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

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

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

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

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

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

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