

THE SOCIALIST "NEW WOMAN"  
AND WILLIAM MORRIS'S THE  
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*By Florence Boos*

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# THE SOCIALIST “NEW WOMAN” AND WILLIAM MORRIS’S THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES

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SEVERAL LITERARY WORKS APPEARED in the 1880s and 1890s which represented female activity and sexuality with growing sympathy and intelligence (George Moore’s *Esther Waters*, Mona Caird’s *The Daughters of Danaus*, Israel Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto*), but they were often countered by hostile and phobic literary images of female power and aggression.<sup>1</sup> William Morris’s last romances, by contrast, offered a qualified social-pastoral idealization of the “new woman,” as projected and imagined by contemporary male socialist-feminists — an idealization whose strengths and limitations were brought into sharper relief by the prose romances’ characteristic blend of temporal detachment and visionary emotion.

William Morris’s artistic temperament had in fact always included some identification with projected inner emotions and life circumstances of women. Several of his long narratives imagine a woman’s adventure, and several more, such as “Gertha’s Lovers” and “The Lovers of Gudrun,” concern themselves with the effect of an impressive woman on the fates of one or more men. Not surprisingly, most of these female romances are tales of confinement or accounts of the frustrations of a woman’s inner life as she seeks or awaits the advent of love. When Morris chose a woman protagonist for one of his late prose romances, socialist-feminist debates about sexuality and oppressive family structures influenced his fashioning of a more complex and sophisticated account of a woman’s psychological development and achievements than any he had attempted before.

Each of the last three romances includes an extended account of its heroine’s life. Two parallel those of their lovers/husbands: Elfhild’s briefer story in *The Sundering Flood* folds into that of Osberne, and Ursula’s in *The Well at the World’s End* into that of Ralph. Birdalone’s complicated and interconnected stories control the narrative of *The Water of the Wondrous*

*Isles*, in which the adventures of her lover Arthur play a subsidiary role. Morris's only woman-centered romance was the last he was able to complete with the loving amplitude of his best work.

Morris wrote *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in 1895, 27 years after Eliza Lynn Linton attacked "The Girl of the Period"; eight years after the appearance of Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling's *The Woman Question*; twelve and two years, respectively, after Meredith and Gissing published their ambivalent portraits of self-directed unmarried women in *Diana of the Crossways* (1882) and *The Odd Women* (1893); and a year after the appearance of the disturbing Sue Bridehead in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Against the background of these "realistic" portrayals by other male writers, Morris's Birdalone is an empathetic figure, who embodies several features characteristic of the "new woman." Readers familiar with the ideas of contemporary progressive and socialist reformers who wrote on the family and sexuality would also have recognized in her tale a kind of alchemical residue of their broader aims and ideals.

Among distinguishing features of the fin-de-siècle "new woman" relevant to Morris's female epic were the desire and ability to secure financial and physical freedom and self-support; rejection of "gentlewomanly" behavior for healthy exercise, outdoor labor, and useful work; and determination to demystify notions of "purity" and "family" and to eradicate tolerance of rape, sexual exploitation, battering, and child abuse. The more radical reformers even envisioned a world in which women could express and enact manifold sexual desires without punitive double standards and began to explore conjectures that women's contributions to religion and myth had been distorted or erased from the historical record.<sup>2</sup>

Even more fundamentally, women writers began to explore women's psychology as a subject in itself, apart from possible relationships with men. Reconsideration of mother-daughter relationships, female friends, and female mentors also made possible the creation of new plots, in which women's marriages or failures to marry became one among several aspects of their adult lives, rather than an all-important determinant of plot closure.<sup>3</sup> *The Water of the Wondrous Isles's* presentation of women's psychology and sexual relationships shows the influence of these new possibilities.

In this essay I will examine the figure of Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* against a background of late-century ideals of the socialist "new woman," and compare the tale's presentation of women's affiliations and creativity with accounts of women's lives by several Victorian women. Something of these writers' gynocentrism came to inform Morris's use of a historically-evocative tradition of goddesses, witches, and mother-figures. The extensions and modifications of Morris's earlier temperamental affinities suggest benign psychological changes in his late-middle age as well as continued empathetic alignment with his reformist milieu.

It is unlikely that Morris consciously set out to write a romance about a historically-displaced socialist "new woman" or to formulate ideal models for women's character(s) and social role(s). Morris had responded to an earlier reviewer in the *Spectator*, who plausibly suggested that he had written political allegories into his prose romances, with a firm denial of any such intent.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* completed a rapprochement with socialist feminism, noticeable in *Pilgrims of Hope* (1888) and *News from Nowhere* (1890). Morris had composed powerful narratives with female protagonists ("The Defence of Guenevere," "The Story of Cupid and Psyche," "The Story of Aslaug") twenty and thirty years before, but *The Water's* hero Birdalone (whose "bird" may derive from the Middle-English "burde," "maiden" or "embroidress") carries one of his most fully developed (and, critics agree, finest) romance epics from beginning to end. The romance's concern with mobility, sexuality, and eroticism also prompted Morris to engage in thought-experiments about gender roles which explore the limits of women's behavior, and to suggest what women under less constrained circumstances might be able to do.

Morris shifted between two contrasting views of eroticism. On the one hand, he preserved a conventional, idealized, and rather anxious set of associations with the youthful female body's beauty, its power to lure and fix a romantic male "gaze." On the other hand, he also expressed throughout his work a sympathetic and respectful sense of a woman's right to her own (hetero)sexuality — be it romantic (Guenevere), vengeful (Gudrun), or extramarital (the wife in "Pilgrims of Hope"), and when the women of his writings are immured in a variety of confinements (Guenevere, Jehane, Rapunzel, Danae), he clearly identified with their near-intolerable frustrations. As a sixty-year-old man approaching death, he also continued to idealize and romanticize physical youth and its impulses, and sympathize apprehensively with the practical and emotional complications they create. Birdalone is in many ways a romanticized counterpart of Ellen in *News from Nowhere*, detached from Ellen's placement in the anticipated twenty-first century and her role as spokeswoman for socialist ideals, and free to embody other emotions and struggles of psychic independence. Like Ellen, however, Birdalone expresses "socialist-feminist" ideas in ways which are qualified by Morris's lingering presuppositions about women's alleged physical dependence and the centrality of romance-quests to his protagonists' inner lives.

The first aspect of a new ideal of womanhood mentioned above was its demand for female independence and self-support. Birdalone is a socialist and no Victorian gentlewoman in her zest for manual labor. No work is too hard for her, and no useful task too menial. In "The Society of the Future," Morris had noted: "[M]y ideal is first unconstrained life, and next simple and natural life. First you must be free; and next you must learn to take pleasure

in all the details of life: which, indeed, will be necessary for you, because, since others will be free, you will have to do your own work" (William Morris 2: 459). The Witch-wife beats the twelve-year-old Birdalone to "learn her swinking" [heavy labor], but the sturdy child "was not slack nor a slug-gard, and hated not the toil, even when it pained and wearied her." (*Water* 9). Straining plausibility somewhat, the narrator adds that "busy and toilsome days . . . irked her in nowise, since it eased her of the torment of [her] hopes and fears . . . , and brought her sound sleep and sweet awaking" (*Water* 11).

More specifically, Birdalone's labors for the Witch include a wide array of harvesting and hunting tasks, described in some detail at various points in the story:

The kine and the goats must she milk, and plough and sow and reap the acre-land according to the seasons, and lead the beasts to the woodland pastures when their own were flooded or burned; she must gather the fruits of the orchard, and the hazel nuts up the woodlands, and beat the walnut-trees in September. She must make the butter and the cheese, grind the wheat in the quern, make and bake the bread, and in all ways earn her livelihood hard enough. Moreover, the bowman's craft had she learned, and . . . must fare alone into the wood now and again to slay big deer and little, and win venison: but neither did that irk her at all, for rest and peace were in the woods for her. (11)

At every stage of her journey, moreover, Birdalone manifests an ability to fend for herself and others. When she meets the three gentlewomen who live helplessly on the "Isle of Increase Unsought," and who later become lifelong friends, one of them explains that they cannot use "the fruits of the earth and the wild creatures for our avail, [for] . . . we have not learned how to turn them into dinner and supper." In pointed contrast, Birdalone offers her services: "[F]or in all matters of the house and the byre and the field have I skill" (65). She later leaves the Castle of the Quest at age twenty and spends the next five years as a successful embroideress in the City of the Five Crafts, where she employs at least three workmen and several workwomen, and disperses the workshop's profits and accumulated capital when she leaves the city. When she offers to deed the house in which she and her companions have worked to her friends and assistants Gerard and the Gerardsons, the men graciously decline: "Wherefore we pray thee to give this house that hath been so dear to us unto thy work-woman and her mates; for we need it not, nor the hire thereof, but shall do well enough with what money or good thou mayst give us" (279). The fruit of their common labor thus becomes a legacy to assist the women who have worked with her.

In a period when women's higher education was still a bitterly disputed reformist ideal, Birdalone's eagerness and ability to exploit every opportunity for education also deserves mention. In the Castle of the Quest, Leonard the

Priest offers to teach her to read, and "she yeasaid that joyously; and thenceforth would she have him with her every day a good while; and an apt scholar she was. . . . [A]nd she learned her A B C speedily" (139). There is also no suggestion that Birdalone ever relinquishes rule of her own affairs during her subsequent married life at Utterhay or sets aside her former occupation to help Arthur engage in his. Arthur's temperament and predilection for military roles might conceivably lead him to depart from time to time on "man-like" adventures. If so, this might leave Birdalone all the freer to practice the socially needed arts of craftwork, food production, and friendship.

Patricia Vertinsky has shown in *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Exercise and Doctors in the Late Nineteenth Century* that many members of the women's movement struggled to demand women's access to physical exercise. In this respect, at least, Birdalone has a model upbringing. At twelve, "far stronger and handier than at first sight she looked to be," she had "learned herself swimming, as the ducks do belike" (8,9), and in order to investigate the isles she "pushed off into the deep and swam strongly through the still water" (23). The Witch-wife describes her as "swift-foot as the best of the deer, [who] mayest over-run any one of them whom thou wilt" (31). Birdalone also fishes skillfully and, as mentioned, she is a good archer. On arrival at the Castle of the Quest, she "took the bow in hand, and shot straighter and well-nigh as hard as the best man there, whereat they marvelled, and praised her much" (184).

Later, however, in the presence of Arthur and other "Champions of the Quest," she is unwilling to join in a more open athletic competition:

Then the young men ran afoot before her for the prize of a belt and knife, and forsooth she wotted well that were she to run against them with trussed-up skirts she would bear off the prize; but she had no heart thereto, for amidst them all, and her new friendships, she had grown shamefast, and might play the wood-maiden no longer. (130)

The presence of these men thus forces on Birdalone a partial reversion to Victorian womanliness, but they are fortunately absent during large parts of the ensuing narrative.

It was a central socialist-feminist doctrine that bourgeois marriage amounted to a commodification of women's bodies, a form of sexual slavery, or in the words of an 1885 Socialist Manifesto which Morris co-authored: "property-marriage, maintained by its necessary complement, universal venal prostitution" (Letters 2: 852). In *News from Nowhere*, Ellen identifies the need to marry one's source of income as capitalism's worst offense to women, when she observes that as the daughter of a "mere tiller of the soil" she would have been poor in the nineteenth-century:

my beauty and cleverness and brightness . . . would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed; for I know enough of that to know that I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life . . . I should have been wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or by luxury. (*Collected Works* 16: 204)

(This remark also closely echoes several passages in Mill's *Subjection of Women* and Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*)<sup>5</sup>. It is no surprise, then, that Birdalone determines to flee the Witch-wife, when

she saw, that she was not her own, but a chattel and a tool of one who not only used her as a thrall in the passing day, but had it in her mind . . . to bait the trap with her for the taking of the sons of Adam. Forsooth she saw, though dimly, that her mistress was indeed wicked, and that in the bonds of that wickedness was she bound. (10)

The Witch only confirms her apprehensions later, when she attempts to dissuade her from flight with promises of future sexual power:

the time is coming when thou shalt see here a many of the fairest of men, and . . . all those shall love and worship thee, and thou mayst gladden whom thou wilt, and whom thou wilt mayst sadden; and no lack soever shalt thou have of the sweetness of love, or the glory of dominion. (31)

Birdalone is shrewd enough to see quickly through this scenario. The tale ends with the obligatory and much-desired heterosexual union, of course, but it is one in which Birdalone's choice of partner is free of coercion, manipulation, or economic constraint.

Socialist-feminist reformers similarly demanded an utter end to prudery and assertion of women's (hetero)sexual desires. Eleanor Marx had noted with pain that "as our boys and girls grow up, the whole subject of sex relations is made a mystery and a shame. . . . Always understanding by chastity the entire suppression of all instincts connected with the begetting of children, we regard chastity as a crime" (21,24). Less melodramatically, Ellen of *News from Nowhere* speaks openly of her desire for marriage and motherhood, with emphasis on the latter. (*Collected Works* 16: 94)<sup>6</sup>

Even Birdalone's three friends on the "Isle of Increase Unsought" assert the erotic nature of their responses — or rather, they repudiate the Victorian assumption that women's sexuality is wholly characterized by narcissistic indirection and sublimation. Atra, for example, tells Birdalone that the three women have lovers, and her conventional account of their relationships is bluntly rebuked by her more affectionate and passionate sister Viridis. To Atra's claim that "they desire our bodies, which they deem far fairer than belike they be. And they would bed us, and beget children on us. And all this

we let them do with a good will, because we love them for their might, and their truth, and the hotness of their love toward us," Viridis responds with heated annoyance: "[H]er eyes gleamed amidst the flushing of her cheeks, and she said: Sister, Sister! even in such wise, and no other, as they desire us do we desire them; it is no mere good will toward them from us, but longing and hot love" (Water 66). Atra does not dispute the correction.

Birdalone is similarly passionate in her response to Arthur, and her states of sexual longing are explicitly described: she "stood there with her heart beating fast and her flesh quivering, and a strange sweetness of joy took hold of her" (129), and "whiles she looked on her limbs, and felt the sleekness of her sides, . . . she said: O my body! how thou longest!" (141). It is also Birdalone's "new-womanly" desire for therapeutic outdoor activity and more active pursuit of romantic aims which inspires her to explore the surrounding countryside and leads to the adventures which occupy much of the central part of the tale. In the book's penultimate section, Birdalone leaves the City of the Five Crafts to seek Arthur, after a scene in which, after she arises and kneels naked on the window seat; "the sun came round that way, and its beams fell upon her bosom and her arms; and she stood up and looked on the fairness of her body, and a great desire took hold of her heart that it might be loved as it deserved by him whom she desired" (277). Narcissism and the "male gaze" are not exactly absent here.

The narrative likewise emphasizes a strong need for sexual honesty and straightforwardness. Arthur and Birdalone (and the tale's other lovers) declare their love simply and immediately, without reserve, coyness, inflated rhetoric, or affectation, and there is a near-complete absence of flirtation or guile. In their early courtship Arthur "would talk with her almost as one man with another, though with a certain tenderness in his voice, and looking earnestly on her the while" (128). After Birdalone is rescued from the Red Knight, she wavers and asks that Viridis narrate her tale of captivity to Arthur, but Viridis bluntly answers that "I am not a proper minstrel to take the word out of thy mouth. . . . When all is told, then shall we be more bound together again" (201). Viridis is right, for Birdalone's own narration of her story soothes Arthur's anxious fears.

Indirectly, Morris's tale also rewards Birdalone's bold visit to the Valley of the Greywethers to further her love. Left alone while the champions seek Aurea, Viridis, and Atra, she ventures into the Valley, avoided by the other castle-dwellers, to petition the ancient powers of the earth: "O Earth, thou and thy first children, I crave of you that he may come back now at once and loving me" (159). This act does lead to her entrapment by the Black and Red Knights, and thus indirectly to the deaths of Baudoin (one of the three "Champions") and the less vengeful Black Knight, so female autonomy can be dangerous to her and others. Birdalone conscientiously regrets her choice,



but Hugh points out that: “we have lost a captain, [but] they have lost their head devil, and their head little devil,” and Arthur remarks that “it were unmeet for us to murmur at our loss in our fellow” (212), and in fact “no blame have we to lay on our sister Birdalone” (211). Moreover, Arthur suggests a further campaign to press their immediate advantage and purge the area of the tyrannical and merciless Red Knight, and this decision lays the groundwork for a more peaceful life within the region.

Birdalone’s prayer in the valley is also answered, when Arthur returns “at once and loving.” They quickly admit their mutual attraction, and the tale never subjects either Birdalone or Arthur to criticism for disruption of Arthur’s prior attachment to Atra. Socialist-feminist reformers such as Engels and Eleanor Marx seem similarly to have assumed that virtuous, companionate love which finds sexual expression will endure for life, or if not, will end without rancor — an innocent moment in the history of social thought.

Entrapped and threatened women have always been a staple of romance-plots, of course, since the days of the *Arcadia* and Aphra Behn. Morris first used the literary motif of the coerced woman in his 1858 poem, “The Haystack in the Floods” (in which Jehane threatens to strangle her potential rapist, Godmar), and he had always recognized that rape and threats of rape are forms of aggression which block women’s access to roles readily accorded men. Josephine Butler, William Stead, and other late-century sexual reformers had often denounced sexual coercion and violence, and Morris may also have been influenced in part by recent publicity of sexual coercion during debates of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1884 (which abolished the penalty of imprisonment for denial of “conjugal rights”) and the Criminal Amendment Bill of 1885 (which raised the age of consent for women from 12 to 13, in an attempt to limit forced prostitution).<sup>7</sup> Whatever the source(s), Morris’s treatment of these issues in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* suggested a deeper understanding of their pervasiveness in women’s everyday life.

Rapists and would-be rapists, in fact, are an ever-present danger in the romance’s narrative. Birdalone chafes at several points under the requirement that she remain indoors or travel with male companions to prevent attack on her, and she spends quite a bit of time and energy negotiating with and warding off men who embody or express varying degrees of unwanted attraction and aggression. When she wishes to leave the Castle of the Quest alone, for example, the castellan Sir Ameryis restrains and warns her that “If [her female attendants] bring thee back safe, they may chance to sing to the twiggen fiddle-bow, that they may be warned from such folly; but if they come back without thee, by All-hallows the wind of wrath shall sweep their heads off them!” (143). Birdalone is finally convinced of Ameryis’s good intentions, but she notes with irony and some bitterness that “Thou art a hard

master, lord castellan; but I must needs obey thee. . . . Nay, nay, thou shalt not kneel to me, but I to thee: for thou art verily the master" (144–45).

Even uncoercive male attention can be a weariness of the flesh. Almost all the men who encounter her — the old man on the Isle of the Young and Old; Sir Amyeris the castellan; Leonard the Priest; the Geraldsons, father and two sons; and the alderman Jacobus — become strongly attracted to Birdalone, and she sometimes struggles to remain independent of her own friends and supporters. Again and again, she has to soothe the emotions of infatuated friends and rejected suitors, a source of persistent embarrassment and, in some cases (that of Jacobus, for example) genuine pain and regret.

Birdalone's narrowest escape occurs when she is seized by the Black and Red Knights. No sooner does she offer her prayer to the Earth in the Valley of the Greywethers, than the Black Knight captures her. She manages to ward him off warily for several days and eventually wrests from him a kind of protection against the even more threatening Red Knight, but she remains constantly alert. On first seeing the Black Knight, "she feared him and rued the meeting of him" (161); when he orders her to mount her horse and asserts that she need not be afraid, since he will "watch and ward thy waking," she answers, "Sir, I am now become afraid of the waking" (164).

Indeed, Birdalone eventually owes her survival to her adroit recognition of the Black Knight's many feints. She retains his armor during the night, "lest desire over-master thee" (167), and responds to his many invitations to accompany him elsewhere with equally stubborn demands that they return to the Castle. Consider the tensions and suppressed anger of the following exchange:

Forsooth she had her bended bow in hand; but . . . she scarce deemed that it behoved her to slay or wound the man because she would be quit of him. Wherefore angrily, and with a flushed face, she answered him: So shall it be then, Sir Knight; or rather so must it be, since thou compellest me. He laughed and said: "Nay, now thou art angry. I compel thee not, I but say that it will not do for thee to compel me to leave thee! . . . Forsooth, damsel, I have said harder words to ladies who have done my pleasure and not deemed themselves compelled." She paled but answered nought. (161–62)

Birdalone also resents the Black Knight's obtrusive "gaze": "she suffered not his hand, [but] his eyes she must needs suffer, as he gazed greedily on the trimness of her feet and legs in her sliding from her horse" (164). Walking beside him, "she, for her part, was silent, partly for fear of the strange man, or, it might be, even for hatred of him, who had thus brought her into such sore trouble" (170). Bitterly, she acknowledges that "thou art stronger than I, and thou mayst break my bow, and wrest this knife out of mine hand; and thou canst bind me and make me fast to the saddle, and so lead my helpless body into thralldom [to the Black Knight's more evil master, the Red Knight] and death" (179).

Compared to his master, however, the Black Knight is an ambivalent and tormented soul, and his reluctant agreement to return her to the castle is an act of defection. Birdalone is understandably alarmed by his bizarrely intense response to her refusals — he rolls on the ground and tears at the grass — and enjoins him, “Rise up, I bid thee, and be a man and not a wild beast” (181). Fear as well as pity prompt her attempts to calm him: “she thought within herself how wild and fierce the man was, and doubted if he might not go stark mad on her hands and destroy her if she thwarted overmuch; and, moreover, frankly she pitied him” (182).

Her wary bargaining with the Black Knight eventually loses precious time, unfortunately, and his master the Red Knight surprises them both. Morris leaves little doubt about this *capo's* gratuitous depravity. After her capture, Birdalone “was tethered to the horse’s crupper by a thong that bound her wrists together, so that she had but just room left ‘twixt her and the horse that she might walk, and round about her neck was hung a man’s head newly hewn off” (195).

The Red Knight does not simply rape women, the Black Knight has warned her — he tortures them. One of his milder suggestions is a final offer to the disloyal Black Knight: “I forgive thee all if thou wilt ride home quietly with me and this damsel-errant to the Red Hold, and let her be mine and not thine so long as I will; and then afterwards, if thou wilt, she shall be thine as long as thou wilt” (208). The Black Knight rushes him instead but is killed, and the Red Knight then continues home with his prey. He threatens the captured Birdalone: “As my foe I might slay thee in any evil way it might like me; as my thrall I might well chastise thee as sharply and as bitterly as I would. But it is not my pleasure to slay thee, rather I will bring thee to the Red Hold, and there see what we may make of thee” (210). In effect, the Red Knight is an allegorical representation of unapologetic male brutality and predation — the ultimate antagonist and Apollyon of a woman’s romance epic.

Morris seems to approve of female self-defense, but in the direst circumstances his heroine’s efforts seem to fail. Although Birdalone carried with her a knife as well as bow and arrows into the Valley of the Greywethers, she scruples to use them in her uneasy truce with the Black Knight:

Sir, thou shalt know that beside these shot-weapons, I have a thing here in my girdle that may serve either against thee or against me, if need drive me thereto; wherefore I will pray thee to forbear. Forsooth, thou shalt presently happen on other women, who shall be better unto thee than I can be. (166)

She does use her knife later, however, in a desperate attempt to aid the Black Knight’s suicidal attack: “in . . . a flash I bethought me of the knife at my girdlestead, and drew it and ran to the Red Knight, and tore aside his mail

hood with one hand and thrust the knife into his shoulder with the other; but so mighty was he that he heeded nought the hurt, but swept his sword back-handed to the Black Knight's unarmed leg. . . . Then arose the Red Knight, and thrust me from him with the left hand" (209). Morris's plot thus seems to suggest that even a physically valiant woman needs male defenders, although it should be recalled that Birdalone's captors have all the heavier weapons, and they have been undefeated by anyone — male or female — for many years.

All the same, such abridgments of a strong (but beautiful) woman's autonomy leads Birdalone to dress as a man called Louis Delahaye during part of her later wanderings. Cross-dressing, of course, is a familiar trope for a woman's escape from Victorian constraints on her behavior.

In none of Morris's earlier narratives is there significant mention of female companionship or friendship. Heroines such as Guenevere, Danae, Psyche, or Aslaug do not benefit from helpful mothers or mother-figures. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, by contrast, female friendship and mentoring relationships are almost as central to the plot as they are in contemporary novels by Edith Johnstone, Mary Chalmordely, Gertrude Dix, Margaret Oliphant, and Mona Caird.<sup>8</sup> Birdalone's friendships with Aurea, Atra, and Viridis (especially the cheerful and sensuous Viridis) are essential to her happiness throughout the work. She reunites these women friends to their lovers, and all four friends experience great sadness each time they part. Their Morrisian sense of "fellowship" and mutual sympathy later survives both the stress of romantic competition (between Atra and Birdalone) and the death of Aurea's partner. Birdalone and Arthur undergo a long period of trial separation and psychological testing of their love, but her women's friendships are essentially immediate, and they transcend wariness, testing, and competition.

Not coincidentally, the now-solitary Atra also becomes a figure of priestess-like wisdom — an honorific, socially useful role which recalls that of the prophetess Hall-Wood in *The House of the Wolfings*. Much of the substance of these young women's confidences remains their longing for their absent male friends, but the tale's celebration of their complementary traits and mutual aid provides an empathetic counterharmony to the adventure-, journey-, and battle-motifs which *The Water* shares with Morris's other prose romances.

It is absolutely typical of Morris's work, moreover, that friendship and trust are expressed in the outer tale through the telling of inner stories, and the most significant of these are the life-histories of Birdalone and other women. When Birdalone meets Atra, Aurea, and Viridis, they exchange stories of their respective pasts. Later, Birdalone describes her friends' situation and narrates her own adventures to the Champions of the Quest. Still later, after the final defeat of the Red Knight, all exchange stories of their respective trials. When separated from her closest women friends, moreover, Birdalone

solicits the tales of other women. When the “champions” leave the Castle of the Quest in search of their partners, Birdalone spends her time in “talking with her women, whereof were five now left. . . . All these told her somewhat of their own lives when she asked them; and some withal told of folk whom they had known or heard tell of. And well pleased was Birdalone to hear thereof” (139). Like the Wanderers and Elders’ narratives in *The Earthly Paradise*, these imbricated interior narratives make the tale(s) as much a series of interlocking memories as an ongoing adventure, as tale folds into tale. And markedly *unlike* the seven monologues of Tennyson’s *The Princess*, which are all spoken by men to women, *The Water’s* tales of women and men alternate, and the women’s tales are unamended and uncensored narratives of their own experiences.

Women’s narratives of female maturation typically place great emphasis on women’s relationships with older women, including mothers, and reunion with a lost mother (or learning details of her fate) is often an important aspect of feminine identity-formation. Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out the importance of the vision of a tutelary maternal image which appears to the fleeing Jane Eyre, for example, and Caroline Henstone in *Shirley* is reunited with her unknown mother before she becomes engaged to Robert Moore.

Birdalone’s brief reunion with her mother similarly gives her a deeper understanding of her past and fulfilled sense of kinship before she leaves the City of the Five Crafts.<sup>9</sup> After her adventures in the Valley, Birdalone earns her living for five years as an embroidress in the City of the Five Crafts, as I mentioned earlier. Shortly after she arrives, the master of the embroidery guild notes the resemblance between her designs and those of an older woman, Audrey, whose needlework “is somewhat after the manner of thine” (265), as is her appearance: “now I look on thee again, she might be somewhat like unto thee, were she young and fresh-looking and strong as thou art” (265). When the widow Audrey comes to visit, Birdalone immediately sympathizes with the gentle older woman, and asks “Why dost thou weep, Mother?” using the term at this point only as an honorific, and the two women exchange stories. Birdalone reminds Audrey of a stolen daughter she has never ceased to mourn, and they suddenly realize that Birdalone is Audrey’s deeply-loved daughter, stolen in infancy by the exploitive Witch-wife of the tale’s opening scenes. Both are overcome with emotion: “For in good sooth I am thy mother, and it is long since I have seen thee: but hearken, when I come quite to myself I shall pray thee not to leave me yet awhile, and I shall pray thee to love me.” Birdalone responds: “I love thee dearly, and never, never shall I leave thee” (271).

Birdalone thus establishes her “proletarian” heritage — as Carole Silver points out, she now knows she is a peasant’s daughter — and her origins as daughter of a farmer and needlewoman confirm that she has come naturally

by her agricultural and textile-designing skills. Only after Audrey dies five years later does Birdalone turn her mind to the unfinished business of her relationship with Arthur, and at this point she seeks the assistance of a more complex and supra-earthly mother-figure.

Throughout *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, Birdalone's spiritual mentor and tutelary spirit is the "earth goddess," Habundia. Within the narrative she fulfills many roles: a second and ideal self; an archetype of Birdalone's awakening self-awareness; a source of knowledge, intelligence, and earthlore; a protectress and guide; and an enfolding source of love in extremity and distress. Their first meeting occurred years earlier when Birdalone was seventeen, and Habundia identified herself as Birdalone's spiritual Other: "As to our likeness, thou hast it now; so alike are we, as if we were cast in one mould. But thy sister of blood I am not; nay, I will tell thee at once that I am not of the children of Adam" (19).

Birdalone returns now to her girlhood home, invokes the presence of her spiritual mother, and opens her heart: "Mother, she said, I am grown older than I should be by the tale of the years . . . and now that the years have worn, the grief abideth and the joy hath departed, save this joy of thee and the day of the meeting I have so often thought of" (322). Habundia responds: "Now I deem thee my daughter again, whereas thou thankest me with such sweet passion for doing to thee as a kind mother needs must without any thought thereof. And I bid thee, my dear, never again to go so far from me as that I may not easily help thee and comfort thee from out of my realm wherein I am mighty. And now tell me all in thy dear speech" (324). Birdalone then tells her tale in full, and Habundia leads her to Arthur. Before the two marry, Birdalone again seeks her counsel, and Habundia offers advice and an extraordinarily generous promise: "And I think I can see that thou and thy man shall do well and happily in Utterhay; and the Green Knight also and thy she-friends. And whatsoever thou wilt of me that I may do for thee or thy friends, ask it freely, and freely shalt thou have it" (378).

There is a close parallel, in fact, between Habundia and a male counterpart in another tale. Steelhead, Osberne's eerily protective "warrior"-spirit in *The Sundering Flood*, Morris's last romance. Osberne continues to seek the elusive Steelhead after his marriage, as he ages, and Steelhead remains unchanged. In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, similarly, Birdalone and Arthur continue to visit Habundia for advice together after their marriage, and Habundia remains a tutelary wisdom-figure throughout their lives: "As to the wood of Evilshaw, it was not once a year only that Birdalone and Arthur sought thither and met the Wood-mother, but a half-score of times or more, might be, in the year's circle; and ever was she kind and loving with them, and they with her" (387).

The deepest trait Habundia shares with her human "daughter," moreover, is the one Morris had presented as the most essential quality of the woman of his new society — a deep and instinctive affinity with the natural lore and surfaces of the earth. As Ellen approaches the house at the base of the Thames, in a familiar passage from *News from Nowhere*, she "laid her shapely sun browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried, 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it — as this had done!'" Birdalone is similarly marked from girlhood by her kinship with living things: "the very grass and flowers were friends to her, and she made tales of them in her mind; and the wild things feared her in no wise, and the fowl would come to her hand, and play with her and love her" (8).

The designs which spring from her embroidress's fingers, accordingly, are of the plants and animals she knows. To make shoes, for example, Birdalone embroiders a skin with "oak-leaves . . . and flowers, and coney, and squirrels" (13), and she covers her one new gown with "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. And the smock she had sewn daintily . . . with fair knots and buds" (14–15).

The gift the adolescent Birdalone seeks most urgently from Habundia is the lore of natural "wisdom," and Habundia gladly offers "to open the book of the earth before [her]. For therein is mine heritage and my dominion." Their communion is too profound to be conveyed or memorialized in language: "Forsooth forgotten is the wisdom, though the tale of its learning abideth, wherefore nought may we tell thereof" (42). Birdalone thus expresses the spirit of her wood-mother when she first rides forth from the Castle of the Quest, and her soul responds to the physical beauty of the land outside its walls: "of a sudden all care left her, and she dropped her rein, and smote her palms together, and cried out: Oh! but thou art beautiful, O earth, thou art beautiful! . . . Ah! she said, but if I were only amidst it, and a part of it, as once I was of the woodland!" (148). For such a secular religion, one appropriate altar is a Valley, in which Birdalone later addresses a prayer to "Earth, thou and thy first children" (159).

The figure of Habundia is new in Morris's writings, and fin-de-siècle interest in non-classical mythology may have helped inspire her creation.<sup>10</sup> Female characters such as the Psyche in *The Earthly Paradise* are sometimes *subject* to female divinities in Morris's earlier work, but Venus is a harsh rival to Psyche, almost a kind of *domina*, and a rather repellent archetype of Victorian rites of sexual passage. Habundia's name suggests some of the fertility of the classical Venus or Ceres, but her behavior also evokes the benign and intelligent qualities ascribed to Celtic goddesses such as Macha — wise sorceress, prophetess, and mother — and Brigid — patroness of poets, goddess of

healing, and smith-goddess of water, fire, and energy. Birdalone's name, too, many resonate slightly with a tradition of bird-women-goddesses.<sup>11</sup>

Morris may or may not have been aware of such parallels, of course, but he read with remarkable depth and range in the folklore and legendary source materials of his generation, and his general awareness of these sources may have blended with an evolving interest in female analogues of the mentor-/father-/brother-figures of his male-centered narratives. The result, in any case, is one of his most benign and original figures: a spiritual and pragmatic guardian-spirit and fitting protectress for Birdalone, as she seeks autonomy and eroticism, selfhood and community.

A similar icon of socialist-feminist allegory might be found in the figures of Birdalone's witch-stepmother or her evil sister-in-spirit, the Lady of the Isle of Increase Unsought. There are many precedents for the Witch in medieval English legend, classical and Scandinavian lore, and Morris's own earlier writings. To the traditional traits of such women — their use of spells, potions, serpent-rings, and the like — Morris added a realistic sense of their particular exemplar's relative indigence and her motives for exploitation of Birdalone's labor. Her power is also limited from the beginning by Habundia's lore and Birdalone's physical endurance and high intelligence, which jointly enable the "bürde" to survive the many perils of her subsequent adventures. As the spiritual daughter of a wise goddess, Birdalone also has a heritage which complements her human one and which befits the numinous status Morris came to accord to an essentially female divinity "of the earth."

In summary, Morris's characterization of Birdalone is remarkably consistent with socialist notions of the "new woman." His romantic plot implausibly makes Birdalone the cynosure of *all* available male "gazes," but the tale's ensuing plot complications are explored with pragmatic insight into the complex circumstances of a woman who is not only beautiful but athletic, and artistically and intellectually gifted. With the help of the tale's numinous archetype of "womanist" competence, the wise and loving Habundia, its female hero slays emblematic dragons of reaction and patriarchy, and begins the narrative of her adult life in a society of equals, lovers, and friends.

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## NOTES

1. See Cunningham and Ardis for discussions of these novels and the reactions to them.
2. See Florence and William Boos, and Florence Boos, "A History of Their Own," for discussions of these developments.
3. For a discussion of the qualities and literary pervasiveness of the "new woman," see Jeffreys; Helsing, Sheets, and Veeder; and Showalter.



4. Morris's letter to the Editor asserted of the reviewer's remarks on *The Wood Beyond the World* that "I had not the least intention of thrusting any allegory in *The Wood Beyond the World*; it is meant for a tale pure and simple, with nothing didactic about it. If I have to write or speak on social problems, I always try to be as direct as I possibly can" (*The Introductions*, 2: 499).
5. See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, chapter 8, "Of the Pernicious Effects Which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society," and chapter 12, "On National Education"; and *The Subjection of Women*, chapter 1.
6. See Florence Boos, "An (Almost-)Egalitarian Sage."
7. See Strachey.
8. See Ardis.
9. For discussions of contemporary British women's contributions to the arts and crafts movement, see Marsh; Marsh and Nunn; Callen; and Burkhauser.
10. See Florence Boos, "Gender Division."
11. See Dexter, 88–93, 164.
12. See Strachey, chapter 10.

Several critics have observed that Morris's post-revolutionary socialist future resembles feminist utopias in a variety of intriguing ways (for example, Levitas, chapters 7 and 8). In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, even the female villains — the Lady of Abundance and the Witch — become projections of a socialist feminist's worst enemies: patriarchy (woman idealized as idle and near-mindless siren), and capitalism (exploitation of woman's labor in all its forms). More individually, Birdalone's clear-eyed analysis of the boundaries imposed on her behavior and resistance to them, her friendships with other women and identification with a female mentor, her physical courage and mental independence — all of these exemplify Morris's intense love and respect for intelligence, creativity, and kinship with the earth, and parallel images of female maturation sketched by Morris's reformist female contemporaries.

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