honest, decent lives in a climate of fair politics and good government. These humanitarian visions he combined with myth and symbol into active narration, a technique he adapted from epic, saga, and romance writing.

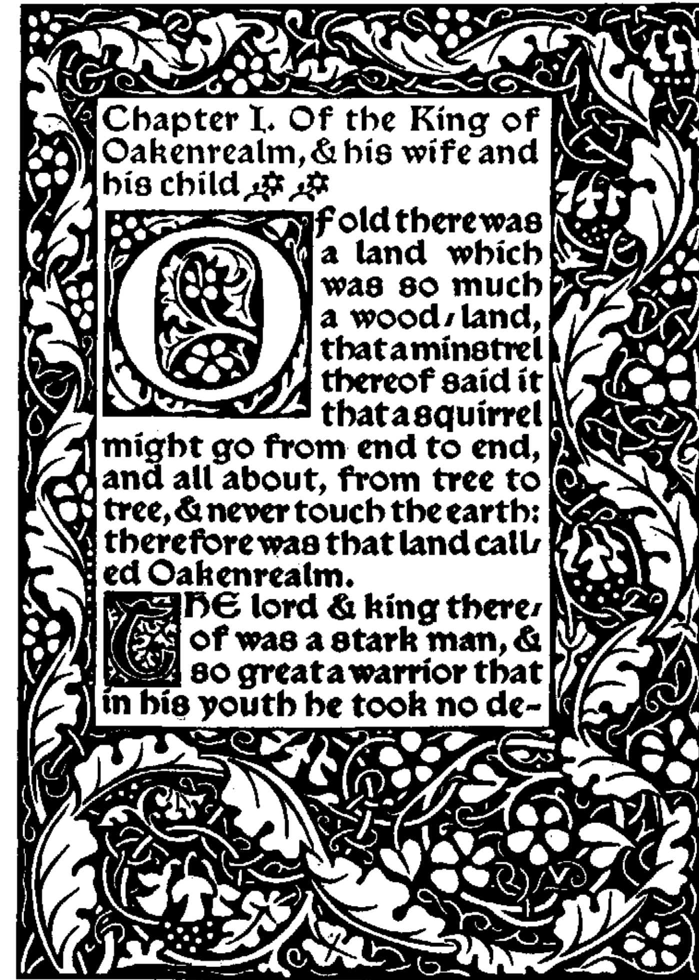
Morris was a man of enormous energy and wide learning. His poetic achievement earned him the offer of the poet laureateship of England after Tennyson's death, but he declined it because of other priorities. His artistic range extended from the mastery of dozens of design and craft skills to that of scholar and translator of *Beowulf, The Aeneid, The Odyssey,* and the great Norse epics. In the preface to his first translations for the six-volume Saga Library, Morris praised the fact that Iceland "retained the memory of the mythology and the hero-tales of the Gothic tribes . . . the poetic life and instinct which made Iceland the treasure-house of the mythology of the whole Teutonic race." His scholarly and literary sensibilities merged with social criticism: he felt called upon to praise and preserve this "treasure-house" because it represented a collection of ancient stories saved through precarious oral traditions over hundreds of years.

Describing himself late in life, Morris observed that "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization." By this he indicated that he discerned a ruinous tendency in his generation's preoccupation with becoming self-consciously "modern." Imaginatively, linguistically, culturally and historically, human life began to cut itself off from roots in the past. Industrialization irrevocably altered the world, isolating labor from meaningful traditions of handwork and craft. The factory system broke each job into pieces, and man lost sight of the whole. Individualism and competition, high speed and efficient productivity became the new ideals. Anything old, slow, and different was simply outdated or old-fashioned, curious and quaint, perhaps, but irrelevant. The world succeeded in becoming streamlined and modern and, regrettably, older poetic and literary forms were ignored as individuals and nations lost their sense of a meaningful past.

Now as we experience renewed interest in fantasy writing, as contemporary individuals search for collective, unconscious imaginative links with the past, we can turn new eyes to the vision of William Morris. Myths no longer seem distant curiosities and childish fairytales but intriguing imaginative expressions of human transformations and possibilities. *Child Christopher* shares with Morris's other fantasy stories the quality of possessing a vital mythic dimension and provides a unique glimpse of the ancient sources of fantasy. The story unfolds as if we had heard it long ago; yet it is at once fresh and reassuring. It seems to capture and hold fast values, ideas, and feelings which reside at the deep core of human consciousness.

The story of *Child Christopher* actually begins for us, as it did for Morris, with the thirteenth-century English metrical romance, *Havelok the Dane*. *Havelok* was composed in a Northeast Midland dialect of Middle English and is one of the earliest pieces of extant English literature to use the language of the common people and to appeal to a non-courtly audience. Both of these factors would have attracted Morris, who opposed high ranks, pretentious stations, and the social and economic exploitation of the courtly tradition. He recognized in this tale of the exploits of a legendary king of England and Denmark a story with mythic and human importance. Though not widely known, *Havelok* had already served Shakespeare as an inspiration for *Hamlet*, and Morris found his interest whetted by the publication of a new edition of the tale by the Early English Text Society in 1868. Readers may enjoy comparing the Shakespearean and Morrisian treatments, particularly with respect to political, social, and religious attitudes.

The original story tells of an English princess named Goldborough who is left an orphan at the age of two. While she is growing up, her kingdom is to be ruled by a regent appointed by her father. The regent is instructed to marry her to the best, fairest, and strongest man living and to assure her rule as Queen when she is old enough. Instead, he shuts her up in Dover Castle. Parallel to this the hero, Havelok, is orphaned when his father, the King of Denmark, dies. The councilor entrusted to rule until Havelok comes of age attempts to have the young prince drowned, but a luminous mark on the boy's shoulder and a bright light issuing from his mouth convince an honest fisherman that the child must be a true king and he is spirited away to


Chapter I. Of the King of Oakenrealm, & his wife and his child

Of old there was a land which was so much a wood-land, that a minstrel thereof said it that a squirrel might go from end to end, and all about, from tree to tree, & never touch the earth: therefore was that land called Oakenrealm.

THE lord & king thereof was a stark man, & so great a warrior that in his youth he took no de-

Original first page of text.

Original title page.

England for safekeeping. There Havelok is raised as a simple fisherman. Finally gaining local fame in a sports contest (stone-throwing), he attracts the attention of Goldborough's regent, who decides to marry her to this poor boy. When the two are wed, and both deceitful regents feel their positions to be entirely safe, Havelok and Goldborough realize through dreams and glowing signs that they must claim their thrones. Havelok invades Denmark, regains his kingdom, conquers England, and rewards all those who have cared for him. He and Goldborough live a hundred years and have many children.

In adapting the tale, Morris preferred the happy ending to the discovery of something rotten in Denmark. He advised his daughter the right way of retelling an old romance: "Read it through, then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself." This provides a way of casting the narrative in your own words while preserving the basic spirit of the source. The mixture of early English and old Scandinavian influences in this tale highlighted the cultural roots Morris admired most. He had already followed these roots to the European continent to produce translations of three Old French romances which he published at his Kelmscott Press, starting in 1893. French romance techniques abound in *Child Christopher,* adding yet another important source to the emerging fantasy form. As Joseph Jacobs observed in the introduction to the 1896 edition of Morris's French translations, the historic origins were far-ranging: "Obscure as still remains the origin of that *genre* of romance to which the tales before us belong, there is little doubt that their models, if not their originals, were once extant as Constantinople. Though in no single instance has the Greek original been discovered of any of these romances, the mere name of their heroes would be in most cases sufficient to prove their Hellenic or Byzantine origin." Morris's daughter May suggested a point still more anterior and recognized in these medieval tales elements of folklore traditions as old as human culture, extending to Africa and the East.

The spirit of the original 1895 Kelmscott Press edition is reminiscent of the historical antecedents which inform *Child Christopher*. The title page, with both lettering and floral designs by Morris himself, beautifully combines both Eastern and Western influences and is a fitting place to begin a brief discussion of central themes. (See illustration on facing page.) Morris's vision of unity extended to a wedding of the visual and literary arts: on this title page his achievements as a designer are inextricably bound up with his fantasy vision. Here Morris achieves clear balance in the names of the central characters and directs our attention to levels of meaning within the words. For the sake of his illumination he consciously varies from the official title of the work, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair,* to word his title page "Of Child Christopher and Fair Goldilind." If we read the words in the way Morris has arranged them, we are strongly drawn first to the "Christ" in "Christopher" and the implied spiritual salvation.

As a linguist and translator, Morris was aware of the roots of language as an affirmation of the continuity and progression of human culture. He chose to stress these roots in both his prose style and word choice. The name "Christopher" derives from Greek, through Latin and Old French, and

means "bearer of Christ." Originally the word was applied by the Christians to themselves, meaning that they bore Christ in their hearts. Later, St. Christopher came to prominence, an early Christian martyr whose name was attached to the legend of a holy man who carried the child Christ across a river. Always the patron of travellers, St. Christopher was one of the commonest subjects for mural paintings inside English churches and a favorite with the average citizen. Morris, himself not conventionally religious, was attracted by the human emphasis in the story. A Morris and Company stained-glass window depicting Saint Christopher was designed in 1868 by Edward Burne-Jones and executed in rich Morris colors. It is one of the most artistically successful small windows ever executed by the company and emphasizes the human commitment of Christopher, a good man who stooped to carry the burden of a fellow traveller across a difficult impasse. In the context of Morris's tale the name and the image seem clearly to connote human spirituality in relation to one's fellow man.

The central lines of the page provide visual connection and support, with "pher" arranged symmetrically above the following line and hinting at a rhyme between "pher" and "fair." "Gold," normally prompting thoughts of money and material wealth, is joined in the heroine's name with fairness, not greed or exploitation. The spiritual emphasis of Christopher is linked to the material fairness of Goldilind. The final syllables, "ilind," suggest "island" (a reference to England and an old name for Iceland); "I lend," which connotes the supportive dimension Goldilind gives to the union in the book; and "lind," a Middle-English word for tree (used, for instance, by Chaucer in his "Clerk's Tale," "Be ay of chere as light as leef on linde"). This final sense of "tree" leads us to the unifying natural growth motifs present on this title page and throughout the narrative. The language of the page is caressed and embraced but not hidden in natural illumination which ranges from delicate leaf and floral patterns at the center to more vigorous flowing acanthus spirals at the outer border. It shows kinship with the finest Persian illuminated manuscripts and carpets (both of which Morris collected) as well as medieval Celtic and Continental illumination. The page forms a whole, graceful and lively, a wedding of Eastern and Western traditions, of spiritual and material planes, of the unconscious flowing growth of nature with the rational consciousness of language.

We might expect, just from this close examination of the title page, that the narrative will portray an ideal world of natural, human, spiritual balance, and the opening scenes confirm this notion. The book begins in Oakenrealm, a heavily forested country "which was so much a woodland, that a minstrel thereof said it that a squirrel might go from end to end, and all about, from tree to tree, and never touch the earth." In the opening action we find ourselves in a dense wood, but one unlike the dark, confused forest of Dante at the beginning of the *Inferno*. Instead, this wood provides a haven for tiny creatures and focuses our attention on the protective upper branches, like the dome of heaven itself, where our thoughts, with the squirrel, need not touch the earth. While our thoughts are elevated, they are still tied to the earth; supported by the sturdy tree-trunks, unifying branches span the land "from end to end." The imagination is not directed to a distant heaven, but to a higher plane in touch with nature.

This forest kingdom of Oakenrealm is home to Child Christopher, and the trees are symbolic, as they have been from Yggdrasill (in Norse mythology the great ash tree whose roots and branches hold together the universe) to the Christian Tree of Life, suggesting a spiritual as well as a natural domain. Goldilind, despite the "lind" of her name, is from Meadham, an unrising plain close to the earth and therefore suggestive of a material realm. When she encounters Christopher later in the story, it is Goldilind who will be most concerned with appearances and rich position. Though each of these central characters is tagged with the name of a dwelling place, they are both dispossessed of their rightful inheritance and assume functions in opposition to their tag images. In their actions Christopher and Goldilind approximate the archetypal animus and anima of Jungian psychology, the active rational and creative unconscious forces of the psyche. Only when they are united is their success assured, and in their union the spiritual and material, unconscious and conscious, are wed. As political and social commentary, the story suggests the sons and daughters of modern society deprived of their rightful inheritance by corrupt establishments. It illustrates the importance of reuniting the fragmented and dislocated children and affirms the ultimate triumph of their cause.

Morris tells us in his introduction to the Saga Library that in the saga tradition "no detail is spared in impressing the reader with a sense of the reality of the event; but no word is wasted in the process of giving that detail. There is nothing didactic and nothing rhetorical in these stories; the reader is left to make his own commentary on the events, and to divine the motives and feelings of the actors in them without any help from the tale-teller. In short, the simplest and purest form of epical narration." That the reader must "divine" the meaning in the work is a notion both ancient and new. "Divinity" resides neither in an external Godhead nor an omniscient author, but in the intellect and feeling of each reader. Many experimental artists in various media tell us now that their efforts are to involve the spectator fully in the act of creation. In Morris's case, the creative imagination is engaged in action strange and familiar, told in a style which makes events at once real and mythic. Throughout his fantasy writing hidden meanings and significance pop out at us like fairies out of bushes.

That this world should be so like our own and not some totally separate realm of fantasy is an invention which links fantastic events with ordinary realities. It reminds us that we inhabit a significant, myth-making, symbolic reality where coincidence, highly-charged emotion, and idealism mysteriously coalesce; where dreams reveal and foretell factual reality; where truth, once hidden, is finally made plain. Even the parts and components of names have significant roots in human history and myth. We may not realize this as we live day to day, because our minds are so caught up in our humdrum affairs and ordinary language that we do not allow ourselves to consider the other dimension, but here in this fictive realm we find ourselves thinking in symbolism, a mode of comprehension generally lost to civilized man. We experience it only rarely, perhaps in the odd dream we may pause to consider, or in a Freudian slip we are suddenly conscious of having made, or on the analyst's

couch, where he may painfully reveal the presence of this other mode to our conscious mind. In Morris's tale characters and readers alike attach deep meanings to both image and action; though they are not explicitly explained, they are implicitly compelling and pressingly felt.

A brief introduction is no place to attempt a full analysis of the symbolic implications of this rich work. Besides, I fully subscribe with Morris to the importance of the notion that "the reader is left to make his own commentary." As in all the best literature, Morris has accomplished here a fusion of politics, morality, art, and invidiual life which challenges our imaginations and elevates our aspirations. It is a happy choice that Newcastle has finally made this book available to a wide reading public, not only because we can now enjoy a happy tale of love and politics set right, but also because it will help us to see more clearly the fusion of influences which stand behind the tradition of the English fantasy novel and which may in turn provide new directions and influences for contemporary fiction.

Richard B. Mathews
Gulfport, Florida, 1976

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