INVENTING FANTASY:

The Prose Romances of William Morris

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Abstract

This thesis sheds light on Morris's thematic concerns and narrative strategies in five of his little-studied prose romances: *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood*. The thesis argues that these romances can be read as significant texts in the development of the modern fantasy genre. The thesis aims to re-orient scholarly discussion of the prose romances in the context of fantasy literature.

Chapter 1, 'Inventing Fantasy', locates the prose romances within the social and cultural context of their production. It discusses the nature of the contemporary reception of the prose romances, and analyses how modern criticism has begun to re-value the prose romances as significant works within the modern fantasy genre. The chapter then identifies the main critical issues in fantasy scholarship. Finally, the chapter sets out the critical methodology for the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 2, 'Inventing Place', investigates the way Morris constructed his invented worlds. It identifies two points of reference for Morris's 'landscape of the mind': one, his experience of real landscapes, particularly those of England and Iceland; and two, his Romantic imagination and desire to re-birth the romantic landscapes of medieval literature. The chapter utilises pastoral discourse, and its attendant

rhetoric, in its close reading of the texts. It develops a critical foundation for the rest of the thesis by indicating the essential connection between the construction of place and the way in which the hero operates as part of the invented world.

Chapter 3, 'Inventing the Quest-Hero', investigates the construction of the male hero and the quest within the invented world. It uses as its point of departure the conventional hero-myth pattern as established by Joseph Campbell and other structuralists. The chapter demonstrates how Morris departs from the conventional male-heroic paradigm in two key ways: first, through the creation of strong female characters and second, through the type of conclusion he gives to the heroes' quests. The chapter demonstrates the way the quests are related to the hero's separation from the world of the familiar, to the hero's interaction with the forces of nature, and to the hero's relationship with women. The chapter pays particular attention to the role of the Maid in Walter's quest in *The Wood Beyond the World,* and argues that Morris was working towards the creation of a new type of female hero.

Chapter 4, 'Inventing the Female Quest-Hero,' examines the construction of Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* as Morris's unique female hero, reading her narrative through a feminist revisioning of the male hero-myth, and with reference to the established discourses of the pastoral.

Chapter 5, 'Conclusion', summarises the main points of the thesis, and suggests some ways forward for critical scholarship of the prose romances.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of a few special people who have seen me through this entire endeavour. First, my supervisor Dr. Diane Speed for her unwavering confidence in me, for her wise words in times of crisis, and for always going above and beyond the call. Second, my associate supervisor Alex Jones, for his enthusiasm for all things Morris. Third, my amazing friend Dr. Kim Selling, for her inspiration and friendship. Last, but by no means least, my parents, for always being there for me.

Contents

Inventing Fantasy

This thesis will investigate the work of William Morris: the inventor of fantasy. The title of this thesis, and of this section – 'Inventing Fantasy' – draws deliberately upon the medieval rhetorical meaning of 'invention'. In medieval rhetoric *inventio* referred to the system for justifying and ordering an idea. It relates to the manner in which a writer 'discovers' or 'finds' new ideas, or subject matter, or develops different ways of expressing these. The word 'inventing' underlines the achievement of William Morris in creating a new literary genre through original assimilation and synthesis of a number of pre-existing literary, historical and social paradigms and the construction of entirely imagined realms of fantasy.[1] At the time of titling this thesis, I was unaware of the importance of *invention* to J. R. R. Tolkien's theory of fantasy, as expressed in his well-known essay 'On Fairy-Stories'. Tolkien identifies three factors that help to identify the 'origin' of a story: invention, inheritance, and diffusion. Of these, Tolkien asserts that invention is 'the most important and fundamental.'[2] It seemed to me even more appropriate then, in light of this, to call the thesis 'Inventing Fantasy'.

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[1] Jane Chance has used the same concept to describe the achievement of J. R. R. Tolkien in her 'Introduction' in Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004, 4.

[2] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' in *Tree and Leaf*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964: 11-70 (24). I will return to Tolkien's concept of invention later in the chapter, in the section entitled 'Critical Issues.'

This chapter will introduce the texts under consideration, beginning with an examination of their cultural context and their production. The chapter will then move to consider the contemporary critical reception of the prose romances, noting the critical neglect of these works. A review of modern criticism follows. In the final sections, the chapter will identify some possible reasons for the marginalisation of Morris's prose romances to date, and suggests a new way forward in terms of critical re-orientation of the works. The development of the modern fantasy genre – with its particular conception of a secondary world, offers the key this critical re-orientation, as the thesis will demonstrate.

Out of longing for a simpler time in an age of technological and industrial advancement, and with fantastic vision and a passion for the past, William Morris (1834-1896), author, poet, designer, socialist, wrote a series of prose romances at the end of his life that can be read as a commentary on Victorian medievalism. With these romances, Morris also incidentally laid the foundations for the modern genre of fantasy, thus carrying the reach of Victorian medievalism into new centuries. The prose romances – *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood* – are the least explored yet the most fascinating of Morris's extended prose fictions. Morris' prose romances were the first modern stories to be set in wholly invented lands (a criterion which is one of the defining aspects of modern fantasy literature). Morris deliberately reinterpreted many aspects of Middle Ages in order to present an image of society that would engage readers on a level of wonder, and,

perhaps inadvertently, would also transmit some of Morris' fundamental concerns and hopes for society. The choices he made in creating his quasi-medieval otherworlds occasionally reflected the more idealised images of the Middle Ages rather than the reality of them, but they were utilized to create a sense of otherness, to endow his imaginary worlds with recognizable yet alienating images.

Guided by the structure and style of medieval romance, and informed by knowledge of medieval history, literature and a particular interest in the Norse sagas, Morris wrote tales of young heroes questing through strange and magical lands, searching for love and happiness. Even in his early days, this love of fairytale days-gone-by was in evidence: as a young boy, he would dress up in his child-size armour and ride his pony through Epping Forest, near his home.[3] As he grew older, he continued to foster this fascination for the past, and it defined many aspects of his life. One of the main structuring forces behind the prose romances originates from Morris' concerns about the rise of industrial capitalism in his own time, which prompted him to envision a pre-technological world inspired by the Middle Ages. Morris's medievalist aestheticism valued the art, literature and society of the Middle Ages, and stood as the antithesis of the Industrial Revolution. The romances stand as an expression of Romantic pastoral medievalism, exploring the desires to reconnect with nature, the past, and a simpler mode of being following the ordered social structures evidenced in earlier ages. It is now well-recognised that Morris created a new generic paradigm of fantasy literature with his last prose romances. The thesis

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[3] See Christine Poulson, *William Morris.* Sydney: Sandstone, 1998, 8.

will unite the prose romances in a fresh critical reading that is delimited by, but not limited to, the fantasy genre.

The Prose Romances

In this section, I will offer a brief introduction to the prose romances, their cultural context and their production. The five prose romances under consideration in this thesis represent a distinct corpus of work, united by the consistent use of a pre-technological, pre-industrial invented setting. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the critical recovery of the prose romances as a significant corpus of literary work within the fantasy genre and by so doing, facilitate a deeper understanding of the roots of modern medievalist fantasy. The stories follow a simple quest pattern of ordinary heroes adventuring through magical lands. Two earlier works, The *House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1889), were composed only a short time before the other romances, and they share much of the narrative style of the last prose romances. They can be seen to represent the transition between historically based imaginary worlds and the fully-fledged autonomous worlds of fantasy that characterise the last five prose romances. They are, however, excepted from this study because of they are set in a pseudo-historic past, and hence lack the determining characteristic of fantasy: the setting in an autonomous and imaginary otherworld.[4] Critics have traditionally interpreted *The House* and *The Roots* as having at least some identifiable ties to recorded history.

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[4] Fiona MacCarthy notes this distinction in *William Morris: A Life For Our Time*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994, 634.

Readers and critics of these novels have sought to describe them in terms of recognisable historical settings; they do not seek to describe the later prose romances in such a way.[5] The earlier romances are the product of an earlier and distinctly different creative period for Morris.

Morris wrote the last prose romances in the final years of his life, between 1890 and 1896. In the lead-up to that period, Victorian England was experiencing rapid social and cultural changes; it was a time of Victorian triumphalism, related not only to Empire but also to industrial power. The intellectual climate was dominated by a tension between a lingering Romanticism (with its typical perception of beauty in what is natural) and the pragmatic acceptance of technological development. Dissatisfaction with Victorian modernity was expressed through a preoccupation with the past and Morris, amongst other writers of his period,[6] turned to the pre-industrial world of the medieval period to express his feelings about the rapidly evolving technological advances of his own age. The medieval period became a

[5] For example, Aymer Vallance (1898) writes of *The House* that it supposedly takes place when the 'struggle between the Romans and the Gothic people was reaching its culmination' in *William Morris: His Art, his Writings and his Public Life*. London: George Bell, 1898, 366. J. W. Mackail (1899), an early biographer of Morris, portrays the earlier novels as having a 'semi-historical setting, and an adherence to the conditions of a world from which the supernatural element was not indeed excluded, but in which it bore such a subordinate place as involved no violent strain on probability.' *The Life of William Morris*. 2 volumes. London: Longman, Green and Co., 1899, volume 2, 242. Frederick Kirkhoff (1986) refers to them as the 'Germanic romances.' 'William Morris's Anti-Books: The Kelmscott Press and the Late Prose Romances' in *Forms of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Third International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film*, ed. Jan Hokenson and Howard Pearce, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, 93.
[6] For an excellent examination of the Victorian period and the way in which its writers responded to contemporary concerns, see Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986.

metaphor for a specific, pre-industrial social order.[7] The quasi-medievalism of the romances may be read as a creative expression of Morris's wider case against the Victorian age, reflecting Morris's concern for the social and ecological well-being of England and Europe, and his desire for the return to a more just, self-regulating and beautiful society.

The Kelmscott Press and the Prose Romances

The writing of the prose romances dominated Morris's creative output in the 1890s. But Morris was also occupied in another major project during this period: the establishment and running of the Kelmscott Press.[8] The Kelmscott Press has been described as 'the final phase of the Gothic Revival.'[9] The Gothic Revival was primarily an architectural movement, but it also articulated ideas about society and its moral values. For Morris, architecture embraced 'the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man.'[10] In this he followed John Ruskin, who articulated his own ideas about architecture in a social and moral framework; writing of Gothic ornament he related it to three human conditions: freedom, humility and joy.[11] There are interwoven connections in Morris's mind between

[7] Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1970, 1.
[8] *The Story of the Glittering Plain* was the first book printed at the Kelmscott Press.
[9] William S. Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 5.
[10] William Morris, 'The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation', in William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art. Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham 1878-1881*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898, 170.
[11] Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay on the History of Taste*. Third Edition. London: John Murray, 1962, 202.

architecture and the book, and the feelings of wonder and escapism that each brought to him. He recalls:

> I remember as a young boy going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of heaven had been opened to me. Also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript, these first pleasures which I discovered for myself were stronger than anything else in life.[12]

The Press may be seen as part of Morris's larger Romantic endeavour; it was, in many ways, an act of revival – of medieval craftsmanship, bookmaking and, above all, of beautiful things. The designs of the Kelmscott books were influenced by medieval manuscript culture, and their production at the Kelmscott Press derived from a personal philosophy of the medieval craftsman promoted by Morris. This philosophy is based on that espoused earlier by Ruskin, in which he lauded the joy of labour experienced by the medieval craftsman: 'this claim of labour for pleasure rests on a foundation stronger than a mere fantastic dream', Morris writes in 'Hopes of Civilisation'.[13] Morris believed in the happiness of the worker, and so maintained working conditions at the Press above the average for Victorian England.[14] In this, Morris aspired to revive the traditional spirit of craftsmanship and counter the Industrial conditions that separated the artist from the craftsman, the designer from the manufacturer. It can hardly be insignificant that the prose romances were produced synchronously with the Press venture, and that the prose romances were

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[12] This is a comment made by Morris to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt. Peterson takes the quote from Blunt's diary. See Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 45.

[13] Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary*. New York: King's Crown Press, 1945, 62.

[14] Peterson describes some of the conditions Morris's printers experienced: they were paid five shillings a week above the standard rate; they received full pay for days they were off sick and generous holidays. For further details, see *The Kelmscott Press*, 182*ff.*

all printed at the Press.[15] Both the Press and the romances venerate the past: the Press, actively and practically; the romances imaginatively and idyllically. In his romances as well as in his book design, I argue, Morris constructed a finished product that reflected his medieval-fantastic vision. He writes:

> I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty, while at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters. I have always been a great admirer of the calligraphy of the Middle Ages, and of the earlier printing which took its place. As to the fifteenth century books, I had noticed that they were always beautiful by force of the mere typography, even without the added ornament, with which so many of them are so lavishly supplied. And it was the essence of my undertaking to produce books which it would be a pleasure to look upon as pieces of printing and arrangement of type.[16]

Morris's efforts are a synthesis of the medieval and 'archaic' and the contemporary, in the same way that the romance narratives themselves blend the imaginary medieval with contemporaneous themes.

Texts and Editions

This list below shows the full titles, followed by the original publication date, of the prose romances under consideration in this thesis. The prose romances were all published, in limited numbers, at Morris's own Kelmscott Press between 1891 and 1898. The following list shows the prose romances in order of publication at the

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[15] Frederick Kirchhoff makes the coincidence of these two ventures – the Press and writing the romances – the subject of his article, 'William Morris's Anti-Books: The Kelmscott Press and the Late Prose Romances' in Jan Hokenson and Howard Pearce, eds., *Forms of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Third International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986: 93-100. He makes a significant link between the two ventures by showing that both share a concern for the act of reading.

[16] 'A note by William Morris on his aims in founding the Kelmscott Press' in H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master Craftsman*. Folkstone: Dawson, 1975, 135.

Press. If an earlier publication exists this too is noted. *The Wood Beyond the World* and *The Well at the World's End* received commercial publication as well as the Kelmscott printings.[17]

- *The Story of the Glittering Plain. Which has been also Called the Land of Living Men or the Acre of the Undying* (1891; 1894 with illustrations); first published in 3 parts in English Illustrated Magazine, 1890.
- *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894)
- *The Well at the World's End* (1896)
- *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (posthumously published, 1897)
- *The Sundering Flood* (posthumously published, 1898) [18]

These books were not aimed at a general market – price alone meant they were out of the range of what an average working-class person could afford. They also had only small print runs. It appears that in writing them, Morris's intentions were not commercial. For example, *The Wood Beyond the World* had a print run of 350, on paper. *The Well at the World's End* also had a print run of 350 copies on paper, and an additional eight copies on vellum.[19] The rarity and cost of these editions made them virtually inaccessible to a contemporary market, and they certainly would not have become accessible to the modern reader. However, the renaissance of interest in fantasy in the late 1960s and early 1970s (in the wake of the popularity of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series)[20] saw the emergence of two special publishing series dedicated to the revival of the 'classics' of the fantasy genre: the

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[17] The dates are based on those collated by Peterson in his Appendix A: Checklist of the Kelmscott Press Books in *The Kelmscott Press*. *The Wood Beyond the World* was published by Lawrence and Bullen in 1895, and *The Well at the World's End* by Longman Green in 1896.
[18] Morris was still working on *The Sundering Flood* at the time of his death, and the text remains technically incomplete.
[19] See Peterson, Appendix A, *The Kelmscott Press*.
[20] *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in 1954-55, but gained commercial success in the 1960s. The book is published in three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.

Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series and the Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy Library. Both publishers included William Morris in their series. The books were published paperback editions that made them affordable to a wide market. Fantasy author Lin Carter was involved as consulting editor for the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, which published *The Wood Beyond the World* (1969) and *The Well at the World's End* (1970). Each includes an introduction by Carter. *The Glittering Plain* appears as one of the Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy series (1973); *The Sundering Flood* was published in 1973 as part of the Unicorn Fantasy Series. Dover published an unabridged facsimile of the original Kelmscott edition of *The Wood Beyond the World* in 1972, describing it as 'fantasy'.[21] In non-fantasy publishing, the William Morris Library produced an edition of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in 1994, including an introduction by Morris scholar and admirer, Norman Talbot. The edition includes notes and a glossary.

I will be using the terms 'prose romances' or 'late prose romances' to refer specifically to the texts I have selected, rather than 'fantasy'. I believe this maintains the integrity and uniqueness of the texts, as well as marking them as products of the nineteenth century, a period before the emergence of fantasy as an established genre. For convenience and consistency, all references to the texts of the romances within this thesis are from the *Collected Works of William Morris*, unless otherwise

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[21] In this facsimile edition, the reader is able to experience 'something like the total effect at which Morris was aiming, one in which the onward movement of the narrative is set against an encouragement to dwell in a leisurely way over every appealing detail of the text.' Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980, 166.

noted.[22] Page numbers, in brackets, will follow quotations, and will be preceded by the abbreviation of the romance title, for clarity. *The Well at the World's End* is published in two volumes: the page number reference will be preceded by 1 or 2 to indicate the volume number.

Abbreviations Used in This Thesis:

GP	*The Story of the Glittering Plain*
WBW	*The Wood Beyond the World*
WWE	*The Well at the World's End*
WWI	*The Water of the Wondrous Isles*
SF	*The Sundering Flood*

Reception: The Prose Romances Diminished

The section will focus on the critical reception of the prose romances in the contemporary period of their publication. A survey of the contemporary reviews shows a mixed reception to the prose romances, with an overwhelming recognition that Morris had created something new in literature. I will establish that generic difficulties contributed to a general marginalisation of the works, both in the context of Morris's other work and in the wider literary context.[23] The prose romances have been, in the main, overlooked as part of Morris's wider biography,

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[22] *The Collected Works of William Morris*. With introductions by his daughter May Morris. London: Longmans Green and Co, 1912-14: *The Story of the Glittering Plain* volume 14*; The Wood Beyond the World* volume 17; *The Well at the World's End* volumes 18 and 19. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, volume 20; *The Sundering Flood*. Volume 21.

[23] Modern critics assert this claim that the generic difficulties have resulted in academic neglect of the romances. See particularly Frederick Kirchhoff, 'Introduction' in Blue Calhoun *et al.*, eds. *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, New York: William Morris Society, 1976, 11-30. Charlotte H. Oberg describes the romances as 'sui generic and thus insusceptible to analysis by any generally accepted literary criteria', thus explaining the lack of critical attention and appreciation. *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris*. Charlottesville, VI: University Press of Virginia, 1978, 115.

diminished in the context of Morris's other achievements. The single most important factor in the prose romances being ignored by both readers and fans of Morris as well as scholars and critics, has been, I believe, the inability of readers to recognise them as valuable literary works. They were so unique at the time of writing that critics could not reconcile them with Morris's previous writings; one biographer wrote that the romances presented 'a strange contrast to Morris's active political and intellectual life.'[24] Even within the wider literary context of the Victorian period, the prose romances were unprecedented.[25]

Poetry and the novel were the popular literary forms of the late-nineteenth century, and the prose romances did not fit comfortably with the expectations of readers who were more used to these popular forms of literature.[26] Further, realism was the established dominant mode of prose fiction by the time Morris came to write his prose romances.[27] Their particular combination of subject matter, structure and quasi-archaic language perplexed many contemporary reviewers, one of whom wrote of Morris that he 'writes a prose akin to that of Chaucer in his "Tale of Meliboeus," except that Chaucer is less archaic and puzzling than his imitator.'[28] Yet, the prominence of mimetic forms of fiction undoubtedly had an important role in

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[24] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976, 674.
[25] See MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 634.
[26] See Peter Faulkner's introduction to W*illiam Morris: The Critical Heritage*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, 2.
[27] Major writers of realist fiction at the time included George Moore, Henry James, and Thomas Hardy.
[28] *The Sundering Flood*, *Academy*, 19 March 1898, unsigned review in Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 428-30

the development of the literature of fantasy, which took shape through dialectic with the literature of realism.[29] Fantasy developed in part because the dominant cultural attitude of the period 'failed to account for, or to provide sufficient means for the expression of, any significant aspect of man's psychological or spiritual makeup.'[30] Such reactions were not confined to Victorian Britain, but can be seen on the European continent as well. Thus, the German *Kunstmärchen* (literary fairytales) arose as a reaction to the intellectual rigidity of *Aufklärung* (the German Age of Enlightenment).[31]

Morris's prose romances represent the last of his published works, and the last of his writings (he dictated the last of *The Sundering Flood* from his bed in the days leading to his death in 1896). They are far removed from his informed political writings, his tracts on architecture, society, art, or indeed from his poetry and even his single other work of extended prose fiction, the utopian *News from Nowhere*. Yet significant biographies of Morris marginalise, if not completely ignore, the late prose romances. Most remarkably, Morris's official biographer Mackail fails to mention at all *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Sundering Flood* or *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. He briefly refers to *The Story of the Glittering Plain* as the first book printed at the Kelmscott Press.[32] Paul Thompson's *The Work of William Morris* similarly overlooks two of the prose romances - *The Wood Beyond the*

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[29] Richard Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. First published 1997. New York and London: Routledge, 2002, 2.
[30] Gary K. Wolfe, 'Symbolic Fantasy', *Genre* 8 (1975): 194-209 (205).
[31] Wolfe, 'Symbolic Fantasy', 205.
[32] Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 255.

World and *The Sundering Flood* – in his overview of Morris's last works, though he does later make reference to *The Wood Beyond the World*.[33]

I would argue that the diversity of Morris's writings was one of the main factors that contributed to the prose romances being under-valued. Morris's writings ranged from poetry to short prose fiction to essays and lectures on art, socialism, architecture and various other subjects. He achieved relative success and popular acclaim with his poems *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) and then turned his attentions to more social issues. In the last two decades of his life, his writings were primarily lectures. From the late 1870s onward, Morris lectured on cultural and political concerns, covering topics such the decorative arts, architecture and socialism. He published a series of five lectures, *Hopes and Fears for Art*, in 1882, which played an extraordinarily influential part in the development of the Arts and Crafts movement. He also engaged passionately with Socialism, speaking and publishing prolifically on the subject. In 1893 he published the most political of his works, *Socialism: its Growth and Outcome*.[34] In 1891 *News From Nowhere*, 'A Utopian Romance', was published in book form, and although this book was only quietly received, it has now joined his early poetry as perhaps the best known of Morris's literary works. In the context of such activities and publications, the prose romances were seen as a 'startling relapse into literary

[33] See Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. On page 47 he lists the prose romances – missing two of them. On page 177 he mentions *The Wood Beyond the World*.
[34] See Faulkner's overview of Morris's output in the introduction to *William Morris*, 16*ff.*

Pre-Raphaelitism', 'nothing more nor less than the resuscitation of Don Quixote's burnt library.'[35] In his book on Morris E. P. Thompson asks if Morris had 'gone soft in the head,'[36], suggesting that the production of the prose romances were evidence of the decline of Morris's mental health.

The prose romances challenged both classification and interpretation. The romances were, according to one contemporary, 'a new thing in literature.'[37] Theodore Watts went straight to the heart of the matter in 1897 when he wrote of the prose romances that they were 'the most original compositions in the imaginative literature of our time.'[38] The contemporary reception of the prose romances indicates a desire to try to classify and understand the 'new thing' Morris had created. One of the responses to the texts concerned the distinctive prose style. The prose style was so uncommon that early reviewers' attempts to classify or describe the texts within conventional literary boundaries were unsuccessful. Victorian criticism was dominated by the realist novel, which set the dominant criteria by which to value literature. Anything that did not fit was therefore 'other', and therefore marginal. This attitude is clearly expressed in a review of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, in which the reviewer claimed the book was lacking because it did

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[35] George Bernard Shaw quoted in Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* , 674.
[36] Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 680.
[37] Vallance, *William Morris: His Art, his Writings and his Public Life*, 366.
[38] Review of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, *Athenaeum*, December 1897, in Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 418.

not display the characteristics of 'all great novels, the effect produced on character by the shocks and blows of circumstance.'[39]

Another response to the texts related specifically to the diction employed by Morris. Theodore Watts diplomatically told his readers, with regard to the diction, that 'there are those for whom it will possess great charm, and there are those whom it will repel.'[40] H.G. Wells found *The Well at the World's End* to be 'full of clean strong sentences and sweet old words,'[41] while another reviewer argued that Chaucer's language was 'less archaic' and 'less puzzling' than Morris's.[42] When critics deplore the language of the romances as archaic, they miss the point that that was part of what Morris was trying to achieve, I would argue. He was not attempting to write mundanely accessible stories, but rather to inculcate an art of reading that would remove the reader from the contemporary period. His diction and syntax serve an aesthetic purpose, pulling the 'reader away from the words and objects of a modern, commercial society, gradually drawing him into the remote world of which

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[39] Unsigned review of *The Sundering Flood*, *Academy*, 19 March 1898, in Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 430.

[40] Review of *The Wood Beyond the World*, *Athenaeum*, 2 March 1895 in Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 376

[41] Review of *The Well at the World's End*, *Saturday Review*, 17 October 1896, in Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 413.

[42] Unsigned review of *The Sundering Flood*, *Academy*, 19 March 1898, Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 428. Modern scholar C. N. Manlove is particularly critical of Morris's prose style. He argues that Morris's attempts at recreating a sense of the medieval idiom results in a distancing from what is said. See his chapter 'Anaemic Fantasy: Morris, Dunsany, Eddison, Beagle' in *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*, London: Macmillan Press, 1983, 128. Manlove goes on to make a similar point in his later book, *The Fantasy Literature of England,* London: Macmillan Press, 1999, in which he claims that the power of Morris's fantasy is 'often weakened' through 'the mistiness of the pseudo-archaic language he uses, his orotundity,' 43-44.

it is a manifestation.'[43] The diction and syntax synthesise many of Morris's creative influences by suggesting a quasi-medieval origin, by evoking medieval romance and saga, by adopting and sometimes adapting the language and prose style of Old Icelandic, and by creating an overall sense of removal from the present day. The diction functions to convey the rich *Sehnsucht*, or 'nostalgia', of the prose romances. Morris's turn away from contemporary diction can also be seen in philological terms as an attempt to return to the Germanic roots of the language. Talbot notes that the prose romances reveal almost no words from Latin or French origin, except when they are technical terms used for referring to armour, heraldry, architecture or religion.[44] The vocabulary, coupled with the controlled simplicity of Morris' syntax, is 'inseparable from the ethos of the romances.'[45]

Comparisons between the prose romances and medieval literature were not uncommon as readers sought to understand the 'new thing' Morris had created. Critics recognised a distinctly medieval 'flavour' in the prose style of the romances. H. G. Wells favourably compares *The Well at the World's End* to the writings of the fifteenth-century Sir Thomas Malory: 'it is Malory, enriched and chastened by the thought and learning of six centuries… Malory with the glow of the dawn of the

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[43] Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982, 159-60.
[44] Norman Talbot, ' "Whilom, as tells the tale": the Language of the Prose Romances', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 8.2 (1989): 16-26 (17).
[45] Kirchhoff, 'Introduction' in *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, 13-14.

Twentieth Century warming his tapestries and beaten metal … It is Malory, but instead of the mystic Grail, the search for long life and the beauty of strength.'[46]

Re-evaluation: The Prose Romances Recovered

Since the late 1960s, when the Tolkien phenomenon inspired a renaissance in fantasy literature, the prose romances have been re-evaluated. In particular, it has come to be recognised that they are the predecessors of a particular type of fantasy literature, usually described as 'heroic fantasy' or 'high fantasy.'[47] Jules Zanger emphasises that one of the primary romantic characteristics of heroic fantasy is 'the locating of the narrative in a setting that is vaguely medieval, combining the matter of chivalry and of the fairy tale to produce the representative temporal and geographical locus of heroic fantasy.'[48] The debt owed by modern fantasy to Morris has been articulated by a number of critics, who use the relationship as a touchstone for wider discussions about the fantasy genre. Raymond H. Thompson, observes that critics 'frequently assume a relationship [between fantasy and medieval literature] and trace the line of descent from medieval romance through William Morris's recreations of the Middle Ages and into modern fantasy.'[49] W. A. Senior notes, in a

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[46] Review of *The Well at the World's End*, *Saturday Review*, 17 October 1896, Faulkner, ed., *William Morris*, 410.

[47] Morris's romances are categorized as 'heroic fantasy' by Diana Waggoner, *The Hills of Faraway: A Guide to Fantasy*. New York: Atheneum, 1978, 36. W. A. Senior also places Morris's romances in the heroic or high fantasy category because of the vaguely medieval setting in 'Medieval Literature and Modern Fantasy: Toward a Common Metaphysics', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 3.3 (1994), 32-49 (33).

[48] 'Heroic Fantasy and Social Reality: *ex nihilo nihil fit*' in Roger C. Schlobin, ed., *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press and Harvester Press, 1982, 229-30.

[49] See Raymond H. Thompson, 'Modern Fantasy and Medieval Romance: A Comparative Study' in Schlobin, ed., *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, 212-15. Thompson also notes that

brief article, that the association of William Morris and medievalism 'has been central to the discussion on the history and development of modern fantasy'.[50]

Scholarship on the romances has tended to rely on relatively conventional literary analysis (as I discuss in below in the Critical Review), but the rapidly growing academic interest in fantasy literature offers a rich new context in which to [re-] examine the prose romances. Yet, although Morris is frequently cited in articles and books on fantasy that focus on the connection between modern fantasy literature and its medieval antecedents, the nature of the references are generally no more than passing mentions. The relationship is nevertheless quite widely accepted: Fiona MacCarthy, Morris's most recent biographer, reflects the trend for including Morris within the fantasy tradition. She argues that the romances are similar to the twentieth-century fantasies of Tolkien and Lewis 'in the way they remove the reader from reality into the curiously convincing detail of their imagined worlds.'[51] I would argue that the identification of place as a key generic identifier of fantasy is central to a proper investigation of the prose romances. What is lacking in current scholarship, beyond this initial identification and connection to 'the medieval', is any in-depth examination of the *function* of place in the prose romances.

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fantasy's enthusiasm for a quasi-medieval setting can be traced back to William Morris, 'the earliest practitioner of this form, who consciously sought to revive the world of medieval romance.' Michael Moorcock states that William Morris was 'doubtless the originator of the story set in an imaginary land where the supernatural is a fact of life', in *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Fantasy*. London: VGSF, 1988, 63

[50] Senior, 'Medieval Literature and Modern Fantasy: Toward a Common Metaphysics', 32.

[51] *William Morris*, 634. Charlotte H. Oberg also makes a generic connection between Morris's romances and J. R. R. Tolkien in *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris*, 115.

Norman Talbot and Richard Mathews are the only critics to have undertaken examination of the prose romances specifically in relation to the fantasy genre in any meaningful way. Mathews is the only person to have considered all of the prose romances together in the context of fantasy literature, in his 1978 monograph *Worlds Beyond the World: The Fantastic Vision of William Morris*.[52] Mathews unites all the prose romances and a number of other prose fictions written by Morris under the umbrella of fantasy and presents a brief analysis of each of them. Because of Mathews' broad understanding of fantasy as anything that incorporates the supernatural or magic, his survey embraces many more texts than are included within this thesis. Mathews's grouping of the prose romances relies principally on their setting in 'worlds beyond the world,' which enables him to associate them with literature of fantasy.[53] Mathews's work is important because he brings into focus several thematic concerns that are readily evident in the romances. He argues for the function of landscape as symbol,[54] and he identifies Morris's use and adaptation of archetypal heroes, ritual patterns and romance patterns. However, there are significant weaknesses to Mathews's book. It is remarkably lacking in extra-textual critical support,[55] and it relies heavily on generic assumptions about fantasy rather than clarifying the precise position of the prose romances within the genre. A more recent book by Mathews, however, offers an excellent introduction

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[52]Richard Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World: The Fantastic Vision of William Morris*. San Bernardino: Borgo Press, 1978.

[53] See Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World*, 3.

[54] See, for examples, his comments on pages 26, 36, 39-40, and 52 in *Worlds Beyond the World.*

[55] Although Mathews occasionally cites the work of major Morris scholars, such as Carole Silver, he does not reference the sources. The book does not contain footnotes or other critical references. It also does not contain an index or table of contents.

to Morris within the fantasy tradition, and his particular influence on later authors. *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination* offers a survey of the development of fantasy since antiquity, with particular focus on key texts and authors, and devotes a chapter to Morris.[56]

Norman Talbot has published a number of more academic articles on the prose romances. Talbot recognises Morris within the fantasy tradition, but only one of his articles specifically refers to one of the prose romances as fantasy.[57] Talbot, identifying *The Story of the Glittering Plain* as the earliest example of a Secondary World Fantasy, assumes a general acceptance of the narrative form and content of fantasy, employing without preamble or explication Tolkien's foundational essay, 'On Fairy-Stories' to support his position. This thesis also proceeds from the assumption that these basic patterns of fantasy are recognised and accepted. In all of this, a significant critical gap becomes evident. Writers such as Mathews and Talbot recognise Morris as the starting point of fantasy literature, but do not pursue the idea very far, though Mathews provides a thorough foundation in his chapter on Morris in *Fantasy: the Liberation of Imagination*. There is room for further development. Moreover, a more detailed analysis of the prose romances will provide a solid foundation for future critical investigations of fantasy literature to be

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[56] See chapter 2, 'Forging Fantasy Paradigms: Swords Tempered by Water' in *Fantasy: the Liberation of Imagination.*

[57] Norman Talbot, 'The First Modern 'Secondary World' Fantasy: Morris's Craftsmanship in The *Story of the Glittering Plain*', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 13.2 (1999): 3-11.

undertaken with more precisely postulated Morrisian connections. The thesis represents the next step in the critical work on Morris and fantasy literature.

Critical Review

Renewed critical interest in the prose romances was by no means limited to those who recognised the significance of Morris's work to the development of fantasy. Indeed, examinations of the romances as fantasy do not [yet] significantly contribute to the overall corpus of critical scholarship. Since the 1960s, the prose romances have been the subject of numerous studies on various aspects of the narrative content and context. The contemporary response to the prose romances, as I have examined in a previous section, focuses on the language and narrative style, with some discussion on the appearance of the editions, and some attempt at generic classification of the books. In modern scholarship, there is far less concern with perceptible style difficulties, suggesting a progressive acceptance of Morris's work. The critical review will demonstrate that, to date, analysis of the romances has been undertaken according to relatively conventional and established methods of literary analyses. Those works that have made a substantial contribution to areas addressed later in the thesis will be dealt with at that time.

Scholarship of any substance will be seen to relate to one of the following areas: socialism; myth and ritual; the role of women; and the Icelandic influence (the work on the prose romances as fantasy has already been addressed, above, in 'Re-Evaluation: The Prose Romances Recovered'). The following section examines a

representative sample of the main areas of research that have been undertaken. Articles appear in critical collections ranging from Victorian literature to fantasy literature, and in specific studies on William Morris. There are no book-length works specifically on the prose romances. The last romances feature as chapters or sections in many general studies of Morris, but they tend to be wide-ranging in nature with little sustained critical analysis. However, there are two notable exceptions: Amanda Hodgson's *The Romances of William Morris*, and Carole Silver's *The Romance of William Morris*. Further, despite the range of scholarly works on the prose romances, they represent a very small collection in terms of volume.

The prose romances have been studied in a contemporary context in light of Morris's other works and interests. This has resulted in several articles examining the socialist aspects of the romances. Two articles of note are Carole G. Silver's article 'Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris' in the collection of essays in *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, [58] and Barbara J. Bono's 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer.'[59] A number of scholars consider the mythic dimensions of the past, and Morris's interest in mythic and literary sources. Carole Silver offers a solid examination of the prose romances in one chapter of her

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[58] Carole G. Silver., 'Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris' in Florence S. Boos and Carole G. Silver, eds., *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1990, 117-26.
[59] Barbara J. Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', *Victorian Poetry* 13.3 and 4 (1975): 43-59.

book *The Romance of William Morris*.[60] Silver utilises myth and ritual theory to explore the romances, focussing on the role and nature of the hero. She offers biographical evidence of Morris's interest in the new interpretations of myth that were emerging in the second half on the nineteenth century.[61] She acknowledges Campbell's basic monomyth pattern in the prose romances but also acknowledges that Morris greatly enriched the basic conventions. Charlotte H. Oberg analyses the late prose romances through the structure of the quest that, she argues, is inextricably associated with the concept of initiation.[62] She utilises the work of Mircea Eliade, particularly *Birth and Rebirth* and *Myth and Reality* to place Morris's heroes in a ritual context. She analyses on the internal transformation of the hero and the symbolic nature of the hero's journey. Her study also includes the social and anthropological aspects of place Morris has constructed - the way in which his societies reflect various stages of human civilisation. Amanda Hodgson offers an explication of the prose romance protagonists in a section of her wider study of Morris - *The Romances of William Morris* (1987).[63] She uses psychological and anthropological approaches to introduce areas rich for further examination. She examines the inner-development of the hero of *The Wood Beyond the World*, particularly in respect of his relationships with women. She explores the Socialist influence in *The Well at the World's End*, examining Ralph's quest with a focus on the ideas of social organization that arise on his journey.

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[60] Chapter Seven, 'The World Beyond the World' in Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*.

[61] Silver notes that by the time he was writing the romances Morris was familiar with, in particular, Lewis H. Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) and Andrew Lang's *Custom and Myth* (1884). See *The Romance of William Morris*. 159.

[62] *A Pagan Prophet: William Morris.*, 119.

[63] *The Romances of William Morris*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 169*ff.*

Contextualising the romances in a mythic milieu, Charlotte Oberg presents 'Motif and Theme in the Late Prose Romances of William Morris'.[64] Other significant critiques include Norman Talbot's article 'William Morris and the Bear: Theme, Magic and Totem in the Romances.'[65] In "William Morris and the Bear: Theme, Magic and Totem in the Romances," Talbot examines the development of Morris's use of totemic motifs. One of the features is Morris's parsimonious use of names or titles that Talbot ties back to folktale conventions. Talbot also examines the particular influence of the Icelandic sagas on the construction of strong and fierce characters in the earlier romances (*The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*) and the way this evolved in the later romances.

Articles examining issues relating to the role and construction of women in the prose romances make up a large portion of the scholarship. Norman Talbot's 1969 article – 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris' – raises several points of interest to this thesis. Foremost, he notes that Morris's female figures are unique, strong individuals who stand in contrast to the women portrayed in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition (to which Morris was connected) and to traditional, popular female figures of the Victorian period.[66] He uses the exposition of Morris's complex female figures to counter some of the earlier criticisms of the prose romances as

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[64] Charlotte Oberg, 'Motif and Theme in the Late Prose Romances of William Morris' in Blue Calhoun *et al*, *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris.*, 33-52.

[65] Norman Talbot 'William Morris and the Bear: Theme, Magic and Totem in the Romances' in Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston, eds., *William Morris: Centenary Essays* (Papers from the Morris Conference organized by the William Morris Society at Exeter College Oxford 30 June-3 July 1996) Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1999: 94-106.

[66] Norman Talbot, 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris', *Southern Review* 3.4 (1969): 339-357 (346).

simple escapist or allegorical tales.[67] He engages a Jungian approach to investigating Morris's construction of women, with a focus on archetypes and the *anima*.

Talbot's later article, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance' (1991) revisits Morris's construction of the female with a specific focus on Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.[68] He examines Birdalone's actions in the context of traditional male heroic patterns of action. His two articles demonstrate that Morris did not conform to traditional expectations when he wrote his female characters. Talbot's work provides the foundation for further examination of Morris's female characters, particularly that of Birdalone. Florence Boos (1992) also examines gender-related issues in the last prose romances.[69] She addresses the Victorian political, social and feminist context of Morris's writings. Not only does she examine Morris's portrayal of women in the romances, she also examines the broader social and communal implications of his portrayals. She reads into Morris's romances the Marxist-feminist philosophies of Friedrich Engels, and presents a complex and insightful analysis.

The connection between the descriptions of place in the prose romances and Morris's own experiences of place in both England and Iceland were recognised very

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[67] Talbot, 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris', 339. His defensive stance is not uncommon in modern scholarship; there is a definite sense of a critical 'righting of wrongs' in terms of the reception of the texts.

[68] Talbot, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance' in Kath Filmer, ed., *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age.* London: Macmillan, 1991: 25-44.

[69] Florence Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, New Series, 1 (1992): 12-22.

early by May Morris (1910-1915).[70] In greater analytical detail, Jane S. Cooper has traced the influence of Iceland on the romances in her article on 'The Iceland Journeys and the Late Romances.'[71] Cooper attempts to directly correlate descriptions recorded by Morris in his journals to descriptions of landscape in the prose romances. Phillippa Bennett demonstrates the way in which Morris's description of landscape in *The Well at the World's End* incorporates versions of the sublime.[72] Burke's and Ruskin's interpretations of the sublime are presented as ways of interpreting Morris's landscapes. Further work on the influence of Iceland on Morris (and the subsequent influence of his *Icelandic Journals* on Tolkien) has been undertaken by Marjorie J. Burns in her article 'Echoes of William Morris's Icelandic Journals in J. R. R. Tolkien.'[73]

Critical Issues

The marginalisation of the prose romances can be recognised as a microcosm of the status of fantasy as a literary genre. 'Realism' was not simply a new genre or mode of writing; 'realism' became an evaluative principle in nineteenth-century criticism, and became the dominant paradigm. Fantasy, aligned with 'romance' (as the devalued other to realism in the nineteenth century), was consigned to a marginal

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[70] May Morris refers to *The Well at the World's End* in particular when writing of her father's use of place. *The Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris*, volume 2. New York: Oriole Editions, 1973, 513*ff.*

[71] Jane S. Cooper, 'The Iceland Journeys and the Late Romances*', Journal of the William Morris Society* 5.4 (1983-84): 40-59.

[72] See Phillippa Bennett, 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', *Journal of William Morris Studies* 16.2 and 3 (2005): 31-48.

[73] 'Echoes of William Morris's Icelandic Journals in J. R. R. Tolkien,'*Studies in Medievalism* 3 (1991): 367-73.

position, alongside children's stories. Like the prose romances, fantasy literature has struggled to attain value and meaning as a literary genre.[74] J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books are said to have made fantasy 'respectable' and to have triggered a significant increase in the publication of books in this category (they foreshadowed the creation of the new publishing category of 'fantasy' in the 1960s).[75] Yet large-selling fantasy books ('genre fantasy') have created a pejorative view of the genre as a whole. Brian Attebery refers to them as 'fantasy-as-formula, which is essentially a commercial product, with particular authors or publishers' lines serving as brand names for the consumer.'[76] And, of course, a publishing category does not reflect a rigorous academic analysis of genre. Nevertheless, such widely-read texts can serve an important critical function, as Attebery himself acknowledges, by acting as a generic 'centre' from which a 'fuzzy set' may be created.[77]

In this section, I will outline the framework for reading the prose romances within the critical discourse of fantasy, with some reference to the historical development

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[74] See Wolfe, 'Symbolic Fantasy', 194-95.

[75] See Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy*, 1. One of the most influential publishing endeavours was the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, which was started in 1969 and ran until 1974. The series concentrated on re-issuing books that were out-of-print or otherwise difficult to find. It published well over 60 books, including *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, Lord Dunsany (1969); *The Wood Beyond the World*, William Morris (1969); *Lud-in-the-Mist*, Hope Mirrlees (1970); *Phantastes*, George Macdonald (1970); *The Island of the Mighty*, Evangeline Walton (1970); *The Broken Sword*, Poul Anderson (1971); *Red Moon and Black Mountain*, Joy Chant (1971); *The Sundering Flood*, William Morris (1973). The Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy Library had a similar agenda to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series, publishing forgotten or out-of-print works of fantasy between 1973 and 1980.

[76] Brain Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, 2.

[77] See Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 12-13. I will be returning to Attebery's work later.

of fantasy criticism as it relates to the concerns of this thesis.[78] Critical, academic study of fantasy is still relatively new, emerging in the 1970s in the wake of the popular reception of *The Lord of the Rings*. The literary fantasy genre is so new, in critical terms, that definition of its internal and external boundaries is still in process. Although genre definition is not of primary interest to this thesis, it is nevertheless important to establish the critical location of the thesis in terms of the genre issue surrounding fantasy literature. There is broad and lively discourse on the generic definitions of fantasy, and many critics have ably addressed the subject.[79] I will proceed with a survey of the key developments and issues in the area of fantasy criticism, as they pertain to this thesis.

Before going further, I would like to clarify the use of certain terminology critical analysis of fantasy, referring to a common confusion between the terms 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic'. Some of the most important critical texts on 'fantasy' literature are studies of the 'fantastic', and the two terms are often used interchangeably. But

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[78] I am indebted to the work of Kim Selling in providing a thorough and detailed concatenation of material relating to the critical development of the fantasy genre in her unpublished PhD thesis *Nature, Reason and the Legacy of Romanticism: Constructing Genre Fantasy*. University of Sydney, 2005.

[79] The following texts (listed here fro convenience with full bibliographical detail)represent some of the important critical works on the fantasy genre: Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992; Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990; Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*. New York and London: Methuen, 1984; W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1976; C. N. Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*. London: Macmillan Press, 1983; Eric S. Rabin, *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976; Ann Swinfen, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1984; David Sandner has compiled extracts from a large sample of fantasy genre scholarship in David Sandner, ed., *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2004.

studies of the 'fantastic' in literature are often, in fact, quite distinct from studies of fantasy as a genre. Nevertheless, it is 'the fantastic' that operates in the bulk of fantasy criticism, primarily with reference to Todorov (see below).

The study of fantasy as a literary phenomenon might be said to have begun with the structuralists. Structuralist approaches to fantasy dominate much of the critical studies, particularly in the 1970s and 80s. The work of Tzvetan Todorov and mythographer Vladimir Propp in particular have had lasting influence on the shape of scholarship in this area. Tzvetan Todorov's book, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre,* first published in 1970 as *Introduction á La Littérature Fantastique,* undoubtedly provided the first serious scholarly work on the generic study of fantasy, and it has remained highly influential.[80] The book was translated into English in 1973, and is perhaps one of the most cited works in the area of fantasy criticism.[81] *The Fantastic* is a rigorous examination of the 'fantastic' as an abstract theory (rather than in relation to a historical genre). The basis of Todorov's approach is formed by the interaction between the narrative and the reader. The fantastic, he explains, is that 'hesitation experienced by a person who

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[80] Tzvetan Todorv, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, New York: Cornell Paperbacks, Cornell University Press, 1975.

[81] For instance, Cornwell sets out a linear model of fantasy based on the milestone work of Todorov, and stresses the need for cross-generic models (38-40). Both Swinfen (*In Defence of Fantasy*) and Manlove ('On the Nature of Fantasy' in Roger C. Schlobin, ed., *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press and Harvester Press, 1982) appropriate Todorov's term 'the marvellous' as part of their process of defining fantasy. Swinfen states that 'the essential ingredient of all fantasy is "the marvellous"', regarded as 'anything outside the normal space-time continuum of the everyday world' (5); Manlove also refers to Todorov's work, stating that most 'would place "fantasy" where Todorov puts his genre of "the marvellous"' (28).

knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.'[82] This hesitation has its roots in the sublime moment of awe, described as part of the fantastic tradition criticism from as early as the eighteenth century.[83] But Todorov's 'fantastic' does not relate closely to the fantasy genre, and this restrictive approach is his primary shortcoming.[84]

Vladimir Propp's approach, in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (first published 1928), challenged the common genre classification by theme and content, proposing instead a formula based on analyzing the narrative structure of texts with a focus on the *functions* of characters.[85] He aimed at a scientific, formulaic representation of the fixed patterns, or 'functions' in folktales. Although Propp's analysis considers only folktales as a specific type of text, his approach can be more widely applied to include fantasy. Propp proposes that the functions of the *dramatis personae* of a tale are basic components of a tale, and must be defined and extracted. He states:

> Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.[86]

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[82] Todorov, 25.

[83] This concept of the sublime in is explored in early essays on fairy tales and the supernatural by Joseph Addison (1712), Anna Laetitia Aiken (later Barbauld) (1773), Ann Radcliffe (1826), through to later works such as Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories' (1947). All of these works are available in David Sandner's *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader,* barring Tolkien, who I will be discussing in more detail below.

[84] See, for example, Nancy H. Traill, who identifies the limitations of Todorov's work but uses it as the foundation of or her own expanded theory of the fantastic. *Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction.* Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1996, 5.

[85] See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale.* Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin and London: University of TX Press, 1975, 20*ff.*

[86] Propp, 21.

Propp's structure reinforces the importance of archetypal characters to the advancement of story, and avoids the arbitrary generalisations of motifs or themes produced by earlier structuralists. The pertinence of Propp's model to the study of fantasy rests on fantasy's essential structure that relies on common story-patterns and archetypal, role-bound characters.[87] Propp's model has been usefully adopted in modern fantasy theory by Brian Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy*. However, there are significant shortcomings to such formalist and structuralist approaches, which have had a detrimental impact on the critical study of fantasy. The wider state of critical literary theory is no doubt in part responsible. Literary criticism has been, until relatively recently, dominated by the New Criticism, which privileged 'realism' over other forms of literature. Fantasy became the de-valued 'other' to the dominant canon of modernist texts; it has been seen as a puerile and escapist with little more to offer than basic entertainment. The earliest critical studies of fantasy were presented as defences; [88] in 1984 Ann Swinfen felt compelled to title her critical study *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945*,[89] playing on the genre's marginalised position. The polarity between 'realism' and fantasy' is a reflection of another prominent discourse, relating to the polemic of Nature *vs.* Reason, which structured much of Western philosophy. Fantasy, as the 'other' to the literary canon, is also associated with

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[87] See Selling, *Nature, Reason and the Legacy of Romanticism*, 63.

[88] See Selling, *Nature, Reason and the Legacy of Romanticism* 37. Selling notes that very little was published in terms of critical studies of fantasy. She highlights John Ruskin's "Fairy Stories" (1868), published as a preface to a collection by the Brothers Grimm; George MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893); G. K. Chesterton's "Fairy Tales" (1908); and H. P. Lovecraft's "Introduction" to *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927).

[89] Swinfen, 1984.

Nature and its attendant association with the anti-modern, the un-real, the primitive (set against, respectively, the modern, the real and the civilised), and even in a gendered dichotomy as the subjugated feminine to the dominant masculine.[90]

Fortunately, critical shifts have opened the way to the recovery of fantasy as a legitimate and valuable genre. The recognition of fantasy as a significant creative expression of Romantic ideology, and as a field of artistic, critical, social and historical meaning, is growing. Most of the earliest examples of critical studies of fantasy express the Romantic functions of fantasy. G. K. Chesterton's study, 'Fairy Tales' (1908), stands as one of the earliest defences of fantasy. It adopts the stance that the modern world-view, with its reliance on reason and science, diminishes the value of fairy-tales/fantasy. Rather than being simple and escapist, fairy-tales offer morality, both in the sense of their innocence and in the sense that they are didactic/moralising.[91] Other early examples that take a Romantic defence of fantasy include George MacDonald's 'The Fantastic Imagination' (1890) and John Ruskin's 'Fairy Stories' (1868).[92]

Perhaps the most famous – and certainly influential – defence of fantasy is J. R. R. Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories'. The essay was first published in 1947, but it was originally composed as a lecture and delivered in 1938.[93] It now stands as a

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[90] This is the central premise of Selling's thesis.
[91] G. K. Chesterton, 'Fairy Tales' in Sandner, *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*. 70.
[92] Both essays can be found in Sandner's *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*.
[93] See the Introductory Note to J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*. 1964.

foundational contribution to fantasy criticism, and it constitutes the earliest academic formulation of an approach to fantasy. It deals with the nature, purpose and origin of fairy-stories. Tolkien's term 'fairy stories' is compatible, and interchangeable, with 'fantasy'.[94] Tolkien's essay seeks to rescue fantasy from the margins of 'unreason': his essay demonstrates his belief that fantasy 'does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt appetite for, nor [sic] obscure the perception of, scientific verity.'[95] He further defends fantasy from the charge of 'mere' escapism, particularly in reference to fantasy's archaism, arguing that escapism is an important function of fairy-stories. Escape is not about simply ignoring 'real life'; it is about getting away from the 'noise, stench, ruthlessness, and extravagance of the internal-combustion engine', from the mass-production of the 'Robot Age', and even from 'hunger, thirst, pain, sorrow, injustice, death.'[96] And after Escape, fantasy can bring Consolation through *eucatastrophe*, the 'good catastrophe', or the 'sudden joyous turn' at the close of the tale: 'it can give to child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart.'[97] Tolkien moves on the consider *eucatastrophe* in Christian terms, which, for some critics, has devalued his contribution. Rosemary Jackson, for example, considers that fantasy stories of the kind described by Tolkien function as 'conservative vehicles for social and instinctual repression.'[98] Tolkien also offers an evaluation of formalist approaches to genre (such as those undertaken by folklorists

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[94] Swinfen, 5.
[95] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' in *Tree and Leaf*, 50.
[96] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 54-58.
[97] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 60.
[98] See *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London and New York: Methuen, 1981, 153-55

or anthropologists), in which he argues that such studies are the pursuit of people 'using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to did evidence.' He does not discount the legitimacy of such endeavours; indeed, he recognises the 'fascination of the desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales.' However, he does highlight the potential for misleading or incorrect conclusions to be drawn, and then fed into the discourse of literature (as has happened).[99] The basis of his position rests on his identification of the three factors that can be used to identify the 'origins' of a story, which I referenced in the first paragraph of this thesis. The three factors are invention (independent evolution), inheritance and diffusion. All three, Tolkien writes, have played their part 'in producing the intricate web of story,' but invention is key. So, while it is possible to say that *Beowulf* 'is only a version of *Dat Erdmänneken*', such an observation precludes the appreciation of the specific colouring, atmosphere and 'unclassifiable individual details of a story.'[100] These early essays of Tolkien, Chesterton and MacDonald, have undoubtedly invigorated the study of fantasy, and revealed fresh avenues for further critical examination of the genre.

Bruce L. Edwards, observing that new critical tools and criteria have emerged in the last couple of decades which have moved beyond the established formalism of the New Criticism, and related approached, offers a suggestion for a new way forward

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[99] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 22-23.
[100] See Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 22-23.

that moves away from the more rigid genre constructions dictated by these approaches. In his article 'Toward a Rhetoric a Nineteenth-Century Fantasy Criticism' (1991), Edwards examines the benefits of C. S. Lewis's critical approach to George MacDonald and William Morris.[101] Lewis's critical stance is based on the tradition developed by G. K. Chesterton in his 1908 'ethics of elfland' critique.[102] Lewis's approach discards the contemporary critical position that the reader forms the text they are reading in favour of an *in situ* critical approach, arguing that the value of a literary work should not be determined by current critical dogma, whatever that might be. Critical 'schools', he felt, were ultimately exclusionary, and so he endorsed an eclectic approach to texts that acknowledged that certain critical frameworks could be utilised, as long as their modes and motives were continually checked and revised.[103] Edwards ultimately argues that searching for a single approach to fantasy texts (indeed, any texts) is misguided, but that diverse and even seemingly contradictory approaches will make texts more accessible, and yield a rich reading experience.

Edwards's approach is not unlike the position Brian Attebery takes in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992).[104] Like Edwards, Attebery proposes a particular way of reading and approaching fantasy texts, but he examines more closely the various developments

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[101] Bruce L. Edwards Jr, 'Towards a Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Fantasy Criticism' in Filmer, ed., *The Victorian Fantasists,* 69-81.
[102] See 'The Ethics of Elfland' in G. K. Chesterton, *A Selection From His Non-Fictional Prose*. Selected by W. H. Auden. London: Faber and Faber, 1970, 174-90. (Originally published in 1908 in *Orthodoxy*)
[103] Edwards Jr., 78.
[104] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*.

of theories of fantasy. He does not hesitate to draw on many disparate approaches to texts: structuralism, semiotics, reader-response theory, feminism, and Bakhtinian dialogism.[105] One of the most important contributions Attebery makes is the provision of a clear analysis of the discursive nature of fantasy as mode, and of the necessary relationship between fantasy and mimesis. By doing so, he attempts to separate fantasy from the evaluative dualism of traditional literary criticism, in which realistic/mimetic literature is separate from and better than non-realistic literature. Attebery's main contribution, I would argue, is his 'fuzzy set' theory, which proposes that the fantasy genre should be defined 'not by a boundary but by a centre.' That is, a single example may serve as the 'central' text, around which all other texts can be placed depending on the type of relationship they hold to that text.[106] Attebery argues that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is the most apposite text to define the 'centre':

> Tolkien is most typical, not just because of the imaginative scope and commitment with which he invested his tale but also, and chiefly, because of the immense popularity that resulted. When *The Lord of the Rings* appeared, we had a core around which to group a number of storytellers who had hitherto been simply, as Northrop Frye suggests, "other writers" belonging to no identified category or tradition.[107]

Attebery's model allows that not all fantasy texts have to have all features that define fantasy. He nominates his three fundamental features that he believes are quintessential to fantasy, and these may be debated, but his 'fuzzy set' model works

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[105] Attebery, introduction, xii.
[106] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 12.
[107] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 14.

regardless.[108] He asserts that the task of literary theory is to 'provide framework capable of accounting for the story's success on its own terms.'[109]

The thesis endorses the approaches suggested by Attebery and Edwards, and will, accordingly, utilise multifarious critical methodologies to investigate the texts under consideration. The various methodologies will offer tools and language for analysis, rather than a rigid structure of theory. The thesis will further draw on the cultural and social context of the romances as a key to their re-valuation, with reference to such movements and traditions as the Gothic Revival, medievalism, and the pastoral tradition.

The Way Forward

Pastoral discourse, and its attendant rhetoric, will form the framework of critical methodology in this thesis.[110] Specifically, the thesis is interested in the oppositional role of pastoral, and in the development of an alternative vision – not of opposition but of integration. As I will demonstrate, pastoral discourse will expose to view the

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[108] Eric S. Rabkin also finds it useful to appropriate a logician's model to illustrate the many cross-'generic' elements of texts we might loosely label 'fantasy'. Rabkin refers to a 'super-genre' that incorporates satire, science fiction and utopia. He argues that by 'capitalising on the idea that science fiction, utopian fiction, and satire may all be fantastic in similar ways, all parts of a single super-genre, we see how a consideration of the way works use the fantastic can produce new analytical insights that complement the products of normal genre criticism. *The Fantastic in Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976, 147-50.

[109] Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, 14.

[110] Many works have more than adequately addressed the nature of the pastoral, and it is not necessary here to re-address the issues. Paul Alpers' article 'What is Pastoral?' is excellent (*Critical Inquiry* 8.3 (1982): 437-60). See also Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*. The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge: 1999; Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984; Helen Cooper, *Pastoral: Medieval into Renaissance*. Ipswich: D. S. Brewer, 1977; William Empson, *Some Versions of the Pastoral*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1935; and Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral*. London: Methuen, 1971.

complex nature of the romance settings, and bring together a number of areas of existing scholarship that I have already addressed in this chapter. From a platform of pastoral discourse and its attendant rhetoric, chapter 2 will investigate the construction of place in the prose romances. This investigation will establish a critical foundation for the rest of the thesis by indicating the essential connection between the construction of place and the way in which the hero operates as part of the invented world. It will further shed light on Morris's narrative strategies and purposes in these last novels, and suggest their critical re-valuation of them. Chapter 3 will investigate the construction of the male hero within the invented world, with a particular focus on the special agency of the female characters. Chapter 4 will then examine the construction of Birdalone as Morris's unique female hero through a feminist revisioning of the male hero-myth, reading her narrative with reference to the established discourses of the pastoral.

Critical scholarship of the prose romances suggests that the generic position of the romances as fantasy relies on two things: first, their setting in a pre-technological invented world; and second, their underlying ideological concerns that form a dialectic with dominant social and cultural principles. At its heart, fantasy literature expresses a critique of dominant, Western, industrialised culture, and it does this primarily through an evocation of the past.[111] The anti-technological propensity of fantasy developed as a reaction against the growth of industrial technology, which

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[111] For further exploration of this area, see Selling, *Nature, Reason and the Legacy of Romanticism*, especially chapter six, 'Romantic Anti-modernism' and chapter eight, 'Green Dreams: Fantasy and Environmentalism.'

reduced the importance of individual skills.[112] Fantasy thus has an inherently important social role 'to confront readers with inescapable, perhaps unpalatable, truths about the human condition – cultural, social, psychological and spiritual.'[113] The lexis of pastoral oppositional discourse brings these two elements together. The invented setting functions loosely as the pastoral idyll, as the escape from the harsh Victorian reality as Morris saw it. The prose romances exhibit an inherent challenge to the dominant and accepted values of late-nineteenth-century Britain in their fundamentally Romantic tendency to valorise the past. Within the narratives, the prose romances explore similar tensions between the natural world and society.

The pastoral, though historically a specific literary form, gained new currency through the Romantic and Victorian poets, who expanded its conventional structure (the idyll and eclogue) to incorporate an examination of broader themes. The central concern of the pastoral remained: the threat posed to the natural world by civilisation.[114] It relies on a stated or implied binary opposition between Nature and Culture, positioning Nature as better than, or preferable to, Culture. These central attitudes of the pastoral retain relevance even today. Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* offers contemporary context and vocabulary for analysing non-traditional forms of pastoral, which will be utilised during the course of this thesis.[115] The pastoral

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[112] John Strugnell, 'Hammering the Demons: Sword, Sorcery and Contemporary Society' in Kath Filmer, ed., *Twentieth-Century Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in Twentieth-Century Mythopoeic Literature*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1992, 177.
[113] Filmer, 'Introduction' in *The Victorian Fantasists*, 2-3.
[114] Blue Calhoun, *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris: The Earthly Paradise*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975, 5.
[115] *Pastoral.* The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge: 1999.

alludes to patterns of contrast and transformation[116] which, I would argue, can be readily transferred into a wider critical discourse of fantasy genre criticism that recognises the Romantic, anti-modernist heritage of the genre, and also its more modern ecological perspective. As such, the pastoral will be considered in terms of its themes and attitudes, rather than its strict traditional conventions. In this, I am deferring to the critical position of Harold Toliver who, amongst other critics, recognises the application of the pastoral to a broad literary genres.[117]

It is apposite to include Victorian medievalism and romanticism in a discussion of the pastoral *apropos* of Morris.[118] Both movements are intimately related to pastoralism in their desire to find an alternative to [modern] civilisation. Medievalism looked to the Middle Ages as a period that represented a Golden Age, offering solutions and alternatives to such problems as industrialisation, overpopulation, social discontent, and lack of beauty in the world. Medievalism was essentially a revolt against the 'excessively rational, ordered, mechanistic tone of eighteenth-century thought and culture.'[119]

Perhaps the most significant shift in modern pastoralism is the development of a contemporary ideology that incorporates an environmental aesthetic. It moves beyond the idealised polarity of Nature/Culture to achieve a more integrated vision

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[116] Harold E. Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971, 3-8.

[117] See Toliver, preface, vii.

[118] These ideas will be introduced here, and will be more dully developed in the following chapter.

[119] See David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change*. London: John Murray, 1997, 178.

of the natural world that includes the human.[120] This 'ecocentric repossession of pastoral' has resulted in a shift in focus, from 'nature as a theatre for human events' to 'representation in the sense of advocacy of nature as a presence for its own sake.'[121] The concept can offer fresh meaning to Morris's romances, I would argue. Two of the prose romances (*The Wood beyond the World* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*) close with the hero's quest culminating in a communal, rather than individual, gain, which symbolises a new type of union between nature and society, as this thesis will demonstrate. Fantasy literature in general reflects a strong ecological element,[122] and its modern roots can be linked to the seeds of the Green environmental movement of the 1960s,[123] and preceding that to its strong relationship to the pastoral and Romantic Medievalism. The themes that connect these traditions include the emphasis on the centrality of Nature, often in opposition to Culture, using the past as a guide for the future, and a rejection of modern technology and materialism in favour of simple technologies and crafts. Further, Romantic Medievalism and the movements and ideals it fostered also argued a spiritual level of eco-preservation. Morris has been placed in the same eco-literary context as Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Ring* books were – and continue to be –

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[120] See Gifford's chapter on 'Post-Pastoral' in *Pastoral.*

[121] Gifford cites Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995) in *Pastoral.* 148.

[122] See Don D. Elgin, *The Comedy of the Fantastic: Ecological Perspectives on the Fantasy Novel.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985.

[123] This period coincides with the rise in popularity of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which was adopted by adherents of the Green movement as a vibrant, critical response to contemporary environmental concerns. See Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 107-11. Veldman notes that Tolkien's work provided 'a vocabulary of moral protest.'

extraordinarily influential on the modern Green cause.[124] Veldman draws a close relationship between the work of the two authors in relation to their rejection of the industrial world and their quest for community.[125] Morris's ecological philosophies, though ostensibly anachronistic in the modern sense, were a direct response to the rapid changes continued industrialisation was bringing to England. He campaigned for the saving of woods, moors, country footpaths and commons from development and destruction. Morris expressed some of his concerns in 'The Beauty of Life', a speech he delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design:

> Again, I must ask what do you do with the trees on a site that is going to be built over? do you try to save them, to adapt your houses at all to them? do you understand what treasures they are in a town or a suburb? or what a relief they will be to the hideous dog-holes which (forgive me!) you are probably going to build in their places?[126]

Morris's veneration of the natural landscape does not preclude modern development; he asks only that buildings be constructed in harmony with their environment rather than at the cost of its total destruction.[127] His attitude of balance

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[124] For some examples of Morris's influence on the ecology movement, and related fields, see Patricia D. Nixon, 'John Ruskin and William Morris: Prophets of the Modern Ecology Movement', *Victorians Institute Journal* 3 (1974): 37-43, Bradley J. Macdonald, 'William Morris and the Vision of Ecosocialism', *Contemporary Justice Review* 7, number 3 (2004): 287-304, and David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 213*ff.*

[125] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain,* 52-53.

[126] 'The Beauty of Life', a speech delivered before the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design, 19 February 1880. Reproduced in *On Art and Socialism*, London: J. Lehmann, 1947, 75.

[127] Morris's particular concern for the preservation of trees within the natural landscape is exemplified in one of Morris's own projects, and shows that he practised those things that he preached. Red House was Morris's dream house, which he had built and decorated to his specifications. He found the perfect site for it in Abbey Wood – which was then a rural area close to London, and is now one of the south-eastern suburbs of the city – on a property that featured orchards of apple trees and cherry trees. Morris was especially delighted at being able to build his house with hardly any destruction of the trees on the site; the house 'seems to have grown there, like the trees in the apple-orchard in which it was built.' Gillian Naylor, introduction to *William Morris by Himself*. Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 2000, 11.

and integration between the human and the natural worlds emerges as one of the concerns of the prose romances, each of which close with an affirmation of the potential for harmony between the traditionally opposed worlds.

Chapter 2

Inventing Place

The distinctive element of all of Morris's late prose romances is the invented world in which they are set. The titles of the romances bear witness to the central motif of landscape: the plain, the wood, the water and isles, the flood, and even the remote well 'at the world's end.' They are not set in any particular chronotope, though they can be recognised now as examples of 'neo-medieval' or 'medievalising' fantasy.[128] The natural romance landscapes are vast, sparsely populated topographies of hills, dales, forests, rivers and pastures, featuring both idyllic retreats and spaces of liminal and sacral wilderness. Within these landscapes lie small communities and occasionally large towns, which are pre-industrial, sometimes small-scale mercantile. The towns usually feature medieval churches and castles. Morris's romance landscapes are both completely imaginary and realistic at the same time, because, I would argue, there are two points of reference for his 'landscape of the mind': one, his experience of real landscapes, particularly those of England and Iceland; and two, his Romantic imagination and desire to re-birth the romantic landscapes of medieval literature. I argue that setting is the structural foundation from which narrative procedures stem. It is the setting that enables the story to happen.

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[128] George Clark and Daniel Timmons eds., *J. R. R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000, 160.

Setting and Place

The construction of place in literature is typically part of the conventional three-fold critical approach to narrative: *setting* (place), *character* and *plot*. The term *setting* is used primarily to distinguish the narrative element from *character* and *plot,* and it is generally understood to mean the time and place of the action of a literary work. However, the term *setting* is somewhat limiting for the purposes of this thesis. *Setting* implies an engagement with the physical elements of the plot's location, but does not necessarily allow an examination of what they mean *apropos* of the plot. This investigation of the prose romances will be examining a number of narrative elements that are related to the traditional concept of setting, but that encompass a much wider range of elements than I consider to be represented by the term *setting*. In order to establish a distinction between the typical approaches to setting, as outlined above, and the approach this chapter will take, I have elected to use the term *place*. Guided by the approach of Leonard Lutwack, I aim to broaden the concept of *setting* by moving away from the conventional approach to narrative.[129] By choosing to adopt such an extensive approach I am following a relatively new critical trend in narrative studies that has emerged over the last couple of decades. New literary elements have emerged as foci of critical interest as a result; as well as reworking perspectives on location, concepts of *space* and *time* are

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[129] As Lutwack has argued, the traditional centres of meaning - plot, character, theme and style, are no longer appropriate. These centres of meaning have receded or altered, and new literary scholarship has uncovered elements that have not to date been critically prominent or that have emerged in newly important ways. Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press: 1984, 1.

particular aspects that have developed as a relatively new and important issues in narrative studies.[130]

Leonard Lutwack's study, *The Role of Place in Literature*, has emerged as a key critical text for my reading of the prose romances. Lutwack argues that the term *setting* is not adequate to encompass locations unrelated to the action or to convey the less tangible aspects of place within a text, such as the conveyance of a sense of space or symbolic place. He argues that related terms such as *scene*, *landscape*, and *geography* are also restrictive in their denotations. *Scene* is commonly associated with a dramatic context as in a stage setting; *landscape* confers the expectation that the literary scene will correspond to the notion of a painterly landscape, conforming to an aesthetic norm, and is may be better utilised in travel literature; and *geography* begs a verisimilitude that is not always present or relevant to a fictional narrative.[131]

Place, on the other hand, can function as an actual or metaphoric construct in narrative, embracing such factors as the physical properties of sites, symbolism of place, and time.[132] Lutwack proposes that *place* offers a far more critically useful term in modern narrative studies. By appropriating and adapting Lutwack's broad concept of *place* I am able to take a heterogeneous approach to the prose romances.

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[130] Some relatively recent works include: Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977; Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983; Richard Lock, *Aspects of Time in Medieval Literature*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985.
[131] Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*, 28-29.
[132] See Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature*, 54-59.

This will allow me to draw together a number of existing areas of criticism, at the same time as offering a fresh way to read the prose romances.

Place also has a function within the study of cultural landscape that is relevant to this chapter. The concept of place connects structure in landscape to human behaviour: 'A place is a setting that, because it contains a distinctive range of social interactions, may be thought of as inviting or inducing the continuation of those actions.'[133] Jakle argues strongly that place is more than location, a spatial context, and pinpoints a number of other areas that are integral to *place*, such as the type of people that occupy that space and the activities performed there.[134] A similar stance is demonstrated by Nedra Reyolds, who writes 'places, whether textual, material, or imaginary, are constructed and reproduced not simply by boundaries but also by practices, structures of feeling, and sedimented features of *habitus*'.[135]

The landscapes of the romances serve the purpose of interrogating the values of the 'real' world, through their tangential association with the history and myths of an earlier time. The landscapes function a symbolic archetypes; in Lutwack's terms, *plac*e has both a literal and symbolic value, a role that meets both geographical and metaphorical ends.[136] The role of landscape in fantasy as articulated in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* highlights the importance of symbolism: 'Landscapes almost

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[133] See John A. Jakle, *The Visual Elements in Landscape*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987, 4.

[134] Jakle, *The Visual Elements in Landscape*, 4-5.

[135] Nedra Reynolds*, Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004, 2.

[136] Lutwack, 31.

invariably convey a sense . . . that every nook and cranny, every chasm and crag, every desert and fertile valley is potentially *meaningful* (italics in original).[137]

Romantic Pastoral

The examination of Morris's construction of place will utilise pastoral discourse and its attendant rhetoric. In the pastoral genre, place is the fundamental concern. The central feature of pastoral literature is the presentation or exploration of the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban.[138] The oppositional role of the country, and other dichotomies related to the construction of place, is one of the main themes in the prose romances. Morris explores themes connected to the town against country and explores various political and social themes along associated lines. In every case, the nature of place is central to the wider social constructs of the narrative.

Pastoral discourse will facilitate the identification of some of the conventions Morris used in his construction of place, and provide a useful vocabulary for investigation. Pastoral discourse will also form the point of departure for the investigation of further themes, in particular, the juxtaposition of 'society' and 'nature' and related tensive structures.[139] Gifford has argued that pastoral authors 'are inescapably of

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[137] See the entry for 'Landscape' in John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. London: Orbit, 1997.

[138] Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2.

[139] Toliver offers a list of characteristics he ascribes to the opposition of nature and society, such as freedom/constriction, innocence/experience, plainness and honesty/marked artificiality. *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes, 3.*

their own culture and its preoccupations;'[140] and I would argue that the construction of place in the romances undoubtedly reflects Morris's imaginative dialectic with contemporary Victorian society. Thus, it will be apposite to make reference to Morris's own aesthetic, social and political views, as well as to the wider conditions of late Victorian England, in this investigation of place.

The particular tendency to privilege nature in later pastoral literature emerged through the Romantic aesthetic;[141] it may then be more appropriate to speak of the 'Romantic pastoral' of Morris's prose romances. The Romantic pastoral ideal is informed by a creative vision that valorises and re-imagines the medieval past, evoking the 'simplicity and innocence' of a Golden Age,[142] and emphasising man living in harmony with the natural environment. The romances, like modern fantasy, look back to an age untainted by the demands and incursions of modern existence. This is the 'anti-historical Romanticism' that Frye describes, one that recreates the earlier ages of history in a specifically Romantic form as symbols of the age's social ideals, rather than of the social reality.[143] The vision of the Middle Ages, constructed as the answer to contemporary dis-ease, is sometimes criticised for its lack of historical accuracy, for its sanitised wholesomeness. But it is not the 'real' Middle Ages that Victorian authors such as Morris had in mind when they created their fictions, but one that operates as a convenient symbol or representation of the

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[140] *Pastoral*, 82.
[141] See Paul Alpers, 'What is Pastoral?', 449.
[142] Alpers quotes René Rapin's essay on pastoral (1659): 'Pastorals were the invention of the simplicity and innocence of [the] Golden Age'. See 'What is Pastoral?', 443.
[143] Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*. New York: Random House, 1968, 36-37.

ideal. The medieval was re-visioned as a place that was free of the encroachments of technology and industry.[144] Morris was not alone in depicting such worlds. From such writers as Sir Walter Scott came the return, in fiction, 'to a more beautiful and ordered world' than that of industrial England, in which the medieval functioned to represent a more certain and stable place.[145] Morris's turn to the past in this manner is a reinforcement and expression of his own statement that 'apart from my desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.'[146]

Morris's Romantic Medievalism was not just a passive yearning for the past, but an active ideology that sought to better the future.[147] The pre-industrial worlds of the romances functions as Morris's Romantic expression against the Victorian age, as well as his concern for the cultural and ecological inheritance of England, and his longing for a more just and beautiful society.[148] Concepts of nature, history and community were re-shaped by the Romantic tradition, based on the concept of an organic universe, and are important aspects of Morris's construction of place.[149] This chapter will demonstrate that a thorough understanding of setting (*place*) in the prose romances is not only critical to an understanding of the significance of the

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[144] See Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, 7-9.

[145] Senior, 'Medieval Literature and Modern Fantasy: Toward a Common Metaphysic', 32.

[146] Quoted from Morris's 'How I Became a Socialist' in Blue Calhoun, *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris*, 1.

[147] See Timothy Evans, 'Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism', *Western Folklore* 47, No. 4 (1988): 248*ff.*

[148] Norman Talbot, 'Introduction', *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, 7.

[149] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 12.

prose romances as a whole, but is the necessary starting-point for an understanding of the other elements of the story.

This chapter will focus its discussion on specific themes and episodes within the five prose romances.[150] To provide meaningful analysis of place in even a single romance would be a large task; the romances are highly episodic, and almost every episode is enacted within a place charged with symbol and meaning. These settings are integral to the events themselves, 'a kind of spiritual landscape in which even the least element might carry a moral meaning.'[151] Instead, this chapter will investigate the key or common elements of place (with reference to variations on them) in the romances. These elements will be considered in relation to the two point of reference pinpointed in the first paragraph of this chapter. First, the influence of the real landscapes of Iceland and England will be investigated. Real landscapes provided an appeal beyond that of superficial aesthetics; for Morris, they represented a tangible reflection of the past, its people and societies, and formed an important part of Morris's Romantic medievalism. The investigation will then address the construction of place using the pastoral dichotomy of Nature and the City as a point of departure.

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[150] Note that particular analysis of the construction of place in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* will be offered in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

[151] Wolfe, 'Symbolic Fantasy', 201.

The Icelandic Sublime

The sublime geography of Iceland is one of the recognised influences of real landscape on Morris's construction of place in the romances.[152] For Morris the myth, history and culture of Iceland was endemic to its geography, and the landscapes in the romances that echo his Icelandic experience carry with them these symbolic associations. Romantic medievalists sought to restore the values of past societies, which they believed had been lost in the process of industrialisation,[153] and for Morris the geography of a land was powerfully symbolic of its people, and nowhere more so than in Iceland. Morris travelled to Iceland twice – in 1871 and 1873 – and published his experiences in *Icelandic Journals*.[154] Phillippa Bennett has examined Morris's *Icelandic Journals* in the context of nineteenth century travel writing, framing Morris's Icelandic experiences within the broader desire of nineteenth-century travellers to 'inhabit and marginal and marvellous space.'[155] Bennett stresses that it was the mythical and literary connections that made Iceland so appealing: its topography provided an 'unmistakeable authenticity of background' to the sagas that Morris loved.[156] Inextricably linked to the sagas, the landscape inspired Morris with its attendant associations of the politics and society of the Northmen, the heroic world of independent Viking colonists. The introduction by James Morris to

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[152] For a brief survey of the critical work on Iceland in the prose romances, refer back to page 27 of this thesis.

[153] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*,14.

[154] See William Morris, *Icelandic Journals*. Introduction by James Morris. Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1969

[155] Bennett, 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', 33.

[156] Cooper, citing Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, in 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', 34.

Morris's Icelandic Journals states that one purpose of the visits to Iceland was 'to trace to their geographical sources the origins of the mediaeval sagas.'[157]

Morris's relationship to the Icelandic landscape was both emotional and psychological, and was expressed in terms of wonder, strangeness, excitement and terror in his *Icelandic Journals*.[158] The harsh, sublime landscapes of Iceland symbolised, for Morris, the admirable toughness and endurance of its people, as well as the values of the past societies of the Icelanders, and he invoked these associations in his construction of place in the romances. Iceland provided a basis for the sublime landscapes of the romances. May Morris observed of *The Sundering Flood* how

> the description of the sheer cliffs and the black water in my father's own tale take one back to the early days of Icelandic travel when the first sight of volcanic mountain heights seemed as much to overwhelm him with their terror as to move him by the majesty of their untrodden mysteries.[159]

Doris Y. Kadish, describes sublime nature as that which 'inspires awe, horror, and mystery – [it] is characterized by such traits as vast depth or height, rugged surfaces, and darkness; it includes objects in nature that are grand and majestic.'[160] Sublime nature evokes the type of 'hesitation' and 'turn' that is the function of fantasy. As Hallblithe faces the mountains that border the Glittering Plain, he is overcome by dizziness,

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[157] Introduction, *Icelandic Journals*, 18.

[158] See Bennett, 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', 35-37.

[159] In volume two of *The Introductions to the Collected Works of William Morris*, 619.

[160] Doris Y. Kadish, *The Literature of Images: Narrative Landscape from* Julie *to* Jane Eyre. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 81. Kadish comments on the contrast between the sublime and the beautiful, which 'is found in smallness and smoothness, as in leaves, slopes, and streams; it includes objects in nature that are colourful and cheerful.'

> … and lo! as he looked, it was to him as if the crags rose up in the sky to meet him and overhang him, and as if the earth heaved up beneath him, and therewith he fell aback and lost all sense, so that he knew not what was become of the earth and the heavens and the passing of the minutes of his life. (*GP*, 279)

The romance landscapes function to evoke an emotional/psychological response in the reader, as much as they function as cultural landscapes, educing associations with the type of people that occupy that space. They are the landscapes of Morris's mind, in the sense of their emotive power, as much as they are landscapes of reality.[161] The eighteenth-century 'protopsychological' discourse of the sublime was an important element on the early development of fantasy, and is a key element in many critical accounts of the fantasy genre.[162] Fantasy literature and the sublime both act through the 'agency of imagination.' In the eighteenth century and Romantic period a shift occurred in relation to the understanding of imagination so that it was conceived as a 'creative faculty' that could 'illuminate the invisible world beyond perceived reality.' This shift was critical in allowing 'the fantastic' to be viewed as an expression of originality, related to the sublime through the concept of 'original genius.' Descriptions of Todorov's 'hesitation' of fantasy and Tolkien's 'eucatastrophe'[163] both rely on the discourse of the sublime.

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[161] Wolfe argues that the form of symbolic fantasy commonly contains 'highly descriptive passages dealing with *landscape and transcendent experiences*' (my italics). 'Symbolic Fantasy', 198.

[162] The account of the sublime in this paragraph relies on Sandner's work in his introduction to *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, particularly 6-13. All quotes are taken from this work, unless otherwise noted.

[163] Refer back to Critical Issues in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

The magnitude of the psychological impact of landscape is evident in *The Well at the World's End*. On his journey to Utterbol, Ralph comes to a 'huge wall of mountains, black and terrible' lying before him (*WWE* 2, 303). Ralph feels his heart 'rather rise than fall at the sight of them', and he says 'Surely beyond them lieth some new thing for me, life or death: fair fame or the forgetting of all men' (*WWE* 2, 303). In this response is Ruskin's version of the sublime, as something that includes wonder and the comprehension of the experience of the sublime:

> it is not the fear, observe, but the contemplation of death; not the instinctive shudder and struggle of self-preservation, but the deliberate ,measurement of the doom, which is really great or sublime in feeling. It is not while we shrink, but while we defy, that we receive or convey the highest conceptions of the fate.[164]

The great mountains are an essential element of the quest terrain, as Bennett argues, and Ralph makes them fathomable in terms of access and progression, rather than obstruction and stasis.[165] The dark, divisive mountain range in *The Wood Beyond the World* also offers both challenge and transition to Walter. He moves into liminal space when he passes through the seemingly uncrossable cliff face. Ruskin's comment that 'mountains are the beginning and the end of all natural scenery'[166] is particularly apt, signalling a place of transition as well as of ritualistic significance. The landscape functions not only to signal the move into the liminal, but also to actuate the symbolic ritual of transition. One particular trait that Morris had noticed

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[164] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*. Excerpt taken from Bennett, 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', 39.

[165] 'Rediscovering the Topography of Wonder: Morris, Iceland and the Last Romances', 39.

[166] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, quoted by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*. London: Fontana Press, 1996, 384.

amongst Icelandic farmers was that they felt an almost gravitational pull back to their farmhouses and 'home-meads.'[167] The centrality of 'home', in particular the draw of the land, impels Osberne; he rejects the mercantile world of the City to return home to ' the land that… endures… when others have faded out' (*SF* 184). In Iceland, Morris 'found both a model for his terrible wastes and a model of tribal felicity that would be quite at home within the borders of even a southern pleasance.'[168] The influence for the 'southern pleasances' of the romances is the English landscapes, particularly those of his home, Kelmscott Manor.

Pastoral Englishness

Fiona MacCarthy argues for the lasting impact of the landscapes of England upon Morris's imagination, and maintains there can be no real understanding of Morris without an appreciation for those places.[169] In terms of modern criticism linking Morris's experiences of the English landscape and the way in which he constructed place in the late prose romances there is very little; Iceland has provided more interest for scholars of Morris's late prose romances. The gentle English landscapes stand in direct contrast to the untamed power of Icelandic topography, and Morris's utilises them for different purposes. I would argue that it is the idiom of pastoral

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[167] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 311.

[168] Calhoun, ' "The Little Land of Abundance": Pastoral Perspective in the Late Romances of William Morris', in Calhoun *et al*, eds., *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, 66.

[169] See MacCarthy, *William Morris*, Introduction, 8-9, in which she writes: 'There is no real way of understanding Morris until you can see, almost with his eyes, the particular pattern of a landscape, the relationship of buildings, the precise lie of the land. Without tramping around Kelmscott, finding the hidden churches that so delighted Morris, the glimpses of the river, the medieval barns, it would be difficult to comprehend the hold that Kelmscott had on him. Without retracing his journeys around Northern France and Iceland it would be hardly possible to see how the places he returned to, in his imagination, lasted all his life.'

'Englishness' that Morris expresses in the prose romances, through his use of the English landscape. May Morris's articulates this aspect of *The Well at the World's End* as Morris's 'passion for the soil.'[170] She recognises Kelmscott Manor as the influence, in particular, for the High House of Upmeads and its surrounds in the romance.[171] The use of this image, I would argue, is one of the ways in which Morris's construction of place is enriched through understanding the symbolic nature of place. Kelmscott Manor, Morris wrote, was one of the 'pleasant places of earth', home to 'harmless, simple people not overburdened with the intricacies of life'. Oberg finds it not insignificant that Morris utilised Kelmscott Manor as the model for his hero's home, arguing that it points to the 'psychological and spiritual significance' of Ralph's battle to defend Upmeads at the end of the tale.[172] Upmeads displays idyllic features: 'meadows and acres, the woods and the far streams, and the little hills' (*WWE* 1,1). There is no great merchant city, great castle or noble abbey of monks in the small kingdom (*WWE* 1, 1). Such images of bucolic peace and the exclusion of major centres of population and rulership invoke traditional pastoral, and its associated simplicity of life. The natural world and simplicity of life were two key elements, in Morris's mind, for the foundation of a happy life: 'Simplicity of life, even the barest, is not misery, but the very foundation of refinement: a sanded floor and whitewashed walls, and green trees, and flowery meads, and living waters

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[170] In the introduction to *The Collected Works of William Morris*, volume 18, 18.

[171] Morris never lived permanently at Kelmscott Manor, located on the Thames, but he held a deep affection for the house. The main part of the building dates from about 1570; a second wing was added toward the end of the seventeenth century. It appears in *News from Nowhere* as 'an archetypal building, the place which time forgot.' See MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 311*ff.*

[172] For the quote by Morris and the following reference to Oberg, see Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 118-19.

outside'.[173] In *The Sundering Flood*, Osberne's house, Wethermel, is 'a mile from the waterside' (*SF* 6). There are woods, and fertile pastures around, utilised by the inhabitants to raise crops and livestock.

As Calhoun notes, Morris constructed these idylls as isolated, remote areas to reinforce a sense of unity within their fertile seclusion.[174] The little country of Upmeads is separated from its neighbour to the north by a great forest, and to the south by high hills (*WWE* 1, 3). Wethermel is geographically isolated by sheer distance and inhospitable terrain from other communities; it is the remotest habitable area along the Flood, a place where the landscape dominates and where the trappings of a more advanced civilization have not yet come to pass. However, these are not Arcadian idylls, entirely separate from and immune to the social and cultural vicissitudes of the wider world. The peace of each is threatened by outsiders. The protection of the homeland and restoration of peace is the ultimate victory for the heroes of these romances. The peaceful, bucolic way of life is thus validated; its associated values of work, love and fellowship are recovered.

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[173] *Hopes and Fears for Art. Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham 1878-1881*, 214.
[174] Calhoun, ' "The Little Land of Abundance": Pastoral Perspective in the Late Romances of William Morris', 70-71.

Numinous Nature

Northrop Frye has drawn attention to a particular aspect of Romanticism that sheds light on Morris's construction of place. Romanticism, Frye argues, paved the way for a revitalised sense of 'the numinous power of nature.'[175] One of the ways this sense is expressed in the romances is through the anthropomorphisation of Nature. The romance heroes are frequently connected to the powers of the earth through figures that represent or are allied with natural forces; they provide spiritual wisdom and, more importantly to the romances, the 'means of achieving the reintegration of self and society'.[176] Morris draws particularly on Northern mythology in *The Sundering Flood*, for example. On the edge of the cultivated area of Osberne's home lies the liminal landscape of Icelandic myth, where dwarves and land-sprites reside. Steelhead, Osberne's mentor and guide, is a figure closely allied to the forces of the earth. He comes from 'the hill-sides and the crannies of the rocks' and he cannot enter 'a builded town' (*SF* 100). The artifices of civilisation are inimical to his very existence. He can be found 'on the lonely marsh maybe, or in the thick of the forest" (*SF* 135). His role is similar to that of Habundia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, a figure also representative of the powers of the earth and of nature. Both serve as guide and mentor to the hero, offering the wisdom 'of the earth' (WWI 42). By anthropomorphising nature in this way, the narrative is able to assert the interdependence of humans and the natural world. The achievement of the goals

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[175] Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism*. New York: Random House, 1968, 16.
[176] Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 13.

does not end the relationship between the natural and the human – both heroes maintain regular contact with their supra-natural mentors. '[O]nce in every quarter Osberne went to that same dale wherein he first met Steelhead, and there he came to him, and they had converse together… and good love was had between those twain.' (*SF* 250). Birdalone visits Habundia the wood at least once a year. These personal rituals assert the bond between nature and human; the quarterly regularity of Osberne's meeting reflects an honorary adherence to the natural cycles of the earth's seasons.

The romances explore further aspects of the numinous power of nature through nature-goddess figures. Some of these figures are non-human, such as Habundia and the Witch-Wife; other figures are human, though they have goddess-like attributes in their ability to harness the magic of the natural world. These figures are invariably female except in *The Sundering Flood*: Osberne is the only male to directly wield 'natural magic', which he learns from his nature-spirit tutor Steelhead. One such female human-goddess figure is the Maid in *The Wood Beyond the World*. She convinces the primitive tribe of Bears that she is the incarnation of their goddess by her ability to control the weather and the fertility of the land. She exhorts the Bears to look upon her:

> Therefore look ye upon me as here I stand, I who have come from the fairer country and the green-wood of the lands, and see if I bear not the summer with me, and the heart that maketh increase and the hand that giveth. (*WBW* 107)

Her magic then manifests itself, expressed through natural things:

the faded flowers that hung about her gathered life and grew fresh again; the woodbine round her neck and her sleek shoulders knit itself together and embraced her freshly, and cast its scent about her face. . . There she stood amidst of the blossoms, like a great orient pearl against the fretwork of the goldsmiths. (*WBW* 107-108)

The Maid is acting the part of benevolent nature-goddess, flower-clad emblem of natural renewal.[177] While the Maid's powers can be seen to be regenerative, the Mistress's power is destructive. The Mistress's powers are associated with blood and violence, not nature.[178] The Maid and the Mistress thus form an oppositional duality, and are associated with true and false representations of nature[179] (a pattern similar to the opposition between Habundia and the Witch-Wife). The Mistress's garden of paradise, 'with hedges of rose and woodbine, and with linden-trees a-blossom, and long ways of green grass betwixt borders of lilies and clove gilliflowers' (*WBW* 66) is fake and ephemeral, constructed by the Lady as a place of seduction into which she lures Walter. When he wakes the next day, the garden has disappeared.

The fake garden functions as a symbol of the Lady herself, beautiful but superficial, powerful but fickle. Her *hortus conclusus* does not offer Walter respite, as it traditionally offers heroes of medieval romance;[180] rather, Walter is left feeling 'sad at heart and fearful' (*WBW* 67). Morris uses another version of the *hortus conclusus* in *The Well at the World's End*, one far more in touch with the natural world. The

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[177] Norman Talbot, *Betwixt Wood-Woman, Wolf and Bear*. New Lambton: Babel Handbook, 1997, 3.
[178] The Bear tribe worships the Lady through blood sacrifice. See *WBW* 109, at which point the Maid tells the Bears to cease their practice of human sacrifice.
[179] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 183-84.
[180] See Calhoun, ' "The Little Land of Abundance": Pastoral Perspective in the Late Romances of William Morris', 56-57.

'Chamber of Love' is a secluded place formed by natural features (unlike the Mistress's built garden); where the stream and the cliff met

> 'was a smooth table of greensward, with three fair thorn bushes thereon, and it went down at each end to the level of the river's lip by a green slope, but amidmost, the little green plain was some ten feet above the stream, and was broken by a little undercliff, which went down sheer into the water.(*WWE* 1, 197)

The Sundering Flood further develops the concept of 'numinous nature' in its construction of place as a 'mythic geography'. I have adapted the concept of mythic geography from Mircea Eliade's discussion of sacred space in *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Eliade explains that 'every microcosm, every inhabited region, has what may be called a "Centre"; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all.' He further states that this centre is not represented by profane geography, but by a mythic geography. Furthermore, 'in mythical geography, sacred space is essentially the *real space*, for . . . in the archaic world the myth alone is real.'[181] It is possible, then, to speak of a mythic geography as a liminal space where the world of man and the world of nature, and magic, and myth, intersect and coexist. Morris's fantasies, like much fantasy literature today, emphasize and mythicise the spiritual dimensions of human life.[182]

The centrality of the land to the narrative of *The Sundering Flood* is evidenced initially by the prominence Morris accords it at the start of the text. Morris devotes

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[181] Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Trans. Philip Mairet. London: Harvill Press, 1961, 39-40.
[182] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 129.

nearly six and a half pages to a detailed account of the geography of the land of the Sundering Flood. Morris's world of fantasy operates in an actualised mythic geography in which the ancient forces of the land, embodied in various liminal beings and land spirits, guide and determine the narrative flow. The rural landscape is the scene for important rites that are made efficacious by the inherent power within the land and the spirits that reside there. The dominant and potent spiritual force emanates from the land, and may be called 'earth power', but it does have a quasi-religious expression comparable to primitive religions. Certain geographic features operate as places of particular potency, such as caves, and in *The Sundering Flood*, these locations are the settings for ritualistic episodes that draw their sacredness from the power of the earth. Liminal beings are intimately connected with the forces of the earth, and act as conduits between it and Osberne and Elfhild. Nature is the source of magic in the land, at its most potent in the rural landscape of Osberne's home.

Wilderness and Symbolic Nature

Taking the notion of 'country' as the opposition to 'city' one step further introduces the zone of 'the wilderness.' To the tamed area of cultural construction and political control, it counterposes another kind of presence and power. It is the necessary complement of the fields and acres of man, and is often perilous and hostile. However, it can also be an abundant provider of the need of the community, and a

test of their hardihood.[183] There are several examples of wilderness in the romances: the Wood Masterless and the Wood Perilous stand out as the most obviously named locations, but there are other anonymous zones of untamed terrain that operates as symbols of power, or liminality, or 'other.' Morris employs archetypal symbols of landscape to convey the meaning of place in the romances. Ralph and Ursula's endurance is tested when they cross the volcanic waste of the rock-sea, where the rocks 'rose up in confused heaps all clotted together by the burning, like to clinkers out of some monstrous forge of the earth-giants, so that their way was naught so clear as it had been, but was rather a maze of jagged stone' (WWE 2, 40). The Sage takes them to the threshold of this place, which he calls 'the very Gate of the Mountains' (*WWE* 2, 37). The landscape is clearly Icelandic, and Ralph and Ursula's experience in it suggests a spiritual as well as physical challenge that may be likened to Morris's own feelings as he trekked across the barren landscapes of Iceland, which tested him both physically and mentally.[184] Ralph and Ursula journey until 'the rocks of the pass closed about them, leaving but a way so narrow that they could see a glimmer of the stars above them as they rode the twilight; no sight they had of the measureless stony desert' (WWE 2, 44), signalling, I would argue, an archetypal passage into the 'World Womb': being 'swallowed into the unknown.'[185]

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[183] See J. M. S. Tompkins, *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry*. London: Cecil Woolf, 1988, 296.

[184] See MacCarthy's account of Morris's three-day trek across the interior of Iceland towards the northern coast. She cites Morris's description of the landscape, from his *Iceland Journals*: 'and there we are in the wilderness: a great plain of black and grey sand, grey rocks sticking up out of it… and a strange plant, a dwarf willow, that grows in these wastes only, a few sprays of long green leaves wreathing about as it were a tangle of bare roots, white and blanched like bones.' *William Morris*, 299*ff.*

[185] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1971,

The wild is often a borderland, and therefore has an important 'threshold' function for the hero, signalling the passageway to a liminal world:

> The border is often the transitional or liminal topos between the human, profane world and a supernatural zone or otherworld; and one obsession of the hero, to find and penetrate into threatening or unknown places and terrains, with the near certainty of encountering alterity in the form either of the hostile human, animal, or supernatural forces, is absolutely a key in feature [in the hero's] biography.[186]

Borders are significant narrative devices in fantasy literature, in which the progress of the hero can be described in terms of crossing borders – whether these are literal borders between worlds, for example, or symbolic borders. Forests are common features in the romances, and can be seen as an inheritance from medieval romance where the romance knight's entry into the forest symbolises his departure from society into a place of mystery and testing. MacCarthy writes with perspicacity that 'in Morris's iconography of nature, a forest was somewhere where you both lost and found yourself,' [187] evoking the forest setting as a ritual topos. The forest is often a locus apart from society, as in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, in which the forest of Evilshaw sits on the periphery of the town of Utterhay, yet is entirely isolated from it. In *The Well at the World's End*, the wood that borders the Land of Abundance is never entered, as Ralph learns

> for beyond the wood go we never: nay, most often we go but a little way into it, no further than we can see the glimmer of the open daylight

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[186] Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, 147-48.

[187] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 14-15.

through its trees,--the daylight of the land of Abundance-- that is enough for us. (*WWE* 1, 103)

A quick scan of Morris's chapter titles in *The Well at the World's End* reveals further the importance of forests or woods to the narrative as key locations of adventure and action, Four chapters refer to the Wood Perilous and Ralph's adventures therein.[188] Other chapter titles include 'Ralph meeteth a Man in a Wood;'[189] 'An Adventure in the Wood;'[190] 'An Adventure in the Wood under the Mountains;'[191] 'They come through the Woodland to the Thirsty Desert.'[192]

Water is a common natural feature in all of the romances. It invokes psychological associations with the unconscious, the origin of life, and the erotic. The female characters in the prose romances are most closely connected with bodies of water, and as such water signals femininity, but it also signals sexuality. The sexual symbolism is clearly implied in several episodes within the romances. An example from *The Wood Beyond the World* shows how Morris's uses the setting of water to invoke sexuality and femininity. Walter comes across the Maid by a brook,

> playing with the welling out of the water, and she had trussed up her sleeves to the shoulder that she might thrust her bare arms therin. Her shoes of black leather lay on the grass beside her, and her feet and legs yet shone with the brook. (*WBW* 55-56)

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[188] In Book 1, chapters 7-9 and chapter 16.
[189] Book 1, Chapter 20
[190] Book 1, Chapter 22
[191] Book 3, Chapter 1. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 also refer to the Wood.
[192] Book 3, Chapter 17.

Startled by Walter, the Maid's first actions are to cover up her bare legs and arms; the modesty of the Maid contrasts the earlier erotic appeal of her pose by the water. The brook in which the Maid bathes is the first body of water Walter reaches following his crossing of the stony waste, and with the joint discovery of the Maid the water becomes symbolic of more than a watery respite after an arid trek. There is an erotic appeal associated with the frequently bare feet of his heroines which 'seems, at least in part, to come about through the intimacy of their physical contact with the earth.'[193] Water is also a sign of transition: Birdalone and Hallblithe both take significant journeys over bodies of water. Swimming in the waters Birdalone 'communed with herself, and found that she was thinking: If I might only swim all the water and be free' (*WWI* 24). Three of the prose romances feature water as a central icon, as gleaned from their titles alone: *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, *The Sundering Flood*, and *The Well at the World's End.* Water, in the form of a magical elixir, is the object of a quest in *The Well*, it is the home of the protagonist in *The Water*, and it divides lovers in *The Sundering Flood*. Water symbolises sexuality and the feminine, as well as liberation and adventure. Morris's fascination with water – rivers, in particular – has been traced back to his childhood experiences; we can consider the following passage from MacCarthy:

> Water for Morris was a lure, a titillation, often used as a starting point in his romances when his heroines are apt to disrobe and tiptoe down through gilded gates to hidden waterways where little boats lie waiting to speed them up the river. Waters held a sexual promise. In *The Sundering Flood* we are not far from consummation in 'the dark green deeps and fierce downlong swirl of the stream'.[194]

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[193] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet,* 125.
[194] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 14.

The City

In its oppositional mode, the pastoral ideal functions as a contrast to and often indictment of contemporary society, which is usually symbolised by the 'city'. In the prose romances, there is only one 'city' (in *The Sundering Flood*); other large centres of population are towns, rather than cities. For the purposes of this investigation, 'city' is to be understood to refer to a broad concept, as I will examine below. The thesis will also defer to the term city when referring to the usual pastoral opposition of country/city. As a symbolic icon, the city came to represent industrialisation and its concomitant impact on society in the nineteenth century. Pike has observed that cities in nineteenth century literature 'came more and more to express the isolation or exclusion of the individual from a community,'[195] A recent collection of fantasy novellas, entitled simply *Cities,* articulates the concept of 'city' in a similar vein:

> We use the city concept as a catch-all for what human society is all about, whether the overall intended feel is one of brash commercialism, urban (and moral) decay, artistic endeavour, technological advancement or abject loneliness – all humanity is there, plus all inhumanity as well.[196]

For Morris, cities were representative of a decline in quality of life, of 'social and psychological disintegration',[197] The Victorian city was smoky, polluted, crowded, and gloomy; they were 'blotches of hideousness' on the English countryside, in

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[195] Burton Pike, Preface to Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 7.
[196] Peter Crowther, *Cities*. London: Gollancz, 2003, introduction, ix.
[197] Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 5.

Morris's words.[198] Not only did large industrial cities degrade and spoil the natural landscapes, but the division of labour dictated by the factory systems was entirely antithetical to what Morris believed about work and labour.[199] Population movement from the land to the cities precipitated a spiritual alienation of the people from the land, and from each other. Further, the rapid growth and change visible in industrial cities came to heighten the sense of personal and cultural anxiety.[200] The banner of the Romantic Revolt was passed to the visual and architectural arts, which were less easy to ignore than the poetics of earlier Romanticism. Architecture emerged as the dominant symbol of the degradation of the human spirit because it was the most obvious – buildings throughout London were demonstrating the worst effects of industrial capitalism.[201] Beautiful old buildings were being destroyed at the same time as ugly, pseudo-historical edifices were being erected in the city. In response, the Gothic Revival was both an attempt to revive an older style of art or architecture, and a moral and ethical protest against contemporary society.[202] It was a part of the wider Romantic Movement and the medieval revival, connected to it by a yearning for the past. The Gothic Revival was particularly concerned with art and architecture, and the way they related to the natural world. The Gothic 'ruins' that began to ornament the parks and garden of the wealthy in the eighteenth

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[198] William Morris, 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth' in *On Art and Socialism*, 171.

[199] He wrote ' it is allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures the beauty of life nowadays. In other words, it is the token of the terrible crime we have fallen into of using our control of the powers of Nature for the purpose of enslaving people, we care less meantime of how much happiness we rob their lives of. Cited, without reference, by Michael Naslas, 'Mediaevalism: A Major Part of Morris's Aesthetic Theory,' *Journal of the William Morris Society* 5.1 (1982): 16-24 (21).

[200] See Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, preface, 8.

[201] See Thompson, *William Morris*, 27.

[202] Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 5.

century showed in their landscape setting an attempt to couple nature and the past, in a similar way that the poetry of the time was attempting.[203]

Morris's construction of towns and cities in the romances arguably works within this Gothic tradition, in that it reveals both a nostalgia for the past and the concern for social and personal happiness. Morris utilised artistic concerns about architecture to give shape to his views of social and political concerns. His greatest influence in this area was John Ruskin. Ruskin's chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice* made a significant and lasting impression upon Morris (Morris printed 'The Nature of Gothic' at his Kelmscott Press in 1892). Ruskin gave Morris the lead 'he needed toward co-ordinating and understanding the philosophy . . . which underlay his instinctive acceptance of Gothic and fierce rejection of Renaissance architecture.'[204] Architecture was more than just an art form for Morris. It testified directly to the conditions of the society in which it was created: 'The ancient buildings of the Middle Ages' were 'the work of associated labour and thought of the *people*, the result of a chain of tradition unbroken from the earliest ages.'[205] Industrial capitalism removed the personal bond of the craftsman to his work, and removed beauty from the product. Under capitalist production, the factories did not 'for a moment trouble themselves as to whether the work which creates the surplus value is pleasurable to the worker or not.'[206] In light of these values, I would suggest

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203 Chandler, *A Dream of Order*, 185.
204 Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master Craftsman*, 109.
205 Thompson cites May Morris, *William Morris*, 643-44.
206 William Morris in *Commonweal*, 1885, cited by Thompson, *William Morris*, 644-45.

that when Morris 'invents' a beautiful castle, or a shabby market town in the prose romances, he is evoking the concomitant values of the society it represents. MacCarthy observes that the church at Goldburg in *The Well at the World's End* is based partly on the cathedral at Rouen, partly on Ruskin. Ruskin provided, in particular, a language for Morris to articulate the savage qualities of the Gothic: its 'wildness of thought, and roughness of work.' Gazing upon the cathedral at Rouen, Morris drew on Ruskin's correlation of the man-made and the natural.[207] In 1878, Morris described his first view of the cathedral: 'what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the Cathedral rising above the flower-market.'[208] The church in Goldburg is also near a flower market; it was 'dainty and delicate as might be, and its steeples and bell-towers were high and well builded, and adorned exceeding richly' (*WWE* 1 264).

The towns function both as cultural and historical symbols, and serve to demonstrate the type of social redemption all of the heroes of the romances offer. Ralph's duty is to 'succour the oppressed and love the lovely, and to be the friends of men.' The Sage of Swevenham specifically bids Ralph and Ursula to 'be no tyrants or builders of cites for merchants and usurers and warriors and thralls' (*WWE* 2, 36). The corrupt societies Ralph passed through on his outward journey are all redeemed during his return journey, in testament to the natural power of the waters of the

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[207] See MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 93-94.
[208] William Morris, as cited by MacCarthy (no reference) in *William Morris*, 92.

Well: the 'water of goodness and fellowship', as Silver aptly describes it.[209] Redemption of morally deficit towns is a recurring theme in the romances. The City of the Sundering Flood embodies the capitalistic and anti-egalitarian society that Morris so abhorred. The king and merchants of the city are engaged in a class struggle with the proletarians of the 'Lesser Crafts'. Osberne helps the Lesser Crafts overcome the King's men, and negotiate a peace. The City is politically reformed as a democracy, and a guild system is established in the city, based on the medieval guild system that Morris enthusiastically believed to represent the paradigm of social harmony, nurturing a society of equals.[210]As a socialist, Morris loved cities 'for their spirit of association . . . as an artist for the beauty of line and structure sometimes resulting from the happy, accidental growth of years, sometimes from deliberate plan.'[211] This sentiment carries into *The Well at the World's End*, which can be distinguished from the other romances by the large number, and individuality, of towns in it.

Higham represents a town of architectural perfection, representing the best of the medieval spirit.[212] The story's hero, Ralph, is impressed by the culture, wealth and guild system of Higham. In his first view of the town, he sees peaceful natural features and the beauty of grand architectural elements:

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[209] *The Romance of William Morris*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982, 179.

[210] Under the auspices of the guild system 'developed those conditions which led to free, pleasant, and therefore, according to the Ruskinian syllogism, artistic work.' Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary*, 67.

[211] Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary*, 126.

[212] Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary*, 127.

lying below him overlooked by a white castle on a knoll, and with a river lapping it about and winding on through its fair green meadows . . . From amidst its houses rose up three towers of churches above their leaden roofs; and high above all, long and great, the Abbey Church; and now was the low sun glittering on its gilded vanes and the wings of the angels high upon the battlements.(*WWE* 1, 23)

One of the most striking aspects of this townscape is the presence of not one but *three* churches. Three churches suggest wealth and potentially a high spiritual and moral standard in the town, and indeed, as Ralph discovers, the town is ruled by a benign theocracy. The rest of the narrative continues the theme of exploring various social structures. Each town Ralph encounters represents not only a different social or political systems, but also a history of civilisation, ranging from upper-barbarism to decadent centres of civilisation. Silver notes the expression of Morris's strong preference for the stage of social development known as 'upper barbarism' in the settings of his prose romances.[213] Morris developed these ideas, she argues, based on the work of Lewis H. Morgan and Frederick Engels. Both Morgan and Engels viewed the history of man as an evolution through three stages of barbarism: lower, middle and upper barbarism, and finally to civilisation. Upper barbarism represented, for Morris, ideal communism. The revival of the values of upper barbarism offered another form of escape from the depredations visited by the Industrial Revolution on England, and from Victorian mechanism.

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[213] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', in Calhoun *et al*, eds, *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, 120-22. The rest of this paragraph follows her analysis.

This chapter has been investigating way in which William Morris constructs *place* in the prose romances. *The Sundering Flood* contributes one further aspect to the construction of place: the original edition of the text includes a map (Figure 1, page 82),[214] foreshadowing the burgeoning popularity of maps in fantasy fiction today.[215]

I believe the *Flood* map stands as the earliest example of a fantasy map, that is, one that depicts a world of fiction that is entirely autonomous from the primary, or 'real' world. The *Flood* map is distinguished from similar maps of fiction, such as those found in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*[216] (1726), which included maps to add support and verisimilitude to a tale that purported to have found many strange and wondrous islands in the great uncharted seas of our very own world. The science of mapping had been established in as early as the second century after Christ by Claudius Ptolemy, but mapping in the West in the fourth to fourteenth centuries stagnated; 'Western scholars who eclipsed Ptolemy were cloistered souls who rejected scientific enquiry as possibly pagan and certainly irrelevant.' Consequently, 'maps produced in Europe in the Middle Ages were more ecclesiastic than

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[214] In the Kelmscott edition (1897), the map is located at the end of the book; in the Longman's editions the map is placed opposite page one (the first page of the story). The Unicorn Fantasy edition (1973) does not include the map (*The Sundering Flood*. Brighton, Seattle: Unicorn Bookshop, 1973).

[215] Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* undoubtedly triggered the massive obsession with maps in fantasy fiction today. His books carry vast amounts of extra-textual apparatus, including maps, which are common additions to fantasy novels now, though none really compare to Tolkien's in terms of sheer detail. See T. A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth.* London: Grafton, 1992, 87-94 for further commentary on Tolkien's mapping and attendant apparatus.

[216] The original full title of the work was *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, by Lemuel Gulliver*.

cartographic, more symbolic than realistic.'[217] The concern was not for the terrestrial world, but for Paradise. Medieval geography was further influenced and inspired by outrageous traveller's tales, descriptions of the monstrous beasts that lived in Africa, for example, such as ants that were as large as mastiffs. Gaius Julius Solinus was the main perpetrator and progenitor of these types of stories, and he plagiarised so shamelessly that he has been dubbed 'Pliny's Ape,' as Pliny's *Natural History* was one of the texts Solinus copied from.[218] The maps of the Middle Ages were illustrated more and more with details from Solinus, details that no one was interested in verifying. In many ways, these medieval maps are maps of 'imagined' lands, maps of fantasy, though they purported to depict actual places. Visually, maps of fantasy are akin to medieval maps in terms of their technical element. They are not intended (primarily) to be a functional reproduction of the space. They are far distanced from the accurate and detailed city maps we have, or the US Geological Survey maps. Their execution and vision reflects the pre-technological stage of the fictional realms they represent. They are, in the best examples, stylised and symbolic, as much a part of the author's imagination as the narrative. It would be a jarring anachronism, I feel, to have a survey map of Middle-earth, complete with contour lines, such as Diane Duane has created,[219] when Middle-earth itself has no technology to support this. Maps function as an extension, if not an integral part of, the narrative, and as such must retain the authenticity of that narrative; or as Duane puts it, 'the world

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[217] John Noble Wilford, *The Mapmakers*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, 35.
[218] Wilford, *The Mapmakers*, 34.
[219] Diane Duane, 'Cartography for Other Worlds: A Short Look at a Neglected Subject', *Science Fiction Writers of America Bulletin* 11.5 (1976): 10-14.

you make inside your head has a particular flavour and feel to it, which by all rights should be reflected as much in the map as in the prose which describes it'.[220]

Maps are not anomalous to Morris's works overall, but the *Sundering Flood* map is unique because it is the only map that accompanies a work of fiction and the only one that represents a wholly invented land. Maps in Morris's earlier works are based on realistic or historical foundations - illustrating his personal travels through Iceland in Icelandic Journeys, and accompanying sagas that were geographically quite precise, in the Saga Library collection.[221] There is very little information regarding the map in Morris scholarship. It is likely that both Emery Walker and Sydney Cockerell – both involved in the Kelmscott Press business - made the decision to use a map in *The Sundering Flood*: a report by Cockerell on the situation at the Press on 7 January 1898 makes a brief reference to having to do 'the map for the Sundering Flood.'[222] However, the extent of Morris's input – if any – is not recorded. H. Cribb is credited as the artist for the map.[223] The map is mentioned in passing by a contemporary reviewer, who describes the map as 'curiously romantic', noting that it depicts 'this fanciful territory as it might have been conceived by the monk dwelling in the House of the Black Canons at Abindon "who gathered this tale."'[224] May Morris does not mention the map at all in her introduction to the tale,

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[220] Duane, 'Cartography for Other Worlds', 14.
[221] A map was prepared for the Kelmscott edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, but it was scrapped before printing. See Peterson, 154.
[222] Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 271.
[223] H. Cribb also created the drawings for the *Icelandic Journeys*, with the help of Emery Walker. See May Morris, *Introduction to the Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 1, 241.
[224] Unsigned review, *Academy*, 19 March 1898 in Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: The Critical*

even though she talks about the inaccuracies and inconsistencies of the tale in terms of its geographical plotting. Her notes on the text, indicate the concern for accuracy in the geographic detail of this story, particularly in relation to the direction of the river:

> In two places I have corrected inaccuracies which the author would certainly have disliked to leave: on pages 93, 94 the points of the compass were wrong; Stephen returning South in making his round of the leaguer, instead of finishing up on the North, to which it is altered. A little more than halfway through the tale the direction of the Sundering Flood, which generally speaking ran North and South, changes, flowing East to West, and so onward to the end, the East side of the river becoming the North, and the West the South. This was altered in the original edition of the Kelmscott Press, and after careful reading of the text there seems no reason to reconsider this correction of what was certainly an oversight which might mystify or trouble an observant reader. [225]

Despite the inaccuracies in this particular romance (which can arguably be ascribed, at least in part, to the fact that Morris did not live long enough to rectify the discrepancies), there is a general cartographic quality to the this romance and also to *The Well at the World's End*, and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* – which Nancy D. Mann observes.[226] A short passage serves to offer a sense of this careful plotting by Morris in *The Water*, in which Gerard describes the journey he and Birdalone can take from Greenford:

> Now there is a highway cometh into this road from out of the tilled country and Appleham, a good town, and goeth through I toward the tillage and the City of the Bridges and the Liberties thereof; and all that land is much builded and plentiful; but, if thou wilt, we will not take either highway, but

wend over the downland which lieth north-east of Upham… over that downland we may wend a four days… (*WWI* 260).

Some analysis can be offered about the function of the map in *The Sundering Flood* in relation to the narrative. The map demarcates the location of the narrative; the map's decorative frame provides the most obvious visual delimitation of place; the frame automatically proscribes a limit to the locations of the narrative action. The map shows no artificial internal borders, however, and so the Flood becomes not only the central feature (literally and figuratively) of the map but also the central division or border.

In the narrative, the river becomes the first focus - it features immediately as the subject of the opening paragraph of a detailed account of the geography and topography of the land. The strong focus on place in the opening is unique to this romance. It is perhaps in part because the hero's journey sees him return home at the end, and this location functions in an important narrative role. Although other locations – such as the City – are also developed as important places, home is central to this narrative. The map also has a dynamic aspect in that it pinpoints some of the key locations of Osberne's adventures. For instance, the map shows 'here Osberne first met Steelhead', 'where Osberne shot the Hart', 'here dwelt Elfhild', 'where Osberne fought with the Black Skimmers', 'where Osberne found Elfhild'. One of the endearing features of the map is the houses and castles: they are realistically, rather than symbolically, represented, and each is unique. The map also has an inset of the City of the Sundering Flood, suggesting that the City is a key location.

The land is far more spiritually imbued than in any of the other romances, and the call home – to the land - is highly important to Osberne, more than to any of the other protagonists. Morris devotes nearly two thousand words in the opening to describing the river and the surrounding land and population:

> It is told that there was once a mighty river which ran south into the sea, and at the mouth thereof was a great and rich city, which had been builded and had waxed and thriven because of the great and most excellent haven which the river aforesaid made where it fell into the sea, and now it was like looking at a huge wood of barked and smoothened fir-trees when one saw the masts of the ships that lay in the said haven. (SF 1)

The descriptive emphasis is on the sheer size of this land- and cityscape: the 'mighty' river, the 'great' city, the 'great' haven, and the 'huge' wood of ship masts. The size of the river becomes meaningful later on when its uncrossable width separates the hero from his childhood sweetheart. The size and might of the river is also the inspiration for its name: the Sunderer. The image of the river also brings with it a sense of passage, of movement, both spatial and temporal.

In a study of the river in myth, literature and geography, Herendeen observes that 'the river itself seems to be continually changing – between historical, linear time, and future, cyclical time; between a definite spatial context, and one which is continuous.'[227] The Thames River specifically held a special place in Morris's heart; it represented for him 'an essential human link back to antiquity and history.'[228]

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[227] *From Landscape to Literature*, 3.
[228] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 14.

Richard Mathews has remarked on the chronological aspect of the geography in *The Sundering Flood*. Located in time, rivers can be described in terms of their human history, and this is how Morris positions his river in *The Sundering Flood*. As we move down the river from the Dale to the City 'we are progressing through many evolutionary stages in man's historical development'.[229] The North-South alignment of the river sets the imagery of this progress in terms of 'descent', I would argue, aligning it with the narrative's internal symbolism of the Dale (at the 'top') representing as an idyllic paragon of communal life, and the City (at the 'bottom'), representing a social 'descent' (in Morris's view) into a volatile mercantile world. The Dale is the remotest habitable area along the Flood, a place where the natural landscape dominates and where the trappings of a more advanced civilization have not yet come to pass. Carole Silver notes more generally Morris's anachronistic placement of groups living in various stages of social evolution within a single land.[230] Highly developed guild systems can operate, in Morris, only short journeys away from people living in conditions of primitive barbarism.[231] The various societies function as evaluative juxtapositions, following the model of the pastoral, as this chapter has been investigating. Though various, and not always compatible or indeed ideal, the societies of the romances are united by their antithesis to the dominant industrial culture of modernist Victorian England.

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[229] Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World*, 58.
[230] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 120.
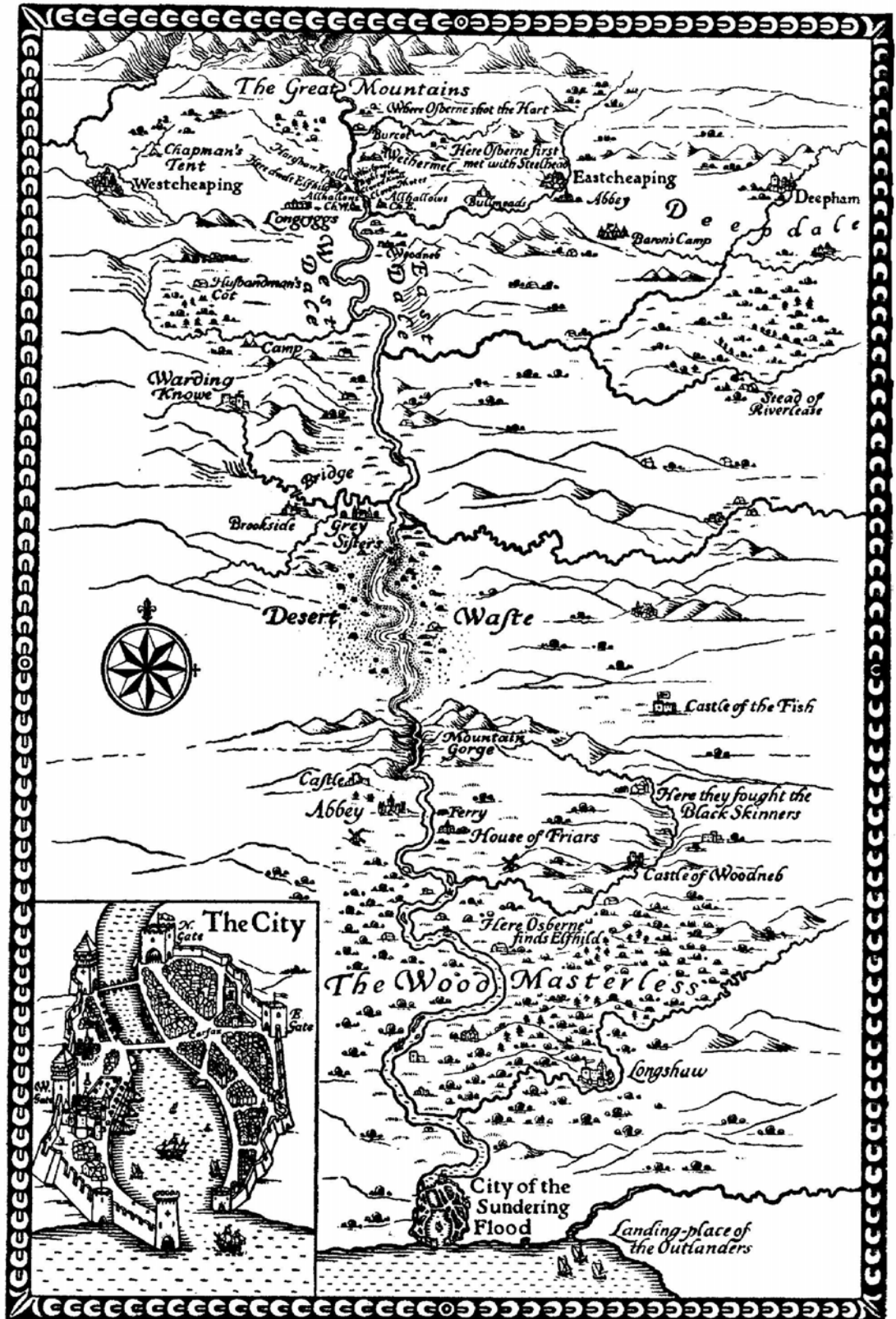[231] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris.*, 157.

Figure 1: The map in *The Sundering Flood*

The map is reproduced from the Collected Works edition of *The Sundering Flood*. The map is included solely for use in this thesis, and not for publication.

Mapping Fantasy

Maps have now become a popular extra-textual addendum to the literature of fantasy – they visually suggest the centrality of *place* to fantasy literature, and can be considered today to be a primary signifier of the genre. Tolkien stands unchallenged in the detail and background he provided for Middle Earth, which included several maps as well as chronologies, a background history, and other apparatus. His maps of Middle Earth are detailed enough to extrapolate further specific information. From the maps and the textual evidence, William Antony Swithin Sarjeant presented a conference paper entitled 'The Geology of Middle Earth', published in *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, 1992*, in which he attempts a 'preliminary reconstruction of the geology of Middle Earth . . . utilizing data presented in the text, maps and illustrations by its arch-explorer J. R. R. Tolkien'.[232]

Notably, both Tolkien and Morris were very influenced by their experiences of landscape, Tolkien most probably by the peaceful English shires that characterise the home of the Hobbits, Morris also by the English countryside but also by the terrain of Iceland. More importantly, both men were dedicated scholars of early language and literature, with a special fascination for Old English and Old Icelandic and the epic poems and stories of these cultures. These interests have infused their fantastic fictions and the maps that accompany them. Chronologically positioned between these two authors is E. R. Eddison whose interest in the medieval is also

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[232] William Antony Swithin Sarjeant 'The Geology of Middle Earth', in *Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference, 1992*. Milton Keynes and Altadena: Tolkien Society/Mythopoeic Press, 1995, 334.

apparent. Eddison is significant because, according to the estimable Lin Carter, he was the man who, in the 1920's, 'revolutionized fantasy by bringing in documentation', buttressing his romances 'with firm chronological tables and detailed, seemingly-realistic maps'.[233] The prevalence of maps has a lot to do with the way fantasies are developing on epic scales. Created worlds are getting bigger and more complex, and maps aid our comprehension of both the geographic layout of such huge worlds, and also contribute to a deeper understanding of the political ramifications of such large and fragmented realms. Maps are also important for the authors of fantasy as an aid for internal consistency and accuracy in their narratives.

The geographical inconsistencies in *The Sundering Flood*, as noted by May Morris, may well have been averted had Morris sketched a map early in the project, particularly the major confusion over whether the river runs North-South or West-East. Tolkien, by comparison, created his Middle-earth in maps before he had a story to set in it.[234] *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* [235]contains maps to illustrate its entries on two other of Morris's prose romances: *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The maps are not very detailed, and in fact contain inaccuracies, but the attempt to present a pictorial representation of the narratives expresses the seemingly innate *need* to map fantasy; or perhaps it testifies to that innate quality of fantasy that allows it to be mapped. For the reader to

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[233] Lin Carter, introduction to L. Sprague de Camp, *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: The Makers of Heroic Fantasy*. Sauk City WIS: Arkham House, 1976, xiii.
[234] *The Road to Middle-Earth*, 119.
[235] Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*. London: Bloomsbury, 1999.

apprehend an imaginary realm, a *mundus alter*, either visually through a map or verbally through description, is an essential aim of fantasy; maps contribute to the successful communication of the 'inner consistency of reality'[236]. Tolkien explains that fantasy

> does not either blunt the appetite for, not obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make.[237]

The Rejection of Arcadia

Morris's rejection of Arcadia is most clearly articulated in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. Morris builds up the Glittering Plain a potential paradise. It is a land beyond time, where no man dies and where 'the days are many: so many that he who hath forgotten how to laugh, may learn the craft again, and forget the days of Sorrow' (GP 212). The realm of the Glittering Plain promises eternal youth, and the quest to find the place is quintessentially a quest to halt time. But just as much as going back to the past to re-inhabit Arcadia is not an option for Morris, neither is halting the passage of time to maintain an idyll. The timelessness of the Plain induces stasis and stagnation, and is contrary to the cycles of Nature that are central to Morris's vision of an integrated community. The 'falseness' of the 'unchanging land' is vividly contrasted to the dynamic and seasonal activities of Hallblithe's home, which he sees in a vision: he sees his kindred 'yoking the oxen to the plough, and slowly going down the acres, as the shining iron drew the long furrow down the stubble-land, and the light haze hung about the elm trees in the calm morning, and the smoke

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[236] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 44.
[237] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 51.

rose straight into the air' (*GP* 271-72). Agricultural activities, which are guided by the seasons, signal the passing of time. The activities also testify to the identification of the community of man with the cycles of nature, the heart of a primitive ideal that Morris expressed in his earlier romances as well.[238] For Morris, communities unsustained by labour – such as the Glittering Plain – are devoid of virtue.[239] The Glittering Plain is so-called because the sun always shines, even in winter (*GP* 253), so that even the passing of the seasons has been halted by the stasis of the land. It is a traditional Earthly Paradise, a retreat from real life. In this instance, the rural, pastoral life of honest toil is the preferred alternative to the offer Hallblithe receives to become the 'deathless lover' of the daughter of the King of the Glittering Plain (*GP* 269).

For Hallblithe, as for Morris, real living involves accepting the inevitable end of living, It also involves facing and accepting the ills that exist in the real world: 'battle and famine, longing unsatisfied, and heart-burning and fear' (*GP* 272). The true 'glittering plain' of happiness is Hallblithe's pastoral home:

> look under the sun down the plain which lieth betwixt the mountains and the sea, and ye shall behold the meadows all gleaming with the spring lilies; yet we do not call this the Glittering Plain, by Cleveland by the Sea. Here men die when their hour comes… [the days of their life] are long enough for the doing of deeds that shall not die. (*GP* 212)

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[238] See Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 46. Bono explores Morris's expression of pure communal life in *The House of the Wolfings*.

[239] Silver, 'Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris', 125.

The inhabitants of the Plain forget their pasts, and with it any notion of meaningful continuity in human experience. Eternal life is granted to the inhabitants of the Plain at the cost of the values and traditions of the community in which they were brought up.[240] In contrast, Ralph and Ursula find the true Paradise of immortality through a belief in the primacy of nature.[241] Ralph's vow, when asked what he would do with the powers of wisdom, love and wholeness conferred by the Well, iterates the importance of nature, and it also stresses remembrance of the living and the dead, which, I would argue, stresses Morris's earlier rejection of the timeless stasis of the Paradise of the Plain. Ralph attains Paradise not by retreating from the world, but by re-entering it. The gifts of the well are only useful when they are applied in the wider world, for the betterment of society. Reaching the Well is only the half-way point of Ralph's journey, which is circular; to achieve his true quest he must return home: only there is the 'complete Paradise.'[242]

Morris does not permit any of his heroes to dwell permanently in the isolation of Arcadian or pastoral happiness.[243] Birdalone and her companions must leave the serenity of their pastoral home in the House under the Wood to ensure that society benefits from their wisdom, and they make a new home in a 'noble town in a pleasant land' (*WWI* 376). Walter moves through the liminal Wood, beyond the barbarian tribe of Bears, and rules the land of Stark-Wall. His legacy remained

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[240] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 154.
[241] *The Romances of William Morris*, 191.
[242] *The Romances of William Morris*, 193.
[243] Osberne is the only Morrisian hero not to experience a paradisal land.

beyond his mortal death in the 'great lineage of Stark-Wall' (WBW 130). As Hodgson has noted, social organization is the means to controlling destructive forces, such as tyranny. The Maid articulates this thought to Walter, once he is made king: 'Here then is the wilderness left behind a long way, and here is warding and protection against the foes of our life and soul' (WBW 124).[244]

Conclusion

In their construction of place, the prose romances share the unifying thread of an ultimate concern with community and vitality. In his turn to the past, and to the example of places of Iceland, Morris may be said to be searching for models of cultural coherence. He draws on Romantic and Gothic aesthetics, pastoral idyll and archetypal place symbolism to furnish his romances with landscapes that have meaning beyond their function as setting. Morris invokes idyllic forms, but only so that he can initiate their compromise.[245] Ultimately, the romances do not represent an escape to a romantic ecotopian past, but rather to a Morrisian vision of an eco-socialist future.[246] Man's relationship to nature, and the natural world, is at the heart of this vision, and so, even in invoking such a traditional opposition as the pastoral country/city, the resolution of the tension between the two is resolved by the formulation of a third option. At the heart of this formulation lies Romanticism's quest for reintegration, based on a belief in an organic universe, which led to new

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[244] *The Romances of William Morris*, 162.
[245] Marcus Waithe makes this observation of Morris in relation to *News from Nowhere*, but the application of it to the late prose romances is particularly apt, I would argue. See '*News from Nowhere*, Utopia and Bakhtin's Idyllic Chronotope', *Textual Practice* 16.3 (2002): 459-72 (460).
[246] See David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1996, 215.

concepts of nature, history and community.[247] Morris's construction of place constitutes a significant part of his overall Romantic vision; it contributes to the significance of the romances as 'a powerful and valuable vehicle for serious ideas.'[248]

Morris's medieval Romanticism lead him beyond the dualist structure that it at the heart of the pastoral, I would argue, and to a social vision of community that embraced nature as an integral part of human life. Nature was a living being, 'with which and in which to participate.'[249] The pastoral Arcadia *per se* endorsed a sense of isolation and disconnection from the wider world that did not correspond to Morris's vision of integration and harmony between the natural and human world. Furthermore, any desire to return to Arcadia was historically impossible; in real terms, going back is not an option. Morris's vision may be considered to be a search for a new way forward: 'If we have no hope for the future, I do not see how we can look back on the past with pleasure.'[250]

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[247] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 12.
[248] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 158.
[249] Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 13.
[250] William Morris, cited, without reference, by Naslas, 'Mediaevalism: A Major Part of Morris's Aesthetic Theory', 22.

Inventing the Quest-Hero

This thesis has so far investigated the way in which Morris constructed his invented landscapes, foreshadowing some of the important thematic concerns of the narratives as a whole. This chapter will examine Morris's male heroes in light of traditional hero paradigms and examine some of the ways in which Morris re-shaped heroic convention. The Morrisian hero departs from convention in two areas: the dominant role of women and the conclusion of the quest.

Morris's male heroes conform, in many respects, to the traditional hero-types as defined by scholars such as Joseph Campbell. They are single young men who have the social freedom and ability to travel and to seek adventure. The heroes function in the relatively conservative, patriarchal worlds of romance and fantasy. They are ordinary men, made special by their adventures in extraordinary places. They ultimately represent the highest ideals of their given social groups, yet avoid the strictly stereo-typical attributes of their gender in terms of warrior prowess and the wielding of martial power.[251] Hallblithe and Ralph become good martial leaders, but that skill is not, I would argue, their defining characteristic. In the case of his highest ranking hero – Ralph, the son of a king – Morris has removed the potential for more than ordinary power by making his hero the youngest son of four, and making his hero deliberately escape the protective world of a king's son to find his

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[251] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 161.

own way in the world. Northrop Frye has stated that the hero of romance is human, and his 'power of action' distinguishes him from the hero of myth. Heroes of myth, as opposed to heroes of Romance, are often attributed with divinity.[252] The humanness of the hero makes him more accessible than a hero endowed with abnormal attributes of strength, power and supernatural qualities. May Morris describes the way in which different traditions constructed their heroes, explaining that her father was drawn to the Northern tradition:

> The Irish heroes have qualities of magic that enable them to achieve deeds of valour so monstrous that they retreat somewhat beyond human sympathy and bring us into a realm of fairy-land peculiarly their own. . .

> But the Gods and Heroes whose legends the noble families of Norway brought from their homes to Iceland, though often monstrous enough in their deeds and dealings, have human attributes that make them companionable and thinkable even to us of the modern world.[253]

It is clear to me that the male heroes of the romances fall easily into two broad categories or types: The first category may be referred to as that of the 'conventional' heroes, those heroes whose narrative most closely follows traditional patterns of the hero-quest. Into this category fall Hallblithe, Ralph and Walter, I would argue. They may be grouped according to their approximate ages (young adulthood). All three stories end with a happy union with a suitable woman, successful [re-]integration into a community, and an advance in social status. Hallblithe and Ralph both return to the community of origin; Walter is the only hero in the prose romances to not

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[252] See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 188.
[253] May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 volumes. New York: Russell and Russell, 1966, volume 1, 446.

return home. The second category contains the 'unconventional' heroes. In this category, I would place Osberne and Birdalone. Osberne is distinguished because of his youth. He is the youngest of the male prose romance heroes, only twelve years old at the start of the narrative. The fact of his youth at the outset emphasises the notion of his quest as one of physical and psychological maturation – as a youth his development, both physically and mentally, is more pronounced than that of an adult. The thematic concerns of his narrative are slightly different to those of his older counterparts'. Birdalone is Morris's unique expression of a totally autonomous female hero. Her story is given special consideration in the following chapter. All of the quests express a concern for social as well as individual development. Bono views Morris's exploration of the hero's individual growth as a microcosm for social development.[254] However, although I have employed the term 'conventional' to describe the structure of the quests, it is to be understood that the term is used only loosely. The rest of this chapter will be concerned with developing and demonstrating the argument that Morris played with conventional structures, even in his most 'typical' quest stories, to invent new forms of the quest and the quest-hero.

Although conventional hero-myth scholarship does not stress the importance of place or location to the hero's story, this thesis will argue that place is an integral factor of the hero-myth structure, building on the foundation laid in the previous

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[254] Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 45-46.

chapter. I would argue that there is a strong connection between discourses on the hero and on place which needs to be made explicit. M. M. Bakhtin has explicitly drawn together the two traditionally separate elements of narrative in his explication of romance: he argues that both 'the hero and the miraculous world in which he acts are of a piece, there is no separation between the two.'[255] Miller draws in the third narrative element – plot – when he refers to the hero's 'framework of adventure'; he maintains that the constraining element in the framework of heroic adventure is the space in which they occur.

The conventional tripartite structure of the hero's adventures, I would argue, is inextricably tied to place. Movement to or from a particular *place* signals or precipitates each stage of the hero's journey: Joseph Campbell describes the stages as Departure, Initiation and Return.[256] Departure is defined by leaving 'home', a place that is often important to the hero's quest, particularly in the 'there-and-back-again' story[257]; Initiation involves a liminal place, often signalled by the crossing of borders; Return or Incorporation is concerned with how the hero is re-integrated at "home" or integrated into a new community. When each of these stages is considered in terms of the place/s in which they are enacted, new meaning is given to the hero's quest-structure, and new importance is given to place. Bono offers some

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[255] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981, 153-154

[256] I have deferred to Joseph Campbell's terminology here for convenience, as they are probably the most standard or familiar. The use of particular terminology in the three-part structure will be set below in Critical Issues. See Campbell's *The Hero.*

[257] J. R. R. Tolkien used this phrase as the subtitle for his novel *The Hobbit*. It references the circular quest in which the hero's quest leads him home again.

observations on Morris's use of place that form a useful summary of some of the main ideas already raised in this thesis. She notes that Morris visualises his hero's progress as a complex relation to symbolic landscape; and that this method is an expression of his deliberate effort to break out of what he saw as the 'solipsism of modern reductive individualism through attention to context' and the shaping forces of the 'natural and social environment.'[258]

Place is also significant in the structure of the hero's quest because it can determine the ways in which the hero is able to empower himself. That is, the ways in which the hero behaves or functions in order to achieve success. For example, in cultural space (by which I mean a town or city), the hero is bound by social conventions. His actions tend to be determined by social convention. In natural space, the hero's actions are determined more by instinct, his behaviour can be seen to be more base (most of the sexual elements in the romances are enacted in natural space). Liminal space, signalled by certain landscape symbols (as I have shown in the previous chapter), is a place of transition – the hero's actions in liminal space can be read with reference to anthropological ritual traditions. Liminal space and natural space are also the places in which magic functions. In the prose romances, I argue that the process of liminality can be explicitly connected to the hero's physical location, developing Elsbree's observation that liminality 'is both temporal and spatial. It can characterise not only the events that compose ritual transition but also the place or

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258 Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 50.

places where these events occur.' It is worth quoting further from Elsbree's articulation of this role of place in liminality:

> These settings, from the writer's or critic's viewpoint, include both the locations in the narrative itself and the larger imaginatively rooted milieu such locations are part of. To put this another way, I am arguing that for certain writers – and perhaps, certain genres – liminal space of a certain kind is essential to creation… This milieu, like the sacred space of actual ritual, sanctions the narrative because it is both defined by tradition and open to the test of agonistic powers. [259]

The male hero's special relationship with place in the romances is mainly determined through the female 'helpers' – Ursula and the Maid in particular are closely aligned with the forces of the natural world, and they connect the hero to the powers of the natural world, 'natural magic'.

Within the framework of the male heroic paradigm, the thesis will explore how the women of the romances affect the male quest narrative. The thesis will demonstrate how the male hero of the romances is dependent on women to enable his quest. I would argue that Morris has 'feminised' the traditional hero and the quest, and has created a unique type of male hero who successfully integrates with the world through his female partner. The role of these auxiliary women is crucial to the success of the male heroes; Morris's male heroes are ultimately empowered and capacitated by women. From a feminist perspective, Morris's pattern offers a positive model for romance women – they are empowered, efficacious, and crucial to the hero's eventual success. Nevertheless, there is a limit to the power of women

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[259] Langdon Elsbree, *Ritual Passages and Narrative Structures*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991, 47.

in the romances: their efforts as individuals are not acknowledged or rewarded: their rewards are reaped only through the men they enable. The romances are ultimately male-heroic romances, but they are unique because of the strong female efficacy Morris has allowed.

The Morrisian Hero

This section will investigate the cultural and ideological context of the romances in relation to Morris's construction of the quest-hero. The Morrisian hero can be read, I would argue, as the symbolic embodiment of the social and cultural ideals of medieval Romanticism. It will be seen that the Morrisian hero's quest is one for integration with nature and community, and the heroes themselves display social and collective values. The construction of the Morrisian hero can be contextualised as Morris's oblique imaginative response to the fragmenting social structures of the nineteenth-century, which were continuing with the rapid industrialisation of the nation. One of the ambitions of Romanticism was to try to restore a sense of individuality that the industrial age had begun to erode away through its development of mechanised processes, large scale factories and mass-production; the individual was rapidly becoming no more than a cog in the machine. The Age of the Machine symbolised standardisation, uniformity and interchangeability, in which man was not permitted the freedom to express his individuality or nurture his community.[260] The Romantic Middle Ages provided a stable and coherent universe in which to develop the idea of the individual as an interdependent part of an

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[260] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 12-14.

integral whole, countering the modern industrial construction of the individual as a competing, self-contained unit.[261] I will demonstrate that by rewriting and re-imagining the hero of myth and medieval romance in a fresh form, Morris both reflected the aesthetic ideals of his age and created a new way of expressing these ideals. Richard Mathews offers a viable classification of the Morrisian hero as a 'horizontal hero' that articulates the underlying Romantic essence of Morris heroes. Mathews describes the horizontal hero as one who 'seeks a wholeness or synthesis of relationships in terms of this world, a horizontal continuity of community and history.' The horizontal hero also seeks to share his love with another, and to 'affirm his tribe's rights, land, and values against encroachment of an enemy.'[262] In the words of the Sage in *The Well at the World's End*, the aim of the hero should be 'to live in peace and patience without fear or hatred, and to succour the oppressed and love the lovely, and to be the friends of men,' (*WWE* 2, 36).

Most critical studies of Morris's romance heroes adopt a relatively conventional approach by utilising the quest pattern and mythic and ritual elements in their readings. Carole Silver, Charlotte H. Oberg and Amanda Hodgson are the main contributors to this field.[263] Their studies will offer significant critical support for this chapter. These studies demonstrate that Morris was well versed in the emerging field of comparative anthropology as well as studies of folklore and mythology, and that these fields have bearing on his prose romances. As Oberg has pointed out, the

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[261] See Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain,* 17.
[262] Mathews, *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*, 90.
[263] A summary of their key works can be found in 'Critical Review' in chapter one of this thesis.

quest pattern is inextricably associated with the concept of initiation, a 'ritual transformation of the hero'. She observes that initiation patterns proliferate in all of Morris's romances.[264] It is critically recognised that his [male] hero's experiences constitute James Campbell's monomyth of the hero; that the heroes undergo a series of initiations on their quests and encounter important archetypal figures on their journeys.[265] Silver offers a concise summary of the influence of these areas of study on Morris. She notes that Morris was especially interested in the fields of mythology and anthropology and the ways they sought to explain the origin, transmission and significance of myth, folklore and romance.[266]

Morris was acquainted with significant texts such as the Grimm brothers' *Teutonic Mythology* (which had been translated into English by 1888), Lewis H. Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871) and Andrew Lang's *Custom and Myth* (1884).[267] The ideas expressed in these new interpretations of myth, folklore and ancient societies undoubtedly shaped Morris's creative thinking when he wrote the prose romances. A question remains as to whether Morris read James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), but it is almost certain that he knew of it and that he was cognizant of the main ideas expressed within it.[268] Increased scholarship during the Victorian period undoubtedly contributed to an important understanding of community, and its attendant values and art, based on new

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[264] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 119.
[265] See Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 162.
[266] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 158.
[267] See Silver's review of Morris's reading in *The Romance of William Morris*, 158*ff*
[268] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 159. Silver analyses Morris's late prose romances in the context of Frazer in her article, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris.'

perceptions of the Middle Ages and other historic periods. For Morris, these developing areas of scholarship were key to liberating his mind from the 'categories of bourgeois thought.'[269] The perspectives of anthropological and mythographical discourse will, I would argue, assist in building a better understanding of Morris's romances. For Morris, the symbolic significance of the initiation pattern clearly had a great imaginative appeal, as Oberg has noted, and 'lift the [romances] above the banality of mere adventure.'[270]

Silver identifies three concepts that shape the prose romances, that may be linked directly to Morris's understanding of anthropology and myth: the three concepts are the myth of barbarism, the myth of the hero, and the myth of the fertile earth-mother.[271] Silver makes what I believe to be a key observation regarding Morris's construction of the prose romances; that is, by assimilating these sources (as I have outlined above) and fusing them with his own private visions Morris created 'new myths for himself and his audience.'[272] I believe this expresses the central nature of the romances. It also recalls Tolkien's imagery of the 'Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story' that he employs to describe the range of sources and material that writers dip into to fashion their stories.[273] Tolkien stresses that, although such shared elements might set up similarities between many fairy-stories, they are only superficial relationships, or at least, ought to be only superficial relationships This is because for

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[269] Thompson, *William Morris*, 28.
[270] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 120.
[271] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 118.
[272] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 120.
[273] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 29.

Tolkien, the most important element of a fairy-story's origin should be *invention*.[274]

This returns us to the thesis's deliberate employment of the term 'invention' to describe Morris's achievement.

This chapter will build upon the work already done by critics such as Silver and Hodgson, and expand their critical framework with a pluralistic approach that will incorporate critical terminology from studies by Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye and Arnold van Gennep, amongst others.

Critical Issues

The structure of the adventure or quest is integral to the construction of the hero; it provides the means by which to examine not only the role and function of the hero, but also to examine the wider themes and issues of the quest narrative. The following section will introduce the main theoretical approaches to reading the hero, which will form the primary critical tools of analysis in this chapter. These approaches are structuralist/formalist in nature, and provide a useful springboard for this thesis to engage in a broader investigation that includes references to the cultural context of the romances. The key references are comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, Northrop Frye, and Arnold van Gennep. The hero-myth essentially presents a structure of the hero's life, with ritual and mythic elements defining the different stages of the life. The hero-myth – or 'monomyth', to adopt Campbell's term – is a powerful tool for the study of fantasy literature (which is

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[274] Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 24.

often based on mythic traditions, particularly Occidental mythic traditions), and of archetypal patterns, as long as its constraints are recognised. It has been demonstrated that the lives of many traditional heroes follow a uniform plot or pattern, and the structure of the hero's quest is often considered within the larger framework of the hero's life. The pattern of the hero-myth was first established by E. B. Tylor in 1871 in his *Primitive Culture*: the hero is exposed at birth, saved by a human or animal, and grows up to be a national hero. This pattern was expanded upon by J. G. von Hahn (1876),[275] and since then, other scholars have continued to explore myths for hero-patterns. The most influential proponents have been Otto Rank in *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909), Lord Raglan in *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (1936), and Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), although there are many other important studies too. Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* concentrates on the hero in the first half of life, and the text remains the classic application of Freudian theory to hero myths.[276] Rank's scheme begins with the birth of the hero, but although he deals with child hero Rank's heroes are predominantly noble, often royalty, and are figures of legend or history. Writing after Rank is Lord Raglan, whose study of the hero singles out the mythic ritual patterns in James Frazer's *Golden Bough* and applies that pattern to hero myths. His list of archetypal events in the life of the hero is very similar to that of Rank.

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275 J. G. von Hahn, *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien*, Jena, 1876.
276 Rank later broke with Freud.

Joseph Campbell

Comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell is perhaps the best-known proponent of the hero myth – known as the 'monomyth.' His analysis of hero myths in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949)[277] has become integral to any study of the hero in romance and fantasy, literatures that are heavily based on mythic traditions. The Hero emerged from the new critical interest in myth theory and criticism, which challenged New Criticism's objective explication of single texts. Campbell's work has done much to popularise the hero-myth, and it serves as an important introduction to studies of the field. The monomyth is famously the foundation for the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* movies, as well as for the *Mad Max* series of films.[278] It has been argued that the enormous popularity of Campbell's hero-myth resides in his articulation of central themes in modern life: individualism, democracy, romantic love, an admiration for the selfless hero; *Hero* became a 'countercultural favourite' in 1960s in America. It is probably not coincidental that this was the period that Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* rose to popularity. *The Lord of the Rings* captured the mood of counter-cultural protest, provided a 'vocabulary of moral protest', and stood for a system of values.[279] I would argue that, superficially at least, the resurrection of the hero-myth through Campbell may be said to be operating in a similar cultural milieu to that of Romanticism. In a period of turbulent social and political change, Campbell's monomyth suggested a transcendentally unifying

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[277] All references in this thesis to text will be taken form the following edition: Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Princeton University Press, 1971.

[278] See Mark Levon Byrne, *Myths of Manhood: The Hero in Jungian Literature*. Sydney Studies in Religion 3, 2001, 144*ff*. The rest of this paragraph also utilizes Byrne's analysis from 144*ff*. Byrne's comments on the reception of Campbell's *Hero* is based mainly on American examples.

[279] Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain*, 110.

concept of man. His one-myth simplified the complexities of the world's myth. It offered a system of values – as Tolkien did in *The Lord of the Rings* – that filled a moral and spiritual void in the modern West. It emphasised the potential for anyone to hear the call to adventure and be a hero. However, it is apposite to signal the fact that there are structural, logical and methodological weaknesses to Campbell's monomyth, well charted by scholars.[280] The limitations of his work do not devalue the importance of it, but they must be acknowledged. The thesis's main interest in Campbell is to serve as a useful point of departure, or structuring system, for analysis. The generic pattern he identifies manifests itself too ubiquitously in fantasy to be entirely ignored, though we must appreciate the many potential variables of the pattern in individual works.

Campbell's monomyth is essentially a synthesis of several theories of myth, from sources such as James Frazer and Carl Jung. In the monomyth, Campbell sought to establish a single universal myth that would highlight the shared themes connecting, as he argued, all hero-myths. Campbell describes the basic pattern:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.[281]

Campbell's hero could be of any rank or station, unlike Raglan's hero prototypes, for instance, which were of high rank or nobility. The 'ordinary hero' allowed for a

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[280] Byrne provides a summary of, and references to, the main counterpoints to Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in *Myths of Manhood*, 144-48.
[281] Campbell, *The Hero*, 30.

broader incorporation of traditions into his schema. The core of Campbell's pattern relies on a three-part model of *separation*, *initiation* and *return*, derived from van Gennep's rites of passage.[282] These patterns serve to delimit – if not limit - the life of the hero.[283] This structure is essentially the quest-structure, described in anthropological terms utilising ritual. Campbell's stages may be summarized thus: The first stage – *separation* – is when the hero is 'called to adventure.' It is the stage during which the curiosity or fascination of the hero is aroused, and he is drawn into adventure. Adventure may be heralded by a numinous or supernatural event or person, or through a more overt summons or need. During this stage the hero 'crosses the threshold' into a world unfamiliar, even dangerous to him. The second phase – *initiation* – is that key period in which the hero faces a succession of trials. Campbell refers to this as the Road of Trials. The hero may be aided by various means during this stage: supernatural helpers, amulets, and liminal figures. The hero also faces possible danger from malign forces and beings, perhaps from the archetypal figure of the 'woman as temptress'. The third stage – *return* – is important because it often involves the transfer of the hero's personal gain to a societal gain: the hero returns to his community which then benefits from his experiences, his wisdom, his gained maturity. By establishing similarities between world hero-myths, Campbell's book lays the groundwork or starting point for more specific studies.

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[282] Campbell, *The Hero*, 30.
[283] Campbell borrowed from Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* in which Gennep describes his tripartite structure.

Northrop Frye

Structuralist critic Northrop Frye took a similar approach to Campbell when he developed his literary theories of myths and archetypes. That is, he considered and amalgamated a wide range of sources and ideas in theory literary archetypes, presented in his seminal work *The Anatomy of Criticism* (first published in 1957). Frye argues that literature is derived from myth, specifically, from the myth of the hero. Frye's analysis of myth assumes that all myths that structure literature were once tied to rituals.[284] Frye writes that 'literature is informed by pre-literary categories such as ritual, myth and folktale.' He describes ritual as an effort to 'recapture a lost rapport with the natural cycle' of the earth.[285]

In *The Anatomy of Criticism* Frye offers pure critical theory on modes, symbols, myths and genres. The third essay, 'Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths', contributes to the exposition of the quest pattern. Frye positions romance as a 'mode' rather than a 'genre', positioning it as a literary archetype. The structure of his romance archetype focuses on the hero (to the exclusion of other elements), and the hero's struggle against his antagonist. Frye's romance hero is superior in degree, but not in kind, to normal men, and he 'moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended.'[286] Frye sets out the tripartite structure of the hero's life as an 'archetypal romance pattern', in which medieval romance narratives

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[284] See Robert Segal's introduction to Frye in *The Myth and Ritual Theory. An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 218.
[285] Frye, 'The Archetypes of Literature' in *The Myth and Ritual Theory*, 223-225.
[286] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 33

are broken into three stages: the first stage is the stage of the 'perilous journey' and the preliminary minor adventures; the second stage consists of the 'crucial struggle'; and the third stage is that of the return and exaltation of the hero.[287] Frye's actual terminology reflects Campbell's, if unnecessarily complicated by a resort to Greek terminology: *agon* ('conflict', corresponding to Campbell's Separation); *pathos* ('death-struggle', corresponding to Campbell's Initiation); *anagnorisis* ('discovery', corresponding to Campbell's Return). Frye's examination of each stage contributes to an overall reading of the hero, not only in the wider context of his society but also in terms that engage with the psychology of the hero.

Wolfe explicitly acknowledges the aptness of Frye's structure of romance to modern fantasy.[288] Frye's approach usefully expands on the concept of the romance genre to include a more general type of literary production; it thus helps us to locate Morris's prose romances within a recognised formula of story, which is influenced by, and reflects, some of the basic patterns of romance, and myth. Romance, as a mode, is a highly adaptable form that responds to particular historical and ideological contexts, as Fuchs has argued, and it is only in post-structuralist terms that this can best be explored.[289] For a meaningful exposition of the romances, I argue, the cultural context is paramount, as is recourse to a variety of critical discourses

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[287] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 187.
[288] Wolfe. 'Symbolic Fantasy', 195-96.
[289] See Barbara Fuchs, *Romance*. The New Critical Idiom. New York and London: Routledge, 2004, 5-8.

The Liminal

In anthropological terms, liminality refers to a particular state of the hero. Arnold van Gennep's (1908) structure of the three phases or stages in the rites of passage is analogous to the basic tripartite structure of the hero's adventures, as outlined above. He places an emphasis on the liminal in his scheme: the three phases are separation (pre-liminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (post-liminal). As Elsbree has articulated, tripartite structures engage our sense of beginnings, transitions and endings in both life and in literature. The three phases enact a powerful homology;[290] van Gennep observes:

> For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross… the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age…[291]

The liminal period not only symbolises an in-between state, but also comprises its own special series of rites. For van Gennep, this liminal phase involves a spatial passage, a step such as moving through a doorway; it is a process of change or transfiguration. Bruce Lincoln has noted van Gennep's particular tendency to employ spatial terms in describing the process – 'border', 'passage', 'threshold' and 'position' – and that these terms are more than metaphorical; the rites themselves make use of spatial factors. Thus, the three-part schema is graphically acted out in spatial terms. Lincoln offers the example from Australian Aboriginal male initiation

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[290] See Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 16-17.
[291] Van Gennep*, The Rites of Passage*, 189.

rites in which the initiand is taken from his 'normal terrain' to 'wilderness', and back to his normal terrain with a new status upon his return.[292]

Van Gennep's influence has spread beyond fields specifically engaged in studies of tribal or traditional societies into literary criticism, in which terms such as 'rites of passage,' 'initiation ritual' and 'liminality' are utilised.[293] Liminality, Elsbree argues, initiates change by 'severing the participants from whatever has been the merely customary or enforced routine.'[294] Victor Turner, following Arnold van Gennep, became particularly interested in the marginal or liminal period of rites of passage, and built considerably on van Gennep's work. Turner defines liminality in a social/cultural context as a moment of 'social limbo': 'liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.'[295] It has been argued that in this phase, the usual social states of gender, age and hierarchy may be negated or reverted.[296] I would suggest that this concept has bearing on Morris's construction of the hero through the concerns of place and society in the romances. The hero essentially functions as an emissary for Morris's social concerns relating to the relationship between man and nature. His eventual success in establishing a harmonious society

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[292]Bruce Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Rituals of Women's Initiation*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 100.

[293] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 15. Elsbree notes, with surprise, that there has been no full-scale working through of the ideas of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner in relation to narrative, given the frequency with which their terms and ideas are used by literary critics.

[294] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 20.

[295] Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969, 95.

[296] Dag Øistein Endsjø, 'To Lock Up Eleusis: A Question of Liminal Space', *Numen* 47.4 (2000): 351-86 (354).

is dependent first on his separation from his original community. In Morris, not only does the male hero leave behind his community, but he also leaves behind his social status within that community. This abandonment of social status can be a deliberate feature of the hero's departure, as in the case of Ralph who leaves his country surreptitiously, or it can be an entirely unexpected part of the adventure, as with Walter, who ends up stranded in an unfamiliar country that does not recognise – or care about – his social status or lineage. I will return to these observations later in my analysis of the texts.

The liminal period of the quest is also pertinent to this study of the hero because of its emphasis on the hero's interaction with the supernatural/other. Miller shows that the border is 'often the transitional or liminal topos between the human, profane world and a supernatural zone or otherworld' for the hero.[297] Schaafsma identifies the encounter with the 'Other' as 'the catalyst for the hero's transformation and for the restoration to health, physical and spiritual, of the larger community.'[298] Schaafsma identifies the supernatural 'other' as a specific figure: a unicorn, dragon, or wizard. This thesis will expand on her definition to include *place*. That is, the encounter with the 'other' will include the overall experience of the hero in the liminal place of his adventure. Even when not overtly or specifically 'supernatural', the hero's adventure in liminal space is equally 'other' – it takes place in a world

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[297] Miller, *The Epic Hero*, 147-48.
[298] Karen Schaafsma, 'Wondrous Vision: Transformation of the Hero in Fantasy through Encounter with the Other' in William Coyle, ed., *Aspects of Fantasy: Selected Essays from the Second International Conference on the Fantastic in Literature and Film*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986, 63.

unknown or unfamiliar to the hero. It may or may not contain supernatural figures, but is almost certain to contain a version of Frye's 'morally neutral' figures of quest-romance, figures who are or who suggest spirits of nature. These are figures that function in or represent liminal space, and they can serve to emphasise the hero's special connection to nature.[299] The hero often undergoes his period of liminality in natural space, in which natural features such as caves, forests, and bodies of water function symbolically as part of the ritual process, and in which the numinous power of nature has its own special role. Quest-stories 'have always been quintessentially liminal'; the 'tests endured and the roles assumed by the hero or heroine presuppose the betwixtness and betweenness of transitional passage.'[300] The emphasis on this middle stage is not antithetical to van Gennep's theories – he acknowledges that not all of the three types of rites (the rites of separation, of transition, and of incorporation) are equally important.[301] In this middle part of the hero's journey the hero encounters the 'other', the extraordinary forces and people that will shape his adventure. Ritual aspects of the hero's Initiation phase are often conveyed through the symbolic aspects of place, and it is during the Initiation stage that the Morrisian hero encounters the exceptional female figures that guide, tempt and teach him. Further, the romance women are capable and empowered *only* in the liminal places. Here, they are able to assist (or to hinder, depending on their role) the hero, but beyond the borders of the liminal world, they are disempowered

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[299] See *Anatomy of Criticism*, 196-97.
[300] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 21.
[301] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.

by the ruling patriarchal culture, and the male hero is permitted to assume his leadership role.

Women in the Hero-myth

Hero-myths essentially rely on Jungian archetypal configurations that include the hero and such other figures as the wise old man, the wicked witch and the wounded king. These archetypal approaches – utilised by Campbell, van Gennep and others, do not accord much space to the role of women. Putting aside the question of the hero being female (which I will return to in detail in the following chapter), in the basic quest-pattern women's roles are limited to one of three parts: the goal of the quest (the bride, the rescued princess); assistant to the quest (the old crone protective figure); or the enemy of the quest (the witch, the temptress). In Frye's structure, the male romance-hero commonly encounters two types of women: the 'lady of duty' and the 'lady of pleasure'.[302] In these terms, women are constructed in relation to the [male] hero.[303]

Campbell makes clear divisions between gender roles in his monomyth, though he claims his structure is non-gender-specific. He offers women specific roles in the hero's quest, each of which relies on the gender dichotomy for its function. For instance, Campbell talks about woman as goddess. In this role, the goddess is the reward for the hero's 'ultimate adventure', in which he finds union with the Queen

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[302] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism,* 196.
[303] I follow an assumption that the heroic paradigms are based on a male, heterosexual hero.

Goddess of the World.[304] In this specifically gendered role, the hero cannot be anything other than male the female cannot be anything other than a conquered prize for the hero, as Campbell goes on to describe: she is the 'bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride.'[305] The hero is also 'master' of life – and the woman is life. Therefore, in Campbell's paradigm, the hero's ultimate goal in to master the female/feminine – whether she represents his consort, or is symbolic of the world and life itself.[306] The hero can encounter woman in the form of the goddess on his journey, says Campbell, but 'she can never be greater than himself.'[307]

I would like to suggest that, though Morris was familiar with archetypal roles from archaeological and mythographical studies, his prose romances indicate a re-imagining of archetypal roles, particularly in respect of the agency of women in the hero's quest. So, although the monomyth provides a useful framework on which to build an investigation of the male Morrisian hero, Morris's female characters have a far more significant role than the conventional approaches can meaningfully account for. I would argue that Morris's 'feminisation' of the male heroic code establishes the foundation for a new and unique heroic paradigm. His male heroes, though recognisable within romance and hero-myth conventions, function in a unique context that allows for significant female agency.

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[304] Campbell, *The Hero*, 109.
[305] Campbell, *The Hero,* 110-11.
[306] Campbell, *The Hero,* 120.
[307] Campbell, *The Hero,* 116.

The Quest-Heroes

This chapter will now proceed with an investigation of the Morrisian hero in the prose romances. It will be seen that Morris constructs his heroes on a fairly conventional narrative framework of hero-myth. To trace all of the heroes in any significant way is beyond the scope of this chapter. I am therefore going to investigate key areas of the hero's progress in his quest, as they are typically identified through the structuralists, and show how these episodes demonstrate the special relationship between the hero and the space in which he operates. I will make briefer reference to the other texts by way of comparison. The investigation will be divided into three areas generally corresponding to the three parts of Campbell's quest structure, with reference to van Gennep's stages of the rites of passage. The investigation will focus on the middle or 'liminal' stage of the hero's quest, and the final incorporation of the hero into society. The liminal is often the most interesting stage; from the story-teller's point of view (in fiction, or plays or films) liminality is the phase 'during which values are tested, issues are clarified, choices begin to have consequences.'[308] This section of the narratives is also the central concern for interpretation. They function as versions of the pastoral, and they are also part of traditional quest-romance with their allusions to an ideal; they are rooted in traditional sources; and they are dependent on the suggestiveness and symbolism of natural imagery.[309]

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[308] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 22.
[309] See Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 51-52.

The primary text for investigation is *The Wood Beyond the World*. This text is of specific interest because it shows, as I will demonstrate, the development of the most active female figure of the romances, before Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Though *The Wood Beyond the World* is ostensibly a male quest narrative, I would like to suggest that it represents a significant step towards a new and 'feminised' version of the conventional quest story. The role of the Maid is critical to Walter's success, and indeed, the agency of females overall in the narrative is quite dominant, as I will demonstrate. Contrasts and comparisons will be drawn with Ralph in *The Well at the World's End*, in light of some shared thematic concerns. Both Walter and Ralph embody the function of hero as renewer of society, and women play a significant role in their final achievements of love and community. These achievements themselves are not the individualistic goals of Campbell's heroes but communal goals that are recognised more within feminist re-readings of the hero myth.[310] Morris's stress on nature goddesses as a special type of female figure, recurring in three of the romances, is part of the expression of his nature-rooted ethical and social schemes.[311] Ralph's narrative is significantly protracted – *The Well at the World's End* is by far the longest of all of the late prose romances (approximately 228 000 words), and takes place in a very different milieu to that of Walter's tale. Ralph's quest takes him to a place 'beyond the world' (the Well), but the greatest part of his liminal stage is enacted in cultured space – towns

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[310] Refer to the following chapter for a deeper critical analysis of feminist revisionings of the hero myth.

[311] See Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 53.

and cities, with interludes in the wilderness. Concomitantly, his main course of education is related to the lessons of ruling a society. Ralph also learns about love and the importance of finding the correct partner in life. However, as I have argued, the hero's final integration into society is dependent on his female partner; Ralph's relationship with Ursula sets forth a paradigm for the relation between nature and society. I will therefore continue to focus on how Morris develops the hero's quest through his relationship key female figures in the romance; as Talbot argues, 'the full import of Ralph's quest is only to be understood in terms of the lady Ursula and the lady of Abundance.'[312]

Before proceeding to the main investigation, I will offer an excursus on *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. This text is the earliest of the prose romances under consideration to be written, and it shows clear distinctions in terms of its construction of the hero and the quest to the later narratives. The key difference is, I would argue, the lack not only of strong female figures, but also of any significant female characters at all. Another area that Morris can be seen to have substantially developed in the later romances is the concerned focus on the hero's integration into society, with an emphasis on the long-term benefits stemming from hero's successful quest on the community. The type of feminist communal integration in the later romances is not evident in this earlier romance. I would argue that its quest conforms closely to conventional quest narrative, especially in respect of the role of

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[312] 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris', *Southern Review* 3.4 (1969): 339-57 (346).

women. The Hostage's role is little more than a convenient precipitator for Hallblithe's quest, which may be aligned with a traditional bride-quest. *The Glittering Plain* may be read as a measure against which the themes and concerns of the following romances can be considered. Kirchhoff views *The Wood Beyond the World* as a 'compensation for the inadequacies of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*,' arguing that *The Glittering Plain* lacks a structure of individual development that is evident in the later romance.[313] I concur with Kirchhoff, but with qualifications. There are certainly elements in this earlier tale that are more fully developed in the later romances, which signal a development of Morris's ideas rather than evoke a sense of 'lack' in this tale. Hallblithe is certainly not made susceptible to personal development in this tale, but I would argue that this is a direct result of the tightly focussed nature of his quest. Hallblithe begins the tale content with his lot, whereas Walter's quest – and Ralph's – is precipitated by unhappiness and ennui. Hallblithe's story is a reinforcement of the power of an ideal life to guide and inure the hero against the superficial temptations he faces. He asserts his pragmatic desire: 'I seek no dream… but rather the end of dreams' (*GP* 273). His quest is specifically directed to rescuing the Hostage; Ralph and Walter seek only adventure. Thus, there are significant structural differences that need to be taken into account. *The Glittering Plain* is the shortest of the romances, pared down, as Hodgson remarks, to its essential components.[314]

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[313] Frederick Kirchhoff, *William Morris*. Boston MA: Twayne Publishers, 1979, 141.
[314] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 151.

The Conventional Quest-Hero

Hallblithe's quest is precipitated by the abduction of his fiancé, unimaginatively named the Hostage, placing his quest story in the tradition of the bride-quest, in which the woman functions as the goal of the quest. Indeed, Hostage's participation in the narrative is extremely limited. She is not present at the beginning of the story except as the subject of the news of the abduction. Hallblithe's appearance and strength are those befitting a hero: he is 'fair, strong, and not untried in battle' (*GP* 2), and his engagement to Hostage is appropriate and proper:

> This man loved an exceeding fair damsel called the Hostage, who was of the House of the Rose, wherein it was right and due that the men of the Raven should wed. She loved him no less, and no man of the kindred gainsaid their love, and they were to be wedded on Midsummer Night. (*GP* 2)

The Hostage's affiliation with the House of the Rose does suggest, I would argue, a connection to nature, an aspect of the feminine power that Morris draws on in much greater detail in the later romances (in figures such as Habundia, the Lady of Abundance and the Maid). Like the other romance heroes, Hallblithe is taken out of the community in which he lives, in this case an ideal pastoral home. Hallblithe carries the memory of his home throughout his journey, using it to focus himself in the 'land of lies' that is the Glittering Plain. His recollection of the land are formed in terms of its activity, and of his relationship to the land, and of the honest work performed there. He yearns 'to behold the roof of his fathers and to tread the meadow which his scythe had swept, and the acres where his hook had smitten the wheat' (*GP* 263). The name 'Hallblithe' reaffirms his nature as a 'stay-at-home'

hero,[315] and reinforces the centrality of Cleveland by the Sea to the tale. Kirchhoff describes the tribal hall and territory as 'the symbol that… confirms the tribe's relationship to nature.'

Hallblithe's journey is by sea – foreshadowing Walter's later sea journey – and symbolises an archetypal engagement with the unconscious. Symbols of ritual processes mark the narrative, as Mathews has observed. The underground cave that provides access to the Isle of Ransom signals a descent to the underworld; the Isle of Ransom is a place of death.[316] Morris uses the geography – recalling the sublime fierceness of Icelandic – to communicate the terror of the ritual descent:

> Now they were underneath the black shadow of the black cliff and amidst the twilight the surf was tosses about like white fire… One moment Hallblithe saw all this hanging above the turmoil of thundering water and dripping rock and the next he was in the darkness of the cave… (*GP* 223)

Hallblithe is left to 'strive for life against death' on the barren Isle, a 'wilderness of black sand and stones and ice-borne rocks' (*GP* 228), associating the episode with ritual death and rebirth, particularly in light of the journey through the cave – the womb of Nature.[317] This episode clearly corresponds to Campbell's 'Belly of the Whale' archetype, in which the hero 'is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died.'[318] Morris utilises this type of symbolic journey in many of the romances: Walter's sea-storm may be read in this context.

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[315] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, 139.
[316] Mathews, *Worlds Beyond the World*, 35-36.
[317] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 119.
[318] Campbell, *The Hero*, 90.

Hallblithe's primary test is to reject the temptations of the erotic but false paradise of the Glittering Plain.[319] He also faces the challenge of remaining true to his beloved when he is offered the love of the King's daughter. His strong adherence to the almost puritanical values of his tribe enable him to successfully conquer any temptations. Unlike Ralph and Walter, who experience relationships with other women before committing to their true loves, Hallblithe is strictly loyal to the Hostage. Offered the choice of two beautiful maidens he rejects them with his proud and stern look, so that one of the maidens recognises that 'Sweeter love abides him, and lips more longed for' (GP 256). It is the absence of the 'correct variety of love' in the Plain that most disturbs Hallblithe, Silver argues.[320] Hallblithe is disturbed by Sea-Eagle's dalliances with a woman who is not known to his kindred, and is 'not born in a house' from which his tribe is permitted to appropriately take a wife (*GP* 256). Morris loosens this stance on sex outside the bonds of matrimony in the later romances, though he still places high value on the importance of true, emotional love over physical sex.

I would argue that Hallblithe's quest is an outright testing – and rejection – of the values associated with an Earthly Paradise as Morris saw them. Hallblithe chooses the world of 'deeds that shall not die' (*GP* 212), paradoxically the world that offers men death, over the land of eternal youth and life that has no history, no memory.

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[319] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 116.
[320] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 165.

The choice of action (deeds) over stasis is echoed later in Walter's choice of the robes of war (deeds) over the robes of peace (stasis, changelessness) (*WBW* 119). These choices represent, it may be argued, a dedication to ancient values of courage and devotion to duty, values that the Glittering Plain completely erases.[321] The Plain's inhabitants are compelled to forget their history and values in order to live in an unchanging present, a sacrifice Hallblithe cannot comprehend. His friend Sea-Eagle has regained his youth, but at the cost of actually living his life: 'Has the spear fallen from thine hand, and hast thou buried the sword of thy fathers in the grave from which thy body hath escaped? What art thou, O Warrior, in the land of the alien and the King?' (*GP* 256). Hallblithe's plea to Sea-Eagle articulates the value of living life in action, of maintaining the values of one's family.

Hallblithe facilitates the social reform of the community of the Ravagers on the Isle of Ransom on his return journey. Hallblithe wins them over with his courage and honesty, which they repay by showing him equal respect, which leads to peace between their tribe and Hallblithe's. They 'give him worthy gifts, such as warriors may take, so that he may show them at home in the House of the Raven, that it may be the beginning of peace' (*GP* 312). Hallblithe's reintegration into his tribe is celebrated with marriage of Hallblithe and the Hostage, 'and that very night she became a wife of the Ravens, that she might bear to the House the best of men and the fairest of women (*GP* 323). On his return, Hallblithe reassumes his place in the

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[321] See Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 117-18.

Hall of his fathers.[322] The conclusion emphasises the importance of the harmony between the two Houses, and of continuing the tribal way of life through the successful integration of the two clans. All prose romances conclude with similar thematic emphasis on union, harmony and community.

The following analysis will explore how Morris developed his quest-heroes from an essentially conventional paradigm in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. The main text under consideration will be, as I have said, *The Wood Beyond the World*. The first part of the analysis, entitled 'Crossing the Threshold', will examine the way in which Morris introduces his heroes and engineers their separation from the familiar world into the realm of the unfamiliar/unknown. The second part, 'The Liminal Hero', will closely examine the trials and tests that the hero undergoes as part of his Road of Trials. It will consider the special role of place to this stage of the hero's journey. The final part, 'Incorporation', will focus on the hero's reintegration into society. Throughout, the special role of women will be given prominent attention in respect of their agency in the hero's quest.

Crossing the Threshold

The first stage of the Morrisian hero's journey incorporates two significant elements from the monomyth and attendant initiation processes, I would argue. The first element is from Campbell's monomyth, which includes what he terms the 'call to

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[322] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 154.

adventure' that signals the first stage of the hero's summons to a 'zone unknown'.[323] This can be connected with van Gennep's 'separation' stage in the rite of passage, which leads to the detachment of the individual 'from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions, or from both.'[324] The second element is the crossing of the threshold, the symbolic signal of the hero's transition into a liminal state, where he is 'betwixt and between'. In Morris's romances, the expression of this stage is closely tied to place, as I will demonstrate.

Stories of remarkable places are part of the 'call to adventure' for two of Morris's heroes: Hallblithe and Ralph are called to adventure by rumours of, respectively, the Glittering Plain and the Well at the World's End. Although initially Hallblithe's 'call to adventure' is triggered by the abduction of his bride-to-be, it is quickly given direction by the mystery of the Glittering Plain. Similarly, Ralph's quest, although initially precipitated simply by a desire for adventure, is soon directed by the search for the magical Well at the World's End. The rumour of a place thus functions as what Campbell terms the 'herald', and it signals the beginning of the hero's transition from the normal to the liminal, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In ritual terms, the hero's decision to accept the call propels him over the threshold and represents the first part of a process of transfiguration.[325]

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[323] Campbell. *The Hero*, 58.
[324] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 94.
[325] Campbell, *The Hero*, 51.

I will investigate how Morris incorporates a 'call to adventure' into the opening stages of the prose romances. These early stages function essentially to remove the hero from the society in which he normally operates, and also introduces the basic information about the hero, and signals or foreshadows some of the themes and concerns of the rest of his adventure. The departure of the hero occurs fairly early in the romances: within the first 2000 words of *The Wood*, Walter has elected to leave home, has sighted the three figures that herald his adventures and has left port aboard his father's ship. Ralph decides he must leave home to seek adventure in the first chapter of *The Well*; by the third chapter (about 3000 words into the tale) he is already on his way and hearing the first reference to the mysterious Well. Both Walter and Ralph leave worlds defined by social conventions, familial structures, obligation and restriction to take on a world that is far more organic and nebulous. However, the circumstances of their departure are very different.

Ralph is prompted to adventure by a simple inclination to escape the banality of his life as the youngest son of a king. Ralph's father rules a quiet and peaceful kingdom, but Ralph desires adventure and excitement: he had 'come forth not for the winning of fatter peace, but to try what new thing his youth and his might and his high hope and his good hap might accomplish.' (*WWE* 1, 25). As the fourth son of a King, Ralph's future social-status is ambiguous – it is unlikely that he will take over his father's throne. His youth also locates him in a transient state: his beard is just sprouting, an old man observes, and then declares Ralph might otherwise be taken for a maid (*WWE* 1, 45). Ralph relinquishes the privileges of his rank when he

leaves home secretly, taking only his horse and his war-gear and sword and spear. Once he is beyond the borders of his father's kingdom, he is no more than an anonymous man-at-arms (*WWE* 1, 8). Ralph's quest is soon given direction by rumour of the magical Well at the World's End. The rumour of a place thus functions as what Campbell terms the 'herald', and it signals the beginning of the hero's transition from the normal to the liminal, from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In ritual terms, the hero's decision to accept the call propels him over the threshold and represents the first part of a process of transfiguration.[326]

Walter is not a royal, like Ralph, but the son of a merchant and still in a relatively privileged position. It is the special privilege of the male hero to seek adventure; he does not suffer the same social constraints as the female hero (as I will explore in the section 'Inventing the Female Quest-Hero'), and he is relatively free to move about the world as he chooses. Walter's desire to leave home is triggered by the desire to escape an unhappy marriage to a woman who has cheated on him. Walter is an Everyman, an ordinary person who experiences extraordinary things. His ordinariness is brought home by the very domestic nature of the problems he has, by the ordinary status he has as the son of a merchant, and by the ordinary nature of the town that he lives in. Walter is

> rather wiser than foolisher than young men are mostly wont; a valiant youth and kind; not of many words but courteous of speech; no roisterer, naught masterful, but peaceable and knowing how to forbear; in a fray a perilous foe, and a trusty war-fellow. (*WBW* 1)

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[326] Campbell, *The Hero*, 51.

Like Ralph, who is 'young and untried' (*WWE* 1, 4), Walter is young, naive and uninitiated, and feels that adventure will precipitate some good change in him. Walter tells his father that when he returns from his travels, he will 'see a new man' in him (*WBW* 4). Walter's initial decision to leave home is, like Ralph's, unguided by a destination. And, again like Ralph, he is stirred to adventure by chance: he has a recurring vision of three figures: a dwarf, 'dark brown of hue and hideous'; a young beautiful maiden with an iron ring around her ankle;[327] and a lady, 'tall and stately', 'radiant of visage and glorious of raiment' (*WBW* 3-4). He thinks they are hallucinations or dreams, but he keeps seeing them on his journey, and the thought of them lures him eventually to the Wood. The two women of his vision become the central concern of the romance as it explores Walter's choices in love. At this stage he is attracted to both of them women: 'he might not tell which of the twain, the maiden or the stately queen, were clearest to his eyes; but sore he desired to see both of them again' (*WBW* 5). The quest in *The Wood Beyond the World* is not one for material riches or power; rather, the focus of the quest is love, and the outcome of the quest or adventure is the attainment of maturity. The beginning of Walter's adventure is guided by an overt theme of sexuality, which continues throughout his journey. Sexuality is a significant aspect of maturation, and the process of Walter's maturation is measured in the main through the nature of his relationships with

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[327] There are several occurrences of women in thralldom in *The Well at the World's End*. Norman Kelvin notes the way in which women are made subservient in that romance, and the way in which this subservience – even thralldom – is a source of the erotic. 'The Erotic in *News From Nowhere* and *The Well at the World's End*' in *Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris*, eds. Blue Calhoun *et al.* New York: William Morris Society, 1976: 97-114. Kelvin notes that the prevalence of the erotic in Morris's prose romances was noticed early by Arthur Compton-Rickett (1913) and has been the subject of attention for a number of scholars.

women: his wife, the Mistress, and the Maid. In terms of the construction of Walter as the quest-hero, I would argue that there are certain areas of ambiguity with respect to his ultimate agency, and that this directly relates to his relationship with women. As one critic has summarised it, the 'hero acts, while the heroine is acted upon.'[328] I would suggest that Walter is, in fact, acted upon – that he undertakes a passive role that is not traditionally associated with the male hero. The Mistress seeks an overt domination of Walter, and it is only through the direct actions of the Maid that Walter achieves his quests – escape from the Mistress and the Wood, the selection of the right partner in the Maid herself, and even the attainment of kingship. I would argue that in the Wood, Walter surrenders any agency he had to both of the women, though they exert their power in different ways.

Liminality is initiated by severing the participants from the ordinary, and Elsbree asserts that this process need not be chosen, wanted or expected.[329] Both heroes are separated from structured, male-dominated societies. Walter is further separated from the social bond of marriage to a woman who, though 'exceeding fair', obviously despises him and is unfaithful (*WBW* 1). The description of his wife on the first page of the narrative not only signals one of the important themes of Walter's quest – the ability to judge women and find true romantic love, but also foreshadows Walter's attraction to the Mistress of the Wood. She too is beautiful but unfaithful, yet Walter cannot help but be attracted to her. The process of Walter's

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[328] Nadya Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*. New York: Continuum, 1994, 24.
[329] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 20.

maturation during the quest is marked by the nature of his relationships with women, particularly with the Mistress and the Maid, measured against the little information we glean of his relationship with his wife.

Walter's separation from home involves a final separation from family: his unfaithful wife's family murders his father while Walter is at sea. With this final tie to his home cut, Walter is not obligated to return home – his adventures end in a new land. Walter retains no ties to his home, and never returns there. Ralph's quest is circular and returns him home – his departure does not involved the cutting of all ties. Liberty – personal and social, is one of the strong themes of Walter's narrative. One of the vestiges of the family tie is in Walter's name: 'Golden Walter'. I would argue that there is both social and individual significance to the appellation. First, it connects Walter to a family lineage. Walter's father is of the 'Lineage of the Goldings, therefore was he called Bartholomew Golden,' (*WBW* 1-2). Bartholomew Golden is a full name befitting the head of the family; in this context, the title Golden Walter may be read as a patronymic that acknowledges Walter's secondary position in the family, as well as family obligation as the direct heir. Second, it references Walter's physical appearance: 'golden' in colouring, Walter is 'a fair-faced man, yellow-haired' and in the 'golden' age of his manhood. 'Golden' is evocative of day, light and brightness, and is further suggestive of Walter's potential heroic virtues. Third, the name Golden can function as a symbol for wealth, and allude to the success of the family as traders, enforcing the commercial nature of the town Walter lives in, Langton-on-Holme. When he leaves this world, he might be said to

be rejecting the world, and associated values, of commercialism, as gold can be seen as a commodity or medium of exchange. Finally, 'Golden' in the context of solar imagery invokes the Sun as the heroic archetype.[330] Both heroes are now set in social limbo – the liminal state. In the woods, only Walter and the King's Son, Otto, have proper names. The other characters carry descriptive or archetypal titles - the Dwarf, the Maid, the Mistress – that are never replaced by proper names. I would suggest that point operates to reinforce the liminal nature of the wood, and also sets up a point of difference between the people of the wood and the people from 'beyond the wood' (presumably Otto was lured to the Wood by the lady from a 'normal' country, like Walter).

The Liminal Hero

The road of trials refers to the set of tests or ordeals the hero must go through once he has crossed the threshold into the unfamiliar. These trials can be considered as an integral part of the liminal stage that the hero must pass in order to move into the final stage of incorporation. *Limen* means not only 'threshold' but 'beginning' in Latin.[331] Thus, the liminal period is the beginning of the hero's transition to a new social state. Moving from the familiar to the unknown, the hero is forced to confront not only the challenges of nature (for Walter) but also challenges from unknown and frequently supernatural forces and experiences. The transition stage moves the hero beyond to a place that is beyond the centres of cultural power,

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[330] Oberg refers briefly to solar imagery in Morris, in *A Pagan Prophet*, 120.
[331] *Latin Dictionary*. Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1993.

which allows for often radical changes or transformations to occur in the hero. This is when the hero becomes the 'liminar', relinquishing their original social status. The association of the liminal state with a liminal place is, I would argue, an important connection in Morris's romances. The signal that the hero is entering or undergoing a liminal state is usually indicated by the location of the hero. This connection is not always made overt, however. Langdon Elsbree, for instance, uses the example of Little Red Riding Hood to illustrate van Gennep's tripartite structure. He writes that Little Red Riding Hood leaves home, and begins the transition to the liminal state as she reaches her grandmother's house. He notes the 'straying from the path' motif, and other ambiguous elements that symbolise puberty.[332] What can be further analysed is the symbolic function of the forest and the path as signals of transition, indicating that the hero is entering a world of the unknown, 'other'. This thesis will demonstrate that place has a central role in the liminal stage.

Walter's progress to the liminal stage is constructed with reference to archetypal place symbolism and romance tradition. Walter's initial journey across the sea, during which his ship is pushed off course by a fierce storm, can be read as a threshold experience, a part of the process of transition from his mundane reality to the otherworld of the Wood. The water element of his journey also suggests a Jungian entrance into the unconscious.

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[332] Elsbree, *Ritual Passages*, 18.

A main aspect of the liminal is the ritual association with death. Walter experiences near-death, or a ritual representation of a near-death experience on the beleaguered ship, and accepts it:

> What matter whether I go down to the bottom of the sea, or come back to Langton, since either way my life or my death will take away from me the fulfilment of desire? (*WBW* 10)

Reference to ritual theory helps to put this event into a clear context of quest ritual. Turner explains that 'liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness,'[333] images Frye notes that the passage of the hero leads to a 'point of *ritual* death'[334] (my italics). Further suggestions of Walter's movement into liminal space build in the narrative. The ship escapes the storm and the shipmen take refuge in a new country, a green and pastoral landscape inhabited only by an old man. He evokes the archetypal image of the 'wild man', clad 'mostly in the skins of beasts' (*WBW* 14). This Carl functions, I would suggest, as Campbell's 'threshold guardian', beyond whom is the unknown and danger, just as beyond the protection of one's community lies danger to the member of that community.[335] Rather than being an overt sign, the threshold is usually signalled by symbolic geography; a bleak and sheer cliff provides the threshold for Walter (the Icelandic influence is clear, I would suggest). The cliffs seem impassable, but Walter spies a pass: 'in the midst of that northern-looking bight was a dark place which seemed to Walter like a downright shard in the cliff' (*WBW* 19). For Walter, a cleft in the

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[333] Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.
[334] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 187.
[335] Campbell, *The Hero*, 77 *ff.*

cliffs symbolises the portal to great adventures, well away from the ordinary world with which he is familiar. He tells the Carl: 'in this land be strange adventures toward, and that if we, and I in especial, were to turn our backs on them, and go home with nothing done, it were pity of our lives: for all will be dull and deedless there' (*WBW* 20). The landscape is almost actively hostile, and the Carl warns him that he faces death if he passes beyond the cliffs, but Walter is less concerned about the dangers than he is by the possibility that he might be passing up an opportunity to find the Mistress in the lands beyond. Ascending the cliff itself offers Walter 'little ill', and then he embarks on a journey that Morris characterizes as the wending of the Waste.[336] This crossing functions on an anthropological level to signal not only a crossing into otherworldly peril, but also a journey of initiation or transition for the traveller. The rocky, arid wasteland beyond the cliff is now well beyond the final protected zone of human habitation (the Carl's land); and beyond the wasteland is the interstitial land of the Wood. The land is close to a pastoral ideal, 'a lovely land of wooded hills, green plains, and little valleys, stretching out far and wide' (*WBW* 26), and quite a contrast to the 'stony wilderness' and 'endless rock' of the waste (*WBW* 24).

There is an evident tension between the world of 'culture' and the world of 'nature', I would suggest, that is given particular expression through Walter's use of his full, or formal, name. The first being Walter encounters beyond the wasteland in the malformed dwarf, a creature more animal than human. Walter introduces himself to

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[336] The relevant chapter is entitled 'Walter Wends the Waste', which is chapter 8 of the book.

the dwarf as a man named Golden Walter from Langton (*WBW* 28). The formality of his identification almost jars against the rough animality of the dwarf, whose 'fearful harsh voice' (*WBW* 28) Walter can barely understand. I would suggest that his use of 'Golden' reflects an attempt to align himself with a familiar identity in a moment of social limbo. However, in the land of the Wood Walter no longer carries the authority of the commercial world. This is the last use of the appellation 'Golden' in reference to Walter in the narrative. The dropping of the name is suggestive of Walter's progress into the liminal state, I would argue, as he drops all form of identification relating to his previous social position. When he encounters the Mistress for the first time, there are further signals of his separation from his previous life. He responds to the question of whether he is a King's Son in terms that diminish his social status, indicated by the use of the word 'but': 'I am but of the sons of merchants' (*WBW* 40). He does not use his name. He furthermore allows the Mistress to make him feel like 'a poor man thrust away from a rich kinsman's door' (*WBW* 40).

Into the Woods

'Into the Woods' is a term that describes a journey in the woods (or similar terrain) that signals a passage from one stage of life to another, as part of a rite of passage.[337] It operates both literally and symbolically in Morris's prose romances. For Walter, 'into the woods' is a literal description of his entry into the titular Wood beyond the

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[337] The term is defined in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 503, which offers some typical examples from fantasy texts of the use of motif, including Lloyd Alexander's *The Book of Three* (1964), Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (1967) and Jane Yolen's *Briar Rose* (1992).

world, and it symbolises a rite of passage. *The Well at the World's End* contains several episodes that specifically utilise the motif in literal and symbolic way.[338] The land of the Wood beyond the world is perhaps the most extreme example in the romances of the natural world functioning as a place of isolation and ritual testing for the hero. It is not until Walter is thrown into the mysterious and magical world of the Wood that his potential is awakened and developed through a series of situations that he would otherwise never have experienced. Langton is safe, it is home; the Wood is the 'Perilous Realm'[339] through which Walter must travel to achieve his quest, and to reach his maturity. The Wood is the main arena for Walter's 'road of trials', a landscape both literal and symbolic that functions to represent the world 'beyond the world'. Entering the Wood, Walter enters a world controlled by a destructive female force in the figure of the Mistress. Even the pull he felt from the three figures he saw back home was engineered through the Mistress's magic. It will be seen that female power dominates the action in the wood, and I will argue that female power in fact subsumes Walter's agency as the primary hero of the story.

The 'otherness' of the Wood is conveyed by the strange creatures that inhabit it, the best example of which is undoubtedly the malformed dwarf. He underlines the vast disparities between himself and Walter when he offers Walter 'loathsome bread. . . such as *ye aliens* must needs eat' (*WBW* 51, my italics). He further draws

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[338] Refer back to the chapter 'Inventing Place' for a survey of the chapters set in woods.
[339] See Tolkien's 'On Fairy Stories', 16.

distinctions between Walter's manners and his own, mocking Walter's dainty ways with meat. Unlike Walter, the dwarf eats his meat fresh, 'blood and all together' (*WBW* 51). The dwarf's ugliness epitomises his maleficence; his barbaric animalistic feeding habits relegate him to the lowest of life forms. One of the lessons Walter comes to learn is that it is not just the ugly and malformed creatures who harbour evil; the Mistress's pulchritude is but a superficial mask which only hides her true nature. The greatest part of the narrative is played out in this setting, and there are only five key figures here: Walter, the Maid, the Mistress, the King's Son (the Mistress's consort) and the malformed dwarf. The Mistress is the ruling figure in the Wood, powerful, fickle and beautiful. The exploration of the relationships Walter has with the Mistress and the Maid contains implied critiques of the nature of love, and thus of Walter's choices, I would argue. The women are the catalysts for and tangible signs of Walter's maturation. His initial choice of the Mistress signals his immaturity and sexual naiveté, whereas his ultimate decision to commit himself to the Maid indicates that he has reached maturation.

The Wood becomes the arena in which the sexual antagonisms at the core of the narrative are to be worked out.[340] The wood motif may function to imply sexual threat, particularly for women, through its sense of enclosure, darkness and danger.[341] This type of threat is evident in *The Wood Beyond the World*. The Mistress poses the primary sexual threat, against Walter. She has lured Walter to the

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[340] Andrew Dodds, 'A Structural Approach to *The Wood Beyond the World*', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 7.2 (1987): 26-28 (27)
[341] See the entry for 'Into the Woods' in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 503.

woods using her sexual allure, but as the story develops, the impression that the

Mistress is potentially hostile and dangerous is confirmed: she wants Walter to kill

the King's Son and replace him as her consort – ultimately, Walter too would be

killed by the next man the Mistress lured to the Wood. There are further sexually-

based threats operating in the wood, the most significant of which is arguably that

which comes from the Dwarf, who holds a violent, sexual obsession for the Maid.

Further sexual complexities are developed by the King's Son's aggressive attraction

toward the Maid, and Walter's increasing desire for the Maid (who must protect her

virginity in order to maintain her magical powers). The sexual freedom expressed in

this romances shows a significant development in Morris's thinking from the strict

monogamy that is endorsed, arguably, in *The Story of the Glittering Plain*. Boos

offers an important context for understanding Morris's developing advocacy of

sexual freedom. She argues that Morris's views were shaped, in part, by the work of

Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884).

This book provided a Marxist-feminist treatise on pre-modern history, popularising

many anthropological arguments.[342] In relation to the themes Morris explores in the

late prose romances in respect of sexual love and jealousy, the following passage

from Engels, cited by Boos, may be read as a summary of Morris' position, I would

argue. Engels addresses the options for 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 instrument
> of social power; a generation of women how have never known what it is to
> give themselves to a man from any other considerations than real love or to

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[342] See Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', 13.

refuse to give themselves to their lover from fear of economic consequences.[343]

Walter's rite of passage in the Wood is based on his relationship with women, a theme the narrative set up during the first stage of Walter's quest when his departure was triggered by the actions of his unfaithful wife. The Wood provides an arena in which this theme of fickle love is developed and intensified, through the role of the Mistress. The Wood also provides the environment in which Walter can explore an alternative to the fickle love of women like his wife and the Mistress. The Mistress beguiles Walter with her sexuality, so that initially the true object of his love, the Maid, is overshadowed. She is almost a double of Walter's wife: fickle, sexually alluring and highly unsuitable. She evokes feelings of dread in Walter, and fear and desire become intertwined: 'when her eyes met his, he felt a pang of fear and desire mingled shoot through his heart' (*WBW* 40). He experiences a similar conflict of emotions about his wife; even though his wife hates him and has been unfaithful to him, Walter continues to desire her for her beauty: 'the sight of her stirred desire within him, so that he longed for her to be sweet and kind with him' (*WBW* 2). Walter cannot dispel his superficial passion for the Lady – the pattern of his past has not yet been broken – and he succumbs to her will. Their coupling takes place in the superficial idyll of the Mistress's garden (referred to in the previous chapter), and it leaves Walter feeling anxious and fearful. In contrast, his eventual union with the Maid takes place 'amidst the sweetness of their love and their safety, and assured hope of many days of joy' (*WBW* 127).

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[343] See Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', 14.

Ralph undergoes a similar testing of his maturity and progress. He encounters the Lady of Abundance in the Wood Perilous (a wild, untamed space), where he also first meets Ursula, the woman who eventually becomes his partner. Silver argues that Ralph is not mature enough to recognise Ursula as his *anima* at this early stage of his quest, and he partners with the Lady of Abundance first.[344] Their trysting place is in the wilderness: beyond the borders of civilisation, it is not ruled by the usual moral codes – the Lady takes Ralph there, even though she is married to the Knight of the Sun. 'And there between them in the wilderness was all the joy of love that might be' (*WWE* 1, 145).

There are signs that Walter's analysis of women is improving; he struggles against the Mistress's superficial beauty, telling himself, 'this woman was hateful, and nought love-worthy, and that she was little like to tempt him, despite all the fairness of her body' (*WBW* 40). Hers is an exploitative sexuality, unconnected with love.[345] The Maid is the antithesis of the Mistress in terms of her sexuality – the Mistress is overtly sexual and sexually powerful; the Maid is a virgin and, though she is attracted to Walter, she is sexually unavailable to Walter. Her sexual un-availability has a practical purpose, however, for two reasons. First, she cannot allow Walter to touch her because the Mistress would be able to detect his touch,

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[344] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 175.

[345] Hilary Newman, 'The Influence of De La Motte Fouqué's *Sintram and His Companions* on William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*', *Journal of the William Morris Society* 14.2 (2001): 47-53 (50-51).

and that would endanger them both. Second, her magic powers are dependent on her virginity, and her powers are necessary to allow them to escape. Sex is a power that, like magic, has no inherent affiliation with good or evil. It is used negatively by the Mistress to manipulate and deceive. The Maid represses her sexual desires in order to do good, to achieve growth, change, and to imbue the land with life, which she does vegetatively, in her incarnation as the a nature goddess, and more literally by becoming joint ruler with Walter and putting an end to the macabre death-ritual practised by the town of Starkwall.

Morris's construction of the Mistress and the Maid is developed through their relationship to the natural world. The thesis has broached this topic in the previous chapter, but I wish to reiterate and develop the topic here in a different context that will help to elucidate the function of 'nature' in relation to the hero's quest. The type of relationship the two women have to nature establishes an evaluative juxtaposition that draws on Romantic pastoral discourse, as I will show. The Mistress and the Maid are opposing figures that represent dichotomies: destruction (the Mistress) and vegetative production (the Maid).[346] They are both figures that symbolise the natural world. The Maid is described in terms that portray her as almost synonymous with nature: she is 'fair of face as a flower' (*WBW* 4): her dress is green 'like the sward wheron she lay' (*WBW* 30). She is usually placed in natural settings that are vibrant and potent:

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[346] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 131-32.

> whenas the summer morn was at its brightest, he saw a little way ahead a grey rock rising up from amidst of a ring of oak trees… and as he went he saw that here was a fountain gushing out from under a rock, which ran thence in a fair little stream. And when he had the rock and the fountain and the stream clear before him, lo! a child of Adam sitting beside the fountain under the shadow of the rock. (*WBW* 30)

The Mistress of the Wood is defined not by nature *per se* but by mimicry of nature. Walter encounters her in the Woods in a richly decorated palace, an artifice set in, yet directly opposed, to the landscape around it. The white marble structure is

> carved all about with knots and imagery, and the carven folk were all painted of their lively colours, whether it were their raiment or their flesh, and the housings wherein they stood all done with gold and fair hues. Gay were the windows of the house; and there was a pillared porch before the great door, with images betwixt the pillars both of men and beasts. (*WBW* 70)

Thus, while the Maid is usually surrounded by nature, the Mistress only mimics nature in the carven images that adorn her palace walls. The beauty of the palace is a beauty without substance. Her vegetative power is thus illusory, while the Maid can bring actual fertility and growth to the land. Morris's influence for these women, it has been demonstrated, lies in the mythic archetype of the Great Mother, who is a symbol of the fecundity of the natural world.[347]

The dichotomous female roles are also evident in *The Well at the World's End*. In this text, the two expressions of female power (destruction and growth) are combined in the single figure of the Lady of Abundance. She paradoxically rules

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[347] See Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 131ff. Kirchhoff sees the Maid and the Mistress as logical developments of the figure of Ellen in *News from Nowhere*. See *William Morris*, 144.

both the realms of the Dry Tree and the fecund Land of Abundance; she is described variously as harlot, mother, creator, destroyer, enemy and guide.[348] The terms in which Morris constructs the relationship of the Mistress and the Maid to nature signals the type of relationship they offer Walter. That is, the Mistress's passion is superficial, fleeting and changeable. The Maid's passion is deeper, longer-lasting, and offers opportunities for growth and development. It may be possible to draw the parallels wider into a social context, in which the Mistress may be said to represent the forces of modernism that lead to the destruction of the natural world; the Maid is the valuable life-force of the natural world. In this context – which reflects the Romantic pastoral discourse that permeates the late prose romances (as I have demonstrated in the pervious chapters) – I would argue that the meaning of the final episodes of the narrative may be freshly illuminated. I will return to address this issue later in the chapter.

Enabling the Quest-Hero

Walter's progress through the Wood demonstrates, I would argue, an increasing dependence on the Maid as an enabler. The significant stages of Walter's quest are all achieved with the assistance and leadership of the Maid. As the story develops, it is the Maid, not Walter, who begins express leadership, courage and to assert her dominance. By the usual male standards of heroism, the Maid equals Walter in terms of courage and physical bravery, if not exceeds him. The Maid even constructs

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[348] Silver, 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris', 134. The benevolent incarnation of the goddess occurs again in the figure of Habundia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.

herself in terms of a male hero when she is talking to Walter, expecting to be treated no less than a triumphant knight returning from battle for engineering their escape:

> I have heard tell that when the knight goeth to the war, and hath overcome his foes by the shearing of swords and guileful tricks, and hath come back home to his own folk, they praise him and bless him, and crown him with flowers, and boast of him before God in the minster for his deliverance of friend and folk and city. Why shouldst thou be worse to me than this? (WBW 63)

The remarkable aspect is that the Maid does in fact achieve the 'deliverance' of folk, and she even enacts her own crowning with flowers when she stands before the tribe of Bears who worship her as their goddess. The Maid makes an important decision to protect both herself and Walter by refusing Walter's advances in the Wood. The Mistress will be able to smell Walter's scent on the Maid and discover their relationship if they consummate their attraction.

Walter's activities in the Wood, when not doing as instructed by the Maid, are somewhat diminished in contrast to both the Maid's example and to the values of the traditional masculine hero. For instance, Walter 'loitered a while about the house' one morning, and then went hunting, and then rested under a tree because it was the hottest part of the day, before cooling himself off with a swim (63). It is difficult to take him seriously as a questing hero in this guise of idle noble. His character is further reduced, I would argue, by his fear of returning to the civilisation once freed from the Lady's negative influence (*WBW* 114). The Maid, characteristically now, takes charge of the situation and tells him that she thinks it would be good for them to 'seek mankind as they live in the world, and to live

amongst them', and even offers her protection to Walter on their journey in a total reversal of typical gender roles: 'let us go now, side by side, out of this fair valley, even as we are, *so that my wisdom and might may help thee at need*' (*WBW* 114, my italics). The Maid's desire for the protection of society is prompted in part by her fear of the Mistress, 'though she be dead' (*WBW* 114). The implication is, I would argue, that the damaging forces of the Mistress have not died with her. Hogdson proposes that social organization is the ley to overcoming such destructive forces, as the Maid has proposed it.[349]

By the time Walter and the Maid have made their way through the wood, the Maid has proven herself heroic through her courageous action and wit in her complex plot to have the Lady kill the King's Son, believing it to be Walter, and then kill herself out of anguish when she realised her mistake. The Maid recounts the story of her plan and its outcome to Walter (*WBW* 91-93). Walter's response to it is to lament, 'whether thy guile slew her, or her own evil heart, she was slain last night who lay in my arms the night before' (*WBW* 93). The comparison he makes here between his actions with the Lady – sleeping with her – and the Maid's actions – contriving her death – highlight a difference in action: he is inactive and powerless; the Maid is active and efficacious. She is able to effect change, whereas Walter only responds to it.

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[349] Hodgson, *The Romance of William Morris*, 162.

Even when Walter undertakes his own heroic deeds, they are not entirely credible. There is some mystery surrounding his killing of the lion, the 'great-headed yellow creature crouching flat to the earth and drawing nigher' (*WBW* 56). The lion strikes utter terror in the Lady, who is guiding Walter's hunt. Courageously, Walter shoots the lion with an arrow and then 'went up to him warily and thrust him through the heart,' killing it (*WBW* 57). However, the killing is cast in some doubt, because when Walter returns to the wood to retrieve the lion's hide, the carcass has disappeared, and there is no sign that it was ever there at all. Walter questions the courage of his own deed: 'Forsooth I deemed I had done manly; but now forsooth I shot nought, and nought there was before the sword of my father's son' (*WBW* 70). He curses the wood as a land of lies, as Hallblithe curses the Glittering Plain.

However, Walter does successfully kill the malicious dwarf in what may be considered a significant episode in his testing. The dwarf is, according to Shippey, an 'evident image of dangerous sexuality,'[350] and is a particular threat to the Maid. The perverted nature of the dwarf is expressed through the rough animalistic imagery used to describe him: his voice is a fierce 'roaring and braying;' his face is a 'hideous hairy countenance;' and although he walks upright, he also scuttles along 'on all fours like an evil beast' (*WBW* 27-29). The dwarf's strange sexual obsession with the Maid is evident from Walter's first meeting with the creature, who describes the Maid in a sexually voyeuristic way:

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[350] Tom Shippey, introduction to *The Wood Beyond the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, xiv.

> It hath a face white and red, like to thine; and hands white as thine, yea, but whiter; and the like it is underneath its raiment, only whiter still: for I have seen It – yes, I have seen It; ah yes and yes and yes. (*WBW* 28)

The dwarf's immense loathing of the Maid is never fully explained, but it comes to a head in an outpouring of violent, sexual rage against her. He goads Walter; 'What will I do with her? Let me at her, and stand by and look on, and then shalt thou have a strange tale to carry off with thee' (*WBW* 80). Walter's reaction ends with him shearing his sword through the dwarf's skull, 'so mightily he smote, that he drave the heavy sword right through to the teeth' (*WBW* 81). Newman identifies this killing as representative of Frye's 'death-struggle.' I would argue that the dwarf's clear sexual perversions offer a way to read the killing as symbolic of Walter's victory over his own misguided lust – both for his wife and for the Lady.[351] Both of these women tempted him with their looks, but proved entirely unfaithful. The dwarf may be seen as an aspect of Walter's unconscious; it appears when the Lady first tempts Walter.[352] Walter spies on the Lady with the King's son, Otto, so overwhelmed by her beauty that he cannot help himself; the act presents a strange (and unflattering) parallel to the dwarf's own voyeuristic tendencies. At that moment, the dwarf appears before Walter. Newman argues that the close alliance between the Lady and the dwarf should have been warning enough for Walter to

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[351] Critic John R. Wilson unfortunately completely diminishes the import of the episode in his analysis of the text. He erroneously describes the dwarf as unarmed, and questions the extent of Walter's bravery in killing an unarmed dwarf. See 'The Eve and the Madonna in Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4 (1983): 52-55.

[352] See Newman, 'The Influence of De La Motte Fouqué's *Sintram and His Companions* on William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*', 51.

stop lusting after her.[353] Walter's murder of the dwarf may also be seen as a straightforward heroic act of bravery that saves the life of the Maid; although he is dependent on her for escaping the Wood, and although she seems to be far more empowered than he is, the dependency is almost mutual at this stage of the story, I would suggest.

The Well at the World's End also contains female figures who contribute substantially to the hero's quest. A web of female agency and influence surrounds Ralph's quest. The first female of any significance in Ralph's story is Katherine, the chapman's wife in the town of Wulstead. Although her appearance is relatively brief, she enables Ralph's quest in a significant way. Katherine gives Ralph a necklace and tells him about the magic Well that sets him on his course:

> Gossip, wear this about thy neck, and let no man take it from thee, and I think it will be salvation to thee in peril, and good luck to thee in the time of questing; so that it shall be to thee as if thou hadst drunk of the WELL AT THE WORLD'S END… if a body might come by it, I hear say it saveth from weariness and wounding and sickness; and it winneth love from all, and maybe life everlasting. (*WWE* 1, 11)

The necklace is a recurring motif in the narrative, and it functions to propel Ralph's quest forward. The lady of Abundance tells the story of how she acquired a necklace that is twin to Ralph's (*WWE* 1, 161-62); Ralph then encounters Ursula wearing that necklace, passed to her by the Lady (*WWE* 2, 13-14). The lady plays an important

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[353] Newman, 'The Influence of De La Motte Fouqué's *Sintram and His Companions* on William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*', 51.

role in bringing Ralph and Ursula together, and guiding them to the Well; Richard comments to Ralph on this matter,

> Doth it seem to thee as if the Lady of the Dry Tree had some inkling that thou shouldst happen upon this other woman: whereas she showed her of the road to the Well at the World's End, and gave her that pair of beads, and meant that thou also shouldest go thither?' (*WWE* 1, 227).

Women clearly function dominantly as enablers in the male quest, I would argue. Morris reveals towards the end of the narrative that female power has been at work in Ralph's life since before he was born, and that his quest for the well was not only foreseen by a Wise Woman, but also guided by her through the gift of the amulet necklace that passed to Ralph through Katherine:

> This pair of beads shall one day lead a man unto the Well at the World's End, but no woman; forsooth, if a woman have them of a woman, or the like of them, (for there be others,) they may serve her for a token; but will be no talisman or leading-stone to her; and this I tell thee lest thou seek to the Well on the strength of them. For I bid thee give them to a man that thou lovest – that thou lovest well, when he is in most need; only he shall not be of thine own blood. (*WWE* 2, 223)

The Lady of Abundance also learned from the Wise Woman. The narrative at the beginning of *The Well at the World's End* foreshadows this late revelation through the subtle employment of the lexis of predetermination: Despite losing the pull of straws, Ralph feels he 'must needs hasten as fate would have him' (*WWE* 8).

The last significant challenge in Walter's journey, before he reaches the city of Stark-wall, is the passage through the land of the Bears. These are the savage people the Carl warned Walter about, 'a nation of half wild men' who worship not God but 'a certain woman with mickle worship' (*WBW* 15). They worship through human

sacrifice, and the Carl warns Walter that if he passes through their land he will be killed for their sacrifice (*WBW* 20-21). But Walter does not heed the rest of the Carl's story about the Bears and their customs; 'Walter's ears were scarce open to this talk: whereas he deemed he would have nought to do with those wild men' (*WBW* 21). Consequently, when Walter and the Maid come to the land of the Bears, it is the Maid who is empowered by knowledge of the Bears' customs, not Walter. Once again, Walter becomes significantly dependent on the Maid for his survival. In what is a small but significant gesture, I would argue, the Maid takes Walter's hand, not he hers, and leads him to the tribe (*WBW* 99); and it is she who first addresses the Bears. The Maid's actions are pro-active, positive and courageous, in the manner of a hero. Walter does little more than follow her lead, though he is cast down by doubt and fear that they will not survive. He tells the Maid, 'to-morrow, meseemeth, I shall go no further in this world' (*WBW* 101); and the Maid is left to try to instil courage in him. Walter in fact overtly cedes mastery to the Maid: 'here at least thou art the master, and I will do thy bidding' (*WBW* 103) in their dealings with the Bears. The Maid successfully leads them through the land of the Bears, tricking them into believing she is the new incarnation of their Goddess.

Incorporation

The Morrisian hero's final space is cultural space, a town or community where he attains his final ultimate hero status: kingship, in the case of Walter and Ralph; marriage (the winning of the bride), in the case of Hallblithe; martial leadership and a peaceful community for Osberne. It is at this point of the quest that the hero

receives the validation of the community and its rewards.[354] The hero's incorporation into society comes at the end of a series of trials or tests that indicate his attainment of the qualities he needs to be a good leader. For Walter, in *The Wood Beyond the World*, the tangible signs of his achievement of the quest are the Maid and the city, both of which he can claim to rule by the end of his adventures. The Maid is affirmation of Walter's successful psychological maturation; he has chosen correctly in love. Kingship of the city may be seen in terms of an affirmation of traditional masculine quest values that privilege qualities of leadership and power. The signs of Ralph's transformation in *The Well at the World's End* are given voice in the narrative by Ursula: 'thou art changed since yester-year… for then thou wert but a lad, high-born and beautiful, but simple maybe, and untried; whereas now thou art meet to sit in the Kaiser's throne and rule the world from the Holy City' (*WWE* 2, 130-31). Like Walter, Ralph has matured in his relationships with women as a result of his quest, and is also able to benefit from a fruitful and committed relationship to the appropriate woman.

Walter undertakes a symbolic test as part of his initiation into the kingship of Stark-wall: he is asked to choose between two kinds of raiment. Oberg's analysis of the episode concludes that Walter 'rightly chooses the battle dress symbolic of action, of deeds, rather than the peace robes, associated here with weakness, cowardice, and pride of place.'[355] I refer to Oberg here because I believe her observation carries with

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354 Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, 22.
355 Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 117-118.

it an implied deferment to Walter as the male quest-hero, without due regard for Morris's development of female power in his male quest narratives. Oberg's conclusion ignores the significant role of the Maid, who has led Walter out of the wilderness and into the city despite his fearful protests. Walter's quest has guided him to internal, psychological maturation, but it is the Maid who leads him in the right direction and guides him to make the right choices. Walter's initial reaction to coming upon the men of the city is to flee; it is only the Maid's counsel that prevents him. She is eager to become a part of their community: 'fair and lovely are they, and of many things shall they be thinking, and a many things shall they do, and we shall be partakers thereof'; Walter responds, 'would that we might flee! But now it is over late; so put we a good face on it, and go to them quietly' (*WBW* 116). In light of this, I would suggest that it is completely out of character for Walter to choose the robes of war, symbolic of action, and I would argue that the text indicates that Walter is motivated not by his own bravery and strength of character, but rather by the desire to maintain his family honour. He makes his selection based on a memory, triggered by the war gear, of the 'array of the Goldings in the forefront of battle' (*WBW* 119). In contrast, in *The Well at the World's End* Ralph's incorporation back into Utterhay takes place amidst *actual* battle, in which Ralph clearly demonstrates his fitness to lead and to rule. His reign as king of Utterhay is imparted in terms that highlight his value as a martial leader:

> The new folk of the Burg of the Four Friths made him their lord and captain, and the Champions of the Dry Tree obeyed him in all honour… He rode to Higham and offered himself as captain to the abbot thereof, and drave out the tyrants and oppressors thence, and gave back peace to the Frank of Higham. Ever was he true captain and brother to the Shepherd-folk, and in many battles they followed him (*WWE* 2, 243)

The king-making ritual that Walter undergoes in Stark-wall corresponds to a type of ritual of incorporation, in van Gennep's terms. However, there is one substantial distinction between what van Gennep describes as ritual of incorporation and what Walter experiences. Walter's ritual differs from the traditional tribal rituals of incorporation in that Water is accepted into a *new* society, rather than back into his own society.[356]

The male heroes, Ralph and Walter, sever their connection with the natural, liminal world once they re-enter cultural space. But they retain the moral and spiritual aspects of that world through their union with a female counterpart. Another aspect of the hero's union with an appropriate woman is that Morris ensures that private passion is transformed into fellowship.[357] Incorporation, in Morris, emphasises communal, rather than just individual, improvement and development. In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Hallblithe's return to the tribe with the Hostage in the successful union of the Houses of the Raven and the Rose. Hallblithe also integrates a new member into the tribe: 'they brought the Puny Fox to the mote-stead of the kindred that he might stand before the fathers and be made a son of the kindred; and this they did because of the word of Hallblithe'. Four rescued maidens are also brought into the House (*GP* 323). One of the developments from Morris's earlier romance, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, is that his later heroes make their final

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[356] See, for an example, his discussion of the rites of the Brahman novitiate in *The Rites of Passage*, 105-106.

[357] Silver, 'Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris', 125.

home in an urban environment. Hallblithe returns to the pastoral setting of Cleveland by the Sea, but Walter and the Maid end up in a new and vibrant city, and Ralph returns home with Ursula to rule the town of Upmeads. This signals a revaluation of Morris's thinking, and a compromise of idyllic forms.[358]

The Maid surrenders hers magical powers when she finally consummates her relationship with Walter, and becomes subservient to his rule. She does perform a final act of authority, though. The Maid's wisdom and virtue continues to provide benefits to society, even after she has lost her magic powers. She returns to the Bears, without her powers, in order to teach them the art of tillage (*WBW* 129). She thus transitions the primitive Bears into a thriving agricultural community – an undoubtedly Morrisian expression of communal benevolence. The Maid, as Kirchhoff argues, is the means by which a relationship is established and controlled between 'man and the potency of the natural world.'[359] The anthropological detail that Morris references is typical, Mann argues, of Morris's conception of the relation between man and nature, which he further carries into the values and principles he assigns to each period and type of society. From a creative point of view, Morris is not concerned with historical accuracy in the way he juxtaposes various societies in the one land, which conveys a 'complex and unschematic view of historical flux.'[360]

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[358] On Morris's distinctive use of spatial and aesthetic qualities in his construction of an idyllic utopia in *News from Nowhere*, see Marcus Waithe's article, '*News from Nowhere*, Utopia and Bakhtin's Idyllic Chronotope', *Textual Practice* 16.3 (2002): 459-72.

[359] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*. Boston MA: Twayne Publishers, 1979, 144.

[360] See Nancy D. Mann, 'Eros and Community in the Fiction of William Morris', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34.3 (1979): 302-25 (316-17).

The transformation of the Maid – from a physically active, dominant leader to dutiful wife and Queen – has been identified as the main unresolved problem with the romance by Kirchhoff, and I would tend to agree. Kirchhoff argues that 'Walter gets off too easily. He has the Maid's magic when he needs it, and it conveniently disappears when it would become a social liability.' [361] I would take Kirchhoff's central stance – that Walter gets off too easily – even further by suggesting that Walter is not in fact a suitable candidate to bestow a kingship upon, and that his good fortune is owed entirely to the Maid who is, in the end, denied any sort of formal validation of her powers.

As this thesis will show in the next chapter, despite Morris's creation of strong, extraordinary female characters, in the end he is compelled to diminish their achievements. Arguably, he does this in *The Wood Beyond the World* in order to serve a greater good, that is, of allowing Walter rule justly and fairly, and to redeem the society of Stark-wall. Just as the Maid disabused the Bears of their practice of human sacrifice, so too does Walter establish a new order in Stark-wall that puts an end to killing strangers from the mountains. Morris closes his tale by remarking that 'folk had clean forgotten their ancient Custom of king-making, so that after Walter of Langton there was never another king that came down to them poor and lonely from out of the Mountains of the Bears' (*WBW* 130).

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[361] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, 144-45.

Empowered Men

One of the roles of the strong female agents in Morris's male quest stories is to give the males a relationship with the powers of the earth – these powers are key to the final integration of the hero into society, as I have demonstrated. However, Morris also explored the development of a new type of male hero whose relationship to the earth does not depend on the female.[362] This male hero is Osberne. He is the only hero to have a male guardian figure in his life, who enables his heroic activities through various means. And he is the only hero *not* to have contact with a female goddess figure, or indeed to have any significant female guidance at all. Other elements also distinguish Osberne's tale from the others. *The Sundering Flood* is unique amongst the prose romances in that the hero is not immediately precipitated into adventure. In fact, Morris devotes a significant amount of time establishing the character of Osberne through his early years, and also establishing the character of the land in which he lives (as I have explored in the previous chapter). The titular place - the Sundering Flood - is a river near Osberne's homestead. It is not the location of a distant place; it does not function as a herald to adventure, as do the titular places of the other romances: the Well, the Wood, the Plain.

Mathews has drawn attention to the importance, in *The Sundering Flood*, of the unity of the hero with the natural world.[363] This unity is achieved through Osberne's

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[362] Kirchhoff makes this point in *William Morris*, 161. I will build upon his observations.
[363] *Worlds Beyond the World*, 58. Mathews actually asserts that the union of Osberne with the natural world is more important than his union with Elfhild. I feel this point of view is open to debate.

special relationship to a male earth-power, Steelhead, a masculine version of Habundia in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.[364] It has been argued that, anthropologically, Steelhead represents the spirit of a dead ancestor operating as tutor to Osberne.[365] Steelhead describes himself as one of the 'warriors of while agone' (*SF* 53) supporting the notion that he is indeed a spirit from the past. Both Steelhead's name and his initial attire strongly suggest an association with metalworking, and a reading of Steelhead as smith contributes greatly to an understanding of his function. The figure of the smith is predominant in Teutonic literature in the form of Weland. He is associated with the mysterious craft of iron working. Specifically, he crafted a magic sword for the Aesir of Norse myth, and the armour in which Beowulf fought Grendel.[366] More closely related to the function of Steelhead is the example found in *Volsunga Saga*, a text with which Morris was very familiar and which he translated, in which the smith Regin is employed as foster-father to Sigurd. He teaches Sigurd 'sports, chess, and runes' as well as several languages.[367] Smiths also function as mentors and are distinguished for their strength and honesty. They are associated with the 'old ways' of the land, and are liminal beings. The forging of the hero's weapon is perhaps the smith's most important task. In *The Sundering Flood*, it is Steelhead who provides the magical weapons for

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[364] See also the chapter 'Inventing Place', in which I discuss Steelhead as an earth-power. I investigate the figure of Habundia in the following chapter, 'Inventing the Female Quest-Hero.'
[365] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 128. She refers to Eliade, to support her argument. In Eliade's study of initiatory ordeals, he writes that masked priests or other men of certain religious vocation represent the role of Ancestors. Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958, 39.
[366] See the entry for 'Weland Smith' in John Clute and John Grant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, 1003.
[367] See Jesse L. Byock's translation of *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1993, 55-56.

Osberne. Although it is never specifically stated that Steelhead himself is the forger of these weapons, I believe his identification as a smith is strongly supported not only by his name but also by his role in the narrative. It is difficult to ignore the implications inherent in his name – Steelhead – that the reference is to his occupation as a metalworker of some sort. Metallic objects and armour distinguish Steelhead's first appearance to Osberne in the Dale:

> For he was so clad that he had a grey hauberk on him of fine ring-mail, and a scarlet coat thereunder embroidered goodly; a big gold ring was on his left arm, a bright basnet on his head; he was girt with a sword, and bare a bow in his hand, and a quiver hung at his back. (*SF* 25)

Considering the colour symbolism of the scarlet coat Steelhead wears, it is possible to further make associations with the fire and heat of a smith's forge, as well as the obvious suggestions of warriorhood and violence, befitting a figure so armed as Steelhead.

Steelhead has several important functions in the narrative as a positive agent for Osberne's maturation, as I will now show. Steelhead is clearly a mentor for Osberne, who does not have any other male role model in his life. This role is made explicit during the ritual of the laying of the Hands, in which Steelhead symbolically initiates Osberne into adulthood. Boos notes that the initiation takes place before Osberne's fourteenth birthday – the age of Icelandic confirmation.[368] Steelhead is also a father figure to Osberne, whose own parents are dead, and it is as this substitute that Steelhead performs the ritual that Morris refers to as the Imposition

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[368] Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', 19.

of Hands (*SF* 97). 'In the old days and in the olden time it was the wont of fathers to bless their children in this wise' (*SF* 53). The Imposition of Hands functions symbolically and actually to hasten the process of Osberne's maturation to manhood. Just as the dwarf in the cave can be considered to have instilled Osberne with a spiritual link to the land because of the chthonic nature of the creature that performed the ritual, it may be said of Steelhead that he comparably imbues Osberne with the quiddity of his own identity, that of warrior. Osberne is then an incarnation of the ancient heroic values[369] as represented by his ancestors. The release the innate puissance of Osberne through this ritual allows him to finally wield the sword Board-cleaver, promised to him by Steelhead earlier. Before the ritual, Osberne finds the sword 'great and heavy', and he asks Steelhead 'Should I not lay it by till I become a man?' to which Steelhead replies:

> That shall be seen to, fair youngling . . . In an hour thou shalt have might enough to wield Board-cleaver, though doubtless thy might shall be eked year by year and month by month thereafter. (*SF* 52)

The gift of the sword is a symbol of initiation into adult masculinity.[370] The maturation of Osberne is achieved at a greatly accelerated rate, however, and the ritual is more than symbolic. It becomes, in this mythic geography, a literal and instant transformation of Osberne from boy to man. Later, Steelhead makes a reference to the ritual in conversation with Osberne, telling him 'a while agone I laid my hands upon thee that I might make thy body stark for adventure' (*SF* 132). The significant property of the sword, named Board-cleaver, is that once it is drawn,

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[369] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 128.

[370] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, 161-62.

it cannot be resheathed until it has taken a life (*SF* 51). The sword has only one purpose, and one benefit to Osberne - it kills his enemies. Osberne also receives a bow and quivers from Steelhead. This gift is employed for positive gain, rather than for death.

One of the central episodes of Osberne's youth is his encounter with a dwarf. This episode is filled with potential danger and the possibility of death, but the symbolism of the whole encounter, as well as the details we learn from the dwarf, reveals an important quasi-religious function. The import of the dwarf episode is clarified when it is considered in terms of ritual and initiation. The location of the episode in a cave signals its connection to prehistoric initiation rites that were held in such locations. Caves had a 'primordial sacredness', representing the womb of Mother Earth. In this instance, entering the cave signals the start of a process of magical death and rebirth for Osberne.[371] He symbolically returns to the womb, and to his embryonic state, and he is then given the opportunity to be 'reborn'. Osberne's experience in the cave reveals both his childish innocence and his innate physical prowess and bravery. Osberne is seemingly incognizant of his 'playmate's' supernatural nature, and he willingly and innocently accompanies him into 'a hole in the rock' and participates in many 'strange plays' with him. Osberne describes the last game:

> My playmate took a big knife and said: Now, drudgling, I shall show thee a good game indeed. And so he did, for he set the edge of the said knife against his neck, and off came his head; but there came no blood, nor did he

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[371] Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth*, 58.

tumble down, but took up his head and stuck it on again . . . Then he said: . . . now I will do like by thee. (*SF* 9)

Osberne's passive participation in the game to this point reflects his youthful innocence and trust. However, he does finally recognise the mortal danger he is in, and acts - he tackles the dwarf and prevents himself from being beheaded. Even though his 'playmate' survived the game of 'heads-off,' representing a magical death and rebirth, Osberne realises that he himself would not be so fortunate. Only the liminal 'land-wight' can enact this literal rendition of a symbolic ritual of death and rebirth.

The incident is highly charged with symbolism, and at the very least reinforces Osberne's special bond to the spirits of the land. But the main import of the episode is found in its relationship to a particular rite of passage that upholds the idea of a ritual death and rebirth. This is best illuminated with reference to James Frazer's seminal book on myth, magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*, in which he briefly describes the rite of death and resurrection, and interprets its function: 'It is customary for lads at puberty to undergo certain initiatory rites, of which one of the commonest is a pretence of killing the lad and bringing him to life again.' Moreover, 'the essence of these initiatory rites . . . would be an exchange of life or soul between a man and his totem.'[372] In *The Sundering Flood*, Osberne does not literally die, and he does escape all physical harm. However, there are other indications that support

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[372] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged edition, London: Papermac, 1995, 682.

the notion of death and rebirth and the exchange of power. The dwarf foretells that Osberne will be given a sword of 'my father's father's fashioning' (*SF* 13), a gift that stands in place of the swapping of souls. Because the sword is dwarf-wrought, it represents a thing of the earth and potentially one of magic. Dwarfs are commonly seen as skilled metalworkers, or smiths, and smiths have the important function of crafting weapons for the hero. Similarities can be drawn between the role of the dwarf and the role of Steelhead: both figures bring a focus to the martial role of the male hero.

Osberne is united with his childhood sweetheart at the end of the tale, but is not dependent on her for his link to the potency of the natural world. His ritualistic meetings with Steelhead throughout his life maintain the connection to the natural world. Osberne has consequently been described as Morris's most satisfactory representation of a masculine self-image in the late romances.[373]

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that by rewriting and re-imagining the hero of myth and medieval romance in a fresh form, Morris both reflected the aesthetic ideals of his age and created a new way of expressing these ideals. Conventional structuralist hero-myth analysis has provided a useful critical ingress to this investigation of the Morrisian hero in the prose romances. I would argue that the quest of the Morrisian

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[373] Kirchhoff, *William Morris*, 161. Morris's construction of Osberne is rich for further analysis. Osberne is the youngest of the prose romance heroes, only twelve years old, and in many respects, he is the most complex of the heroes.

hero, though it at first seems to equate to Campbell's in terms of gaining social status, ultimately shows that its concerns are with community and the good of society. The relationship of the hero to the community is enabled by the heroes' relationship with women as the ultimate symbol of integration, as I have shown. In this way, Morris presents a challenge to the expected norms of male pursuits: warfare, territorial expansion, and aggression.[374] This chapter has shown that a number of key points of departure from conventional analysis are required in order to facilitate a meaningful reading of the prose romance heroes in terms of Morrisian ideology. I would argue that the underlying reason for this is that conventional hero-myth paradigms subscribe to a discourse of dualism that does not allow for a more complex set of relationships between the hero and the other figures of the romances, and indeed between the hero and Nature.

Morris's creation of certain strong female roles provides arguable the most significant point of departure. I have demonstrated that in *The Wood Beyond the World*, female power subsumes Walter's agency as the primary hero of the story. I also argued that Ralph's quest in *The Well at the World' End* is clearly shaped by female agency. There is nevertheless an evident tension in the narratives, I would suggest, in Morris's construction of the male quest. The final vision of *The Wood Beyond the World*, for instance, offers a view of a new type of society based partly on the recognition of an empowered feminine force. Yet it is a somewhat

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[374]Male pursuits so described by Clare A Lees, Introduction in Clare A Lees, ed., *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 15.

uncomfortable resolution in relation to the way it in which it was attained, which relied on 'dutifully agonistic' and 'masculine' endeavours to attain it (to borrow Boos's terms).[375]

Hodgson articulates an important context to the prose romances in light of Morris's political convictions, which bears mention here. Hodgson writes that the romance provided a form in which Morris could explore the social and political transformations he believed would occur in later generations as he had lost hope that revolution would occur in his own time. Such transformations, consequently, could only take place for him in 'the mythopoeic power of romance which makes possible to grasp in fantasy what is evasive in reality.'[376] The alternative mode of realism was particularly distasteful to Morris, who saw in its function an anti-socialist tendency. He viewed realism itself as antiproletarian.[377]

The role of women and nature in society is one of Morris's important developments, I would argue, in constructing a viable new system of engaging with the world and with fellow man. In the prose romances, this vision relies on the construction of efficacious and strong women. The efficacy of the Maid in respect of Walter's quest

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[375] Boos proposes the hypothesis that, in Morris's expression of his socialist ideals and views on gender identity in t he late romances, 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.' Boos's examination focuses on *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and *The Sundering Flood*, but I would argue that her observations are equally relevant to *The Wood Beyond the World*. 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', 16.

[376] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 156.

[377] Silver, 'Socialism Internalized: The Last Romances of William Morris', 119.

represents an important step towards Morris's creation of an entirely autonomous female hero in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The type of closure Morris offers in his romances forms another point of departure from conventional hero-myth structures, and is a key element of his Romantic vision. The romances offer a kind of closure, but arguably not complete closure: the positive endings project forwards into another, invisible, textual place. This is the root of his Romantic ideology: the thematic concern for the betterment of society with a view to using the past as a potential model for the future.

Chapter 4

Inventing the Female Quest-Hero

'Inventing the Female Quest-Hero' will explore the figure of Birdalone, the female hero of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The chapter will argue that, in his construction of Birdalone, Morris created a unique type of female hero. While he drew on traditional sources for heroes such as Walter, he played with the same conventions in a new way in his construction of Birdalone. Birdalone's story contains the basic elements of the male quest, and her quest's fulfilment includes union with her beloved, and a integration into a stable community, a conclusion also found by Morris's male heroes. I argue that Birdalone represents a more autonomous development of some of the other romance women, particularly the Maid (as I addressed in the previous chapter). Like the majority of Morris's female characters in the romances, Birdalone is an active and potent figure. She is independent, physically capable, and is able to tap into magical powers like the other women of the romances. But Birdalone's role is not that of Temptress, or Helper. She is the primary character, the Female Hero. She challenges the male quest structure by appropriating the traditional role of 'hero' and featuring as the active subject of the quest (rather than the more customary role of *object* of the quest).

This chapter will focus on a number of key themes and episodes that will demonstrate how Morris constructs his female hero. It will utilise and build on many of the critical foundations that have already been established in this thesis,

particularly the oppositional discourse of pastoral. I would like to extend the concept of the pastoral to reflect the new critical discourses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism as they relate to the pastoral.[378] Ecocriticism is concerned with not only the author's attitude toward nature, but also with the patterns of inter-relatedness between the human and the non-human world. Eco-feminist criticism argues that the control and exploitation of the natural world reflects the same attitudes that have led to the control and exploitation of women. These attitudes are rooted in an essential identification of women and nature as interchangeable in scientific thought since the Renaissance.[379] I would argue that Morris employs this association within *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and I will demonstrate in this chapter how a recognition of it may lead to fresh interpretations of the particularly problematic episodes within the text. The woman-nature identification is an intimate part of the wider dualist construct of male/female and culture/nature,[380] which I would argue is one of the underlying sensibilities in the prose romances.

Before engaging with the Victorian feminist context and the critical issues of concern to this chapter, I would like to offer a critical review. Birdalone is a unique construct for Morris, and one that has not been fully explored in Morris scholarship

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[378] Ecofeminist criticism has developed in the last twenty years or so, predominantly in the USA. Gifford refers to two particularly important collections of ecofeminist essays: Judith Plant, ed. *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989; and Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990. See *Pastoral*, 165-66.

[379] See Gifford, *Pastoral*, 5.

[380] Val Plumwood develops her ideas of ecofeminism to move away from the binary construct that says 'women are, and men are not, part of nature' and 'men are, and women are not, part of culture.' See *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993, 35.

to date. Reflecting the overall status of Morris scholarship, critical works on his female hero are limited. The following section will briefly examine the few critical works that have had bearing on this thesis. Only one scholar to date has specifically examined the role of Birdalone as hero. Norman Talbot's article 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance'[381] addresses the assumptions the male heroic-paradigm brings to a narrative whose hero is female. The article provides a starting point for further investigation, and signals some of the themes that I will investigate more fully in this thesis. Norman Talbot's introduction to the William Morris Library edition of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is not properly a critical, academic review, but it does bear mention for the specific attention Talbot brings to Morris's achievement. The special qualities of Birdalone, he argues, lie in Morris's subversion of popular conventions and attitudes. Most obviously, Birdalone challenges the traditional assumptions about quest-romance. She is further a reflection of Morris's views on women in general – which no doubt developed in part as a result of his close relationships with his mother and sisters. Talbot's introduction to the text focuses on the ways in which Birdalone challenges audience expectation. He depicts the romance as a blend of *Bildungsroman*, wonder-folktale and pastiche of chivalric adventure, satirically exploring Victorian social conventions.[382]

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[381] In Filmer, ed., *The Victorian Fantasists*. 25-44. The other important articles – more broadly addressing female figures in the romances – are Kelvin's 'The Erotic in *News From Nowhere* and *The Well at the World's End*;' and Talbot's 'Women and Goddesses in the Romances of William Morris'.

[382] Talbot, introduction to *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, 12-13.

Other critical works on the female hero and feminine/feminist aspects of Morris's prose romances are few, but a small number of key studies have provided an important starting point for this chapter. Morris scholars have recognised the power and allure of Morris's women; they are variously clever, brave, competent, wise, physically able and always beautiful. They hold sexual power as well as intellectual power. Amanda Hodgson's monograph 'The Witch in the Wood: William Morris's Romance Heroines and the Late-Victorian "New Woman"' studies more broadly the women of the romances, with a focus on Birdalone.[383] Hodgson focuses particularly on the social and political aspects of the New Woman and how Morris has constructed his female heroes in relation to them. She raises several key elements in respect of Morris construction of Birdalone, such as the containment of the female hero (which I will return to in more detail in the next section, 'Theoretical Approach'). She also touches upon cross-dressing (using Ursula as her example) and the reasons the female hero needs to employ gender-disguise; the blurring of traditional gender-boundaries; and the sexuality of the romance women. She concludes by arguing that Morris's female heroes find only a partial and ambiguous emancipation.

John David Moore examines *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in comparison to the myth of Psyche and Eros.[384] Moore argues that the similarities between the two

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[383] The Annual Kelmscott Lecture of the William Morris Society given at the Art Workers' Guild on 7 November 1997. London: William Morris Society, 2000.

[384] John David Moore, 'The Vision of the Feminine in William Morris's *The Waters* [sic] *of the Wondrous Isles*', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* (May 1980): 58-65. Note that Moore

stories highlights the significance of the conflict between two opposing feminine forces in Morris tale: Birdalone and the Witch Wife. They represent, respectively, the benign and malign energies. Moore's analysis is an important recognition of Morris's positive vision of the feminine, and of the feminine energies being the key to the greater fulfilment of society. Another article that tackles a similar theme is 'The Eve and the Madonna in Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*.' In this article John R. Wilson proposes that the females of the tale are in fact superior to the males; that the women function to challenge and test the hero and ultimately find him wanting.[385]

Other articles contribute more generally to this reading of the female hero in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. They will be referenced at appropriate times throughout this part of the thesis. Florence Boos's article on "Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris' is a key reference.[386] Charlotte H. Oberg has described Morris's female characters as 'warrior-maidens', 'beautiful, yet doughty and militant', referring to Ursula and her antecedents in Morris's earlier writings.[387] This bold, rich description of Morris's fictional women is followed by a disappointingly brief examination by Oberg of their roles in the prose romances. Yet, the creation of strong, active female characters in the prose romances was one of Morris's unique contributions to the literature of his age. In a separate

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incorrectly refers to the 'Waters' rather than the 'Water' of the Wondrous Isles throughout the article.

[385] *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4(1983): 52-55.

[386] Boos, 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', 12-22.

[387] Oberg, *A Pagan Prophet*, 124.

article, Oberg discusses the important theme of liberation from tyranny that pervades Morris's romances, but she does not fully explore the subject and she does not include Birdalone amongst her examples.[388]

Morris's 'New Woman' and the Fantasy Tradition

The Water of the Wondrous Isles represents a significant development toward the femino-centric narratives that are otherwise virtually absent in fantasy literature until the late twentieth century.[389] Modern fantasy has been criticised for being male-dominated: the majority of fantasy authors are male, their protagonists are male, and heroic adventure is male-oriented, with the dominant values of 'quest, contest, and conquest as the plot, sacrifice as the key, victory or destruction as the ending.'[390] Even within this contemporary genre the female experience is yet to find a prevailing voice. The masculine 'warrior-hero' archetype stands as the common paradigm for the fantasy hero.[391] This in itself is almost enough to exclude the female sex automatically: women are archetypically not warriors, but mothers, muses, lovers or wives. As a further detriment, the very code by which the warrior operates positions women as subsidiary or ancillary. The influence of 'the medieval' on the construction of the fantasy genre has meant that the common code by which the

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[388] Oberg, 'Motif and Theme in the Late Prose Romances of William Morris', 33-52.

[389] The earliest example of a female hero in fantasy is probably that of Jirel of Joiry, in stories by C. L. Moore's, published in the 1930's. But Jirel is, I would argue, a rare exception for this period. Jirel of Joiry first appeared in a story in *Weird Tales* in 1934. Moore's tales of Jirel were later collected and published in book form

[390] Ursula Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned*. Cambridge: Children's Literature New England in association with Green Bay Publications, 1993, 13.

[391] See Frontgia's article, 'Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives', *Mythlore* 18.1 (1991): 15-18 (15). John Lash makes the same argument in the wider context of his study, *The Hero: Manhood and Power*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995, 6.

warrior-hero operates is that of chivalry, a code that – viewed from a feminist perspective - tends towards the subjugation of women, constructing them as in need of male protection, often positioning women as victims. Within this paradigm, where and how do female heroes belong? Can a woman be seen to act with 'chivalry'? The female hero, it would seem, is the antithesis of the male chivalric hero. Indeed, the concept of the female hero is oxymoronic by some definitions: it is rarely disputed that 'the hero is undeniably *he*, the male of the human species . . . the hero incarnates masculinity at its best' (italics in original).[392]

It was not until the 1980s that fantasy really began to reshape what has been described as the 'patently patriarchal and phallocentric orientations' of the genre.[393] Consumer demand has been identified as one of the main imperatives for the change; popular fantasy author Marion Zimmer Bradley asserted that women read fantasy too, and they 'get tired of identifying with male heroes.'[394] The emergence of strong female characters in fantasy has been read as a 'critical reclaiming of the concept of heroism out of the patriarchal rut into which it had been lodged.'[395] Ursula Le Guin contributed to this reclaiming by writing a fourth part to her successful *Earthsea* series, *Tehanu*, constructing it as a 'feminist revisioning' of the traditional masculine-hero narrative, a tradition that *Earthsea* had been criticised for

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[392] Lash, *The Hero*, 5.

[393] Joseph Grixti, 'Consumed Identities: Heroic Fantasies and the Trivialisation of Selfhood', *Journal of Popular Culture* (1994): 207-228, 209. There are, of course, examples of strong female heroes in fantasy literature before the 1980s, but they were exceptional. I have already referenced the work of C. L. Moore – see note on page 168 of this thesis.

[394] See Grixti, 'Consumed Identities: Heroic Fantasies and the Trivialisation of Selfhood', 209.

[395] Grixti, 'Consumed Identities: Heroic Fantasies and the Trivialisation of Selfhood', 209.

embracing.[396] In some ways, this feminine 'reclaiming' of fantasy seems unusual in light of critical claims that modern fantasy values qualities that have been traditionally associated with the feminine – nature, ecology, and the inevitable cycles of birth and death. Yet in its execution, fantasy has dominantly placed the male at the centre of the narrative.

Kath Filmer sees one of Morris's achievements as providing a 'paradigm for twentieth-century feminist fantasy, especially in relation to the subversive, radical impetus of fantasy literature.'[397] This is not to say that *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is itself a 'feminist fantasy' in the sense that it consciously attempts to deconstruct patriarchal discourse.[398] Nevertheless, Morris's text, while not presenting a deconstruction, *per se*, of conservative, male-centric heroic tradition, can be read as an important step toward challenging that gender-based heroic tradition. To some extent, Morris's age and class prevented him from developing and sustaining a true feminist critique. But in deference to the enlightenment he did achieve, biographer Fiona MacCarthy describes Morris as a 'semi-feminist'. In his last romances he invented a 'new woman', she writes, who was 'not simply a worker but a warrior.' She refers to Ursula (*The Well at the World's End*) and Birdalone (*The Water of the Wondrous Isles*), two women who subvert the gendered

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[396] The Earthsea Trilogy is made up of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (first published in 1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971), and *The Farthest Shore* (1972). *Tehanu* was first published in 1990.
[397] 'Introduction', *The Victorian Fantasists*, 7.
[398] See Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, 79. She defines feminist texts as those that have as their fundamental strategy the deconstruction of patriarchal discourse.

expectations of women by donning armour and bearing weapons.[399] But Birdalone is a problematic for Morris, a paradox; a female hero operating in male patriarchal tradition. She sits uneasily between the traditions of medieval romance and the emerging social movements of the late Victorian era. Morris's construction of Birdalone is an exploration – an experiment – of how women affect the normal heroic paradigm.

By including strong, active women in all of his late prose romances, Morris was 'an enemy of his age in its patriarchal as well as its economic, aesthetic and ethical assumptions,'[400] according to Talbot, admirer and scholar of Morris's work. One of the assumptions of his age was that women were beautiful yet passive and tragic figures. In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King,* Elaine is a 'meek maid' to Lancelot, who shuns her love. She begs to serve him, and when he finally spurns her, she takes her own life. Enid is subtly dominated by Geraint, who mistreats her in order to test her love: 'I charge you, on your duty as a wife'. Tennyson's code of the Knights of the Round Table does outline the ideal behaviour for a man towards a woman. They are 'to love one maiden only, cleave to her,/ And worship her by years of noble deeds,/ until they won her.'[401] The artistic principles of the Pre-Raphaelites were also being held to account to a certain extent. J. E. Millais painted *The Knight Errant* in 1870: the painting depicts a sword-bearing knight rescuing a naked woman bound to a

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[399] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 636-37.
[400] Talbot, ed., introduction to *The Water of the Wondrous Isles,* 9.
[401] Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* in Richard Barber, *The Arthurian Legends: An Illustrated Anthology*. Woodbridge, UK and Rochester NY: The Boydell Press, 1992, 167.

tree. This painting has been read as 'an unintended comment on the attitude to women which was sometimes covered by the ideal of "chivalry".'[402] The painting can be viewed as an example of the way in which chivalry 'victimises' as well as objectifies women. The painting may be seen to represent a form of Victorian 'soft porn', and alludes to an uncomfortable association between sex and violence. Morris manages to avoid totally objectifying his women - Morris's women are certainly beautiful but they are also empowered, subverting the conventional Victorian expectation of female behaviour. They are not 'mournful women' of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, but rather 'maidens who can shoot with the bow, swim, ride and generally do most things, including making love, a good deal more capably than their young men'.[403] Nevertheless, it must be ceded that Morris certainly offers titillation and sexual distraction in the prose romances through his female characters, who are often to be found naked or near-naked in the most alarming circumstances. Consider, for example, the way Birdalone decides to play in the water not long after she has been threatened with rape: she 'went down to the water and unclad her', then she 'took to the water, and desported her merrily therein' (*WWI* 176)

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[402] Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*, 52.

[403] Thompson, W*illiam Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 681. Morris was not entirely alone in the nineteenth century in his liberal portrayals of women. Walter Scott has been noted, among a few other early Victorian authors, for his particular treatment of female characters. Susan Morgan posits that 'Scott's greatest contribution, the first peasant heroine in British Fiction, Jeanie Deans [*The Heart of Midlothian*], embodies a definition of a new kind of hero, one available both to men and to women.'[403] Jeanie Deans, plump and plain, is nevertheless empowered; what she 'wants to happen and tries to make happen, does happen. Her efforts are realized, her dreams come true.' *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 58

Conventional expectations of gender behaviour were beginning to be publicly debated at the end of the nineteenth century; the Victorian New Woman debate was at its height at the time Morris wrote his late prose romances. The emergence of the New Woman can be read in terms of power: women were moving from a period of oppression to a period of agency in domestic, social and political spheres in the late-Victorian period. Opinion of the 'New Woman' was polarised. On one hand, she was criticised as a

> blatant female who made herself conspicuous and at the same time absurd by going about loudly demanding her "rights," denouncing man as her natural enemy, affecting an uncouth singularity in dress and manners, and generally transforming herself into as unlovely and unfeminine as object as nature would permit.

On the other hand, more sympathetic views held that she

> saw that she and her sisters had, under existing conditions, no reasonable chance of doing their best work and making their largest possible contribution to the world's welfare and happiness; [they] courageously and hopefully stepped off the beaten, easy track and forced a way through the thick growth of prejudice and established custom to the open regions where free development was possible.[404]

According to Jan Marsh, in her article 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender',[405] Morris was very much concerned about the issue of women and how their role would be defined in the Socialist vision for the future. *News From Nowhere* (1890) was written only shortly before the prose romances. It is quite conceivable that the romances were in some way infused with similar ideas and

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[404] Both excerpts are taken from Natalie Joy Woodall, ' "Women are knights-errant to the last": Nineteenth-Century Women Writers Reinvent the Medieval Literary Damsel' in William F. Gentrup, ed., *Reinventing the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Constructions of the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*. Arizona: Brepols, 1998, 216.

[405] In Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan, eds., *William Morris and* News From Nowhere*: A Vision For Our Time*. Devon: Green Books, 1990, 107-125.

commentary, latent or overt, on the subject of women and their role in society. I will outline some of the points made by Marsh about the gender issues in *News*, in order to signal some of the concerns that I will raise in the investigation of Birdalone. Morris was conscious that 'questions of gender equality and personal relations formed a large element in the debate about the socialist future.'[406] The first criticism Marsh makes of the portrayal of women in *News* is that Morris seems to focus primarily on 'beauty, pretty clothes, and the domestic graces of hospitality, flower arranging and food preparation,' and that he seems intent on figuring women as erotic objects. There is no suggestion that the division of labour between the sexes is anything other than traditional – women tending to domestic chores, men physically labouring in the outdoors.[407] Morris appears to be positioning housework as a serious occupation, nevertheless, but Marsh argues that the gendered division of tasks has more in common with Engels's view of 'primitive communism'. In Engels's structure, household management is as socially necessary as hunting, and he claimed there was much more real respect for women than under European capitalism. Under European capitalism, he argues, the lady of civilization, surrounded by false homage and estranged from all real work, has an infinitely lower social position than the hard-working woman of barbarism, who was regarded among her people as a real lady. From his passion for archaic Nordic literature, we know that Morris held

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[406] Jan Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender' in Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan, eds., *William Morris and* News From Nowhere*: A Vision For Our Time*. Devon: Green Books, 1990. 107-125 (111).
[407] Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender', 113.

much the same view.[408] Florence Boos notes that women's creative work is a concern glaringly absent from Morris's essays on art and socialism, though his views on and responses to 'the Woman Question' evolve significantly enough to mark him out from his contemporaries and predecessors on feminist issues.[409]

On a more positive note, Marsh concedes that 'although reactionary gender relations do form the bedrock of Morris's desirable society, it is also true that, as the story is told, the social and personal relations of men and women are rather more flexible and varied than this implies.'[410] Marsh points out that the women are 'lively, acute and generally wiser than the men',[411] but this seems to be only positive statement; she continues to say that the women lead lives 'of what can only be termed idleness', despite the role of Philippa, who Marsh accepts only as the exception that proves the rule. When Guest first enters the Guest House, he sees three young women at work:

> As they were the first of their sex I had seen on this eventful morning, I naturally looked at them very attentively, and found them at least as good as the gardens, the architecture, and the male men.
> . . .
> As to the women themselves, it was pleasant indeed to see them, they were so kind and happy-looking in expression of face, so shapely and well-knit of body, and thoroughly healthy-looking and strong. All were at least comely, and one of them very handsome and regular of feature. (*NFN* 11)[412]

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[408] Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender', 115.

[409] Boos, 'An (Almost) Egalitarian Sage: William Morris and Nineteenth-Century Socialist-Feminism', Feminism' in Thaïs E. Morgan, ed., *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick and London, 1990,188.

[410] Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender', 119.

[411] Marsh, 'Concerning Love: *News From Nowhere* and Gender', 119.

[412] Page references to *News from Nowhere* are taken from *News from Nowhere, or an epoch of rest*. James Redmond, ed. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1977.

This description is strikingly similar to a scene witnessed by Birdalone on the Isle of Queens, I would argue. Birdalone enters a great hall that is filled with women, 'lovely were they many of them, and none less than comely; their cheeks were bright, and their eyes gleamed, and their hair flowed down fair of fashion' (*WWI* 93). One of the important differences between the two descriptions, I would suggest, is that the images of perfect femininity that Birdalone sees are *dead* whereas the women in *News* are characterised by their *live*liness – their energy, activity and involvement in society. They contribute to work as much as the men do: Mistress Philippa is head carver on a new building, working with chisel and mallet, and the other women also engage happily in doing 'what they like best, and the men are neither jealous of it or injured by it' (*NFN* 50).

It can be argued that, from the working women of *News*, Morris has moved on in the last romances to creating a 'new woman' who is 'not simply a worker but a warrior.'[413] Although Morris was not strikingly vocal on the issues himself, some of the key aspects of the New Woman can be seen in the women of the romances.[414] For instance, Birdalone aspires to economic independence and sexual freedom; and Ursula and Birdalone both dress in masculine attire in the way of the New Women

[413] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 636.
[414] See Amanda Hodgson's monograph, *The Witch in the Wood: William Morris's Romance Heroines and the Late-Victorian 'New Woman'*, the Annual Kelmscott Lecture of the William Morris Society given at the Art Workers' Guild on 7 November 1997. London: William Morris Society, 2000. Judith Lowder offers further critical analysis of the New Woman debate in fiction in her study *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-1860*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981. Other notable contemporaries were remarkably absent from the trend towards addressing social feminist issues in their work, such as John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. See Boos, 'An (Almost) Egalitarian Sage: William Morris and Nineteenth-Century Socialist Feminism, 191.

who adopted an androgynous – if not outright masculine – style that suited their active, practical lives. The romance women hold relatively large degrees of power and influence. Some are socially and economically independent, some are gifted with supernatural talent and wisdom; and all are sexually uninhibited and free to choose their partners. They are able to influence not only individuals (usually the male hero) but also situations: they function as significant narrative agents. I would argue that one of the reasons Morris was able to articulate such relatively progressive ideologies in relation to his construction of women in the late prose romances is their form: the invention of imaginary worlds allowed Morris a certain freedom to interrogate – even subtly – the cultural order.

Critical Issues

Heroism has been constructed as a strictly masculine endeavour, and concomitantly the hero has been generally assumed to be male. As John Lash has pointed out, it is rarely disputed that 'the hero is undeniably *he*, the male of the human species . . . the hero incarnates masculinity at its best' (italics in original).[415] The paradigmatic pattern of the hero-myth of Campbell, to take one example, is founded almost exclusively on examples of male heroes. [416] Morris's romance demonstrates a pattern of female heroism that reflects more modern, feminist revisions of the traditional male heroic paradigm. In light of this, the theoretical framework for this chapter

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[415] Lash, *The Hero,* 5.
[416] Joseph Campbell does allow that a hero may be a woman. In his Prologue to *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, he writes 'The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms,' 19-20. Hahn, Tylor, Propp, Rank, and Raglan also overlook the figure of the female hero in their hero-myth studies.

will be informed by critical feminist scholarship, specifically, feminist re-visionings of Campbell's monomyth. The approach does not discard the work of Campbell, however: each of the critics acknowledges and utilises the monomyth, but adds to it in order to allow for the female experience. This chapter will also continue to draw on the critical discourses established earlier in the thesis.

Before proceeding with an examination of the critical and methodological issues of concern to this thesis, I will briefly address my use of the term 'female hero' rather than 'heroine'. There are semantic encumbrances with both of these terms. Both terms situate the female as the 'other', and emphasise the traditional assumption that heroes are, and can only be, men. Feminist critics generally seem to agree that the 'heroine' is not an equal counterpart to 'hero' but rather a derivative figure, often the object of rescue by the hero.[417] 'Heroines' are the passive prizes of male heroism, appendages rather than agents. The term 'female hero' is also problematic because it automatically positions the female within an established [masculine-centric] heroic paradigm. However, as Dana A. Heller as argued, while the term 'heroine' is a passive term, the term' hero' is active. By rejecting the term 'heroine' and adopting the term 'hero', a woman automatically appropriates power from the masculine sphere and 'accepts the active disobedience of patriarchal law and language.'[418]

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[417] See, for example, Lee R. Edwards' article 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a Theory of Female Heroism', *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1979): 33-49 and Rachel Brownstein's work, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels*. New York: Viking, 1982. Northrop Frye maintains that women make the quest possible for the man, but ultimately she always remains subordinate to his quest. *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, 195-196.

[418] Dana A. Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures*. Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1990, 1.

Campbell's Monomyth and the Female Hero

As indicated, the theoretical apparatus for this chapter will be informed by Campbell's monomyth and feminist revisions of the monomyth. Campbell presents his monomyth as a universal, non-gender-specific myth, yet the examples he uses are almost without exception based on male experience. Campbell's reliance on the traditions and myths of patriarchal cultures has elicited a response from feminist scholars who wish to redress the scope of his work to allow for female experience. Feminist critiques that argue the role of the female protagonist is de-valued or otherwise elided in Campbell's work. A survey of the main areas of debate will draw together this work

One of the feminist concerns is that Campbell's description of the hero 'setting forth' to the 'threshold of adventure' presupposes a social freedom that is traditionally permitted only to men.[419] Historically, a woman does not have the same social freedom to take to the road and travel the solitary journey of the male monomythic hero. She has to consider her safety, her chastity and her honour (or rather the honour of her family). Society insists she remains safely contained in the domestic sphere. Another concern is that Campbell makes explicit and implicit distinctions between 'male' roles and 'female' roles in the life of the hero, and female roles are secondary to the male/hero. I have already touched upon the general lack of freedom permitted to females to undertake the individual journey of the hero as

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[419] Campbell, *The Hero*, 245.

Campbell presents it. Campbell also structures the woman as other to the hero when he writes 'Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know.'[420] The female is also implicitly excluded from the role of hero in Campbell description of the hero's initiation: The hero encounters a female figure who is 'the reply to all desire, the bliss-bestowing goal of every hero's earthly and unearthly quest. She is mother, sister, mistress, bride.'[421] This formula positions the hero as male and heterosexual. The female's – mother, sister, mistress, bride – are secondary figures or the goal of the quest, never the quester.

Another matter raised in criticism is that when Campbell does specifically refer to the female hero, he contains her role to one that is based on her beauty and her sexual appeal rather than on her actions:

> And when the adventurer, in this context, is not a youth but a maid, she is the one who, by her qualities, her beauty, or her yearning, is fit to become the consort of an immortal. Then the heavenly husband descends to her and conducts her to his bed – whether she will or no.[422]

The female hero is thus no more than a secondary figure to a male – a 'consort', a sexual object for the male to take to his bed 'whether she will or no'. The female hero is not the subject, but the object. She is acted upon; she is not the one who acts. And indeed the manner in which she is acted upon (by the heavenly husband) is evocative of that most female of traumas: rape. The so-called rape-trauma archetype

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[420] Campbell, *The Hero*, 116.
[421] Campbell, *The Hero*, 110-111.
[422] Campbell, *The Hero*, 119.

has only relatively recently been described by feminist critics. For Annis Pratt and other critics, the recovery from rape-trauma is one of the unique experiences of the female hero.[423] As I will explore later, Morris's female hero Birdalone is subject to the threat of rape; it is a key incident in the narrative.

Terri Frontgia recognises that Campbell elides the possibility of a woman being the hero. In *The Power of Myth* Campbell argues that a girl has no need to perform the hero's journey of separation and trials, as the boy does, in order to reach maturation. He writes, 'the girl has no choice but to become a woman, 'whether she intends it or not, but the little boy has to intend to be a man. At the first menstruation, the girl is a woman. The next thing she knows, she's pregnant, she's a mother.' Men, however, must make a spiritual, psychological and emotional 'journey' to attain adulthood through cultural rites of passage. Therefore, argues Frontgia, the actual possibility of the hero's journey (and therefore of heroism) is implicitly denied women. Women are excluded from participating in - and *requiring* to participate in - the traditional [male-] identity quest. [424]

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[423] Annis Pratt *et.al.*, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981, 16*ff*. In her unpublished PhD thesis, Rebecca S. Phillips examines more closely the 'rape-trauma archetype' in Campbell's work, noting in particular his reading of the Apollo-Daphne myth. Phillips argues that Campbell sees Daphne's refusal to submit to Apollo's advances as a refusal of the call to heroism, rather than a heroic preservation of her bodily integrity.
[424] Frontgia, 'Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives', 16.

Rites of Passage

The previous chapter demonstrated that initiation patterns and rites of passage constitute an important element of Morris's construction of the hero's quest. These patterns and rites are based on traditions of male quest stories, of rituals and initiations geared toward enabling a *male* to move up in his society. A new approach to these symbolic aspects of the male hero quest is required in order to facilitate a proper understanding of Birdalone as a female hero. In his book, *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, Bruce Lincoln offers an important contribution to this area of study. He argues that women's rites of passage are very different to those of men, not only in their nature but also, and perhaps more significantly, in terms of their outcome. Lincoln takes as his base paradigm van Gennep's tripartite structure of the ritual stages of liminality. He argues that van Gennep's focus on the ritual passages from one social state to another (with its focus on liminality) excludes popular female experience. The reason for this, Lincoln explains, is that the status of women – socially and politically – traditionally tends to be low and consequently, they 'cannot be deprived of it, and one is forced to conclude that there can be no liminal state for women or that women exist always in a liminal state.' Unlike men's rites, women's rites do not bring about a change in hierarchical status, Lincoln observes. He cautiously proposes an alternate set of terms to allow for women's experience: enclosure, metamorphosis and emergence.[425] My interest in these new terms lies on Lincoln's use of the term 'enclosure', because this term is one that is specifically used in feminist revisions of the hero myth. Lincoln argues that for women, the 'liminal

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[425] See Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, 101-103.

stage' is not defined by spatial change, as it is for the male; the woman 'remains where she has always been, in terms of hierarchy as well as domicile, and this is why she is secluded within her normal living space, rather than separated from it at the outset of initiation.'[426] I will show that one of the pivotal experiences in Birdalone's quest is enacted in domestic, enclosed space; Lincoln's definition assists in understanding the import of the sequence of events that occur when Birdalone is enclosed in the Castle of the Quest.

Feminist Revisions of the Hero Myth

Annis Pratt, Dana Heller, and Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope will be the main references for the feminist re-visioning of Campbell's monomyth.[427] Each of the critics referred to identifies certain important aspects of the female quest not acknowledged by Campbell. The critics each share a relatively moderate stance on the monomyth in that they recognise the importance of Campbell's work and do not discard his main ideas. They allow that the female counterpart to the traditional masculine hero can function within the system proscribed by the monomyth, with some modifications and allowances for the female experience. I concur with Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope's position that the female hero is not that different to the male hero in her search for self-knowledge and fulfilment, but the path she takes to achieve this is not the same as the male hero's. That is, on an archetypal

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[426] Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, 102.
[427] Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures*; Pearson and Pope, *The Female Hero in American and British Literature.* New York and London: R R Bowker, 198.; Pratt, et.al., *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction.*

level the journey is the same; the differences arise in the nature of the female hero's plight, and in the degree and type of libration she achieves.[428] The monomyth does not deny the fulfilment of the hero's quest to the female, but it does not account for the special ways in which females have to operate in order to gain their boon.

This 'female monomyth', as I will refer to the emerging but not yet conclusively defined structure, shares the stages of departure, initiation, and return with the journey of the monomyth, but has traits that set it apart from the traditional narrative. I will offer an overview of the feminist revisioning of the masculine hero myth as it pertains to the work in this chapter. I will limit this analysis of the feminist revisions of the monomyth to concentrate only on those aspects that are relevant to the female experience in Morris's *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The two main areas of interest to this thesis are the 'green world' and 'enclosure in the patriarchy', as set out below.

The Green World Archetype

The green world archetype has been identified by Annis Pratt and Barbara White as a 'special world of nature', unique to the female hero. The green world can function as a protective, nurturing space, a place of childhood, but ultimately it is a place that the female hero must leave in order to fulfil her transformation.[429] As well as being a place of departure, the female hero can live permanently in the green world, her

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[428] Pearson and Pope, *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, preface, 8.
[429] Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 17.

devotion to nature a central element of her development. The green world archetype is relevant to this thesis not least of all because it allows place - the natural world - to attain a significant role. The importance of the green world recalls the impulse of the pastoral to construct a natural world in which people are connected to the earth's natural processes. It also reflects Frye's concept of the 'innocent youth of the hero' whose locus is 'a pastoral world'.[430] The green world is a crucial element of the female hero's story, whether she leaves it and only returns to it in memory or whether she spends her whole life within it. The concept of the female hero's departure from the green world - the idea that it is a necessary step for her to attain selfhood - allows for an alignment of her heroic biography with that of Campbell's paradigmatic male hero, whose first stage of adventure involves separation or departure. The main difference is that Campbell's hero is 'called *to*' adventure; the female hero must 'depart *from*' in order to begin her adventure. The female hero's journey is constructed as reactive rather than proactive; Pratt recognises this element of the female experience in the need for the female hero to escape patriarchal enclosure.

Enclosure in the Patriarchy

The female cannot operate in the same way as the male in a western, patriarchal society, such as that which forms the basis of Campbell's study. Containment and enclosure in systems constructed by or for men become the dominant obstacles for the female hero. So rather than experience Campbell's other-worldly passage to a

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[430] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 198.

higher reality, the female hero must contend with the restrictive cultures and values of the 'real' world that seek to prevent the development of female power. The male hero is free to explore and develop both his inner-psyche and external experiences; for the female hero enclosure prevents the progress of her quest. In Pratt's study, enclosure takes the form of marriage to which the woman has (usually) willingly consigned herself. But her observations can easily be extended to include general experience, in which the female can still find herself restricted in terms of her freedom to travel, to make decisions about her life, to express critical intelligence, and even in terms of her erotic freedom.[431] Her father, or other members of her family, and even by her wider community can impose these constraints when she feels pressure to conform to the 'norm'.

Heller has also argued that containment is a major obstacle to the development of the female hero. Heller makes reference to several forms of containment that obstruct the female. She argues that when women lack a heroic female self-image they become restricted by the internalised image of themselves as a passive object; 'they are removed from the very symbols and activities the quest traditionally evokes.'[432] Women are confined to a domestic sphere that restricts their development, while the male hero is allowed a more expansive sphere in which to develop.[433] This notion of a wider sphere for the male hero is also evidenced in the type of reward the male receives for a successful quest: social power and autonomy.

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[431] Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 45.
[432] Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, 6.
[433] Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, 11.

The female hero cannot claim these rewards in a patriarchal culture. In a discourse of dualism, the patriarchy (as inherently masculine) may be constructed in opposition to the natural world (as inherently feminine). The thesis argues that this context can provide a meaningful connection to the dialectic of postoral opposition in the romances.

The Asexual Archetype

Lee R. Edwards' article 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a New Theory of Female Heroism' posits a valuable strategy for investigating the role of the female hero.[434] She does not use Campbell's paradigm, but examines Erich Neumann's reading of the Psyche myth, and then offers a variation on it with reference to Victor Turner. Like Pratt and the other scholars discussed above, she also does not seek to discard the primary elements of the male hero myth, but argues instead for a revisioning of the male archetype as an asexual or omnisexual archetype. Edwards's study is important because the myth of Psyche parallels the story of Birdalone, and her conclusions are transferable to Morris's work.[435]

Edwards demonstrates that Erich Neumann's reading of *Amor and Psyche* describes a pattern of action that allows for a female hero: his pattern does not limit action to physical, martial or other forms of power (inherently masculine), but extends it so

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[434] Edwards, 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a New Theory of Female Heroism,' 33-49.

[435] Moore analyses the links between the Psyche myth and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in 'The Vision of the Feminine in William Morris's *The Waters* [sic] *of the Wondrous Isles*'. Moore structures his article around Neumann's description of the 'psychic development of the feminine.'

that physical action becomes a symbolic expression of underlying psychic structures.[436] But she rejects Neumann's conclusion that Psyche shows 'failure' as a hero in her passivity to love. She argues that Neumann's assessment of Psyche presents her as the projected *anima* of patriarchal culture, rather than the representative feminine archetype. She shows that his reading limits the significance of the tale, reducing it from a quintessential myth about the human mind to one that only reflects the feminine image of the patriarchy. She suggests that the underlying myth of heroic questing and psychic individuation is significant because it concentrates on *human* growth and change. [437] She shows that Victor Turner's ritual framework is more 'useful and liberating because it allows us to see Psyche as a marginal being who adapts the ritual process to her own unique ends.'[438]

Edwards is not the only one to consider an asexual reading of the male hero myth. Frontgia has demonstrated that there is a possible alternative to Campbell's structure of female development. She cites the work of Jean Shinoda Bolen, in *Goddesses in Everywoman: The New Psychology of Women,* in which Bolen presents her own interpretation of female identity and heroism.[439] Bolen, like Campbell, relies on traditional archetypes in her construction of female identity, but Bolen recognises that the female self can be multi-faceted, and have qualities beyond that bestowed by biology. Concomitantly, the female self is empowered to make decisions about

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[436] Edwards, 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a New Theory of Female Heroism', 39.
[437] Edwards, 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a New Theory of Female Heroism', 39-44
[438] Edwards, 'The Labors of Psyche: Toward a New Theory of Female Heroism', 48.
[439] Frontgia, 'Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives', 16-17.

her life rather than to be simply ruled by her biological function to procreate. Bolen allows that there is the possibility of a female journey or quest - identical to that of the male hero - in which the female hero will face tasks and obstacles and will respond to these, making her journey a 'journey of self-discovery and development, of integrating aspects of herself into a whole, yet complex personality.'[440] Like Campbell's heroic male boon-bringer, the heroine also returns with both knowledge and power, as well as with a new sense of personal strength and authority.[441]

Heller's *The Feminization of Quest-Romance: Radical Departures* argues for a positioning of the female hero within traditional concepts of heroism, accepting 'heroism' as an androgynous, rather than purely masculine, concept. In this, Heller follows Lee R. Edwards' position that heroism is mythologically defined as an 'asexual or omnisexual archetype'.[442]

Community

One of the positive themes found within feminist revisions of the monomyth, and reflected in Morris's romance, is the focus on community and the transformation of society. Feminist revisions of the monomyth locate the emphasis on community as a female focus. Rather than pursuing the individualistic goals of the male hero, the

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[440] Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: The New Psychology of Women,* as cited by Frontgia, 'Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives', 17.
[441] Frontgia, 'Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives', 17.
[442] Heller, *The Feminization of Quest-Romance*, 9.

female hero's goals are communal, and have a transformative effect on society.[443] Social, as well as personal, rebirth is the ultimate goal for the Morrisian hero, not least of all of for Birdalone. For the female hero, the path to social and personal rebirth means the rejection – if not the destruction – of the dominant patriarchal culture. Discussed in psychological terms, successful social change is the result of a balance between *ego* and *anima*, [male] consciousness and the [feminine] unconscious. For Morris, the important expression of such a balance is social, rather than psychological, I would argue, but the concept is the same: the balance between the Nature and Culture. The duality of Nature and Culture can be considered in gendered terms, in which Nature is synonymous with the feminine/female and Culture synonymous with masculine/male. In Morris's construction of place the gendered dichotomy can be utilised as a critical tool to examine the conflicts in the narrative. The domination of the female hero within patriarchal structures in Morris's romance attains new meaning when read in the context of the dualistic tension between Nature and Culture.

Bildungsroman

I raise the issue of the *Bildungsroman* briefly here to acknowledge the interrelationship it has with the hero-myth. Birdalone's story can be read, in part, as a truncated female *Bildungsroman*. The tradition has undergone many of the same revisions as Campbell's monomyth of the hero. It has been argued that the feminist

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[443] See, for example, Moore's conclusion in 'The Vision of the Feminine in William Morris's *The Waters* [sic] *of the Wondrous Isles*', 65.

version of the *Bildungsroman* that is the most common type of feminist narrative in fantasy literature.[444] In this structure, the female protagonist 'goes through a search for self that takes her through various traumatic experiences but finally results in her becoming a whole and committed person.'[445] Esther Kleinbord Labovitz's book on *The Myth of the Heroine. The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century*, provides an excellent reference point to understanding what she describes as 'the belated arrival of the female heroine in the Bildungsroman.'[446] The *Bildungsroman* flourished in the nineteenth century, along with a supporting body of critical theory and literature, but with a marked absence of women: very few novels in the genre were written by or about women. *Bildung* belonged the male hero.[447] The widely accepted definition of the *Bildungsroman*, described by Wilhelm Dilthey, assumes a male protagonist: 'a young male hero discovers himself and his social role through the experiences of love, friendship, and the hard realities of life.'[448] The exclusion of the female hero 'from the *Bildungsroman* tradition was a historical, social, and cultural fact'; the Bildungsroman was considered only in male-centred terms.[449]

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[444] See Kathleen Cioffi, 'Types of Feminist Fantasy and Science Fiction' in *Women Worldwalkers: New Dimensions of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, 83-93.

[445] Cioffi, 'Types of Feminist Fantasy and Science Fiction', 89-90.

[446] Esther Kleinbord Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine. The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century: Dorothy Richardson, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Christa Wolf.* New York: Peter Lang, 1986, 5.

[447] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, 2.

[448] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, 2, cites Susan L Cocalis.

[449] Labovitz, *The Myth of the Heroine*, 245.

Birdalone in the Green World

Morris's use of the 'green world archetype' is central to this exegesis of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Identifying the wood as the 'green world' of the narrative establishes a critical framework that incorporates key critical indictors from the monomyth and feminist revisions of the monomyth. The green world also operates as the central landscape feature of the pastoral tradition; it is the 'enclosed garden', a safe and protected area. It is also a marginal, isolated area, constructed as a place outside 'normal' society; this aspect of marginalisation and isolation will have relevance later in the analysis, when Morris constructs his final vision of the romance. He moves away from the image of an isolated hero to develop a hero who is integrated into society; the question is at what cost.

The narrative sets the natural world in binary opposition to the civilized world, creating a dichotomy based on Nature and Culture. This section will proceed by investigating this construction of difference, then will examine the important relationship between Birdalone and the two females who help raise her, and relate the special quality of the feminine space of the woodland to the eco-feminist relationship between women and nature. Finally, I will explore the liminal and ritual importance of the natural world.

Construction of Difference

The green world of Evilshaw and the patriarchal domain of the Castle of the Quest function as a gendered dichotomy in *The Water of the Wondrous*. The green world

is feminine and natural, the patriarchal domain is masculine and constructed. This construction of difference, expressed in gender, also references deeper dualisms that include pastoral, social and political oppositions. Pastoral dualism relies on a hierarchical structure that privileges the natural world (peaceful, bucolic, humanist) over the urban/cultured world (frenetic, soulless, industrial). The first half of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* treats these two opposing forces as mutually exclusive; when Birdalone – raised as child of nature – enters the patriarchal domain, the incompatibility of the two forces leads to death (as I will explore later in the section 'Escape from Enclosure'). However, Morris's resolution of this conflict is not to return Birdalone to the pastoral idyll of the green world. Rather, he breaks the pastoral tradition and instead explores the possibility for communal harmony. Birdalone becomes an emissary for the natural world, and in her union with Arthur joins the two worlds of Nature and Culture.

As in the other romances, Morris constructs the natural world as the contrary of the civilized world, creating a dichotomy between 'country' and 'city', Nature and Culture. Before the narrative explores the conflict between Birdalone and the world of chivalry (in the Castle), it introduces a brief social critique that utilises the same pastoral opposition. The romance begins by constructing a social and geographical dichotomy between Utterhay and the wood Evilshaw. Utterhay is a town of 'thrift and abundance', but Birdalone's mother lives at the edge of the town, the periphery to which the poor are relegated. She has no money to feed her baby daughter, and complains of a lack of community and social justice: 'What neighbours have I since

my man dies; and I dying of hunger, and in this town of thrift and abundance?' (*WWI* 3). Morris's construction of the town can be read as his critique of urban capitalism and the extremes of wealth and poverty it fosters. The bustling market day at Utterhay does not provide for Birdalone's mother; the extreme poverty in which Birdalone exists is conveyed through Morris's description of the way she and her mother are dressed: Birdalone had 'scarce a rag' (*WWI* 2) upon her little body; her mother, though only twenty-five years old, was 'grown bony and haggard' and was 'evilly clad' (*WWI* 2). The mother's desperation for food and money leads her to risk leaving her baby with a stranger, who then steals the baby away. The brief vignette of Utterhay provides a curious start to the narrative because it is not the ideal childhood home; and in fact Evilshaw is far more ideal in many ways, even though it is a place of imprisonment for her.

Located on the edge of Utterhay, Evilshaw can be termed a spatial periphery. Such peripheral places are traditionally wild, untamed, spaces, places where people fear to go.[450] The local townspeople fear Evilshaw, and believe it to be a place of peril, inhabited by 'the Faery', and 'full of malice and guile' (*WWI* 1). This fear and superstition protects the woodland from outsiders entering, and isolates Birdalone from any contact with the outside world. Operating on the margins of society, Evilshaw is a peaceful refuge for Morris's female hero, a self-contained bucolic

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[450] Geographer David Sibley has shown there is a history of imaginary geographies which cast people who are seen to pose a threat to the dominant group in society as 'folk devils', who are then located 'elsewhere', to spatial peripheries like the edge of the world, or the margins of a city. *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*. London: Routledge, 1995, 49.

world far removed from the ills of society. It becomes a version of the 'garden of childhood' for Birdalone, a magical place, bound and inaccessible to others.[451] It corresponds to Frye's description of the 'innocent youth of the hero' which takes place in an Arcadian, pastoral landscape, wooded, full of glades.[452]

> the ending of the wood left a fair green plain betwixt it and the water… and there was a broad bight of greensward of the fashion of the moon seven nights old… Some deal of this greensward was broken by closes of acre-land, and the tall green wheat stood blossoming therein; but the most was sweet meadow, and there as now was a gallant flock of goats feeding down it; five kine withal, and a tethered bull. (*WWI* 6)

Pratt's green world functions as a place of renewal, which Birdalone experiences even after she has left its borders. The woods offer Birdalone 'rest and peace' (*WWI* 11). When Birdalone reaches the Castle of the Quest she is not permitted to enter the castle, but is instead offered a 'lair' (*WWI* 107) – a cottage – in which to shelter. The term 'lair', used by Morris to refer to a bed or resting place, also functions as a subtle reminder of Birdalone's affinity with the natural world in its dual meaning of 'den of an animal'.[453] Birdalone is delighted to be offered the 'sweet and clean' bracken bed, and the cottage offered her 'rest and peace in her mind' (*WWI* 110):

> She felt happy in the lonely little cot, and her heart had gone out to the sweet meadow-land, and she loved it after all the trouble of the water; and herseemed that even now, in the dusk a-growing into dark, it loved and caressed her. (*WWI* 110)

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[451] See Susan E. Honeyman's article, 'Childhood Bound: In Gardens, Maps and Pictures', *Mosaic* 34.2 (2001): 117-132.

[452] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 198.

[453] There are further examples of Morris's use of animal-imagery in relation to Birdalone: when the knights go to look for her in the Black Valley of the Greywethers, Morris writes that 'they took up the *slot* of her' (180, my italics). Linda Gallasch notes that 'slot', meaning 'track or trail' is used when referring to animals, and not human beings, in *The Use of Compounds and Archaic Diction in the Works of William Morris,* Bern: Peter Lang, 1979, 68. The use of this term can bee seen to emphasise Birdalone's position outside normal human society.

The natural world offers Birdalone the power of self-sufficiency. She learns 'of the ways and the wont of all the creatures round about her' (*WWI* 8), and though alone, she is content in her solitude and the 'very grass and flowers were friends to her' (*WWI* 8). She also finds the 'wood a better home than the house' (*WWI* 9). The natural world also provides sustenance for Birdalone and the Witch-Wife, enabling their self-sufficiency. Birdalone learns to 'plough and sow and reap the acre-land according to the seasons'; herd the stock, 'and 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'. She also learns how to shoot a bow and arrow and to hunt in the woods for deer (*WWI* 11).

Feminine Space

The green world of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is a wholly feminine space; and is a place of feminine/female power. [454] The social and geographic isolation of the wood means that Birdalone is raised outside the reach of formal social and cultural institutions, without preconceived notions of conventional gender restrictions, and in an environment that supports female independence and empowerment. She is raised without patriarchal conditioning. The wood operates outside the realm of patriarchy; indeed, the literal figure of the patriarchy – Birdalone's father – is entirely absent from the story. Other than Birdalone, the

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[454] In Pratt's archetype, the green world is often inhabited by an erotic male guide – a 'green world lover'. See *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 16.

green world is inhabited only by the Witch-Wife and the nature spirit Habundia.[455]

These two females have critical roles in Birdalone's development. Habundia is a *domina Abundia*,[456] a nature goddess, and she represents the wise woman of romance tradition. She is a benign-feminine force. The Witch-Wife is the wicked-witch of the fairy-tale tradition, a malign-feminine force. The two feminine representatives of the natural and super-natural worlds reflect the benevolent and threatening aspects of the natural world. It can be calm, bucolic, and nurturing as well as wild, untamed and dangerous. Between the two forces, Birdalone undergoes a dialectic of self-discovery.

Both figures function as surrogate mothers to Birdalone. Birdalone's relationship with Habundia develops progressively to the point where Habundia becomes mother, mentor and teacher to Birdalone.[457] Morris shows this progression through language. Early in the relationship, Birdalone refers to Habundia as 'sister' and 'dear sister' (*WWI* 35). However, as the relationship between Birdalone and Habundia develops, a shifting of their roles occurs, and Birdalone positions herself as both student and daughter of Habundia:

> I would ask thee a thing and crave somewhat of thee, *as if thou wert verily my mother*; wilt thou grant it me? Yea, surely, child, said Habundia. Said Birdalone: This it is then, that *thou wilt learn me of thy wisdom*. (*WWI* 42, my italics)

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[455] It remains a feminine space until the end of the story, when Arthur joins Birdalone to live in the Witch-Wife's cottage. The Wood in *The Wood Beyond the World* is another example of a green world that nurtures female power.

[456] See Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 182.

[457] This pattern of a girl being tutored by a wise-woman occurs in other romances of Morris: the Maid in *Wood Beyond the World*, Elfhild in *The Sundering Flood*, the Lady of Abundance in *The Well at the World's End* in particular.

From this point forward, Morris, as narrator, also changes the way he refers to Habundia, and introduces the name 'Woodmother'/'wood-mother' (*WWI* 42 onwards). Birdalone also directly refers to Habundia as 'mother'. Habundia tutors Birdalone as requested, but the narrator of the tale insists 'Forsooth forgotten is the wisdom, though the tale of its learning abideth, wherefore nought may we tell thereof' (*WWI* 42). Like Steelhead, Habundia offers her pupil both advice and practical help. While Osberne's guardian is responsible for introducing Osberne to his martial side, Birdalone's guardian offers her advice and teaching on more feminine aspects of growing up.

Habundia's powers are connected to the natural world. Like Frye's morally neutral nature-spirits of romance, she is part of liminal space, and emphasises the hero's special connection to nature.[458] She manifests mainly under an old oak tree in the wood – a symbolic Green Tree that stands for the celebration of 'natural profusion, delight in the body, and simplicity of life.'[459] Birdalone learns 'that the witch-wife would enter it [the wood] never' (*WWI* 9); this fact allows Birdalone to safely maintain contact with Habundia. By contrast, Habundia does not enter places built by man: 'I have little to do with houses, and doubt if a house be safe for me' (*WWI* 329). The man-made world is inimical to the spirit of nature, and is a reminder of the polarity Morris has introduced already between Nature and Culture. A similar opposition can be drawn between Habundia's magic knowledge, which comes from

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[458] See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 196-197.
[459] Calhoun, *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris*, 5.

'the book of the earth' (*WWI* 42), and the Witch-Wife's power that incorporates violence and blood (in the spell of the Sending Boat) and relies on structured, formulaic incantations.

Habundia helps Birdalone achieve selfhood, the first step in Birdalone's *Bildung* and transition to active hero. Habundia appears before Birdalone as her identical twin in a sacral episode that highlights the innocence and beauty of Birdalone and, by extension, can be read as Morris's identification of Nature as beautiful and innocent. The episode includes a lengthy physical description of Birdalone, in which Morris utilises imagery from nature to reveal Birdalone's beauty: her skin is tanned as if the 'golden sunlight which fulfilleth the promise of the earth, were playing therein' (*WWI* 16-17); her eyes are 'grey as a hawk's', but kind (*WWI* 17). The episode is set up as almost as a medieval decorative set-piece; the two young women, Birdalone and Habundia, standing naked facing each other, making a natural tableau echoing the two harts Birdalone has stitched upon her dress.[460] They are 'two children whom the earth loveth' (*WWI* 16).

I would argue the Witch-Wife's role is almost as important as Habundia's in Birdalone's development. Excellent Morris scholars like Carole Silver tend to overlook the role of the Witch-Wife, because, I would suggest, of archetyping. As the 'terrible mother' or 'wicked witch' she is not traditionally recognised a teacher

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[460] Talbot makes the observation in his notes to the text in his edition.

or guide,[461] yet she is involved in key episodes of Birdalone's maturation. She fosters Birdalone's creative skills, giving her fabric and thread to embroider with (*WWI* 13), and she teaches Birdalone stories about 'men and women, and kings and warriors and thralls, and the folk of the world beyond them' (*WWI* 9). The Witch-Wife also displays some aspect of maternal responsibility. She makes a claim to Birdalone that she has,

> reared thee as faithfully as ever mother did to child; clemming thee never, smiting thee not so oft, and but seldom cruelly. Moreover, I have suffered thee to go whereso thou wouldest, and have compelled thee to toil for nought but what was needful for our two livelihoods. And I have not stayed thy swimmings in the lake, nor thy wanderings in the wood, and thou hast learned bowshot there, till thou art now a past-master in the craft: and, moreover, thou art swift-foot as the best of the deer, and mayest over-run any one of them whom thou wilt. (*WWI* 31)

Although the Witch-Wife appears sincere in her claim to be like a mother to Birdalone, there is an essential element missing in the evidence she cites, and that is the absence of love or any emotional feeling. Furthermore, no true mother would raise her daughter to be allure for men as the Witch-Wife intends to do with Birdalone. The Witch-Wife represents only the façade of motherhood; Habundia provides the core qualities of motherhood through her love and nurture of Birdalone's emotional and mental development.[462]

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[461] Silver ignores the figure of the Witch-Wife in her study, *The Romance of William Morris*. She only briefly refers to her in 'Myth and Ritual in the Last Prose Romances of William Morris', 135. Talbot does not refer to the witch at all in his essay 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance'*,* 25-44.

[462] The Witch-Wife may be seen as a variation of the mistress of the Lady of Abundance in *The Well at the World's End*. Morris obviously enjoys exploring the theme of female development under malign female control. The Lady is freed from the malign dominance of her mistress through with the help of a wise woman (see *WWE* 1, 149ff for the narration of the lady's story). There obvious parallels in between the lady, her mistress and the wise woman of *The Well* and the Birdalone, the

Other females also help in Birdalone's education. One particular area that Habundia was not able to teach her about was men and love; the isolated space of the wood denies Birdalone any opportunity to interact with men. Birdalone's lack of experience with men becomes evident when she meets Aurea, Atra and Viridis for the first time. They tell her about their own love for three knights, from whom they have been separated; Birdalone's response indicates the beginnings of her own sexual awakening: 'the colour came and went in her cheeks, her flesh quaked, her heart beat quick, and she was oppressed by the sweetness of longing. . . and tender she was of her body as of that which should one day be so sorely loved' (*WWI* 63). The account is portrayed in terms of sexual arousal, and the terms are echoed when Birdalone and the knights meet. Birdalone reddens under the gaze of Arthur the Black Squire (*WWI* 114-115), and he in turn becomes flushed. Birdalone's sexual appeal affects the other knights too, though to a lesser degree. The Green Knight also succumbs to a flush when he greets Birdalone, but he is responding more to the smock she is wearing – it belongs to his lover Viridis.

The feminine space of the green world is no only a place of safety and renewal, but also a place of power for Birdalone. Feminist re-visioning of the hero-myth has included a redefining of the term 'power' to allow for greater female participation. Judith Lowder Newton has summarised the shift in definition. She explains that power was predominantly considered in 'masculine' terms, as a masculine attribute

Witch-Wife and Habundia in *The Water*.

of physical strength and dominance, and that feminist discourse appropriated and expanded it to refer to agency, ability, and competence, encompassing woman's experience in all spheres of life.[463] The debate about woman's power and influence has been traced back to the 'woman question' in Victorian England, when the best a woman could respectfully hope for was an unobtrusive, secret and somewhat passive 'influence' in the domestic sphere. In fact, any more 'power' wielded by women would threaten the spirit of chivalry, according to a writer in the *Edinburgh Review*.[464]

On occasion, the line between traditional masculine forms of power, and more feminine forms of power is blurred in the figure of Birdalone. Her upbringing in the wood has equipped her with many physical and martial skills, and these skills pose a challenge to her knightly companions: her prowess threatens the gender-based dichotomy that defines life in the Castle. This dichotomy dictates that she is not permitted to excel in the same arenas as her male counterparts. Exercising their martial arts at the Castle, the knights include Birdalone and offer her a bow and arrow and she 'shot straighter and well-nigh as hard as the best man there, whereat they marvelled' (*WWI* 121). But when they try to engage her in foot races, Birdalone refuses: '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.' Social propriety forces her to contain her abilities because she 'wotted well that

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[463] Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-1860*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981, preface, 18.
[464] Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion*, 4-5.

were she to run against them with trussed-up skirts she would bear off the prize' (*WWI* 130).

Liminal and Ritual Space

As a childhood place, and a liminal space, the wood is the location of many of Birdalone's rites of passage into adulthood. As biographer MacCarthy observes, in Morris's iconography of Nature, 'a forest was where you both lost yourself and found yourself.'[465] Morris signals the entry into this liminal, ritual locus in an episode that corresponds to Campbell's 'crossing the threshold' motif. After several days' journey the wood 'began to grow grey betwixt the distant boles, and then from grey to white, and it was as if a new world of light lay before them' (*WWI* 6).

The green world as a liminal space allows a correlation to be made with Turner and Van Gennep's definition of liminality, which involves a separation from the social order. In Turner's work, liminality is a moment of 'social limbo', and one of the expressions of this limbo for Birdalone is, I would argue, the anonymity that is induced through namelessness. Morris tells us the name of his female hero only in chapter four (*WWI* 8) of the first part of the romance. The Witch-Wife, he tells us, seldom uses Birdalone's name, 'nor indeed … any name' (*WWI* 8), thereby denying Birdalone an individual or independent identity, and reinforcing Birdalone's non-independent status as a 'thrall.' But even Birdalone's name - divided into 'bird' and 'alone' – signals her psychological separation from society as much as her physical

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[465] MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 14-15.

separation from society (that is, from her mother and her community).[466] Moreover, the witch delights in insulting Birdalone by calling her names like 'rag', 'bag-o'-bones', and 'lank elf' (*WWI* 18), names that deliberately seek to deny Birdalone's womanhood and shapely and feminine figure. Although the witch professes to have raised Birdalone like her own child (*WWI* 31), Birdalone already realises that she is nothing so personal, or individual, as that: 'For this she saw, that she was not her own, but a chattel and a tool of one who… used her as a thrall' (*WWI* 10). In this context, Habundia's use of Birdalone's name at their first meeting can be seen as a symbolic restoration of Birdalone's individuality (*WWI* 15). The witch herself is never referred to as anything other than Witch-Wife.

The construction of identity through clothing reflects Birdalone's search for a place in society. Birdalone's self-conception, and thus also her public image, begins to develop once she is able to personalise her appearance through her clothes. Birdalone is at first forced and then inspired to make and decorate her own clothes and shoes: the Witch-Wife tells her 'thou art a handy wench, take the deer skin that hangs up yonder and make thee brogues for thy feet' (*WWI* 12). Once she begins the process of making her new shoes, she remembers seeing 'some threads of silk of divers colours' (*WWI* 12), and takes these to decorate the shoes. That which is utilitarian becomes beautiful also. She 'sat down happily under a great spreading oak which much she haunted, and fell to broidering the kindly deerskin' (*WWI* 12). She

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[466] Morris uses the word 'bird-alone' adjectivally in *The Wood Beyond the World*: she 'went down all bird-alone to the dwelling of those huge men' (Chapter 31).

goes on to embroider her smock and coat with delicate images of roses and lilies, a tall tree, and a pair of harts. This becomes an obvious example of one of Morris's great passions regarding the 'lesser arts' and decoration: 'to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce *use*, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in things they must perforce *make*, that is the other pleasure of it.'[467]

These decorated clothes become the first real thing that Birdalone can lay a personal claim to, for she owns nothing else. She has marked her tatty clothes with symbols from nature, creating an external, visual and public representation of her self. Her declared alliance with the natural world is more than superficial, however. Morris tells us that 'the earth was her friend' (*WWI* 9); he likens the blossoming of the earth' to the blossoming of Birdalone; she finds solace in the 'trees and flowers' (*WWI* 49) and in the softness of the grass (*WWI* 54). Confined in the Castle of the Quest, Birdalone 'longed for the oak-glades, and the wood-lawns, and for the sight of the beasts that dwelt therein' (*WWI* 139), and she becomes physically ill because she has had no contact with nature while waiting in the Castle for the knights to return from their quest. The symbol of the oak is a recurring motif in the narrative. Birdalone embroiders oak leaves onto her shoes (*WWI* 13); an old oak tree is her favourite resting place in the woods (*WWI* 12), and is the location of her first meeting with Habundia (*WWI* 15*ff*); Habundia first appears to Birdalone stark naked, apart from an oak wreath – the signature of the forest – around her loins

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[467] William Morris, 'The Lesser Arts' in *Hopes and Fears for Art. Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London, and Nottingham 1878-1881*, 4.

(*WWI* 15). Most remarkably, Arthur is wearing an oak-wreath on his head when Birdalone first sees him.[468] This small detail establishes a symbolic affinity between Arthur and Birdalone that is later borne out by their attraction to each other. It also sets up Arthur with a special relationship to the natural world that is developed later, when he adopts the role of the wild man of romance tradition, and comes to be healed by Habundia.

The decoration of the clothes, moreover, reveals Birdalone's skill as an embroiderer, and this provides an important key to later events. Her creativity and expertise in embroidering are utilized in the Castle of the Quest. Her work there is admired by the other ladies: 'so marvellous fine as it was, and how that in little space of time were come flowers and trees, and birds and beasts, all lovely; and they said that the Faery must have learned her that craft' (*WWI* 139). Birdalone's skills eventually lead her to establish an embroidery business, through which she finds her biological mother. I will return to this episode later in the chapter.

Enclosure in the Patriarchy

Theories of 'enclosure', as proposed by Pratt and Heller, offer a particular vocabulary for examining this section of Morris's narrative, bringing to light a fresh perspective. The span of narrative from Birdalone's entry into the castle to the part entitled 'The

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[468] *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, 114: all three knights rode bare-headed, 'save that the Black Knight bore an oak-wreath on the head.' The reference to the Black Knight here is an error on Morris's part. The Black Knight is the title given later to the enemy knight from the Red Hold. Arthur is in fact the Black Squire. This is the only time he is called the Black Knight.

Tale of the Quest's Ending' is the most complex section in respect of what Morris was doing with narrative convention and traditional gender roles. Reading this section as the 'enclosure' of the female hero draws on a discourse of dualism (already established in the thesis).

Morris's imagined green world, free of religion, patriarchy and even men, is now held up for comparison against the 'real' world of patriarchal, religious and chivalric dominance, symbolised by the Castle of the Quest. The Castle of the Quest is the polar opposite of the wood: it is a built structure, as opposed to a natural space; it was built by and for men, and is inhabited primarily by men. Chivalry and religion are the ordering forces in the Castle, both of which are male-centric orders.

Birdalone is often literally and symbolically enclosed and contained by the gendered expectations of the male heroic culture. I suggest that although Morris's female hero represents a challenge to the dominant patriarchal ideologies of his time, in the end she can use her power only to adapt to, rather than change, the culture patriarchy. The ability to adapt, rather than to overwhelm, is the difference between male power and female power, as Lash argues. The male hero 'in his trials and triumphs displays exclusively one dimension of our common endowment: *the full ripening of the aggressive instinct which assures survival by the mastery of overwhelming*

forces rather than adaptation to them, adaptation being the forte of the female'[469] (italics in original).

Architectural Enclosure

Birdalone's arrival at the Castle of the Quest should represent Birdalone's greatest heroic achievement: she has safely navigated the strange waters and its mysterious isles and arrived at the castle of the three knights she needs to find to help her friends. Yet, as the *dénouement* to her escape from captivity, Birdalone's arrival at the Castle does not celebrate her achievement. Instead, she is faced with exclusion. As an individual traveling woman, Birdalone represents 'unassimilated female otherness', and her request to enter the Castle is subversive to the phallocentric norm.[470] The Castle was built to exclude women, and to celebrate masculine power.

The pastoral opposition of Nature/Culture works here within the construct of a dualism that sees the dominant masculine culture rejecting the natural and feminine. Birdalone's arrival is met by a display of male power and order in the figures of the castellan and the priest. These two are not only the first men Birdalone has ever met, but they are two of the extreme examples of male power, supremacy, and order through religion and chivalry. I would add that this parody further highlights the inappropriateness of the chivalric code to the female-hero experience. Birdalone is greeted neither as a hero nor as a lady, but simply as a

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[469] Lash, *The Hero*, 10.
[470] I have adopted these ideas from Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, in particular, from her discussion of colonisation, 161.

Woman who must be kept out. Aymeris is the first to confront Birdalone, and he tells her she is not welcome at the Castle: 'Lady, this is an house where women enter never since first the roof was done thereon, which forsooth was but a year ago' (*WWI* 104). He explains that the inhabitants are 'bound by oath not to suffer a woman to abide in this castle till our lords take the bann off, and bid us open to women.' (*WWI* 105). His formalism fails to allow for kindness or deviation from his duty, even though Birdalone is exhausted, starving and alone. He stresses the need to keep his oath (*WWI* 106), and though he has provided a meal for Birdalone, he still insists on sheltering her outside the castle gates overnight.

The rigid formality displayed to Birdalone highlights the patriarchy as one of the main obstacles faced by the female hero. If it were not for the determination of Birdalone, her quest might well have ended, in failure, at the gates of the castle. As Talbot has argued, the severe rigidity of Castle-life does not reflect a paradigm of excellence, but a distortion of that excellence. Male supremacy is enforced, to the extreme, by the deliberate exclusion of women from the Castle. Talbot notes Morris's particular use of Latin- and French-based vocabulary in the dialogue of Sir Aymeris (the castellan) and Leonard the priest that reinforces the rhetoric of male supremacy.[471] The male-chivalric code, which professes to protect women (and let us think back to Millais's painting of the knight rescuing the naked lady), actually turns Birdalone away from its gates, refusing her protection or succour. Morris constructs

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[471] Some key terms Talbot notes are 'castellan', 'quest', 'chaplain', and 'religious'. See Talbot's notes to page 105 in his edition of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.

the critique of Culture through a parody of the typically 'superior' side of the dualism, but by doing so he sacrifices the success of his female hero by denying her celebration. Birdalone eventually gains an audience with the knights and is permitted to enter the Castle. Her arrival enables and empowers the knights. She is not only able to tell them where their lovers are being held, but also she is able to provide them with only means of transport to reach the Sending Boat. She is obliged to put her own interests aside for those of the knights, whose primary goal is to save their lovers. Birdalone has enabled the knights to undertake their rescue of Aurea, Atra and Viridis; she is the means to their ends.

The knights instruct Birdalone to 'keep *within walls* while we be away' (*WWI* 133, my italics). In the patriarchal culture of the traditional male hero-quest, the role of the female is enacted in 'contained' space. This contained space, or enclosure, has been commonly identified as the domestic sphere: the women of quest-romance are not found adventuring in the great outdoors, but rather sitting patiently in castles. Pratt has located enclosure in the patriarchy as an archetype specific to the female-hero experience, not dissimilar to Campbell's 'belly of the whale' archetype but one exclusive to the female.[472] Enclosure in the patriarchy can take many forms; for Birdalone the main symbol of enclosure the Castle of the Quest. The Castle is an architectural representation of male chivalric values and customs, and of female passivity, and is a place of literal enclosure for Birdalone.

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[472] Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 45*ff.*

The work of Christiania Whitehead offers a particular vocabulary for addressing the area of architectural allegory. Her study of medieval architectural allegory in *Castles of the Mind* explores the symbolic and allegorical functions of architecture, and also the way it stands for the human body and in particular, the female body.[473] According to Whitehead, the castle in medieval religious literature was employed in various ways, but all concerned the representation of virtue or virginity.[474] In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, such a reading enhances the symbolic meaning of Birdalone's confinement. As a symbol of virginity (and the female body) the protected and unassailed castle reflects Birdalone's own unexplored sexuality and her absolute protection from male attention. Enhancing the sense of virginal space, the castle is newly built to a single purpose - a stagnant memorial to the three missing ladies. The knights have forbidden any women to enter until their own ladies are returned. It is thus a place of enforced chastity and passive female worship. The castle is white (*WWI* 103), the colour associated with purity and chastity; the local people know it as the White Ward by the Water. Once Birdalone enters she is unwillingly conscripted into the stasis of chastity and obedience.

Once the knights have departed on their quest, Birdalone is left in the company of women; her closest male companion in the castle is the chaplain Leonard – who by his vocation is a non-sexual presence. She is compelled to engage in traditional women's activities – embroidering, sewing and learning to read - to fill her days.

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[473] Christiania Whitehead, *Castles of the Mind: A Study of Medieval Architectural Allegory*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003, 3.
[474] Whitehead, *Castles of the Mind*, 88.

There is ultimately little joy in this labour for Birdalone and she struggles against the restriction placed upon her to never leave the castle: 'and after the first two days, had enforced herself to fill up her time as aforesaid' (*WWI* 139). She feels trapped within the four walls and longs for the unrestricted outdoors (*WWI* 139). She tells Sir Aymeris, 'I was reared amidst the woods and the meadows, with the burning of the sun, and the buffets of the wind; and now for lack of some deal of that I am waxing white and faint' (*WWI* 142). Like a caged animal, she paces the floor, waiting for the knights to return to the castle. Her days are repetitive and claustrophobic:

> She wore the hours whiles going up to the tower-top and looking over the lake, whiles broidering amidst her maids, whiles learning her clerks work with Sir Leonard, but ever eating her heart out with longing. (*WWI* 142)

These images of containment and immobility allude to – and critique – a medieval traditional ideology, identified by Whitehead, that insists upon the value of containment for women.[475]

Birdalone's active role as quester has been redefined as a more passive one of meaningless creativity. Her potentially active power as a female hero is contained by the enforcement of traditional and passive female roles. A parallel may be drawn between Birdalone waiting for the knights to return to the castle so that she might again have her liberty, and the three ladies waiting on the Isle of Increase Unsought to be rescued by the three knights. In both cases, the females are impotent and

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[475] Whitehead, *Castles of the Mind*, 92.

effectively imprisoned until the arrival of men. Birdalone is simply not permitted to act as a female hero within the culture of chivalry and patriarchy.

A further elucidation can be offered, I would argue, with reference to Lincoln's proposition that women's initiation is enacted in an 'enclosure'; that she remains in her usual domicile, where the limits of her social status place her.[476] In the Castle, Birdalone is placed in what I would term a 'socially appropriate' position in the patriarchy. The events that take place within the Castle may be read as her unique process of initiation: she is re-clothed, to indicate her new social status (as I explore in the following section), and she is homogenised through her engagement in traditional women's activities, like embroidery. The following two sections will address some of the key episodes and themes that I argue represent forms of rites of passage or initiation. The element that creates friction in the construction of Birdalone is, of course, that she is not a woman of patriarchal culture, but a child of nature; the series of initiations or rites that she endures – if we may read them as such – produce and inevitable clash of cultures. Or rather, a clash of culture with nature.

Clothing as Cultural Appropriation

Birdalone undergoes a process of cultural assimilation in the Castle, which may be considered through two areas: clothing and activities. The motif of clothing has formed a consistent part of Birdalone's presentation. Clothing becomes a symbol of

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[476] See Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis*, 102.

Birdalone's cultural appropriation by the Castle, the means by which she is assimilated – if only superficially. In terms of female rites, Lincoln notes the special use of clothing, with comparison to male rites. Male rites commonly involve symbolic use of clothing with a tendency toward nakedness. For women's rites.

> Instead of removing clothing, we find the addition of new clothing or bodily adornment – a marriage token, a feather headdress, elaborate jewelry… The general tendency in women's rites seems to be toward an additive process (clothes put on) rather than a subtractive one (clothes taken off).[477]

The significance of this difference in men's and women's use of clothing is that, Lincoln argues,

> men (who have status) must lose their status in order to assume another, women (who have no status) need not do so. For them there is no true liminality, no stress on nudity, no "being ground down to nothing".[478]

In this context, I argue that Birdalone's re-clothing by the knights assumes an important symbolic and initiatory function. It functions symbolically as an element of her physical enclosure, and of her enclosure in the patriarchy, and as an initiation into the correct social status for a woman in patriarchal culture.

The first element of her enclosure in clothing is the negation of her individuality. Birdalone's entry into the Castle is successful only because her clothes belong to Aurea, Atra and Viridis and prove her story that she comes as an emissary for the

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[477] Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis, 103.*
[478] Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis, 103.* Lincoln quotes from Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process.*

three women.[479] Birdalone stands before the knights not as an individual or independent other, but rather as a symbolic reflection of these women. Each of the knights recognises the articles of their lovers, and it is these that they respond to, not Birdalone herself. The Golden Knight lays his hand on her side, drawn by the golden gown she is wearing because it is Aurea's; the Green Knight places his face 'close to her bosom whereon lay Viridis' smock'; and Arthur the Black Knight throws himself on the ground before her in order to kiss her feet 'or, if you will, Atra's shoon which covered them' (*WWI* 114-115).

Birdalone's identity is then symbolically re-constructed and assimilated through clothing. Once she has surrendered the borrowed clothes, she has nothing of her own to wear, so the knights organise for clothes to be specially made for her. Birdalone's appearance now conforms to the standards of the Castle, and her clothes become representative of a specific status and gender role. The knights arrange for 'a good shaper and embroideress, and sewing-women, and cloth and silk and linen, and all things needful' (*WWI* 118) to fashion clothes for Birdalone. The formal act of making these clothes stands in contrast to Birdalone's joyful creation of her dress in the wood.

Birdalone's social status is elevated when the knights reclothe her, but as part of the ritual she is made subservient to their wishes and to the courtly–love conventions of

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[479] Before her escape from the Isle of Increase Unsought the three women asked Birdalone 'to bear these lendings on thy body in such wise that when thou comest to the mainland they may be seen by knights seeking adventures' (*WWI* 80).

the Castle they live in. Birdalone wears the 'richest of her new raiment' (*WWI* 131)

to join the knights at a feast, adorning herself with a token from each of the knights:

> on her neck she bore the Golden' Knight's collar; her loins were girt with the Black Squire's girdle; and on her wrists was the Green Knight's ancient gold ring. (*WWI* 131)

It can be argued that through this, Birdalone is transformed from active messenger

and quester (bearing the tokens from the women) to passive subject of male

chivalric ownership, wearing the adornments that identify her as 'theirs'.

Birdalone's re-clothing by the knights bears some of the ritualistic and solemn marks

of a commitment ceremony; and it is ritualistic because it transforms its main

participant Birdalone. Crane notes that in certain medieval marriage rituals, the

clothing of brides by their husbands functioned to incorporate them visually into

the husbands' households, and also expressed 'their subordination to their husbands'

kin and lineage.'[480] In the patriarchal, chivalric context, Birdalone's re-clothing by

the knights can be read in a similar context: she is subsumed into the Castle and

must conform to its gender-based expectations.

Subject of the male gaze, Birdalone comes before the knights 'with bright eager eyes,

and flushed cheeks, and a countenance smiling with love', not unlike a young bride

going to her future husband; the men 'gazed on her, and were overcome by her

loveliness' (*WWI* 132). The 'male gaze' represents a particular form of masculine

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[480] Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, 33.

and patriarchal dominance in which woman functions as the 'image, man as bearer of the look.'[481] Birdalone and the knights exchange words that function as vows. Birdalone tells them 'I pray you to love me ever, and bear me ever in your minds'. In return, Baudoin vows to

> never forget thee, or cease to love thee; and here I swear by God upon the Tree, that it shall be a light thing for me to die for thee, if in any need I find thee. (*WWI* 132)

The vow is formalised by the other two knights: Morris tells us they 'took the Rood and swore upon it' (*WWI* 132), and with this, the ritual concludes. Le Guin pinpoints the static, auxiliary role of women in chivalric tradition as one of the difficulties she needed to confront when writing fantasy, a genre entrenched in the male heroic tradition. She describes chivalry as a 'beautiful, worshipful spell'.[482]

Birdalone later appropriates the ritual of clothing as a passive symbol of her commitment to the knights, in particular to Arthur, with whom she has fallen in love. She wears nothing but black once the knights have departed the Castle: 'a strait black coat and with unshod feet; and she looked no sorrier than she was' (*WWI* 125). It is a quasi-mourning ritual; her clothes are an external reflection of her inner turmoil. There is also a suggestion of her commitment to Arthur – the Black Squire – in the wearing of his colour. In this, she parallels Atra, who's signature colour is black.

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[481] The concept of the male gaze has been borrowed from Laura Mulvey's study, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in John Caughie, Annette Kuhn, Mandy Merck, and Barbara Creed, eds., *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1992, 27.
[482] Le Guin, *Earthsea Revisioned*, 16.

Escape from Enclosure: the Challenge to Chivalry

When Birdalone eventually devises to take a trip outside the castle by herself, it ends in tragedy. No longer protected within the strong walls of the Castle, and so no longer protected by the rules of chivalry that seek to protect female virtue, she is nearly raped. The rape-trauma archetype has been identified as one of the unique elements of the female hero's experience, as I have discussed earlier.[483] Her rescue leaves the potential rapist and one of the Castle Knights dead. The episode has been read as an exploration of what happens when a female hero breaks the codes of her gender (as defined by the patriarchy) and seeks to determine her own future. I suggest that this type of reading is not the most meaningful way to interpret the episode. It tends to rely on a gender-based assumption that Birdalone is not actually the hero of the story. Before offering my own analysis of the episode, I will briefly outline the sequence of events, and then address the ways in which the episode has been interpreted by critics.

During one of Birdalone's rare rides out of the Castle grounds with Sir Aymeris, they come to a place Aymeris will not venture in to: the Black Valley of the Greywethers, a place reputedly haunted by dangerous spirits. Birdalone's curiosity is aroused, and she learns more about the Valley from the priest Sir Leonard. He tells her of one legend that claims a person's wish may be granted by the Greywethers. He teaches Birdalone the correct way to word the wish. Still pining within the confines of the

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[483] Pratt , *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, 16*ff.*

Castle, Birdalone's desire for Arthur grows as she waits for the knights to return. She persuades Sir Leonard to allow her to leave the Castle on her own. She makes her wish at Greywethers, but it goes awry when an unfamiliar knight accosts her. He is the Black Knight. He threatens to rape her, but she is able to convince him not to. He then confesses to her that he comes from the Red Hold and that the Red Knight – enemy of the knights of the Castle of the Quest – sent him out to kidnap her. In the meantime, the knights have returned to the Castle, with the rescued women. They immediately learn from Sir Leonard that Birdalone has left the Castle, alone. The three of them set out to find her, concerned for her safety. They track her to Greywethers and the lands of the Red Hold. They find her with the Red Knight, who has bound Birdalone and tied the bloody head of the Black Knight around her neck. The Red Knight has slain the Black Knight for his treachery in protecting Birdalone. The three knights engage the Red Knight and kill him, but Baudoin also loses his life.

In her critique of the episode, Amanda Hodgson reads Birdalone's actions within the tradition of male-chivalric codes.[484] I have earlier argued that by these codes, Birdalone is not permitted to act in the manner of a hero: she is not permitted to travel alone, and while the knights are away on their quest, she cannot leave the Castle. I would argue then that Hodgson's reading makes the mistake of deferring to the masculine paradigm. Hodgson pivots her assessment of the whole episode – and the death of Baudoin – on two points: the first is the wish Birdalone makes at

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[484] In Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*,174*ff.*

Greywethers. She argues that the death of Baudoin – and the subsequent separation of the fellowship of the knights and their ladies – is the direct result of Birdalone's selfishly motivated wish to be united with Arthur. Carole Silver also assigns blame for the death of Baudoin and the Black Knight to Birdalone, arguing that she lacked patience and endurance, was too quick to act.[485] The second point Hodgson makes is relates to the impact of Baudoin death on the narrative's expectations:

> when the three knights ride to save Birdalone, we feel confident of their success. We are only half-way through the book; heroes of romance always survive until the end and win their battles. The shock of Baudoin's death is therefore extreme. Birdalone has not only broken the fellowship, but has caused the romance (which is itself an image of harmony) to fail of its happy ending, *because one of the heroes has been lost*. (my italics)[486]

My concern with Hodgson's analysis is that it reflects a bias towards male-heroic narrative expectations. She says that 'heroes of romance always survive' and so the death of Baudoin is shocking; this point entirely occludes the fact that *Birdalone* is the hero of this narrative, not the knights. Hodgson argues that Morris deliberately structured the course of events in the narrative to overturn his readers' expectations 'to bring home the enormity of Birdalone' s crime.'[487] Conceding the shock-value of the turn of events, it is nevertheless disturbing to consider Birdalone's actions a 'crime.' The sequence of events that lead to Baudoin's death are unfortunate, but not a crime; they certainly do not do anything other than testify to Birdalone's pure and natural desires.

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[485] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 184.
[486] Hodgson, *The Romances of William Morris*, 175.
[487] *The Romances of William Morris*, 175.

Talbot's article, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance', uses as a springboard the following observation made by Carole Silver in her study, *The Romance of William Morris*:

> Birdalone's desire to do but not to suffer – her lack of patience and endurance – lead to pain for all. Too eager to act, Birdalone is responsible for the murder of a knight who meets and kidnaps her and for the death of Aurea's beloved, the Golden Knight.[488]

Talbot disagrees with this reading of Birdalone, which he sees as an indictment on Birdalone's failure to fulfil the gender-based expectations of quest-romance. Instead, Talbot argues that Birdalone should not be judged by male-chivalric codes. He argues two significant points: that Birdalone is 'bred by nature personified' and that her flight from the castle is a 'necessary rejection of a civilized and genteel culture that is inimical to her'.[489] The text itself makes clear, I would argue, that Birdalone's period in the Castle up to the point of her departure was in fact adverse. Further, the challenge to chivalry, made by Birdalone, is not criminal but anticipated when read in the context of a nature/culture dichotomy: her presence exposes the insecurity and instability of the Castle and its knights. Her departure from the Castle then triggers the eventual abandonment of it (I will return to this point later).

Talbot uses the polarization between Nature and Chivalry as the key to understanding Morris's female hero. He rejects chivalric and patriarchal values as inappropriate standards by which to judge her. These values correspond to pastoral values expressed through the juxtaposition of Nature and City/Culture. I would

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[488] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*. 184.
[489] Talbot, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance', 29.

argue that the episode may be more fully explicated in terms of the oppositional tension in the narrative between the world of nature and the world of culture. Birdalone is an embodiment of the natural world; her entry into the Castle triggers an unavoidable sequence of events that has less to do with Birdalone *per se* than with Morris's exploration of the failings of a rigid chivalric structure, as he saw it.

Patriarchy is the 'belly of the whale', but escape from it does not lead to a 'rebirth' as it does for the male hero because of what I would argue is an inherent paradox in the female hero's position. Patriarchy is the culture of mastery, and within it, the female is simply not given any real avenue for escape and development of female strength. Although Birdalone escapes from the symbol of the patriarchy (the Castle), she cannot actually flee from the culture of patriarchy that exists outside its walls. The only place that was outside this culture was Evilshaw – but living there is not a viable alternative, as I will argue Morris shows in the conclusion of the narrative. It must not be forgotten that, though Birdalone is responsible (to an extent) for disrupting the fellowship, she is also responsible for saving it in the first place.

Cross-Dressing

Cross-dressing is one of the ways in which Birdalone bypasses the restrictions of her gender in a patriarchal structure; it allows her to travel safely alone, in the manner of a traditional [male] questing hero. Cross-dressing recalls Mircea Eliade's motif of

'temporary androgenization and asexuality of novices'[490] In the later part of the narrative, Birdalone decides to return to the Castle of the Quest. She disguises her gender and travels dressed as a man in armour, complete with sword. The disguise serves the practical purpose of giving her public freedom: she is able to travel without escort in relative safety, and she is permitted to carry weapons. In this way she subverts the traditional enclosure of the patriarchal system, in which women are not permitted the freedom to travel alone.

Cross-dressing allowed a woman to claim the social advantages of men: protection from sexual assault, mobility and access to arms.[491] Usually, a woman's husband or father or other family or group member would enforce this convention, but Birdalone lives without such familial protection. She asks her companions, 'furnish me for the array of a young man, with such armour as I may easily bear, to dight me for my road' (*WWI* 278). She explains her intent, which reveals that the practice is not at all uncommon: 'Forsooth ye wot that not unseldom do women use the custom of going arrayed like men, when they would journey with hidden head'. She requests a bow and a quiver of arrows, 'for verily these be the proper weapons that I can deal with deftly' (*WWI* 278-279).

After all is arranged, she departs, disguising the 'lovely shapeliness of her legs with long boots of deer-leather . . . she was well hidden, and whereas she was a tall and

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[490] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975, 80.
[491] Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 73.

strong woman, she might well pass for a young man, slender and fair-faced' (*WWI* 280). The androgynous element suggested here accords with the medieval male ideal, which is quite feminine. 'He usually has blonde hair, rosy complexion, fine nose and eyes, and a beautiful neck and beardless chin. Further, he is well built, tall, and exquisitely dressed or armed.'[492] Birdalone is not the only one of Morris's female prose romance characters to adopt the guise of a man. Ursula – in *The Well at the World's End* – also dresses as a man. Ursula is concerned that her androgynous appearance will be unattractive to Ralph, but practical considerations are paramount. She says to Ralph,

> Now we are for the road I must be an armed knight again: forsooth I unbound my hair e'en now and let my surcoat hang loose about me in token that thou wottest my secret. Soothly, my friend, it irks me that now we have met after a long while, I must needs be clad thus graceless. But need drave me to it… (*WWE* 2, 18)

She need not have feared Ralph's reaction: He looked on her lovingly and loved her shapely hands amidst the dark grey mail' (*WWE* 2, 18). Ursula in armour suggests a warrior virgin and recalls Joan of Arc.

Return to the Green World

Departing the Castle of the Quest, Birdalone is symbolically rejecting the male chivalric system. She finds instead a reconnection with female power, first with her biological mother, then with Habundia. The natural, instinctive longings of Birdalone that led to the death of Baudoin are now beginning to be turned towards the community, where they have more beneficial outcomes. The reconnection with

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[492] Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Clothes Make the Man: Female Cross Dressing in Medieval Europe*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996119.

her biological mother allows Birdalone to let go of masculine definitions of success and seek her own place in the world. In the City of Five Crafts, Birdalone is accepted into the Guild of Broiders, and with her mother sets up a successful embroidery business. Their work is unmatched, 'for of fine broidery there was little done in the Five Crafts, and none at all that could be put beside their work, either for beauty of the draft of it, or for skill of handiwork' (*WWI* 272). The embroidery skills shared by mother and daughter function to unite them as a symbol of their shared biology.

When Birdalone comes to confront the malign-maternal – the Witch-Wife – she finds her dead in the cottage. Confrontation with parental figures can be a significant part of women's rebirth, according to Pratt, but Morris does not offer this to Birdalone. Nevertheless, there are key elements to her return that elevate it to ritual significance. Birdalone's journeys along the water can be read as rites of passage, symbolic rebirth and the crossing of the unconscious. Her naked journeys signal the infancy of her experience.[493] An important internal transition occurs in Birdalone as she confronts the fear of returning to her childhood home:

> She knew not what it was that she feared; but when she called to mind that it was even the meeting with her old mistress, her flesh quaked indeed with the memory of bygone anguish, but valiantly she arose and faced the dwelling of the witch despite her naked helplessness. (*WWI* 315-316)

Birdalone's nakedness signals the ritual significance of this act of confrontation. The shedding of clothes denotes the next transition of Birdalone's life. Every journey she

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[493] Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, 183.

makes to and from the Wood - barring her final one - she makes naked. She flees the Witch wearing nothing: the Witch cries at her 'Go then, naked and outcast! Go then, naked fool! (*WWI* 52); she arrives symbolically naked on the shores on the Isle of Increase Unsought. This departure marks the end of the first section of the book, and it symbolises the severance of the pseudo-maternal ties that bind her to the Witch. She has now completed her circular journey, and again prepares to face the witch naked. Though anti-climactic, the scene offers closure. Later, Birdalone is embraced and transformed by the benign-maternal power of Habundia. Naked at the witch's cottage, Habundia transforms her: 'I shall fetch the raiment that shall make us forget that thou comest back to this land as naked as thou didst depart hence' (*WWI* 323).

Birdalone experiences a powerful emotional release when she realises that her old mistress is truly dead; 'a great weight lifted off her heart' (*WWI* 317). Her first task is the reclamation of her green world from the witch, and from her bad memories. She finds all of her old clothes still in the cottage, but chooses to don her 'old smock and ragged grey coat' rather than the green gown and shoes that she had made herself. She thinks the witch has worn these items, and so declares 'ye have been in ill company, I will wear you not, though ye be goodly, at least not till ye have been fumigated and hallowed for me' (*WWI* 317). Her first chore is to bury the witch's body, after which she immerses herself in the restorative power of her green world.

> [She] walked about the meadow, and hearkened to the birds' song, and watched the kine and the goats as they fed down the pasture; and now a soft content came over her, that all this was free unto her to hold in peace, and to take her pleasure in' (*WWI* 319)

The green world's power of renewal extends to Arthur. The fellowship of the castle splits after Birdalone leaves. Arthur, 'trapped and drained by the stock masculine elements of aggressive and violent self-expression', eventually flees chivalric life and becomes the 'wild man' of medieval romance. [494] He dwells in the wildwood and plays the harp, recalling such medieval paradigms of wild men as Malory's Lancelot, *Ywain and Gawain*'s Tristan, and even the story of Sir Orfeo.[495] He is so far between human and animal that Habundia cannot tell if he is 'a man in a beast's skin or a beast in a man's skin' (*WWI* 332). The symbolic metamorphosis of Arthur has a significant pastoral tradition, I would argue; it represents the dissolution of Arthur's rigid identity as chivalric knight, and signals a rebirth that eventually restores harmony between him and nature.[496]

Arthur is the first male in the story to be invited into the green world. Habundia takes charge of his recovery and shelters him in the forest so that he can heal. The natural world becomes a significant element in his recovery. Once he is sufficiently recovered, Habundia reunites him with Birdalone, after which both 'the earth and the nimble hands and feet of Birdalone' cared for him (*WWI* 352). Birdalone returns Arthur to himself, and ensures that he is able to recover even from what Talbot describes as 'the delusions of male Quest-romance'.[497]

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[494] Talbot, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance', 43.
[495] Arthur specifically resembles Sir Orfeo in his harp playing. See *Sir Orfeo* in volume 1 of Diane Speed, ed., *Medieval English Romances*. 2 volumes. Durham Medieval Texts 8: Durham, 1993.
[496] See Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes*, 364.
[497] Talbot, 'Heroine as Hero: Morris's Case Against Quest-Romance', 43.

The agricultural abundance of Birdalone's green world, and the skills she has to maintain the small farm, ensure the well-being and self-sufficiency of the world. Birdalone and Arthur are able to maintain a simple, harmonious life in the old witch's cottage, which Morris names the 'House of Love' (*WWI* 356). We can recall here the other various 'chambers of love' that Morris employs in the romances, such as the Mistress's false garden of paradise, the Lady of Abundance's wilderness trysting place. The green world is the place where Arthur and Birdalone finally consummate their love. Birdalone has come full-circle and claimed the green world back from the witch. Her ability to finally unite happily with Arthur testifies to the completion of her quest for selfhood. She is able to express her feeling on her own terms in the green world, free of the constraints and rituals of the Castle. Their happiness evokes the happiness of children, and is a reminder of the safety of the 'garden of childhood.'

The constructed and rigid world of chivalry in the meantime has been discarded – the Castle of the Quest is abandoned, the institutions it represented (religion and chivalry) no longer relevant. Hugh left the Castle with Viridis, Aurea and Atra to live in a place where both 'land and folk' would 'look friendly on him' (*WWI* 288). The self-imposed isolation of the fellowship of the Castle could not be sustained once the quest to rescue the three ladies was achieved. Even the religious power within the Castle is challenged and overcome by the Witch-Wife, who haunted the Castle with apparitions. Leonard the priest was 'called upon to lay them' but the

rites of the Holy Church could not prevail against the Witch-Wife's magic (*WWI*
288-289); the all-male Castle is finally undone by female power.

Incorporation

The female hero – like the male hero – experiences the stage of incorporation. The
final stage of Birdalone's quest entails her incorporation into the community of her
birth, and may be read, I would argue, as an expression of Morris's compromise to
the traditional tensions between nature and culture. The green world remains a
central feature of the final stage of Birdalone's journey, heralding Morris's vision of
integration and harmony between the natural and human world. The separated
fellowship is reunited with the aid of Habundia and Hugh, Viridis, Atra and Aurea
join Birdalone and Arthur in the forest. However, the entry into the green world of
the fellowship brings an inevitable clash with patriarchal norms. Birdalone must
choose between maintaining the company of friends in the world beyond the wood,
and staying in the wood. Although Hugh tells her that the group would never seek
to split from her again, he does not offer her much choice in the way he positions
his offer. He speaks with the authority of the group, including Arthur:

> But if thou wilt come with me to our land under the Green Mountains,
> there is for thee a pleasant place and a fair dwelling, and honour from all
> folk, and our love that shall never leave thee; and I, and Arthur my brother,
> we shall win fame together amongst the knighthood, and thou shalt be
> proud and glad of both him and of me. (*WWI* 374)

The future he offers her is one of assimilation into the patriarchy, and to become a
passive spectator of masculine deeds of honour. The masculine emphasis is extended

later when Hugh employs the language of martial and material power to convince the Captain of Utterhay to let the group live in the town:

> We be minded to dwell in your good town of Utterhay, and take our part with your folk, and we have wealth enow thereto, so as to be beholden to none; and as time goes on we may serve you in divers wise… we shall draw sword for your peace and the freedom of them of Utterhay. (*WWI* 383)

Birdalone, however, offers the feminine balance to Hugh's masculine vision of social integration. She maintains her pledge to visit Habundia regularly with her friends, so that Habundia might 'see them and talk to them and love them'. The maintained connection with the natural world is the key to the final harmony of the world. (Osberne pays similar honour to his nature-spirit guardian Steelhead at the end of *The Sundering Flood*.)[498]. When the witch stole Birdalone from Utterhay, she symbolically divided the town from the forest, civilisation from nature;[499] now that division is healed, and the symbolic border between the two worlds is dissolved by the regular visits of the fellowship to the wood.

There are some elements of Morris's final vision that serve as a reminder that, after all, Birdalone has not truly escaped the enclosure of patriarchy. Confronted at the gates of Utterhay by the Captain of the town, Birdalone and her companions are refused entry to the town. The Captain tells the group that 'there is a custom of the good town, that none may enter its gates coming out of this Forest of Evilshaw' (*WWI* 383). Not only it is a remarkably rigid custom to uphold in light of the

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[498] See thesis chapter 'Inventing Place'.
[499] Bono, 'The Prose Fictions of William Morris: A Study in the Literary Aesthetic of a Victorian Social Reformer', 53.

recognized good reputation of Sir Hugh and the companions, but also it is a curious echo of the refusal Birdalone's experiences at the Castle of the Quest. Birdalone offers herself as a hostage to the guards, in order for Hugh to be allowed into the town to meet with the Mayor. She identifies herself as the 'Lady of the Black Squire', rather than as 'Birdalone'. It is almost a patronymic, and it abruptly diminishes her role as female hero. Moreover, she presents herself in physical submission to the Captain, 'and held out her hands as if for the manacles' (*WWI* 383).

The establishment and maintenance of community stands as one of the main departures for the female hero from the monomyth, as I have argued. Birdalone's success cannot be judged by male-heroic standards, in which we can expect success to come in the form of leadership or power, indicating a progress in social status (such as Ralph and Walter, who are made kings). Conquest and power, in any form, are masculine ends, and reflect a vision of the world as mechanistic rather than organic.[500] Instead, I would argue that Birdalone's 'power' lies in the private realm of the personal choices she has made throughout her journey. The outcome of these choices leads to union and harmony, though it also caused death and separation on the way. Birdalone has wrought the beginnings of a significant change to the society of Utterhay. Though she has not altered the patriarchal culture, she has introduced into it a tempering maternal principle. Johann Bachofen, forbear of Friedrich Engels,

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[500] See Aisenberg's analysis of male desire for conquest, for power and control, as related to the modern West's conception of the world as mechanistic, and therefore able to be controlled and shaped. *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth,* 192-93.

articulates this idea: '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.'[501] Birdalone has reunited the fellowship of the Castle and embraced it in her own terms with the guidance of Habundia. Habundia, firm symbol of the maternal, extends her care to all of the fellowship, nursing Arthur back to health and indirectly aiding Hugh's company in their battle against the people of the Red Hold. But the integration of the female hero into a community risks the de-valuation of her achievements. Though Birdalone's final place is one that seems distressingly compromised to an active feminist reader, it is nonetheless the only place in which she can finally be integrated into society. Social integration is the token of achievement for all of Morris's heroes, as he seeks to embody the Romantic dream of reconciling Man and Nature.

Conclusion

Although Morris utilised a pastoral-based binary opposition to create an exploration of social values in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, his final vision moves away from the pastoral ideal to explore a new kind of social structure. The locus of value is based on a collective experience, and in this romance Morris has, with particular attention, expressed most fully his sense of both 'the difficulties and the necessity of

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[501] Johannn Bachofen, *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridicial Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient Word* (1861), as cited by Florence Boos in 'Gender Division and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, new series, 1 (Fall 1992), 14.

human fellowship.'[502] Morris endeavours to establish a harmonious balance between Nature and Culture, using Birdalone's union with Arthur to symbolise the healing of the rift between Utterhay and Evilshaw. It is an artificial and deliberate creation of community but, as Mann has argued, a 'superbly natural fulfilment of human needs.'[503] The final focus is on communal, rather than individualistic, achievement. In this, Morris has foreshadowed contemporary feminist thinking on the concept of the measure of a hero's success – the terms of success should be considered, Morris's text seems to be suggesting, in terms of community not the individual. Aisenberg offers this summary of powerful feminist propositions for the here and now, that can carry us into the future: the final celebration of feminist adventure extols not

> a heroic exploit... but better relations among peoples and between the sexes, nothing more nor less than a mature society which would eschew the reductionism of failure/success for a recognition of the profound cultural complexities of right and wrong.[504]

I would argue that *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* represents an important proposition for consideration in these terms. However, Morris was not in a position, at the close of the nineteenth century, to properly or completely develop such a radical shift away from modernist, masculine values; there remains an ongoing tension in the closure of the tale between 'nature' and 'community', expressed most clearly through the compromises Birdalone must make to ensure the harmony of her chosen community. Birdalone must always act within a system that privileges the

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[502] See Mann, 'Eros and Community in the Fiction of William Morris', 316-17.
[503] Mann, 'Eros and Community in the Fiction of William Morris', 319.
[504] Aisenberg, *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, 182-183.

male. Her power is not that she is able to restructure the system, but that she is able to work within it to find her place in society.

Once Birdalone is contextualised within the male-heroic tradition, full female autonomy is never quite realised: I would argue that ultimately, the inherent masculine agenda of quest-narratives subsumes her power and her narrative is completed with her situated in a far more passive, and traditionally female role. Hodgson argues that the very genre of romance that Morris utilized inherently excludes, by definition, the new, and that his female hero can therefore only temporarily evade traditional gender roles.[505] I believe the conclusion of the tale testifies to this. The final portrait of Birdalone is of a woman who, for all her achievements, can be seen to be successful only within the terms of traditional gender roles; Morris has contained her, in the end, even if only to close his book on a fulfilled female hero. And in these terms, why should she not be fulfilled? She is reunited with her friends, and with her spirit-mother, and has found love with Arthur. The achievement of the romance is that it recognizes and strives to develop female power at all.

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[505] Hodgson, *The Witch in the Wood*, 25-26.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis has thrown light on Morris's thematic concerns and strategies in five of his little-studied prose romances: *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, *The Well at the World's End*, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Sundering Flood*.

Chapter one, 'Inventing Fantasy', reviewed the small corpus of critical work on the prose romances, noting the critical neglect of these works. The chapter examined some of the cultural as well as literary-critical influences that shaped the reception of the prose romances, drawing together many previous areas of scholarship. The chapter argued for a scholarly re-orientation of discussion of these works within the context of the development of the modern fantasy genre. The chapter articulated a new way forward, presenting the critical methodology of the thesis through the framework of Romantic pastoral discourse and its attendant rhetoric. The most significant feature of this Romantic pastoralism is Morris's expression of a workable compromise to the resolution of the traditionally oppositional worlds of nature and man.

Chapter two, 'Inventing Place', developed the discussion of the Romantic pastoral introduced in the previous chapter, re-orienting traditional pastoral discourse to tie in several key themes, including Morris's socialism and his underlying vision for a

relationship between man and his landscape. The chapter also drew on the modern environmental reclamation of the pastoral, and demonstrated how Morris's construction of place constituted a significant aspect of his overall Romantic vision. The chapter argued that a critical concentration on place offers a meaningful approach to understanding the nature of the respective heroes' quests through the ideologies raised in relation to Morris's Romantic pastoral. The ecological ideal implied in his Romantic vision is developed in later chapters of the thesis, particularly with reference to Morris's treatment of women in the prose romances, and to Morris's desire to explore his heroes' relationship to community rather than their individualistic goals.

Chapter three, 'Inventing the Quest-Hero', demonstrated how Morris played with conventional male-heroic narrative structures, even in his most 'typical' quest stories, to invent new forms of the quest and the quest-hero. The chapter built upon the ideas advanced in the previous chapter, arguing that the conventional tripartite structure of the hero's adventures is tied inextricably to place. The chapter demonstrated that by rewriting and re-imagining the hero of myth and medieval romance in a fresh form, Morris both reflected the aesthetic ideals of his age and created a new way of expressing these ideals. Taking the work of Joseph Campbell as a critical springboard, the chapter examined the idea that, for Morris, it was not the hero's social status that was of primary interest, but rather the social benefit to community that the hero could facilitate. Morris's specific interest in portraying strong women as agents in the development and journey of the male hero is a

valuable identification of a significant element in the four prose romances featuring a male hero. This identification is arguably validated in that Morris has developed an extraordinary female in the fifth romance: Birdalone, the subject of the following thesis chapter.

Chapter four, 'Inventing the Female Quest-Hero', utilised critical feminist discourse to develop the broader critical framework of Romantic pastoral discourse and its attendant rhetoric in the investigation of Birdalone. This approach facilitated a useful amalgamation of existing scholarship as well as a substantial development of the ideas raised in this scholarship. The chapter demonstrated how Morris's achievement in creating his unique female hero foreshadowed many modern feminist issues. The chapter offered new critical explorations of the containment of the female through analysis of architecture and clothing as forms of containment. The chapter examined Morris's exploration of the tension inherent in invoking such a traditional opposition as the pastoral country/city through a gender-based dichotomy. The resolution of the tension between the two is resolved by the formulation of a third option, the chapter argued. At the heart of this formulation lies Romanticism's quest for reintegration, based on a belief in an organic universe, which led to new concepts of nature, history and community.

This thesis as a whole has offered a new and significant contribution to the corpus of scholarship on the prose romances. It suggests some fresh perspectives on existing strands of scholarship, and signals a number of profitable areas of research for future

investigation. One such area would be a re-valuation of the prose romances through further research into Morris's larger interests in the role and function of women, tracing backwards from *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Another area is the further exploration of details of the indebtedness of modern medievalist fantasy to Morris, particularly through the application of a critical discourse that recognises the cultural context of the romances. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the critical recovery of the prose romances as a significant and valuable corpus of literary work within the fantasy genre.

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