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Gender-Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris

From a feminist point of view, William Morris's last three prose romances suggest several vexing questions.¹ Do these last romances show continued awareness of issues which were raised by socialist-feminists in the late 1880s in socialist works written between 1885 and 1890, including "The Pilgrims of Hope," *News from Nowhere*, *Roots of the Mountains*, and *The House of the Wolfings*? And if so, why is Morris's finest myth of a female journey, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, followed by two more conventional patriarchal narratives, *The Well at the World's End*, and *The Sundering Flood*, in which the experiences of women are ancillary to male journeys toward fulfillment?

More generally, do these fantasy-romances of the 90s still consistently express Morris's search for "medieval" prototypes of a temporally indefinite future? Do they share a common sensibility with other politically motivated reconstructions of "primitive," "barbarian," and medieval family life by Morris himself and by his reformist and socialist contemporaries? And if so, what explains his apparent diminution of imaginative interest in some of the more genuinely creative, even revolutionary implications of his work? In an effort to address these questions, I will consider first some Victorian patriarchal and reformist myths which formed a loose social matrix for Morris's creation of the plots and prominent female characters of the last romances: wood-spirits, magicians, and others—the Witch, Habundia, Birdalone, the Lady of Abundance, Ursula, and Elfhild. I will suggest that despite genuine awareness of the injustice of colonial wars, contemporary reformist and socialist reconstructions of the past gave relatively little attention to pacifist or anti-militia concerns, and failed to confront the implications of pervasive violence for various kinds of legal, sexual, and economic oppression. I will also comment on some implications of this ideology

for Morris's development in the last romances of a "separate female quest pattern," in which women are permitted to carry some of the dominant virtues of nature, but only in peaceful, non-combative settings. Finally, I will ask why Morris's deepest metaphors for human alienation in the last romances involved gender division and war, and suggest that these seemed to him reciprocally linked in rather complex ways.

In a period which often formulated social ideals in terms of pre-historical and historical "origins," speculative reconstructions of classical and European tribal organization and religious myths became the subjects of ever-more elaborate controversy and interpretation. It is first of all worth noticing in this context that the ethos and myth-world of Morris's romances bear scant resemblance to those found in the more well-known Victorian mythopoetic writers—Ruskin and Pater, for example, or Müller and Frazer.

John Ruskin's descriptions of classical landscape have some of the pervasive brightness of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, but his conceptions of classical myth, developed in volume five of *Modern Painters*, *The Cestus of Aglaia*, *The Ethics of the Dust*, *The Crown of Wild Olive*, and *The Queen of the Air*, are radically un-Morrisian in their appeal to modes of allegory founded on abstract moral dogma. Ruskin's favorite deity is the father-born ruler-goddess, Athena, an allegedly androgynous giver of "perfect knowledge" as well as "strength and peace, in sign of which she is crowned with the olive spray, and bears the resistless spear" (xviii, 445-6). Insistently, Ruskin asserts the non-material and nonerotic nature of his transmogrified puritan ethic:

It is an error to suppose that the Greek worship, or seeking, was chiefly of Beauty. It was essentially of rightness and strength, founded on Forethought. . . the

Dorian Apollo-worship and Athenian Virgin-worship are both expressions of divine wisdom and purity. . . There is no Venus-worship among the Greeks in the great times: and the Muses are essentially teachers of Truth, and of its harmonies. (xviii, 446)

So much for physical love and fertility rites.

One might expect more of the latter in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, published in 1890, the year of the first of Morris's last six prose romances. Frazer's concern with the social meaning and artifacts associated with early religions did reflect some of the same respect for enduring popular traditions Morris expressed in his essays on the "lesser arts," and reconstructions of daily life in "Germanic" romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. The legend Frazer found central to all "Aryan" cultures, however—immolation of a corn-god, celebrated by a sacrificial meal—was as foreign to Morris's imagination as it was central to orthodox Christianity. Few of his loving descriptions of the details of harvest rituals suggest any motifs of Morrisian plots. Morris's landscapes, moreover, are moderately well-populated with women and female divinities, but the gods of Frazer's rites are almost all male. The sole exceptions appear in his account of the myth of "Demeter and Proserpine" as Maiden and Old Woman/Corn Mother.

Morris's respect for Ruskin was largely based on the latter's social ideas, so he might well have paid little heed to his (relatively late) disquisitions on myth. He presumably browsed through Frazer's compilation at some point, but only as one among many collections of myths and folktales he read as a matter of course. Of more likely importance to Morris would have been Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the most prominent Marxist interpretation of pre-modern history, which was reviewed in *Commonweal* the year of its first German publication (1884). Several of Engels's ideas may even have prompted specific passages in "The Roots of Socialism," the series of articles Morris co-authored with Ernest Belfort Bax which appeared concurrently with *A Dream of John Ball* in *Commonweal* in 1886.²

Engels shared Morris's tendency to find anticipations of radical-democratic and proto-communist egalitarian ideals in "primitive" tribal societies. Engels's *Origin* was one of his best independent works, both a marxist-feminist treatise and a bold popularization of

anthropological arguments which were powerful as well as myopic. Several socialist-feminist critics have already noted the merits and limitations of Engels's argument as a male-feminist polemic (See Footnote and Works Cited Boos, 3-34, and Vogel, Part II). In the context of this paper, I wish to contrast Engels's reconstructions with those of his more romantically inclined forebear, Johann Bachofen, as well as with Morris's parallel admiration for the social practices of medieval Icelanders and early medieval Germanic tribes. Engels's exposition, in particular, omitted several major elements of Bachofen's speculations about women's early authority and economic power.

Bachofen's 1861 *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World* may have provided the first scholarly interpretation of ancient history as a series of clashes between male and female rule. Bachofen believed that human religion and society developed through "tellurian" and "lunar" to a predictably patriarchal "solar" stage, but expressed impassioned respect for women's essential contributions (as he saw them) to the earliest periods of human history of religion and culture:

At the lowest, darkest stages of human existence the love between the mother and her offspring is the bright spot in life, the only light in the moral darkness, the only joy amid profound misery . . . Paternal love appears later. The relationship which stands at the origin of all culture, of every virtue, of every nobler aspect of existence, is that between mother and child; it operates in a world of violence as the divine principle of love, of union, of peace. Raising her young, the woman learns earlier than the man to extend her loving care beyond the limits of the ego to another creature, and to direct whatever gift of invention she possesses to the preservation and improvement of this other's existence. Woman at this stage is the repository of all culture, of all benevolence, of all devotion, of all concern for the living and grief for the dead. (79)

Engels described Bachofen in the *Origin* as a "mystic genius" and summarized his arguments with respect, but Bachofen's obvious idealism and religious interpretations of culture were clearly alien to Engels's much more literal and schematic reconstructions of material relations. Bachofen's lyrical prose (unlike Morris's) focused primarily on woman-as-

mother, but he also suggested several insights and lines of thought which are absent from Engels's later account of the social system he called "matriarchy."

Bachofen suggested, for example, that different relationships between children and parents might emerge in families organized by mothers rather than legally dominant fathers. He also argued that maternally organized communal societies might foster a different and more inclusive ethic:

whereas the paternal principle is inherently restrictive, the maternal principle is universal; the paternal principle implies limitation to definite groups, but the maternal principle, like the life of nature, knows no barriers. *The idea of motherhood produces a sense of universal fraternity among all men, which dies with the development of paternity.* (80) (italics mine)

Bachofen suggested relationships totally alien to Engels's conception of matrilinear society (and here to Morris's work as well) in his recognition of the importance within matriarchies of the role of sisters both to their brothers and to their sisters.

Bachofen's lyrical accounts were diffusely romantic and described only some of women's actual and potential roles, but they hold interest for their strong association of women with the origins of human *culture*, their recognition that alternate family structures may foster less competitive modes of behavior, and their obvious avowal of a need, expressed in the passage just quoted, to achieve (or recover) what Morris, Bax, and other socialists later called a "religion of humanity."

Nineteenth-century socialist-feminists might in principle have continued such explorations into feminist historiography and assertions of women's benign and unacknowledged contributions to the past, but few did. Eleanor Marx's *The Woman Question* (1887) made no attempt at historical retrospective, and the period's most extended reformist feminist survey of family history, Mona Caird's *The Morality of Marriage* (a collection of earlier essays, published in 1897) found almost nothing worth admiration of preservation in women's collective past. Jane Ellen Harrison, an early twentieth-century classicist, finally extended Bachofen's insights in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis* (1912), in which she carefully assembled evidence for widespread early Greek worship of an earth goddess, Themis.

In any case, unlike Bachofen, Engels largely ignored the emotional and psychological aspects of social organization, and his account often seems more ingenious than persuasive. Against the background of Bachofen, moreover, Engels's "matriarchy" can be seen for what it is: not a matriarchy at all, but rather a matrilinear patriarchal agricultural society, whose vaguely adumbrated ethos included few norms for organization or decision-making beyond general appeals to "community."

Engels does deserve credit, however, for his uncompromising vision of women as the social victims of men, which he expressed in somewhat apocalyptic Hegelian language in his assertion that "The overthrow of mother right [note Bachofen's phrase] was the world historical defeat of the female sex" (120). More characteristically, he later adds that "monogamous marriage," in his view a source of many evils, "comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other; it announces a struggle between the sexes. . . . The first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male" (128-29). What Engels lacked was a concomitant sense that women might organize among *themselves*, to try to make a modern feminist, as well as socialist, revolution.

Essentially cool to sisterhood, as well as to motherhood, Engels presented in the *Origin* an impassioned defense of *sexual* freedom for both sexes. What this meant to him is not always clear, and he reveals a marked psychological unrealism about the consequences and preconditions of this "freedom," for example, in his view of "group marriage," as "the form of family in which whole groups of men and whole groups of women mutually possess one another, and which leaves little room for jealousy" (31). A measure of sincere egalitarianism did appear in Engels's impassioned defense of erotic love outside the bonds of bourgeois marriage:

But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up: a generation of men who never in their lives have known what it is to buy a woman's surrender with money or any other social instrument of power; a generation of women who have never known what it is to give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of the economic consequences. (145)

Advocacy of sexual "freedom" for women was also an essential part of Morris's own version of socialist-feminism, and his acceptance of his wife's rejection witnessed that he practiced what he preached.

Apparently absorbed by the intellectual intricacies of Lewis Morgan's description of tribal kinship systems, Engels nevertheless seldom seems to have paused to ask what life in such a "matrilinear" society might *really* have been like, for women and for men. There is no mention of women's conduct of tribal government, for example; or contributions to religion or art; or shared responsibility for war; or relations with their partners or—of manifest importance within a patriarchy, after all—with their children and each other. Since Engels, like Marx, Bebel, Eleanor Marx, and most other nineteenth-century socialists, professed to find all forms of homosexuality utterly abhorrent, lesbian ties in the new/old order are of course nonexistent. More revealingly, perhaps, motherhood and child-rearing are scarcely mentioned, apart from issues of sexuality. Engels also failed to consider how a society which *really* regarded women and men equally would adjudicate responsibilities of childcare and children's education and was largely unconcerned with issues of sexual or other forms of personal and social violence. He never seemed to consider the possibility that women might someday have to take separate organized action of their own to address such issues. In the grip of his belief that kinship relationships must inevitably determine respective degrees of power, Engels neglected to examine other forms of gender inequality, or ask how his tribal "communist" society would differ from a matrilinear patriarchy.

The best aspects of Engels's treatise did however provide a powerful defense of the need to separate sex and love from economic barter. The work's speculative reconstructions of agrarian egalitarianism were less successful, as were its conspicuous failures to consider the social and political implications of phrases about female equality, or extend them beyond undifferentiated talk of "sexual freedom" and an end to "oppression." This is not to depreciate one of the century's more original and humanitarian literary efforts at male feminism, but only to suggest that Engels, like Morris, accepted nominally feminist ideals which brought with them little conception of specific changes these might require in daily human and economic relations—or for that matter, the practice and focus of the "lesser arts" Morris so loved. Except for Bachofen,

few nineteenth-century theorists of family origins, whatever their ostensible ideologies, had any serious interest in women's historical roles, or reservations about rigid gender-divisions, and even fewer discerned any connection between such divisions and recurrent forms of individual and communal violence. Joint condemnations of sexism and militarism formed the smallest of clouds on the horizon of nineteenth-century imperial England.

I have argued elsewhere (Boos, *Victorian Sages*, ed. Morgan, 187-206, 296-301) that socialist-feminist debates of the mid- and late 1880's and the presence of women activists in the socialist movement influenced Morris's poetic conscience and imagination, and that one can already trace this influence in the plots of "The Pilgrims of Hope," *News From Nowhere*, and to a lesser degree, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. Morris's narratives with women as protagonists or central figures (e.g., "The Defence of Guenevere," "Cupid and Psyche," "The Lovers of Gudrun," and *News from Nowhere*) are among his best works. Against this background, and that of the sources sketched in the foregoing paragraphs, I wish to (re) consider the puzzling trajectory of Morris's last three prose romances and attempt to answer some of the questions posed at the beginning of this essay.

All three of Morris's last tales, of course, are set in an unspecific quasi-medieval past, but the genuine historical references do grow in number from tale to tale. Each, moreover, is arguably a shade more "socialist" than its predecessor. *The Sundering Flood*, Morris's final work and his most historically specific tale since the German romances, continues this progression. Earlier, Morris embodied his most optimistic views of social processes in *News from Nowhere*, a tale of an imagined *future*. In these final romances, by contrast, he fused chronology and geography into a strangely gentle other-when and other-where of mythic struggle and fulfillment.

Morris' medieval socialist romances of the 80's—*John Ball*, *Wolfings*, *Roots*—were also tales of heroic conflict between "the people" and their oppressors, of course, and *John Ball* and *Wolfings* both ended with redemptive deaths of their male protagonists. Near the end of his life Morris seems to have returned to this preoccupation with heroic efforts to redeem nature for its original intents. Women were essential as motivators and observers of this struggle, but their separate

journeys bore with greater indirection on their courses and outcomes.

The recurrent force of this personal dialectic in a thoroughly pacifist man also suggests that the sharply polarized gender divisions in Morris's quasi-chivalric quest-literature reflected deep unexamined assumptions of Victorian culture about women and also about the nature of violence and the need for personal loyalties and family structures which enforce and contain it. Morris seems to have considered the implications of such gender-division a bitter necessity in the struggle toward socialism, and its partial suspension to be an inherent benefit of its successful attainment. This iron law of gender-division is wrong, I believe, but its identification of "feminine" ideals with the goal towards which socialism moves stands at least with Bachofen, and against Freud's perception of women as civilization's enemies (except that for Morris, of course, "civilization" *per se* was an enemy).³

In effect, then, I wish to propose two hypotheses about Morris's socialist ideals and the views of gender identity he expressed in his literature. The first is that there was something profoundly "feminine" about socialism attained, as he envisioned it, but something tediously but dutifully agonistic and "masculine" about the struggle for that attainment. The second is that a "dialectic" can be traced in the succession of his works which moves restlessly between these two poles: of apparently unceasing, perhaps even unavailing struggle, followed, at length (he devoutly hoped), by "rest": Ellen's and Ursula's embrace of the "earth and everything in it." If these hypotheses are at all right, it becomes doubly relevant to interpret the sexual polarities and political alienation of Morris's final romances against the background of the Victorian speculations about the origins of family life, as well as the socialist-feminine projections of a proto-communist "medieval" life Morris intended his tales to represent.

The first of the final romances is *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, Morris's finest account of female maturation, and one of his best and most empathetic celebrations of women's autonomy and sexuality seen from the vantage point of moderate socialist-feminism and the tempered optimism of late middle age. The natural imagery and pleasant unexpectedness of many of Birdalone's experiences give her the character of a force of life. She is not only an individual woman, but

also represents an imagined desiring self within all persons, and the maturation-myth of her journey in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is also a sustained harmonious projection of its author's own "feminine" love of nature, expressed most poignantly by Ellen at the end of *News from Nowhere*. Seen in these terms, then, Birdalone can be regarded as the new anarchist-socialist heroine liberated to wander in a world after the Change, suffering only the conflicts needed to achieve psychological maturation, and mercifully unshackled by the complicated physical challenges and political obstacles Morris felt compelled to impose on his male heroes. The last of Morris's separate female-search plots, Birdalone's story is also his best.

The second of these final tales is *The Well at the World's End*, in which Ralph rescues Ursula from captivity and regains his parents' threatened kingdom. The tale's stylized scenes of "combat," however, are less attractive than a shared pilgrimage by Ralph and Ursula to seek the wisdom of the Well, during which Ursula and an elderly Sage give appropriate advice about the journey. At one point, for example, Ralph recoils with fear and disgust before the corpses of others who have died in search of the Well, and Ursula reminds him of the "realistic" setting and rationale for their search:

Ralph: "Yea, but even if we die not in the waste, yet this is piteous; so many lives passed away, so many hopes slain."

"Yea," she said; "but do not folk die there in the world behind us? I have seen sights far worsen than this at Utterbol, little while as I was there. Moreover I can note that this army of dead men has not come all in one day or one year, but in a long, long while, by one and two and three; for hast thou not noted that their raiment and wargear both, is of many fashions, and some much more perished than other, long as things last in this Dry Waste? I say that men die as in the world beyond, but here we see them as they lie dead, and have lain for so long."

He said: "I fear neither the Waste nor the dead men, if thou fearest not, beloved: but I lament for these poor souls."

"And I also," said she, "therefore let us on, that we may come to those whose grief we may heal." (71)

Like *News from Nowhere*, *The Well at the World's End* also employs as interpreter and prophet of the couple's experience an old man (notice again, not an old woman

or an old *couple*). Ursula's personal story and intelligent presences are nonetheless essential to the tale.

Ursula also affirms once again Morris's unashamed sense of physical union with all forms of sentient life. Before they reach the Well, Ralph worries that when he and Ursula are old, they will feel alienated or dissociated from those around them: "[T]he day may come when. . . the folk round about us shall be to us as much and no more than these trees and the wild things that dwell amongst them" (67). In a remarkable passage that recalls the embrace of the earth at the end of *News*, Ursula finds in this comparison deep grounds for hope:

"But I say that well will it be in those days if I love the folk then as well as now I love these trees and the wild things whose house they are." And she rose up therewith and threw her arms about the oak-bole and kissed its ruggedness . . . (67).

Before Ralph makes his public declaration of marriage with Ursula—witnessed only by local tribespeople, and unmarred, of course, by civil rites—he had cohabited for a time with a beautiful Lady of Abundance, a kind of unreal and amiably amoral Birdalone-figure. Ursula, by contrast, is a Birdalone tempered for permanent companionship in the real world. Fair but not the "fairest of all women," she is self-possessed and quietly loving of all living things, as the oak-bole incident makes clear, but loyal to the goals and common destiny they share. The couple make spousal vows whose asymmetry is both pointed and complex. Hers is "To thy life, beloved!" His is "To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!" (83), a pledge which (presumably) includes the woman who stands before him. She drinks first, then hands him the cup. The woman's journey of *Water of the Wondrous Isles* is thus subordinated in *The Well at the World's End* to that of her partner, but it retains its own complementary integrity, and Ursula's parallel development ensures that the tale's most pervasive metaphors for life and for the renewal of Morris's "Change" are of pilgrimage and return, not battle or ritual conflict.

Morris completed his final political/historical romance, *The Sundering Flood*, in June, 1896, only four months before his death. It is somewhat shorter than the two romances which preceded it, and its brevity and abrupt ending may have reflected Morris's need to

finish the work before his illness overcame him. The tale's central metaphor is a powerful river which courses through a deep stone gorge, and its hero Osberne Wolfgrimsson is a young Icelandic/Scandinavian scald whose dimeter rhyming staves suggest the poetry of the Eddas or Anglo-Saxon verse. The romance's interspersed poems and loving, melodic rural descriptions create a countervailing effect of fluid harmony amid recurrent political conflict.

Several of *The Sundering Flood's* features and plot motifs also reflect characteristic features of Morris's earlier narratives. The tale is introduced, for example, by its "gatherer," a medieval English monk in the House of the Black Canons at Abingdon, who begins with direct second-person address ("For ye must know. . . But when ye have journeyed. . ." 2,3), then shifts to a more generic, third-person narrative voice. This invoker of "St. William, and St. Richard, and the Holy Austin our candle in the dark!" (2) is clearly medieval, English, and male, but the frame's other allusions and associations evoke a world of achronal myth. The essentially Icelandic landscape of the Flood, however, contains grazing land, deer, scattered cottages, many narrow rock-bound waterfalls, the deep-chasmed river of the title, and a terrain so devoid of trees that, as in the Iceland Morris had visited in 1871 and 1873, the inhabitants must buy timber. Like northern Britons and Scandinavians, its denizens also celebrate a Midsummer Night's festival. Further south along the "Flood" (*flóð* in Icelandic means "flood," and *fljótt* a large river) lies the communally owned "Wood Masterless." Further down river still is the City of the Sundering Flood, a lowland port, whose descriptions recall Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, and Goteborg, but also perhaps medieval London.

A sustained political-historical allegory organizes the plot. Osberne comes of a self-governing people, like the Icelanders without king or obvious ruling class ("neither King nor Earl nor Alderman," 4), and his songs celebrate their customs and actions. He leaves home only to defend his relatives and neighbors, against marauding warriors of the southern king who also rules the denizens of the port city against their will. He later returns to a life of peace when their independence seems secured. In this quest to defend political freedom, Osberne attaches himself to the resistance leader, Sir Godrick (*Goo-ruler*, "good-powerful"), who gathers his bowmen in the Wood Masterless and attempts to join forces with groups of

workers from the town: the husbandmen, mariners, and guildspeople "of the Lesser Crafts" (artisans).

Osberne clearly seeks a "just war" and no other. Before he offers his services to Godrick he obtains from the latter a rather detailed account of the latter's political allegiances and principles and receives assurance of Godrick's probity in war: humane treatment of non-combatants, punishment of crimes against the populace, and support of the workers' revolution. When Osberne asks, for example, "[I]f those guilds of craft aforesaid should rise up against their King and the tyrants of the Porte, and they sent to thee for help, wouldst thou give them so much help as not to be against them. . . Or how much more wouldst thou give?" (139), Godrick replies with due revolutionary allegiance: "[T]hen will I go to them with all mine and leave house and lands behind, that we may battle it out side by side to live or die together." Even in the worst case he will provision them, to "harry the King and his dastards till we prevail at last."

The next chapters resemble *News from Nowhere's* account of "How the Change Came." As in *News*, the people's army (a "revolutionary vanguard") engage in widely dispersed, small-scale conflicts in defense of the populace, and more and more people over the course of several years gradually defect to their cause. Osberne's own revolutionary aims are also rather clearly "inscribed" in his new name, "The Red Lad" (a wry self-reference, perhaps, to the once-red-haired "Topsy"). He leads a final battle in the city square which Morris clearly intended as a reversal of the 1886 massacre in Trafalgar Square. The movement's rather quaint battle slogan ("The Red Lad, the Red Lad for Longshaw and the Crafts," 67), obviously expresses Morris's ardent love of the countryside and the practical arts.

Unlike most insurrectionist armies, Sir Godrick's strikingly renounces all spoils in favor of democratic reforms, and the narrator enumerates these in considerable detail. Somewhat like the early municipality of London under its City Council and Mayor, the City of the Sundering Flood will now be an independent commune; its Burgreve will be elected by delegates of the Lesser Crafts, and the guilds of the latter proportionately represented on the city's Great Council (171).

According to contemporary anarchist theory, and Morris's own account of the uprising in *News*, only the (largely) non-violent and effective common efforts of a determined and informed population will undermine

the oppressive State, and such an alliance will most likely emerge from the work of autonomous craft unions, small local organizing committees, and an independent Labour Parliament. And so it occurs here. The King finally attempts to ally with a foreign invader against his people, but is forced to flee, and the people's Mote finally abolishes the monarchy in absentia. In a sequence reminiscent of Morris's socialist comedy, *Nupkins Awakened*, the narrator remarks with wry delight that

[The departed king's] back being turned upon his once subjects, many men began to think that belike they might do without him once and for all, when they cast up the use he had been to them in times past. And this imagination grew, until at last a great Mote was called, and there it was put forward, that since the City had a Porte and a Great Council, and a Burgreve under these, the office of King was little needed there. . . and next, with little gainsaying, they did away with the office of King altogether, and most men felt the lighter-hearted therefor. (173)

Not surprisingly, "the City throve as well as ever it had done."

Another important if unrealistic aspect of the tale's cheerful political allegory is its hero's swift retirement from war and positions of power, once the countryside is free. Osberne refuses a reward of knighthood for his military services, for "his kindred are not and were not of the knighthood, albeit men of honour" (141). After five years of conflict, he also hopes wistfully to find Elfhild, his adolescent love and return with her to Wethermel, their mutual home. Later Osberne dutifully volunteers at one point to help his now-beleaguered former ally the Knight of Longshaw, but his friend firmly refuses his aid, for "now I can do without thee well" (238), and Osberne settles down with his wife to happiness and political obscurity. As he remarked to the neighbors who witnessed the couple's informal marriage ceremony, "What tale shall there be except of peace and quiet in these far-away upland vales?" (233). The end of revolution is peaceful service and the quiet life of couples grown old:

But surely about both of them there was then and always a sweet wisdom that never went beyond what was due and meet for the land they lived in or the people with whom they dwelt. So that all round them the folk grew

better and not the worsen. (233)

Prior to this idyllic conclusion, however, the tale's political allegory has been closely intertwined with the story of The Red Lad's gradual maturation and his romance with a sensitive and earnest local maiden, Elfhild, whose name in old Norse means "elf-battle," which acquires a certain resonance as the romance-plot develops. Osberne Wolfgrímsson is an orphan remarkable for his physical courage, insight into others' motives, and poetic gifts. Raised in a rural cottage at Wethermel, east of the Sundering Flood, by a cowardly and mean-spirited grandfather, affectionate but timid grandmother, and the latter's elderly friend Bridget, Osberne soon feels the urge to wander from home. Despite beatings by his grandfather, he begins to explore his surroundings, aided by a series of helpful guardian-figures who share various degrees of kinship with the spirit world. A Dwarf, for example, threatens at first to behead him, but then gives the courageous boy a knife and promises the later gift of an ancient sword, fashioned by his own grandfather. A resident farmhand, Stephen the Eater, presciently advises him to visit the edge of the Flood, where he first sees Elfhild on the other side.

The most significant such figure, however, is an imposing Icelandic-*alfur*-like traveler who describes himself variously as "Steelhead," "Wayfarer," and one of the "warriors of while agone" (50-51). He provides the youth with a magically efficacious bow, and later with the powerful sword Boardcleaver, whose considerable powers are conditional upon proper use:

Now then thou hast the sword; but I lay this upon thee therewith, that thou be no brawler nor make-bate, and that thou draw not Boardcleaver in any false quarrel, or in behalf of any tyrant or evil-doer, or else shall thy luck fail thee despite the blade that lieth hidden there. (49)

Unlike the young Odysseus visited by Athena or Jason by Juno, all three of Osberne's mentoring figures are male; the elderly womenfolk serve Osberne food and praise him affectionately to neighbors, but recoil understandably when he returns home with the heads of three wolves he has killed with the Dwarf's knife. Real fathers are seldom fostering in Morris's romance-world, and so it is not surprising that Osberne's cowardly grandfather serves chiefly as a foil to his ingenious and hospitable grandson.

These male-helper figures, by contrast, develop various aspects of Osberne's personality. The Dwarf, a "little, little old man, white-haired and wrinkle-faced, but without a beard [whose] hair shone like glass" (9), is a local spirit of Wethermel, a knoll which "had been of old time a dwelling of the Dwarfs or the Land-wights, [whom many thought] grudged it that the children of Adam had supplanted them [therein], and that corn grew on the very roof of their ancient house" (6). The Dwarf's gift of a tool of skill, the knife, and his promise of his ancient Dwarf-crafted weapon symbolically provide Osberne with the means to provision and defend the homeland to which Osberne remains quietly loyal, as we have seen. Stephen the laborer is a good companion who teaches the boy the skills he needs to hunt well, and he also sends Osberne to his meeting with Elfhild clad in his emblematic red coat, symbol of later roles as lover, soldier, and radical insurgent.

The most important of Osberne's "fosterers," however, is Steelhead, a partly supernatural being capable of changing his shape at will. His language is inaccessible to Osberne's people, and his visitations remain a lifelong secret:

Now that I know thy name, it is like that thou wouldst know mine and who I am; but my very name I may not tell thee, for thy tongue has no word for it, but now and when we meet again thou mayst call me Steelhead: and thou shalt know that when next we meet I shall be arrayed all otherwise than now. In that array I deem thou wilt know me, but look to it that thou show no sign thereof before other men. . . (26)

Steelhead later returns before Osberne's fourteenth birthday (the age of Icelandic confirmation) to give him the charmed sword and performs a kind of baptismal laying on of hands. This strange event, part homoerotic and part paternal, is described as follows:

So they did off their raiment, both of them, and went into the biggest of the pools hard by; and if Steelhead were a noble-looking man clad, far nobler was he to look on naked, for he was both big and well shapen, so that better might not be. As for Osberne, there looked but little of him when he was unclad, as is the fashion of lads to be lank, yet for his age he was full well shapen. . . Then Steelhead called the lad to him all naked as he was, and said: "Stand thou before me, youngling, and I will give

thee a gift which shall go well with Boardcleaver." And the lad stood still before him, and Steelhead laid his hands on the head of him first, and let them abide there a while; then he passed his hands over the shoulders and arms of the boy, and his legs and thighs and breast, and all over his body; and therewith he said: "In our days and the olden time it was the wont of fathers to bless their children in this wise; but for thee, thy father is dead, and thy nighest kinsman is little-hearted and somewhat of a churl. Thus then have I done to thee to take the place of a father to thee. . . Now it is done, so cover thee in thy raiment and rest a while; and then I will depart and leave thee to the might which I have given thee, and the valiance which hath grown up in thine heart." (50)

They later share a (symbolic) meal, and Steelhead kisses him farewell. Shortly thereafter Osberne encounters and kills his first adversary, the thug Hardcastle, who has tried to steal his grandparents' farm. At several nodal points later in the tale, Steelhead will again return, each time to provide aid or counsel which will save Osberne's life. The final insistence of this occurs when Osberne returns home to Elfhild, after the successful revolution described above. Three thieves attack him from behind while he drinks from a ghyll, but they are frightened away by Steelhead, who is arrayed "in a scarlet kirtle, as they deemed, and a bright steel basnet" (179). This strange guardian warrior-angel then staunches the wounded Osberne's blood and bears him in his arms to a nearby hermit for the healing of "long leechdom" (180).

The tale's final account of Osberne also includes a report that after his marriage and return to Eastdale, he continues through the changes of his later life to meet this timeless father-brother-figure in the meadow:

It is further to be told that once in every quarter Osberne went into that same dale wherein he first met Steelhead, and there he came to him, and they had converse together; and though Osberne changed the aspect of him from year to year, as for Steelhead he changed not at all, but was ever the same as when Osberne first saw him, and good love there was between those twain. (238)

Steelhead's role as Osberne's lifelong guardian and savior thus blends the imagery of a post-resurrection Christ, a fostering alfur, and one of the heroes of Morris's beloved Icelandic sagas, Gunnar, who walks still above his "howe" in Morris's haunting poem.

Elfhild's life runs parallel to Osberne's throughout the tale, but the division of gender roles remarked earlier is very pronounced. Osberne and Elfhild love each other faithfully, but in contrast to the shared journey of Ralph and Ursula in *Well at the World's End*, their lives follow near-separate paths until the tale's conclusion, at which point they finally blend together. When Osberne and Elfhild meet across the Flood, she is the only other young inhabitant of the region, a shepherdess not quite a year younger than he. Since the two live on opposite sides of the impassible Flood, they can only shout to one another across the divide. Like Osberne, Elfhild is an orphan with an inhospitable home, ruled by two hostile and puritanical aunts. For solace from their harsh regime, she has often climbed down to a cave on the river, a legendary dwelling of the Dwarfs, and they have provided her with two important gifts: a pipe which she uses to dance and charm her sheep, and a jeweled necklace which helps render her attractive to Osberne. Osberne and Elfhild know that their respective possessions reflect different fates; when Osberne boyishly offers her his Dwarf-wrought whittle, she refuses on the grounds that, "That were a gift for a man but not for me; keep it, dear and kind lad" (38). She, in turn, innocently offers him her necklace, but he responds in kind: "as to the necklace, that is woman's gear even as the whittle is man's" (38).

Even Elfhild's name suggest a clear tie with the local spirits and Osberne's love for her and his region merge. Osberne first leaves home and takes up arms against the local Baron's army in part from the desire to circle round the as-yet-unbridged Flood, so that he and Elfhild may join. When he later returns home briefly from his first encounters, the couple exchange their trothplight, but soon afterwards Elfhild is abducted by maurading allies of the Barons' forces, and Osberne immediately turns southwards to join the forces of resistance to the region's attackers.

Throughout their early encounters, Osberne's behavior toward Elfhild is characterized by friendly admiration, growing attraction, and loyal response to deep and somewhat anxious affection. The young people meet often across the Flood, and she pines with anxiety during his first battle as elected captain of the forces of Eastdale. When she hears that other women admire him, for example, she laments:

"[M]y carline saith of thee, that all women shall love

thee; and that is most like, and what shall I do then, I who shall be so far away from thee?" Then he swore to her that whatever betid he would always love her, and she made as if she were gladdened again thereby;. . . But when he was gone, she sat down and wept, she knew not why. (71-72)

They later pledge their troth, and Morris describes a figure of earnest sensitivity and simple grace:

In all her face was a look half piteous, as though she craved the love of folk; but yet both mirth and swift thought brake through it at whiles, and sober wisdom shaded it into something like sternness. Low-bosomed she was yet, and thin-flanked, and had learned no tricks and graces of movement such as women of towns and great houses use for the beguiling of men. But the dear simpleness of her body in these days when the joy of childhood had left her, and a high heart of good longing was ever before her, was an allurements of love and far beyond any fooling such as that. (107)

At this meeting, she reports to his dismay that a wealthy merchant has spent the night at the cottage she now shares with an older friend Anna and has tried first to rape and then to buy her. The "carline" Anna turns out to have redoubtable powers of wizardry, which eventually give credence to Elfhild's name. They render the merchant immobile until the women can escape, but he returns later with a band of raiders to abduct the two women. This event finally breaks up for good the peace of Osberne's homestead and provides him with a double motive for the war which follows.

Defense of his homeland and his search for Elfhild thus become the dual motives of Osberne's life for several years, and when the revolutionary forces have prevailed, he sets forth to fulfill the more personal half of his mission. After he is ambushed and his wounds healed by a hermit's leechcraft, Osberne finally finds Anna, who leads him to a house in the forest where she and Elfhild now live. Shortly after Osberne arrives, the three thieves who had ambushed him reappear at the dwelling and threaten its inhabitants. One grabs Elfhild, but Osberne then manages to drive all three outside and kills them all. Elfhild responds to all this with alarm and distress; she asks her friend, "Mother, what is it? What has befallen?" and is reassured only when Osberne returns. For the first time in the ro-

mance the lovers are together on the same side of the river, as Osberne cries out to her: "'O my sweet, where is now the Sundering Flood?' And there they were in each other's arms, as though the long years had never been" (185)

Anna now recounts to Osberne the women's shared adventures, which form an eleven-chapter separate female journey, inset in the larger tale. After the merchant and his henchmen have kidnapped the pair from the banks of the Flood, a compassionate passerby, Sir Mark the Blue Knight, rescues and takes them to his castle for protection. During their stay at the castle, messengers bring reports of an especially valiant captain in the service of Sir Godrick's forces, and Elfhild recognized him immediately: "Who then can this be same mine own beloved?" (215). The Blue Knight later dies in the service of the Baron's League, and his mother's hostility forces the women to flee. They fall prey to a band of merchant-slavers, but Anna's magic again enables them to flee, and she continues to guide their future course with the aid of spells and dreams. At last the women arrive safely at an Abbey, where Elfhild tells the abbot she wishes to find Sir Godrick's chief adjutant, and he assigns them the guest-house to which Anna has led Osberne.

Like Osberne, Elfhild has a same-sex companion and guardian for her travels, but it is conspicuously the by-now-somewhat-formidable "carline" Anna's spells, rather than ancillary exertions on Elfhild's part, which rescue the women from male violence. The growing bond between the older and younger woman, their mutual loyalty and resilience, and the old woman's vigorous and protective intelligence nevertheless give their story considerable active force. Just as Osberne has chosen Elfhild despite manifest interest in him shown by other women, Elfhild has also rejected a worthy alternate suitor, the Blue Knight, whose political allegiances are misguided but who comments with respect on the motives of Sir Godrick and his forces. Anna's lengthy tale provides a badly needed counterweight to the male battle plot, a partial symmetry which is only completed when the couple finally return to Wethermel for their life of peaceful joint labor.

At the beginning of these summaries, I suggested that Morris alternated between two polarized antitheses, of restless "masculine" conflict and restful, "feminine" love, and pointed to some of the female characters he created in the last decade of his life, who expressed his counterfactual ideal of natural fullness,

harmony, and "rest" with especial poignance. Ellen clearly embodied the ideal as an expression of Morris's ardently utopian political vision of the "religion of humanity" triumphant in *News from Nowhere*, and Birdalone provided its fullest pastoral manifestation in *Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Morris's last two tales are *not* feminist, for the young women in them never play fully autonomous roles. But they are curiously "feminine" celebrations of the love of life, which strongly suggest that love at its best is something essentially female, and Morris's faith in the natural wisdom and goodness of women clearly emerges in both tales.

The Well at the World's End is the most extended narrative of a fulfilled courtship in Morris's later writings, in which Ralph and Ursula share many of the difficulties and aspirations of their lives in search of Morris's beloved "rest." In *The Sundering Flood*, by contrast, polarized separation of the sexes and their stylized roles underlie the central metaphor of the title and the book as a whole, and express Morris's deep apprehension that men and women may be "sundered" from birth. He further aligns this metaphor with a pastoral-idyllic version of his utopian politics, however, for the chasm of the Sundering Flood is also an obvious emblem of political as well as sexual alienation, which can only be half-resolved in righteous conflict. Osberne's battles are successful, with a little help from his strangely supernal friend, but they do not heal this breach.

Like most Victorian medievalists, Morris's "active" imagination tended to celebrate stereotypical deeds of "male" *prouesse*, and he usually denied his heroines comparably active participation in such quests. The world of *The Sundering Flood* is not entirely a patriarchy, however. It is more a world of the young than of old and established men, for one thing, though

it was written by a dying man of 62. The heroine's griefs and valor, moreover, are vital. Strongly aided by the shaman Anna, Elfhild is the moral and natural force which inspires Osberne's acts in all their deepest political significance. The lovers' maturation follows "sundered" paths, but both these paths are arduous, and they finally join in the "peace" Morris valued more highly than the ritual struggles which preceded it. Had he lived, he might well have expanded the concluding chapters and described this peace and Elfhild's future in greater detail. I suspect, for example, that her contacts with the old "carline" Anna endure, as do Osberne's with his mentor Steelhead—indeed, that Morris intended that we should see the two guardian figures as individually inadequate but as complementary manifestations of a common life-force.

There was, then, something stubbornly consistent in the insight of Morris's humanitarian socialist "religion": that genuine reconciliation of gender tensions may not be possible without healing other forms of social alienation, in particular, an end to war. In some sense, moreover, he may also have come to realize—prompted in part by the deeply "feminine" qualities of Ellen's love of "the earth, and everything in it"—that the converse was true as well. If so, this insight finally provided Morris with partial resolution of the dialectical tensions in so many of his writings between "male" and "female," warrior ethic and romance, democratic "struggle" and socialist "rest." At the end of what turned out to be his last tale, the Sundering Flood has finally been bridged, and the tale's protagonists come together in a life of peace, "in each other's arms, as though the long years had never been."

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NOTES

¹ See my essays in *Victorian Studies*, 321-42, and *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, ed. Boos & Carole Silver, 147-66.

² Morris's women seldom play the prescribed social role of motherhood, by the way. If they are not lovers, they are more likely to be surrogate mothers, or anti-motherly hostile crones.

³ With Ernest Belfort Bax, April-September, 1886; reprinted with some additions as *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilizations and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, NY: Norton, 1961, 50-51: "Further-

more, women soon come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence. . . The work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men, it confronts them with ever more difficult tasks and compels them to carry out instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable. . . Thus the woman finds herself forced into the background by the claims of civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it." Compare Morris's "The Society of the Future" in May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Oxford: Russell and Russell, 1936 453-468.

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