

80. A. C. Swinburne, review,
Nineteenth Century

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The creative gift of Mr. Morris, his distinctive power of imagination, cannot be defined or appreciated by any such test of critical comparison as is applicable to the work of any other man. He is himself alone, and so absolutely that his work can no more be likened to any mediæval than to any contemporary kinsman's. In his love of a story for a story's sake he is akin to Chaucer and the French precursors of Chaucer: but if he has not much of Chaucer's realistic humour and artistic power of condensation and composition, he has a gift of invention as far beyond Chaucer's as the scope of a story like *The Well at the World's End* is beyond the range of such brief romances as 'Amis and Amile' or 'Aucassin and Nicolette.' Readers and lovers (the terms should here be synonymous) of his former tales or poems in prose will expect to find in this masterpiece—for a perfect and unique masterpiece it is—something that will remind them less of 'Child Christopher' than of *The Wood Beyond the World*: the mere likeness in the titles would suggest so much: and this I think they will not fail to find: but I am yet more certain that the quality of this work is even finer and stronger than that of either. The interest, for those who bring with them to the reading of a work of imagination any auxiliary or sympathetic imagination of their own, is deeper and more vivid as well as more various: but the crowning test and triumph of the author's genius will be recognised in the all but unique power of touching with natural pathos the alien element of magical or supernatural fiction. Coleridge could do this: who else till now has done it? And when we venture to bring in the unapproachable name of Coleridge, we are venturing to cite the example of the most imaginative, the most essentially poetic, among all poets of all nations and all time.

It should be remembered that when an allegorical intention was detected in the beautiful story of adventure and suffering and love which enchanted all readers in *The Wood beyond the World*, Mr. Morris for once condescended to disclaim the misinterpretation of his meaning,

and to point out the difference between allegorical and simple narrative in words of perfect and conclusive accuracy. No commentator, I should hope, will ever waste his time on the childish task of inventing an occult significance for the incidents and adventures, the lurid and the lovely landscapes, set before him and impressed upon his memory in this later and yet more magically beautiful tale. The perfect simplicity and the supreme nobility of the spirit which informs and pervades and quickens and exalts it must needs make any but an inept and incapable reader feel yet once more a sense of wonder at the stupidity of the generations which could imagine a difference and a contrast between simple and noble. The simplest English writer of our time is also the noblest: and the noblest by reason and by virtue of his sublime simplicity of spirit and of speech. If the English of the future are not utterly unworthy and irredeemably unmindful of the past, they will need no memorial to remind them that his name was William Morris.

81. W. B. Yeats, review, *Bookman*

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William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), the great Irish poet, produced a good deal of literary journalism in his early years.

That Mr. William Morris was the greatest poet of his time one may doubt, remembering more impassioned numbers than his, but one need not doubt at all that he was the poet of his time who was most perfectly a poet. Certain men impress themselves on the imagination of the world as types, and Shelley, with his wayward desires, his unavailing protest, has become the type of the poet to most men and to all women, and perhaps because he seemed to illustrate that English dream, which holds the poet and the artist unfitted for practical life: laughable and lovable children whose stories and angers one may listen