

THE EVE AND THE MADONNA IN
MORRIS'S THE WOOD BEYOND THE WORLD

Every student of Victorian poetry knows William Morris's bold Guenevere and most would recognize his portrayals of the slender-necked Pre-Raphaelite woman, but Morris's fascination with unusual women endures much beyond these early preoccupations. One typically associates the post-Pre-Raphaelite Morris with the harsh masculine values of the Icelandic-Norse world, or with the male-female harmony manifest in his socialist writing, such as News From Nowhere, or with the medieval adventurers in his romances -- all of which worlds seemingly emphasize a masculine point of view. And all of which imply, if not the subordination, at least no more than the equality of women. Perhaps. But in one of his relatively late (1894) prose romances, far from manifesting the superiority of the masculine over the feminine, Morris advances the anti-thesis: in The Wood Beyond the World Walter begins as protagonist hero but ends stripped of such a title by the action of the "innocent" Maiden. The males in this romance are corrupt, perhaps even -- metaphorically -- gelded, whereas the women are in charge, perhaps even to the point of complete dominance. Does Morris, one might ask, intend this romance to manifest the superiority of women -- possibly, indeed, of the female principle itself?

By the time Walter and the Maiden have passed through their many adventures, she is clearly seen to be dominant, especially when we realize that Walter -- morally irresolute as he has been throughout -- timidly wants to remain in the wilderness, afraid of the people of Stark-wall. Her spur into his weak will does admittedly bring him the kingship of Stark-wall -- he is after all a comely man and a King's son -- but in fact it is not Walter but she who gains the most praise from the people, being hallowed not much less than one hallows "the name of the Mother of God" (253).¹ Moreover, whereas he merely administers the Kingdom, she, though no longer retaining her "wizardry" since the loss of her maiden-head, acts creatively -- out of "wisdom" -- offering such counsel and doing such deeds that the people revere her as a very god. Not Walter's but her action fashions the paradise on earth so necessary a part of Morris's world. On the level of adventure, then, the "hero" Walter assumes the title in name only, for without the Maiden he would have languished early on.

Throughout the romance the Maiden dominates physically, a superiority best observed in her courage in causing the death of the person who endangers Walter -- the "Lady" -- and the one who