

WRITING
ON THE IMAGE:
READING
WILLIAM MORRIS

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Socialist Fellowship and the Woman Question

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William Morris's treatment of the woman question has sometimes been called reactionary. I wish to offer a qualified defence and suggest that his solution to the problem of the woman question is insightful. Morris believed that the woman question revolved around two evils: exploitation in the labour force and subordination in bourgeois marriage. He believed that the resolution of these issues required socialists to recognize that women were naturally different from men. Work and romance were the two principal realms of this difference and he matched them to the problems of capitalist exploitation and marital oppression respectively. This pairing led him to argue that the emancipation of women required a dual liberation, through the implementation of a natural division of labour and the realization of free love. These ideas were not easily reconciled: after all, the first implied the maintenance of the domestic sphere and the second its abandonment. Morris sought to defuse this contradiction through his idea of fellowship. In his late prose romances he argued that socialist fellowship would lead women to adopt a new domestic role, linked to motherhood.

The Woman Question

The woman question, as debated in the 1880s and 1890s, had a number of dimensions, including the nature of women's work, the extension of women's rights, and the position of women in the family. Even in these late decades of the century, none of these issues was new. Fifty

years earlier, Owenites like William Thompson and Anna Wheeler had pushed the issue of women's emancipation to the forefront of the socialist agenda (Taylor 5-9). Similarly, non-socialists like Emily Davies, Frances Cobbe, Josephine Butler, and Millicent Fawcett had led a variety of campaigns in the 1860s and 1870s to focus attention on the exclusion of women from the public sphere and on the double standards of Victorian sexual morality (Caine 1-17). But in the later decades of the century, a number of new phenomena rekindled interest in these issues. In the 1880s the appearance of the 'new woman' stirred debate about the status of women in Victorian society and the nature of female sexuality (Bland 141-65). Likewise, the fashion for sociological investigation raised awareness of women's social and economic conditions: even though W.T. Stead's 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' gave a lurid and titillating account of prostitution, it stimulated a major debate of one of the central issues of the 1880s (Walkowitz 42-3). Finally, the development of pseudo-scientific thought, encouraged by the popularity of Darwinian ideas, raised questions about the biological differences between the sexes and the naturalness of existing social roles (Walkowitz 37-59; Brandon, ch. 2).

Morris took a keen interest in all of these issues. Picking his way through the tangled thickets of debate, he identified two central issues for socialism: the exploitation of female labour and the institution of bourgeois marriage. His treatment of these problems had much in common with the analysis presented by Eleanor and Edward Marx-Aveling in their popular review of August Bebel's enormously successful book, *Woman Under Socialism* (Hunt 33-6). They boldly asserted that the woman question 'rests, as everything in our complex modern society rests, on an economic basis' (Marx-Aveling 4). Though they admitted that women were subject to 'an organized tyranny of men' they believed that this tyranny was less important than the 'organized tyranny of idlers' which preyed on the workers and they concluded that the liberation of women would be secured only through the liberation of the working class. Morris followed suit. He, too, acknowledged that women were often treated less well than even the most ill-treated men, that a large number of women were forced into prostitution, for example, and, that elsewhere, women were viewed merely as the cheapest source of available labour. In capitalism, monopolists employed women for the same reasons that they introduced machinery: in order to 'displace with skilled labour' and to slash labour costs. Yet for all the extreme deprivations they suffered

in the market, Morris still treated women as a special component of the working class and insisted that the most important causes of their oppression were economic. The 'causes that drive girls and women into the streets to sell their love,' he argued, were 'the same as those which made men degrade themselves 'by over-hours and competition' (Contributions 27). Prostitutes, he observed, were 'as necessary' in modern society as 'the banker who looks after the money that pays them, or the policeman who runs them in' (Contributions 616).

Morris also compared women to workers in the context of bourgeois marriage. Here, however, he was concerned to examine the motivation that explained the inequities rather than the exploitation that resulted from it. His principal objection to bourgeois marriage was that it was based on force. In bourgeois society, women were 'compelled' to marry just as workers were compelled to labour (Letters 2:404). Both marriage and labour were free, in the sense that they were regulated by legal contracts, but neither was entered into freely. With no rights of ownership to the means of production, workers were coerced into labour by the threat of starvation. Similarly, women entered into marriage because they had no other means of supporting themselves. The vast majority of women, Morris noted, pursued 'marriage ... as a profession' (Contributions 259). Naturally, polite society fostered the view that marriage was based on everlasting love, just as individual employers maintained the idea that labour relations were based on class cooperation. In Morris's view, however, both ideas were fictions. In so far as romance was concerned, there was little difference between marriage and prostitution. Indeed, Morris told George Bernard Shaw that for most women marriage was best described as 'legalized rape' (Letters 2:404). And, since divorce was still a virtual impossibility, large numbers of women were forced to endure a lifetime of continual assault.

Tracing the roots of women's oppression to capitalism, Morris concluded that the struggle for women's liberation was part of the class struggle to 'free labour from the tyranny of monopoly' (Contributions 259). Equally, when he looked forward to socialism, he assumed that men and women would both enjoy 'inalienable rights of livelihood' and that there would be 'nothing to force people into legal prostitution or tempt them into irregular venal do. [sic] which for the rest they couldn't have as it ... is simply a form of ordinary market exploitation' (Letters 2:584-5). Yet Morris also argued that the resolution of the woman question required the recognition of natural

sexual differences as well as the abolition of capitalism. What were these differences? Morris did not always make his understanding clear. On one occasion he carelessly assumed that all women were potential mothers and argued that 'childbearing makes ... women inferior to men, since a certain time of their lives they must be dependent on them' (*Letters* 2:545). More typically, he suggested that women were not less able than men but that the conditions for their well-being and freedom were not the same as they were for men.

For Morris the two principal areas of natural difference were art and romance. In art, the difference was largely a natural inequality: women, he argued in an interview, did not 'excel in ... inventive power' and were unlikely to become 'first-rank' musicians or painters. In particular, owing to their 'more nervous and less muscular structure,' they lacked the strength to develop the lightness of touch that craftwork demanded (Tooley 260-1). In the same interview, Morris suggested that women had a talent for business, management, medicine, and, above all, for the 'difficult and important' task of housekeeping (Tooley 261). The distinction he made here between artistic and domestic labour seemed to fly in the face of his own experience. Morris had seen how some women excelled in certain crafts, notably embroidery. Yet, insisting on the idea of artistic difference, he designated embroidery a 'domestic' art and insisted that women were incapable of producing the 'fine and delicate work' demanded of the 'building' or 'workshop' arts like weaving and tapestry ('How Shall We Live Then' 230-1; Tooley 260). The inconsistency in Morris's understanding was his belief that women made poor cooks and that only men could be creative in kitchens. He told Mackail that women knew 'absolutely nothing' about cookery: 'their twist isn't that way.' Indeed, priding himself on his own culinary skills, Morris protested that a woman had 'never invented a new dish or failed to half spoil an old one' (Mackail 1:230-1). His mocking tone carried a serious message. As Mackail noted, Morris thought that cookery was one of the important 'arts of human life'; and his estimation of women's skills in this area perhaps helps explain his eagerness to encourage men in socialism to take a part in domestic labour. But whatever the root of his concern, cookery was the exception that proved the rule about domestic art. In socialism, Morris insisted, housekeeping would become woman's 'special' domain: men would 'never be any good at it' (Tooley 261). Although he was committed to realize a condition of 'absolute equality ... between women & men, as

between other groups,' Morris accordingly told Bruce Glasier that it would 'be poor economy setting women to do men's work (as unluckily they often do now) or vice versa' (*Letters* 2:545).

Morris's reflections on the differences between men and women in respect of love or romance were perhaps shaped by his own experience. of marriage to Jane Burden, whom he married in April 1859. The couple were never well-matched: Jane liked music, theatre, warm weather, and Mediterranean landscapes - date palms, 'olives, lemons, oranges ... blue mountains - blue sea' (Bryson and Troxell 172). Morris, on the other hand, was indifferent to music and only tolerated the theatre. Thinking of himself as 'a man of the North,' he was 'disappointed' when the weather was fine, preferring instead to sit indoors watching the rain 'beating on the windows' (Blunt 283). While their evident incompatibility did not prevent them from developing an affectionate and companionable relationship, it symbolized a basic difference of temperament and spirit (Marsh, *Jane and May* 174-5). Both were passionate, but Jane was sensuous and outgoing, whilst Morris was reserved (Marsh, *Jane and May* 63-5). By marrying Morris, Jane had made a calculated match, securing social advancement. For his part, Morris had won a 'stunner,' a physical beauty whom he worshipped as an object of desire (MacCarthy 135-7). The tragedy of the match was, as Wifrid Scawen Blunt suggested, that Morris knew that he 'had married for love, and his wife had never loved him' (Marsh, *Jane and May* 73). Still worse, he knew that Jane was 'too lovely and noble not to be loved' (Bryson and Troxell 11). Captivated by her beauty, he had become love's willing pawn, ultimately doomed to suffer his wife's indifference and infidelity.

Regardless of his own situation, Morris believed that while women were capable of both love and of forging lasting relationships, they did not love in the same way as men. Men were the heroic victims of love, magnetically attracted to their lovers and prone to idolize them. Women were the knowing objects of men's desire and were able to govern and direct their passions in a way that men were unable to do. If forced by circumstances, they became sly, wily creatures, using their insight into men's desires to win advantages for themselves. In the Old North, for example, Morris suggested that 'women claimed and obtained immunity for responsibility for their violence on the score of their being 'weak women' ('Early Literature of the North - Iceland' 185). In bourgeois society this problem was more acute and

women exaggerated their coyness in order to secure special legal rights. Lending support to his friend Ernest Belfort Bax, for example, Morris pointed out that women enjoyed exemption from military service. And in love, women could be both calculating and inconstant. As Morris made clear in his novels, women were capable of ensnaring their lovers and of switching their affections to reject them.

Morris's conception of natural difference significantly complicated his treatment of the woman question. When he thought of women as a special cohort of the working class, Morris argued merely for the realization of 'certainty of livelihood' and the abolition of 'bourgeois property-marriage' ('Manifesto of the Socialist League' 6, 12). From this point of view, women's liberation was a matter of equal employment and non-coercive relationships. Socialism promised a future when 'the economical position of women would be the same as that of men,' with 'one moral law' serving to regulate the behaviour of 'both sexes' (Tooley 260-1). Yet Morris also argued that socialist women would not find fulfilment in labour as such, but primarily in domestic labour. Equally, women would not flourish in what Lenin called proletarian marriages (35:182-5) - life-long, monogamous relationships - but only in free love, or relationships that enabled them to indulge their fleeting passions. In other words, Morris's analysis suggested that the solution to the woman question did not lie simply in negating the evils of bourgeois-capitalist society, but in designing a new social system that enabled women to fulfil themselves in the domestic sphere without sacrificing their sexual independence. In Morris's view, these aims could only be realized in the fostering of fellowship.

As G.D.H. Cole noted, Morris identified fellowship as a primary socialist value. John Ball's cry that 'fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death' is one of the keynotes of his socialism (Cole 419; *A Dream of John Ball*, CW 16:230). At one point he even defined the battle between capitalism and socialism as one between 'mastership or fellowship' ('Dawn of a New Epoch,' CW 23:124). Morris understood fellowship as a principle of duty. In the political sphere, for example, he believed that fellowship held out the hope that communists would eventually be able to secure cooperation in the community without coercion. Fellowship underpinned the morality that, in his famous dispute with the anarchists, he referred to as the public or social conscience (*Letters* 3:86). In the economic realm, fellowship described the basis on which work would be performed. In the future, when individuals worked in fellowship, the community would benefit from

'each man's diverse talents developed for the use and advantage of the common good' (*Letters* 2:289). In communism, there would be

no contention of man with man, but *association* instead; so only can labour be really organized, harmoniously organized. But harmony can not co-exist with contention for individual gain: men must work for the common gain if the world is to be raised out of its present misery; therefore that claim of the workman ... must be subject to the fact that he is but a part of a harmonious whole: he is worthless without the co-operation of his fellows. ('Dawn of a New Epoch,' CW 23:133)

Similarly, in the domestic realm, Morris believed that fellowship described the duty that women would feel towards the wider community. In fellowship, women would discover how to direct their inconstant romantic passions to secure communal well-being.

Morris's literature provides the best guide to his understanding of the relationship between fellowship and the woman question. Admittedly, his views changed dramatically over time. In his pre-socialist writings, especially *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), and *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), he distinguished fellowship from romance, suggesting that fellowship governed relations between men but excluded women. Fellowship developed from a conscious desire to live in community with one's fellows and it was distinct from the uncontrollable romantic impulses which governed male-female relations. Indeed, in Morris's view, fellowship and romance usually conflicted. In pursuit of fellowship, men often deserted their lovers and weakened the bonds of romance. By the same token, men otherwise united in fellowship would fall out over a shared romance. In 'The Lovers of Gudrun' (from *The Earthly Paradise*), Morris painted both scenarios: Kiartan's quest in Norway first leads to the undoing of his love for Gudrun; Bodli's love for Gudrun subsequently leads him to sacrifice his fellowship with Kiartan. More strongly, Morris argued that women were excluded from fellowship because they lacked the virtues demanded of it. Morris equated fellowship with what he regarded as manly traits, like heroism and courage, but above all, he believed that fellowship required a sense of justice. In *Sigurd the Volsung*, he described Gutorm, the only Niblung brother to be excluded from fellowship with Sigurd, as 'fierce and strong,' but 'blind-eyed through right and wrong' (CW 12:202, 226). Whilst Gutorm demonstrated that some men were incapable of either justice or fellowship, Morris

held that the majority understood the standards that justice imposed and that women did not share the same understanding. The difference turned on the contrast that Morris drew between manly justice and unmanly vengeance. In his early story 'The Hollow Land,' the heroes Sir Florian and Hugh mistakenly appoint themselves as God's agents for the murder of Queen Swanhilda. After killing her, they repent their act, realizing that it was a 'poor cowardly piece of revenge, instead of a brave act of justice' (CW 1:273). Here, the men act wrongly, but do not put themselves beyond the bounds of justice. Morris's women, by contrast, are unable to evaluate their actions dispassionately and their crimes are characteristically vengeful. When Gudrun discovers that Kiartan has deserted her, she swears by Thor 'That the false foster-brother shall be slain / Before three summers have come round again, / If by my hand must bring him to his end' (CW 5:387). Sigurd's wife Gudrun similarly acts in vengeance and, on hearing of Gutorm's murder of her husband, plots the downfall of the Niblung family. Admittedly, both stories were drawn from Icelandic mythology where vengeance was a common theme (Latham, *Poems by the Way* XIX-XX). Yet Morris's portrayal of women as vengeful was not confined by this particular context. Medea, too, is vengeful. Betrayed by Jason, she kills their children and murders Glauce, his second wife.

When he became a socialist Morris revised this position and began to see that fellowship and romance could be reconciled. In his late prose romances, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888), *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890), *The Glittering Plain* (1891), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), and *The Sundering Flood* (1897), the potential for conflict between romance and fellowship is denied altogether. When Ralph, the hero of *The Well at the World's End*, is accused of preferring romance to fellowship, he rejects the charge and explicitly ties his quest to find his love, Ursula, to his knightly duty (CW 23:266). Similarly, while the marriage between Gold-mane and Sun-beam, hero and heroine of *The Roots of the Mountains*, is arranged to seal an alliance between their two villages, the couple satisfy the duty imposed upon them by also celebrating their love (CW 15:374-9). In these stories, Morris also reconsidered his depiction of women and, in particular, their potential for justice and honesty. In contrast to his early literature, he now distinguished between good and evil women. Women in both categories are characteristically beautiful, but his heroines match their physical

beauty with a pureness of heart. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, for example, Birdalone has a close affinity with nature and, wandering about the woods, she finds that 'the rabbits and squirrels ... come to her hand and sport with her' (CW 20:15). The Lady of Abundance, who first captures Ralph's heart in *The Well at the World's End*, is similarly a gentle soul, 'kind and proud at once' (CW 18:157). By contrast, the Lady who pursues Walter in *The Wood Beyond the World* is physically beautiful but 'hateful, and nought love-worthy' (CW 17:40). Looking at herself through the hero Ralph's eyes, the Queen in *The Well at the World's End* discovers that she is likewise

not uncomely ... but coarse and little-minded. I rage in the household when whim takes me, and should believe be untrue if there were any force to drive me thereto. And I suffer my husband to go after other women ... so that I may take my pleasure unstayed with other men whom I love not greatly. Yea, I am foolish, and empty-hearted and unclean. (CW 18:311-12)

While these evil women show themselves to be vengeful and unable to overcome the disappointment or frustrations of love, the heroines of Morris's stories display temperate understanding in the face of adversity. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, the Bride eventually overcomes Gold-mane's betrayal of her love and leaves Gold-mane and his new love, Sun-beam, to live in peace. Also involved in a triangular affair, Birdalone believes that her friendship with Atra will be destroyed by their competing love for the knight Arthur (*Wondrous Isles*, CW 20:253). In time, however, Atra, too, reconciles herself to the loss of her love and her sisterhood with Birdalone survives (20:378).

Morris's interest in women's capacity for honesty ran counter to his intuitive sense that women were crafty and manipulative. He had expressed this idea in his early literature, denoting cunning in the attribution of supernatural powers, but in the later prose romances the theme became dominant, as Morris felt able to both confront and modify his previously negative views. He described most of the heroines in these later works as witches. In his last, unfinished romance, *The Sundering Flood*, Elfhild, for example, has a magic pipe, a gift from cave-dwelling dwarfs (CW 21:34-5). In *The Well at the World's End*, the Lady of Abundance is a herbalist, versed in ancient lore (CW 18:185). Though she possesses none of the blackness of her step-mother, Birdalone has access to the magic contained in the 'book of the earth,' and is described

as a spinner who produces embroidery so beautiful that others believe 'that the Faery must have learned her craft' (*Wondrous Isles*, CW 20:42, 139). These women invariably use their powers to good ends, usually in an effort to find love or to cement the fate of their lovers, as circumstances dictate. With the help of her Woodmother, Sun-beam lures the heroic Gold-mane into her clutches with spells and songs of the 'wild-wood, and what was therein of desire and peril and beguiling and death, and love unto Death itself' (*Roots of the Mountains*, CW 15:118). Yet, more importantly, once these women are secure in love, they also sense the fraudulence of their powers and give them up. Birdalone chooses to live in fellowship with Arthur and the other knights even though she knows that she can live in sisterhood without giving up her magic (*Wondrous Isles*, CW 20:55). In *The Wood Beyond the World*, the Maid tells Walter that she will her call a halt to her use of magic lore on the day she is 'made all happy' (CW 17:97). Accordingly, upon their marriage, 'all wizardry left her' (17:128). Admittedly, some of Morris's heroines are more reluctant than the Maid to relinquish their magic. Once united with Osberne, Elfhild is 'a little grieved' to find that she has lost the power of the dwarf pipe. Nevertheless, in common with Morris's other leading ladies, she consents to her disempowerment and watches Osberne cast the pipe into the caves (*Sundering Flood*, CW 21:247).

Emphasizing the reasonableness of women and their capacity for honesty, Morris also demonstrates that women are fit for fellowship and the duties it imposed. Having overcome her grief for Gold-mane, the Bride marries Sun-beam's brother, forging 'a very good alliance for the Burgdalers and the Silverdalers' (*Letters* 3:42). In *The House of the Wolfings*, the goddess Wood-Sun demonstrates a similar sense of sacrifice. Though she tries to protect the warrior Thiodolf from death by casting him under her dreamy spell, she is eventually persuaded by Hall-Sun, their daughter, that she must give him up and allow him to die for the sake of the folk. In fellowship, moreover, Morris argued that women spontaneously tailored their interests to suit those of the community. In this respect, most of Morris's heroines discover that fellowship is best served by motherhood. Admittedly, Birdalone eventually assumes a wifely, not a motherly role and, having rescued Arthur, she happily devotes herself to his every need, busying herself 'about the housekeeping ... to provide ... dainties of their meadow and woodland husbandry, as cream and junkets and wood-fruit and honey, and fine bread made for that very occasion' (*Wondrous Isles*, CW 20:352).

More typically, Walter's Maid becomes 'the land's increase, and the city's safeguard, and the bliss of the folk' (*Wood Beyond the World*, CW 17:128). At her journey's end, Ursula, 'valiant and true,' bears Ralph eight children (*Well*, CW 19:244). After her marriage to Gold-mane, Sun-beam presses her kinswoman, Bow-may, to follow her example. Accustomed to the idea that women had a duty 'to bear more warriors to the folk,' she holds fast to the tradition that encourages 'strong and goodly women ... women so kind and friendly' to think of themselves as mothers (*Roots of the Mountains*, CW 15:110, 410).

Morris did not explain the mechanisms that would lead to the blossoming of fellowship in communism. Looking at the problem in relation to labour he merely argued that workers would come to their 'right senses' and that, after the revolution, the communal ties that workers 'ought to feel' were those that they 'will feel.' Having overcome the compulsion of capitalism each would recognize 'that he is working for his own interest when he is working for the community' ('Dawn of a New Epoch,' CW 23:133). Morris expected that the transformation of the domestic realm would follow the same pattern and that material changes would provide a basis for the development of a new social conscience, but here he was perhaps more interested in the effect of the changes than he was in their operation. In so far as the woman question was concerned, fellowship perfectly eased the tension between his demand for free love and the natural division of labour. Since it pointed to motherhood, fellowship provided women with a strong incentive to maintain the domestic sphere without compromising the demand for free love. In bourgeois society, women had been compelled by marriage laws and the operation of the market to work as housekeepers. Unlike their bourgeois sisters, socialist women faced no such compulsion. Yet, economically independent and free to enter into 'genuine unions of passion & affection,' they would not destroy the home by confusing free love with recreational sex or promiscuity (*Letters* 2:584-5). Women would maintain the domestic sphere for two reasons: because domestic work was fulfilling and because domesticity enabled them to spend time with their children.

Fellowship as a Solution to the Woman Question

In the past, critics have accused Morris of supporting a regressive, pre-industrial model of social relations that consigns women to 'a particularly unradicalized position' (Swindells and Jardine 57). Jan-

Marsh's analysis of *News from Nowhere* echoes this conclusion. Morris's Utopia, she argues, offers 'regrettably a masculine vision of paradise' ('Concerning Love' 121). Morris's analysis of the woman question and fellowship provides a good deal of fuel for this criticism. His insistence that women were, by virtue of their biological makeup, suited to a particular social role seems extremely conservative. Equally, his idealization of family life and his suggestion that women were not equipped to perform 'men's work' typically ignored the drudgery of housework and the real lack of opportunities faced by the majority of women who assumed this role.

Morris was aware of the apparently reactionary overtones of this solution to the woman question, just as he was conscious of the conservative and sentimental implications of his desire to revitalize the handicrafts ('The Revival of Handicraft,' CW 22:331). But he did not temper his belief that housework was the natural realm of womanly excellence or that a woman's natural vocation was to provide 'help and comfort' for her children and the 'head of the family' ('True and False Society,' CW 23:223). In *News from Nowhere* he openly rejected the movement for emancipation, characterizing its central demand as the right to free 'the more intelligent part of their sex from the bearing of children' (*News from Nowhere* 95). Indeed, his descriptions of the domestic sphere were clearly imbued with the 'feeling and language of male desire' (Marsh, 'Concerning Love' 121). Like the women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist classic, *Herland*, the domestic workers in *News from Nowhere* are independent, athletic, active, and passionate. Not in the least worn down by their labours, they are also good-natured and extremely beautiful. The idea that such vigorous and self-willed women would consider domestic service as a form of flirtation, as Old Hammond claims, can be construed as Morris's fantasy (*News from Nowhere* 94); and it is perhaps not surprising that Morris confessed that he had fallen in love with Ellen, the heroine of *News From Nowhere* (Glasier 140). Yet for all its difficulties, Morris's treatment of the woman question should not be dismissed as mere conservatism but considered as part of the aesthetic romantic tradition in feminist thought. This marginalized the political sphere as a space for the realization of human potential, but remains relevant (Vogel 17-46). However crude Morris's biological essentialism and understanding of female psychology, his model of social organization supports a forward-looking set of social arrangements, flexible enough to allow women to question the social roles that he would have assigned them and, as

importantly, predicated on a fundamental change in human relationships. The key to the success of the social arrangements in *News from Nowhere* lay in the choices that women (and men) were able to exercise: they would not be coerced into becoming domestic slaves. Of course, if fellowship failed to provide the sense of duty Morris anticipated, the hard question of how to reconcile women's choices with domestic labour remains unanswered. Nevertheless, in Morris's ideal, women were able to follow their chosen vocations in a framework that gave them - as he saw it - the whip-hand in love.

In *News from Nowhere*, Clara initiates both her 'divorce' from Dick and their reconciliation. Ellen tells Guest that she has 'two or three young men' who have taken a 'special liking' to her. Had she been born into Guest's age, she realizes that she would have been 'sold to rich men' and her life 'would have been wasted' (223). In her own age, she keeps all her admirers keen, without choosing to stay with any. While women like Ellen balance complicated affairs, the men in *News from Nowhere* remain both obsessive and possessive in love; they may even murder each other in passionate struggles for the love of their women. But in contrast to the so-called radicals like Edward Aveling, Morris's men did not neglect the importance of love, leaving women to bear its pain. And in contrast to bourgeois men, who strove in vain to control their women, these men have largely reconciled themselves to women's apparently inconstant passions. Discussing 'the trouble that bests the dealings between the sexes,' Old Hammond tells Guest how men prepare to face disappointment in *News from Nowhere*:

Calf love, mistaken for a heroism that shall be lifelong, yet early wanting into disappointment; the inexplicable desire that comes on a man of riper years to be all-in-all to some one woman, whose ordinary human kindness and human beauty he has idealised into superhuman perfection, and made the one object of his desire; or lastly the reasonable longing of a strong and thoughtful man to become the most intimate friend of some beautiful and wise woman, the very type of the beauty and glory of the world which we love so well, - as we exult in all the pleasure and exaltation of spirit which goes with these things, so we set ourselves to bear the sorrow which not uneldom goes with them also. (91)

In sum, while crude in its assumptions, Morris's model granted women the power to enter into relationships when they liked and

with whom they wanted. The community would have an interest in ensuring the well-being of children, but not in ensuring that women remain locked in unhappy relationships (*Letters* 2:584-5).

The most controversial aspect of Morris's solution to the woman question was his desire to counter what he saw as the destructive attempts of some feminists to emancipate women from motherhood. Morris did not discuss this demand in any depth but he clearly objected to the idea of liberation that lay at its heart. In Morris's view, material change held the key to emancipation: in socialism, he argued, women would have sufficient resources to ensure that both they and their children flourished. With this economic security, women would then be free honestly to explore their sexuality. Admittedly, Morris's economic theory was utopian and he failed to devise any way of realizing this aim apart from suggesting the need for revolution. Nevertheless, his warning that the reaction against motherhood might lead feminists to take a wrong turn was surely prophetic. Morris's fear was that women, frustrated by the constraints of bourgeois society, would find a solution to their problems in the relaxation of marriage laws and the opening up of employment opportunities. Leaving home for work, they would find a kind of equality, but one that left the social and economic fabric of society largely unchanged. The worst possible outcome was that women would end up facing a double burden of paid and domestic work whilst still competing for the favours of men. Suggesting that his feminist opponents had been 'brought up in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience' (*News from Nowhere* 96), Morris hinted that the rejection of maternal roles would leave women trapped in a system which encouraged promiscuity without legal or social restraint. Morris's alternative vision of the future was romantic, but is it any worse than the existing models that have left 'working' women largely responsible for the care of children while emphasizing the importance of sex as the primary means of empowerment?

The Reception of William Morris's *Beowulf*

Chris Jones

First published in 1895 by the Kelmscott Press, William Morris's translation of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* has had a chequered reception among critics and scholars over the course of the last century.¹ This essay investigates the varied and extreme reactions the poem has elicited since its publication.

'Few people,' Fiona MacCarthy cautions us, 'have had a good word to say for Morris's "Beowulf"' (649). In 1975, Jack Lindsay politely called it 'one of [Morris's] least successful productions' (365); in 1967, Paul Thompson condemned it as 'the worst thing [Morris] ever wrote,' 'incomprehensible,' and 'gibberish' (163). More recently, Michael Alexander, another translator of *Beowulf*, confesses his perverse fondness for one of Morris's lines concerning the hero's fight with Grendel's mother: 'Then she sat on the hall-guest and tugg'd out her sax' ('Sheen on the Mere' 81-2, quoting Morris, CW 10:225). MacCarthy herself adds that *The Tale of Beowulf* is 'Morris at his most garrulous and loose,' concluding that his translation is 'an unexpected failure' (649). Chief among the criticisms are that Morris does not so much translate as transliterate, making the diction obscure and the syntax archaic and affected.

Yet the work was not always judged harshly. An early review by Theodore Watts made great claims for Morris's translation, calling it 'an entire success' and suggesting that the archaisms 'bring his readers far nearer to the original than any later form could have done' (181). When Chauncey Tinker published a critical bibliography of all the translations of *Beowulf* up to 1903, he censured Morris's version for its