

*STUDIES IN
THE LATE ROMANCES
OF WILLIAM MORRIS*



BLUE CALHOUN JOHN HOLLOW
NORMAN KELVIN CHARLOTTE OBERG
and CAROLE SILVER

With an Introduction by
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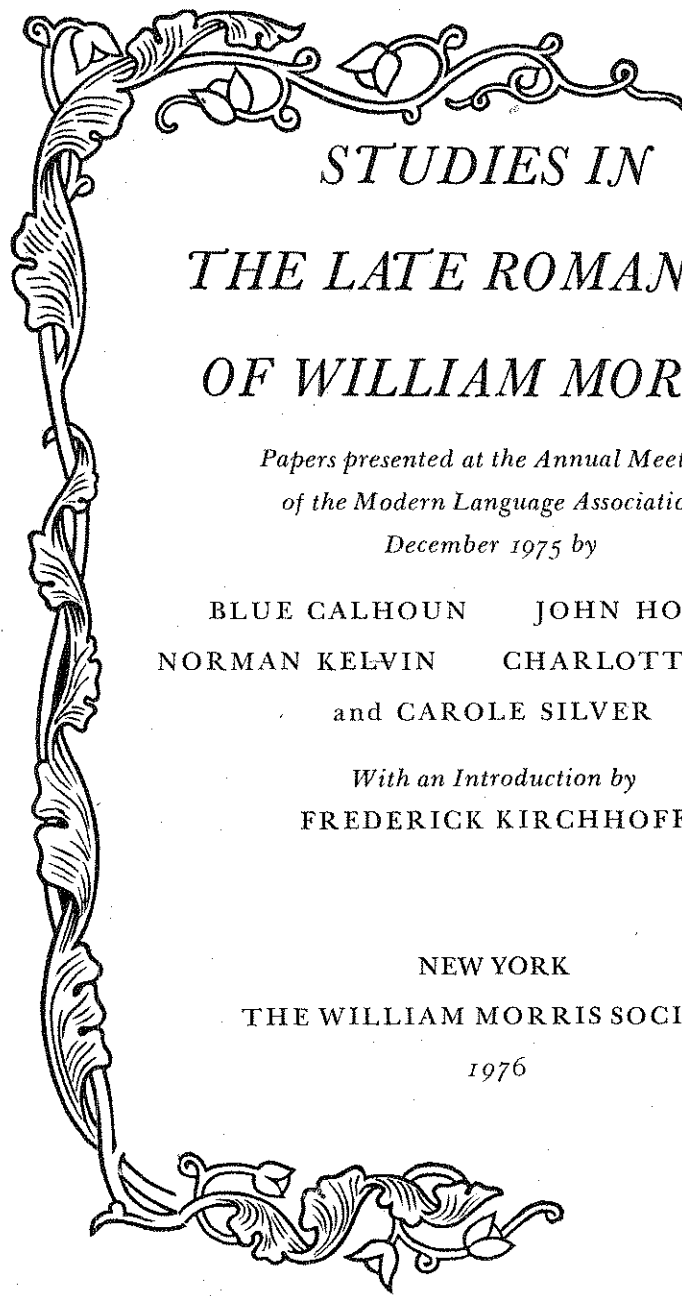
The essays contained in this volume are based on papers written for two seminars which were held at the convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, December 1975. Frederick Kirchhoff organized the seminar entitled "William Morris: the Prose Romances" at which the papers by Blue Calhoun, John Hollow, Norman Kelvin and Carole Silver were presented. Charlotte Oberg's contribution was written for the seminar on "Fantasy Motifs." It is based on a chapter in her forthcoming book, A Pagan Prophet: William Morris, to be published by the University Press of Virginia.

Carole Silver and Joseph Dunlap prepared the papers for publication. Mr. S. A. Russell, president of Oriole Editions, kindly took charge of design and production. Scholastic and Manuscript Typing Service made the text camera ready.

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The decoration on the title page appears in the Kelmscott Press edition of The Sundering Flood at the beginning of Chapter XXIII.

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*Papers presented at the Annual Meeting
of the Modern Language Association
December 1975 by*

BLUE CALHOUN JOHN HOLLOW
NORMAN KELVIN CHARLOTTE OBERG
and CAROLE SILVER

With an Introduction by
FREDERICK KIRCHHOFF

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Introduction

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of William Morris

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Therefore day after day betimes in
the morning they bore the said book
to the altar and read therein,
till they had learned much wisdom.

ERRATA

Page 59, line 6: Read Mirkwood for Markwood.

" 119, lines 11 & 13: Read Pater for Peter.

" 124, lines 26 & 28/29: Read Sun-beam for Sun-Beam.

" 124, line 29: Read Folk-might for Folk-Might.

" 127, line 24: Read barbarians for bararians.

NOTE

To avoid unnecessary repetition, all references to The Collected Works of William Morris, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966) are given in the text by volume and page only: (18:123).

INTRODUCTION

Frederick Kirchoff

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields--like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main--why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.

--Wordsworth, Preface to
The Excursion (1814), ll. 47-55

With the exception of the explicitly Marxist Dream of John Ball (1886) and News from Nowhere (1890), the prose romances of William Morris' final decade remain the least understood body of major Victorian fiction. Despite their claim of place--the culmination of Morris' literary development--they have received a fraction of the critical attention given his earliest work. In fact, during the past fifteen years there has been more published criticism on the title poem of The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858) than on all the romances put together. In this respect, of course, they share their neglect with Love is Enough (1873) and The Story of Sigurd the Volsung (1876). But even within the context of the purely literary work of Morris' last quarter century, the romances are something of a special case. Never lacking a small but respectable following, they have presented an enigma or an embarrassment for otherwise staunch admirers of Morris' social vision,

design, and even poetry. Shaw dismissed them as "a startling relapse into literary pre-Raphaelitism," symptomatic of Morris' need for "a refuge from reality."¹ E. P. Thompson, who rejects the "startling relapse" theory, treats them as mere "fairy-stories, legends, for which the belief of the active mind is not invited."² Philip Henderson, in a life-and-works biography his publisher had the temerity to call "definitive," does not even seem to have read the romances with sufficient attention to get their plots straight. On the other hand, John Goode's perceptive reading of The House of the Wolfings cavalierly misspells the name of its central figure.³ And even Norman Talbot, among the most sophisticated of their recent critics, feels constrained to justify himself for writing on what is, but he knows should not be, "an esoteric subject."⁴ But the romances are far from esoteric. Indeed, in this country they are the one portion of Morris' literary output popular with a non-academic audience. And judging from the availability of paperback reprints, they may well have begun to be accepted--as Morris hoped--as something akin to an art of the people.

There are a number of reasons for the neglect of the romances by academic critics. The most significant have doubtless been their "escapist" genre and archaic language. In response to the question of genre, it is sufficient to reiterate Northrop Frye's injunction that "William Morris should not be left on the side lines of prose fiction merely because the critic has not learned to take the romance form seriously."⁵ Certainly the papers in this collection more than adequately document the "seriousness" of the romances and, confirming Frye's notion of the "revolutionary nature of the romance," their relevance to the social and political concerns of Morris' last

years. Far from being "a refuge from reality," Morris refines the genre into a uniquely synthetic model of human experience--a model which, among its other functions, at once confirms and re-examines his commitment to Marxism. In the recurrent characters and narrative structures of the romances Morris establishes a set of psychological archetypes by means of which he can explore the processes of individuation, sexual relationship, and social interaction that must be accounted for in any version of the Earthly Paradise. Moreover, this fascination with form in itself leads Morris to an imaginative and intellectual freedom that I feel brash enough to compare with that of Beethoven's late quartets and Shakespeare's final romances. Here, as nowhere else, Morris' imagination is fully liberated. Here, as Norman Kelvin persuasively argues, Morris gives fullest rein to his own erotic fantasies. And as a result, it is difficult to escape a sense that it was in writing the prose romances--and returning full-circle to the genre he had laid aside at the beginning of his manhood--that Morris became most fully himself.

Early reviewers of the romances, who dismissed their diction as "Wardour Street English," failed to grasp the genuinely radical nature of Morris' experimentation with language. Admittedly a stumbling block in The House of the Wolfings (1888), and perhaps never entirely successful, although much refined, in the subsequent romances, his extensive use of archaic terminology is not so much an attempt to evoke the past as it is to revitalize the language through a return to its Germanic roots. Just as the romances themselves oppose the "healthy" world of the Germanic gens to the decadence of Rome, their diction deliberately substitutes a Germanic for a Latin vocabulary. No quaint self-indulgence, this vocabulary, coupled

with the controlled simplicity of Morris' syntax, is inseparable from the ethos of the romances. For he is as much concerned with setting forth a way of thinking--or story-telling--as he is with the story line of the narration.⁶

This link with an earlier stage in the evolution of the language is one aspect of an overall pattern of reintegration functioning in the prose romance. As Charlotte Oberg and Carole Silver from separate viewpoints observe, the romances reassert the values of the past--whether an heroic code or the social structure of the gens--in order to restructure or revitalize the present. They present a series of idealized societies--family, tribe or nation--happy in their accommodation to the natural world. But these accommodations tend to be static (insofar as the cyclic pattern of Nature is itself static). Hence, their vulnerability to external forces and consequent dependence on the hero, who alone is capable of revitalizing his society. But the romances do not merely celebrate the fortunate presence of these "lucky" men. The hero faces two closely related liabilities: his very stature threatens his ability to participate in his own society, and his traffic with the sources of power in Nature and history threatens to transform his personality. Since John Hollow deals with the social role of "special men" in the romances, and Charlotte Oberg with the quest of the hero in history, I shall take the opportunity of this Introduction to explore what seems to me the most ticklish issue in Morris' later writing: the problems inherent in the hero's relationship with the natural world.

The revitalizing dialectic, in which the past is re-created against the present in order to be negated in a new present, functions through the

thematic oppositions of town and country, village and wilderness, "civilization" and the natural world. Extending the argument of her important study of The Earthly Paradise,⁷ Blue Calhoun discusses this structure in terms of the pastoral. It strikes me that the dialectic of the romances can with equal fruitfulness be related to Romantic concerns with the relationship between Imagination and Nature. Specifically, the romances are an epoch in the long series of attempts to resolve the ambivalent role of Nature in the development of the individual Imagination.

From the start, Morris has misgivings. In The House of the Wolfings, the Valkyrie Wood-Sun stands for a superhuman potency at cross-purposes with Thiodolf's participation in the life of the Wolf gens. As her name implies, their daughter Hall-Sun is able to unite the strengths of her two parents, yet only at the cost of Thiodolf's life. Rejecting Wood-Sun's protection in battle, Thiodolf accepts his necessary doom. Thus, to revitalize his gens through intercourse with the alien power of the natural world--an act necessary if the gens is to withstand the threat of Roman invasion--and at the same time remain true to the heroic code of his human society, the hero must take upon himself the role of sacrificial victim. And it is precisely this tragic dilemma that the later romances attempt to circumvent. In The Roots of the Mountains (1889), Morris allows Face-of-god's infatuation with the Sun-beam--who of all his heroines most clearly links Nature with the historical past of the hero's tribe--to resolve itself with the best interests of his tribe. Yet this is only possible by means of a remarkably ineffectual scene in which the Sun-beam, hitherto a figure of stark courage, gives way to an unconvincing show of maiden fear (15: 144-146), and by the timely discovery that the "aliens" to whose cause Face-of-god has found

himself committed are really long-lost kinsmen. The most optimistic of the romances, The Roots of the Mountains leaves us with a sense that the hero's victory has come altogether too effortlessly.

News from Nowhere, that work that brings together so many strands of Morris' thinking, sets forth the problem in a Marxist context. Life in Morris' communist utopia is a "reasonable strife with nature" founded on the carefully balanced integration of urban and rural values. The renewed countryside is "vivified by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk." City-dwellers regularly journey down to participate in the seasonal tasks of agriculture. But the relationship between man and his environment is more than a simple synthesis of town and country. "The spirit of the new days . . . was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as the lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves" (16: 132). The metaphor is no accident. Morris has in mind a wedding of man and Nature very like that anticipated by Wordsworth--whose poetry he ostentatiously disliked--in the lines quoted as my epigraph. Certainly Wordsworth's promise of "Paradise . . . a simple produce of the common day" is an accurate description of News from Nowhere. And it is also more than coincidence that Wordsworth deliberately opposes this goal to that of an earlier quest--"like those of old/Sought in the Atlantic Main"--like that of the Wanderers in The Earthly Paradise. One looks in vain in The Excursion for an Earthly Paradise comparable to Morris' utopia. But the vision of Nature in Wordsworth's fragmentary "Home at Grasmere" is comparable. That Wordsworth (in

effect) suppressed "Home at Grasmere" suggests, of course, the very aspect of his personality Morris found uncongenial. (It is hard to imagine Wordsworth ever allowing himself to write poetry as defiantly unrepressed as the prose romances.) What the parallel argues is not literary influence, but common concern. And it is precisely this bond of common concern that urges we read the prose romances as a significant stage in the evolution of British Romanticism.

Yet despite the talk about Nature as a sexual object, the childlike qualities of life in News from Nowhere suggest that the relationship between man and his natural environment may be closer to son and mother than husband and wife or mistress. What, for example, are we to make of the haymaking festival that climaxes the utopia? Is the ritual, like the apocalyptic harvest of The Four Zoas, an ultimate symbol for Nature re-created as an expression of the Imagination? Or does it set a natural limit to the claims of the Imagination? (Is communal agriculture--determined by the cycles of the natural year--the highest achievement we should look forward to in an ideal society?) Put another way, is the idealization of Nature we encounter in News from Nowhere a metaphor for the perfection of man under communism? Or does Morris' need to idealize Nature give the lie to whatever realism might underpin his vision? (Without so hospitable a setting, would the utopia he envisions be nearly so appealing?) Whether one chooses to term Morris' strategy a synthesis or a self-contradiction, these conflicting possibilities lie at the heart of News from Nowhere.

Seen in terms of its place in Romantic literature, this ambiguity is the price Morris pays for attempting a short solution to a long problem. In order to revise the pattern of loss Wordsworth

expresses in "Tintern Abbey" or the Intimations Ode, Morris must assume the wholesale benignity of Nature. In the communist society he envisions, man is born again as an infant "best philosopher" whose untainted good sense rejects the validity of that other kind of "philosophic mind" founded on "the soothing thoughts that spring/Out of human suffering." But this is only possible because the childlike adults of his utopia are--very literally --"nurtured" by an accommodating Mother Nature. Thus, the significant act of faith we make in accepting News from Nowhere as the picture of an ideal society does not stem from Morris' disregard for the equation of work to productivity, but from his assumption that a lifestyle largely subservient to the cycles of Nature can answer to the claims of the Imagination.

Reacting to this assumption, the sequence of romances Morris completed in the six years following the publication of News from Nowhere qualifies the optimism of his utopia and continues his trial-and-error search for alternative possibilities. News from Nowhere, of course, is both an expression of Morris' visionary ideal and the record of his inability, as a man of the late nineteenth century, to achieve it. His quest is in part success, in part failure. He has his vision, and hopefully his journey into a future significantly akin to the Middle Ages will in some sense revitalize his own society. But this revitalization is a slow process, and the immediate effect of his return to the present is a sense of profound loss. Within the romance, this conflicting pattern of gain and loss is reflected in the narrator's hopeless passion for Ellen.⁸ Like the earlier heroines, she accompanies the hero--seductively--into the heart of the natural world--in this case, from London to the center of rural England. But unlike her predecessors, she must finally dismiss

him from her world. She is at once the woman who beckons and the woman who forbids: her promise of an intense, sexually liberated existence awakens the narrator to the sharp awareness of his erotic unfulfillment.

If Ellen is an intriguing character, this is because she represents so much that is problematic in News from Nowhere. The history and economics of Morris' utopia are interesting in their way, but Ellen's natural supernaturalism is the crux of his vision. Thus, it is only understandable that the later romances tend to shift intellectual focus from the relatively straightforward events of the hero's quest to the more complex business of the heroine's upbringing.

The first evidence of this shift is the presence of alternative heroines in The Story of the Glittering Plain (1891). However the King's Daughter, whom Hallblithe rejects, and the Hostage, who has the advantage of belonging to the gens "wherein it was right and due" he wed, are so strikingly unrelated that the strategy proves ineffectual. The figure of the Hostage seems an attempt to emphasize the "common day" aspect of Ellen. Conversely, the King's Daughter, whose desire for Hallblithe rises out of seeing his picture in an illuminated book--like Guest in News from Nowhere, he is a kind of living history lesson--is meant to clarify what Ellen ought not to be. As a result of these exaggerations, Hallblithe's ultimate union with the Hostage is anticlimactic; the King's Daughter is a tragic figure for whom we can feel a surprising sympathy. For the King's Daughter is more profoundly in bondage than the Hostage (who has been kidnapped by Vikings). The Daughter is psychologically trapped in a state of perpetual innocence. Despite its self-indulgence, her infatuation with

Hallblithe equates to the desire to be freed from the enforced childhood of her father's kingdom. Had the romance been written from a different perspective, liberating the King's Daughter and leading her from the pseudo-paradise of the Glittering Plain to the real world of Cleveland-by-the-Sea would have been an entirely satisfactory denouement to Hallblithe's quest.

Significantly, the next group of romances--The Wood Beyond the World (1894), The Well at the World's End (1896), and the posthumously published Water of the Wondrous Isles (1897)--emphasize the pattern of psychological dependence and rescue latent but ignored in The Story of the Glittering Plain. But rescue is no longer a simple matter of freeing the maiden from a dominant father-figure. The King of the Glittering Plain is replaced by a series of older women--witches or sorceresses--through whom Morris is able to examine both the essentially alien power of the natural world and the liabilities inherent in attempts to dominate this alien power for human purposes. At the same time, the virgin herself is at once a bride to be won from bondage to the witch-wife and a permanent bond to the sources of natural potency.

The King of the Glittering Plain succeeds in exerting dominance over the natural processes of growth and decay. But the price of this dominance is sterility and dehumanization. Similarly, the witch-wife in The Water of the Wondrous Isles enjoys power over the natural world at the cost of her full humanity. Symbolically, she is given to fits of uncontrollable and debilitating anger, while her sister, also a sorceress, cannot remember anything for longer than twenty-four hours. Her dwelling, a farmhouse isolated between forest and inland sea, is the geographical antithesis of the world of socio-economic cooperation from which the hero initiates his quest and to which he will ultimately return. (This pattern

is also true for The Wood Beyond the World and The Well at the World's End.) To function in the outside world--even to pass through the forest she has violated--in her search for power--she must forgo her natural shape. Moreover, she relies on the captive virgin (Birdalone) to accomplish acts of which her incomplete humanity is incapable.

The witch-wife's Sending Boat is perhaps the best illustration of the form and limitations of her power. Its stem and stern smeared with her blood and appropriate verses spoken, the boat carries the witch to whatever destination she wills. Discovering the ritual, Birdalone is able to use the boat to escape, but her course is programmed by the witch's previous journeys and the boat's power is contingent upon the witch's life. At her death the boat breaks up and a "big serpent, mouldy and hairy, grey and brown-flecked, came forth from under the stem and went into the water and up the bank and so into the dusk of the alder-wood" (20: 320). To make use of the boat, anyone but the witch must submit to its maker's itinerary. The price of commanding natural forces to perform a given act is human blood. The spell dissolved, the natural force itself, sinister and ancient, returns to the symbolic repository of all natural power, the forest. (That Morris refrained from explaining the mechanism of the "force barges" in News from Nowhere turns out to have been more than a matter of literary decorum. As we have discovered in our own century, apparently "clean" energy belies its appearance, and what seems an effortless power over the natural world can commit its user to forces all too easily beyond his control. While I do not mean to credit Morris with prophesying thermonuclear energy, the parallel of the force barges to the witch-wife's Sending Boat suggests the ambivalence of their power.)

By resolving the Nature figure into two components, Morris clarifies the distinction between the threatening and benevolent aspects of the natural world. But the virgin is not merely the innocent victim of the witch's machinations destined for rescue by the hero: she represents a significant alternative to the witch's attempt to find power through dominating Nature. Instead of dominance, she is able to gain at least some of her ends by participation with the forces of the natural world. Strictly speaking, then, the witch is not a Nature figure at all, but an archetypal representation of man dehumanized by his--or, in this case, her--attempt to bend Nature to her own purposes. That she can function as an agent of whatever forces threaten to bind the Imagination to the natural world--by reducing the hero to the instrument of her own sexual gratification--is thus the fundamental irony of her situation. (Blake would recognize the figure immediately as a priestess of natural religion--even without the druid altars and rumors of human sacrifice with which Morris links her.)

But despite her dissociation with the witch-wife, the virgin is not an entirely "safe" figure. Her participation in the potency of the natural world does not entirely suit her for entering into human civilization--Birdalone literally reduces her lover to a "wild man"--and there is a period in her relationship with the hero in which she assumes a dominant, protective role from which the hero must emerge if he is to attain full manhood. Moreover, this dominant role is based, in part, on the natural magic she has learned or stolen from her mistress. And this use of the sorceress' power seems to have posed a problem of possible contamination Morris found it difficult to resolve.

His chief tactic in explaining the virgin's special skills is to attribute the large part of her power to an aspect of her education directly opposed to whatever learning she undergoes with the sorceress. The Maid in The Wood Beyond the World, explaining the hardships of her past life, describes "an old woman, who telleth me sweet tales of other life, wherein all is high and goodly, or at least valiant and doughty, and she setteth hope in my heart and learneth me, and maketh me to know much . . . O much . . . so that at last I am grown wise, and wise to be mighty if I durst" (17: 86). This inversion of the witch-captor figure is given fuller treatment in subsequent romances. Also, it is related explicitly to the virgin's coming-of-age through participation in the processes of the natural world.

In The Well at the World's End, the episode in which the future Lady of Abundance is encouraged to revolt from her mistress establishes the essential elements of this aspect of the virgin's education. Morris' symbolism is largely self-explanatory:

On a day of May-tide I fared abroad with my goats, and went far with them, further from the house than I had been as yet. . . . I went till I came to a little flowery dell, beset with blossoming whitethorns and with a fair stream running through it. . . . And the sun was hot about noontide, so I did off my raiment, which was rough and poor, and more meet for winter than May-tide, and I entered a pool of the clear water, and bathed me and sported therein, smelling the sweet scent of the whitethorns and hearkening to the song of the many birds; and when I came

forth from the water, the air was so soft and sweet to me, and the flowery grass so kind to my feet, and the May-blooms fell upon my shoulders, that I was loth to do on my rough raiment hastily, and withal I looked to see no child of man in that wilderness: so I sported myself there a long while, and milked a goat and drank of the milk, and crowned myself with whitethorn and hare-bells; and held the blossoms in my hand, and felt that I also had some might in me, and that I should not be a thrall of that sorceress for ever. (18: 156)

It is at this point, when the virgin has actively participated in the natural cycle of death (removing her old clothes) and renewal, that just as she begins to take up her task of spinning (symbolic of her thralldom and sexual latency) she looks up and sees "a child of man coming down the side of the little dale towards me . . . an old woman grey-haired, uncomely of raiment, but with shining bright eyes in her wrinkled face" (18: 157). The natural order can lead her to the verge of sexual maturity, but the actual transition requires the presence of a human figure against whom the virgin can measure her own identity. This old woman (the Wise Woman of Sarras) teaches the virgin "much of the world which she had not yet seen, of its fairness and its foulness; of life and death, and desire and disappointment, and despair," and anticipates her longing for escape by telling her the direction of the compass in which escape can be made. Their conversations are repeated day after day through the late spring until Midsummer Day, when the virgin encounters a knight in "gay surcoat of green embroidered with flowers." He is in search of the Well at the World's End, but even his quest cannot carry him past the girl without a kiss, which turns into an embrace until "there in that place, and in a little while, we loved each other sorely." He

goes his way, but gives her a necklace of beads, the token of searchers for the Well and, as defined by this instance, recompense for her lost innocence. Proceeding to her meeting with the Wise Woman, she is given a gift to go along with the necklace--a sharp knife. When she returns to the House of the Sorceress, her mistress announces that "now at last the time has come when thou art of no more use to me," then screams and rushes at the girl, who stabs her with the knife and thus effects her escape.

The day of the knight's coming and the sorceress' murder is Midsummer Day, the longest day of the year and the climax of the process of natural fecundity celebrated on the day the girl crowned herself with whitethorn. If she elects to stay in the cycle of the natural year, she now begins the stage of decline as days shorten to winter. It is fitting, then, that this is both the day of the virgin's escape from her enslaver and of her transfer of affection from Nature--her Pre-Raphaelite absorption in the natural sensuousness of the May-tide--to a living human being. Moreover, the knight's gift of the bead necklace is itself a token of power over and through the natural world unavailable to the sorceress figure. (The sorceress owns a similar necklace--taken from the body of a dead woman--but it is useless to her, since it was not acquired as a gift of love.)

The episode in the forest in which Birdalone meets Habundia parallels the meeting between the Lady of Abundance and the Wise Woman of Sarras. Sitting alone by an oak, she takes off her clothes "that she might feel all the pleasure of the cool shadow and what air was stirring, and the kindness of the greensward upon her very body" (20: 15). Her only covering is the green gown in her lap on which she is at work embroidering "roses and lilies,

and a tall tree springing up from amidmost the hem of the skirt, and a hart on either side thereof, face to face of each other." (The imagery suggests a moment of stasis, in which Birdalone is poised at the transition between the "roses and lilies" of experience and innocence, the two "harts" at once joined and separated by the tree of natural potency.) Suddenly "she saw standing before her the shape of a young woman as naked as herself, save that she had an oak-wreath around her loins." But Habundia's nakedness is not the only thing she has in common with Birdalone. She appears here and elsewhere in the romance as Birdalone's identical twin. "Hast thou ever seen thyself in a mirror?" she asks the girl. "Now I am to be thy mirror." From the passage that follows it is clear that the appearance of Habundia corresponds to Birdalone's awakening self-awareness. Significantly, when she returns to the witch's house, she is able to tell her first thorough-going lie. Moreover, in parting, Habundia translates Birdalone's vague dissatisfaction into the explicit desire to escape and tells her that escape itself must be by water. Confrontation with her own identity is thus the first stage in Birdalone's escape both from the dominance of the witch and also from the state of innocence represented by her life in the forest. And insofar as this confrontation involves an awareness of her own sexuality--Habundia's description of Birdalone's physical attractiveness is among the more unabashedly erotic passages in the romances--it is the first stage in her preparation for union with the hero.

This double pattern of slavery and education suggests a further refinement in Morris' notion of the ambivalence of the natural world and establishes unexpected affinities between Birdalone's education and the dialectic of imaginative pro-

jection and response to Nature described in the first books of The Prelude. Just as Wordsworth's Nature is at once protective mother and an expression of the poet's own developing individuality, the forest in The Water of the Wondrous Isles is at once that which enslaves--the barrier that separates her from the civilized world--and that which frees the virgin from the innocence (or intellectual passivity) of childhood. Insofar as Habundia is the natural world--seen either as the source of all things (that abundance implicit in her name) or as the "Wood-wife," a natural spirit "not of the children of Adam"--Birdalone first becomes aware of her own identity through encountering its projection in the mirror of Nature. (This notion of a mirror may be the significance of the two harts in Birdalone's embroidery.) In this respect, Habundia's gesture directly counters the witch's threat of sacrifice (loss of identity) for the appeasement of the natural power she seeks to enlist to her private ends.

The virgin must choose a middle course between two equally destructive alternatives: complete absorption in the world of natural process and alienation from Nature through the attempt to dominate it. (Choosing the former, she is not only trapped in undifferentiated innocence, but an easy mark for the witch-wife's natural magic.) Morris seems to have felt this could be possible through projection of the personality onto Nature itself, a humanizing process stimulated by the benevolent aspects of natural potency expressed in the figure of Habundia or perhaps the "natural" lore of the Wise Woman of Sarras. (Although I tend to think of Habundia as a revision of the earlier figure.) Undergoing this dialectic of self-discovery, she becomes in turn the medium for the hero's encounter with the sources of power in the natural world. But while the elaborate coming-of-age strategies

of the last romances qualify the destructive potency of a figure like Wood-Sun in The House of the Wolfings, even her limited participation in the alien power of Nature remains a threat to the hero's individuality.

To elucidate Morris' attempts to solve this problem exceeds the scope of an Introduction. In The Wood Beyond the World, he limits the Maid's natural magic to a geographical locus and the condition of virginity itself. In The Well at the World's End he subdivides the virgin figure into the Lady of Abundance and Ursula. In The Water of the Wondrous Isles--the most satisfying of the romances--he refocuses on the heroine's personal quest to control her own devastating power. No strategy proves a final solution. (The Sundering Flood, drafted but incomplete at Morris' death in 1896, introduces a male fertility figure and returns the focus of the romance to the childhood of the hero.) Generally speaking, however, Morris' thinking moves in the direction of a complex set of compromises and accommodations between the worlds of forest and town, Nature and Imagination, of which the final chapters of The Water of the Wondrous Isles are the fullest expression. In the process, the "intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth" he hopes for in News from Nowhere is relegated from adult to adolescent experience. Specifically, to the transitory experience of coming of age. Its closest equivalent in the later romances is Ralph's brief sexual union with the Lady of Abundance in the heart of the wilderness. But she is murdered a few hours later and becomes a Wordsworthian memory of lost intensity never entirely forgotten in his subsequent love for Ursula. His personal triumph, of course, is in finding what John Hollow aptly terms "deliberate happiness" in spite of--but also founded on--his failure to sustain this

"intense" union with the "Abundance" of the natural world.

There is nothing comparable to this pattern of loss and consequent spiritual growth in News from Nowhere. Its presence in The Well at the World's End and The Water of the Wondrous Isles is a development and not a digression--much less, a "relapse"--in Morris' thought. The prose romances lead Morris--perhaps against his considered wishes--to accept the problematic nature of man's relationship with the means of his own power. Here, as nowhere in his earlier imaginative writing, we encounter the real obstacles to an Earthly Paradise. As the essays in this collection ably demonstrate, the prose romances turn out to be the most deadly "serious" of Morris' literary undertakings.

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- 1 "Morris as I knew him," in William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist, ed. May Morris (1936; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), II, xxviii-xxix.
- 2 William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961), p. 787.
- 3 "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century, ed. John Lucas (London: Methuen and Co., 1971), pp. 262-269.
- 4 "Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris," Southern Review, III (1969), 339.
- 5 Anatomy of Criticism (1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 305.

⁶The definitive study of Morris' language remains unwritten. C. S. Lewis has some perceptive things to say about the diction of the romances in his essay "William Morris" (Rehabilitations [London: Oxford University Press, 1939], pp. 37-41). E. P. Thompson, who agrees "it is pointless to criticize Morris for using archaic . . . English" and recognizes "that his vocabulary . . . is an essential part of his purpose," does not see it as a means of reinstating the past, but rather of emphasizing "the difference between the values of the folk and those of today" (p. 785).

⁷The Pastoral Vision of William Morris (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975).

⁸When Bruce Glasier admitted to having "fallen in love with Ellen," Morris "said he had fallen in love with her himself! 'Oh, and I shan't give her up to you--not without a tussle for her anyway,' he said, with a smile, but almost jealously, I thought" (Glasier, William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921], p. 140).

MOTIF AND THEME IN THE LATE PROSE
ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Charlotte Oberg