# REVIEWS

*William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872* by Frederick Kirchoff. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990. xv + 248. ISBN 0821409549; $29.95.

Kirchoff's *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872*, a psychobiographical study which draws upon, develops, and questions many of the ideas in his earlier *William Morris*, is, as he explains in his preface, based upon eidetic and object-relations psychology—more specifically, upon the theories of Heinz Kohut and Harry Stack Sullivan. My own scepticism about the usefulness of psychobiography perhaps makes me a less than ideal reader for this work; I found myself frequently raising a quizzical eyebrow while reading through the introductory discussion of Morris's relationships with his family: the traumatic withdrawal of his mother's affections, the perceived desertion of his sister through marriage, and the emotional distancing from an elusive father who left Morris "insecure about his own identity" (20). These relationships, according to Kirchhoff, along with a lack of those same-sex bonding experiences usually associated with preadolescence, impeded Morris's progression towards adulthood, and it is this belated process of maturation that Kirchhoff traces in his analysis of the early works.

In spite of initial scepticism, I soon found myself being converted: the following chapter on "The Early Romances" immediately proves just how fruitful Kirchhoff's chosen approach can be. Rarely leaving the reader with the impression that he is claiming privileged insight into authorial intention, the most common problem with psychobiography, Kirchhoff actually provides some impressively suggestive readings of a group of difficult texts which, he writes, "look back with nostalgia to the male bonding of preadolescence even as they attempt to define the place of the writer's self in the opening world of adult relationships" (24). Beginning with a discussion of "The Story of the Unknown Church" in relation to the Ruskinian "The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens," Kirchhoff provides the most convincing explanation that I have read of Morris's dislocated narratives. As Morris reworks the same characters and situations throughout the early prose romances, Kirchhoff suggests, he "learned a narrative technique that enabled him to conceptualize human life as an evolving, causal sequence" (39). One of the most interesting points in this discussion concerns the manner in which characters like Lawrence in "A Dream" are faced with a choice between "a code of conduct grounded in patriarchally defined duty" which "merges the individual in a higher cause" and "a code grounded in sexual desire" which embodies "the temptation to prove oneself as an individual" (40)—a point which illuminated for me many of the more puzzling aspects of the images in these stories. The chapter concludes with a fine analysis of Florian's quest in "The Hollow Land" for "an image of the male self, defined in its relationship to a female counterpart" (55), a quest which, at this stage, remains incomplete.

The most fruitful line of questioning in this book, in fact, stems from Kirchhoff's interest in Morris's puzzling relationships with women. Finding both a "mind obsessed with erotic failure" and a "sympathetic understanding of female experience," Kirchhoff asks "Does his enlightened view of women stem from his inability to dominate the women in his own life? Or does his refusal to assume a 'masculine' role reflect his grasp of its implications?" (8-9). The question becomes the focus of three stimulating chapters devoted to *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* and continues to be a basic concern in Kirchhoff's readings of *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*, *The Life and Death of Jason*, *The Earthly Paradise*, and *Love is Enough*.

The centrality of Morris's relationships with women in his construction of a male self is obvious—in spite of such claims as Luke Ionides's "Women did not seem to count with him" and Wilfred Scawen Blunt's description of him as "the only man I ever came in contact with who seemed absolutely independent of sex considerations" (236). As Kirchhoff makes clear: "women never ceased to play a role in the life of his imagination" (236), and such remarks as these only reveal how little Victorian sexual politics, with its vocabulary of male dominance, must have affected Morris:

> he stood, at least in conversation, outside the system of sexual politics. Freed of the needs both for self-assertive individualism and for psychosexual dependence, he became, in effect, a new kind of man—or, as he might have put it, recovered the tribal consciousness he was later to celebrate in his prose romances. (237)