

THE VISION OF THE FEMININE IN WILLIAM MORRIS'S
THE WATERS OF THE WONDROUS ISLES

Morris's attitude in The Waters of the Wondrous Isles towards the powers of the anima transcends the masochistic preoccupations with women that color a great deal of the art and literature of Morris's contemporaries. Certainly Morris was no stranger to the fatal woman examined so thoroughly by Mario Praz, for her figure haunts many of the tales in The Earthly Paradise, but in the later period of the prose romances between 1888 and the year of his death, Morris's vision of femininity underwent a positive metamorphosis. In each of these late works the success of the hero is managed with a great deal of inspiration and guidance from a feminine character who acts the part of the hero's anima. In The Waters of the Wondrous Isles, however, Morris places a heroine at the center of the action. The story of Birdalone testifies to Morris's prevailing fascination with the feminine side of the human psyche as well as to his delight in the great stories of antique mythology. In essence Morris's tale of a feminine quest recreates what Erich Neumann has called "the psychic development of the feminine", a phrase which he has applied to the pattern of Apuleius' story of Eros and Psyche.¹

Although the story of Birdalone's quest appears, like Morris's other prose romances, to be an original work of imagination and not a retold tale such as those compiled in The Earthly Paradise, it is revealing to examine this romance in conjunction with the classic tale of Eros and Psyche contained in Apuleius' The Golden Ass. Although Apuleius' tale cannot be verified as a specific source for Morris's romance, Morris's narrative contains more than enough structural and archetypal parallels with the Psyche myth to make a comparison of the two revealing. That the myth of Eros and Psyche held great interest for Morris is demonstrated by its inclusion in The Earthly Paradise where its bright conclusion appears at first glance to form a welcome contrast to that volume's dominant emphasis on stories of ironic failure and melancholy languor. The tale, as it appears in The Earthly Paradise, reveals Morris's largely iterative approach to myth, whereas the later romance of Birdalone discloses a more mythopoeic approach in which, consciously or not, the elements of the original myth are retained, as in a palimpsest, beneath the new layer of narrative. By providing a new context for the ancient mythic patterns of a feminine quest Morris has, in Jung's phrase, "dreamed the myth onwards".² The restructuring of Psyche's quest in the story of Birdalone reveals that Morris was not merely interested in the aesthetic atmosphere of antique stories or in being a curator of recorded myth; rather he sought to revivify the important mythic content of those tales and make their