

*STUDIES IN
THE LATE ROMANCES
OF WILLIAM MORRIS*



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NORMAN KELVIN CHARLOTTE OBERG
and CAROLE SILVER

With an Introduction by
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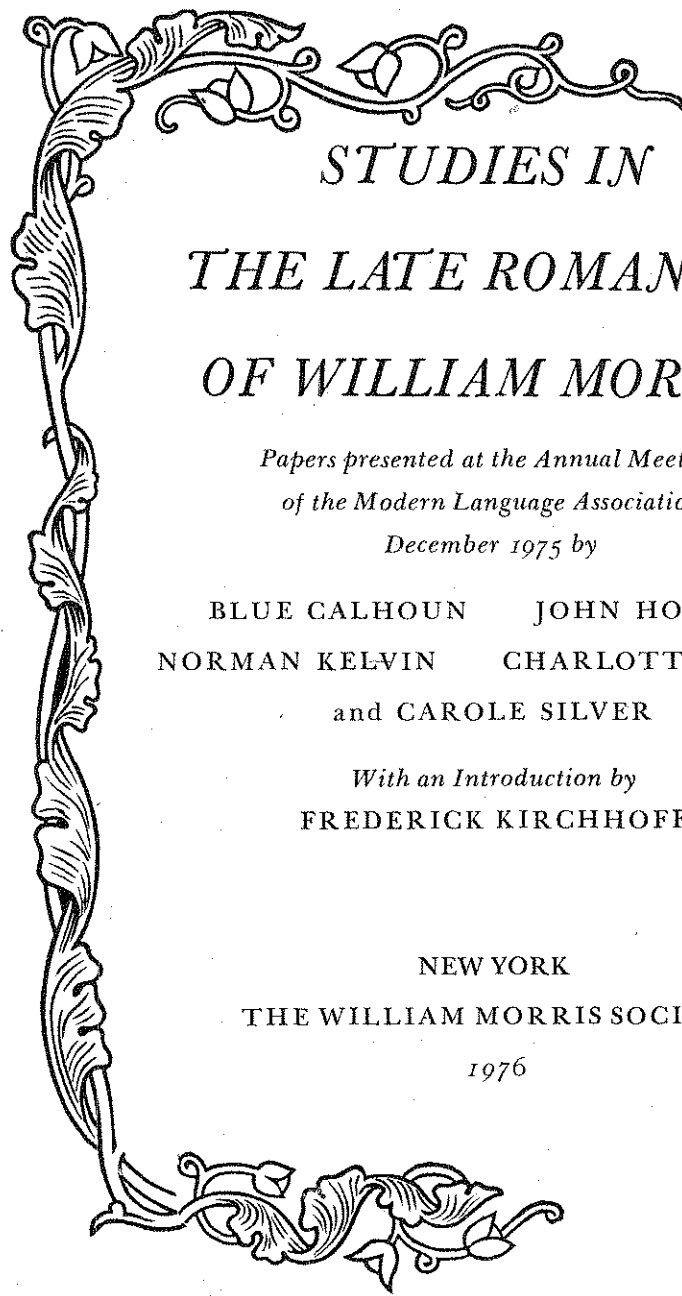
The essays contained in this volume are based on papers written for two seminars which were held at the convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, December 1975. Frederick Kirchhoff organized the seminar entitled "William Morris: the Prose Romances" at which the papers by Blue Calhoun, 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.

The cut on the cover and on page [7] was designed by A. J. Gaskin as an illustration for Chapter XVI, Book III, of the Kelmscott Press edition of The Well at the World's End, but it was not used. (Courtesy of the Pierpont Morgan Library.)



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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.

6. The 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).

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

8. When 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

Morris' prose romances are varied in type if not in style or basic theme. Following his historical romances and immediately after writing the Utopian dream-vision News from Nowhere, Morris began to evolve yet another genre. one which his daughter, May Morris, has called "fairy romances," a term appropriate in that it connotes elements of magic supernaturalism, which, in fact, figure prominently in The Story of the Glittering Plain, The Wood Beyond the World, The Well at the World's End, The Water of the Wondrous Islea and The Sundering Flood. But a common feature more significant than the fairy-tale provenance is the quest pattern which is basic to all these romances. With the exception of The Glittering Plain, set in a northern tribal culture reminiscent of that in The House of the Wolfings, all these later romances take place in a vaguely medieval setting recalling the romance cycles of the middle ages (and the world of the early Pre-Raphaelite poems). But whereas Wolfings and The Roots of the Mountains are firmly grounded in the actual history and struggles of the Northern races, The Glittering Plain (1890) is clearly a fantasy. For the land in which Hallblithe stays for a year, the Land of the Glittering Plain, is the Other World of myth and folktale, a realm of eternal youth like that sought unsuccessfully by the wanderers of The Earthly Paradise. The implicit authorial viewpoint, moreover, is the same as that in The Earthly Paradise--that is to say, the regressive searching for escape from the demands of life is at length condemned, in The Earthly Paradise by its own failure, in The Glittering Plain by the example of Hallblithe's rejection. But, unlike the quest of the

wanderers, Hallblithe's is not an elixir quest, for he journeys to the Acre of the Undying only to ransom his betrothed, the Hostage, and the testing which he successfully undergoes requires him to reject the temptations of this erotic paradise. Hallblithe, almost puritanical in his devotion to the ideals and traditions of his austere and moralistic tribal life, is never really tempted by the sensual pleasures available to him in the Land of the Glittering Plain, and is not even momentarily attracted by the beautiful princess whose love has set in motion the abduction of the Hostage and his own beguiling. He expresses his dedication to the world of deeds and death (which is, paradoxically, the arena of life) in a stirring rebuke to his companion Sea-eagle, and this speech expresses forcefully the joy in the life of this earth which Morris himself obviously felt. It begins: "O Eagle of the Sea, thou hast thy youth again: what then wilt thou do with it? Wilt thou not weary for the moonlit main, and the washing of waves and the dashing of spray, and thy fellows all glistering with the brine?" (14:256). With these images of motion, of flux, Hallblithe conveys the joy which life's very transience confers on mortals.

The testing which Hallblithe undergoes is not for the purpose of chastening and purifying the quester which purpose has come to be associated with the quest pattern since the medieval grail legends took that form. Hallblithe's character (and, in so far as we may infer it, his spiritual state) is just the same at the end as at the beginning. For him as an individual, there is no real temptation, no consequent fall, and, thus, no redemption. In other words, Morris is not concerned here with allegories of the human soul and its search for God--there is no Christian accommodation of the quest pattern such as we see in the grail legends or in The Faerie Queene.

This generalization also holds up for the other romances of this group. In each of these tales we meet heroes and heroines who are entirely blameless from the beginning, whose adventures prove and confirm their congenital worthiness. Walter, for example, in The Wood Beyond the World, though he consorts with the malevolent Queen of the Wood, does so at the direction of the wise and virtuous Maid, so that their planned escape may not be suspected and forestalled; he is not in any sense tainted by his amorous night in the arms of the Queen, and does not have to suffer, do penance, or be purified in any way. (Arthur of The Water of the Wondrous Isles similarly is forced to succumb to a witch's lust; his subsequent suffering is occasioned not by this episode but by the necessity of forsaking his sworn lady, Atra, because of his love for Birdalone.) Ralph, Birdalone, and the other central figures of the romances are pre-eminently spotless in their characters (and persons as well for, as always in Morris, outward beauty signifies inward worth).

But what is the meaning of these last romances? Many critics would suggest, and no doubt many readers would protest, that there need be no meaning, that these are entertainments which at most represent the repressed longings of incipient old age. Morris' own continual protestations against proffered interpretations add weight to this view. And yet, there is more to be said about the recurrent themes and motifs of these romances and their implications.

First, it is quite plain that, in these late romances as in earlier writings, Morris is concerned with liberation from tyranny. This is basic to The Wood Beyond the World. On the most superficial level of plot, the Maid is liberated from her bondage to the Queen; Walter, who had undertaken his wanderings as an escape from the torment of marriage to

an unfaithful wife, is liberated from the more subtle slavery of an unfair social bond. It is poetically just that these two former victims should become rulers of a new kingdom--a new society--upon their escape from the Wood. Further, there is a symbolic progression in the social orders they encounter in their adventures. Upon leaving the Wood, presided over by a cruel and tyrannical queen, where both are humiliated and threatened because of their positions in this corrupt order, they pass through the land of the Bears, a primitive tribe of herdsmen who as yet are ignorant of agriculture. On leaving the superstitious Bears, who have accepted the Maid as their goddess, they are escorted to the beautiful city of Stark-wall by the elders who, according to tradition, are awaiting their appointed rulers to come down through the same mountain pass through which their forebears traveled to found the city. Thus the experience of Walter and the Maid is a paradigm of the history of civilization--from oppression to a new beginning, represented by the primitive Bears, to an advanced and harmonious civilization governed in an enlightened and beneficent fashion. As king, Walter continues and refines this just government: ". . . first he bade open the prison-doors, and feed the needy and clothe them, and make good cheer to all men, high and low, rich and unrich . . ." (17:128). Thus a millennial period of peace and harmony is instituted. It is important to note that Walter's reign of prosperity is gained through a rededication to the ancient values of courage and of devotion to duty. This is made clear in the emblematic choice made by Walter immediately before the elders hail him as king. As one of the tests to be undergone, he is asked to choose between two kinds of raiment: ". . . one was all of robes of peace, glorious and be-gemmed, unmeet for any save a great king;

while the other was war-weed, seemly, well-fashioned, but little adorned; nay rather, worn and bestained with weather, and the pelting of the spear-storm" (17:119). Walter rightly chooses the battledress, symbolic of action, of deeds, rather than the peace robes, associated here with weakness, cowardice, and pride of place. This militancy of attitude is always presented as admirable in Morris' writings. Just as Walter, together with the Maid, comes to the city through the same mountain pass as their leaders of old, thus standing in their place, so his values and ideals are those of past times--and, the success of the future results from an affirmation of the past.

In The Well at the World's End (1896), unquestionably the most complex (and lengthy) of all Morris' romances, the same issues are of paramount importance. Here the hero Ralph dedicates himself at the beginning to a life of deeds when he rejects his parents' desire that he remain at home and leaves to seek the greater world. The plot of this romance is intricate, but one of its main threads is the overthrowing of threatening tyrannical forces, culminating in the apocalyptic defense of Ralph's homeland, Upmeads, at the end. The psychological and spiritual significance of these imaginary events to Morris himself is underscored by the revealing remarks of May Morris to the effect that Ralph's home, the High House of Upmeads, was an extrapolation from Morris' beloved home, Kelmscott Manor itself: ". . . the King's sons start on their adventures from the very door of Kelmscott Manor transformed into the palace of a simple-living kinglet, and the second page describes closely the placing of our home between river and upland, with the ford at the corner where the harvesters in News from Nowhere landed at their journey's end" (18:xix). Of Kelmscott Manor, Morris once wrote: "It has come to be the type of the pleasant places of earth, and of the homes of

harmless, simple people not overburdened with the intricacies of life; and, as others love the race of man through their lovers or their children, so I love the Earth through that small space of it."¹ Kelmscott had come to be the center of Morris' world--a home in every sense of the word, inextricably bound up with his own life and, thus, a personally symbolic focus for the earth, home of mankind.

Now the quest pattern is inextricably associated with the concept of initiation, that is, a ritual transformation of the quester into a new state of being or, in short, rebirth. Initiation patterns proliferate in all Morris' romances; for instance, the Land of the Glittering Plain is reached twice by Hallblithe after experiences in caves, suggesting symbolic entries into the womb of Nature prior to rebirth. Caves figure importantly in Well--Ralph buries the Lady in a cave and lives with Ursula in a cave during the winter prior to completing their journey to the Well of Life. The Lady and Ursula of Well and Birdalone of Water dress like men--here is the motif of "temporary androgynization and asexuality of novices" discussed by Mircea Eliade in Rites and Symbols;² Ursula refuses to wear men's clothing after drinking from the Well, that is, after her initiation is complete. Birdalone escapes from and returns to the witch's hut naked, and Walter in Wood is made to present his naked body for inspection by the elders of Stark-wall; we see in these episodes the ritual nakedness common to initiation rites.³ Such symbolic initiatory episodes are common to the heroic literature with which Morris was intimately familiar, e.g., Jason's passage through the Symplegades, or Aeneas' experiences in caves,⁴ and, of course, their counterparts occur often in the medieval romances he knew so well. Morris

seems to have grasped intuitively not only the great symbolic significance of the initiation pattern (without guidance from writers on cultural anthropology), but also the tremendous imaginative appeal of such strange episodes. They lend an air of mystery to the romances lifting them above the banality of mere adventure. Ralph's initiation is quite complex, progressing through several levels, beginning with the gift from his "gossip" Katherine of the mysterious necklace of blue and green beads, and climaxing in the drinking of the water of the Well (of Life, although Morris does not so name it). Through the intervening experiences, including his wanderings in a labyrinthine wood (like the entrails of the earth), Ralph is not really transformed, but, rather, develops naturally from a beautiful young man into a semi-divine culture hero who is thereupon enabled to redeem his society--that is, to effect, in part, the rebirth of the world into new life. The real significance of the initiation symbolism is that the world is reborn as man regains his primeval perfection.⁵ This is no Christian quest for a heavenly vision which is granted only to those who have risen above and renounced the world (cf. the equivocal experience of Galahad in Morris' early poem, "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery").

Whereas the wanderers of The Earthly Paradise had sought the land of eternal youth in the West, associated of old with death, Ralph finds the Well in the heathen East, where the dawning sun symbolizes the beginning of new life. As he starts out, at first heading south toward the warmth of life and love, he greets and blesses the world: "Now, welcome world, and be thou blessed from one end to the other, from the ocean sea to the uttermost mountains!" (18:20). This dedication to the earth is reiterated throughout the two volumes of Well--when, for instance, Ralph speaks to the people of the Land of Abundance as their dead Lady would have done: "Live

in peace, and love ye the works of the earth" (19:151), or when, even more dramatically, he drinks of the water of the Well and cries out: "To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!" (19:83).

Ralph's words are borne out by his deeds as, on his return, he gathers to him a conquering host, annihilates the would-be oppressors of his homeland, and institutes a preternaturally long reign of prosperity and peace (but a peace won and maintained by the might of the sword). For Ralph is a great military leader, whose very aspect terrifies and paralyzes his foes, as he confronts them unarmored and unhelmeted like the humblest of the shepherd warriors in his company. Like Alexander the Great, whose footsteps Ralph retraces to the Dry Tree and the Well, Ralph is invincible. His luck is noted and remarked upon by all who meet him in the course of his adventures and we find, in the last chapters, that his quest, prophesied and prepared for by those who are "somewhat foreseeing," is a fulfilment of the ancient prophecies of the people of the Bear, the Shepherds. In short, Ralph is the one looked-for, the renewer of the age of gold. Thus Ralph does not merely resemble Alexander in being a great leader and warrior, but, because he, like Alexander, is born to greatness, he is likewise an incarnation of the recurring heroic ideal. The Alexander romance cycle, which is obviously the major inspiration for Morris' romance, is of considerable importance in interpreting it. Alexander's life is an instance of the confluence of myth and history--the ideal and the actual. Further, for the Middle Ages as well as for later antiquity, Alexander was, in the words of Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, "the prototype of all aspirants to the dominion of the world."⁶ Morris means that his readers should be aware of these matters, and so

insistently mentions Alexander again and again throughout Well.

Ralph's great destiny is from the beginning apparent in his great beauty of form and character, for Ralph in truth has no spot nor blemish. He need not be chastened or purified; he is the type of the new man, that is, he embodies the endemic perfection of mankind, which must become apparent when the unlovely fruits of selfish ambition--tyranny, cruelty, poverty, etc.--are purged and eradicated and a prelapsarian state of innocence, i.e., nobility, is regained. As the Innocent People beyond the mountains called the Wall of the World (which they call the Wall of Strife) explain it: "Now our folk live well and hale, and without the sickness and pestilence, such as I have heard oft befall folk in other lands. . . . Of strife and of war also we know nought: nor do we desire aught which we may not easily attain to. Therefore we live long, and we fear the Gods if we should strive to live longer, lest they should bring upon us war and sickness, and overweening desire, and weariness of life" (19:65-66). The Innocent People need not to seek the Well, for they have not fallen into corruption. In short, they represent an ideal and unfallen state of society, where unnatural greed and ambition have not changed man from his primeval state of earthly happiness. Here death is welcomed as a friend, lest men grow weary of life.

The other societies Ralph encounters on his symbolic eastward journey to the Well or source of life likewise suggest stages of civilization, growing successively more primitive as he, travelling eastward back through time, approaches the origins of life: starting out from a Christianized feudal system, he meets with despotic tyrannies in eastern

cities situated among terrible mountains and desert wastes (inspired by the topography of Iceland) before reaching the Innocent People beyond the Wall of the World, and finally travels unpeopled volcanic wastes before reaching the Well. The bird which lights unafraid on Ursula's shoulder in a forest region near the Well signifies that Ralph and Ursula have reached symbolically a stage of harmony with nature--in short, this is a paradisaical interlude expressing itself in images traditional throughout the literature and religions of the world.⁷

On another level, which we might call psychological or spiritual in another author's work, Ralph must experience death before he finds new life. The Dry Tree, surrounded by the corpses of those who sought the Well in vain, symbolizes this death, foreshadowed by the death of the Lady, which plunges Ralph into despair and marks the end of his boyish naïveté. (But what the Lady represents lives on in Ursula, who takes her place in the Quest and in Ralph's affections.) The Dry Tree irresistably suggests another level of interpretation--it was a pre-Christian symbol of death, associated paradoxically with the Tree of Life, and is certainly used in that sense by Morris. Trees have long had symbolic associations with the cross and are used interchangeably as symbols of the crucifixion and, hence, of Christianity.⁸ A dead tree suggests that Christianity is dead--or a source of death, as is Morris' tree standing in a poisonous pool. The Dry Tree is a waymark on the road to the Well of Life--it must be passed beyond and is not the goal of the journey. The Fellowship of the Tree exemplifies medieval ideals of chivalry based on Christianity, but, like Christianity, they are limited. Further, Christianity is an other-worldly religion and the cosmic tree is a traditional focal point

for crossing into the other world, but the tree is dead, there is no other world, and thus, no getting beyond this world. (The legend of the Dry Tree, like the legend-laden life of Alexander in its entirety, is a further instance of the confluence, or, in this case, confusion, of myth and actuality: it was extraordinarily popular in the thirteenth century when it figured importantly in numerous romances, and the tree itself even appeared on maps. Supposed to have "marked the eastern extremity of the known world," it was placed in the vicinity of the Terrestrial Paradise on the thirteenth-century Hereford map by Richard de Haldingham, and many travelers claimed to have visited it.⁹

Ralph and Ursula note that the dead seekers do not wear the talismanic beads of questers after the Well; that is to say, not being among those chosen by destiny for the Fellowship of the Well, they must needs fail. One may wonder at this point whether the exclusivity of this fellowship is not more than a little undemocratic, and whether it is not inconsistent for the egalitarian Morris to have posited such a situation in an idealistic work of fiction. But the hierophantic elements of Well suggest the same kind of millennial thinking evident in the earlier poetry and romances. The mystic Fellowship of the Well is a chosen group, much as are the barbarian Goths, or Aryans, if you will, of Wolfings and Roots, who are to lead the world into a glorious millennial age. These, the chosen, represent all mankind. In the story of Ralph of Upmeads, destined to become a great leader of men, Morris makes explicit what he implies elsewhere: Destiny chooses its agents; all has been arranged since the beginning of time; man's role is to recognize and rise to his own destiny, no more, no less. Further, any man is chosen if he only realize that destiny. Morris spoke as follows about those fallen

in the American Civil War: ". . . many thousand men of our own kindred gave their lives on the battle-field to bring to a happy ending a mere episode in the struggle for the abolition of slavery: they are blessed and happy, for the opportunity came to them, and they seized it and did their best, and the world is the wealthier for it: and if such an opportunity is offered to us shall we thrust it from us that we may sit still in ease of body, in doubt, in disease of soul?" (23:212). This speech expresses clearly the meaning of Ralph's quest and explains why the gold cup at the Well is inscribed: "THE STRONG OF HEART SHALL DRINK FROM ME" (19:82), and not "THOSE WHO DRINK FROM ME SHALL BE STRONG OF HEART." That is, all those who are strong in heart shall accept their destined mission, and, in the fulfilment of the quest shall find what they have always been. (If this sounds disconcertingly like a comment on The Wizard of Oz, let us remember that Baum also drew on the tradition of the quest.) Ralph's greatness is confirmed and brought to fruition by the struggles and hardships of the journey, but it is his own intrinsic worth which makes him into a hero-king. By contrast, we are told that the foolish King of Goldburg wasted the gifts of the Well on pomp and luxury; his portion was death.

The deeper signification, then, of the Fellowship of the Well is not of an elite body of the elect. In fact, Well bristles throughout with some rather pointed egalitarian preachments by example: Ralph gives up his horse and fights unprotected so as not to have an advantage over the lowliest of his shepherd followers; though a king's son, he weds a yeoman's daughter, Ursula, whose "heart is greater than a king's or a leader of folk" (19:215). Throughout the romances, as a matter of fact, Morris democratically takes his

heroes and heroines from all strata of society: Walter, in Wood, is a merchant's son; Birdalone is a child of the poor; Osberne in The Sundering Flood refuses knighthood because it would not be consistent with his yeoman heritage.

But Ursula's parentage is of minor importance; her true relations are the other beautiful, yet doughty and militant women who figure in Morris' writings from Sigurd the Volsung on, just as Ralph is cast in the mold of other Morrisian heroes. These warrior-maidens abound in Wolfings and in Roots: in Wood, it is the Maid who plans and directs the escape from the evil wood. In Well, Ursula, by virtue of her courage and stamina, becomes an equal partner in the quest and, rather than being conventionally rescued by the hero of romance, herself saves Ralph at the Dry Tree. In fact Morris' egalitarianism is nowhere more evident than in his depiction of women as the equals of men both in spirit and in body. Far from the ethereal creatures of the courtly love tradition and the Victorian stereotype (and far too, we might note, from Janey Morris' enjoyment of ill health), they were born in the pages of Germanic saga. If they are not completely liberated sexually (their maidenly virtue always being preserved until union with the hero), neither are most of their prototypes of heroic literature.

Morris indulged his fascination with these self-sufficient women by making one of them the central figure of the posthumously published The Water of the Wondrous Isles, the last romance he was able to put into finished form. In this tale, Birdalone's adventures subsume a number of the various roles and situations experienced by other Morrisian heroines, most notably the Lady in Well. Like the Lady, Birdalone grows to womanhood in an isolated woodland cottage as the thrall of a witch and is tutored

in secret by a fairy godmother figure, who prepares her for escape to the world and the life of mankind. (A similar situation occurs in Wood.) In The Sundering Flood, Elfhild's unsympathetic aunts take the place of the witch figure; Dame Anna, wise in spell-making, is her tutor and helper. (The fragment Desiderius contains the germ of the same situation.) Morris' repetition of this motif underlines its importance: symbolically, the interlude with the witch in an almost inaccessible forest suggests a kind of enforced separation or isolation from life itself, which isolation must be ended by the slave herself, as it is in these cases when she is reborn through the initiatory instruction by those wise in the lore of the earth, i.e., an elder, or even the spirit of an ancestor. When the Lady in Well and Birdalone in Water return to these forest huts, their solitary sojourns suggest initiatory ordeals--symbolic returns to the womb (the hut) surrounded by chaos (the forest). The witch, who embodies in each case an unnatural and perverted force, must be overcome or annihilated so that her victim may not only be liberated but united with the greater life of the earth. It is symbolically fitting, therefore, that Birdalone's tutor should be an earth spirit, a faerie queene of the wood, whose name, Habundia, suggests the abundance and fertility of the earth, the antithesis of the perverted and barren sexuality of the witch, and Birdalone's true heritage. So Birdalone and Arthur are at last blessed by Habundia as very children of the earth (20:360).

The pattern of separation and isolation ended by union and generation is centrally important in the romances and is the deeper significance of the emphasis on sexual love so noticeable in all of them. Morris' heroes and heroines are all

devastatingly attractive to the opposite sex, though occasionally this may be unconvincing to the reader. (It is difficult, for example, to reconcile Birdalone's fatally potent sex appeal with some of her Girl Scout speeches and actions.) But this sexual attraction is an outward sign of the inner generative force working through the lives of these characters, overcoming unnatural restraints and privations in order to bless the earth and bring forth the abundant fruit of love and brotherhood. Even the luxuriance of their hair suggests their kinship with the burgeoning life force of the earth.

A striking pattern in the tales of The Earthly Paradise is the opposition of Diana, associated with celibacy and death, and Venus, associated with sexuality and life. In the romances, Diana's associations with death and sterility are attributed to the witch figures while the hunt-maiden heroines blossom into love goddesses. (Morris frequently compares their beauty to that of goddesses of old.) In their mixed militancy and nubility, the heroines of Morris' prose romances suggest a blending of the archetypal female roles of Aphrodite and Artemis--an emblem of this reconciliation is the reiterated description of Birdalone in her huntress garb, armed with bow and arrow.

Numerous episodes in the romances are emblematic in function. As a matter of fact, Morris remarked in an 1892 biographical talk that his poems "are rather of the nature of a series of pictures" (22: xxxii), and he might have included the romances in this observation. In Well, for example, the rock carving called "The Fighting Man," which is an important waysign for seekers after the Well, suggests the militancy and commitment to action essential for the Strong of Heart who are to renew their lives at the Well, and, further, is a natural

association with the great military leader, Alexander the Great, an early traveler to the ends of the world, and Ralph, who follows in Alexander's path to become a Fellow of the Well and a warleader. Earlier in the plot, an arras in the Castle of Abundance, where Ralph awaits the Lady prior to setting out for the Well, depicts the story of Alexander, foreshadowing Ralph's subsequent adventures. Similarly, in an earlier episode, Ralph sees the play of St. George killing the dragon and is shortly after, in his first encounter with the Lady, able to effect his own rescue of a lady in distress.

In Water, the magic boat in which Birdalone escapes the witch stops at several islands which have no real plot function other than to suggest emblematically the basic theme, isolation followed by union, which is the pattern of the plot. Upon leaving the enchanted Isle of Increase Unsought where the three damsels are held captive by the sister-witch, Birdalone comes to the Isle of the Young and the Old, inhabited only by children and an old man who has no memory. Next are the Isle of the Queens, where an enchanted company of women mourn a dead king, and the complementary Isle of the Kings, where a dead woman lies in state among an enchanted throng of armed men. The last island lying between Birdalone and the Castle of the Quest toward which she is bound is the Isle of Nothing, a barren desert where she is trapped in an obscuring mist. The first three of these islands are emblematic representations of perverted states of society in which parts of family units exist in unnatural isolation and consequent paralysis. The last, the Isle of Nothing, suggests the sterility resulting from such perversions and frustrations of nature. Long afterward, on Birdalone's return voyage to the witch's house by the water-side, she finds these islands somewhat

returned to normality: the Isle of Nothing become populated and fruitful; the women and men of the Isle of the Queens and the Isle of the Kings aroused from their enchantment (their unsatisfied lust emphasizing their incompleteness); the old man gone from the Isle of the Young and the Old. We might infer that these changes are the result of the destruction of the Isle of Increase Unsought together with its witch-mistress. At any rate, there is evident a liberation from a debilitating or atrophic enchantment which would isolate, separate, wither, and annihilate humankind; what Birdalone sees on her way back to the forest of Evilshaw is a renewal of life not yet complete, but promising that her journey will end in lovers' meeting, as indeed it does, ending her long separation from Arthur. Renewal is foreshadowed in the magical serpent ring given Birdalone by Habundia before she escapes the witch, and in the serpent shape assumed by the escaping spirit of the sending boat after her return to the witch's cottage, the serpent, who sheds his skin and renews his life, long having been a symbol of regeneration.

The pattern of separation followed by union and restoration is graphically developed in Morris' last romance, The Sundering Flood, which tells the story of two lovers who grow up separated by an impassable river and of their individual quests to find one another and be united. Morris did not have time to develop The Sundering Flood as he seems to have planned,¹⁰ but, despite the relative lack of development toward the end, this last tale shows clearly its affinity with its predecessors. Osberne, like Ralph and Face-of-god, is created in the mold of the archetypal hero of saga and myth, singled out from childhood to become a glorious leader by a destiny manifesting itself in supernatural helpers. Like Ralph, Osberne has luck, plain for all to see in his face, and the elfin

sword Boardcleaver, "fashioned by the fathers of long ago" (21:73) is in fact an attribute of his innate prowess rather than a source of it. The mysterious Steelhead, who initiates Osberne into manhood by the Imposition of Hands, and who gives him the magical sword, is a spirit of the earth, one of the "warriors of while agone" (21:76), and may not come into builded towns. (Anthropologically, Osberne's initiation is a classic example of tutelage by the spirit of a dead ancestor.)¹¹ Osberne is, in fact, an incarnation of ancient heroic values reasserting themselves in a new age in order to revitalize and restore a nation. His significance as the agent of rebirth and renewal is emblemized in his boyhood victory over the would-be tyrant, Hardcastle, an experienced warrior. The analogy between Osberne's challenge of the champion and David going out to fight Goliath (perceived by the women of the household) is significantly appropriate. The wonderful child Osberne brings together the past and future: his youth is a promise of the future as his manly deeds vindicate and reaffirm the values of the past.

Osberne's glorious career as the Red Lad, the bane of tyrants, does not lead him into kingship; this, the most democratic of all Morris' heroes, returns to his home to live out his life among his own, the free goodmen of the uplands. Like Ralph and Birdalone, he does not forsake his heritage, but returns to his origins, healing and protecting the land which cradled him. This is the noblest end to which heroism may be put, and Morris' homecoming heroes and heroines complete and make whole their lives in the circular pattern of their quests, separation overcome and union achieved. The idea of returning to origins is allied to the millennial eschatological themes recurrent in Morris' writings. Man has been separated from his origins (earth, life, the unfallen

state) and must achieve reunification.¹² Morris' heroes come from the earth and return to it in death, forever a part of the unending cycle of life. Like Morris, they accept the human condition, its limitations as well as its glories.

The implicit message of the "fairy romances," then, is plain: heroism is not dead; the earth calls to each man and woman in her hour of need; she will be saved and revitalized by those of strong heart who heed the call; and those are blessed indeed who give their all to destiny. Morris once described himself as "careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind" (23:280). On another occasion, he remarked, "In religion I am a pagan" (22:xxxii). That is to say, Morris' concern first and foremost was for the life of this earth, and the romances would be anomalous indeed if they did not evidence the same abiding concern for our earthly life which is so abundantly plain in everything else Morris undertook during the years of his maturity. Because the romances emphasize and mythicize the dimensions of human life, they constitute an important part of Morris' work, complementing his personal struggles in the realms of architecture and crafts, as well as politics. And this in addition to their being in themselves delightfully unique works of art.

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¹Quoted by H. Halliday Sparling in The Kelmscott Press and William Morris, Master-Craftsman (London, 1924), p. 73.

²Rites and Symbols of Initiation, The Mysteries

of Birth and Rebirth, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1965), p. 44; see also pp. 36-51 passim. See also Eliade's Myth and Reality, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York and Evanston, 1963), p. 80.

³ See Eliade, Images and Symbols, Studies in Religious Symbolism, trans. Philip Mairet (New York, 1969), pp. 155 ff.

⁴ See W. Jackson Knight, Cumaeae Gates, Part II in Vergil: Epic and Anthropology (New York, 1967), for an extended treatment of this subject.

⁵ Eliade, Rites and Symbols, p. 59, suggests that the idea of the rebirth of the cosmos has always been closely associated with primitive initiation rites.

⁶ The Life of Alexander of Macedon (New York, 1955), p. 8.

⁷ See Eliade, Images and Symbols, pp. 165-67.

⁸ On the incorporation of the symbols of the Cosmic Tree and the center of the world into the symbolism of the cross, see Eliade, Rites and Symbols, pp. 119-20.

⁹ See Rose Jeffries Peebles, "The Dry Tree: Symbol of Death," pp. 59-79 in Vassar Mediaeval Studies (New Haven, 1923), ed. Christabel Forsyth Fiske.

¹⁰ May Morris discusses this matter in Works, 21:xi-xiv.

¹¹ See Eliade, Rites and Symbols, pp. 39-40.

¹² See Eliade, Myth and Reality, pp. 21-38.

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ROMANCES OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Blue Calhoun