“Whilom, as tells the tale”: the Language of the Prose Romances

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The vocabulary and syntax of Morris’s late romances have often been misunderstood as a sentimental adherence to ‘Middle English’, and lamented. Some have condemned this language as an unintended, and therefore inept, obstacle to his contemporaries’ and our enjoyment, others as a deliberate, and therefore self-indulgent, signal that the book is for the élite only. It is hard to credit that anyone who has thought about the last fifteen years of Morris’ life, with their extraordinary dedication to speaking abroad his political and aesthetic convictions, could believe either. Years ago, my first delight in discovering the prose romances was briefly turned to wrath when I read Philip Henderson’s well-intentioned reassurance that nobody need read such rubbish. He proved there was no point in discussing those seven major works by the simple tactic of quoting about one-third of the first sentence of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*: “Whilom, as tells the tale, was a walled cheaping town hight Utterhay …” ¹ There is real art in Henderson stopping where he does, both because it makes the sentence more dismissible and the critic more pleased with himself for his stern, commonsensical discriminations, and because it avoids quoting the remainder of the sentence, where there is far less archaism. I should like to turn the tables and examine the opening of that very work to find out how Morris’s style works, and what it works at.
The vocabulary and syntax are of a piece with Morris’s specific and well-articulated convictions. The nearest analogy is the language of the English and Scottish Border Ballads, with a basically Anglian and Norse vocabulary and no great care for when any one sentence might stop, so that two or more sentences may make up one periodic structure – often joined by ‘and’ – in a series of semi-parallel ballad stanzas. Almost no words from Latin or French appear, except when they are the right technical labels, for instance with armour, heraldry, architecture or religious matters. When such a ‘foreign’ word is found, it often has a conspicuous function, signalling a component essential to the plot and inviting contrast with its verbal surroundings.

II

The opening sentence, which is also the first paragraph, of The Water of the Wondrous Isles, is remarkably distancing, even for a style that will require us to maintain a narrative distance from everything except Birdalone’s reactions:

Whilom, as tells the tale, was a walled cheaping-town hight Utterhay, which was builded in a bight of the land a little way off the great highway which went from over the mountains to the sea. The first word not only means but effectively moves a long way back in time, without the narrative cosiness of “Once Upon a Time”. The storyteller immediately signals that he is passing on a traditional story, though we do not know what tradition is so casually referred to – nor what mountains and sea, let alone what highway. Thus the audience is at the same time welcomed into a tradition that it may treat as its own, and encouraged to work out by detection what the tradition is like, to explore the tradition’s geography – and social and natural laws – because it is still conscious of being a foreign audience. The town is “walled”, thus had and might still have enemies: the word signals a medieval setting, and conflict. It is a “cheaping-town”, thus resembling a medieval market-town: the word signals bargaining and commercial competition. “Hight” is more distancing than “was called”, and the archaic word implies that either the name, or the town, or the whole civilisation of which it was outpost, is long vanished. The name itself confirms this: “Utter” means furthest, and “hay” means boundary-hedge – and we have never heard of this stubbornly resistant but vulnerable place. The next old word, “bight”, is still used, but almost entirely of wide curves of sea; here the land is somehow in a bight, and the next three paragraphs explain that a great woodland curves around the town, increasing the defensiveness of the place and leading us to expect alienation from external nature, with important consequences for individual and social behaviour. The central terms of this paragraph are the great negatives of capitalism as Morris saw it, and the story proper at once focusses upon the gap between the prosperous and the poor. Clearly, the archaisms of the first paragraph-sentence are not only decorative – to some readers at least – but also highly functional. They link up with the syntactic elements that are so conspicuously in the past tense and evocative of past language. In particular, “as tells the tale” implies that the individuality of the teller is unimportant, that such a story is common property; also, its continuous present, governed by the tale and not its teller, establishes a continuum in a vastly
different civilisation from that which is being told about. Or is that continuum a ‘civilisation’ at all? The tale seems to expect to be told in a low-technology world, where people gather round to hear long narratives like those of Odysseus or Sigurd, probably presented over several evenings. Such a world is not that of Morris’ contemporaries, or of our media-stuffed society, and any inducements or warnings-off that they or we respond to are, so the style informs us, largely incidental. We notice that the initial sentence has three strong simple verbs (apart from “tells”, which is in a subordinate clause, though a powerfully placed and suggestive one). They are “was”, “was builded”, and “went”, and intensify our sense of pastness. We begin to accept that the town is gone, and even the site of its ancient building is lost, and so is the very line of the “great highway”. Vast changes have occurred since the world of this tale existed. Or, possibly, as with the worlds of folktale and legend, this place never existed - except in the tale and the places that the tale and our creative mimesis-through-history awaken in our minds. The neighbours of Nowhere, with their fondness for the tales of Grimm, would have made an excellent audience for the teller here, and would need such implanted warnings about a world of conflict, competition, and alienation from external nature, since they suffer from none of these diseases. Not only tales but most accommodation and ‘possessions’ and all work – including building – are common property with them. They have nothing to build walls against, though they are admittedly in danger of forgetting the past, or miscomprehending what was wrong with it, and thus perhaps of repeating it in some new form. Except, I should add, if they learn to enjoy, and understand the implications of, such tales as this, sent to them from the past by their loving ancestors.

The next three paragraphs of the first page are designed to settle the audience into the language and the phenomena of the narrative world they will inhabit for a while:

The said town was hard on the borders of a mighty wood, which men held to be mighty great, or maybe measureless; though few indeed had entered it, and they that had, brought back tales wild and confused thereof.

Therein was neither highway nor byway, nor wood-reeve nor way-warden; never came chapman thence into Utterhay; no man of Utterhay was so poor or so bold that he durst raise the hunt therein; no outlaw durst flee thereto; no man of God had such trust in the saints that he durst build him a cell in that wood.

For all men deemed it more than perilous; and some said that there walked the worst of the dead; other some that the Goddesses of the Gentiles haunted there; others again that it was the Faery rather, but they full of malice and guile. But most commonly it was deemed that the devils swarmed amidst of its thickets, and that wheresoever a man sought to, who was environed by it, ever it was the Gate of Hell whereto he came. And the said wood was called Evilshaw.

The difficulties of the passage are obvious, and a simple glossary would remove the practical obstacles for Nowherian audiences, or any real future audiences for which Morris so lovingly wrote. The style’s positive intentions and effects are also obvious: we experience a delightful and total immersion in a language not our own, and are challenged to understand a world view irredeemably more fearful than our own. The
paragraphs pretend to describe Evilshaw, but in fact describe only the human beings that find reasons to react against it and avoid it. The alliterative “mighty great, or maybe measureless” contrasts with the small divided men who “held” (that so confident word for human credulities) it to be so. The citizens are ignorant: “few” go in, and all they bring back are “wild and confused” stories. In contrast the great wood, though wild, is unconfused because unpestered by humans; our ironic suspicion of the citizens is strengthened.

The next paragraph begins to weave a series of parallel minor sentences into tapestry, using negatives and the word “durst” across them. So, “neither... nor..., nor... nor...” is amplified after the semicolon to “never came chapman...; no man... durst... hunt...; no outlaw durst flee...; no man of God... durst build...” Trader and hunter, outlaw and hermit, have different uses for and attitudes to woodland, yet all fear this one. Humanity, as in the worst stages of its inhumanity to man, is divided and discriminatory, and united only in fear. Chapmen are made bold by greed for profit, poor men become hunters from hard need, though both categories may also love their occupations. Outlaws flee from a society that threatens them, justly or not, while hermits turn from society to seek oneness with God (though “the saints” are not perhaps as worthy of trust as the unifying inclusiveness of God would have been). All categories, needing the wood, dare not resort to it. The parallels and variations here establish a tapestried prose that resembles Malory or Wyclif, Froissart or William of Malmesbury, though far more purposeful and self-consistent as well as more consciously craftsmanlike than these. Having indicated some salient features of human society’s divisions – rich and poor, guilty and innocent – the tale gives an equally brief summary of the supernatural images projected upon the wood by “all men”. Some evoke ghosts; others call upon non-Christian mythologies such as Artemis-Diana, or the Germanic Folla, who according to Grimm’s Teutonic Mythology could be called “domina Abundia” or “dame habonde”. A third group cites “the Faery”, which covers many kinds of elves, sprites, powers like Puck or Will-o-the-Wisp, and other minor semi-animistic beings, but also includes the “well-fared may” or ‘Clerk Colvill’, and the Elfqueen of ‘Thomas the Rhymer’ and ‘Tam Lin’. The qualification that ends the sentence, “but they full of malice and guile”, turns the Faery malevolent; and yet the hint in “but” reminds us that traditionally the Faery are as far from evil as from good. The audience may recall the more splendid aspects of the pagan Goddesses and the implication that there is a wide range of “the dead” preferable to “the worst”, and decide that this list of horrible imaginings is self-induced by the citizens.

The final sentences, which associate the natural world with Hell, evil, and swarms of devils, makes a grotesquerie out of these urban views of the woods. An evil wood, for Morris, is a contradiction in terms. The church, well-placed to play upon the fears of the townsfolk, is the unnamed villain here, and the prosperity of the following paragraphs is allied with this crucial aspect of the medieval town. All through the first episode, the selection and stealing of the child, the witchwife exploits and illustrates the ironies of civilisation, and the language allows these ironies to surface subtly. She is an “alien” – but she has money, so she is not nearly as alien as a starving widow and her babe in this prosperous town. In a later episode, when she is described as abducting three young ladies to serve as slaves to her sister,
it is clear that she is given her opportunity by the moral sickness and neurotic ennui of comfortable and privileged society. Here in Utterhay the superstitious fear of the wood, which she hates with far better cause than even the bourgeoisie can have, guarantees the success of her kidnapping project. On her way into the wood she passes three men of the city, but when they realise where she is going they look away and cross themselves rather than stopping her to question her. With a typical Morris irony that juxtaposes the medieval commonplace phrase for “in a short time” with the superstitious, pious cowardice that prevents their doing their neighbourly duty, her success is given resonance:

So in scarce more than the saying of a low mass she was in amongst the trees, with her ass and her wares and her prey. (6)

III

Morris despised the cockneyfied, vulgar ‘progress’ of his day even when it was largely autonomous, but when, as was usually the case, it marred an earlier beauty—a zinc roof on a lovely ancient barn at Black Bourton, say—he hated it heartily. The negative aspect of his language is akin to the efforts of Barnes (now largely forgotten) and Hopkins (now widely revered) to Saxonise and Celticise a degenerate English. Morris well understood why Keats valued Chatterton above more correct writers, in that his tongue was meant to be English without the bullying of French and Latin diction. However, the positive aspect of his vocabulary—the good side of his word-hoard—is as important as his eschewing the corruptions of Paris and Rome.

First, his diction is essentially simple, in spite of a studding of old words—at least as simple as Wordsworth’s “selection of the language really used by men” —and hinges upon things and actions rather than subtleties and discriminations of detail. Thus when several feeble adjectives and adverbs cluster together, a specific effect is achieved by the contrast with the stylistic context. For example, when the witch-wife cajoles the baby:

Then she came out of doors, and spake sweetly to the little one:

‘See now this pretty way-beast! We will ride merrily on him to find thy mother,’ (5)

the weak words are strong writing because totally alien to the personality that so effortfully produces them. The audience have seen enough to mistrust her previously, and now such expectations are confirmed. Second, in the more typical style, where verb and noun are everything, any French or Latin word obtrudes, whether archaic or part of the active vocabulary of Morris’ day. Any southern word becomes conspicuous, whereas the northern archaisms become less strange as the book develops. I have chosen two words from deeper within the text to illustrate this, and set them in their narrative and imagined visual context.

The teenage Birdalone first meets Habundia in the seventh chapter, and is asked if she has ever seen herself in a “mirror” (16). The word has to be explained to her, and her ignorance of it is eloquent of the dimensions of her natural upbringing. It also alerts the audience to the ironies of nature around it. Both speakers are natural, in their nakedness and frankness and in their belonging to the wood rather than fearing
or opposing it; Habundia is in fact a nature-spirit. Yet Habundia is a mirror-image of Birdalone, what Shakespeare's Orsino calls, illuminated by his amazement, "a natural perspective". And how can that be natural? It is in fact a sophisticated effect, though its ingredients are beautifully simple. The naked girls under the oak correspond to the two harts facing each other on either side of the spreading green tree that Birdalone is embroidering with naturally inherited art on her gown, which is why she is naked in the first place. Nature reflects art, and so does Habundia when she says, "now am I to be thy mirror." This entails her standing before Birdalone and in her image, while giving an extended description or inventory of her body. The process is thrilling and liberating to Birdalone, as teenage body-exploration should be, and also wholly innocent – in the original sense of the word.

Birdalone's innocence of the word "mirror" is natural, in her upbringing. But her upbringing, in its lack of comfort and elegance, is also training, and its servitude and enforced isolation from her kind it is deeply unnatural: there is no mirror only because the witch-wife does not wish there to be one. The ironies about what is natural for humans permeate the relationship with Habundia from this first meeting on ward, just as ironies about what is naturally female permeate Birdalone's contact with the knights and Castle of the Quest. Here we are more likely to respond to the point that it is not unnatural for a seventeen-year-old to be curious about her own body and delighted by its beauty. We also realise that the witch-wife's plan to make Birdalone's beauty into a trap and a bait for admiring males is both antisexual and unnatural, especially because its ingredients are beautiful and natural.

There are three major ways of reading this scene: as a medieval decorative set-piece (the erotic description of fair women unashamed), as the ritual of a Bildungsroman (associated with Birdalone embroidering her first “good clothes” but illustrating the root meaning of Bildung as picture), and as the figuring forth of “the promise of the earth” in the heroine's body (the growth of heroine to full representative and fulfilled protagonist). These approaches are held in tension and frequent interplay throughout the romance. The three versions of the story are the descriptive, delightful in itself, the psychological, whether psychoanalytic or individuative, and the mythic or archetypal.

The fourth aspect of the romance, the social or communal aspect, depends upon our accepting Birdalone as natural, with all the powers and limitations this may imply, here and elsewhere, and following her with our keenest sympathy into more complex relationships. This ought to be crowned by her re-entering Utterhay at the end of the romance, married and fulfilled, and beginning that town's redemption. Unfortunately, Morris died while still engaged in a thorough and craftsmanlike revision of the text, so the ending was never developed into more than a graceful tableau of the nice-girl-as-ransom kind and a cursory happy ending.

However, another shrewdly highlighted Franco-Latinate world, "prison", indicates some of the potential of the social reading of the romance. At the beginning of the second book, Birdalone is dismissed by the cruel Queen of the Isle of Increase Unsought, the Witch-wife's sister. Atra, one of the slaves, explains that she must take Birdalone to prison, and the girl answers, "Yea, and what is prison?" (60). The naive question sets Birdalone beside the inhabitants of Nowhere, who find the idea of imprisonment an obscenity in itself, as Dick Hammond points out in the seventh
chapter of *News from Nowhere*. Birdalone's perspective is natural, and later, when she is imprisoned for some time in the benevolent confinement of the Castle of the Quest, she becomes claustrophobic, acutely nervous and literally ill. Part of this response is due to lovesickness, admittedly, but it expresses a great deal about male typecasting of women, and about the male language of chivalry. Atra's reply to the question about prison is worth quoting:

“A prison is a grim place where poor folk who have done that which pleaseth not the rich folk are shut up, that they may be grieved and tormented by not being able to fare abroad, or go where they would.” (60)

Words like “tormented”, and the later technical terms of a cruel and cruelly divided society, like “suffering” and “master”, are inseparable from the definition. Since one of the ironies of imprisonment is that the jailers are fastened there as surely as the officially imprisoned, we feel something of the reluctance and self-revulsion with which Atra has to use them before the noble innocence of Birdalone. They are, of course, obscenities designed to waken the historical memories of Nowhere audiences.

IV

Birdalone is the standard by which characters and societies are valued, but she is also an individual character, and her vocabulary and syntax are appropriate to her – but only just. Other kinds of fiction offer characters with markedly different languages, Dickens, for example, “do the police in different voices.” Morris’s heroes and heroines must not sound too foreign to their linguistic context. Birdalone is minimally distinct, in that her language has more openness and naivety than other characters have, but this can never be shown at the expense of the mobility and elasticity of the story-teller’s idiom. Yet Morris has to convey reactions and emotions appropriate to individual events and characters, without tightening or loosening a part of the overall style. Another character than Birdalone will show better how full value can be given to strong events and feelings.

Birdalone has been confined in the males' Castle of the Quest; while they carry out the task that was meant for heroes she is expected to learn to be a respectable lady, a courtesy-object, as it were. But her temperament is just as active and passionate as any of the knights', so she cannot remain placid and passive. She escapes, using what some males pejoratively call “feminine wiles” – seeing there are no other weapons available in such a polite prison. The quest has been successful, in a way, but her adventures tear that limited success to shreds. The tableau she spoils, of three fair, upper-class maidens rescued by three handsome, devoted knights, was ruined by the heroic death of Baudoin, rescuing Birdalone; but then that tableau had left no place for Birdalone, and the dispersal of the charming company began some really useful knight-errantry. The emotion and eloquence of Atra’s speeches at this crux indicate how the tale’s style can offer an individual character in a unique relationship.

Atra’s plight is painful, and she has a sharp awareness of irony as well as a minor power to see into people – and the future. Two speeches here seem to show two opposed wishes in this one character; the first ends a chapter and is oratorical or public, while the other is in a very private conversation. When Birdalone concludes
her story of the death of Sir Baudoin and the Red and Black Knights, Atra formally welcomes the war-plans Arthur has called for: “Good is the word, and we look to it that the deed shall be better yet.” Then suddenly, as though inspired, she generalises about the pattern they are now in:

“Thus has the evil arisen that shall destroy the evil, as oft hath been when the valiant have been grieved, and the joy of the true-hearted hath been stolen from them; then the hand doth the doughty deed and the heart hath ease, and solaced is sorrow.” (213).

Atra is broadening the personal response of the bereaved Aurea to suit the love-tangle she shares with Arthur and Birdalone. If war is an evil it may be a necessary and purgative one, she says, and distinguishes male sufferings (“the valiant”) from female (“the true-hearted”). On the surface she indicates the frustration and helplessness of waiting and weeping as opposed to fighting, where the male may at least vent his frustration on a physical enemy. She may also be hinting, however, at the question of whether Birdalone has been “true-hearted”, where a male would have been praised for taking positive action instead of letting his emotional grief prey upon his inactive misery, Birdalone is judged to have failed as a lady. Strong male grief and the absent, stolen joy of the female imply that maleness has positive states and where femaleness has passive negations, lacks.

A semi-colon divides this summary of the traditional quest-romance, which is also the story of the three stolen maidens and their betrothed knights, that Atra now mourns, from a different pattern that descends from it. The audience, strongly identified with Birdalone, cannot but wish to reject the old and accusing version of woman’s role, and looks eagerly for mutual positives in the events she is foretelling. Here, “hand” and “heart” are alliteratively linked, though the first governs an alliterative group of action-words, “doth the doughty deed”, while the second controls a soft vocalic alliteration that still sounds passive, (in alliterative verse h-words alliterate with all vowels, but this is the weakest alliteration). Yet the hand-heart reminds us that in both medieval and Victorian cliche these terms were used to distinguish the active and “feeling” aspects of the same being: a Dickensian verbalist might describe an acceptance of a marriage proposal as, “The lady gave her And where she had already given her Art.” In the final phrase of the periodic sentence the culminating word “sorrow” not only summarises the two kinds of suffering that have been brought closer together, but also alliterates with the “solace” that overcomes it. The whole speech ritually enacts the bringing together of the company in sorrow, resolution and muted hope, based on war. By this foretelling she becomes a Valkyrie, “for she spake with her head upraised and her eyes glittering, as she had been one of the wise women of yore.” The Wood-Sun and the Hall-Sun, from The House of the Wolfings, would have been proud of her.

This aspect of her temperament is confirmed in the next chapter’s opening, when she assures Birdalone that she feels no hate for her, though they both love Arthur:

“e’en now, when I spake thus boastfully, I thought: When he hath died as a doughty knight should, then, when life begins again, Birdalone and I shall be friends and sisters, and we two will talk together oft and call him to mind, and the kindness of him, and how he loved us.” (211).

When sharp physical longing is in question, women cannot feel the mutuality they
nonetheless yearn for. Nor can Atra have any hope that Arthur wants her as specifically and sexually as she wants him; perhaps she foresaw this in her first extended talk with Birdalone, back on the Isle of Increase Unsought. When Birdalone seems unsure whether they are foes, she replies with a remarkable set-piece description of a church mural, to juxtapose another world with their present suffering. It is touching that a private unboasoming should have this distanced and formal articulation:

“I have seen, once and again, on the wall of the Minorites’ church at Greenford, a fair picture of the Blessed, and they walking in the meads of Paradise, clad in like raiment, men and women; their heads flower-crowned, their feet naked in the harmless blossomed grass; hand in hand they walk, with all wrath passed for ever, all desire changed into loving-kindness, all the anguish of forgiveness forgotten. And underneath the picture is it writ:

Bitter winter, burning summer, never more shall waste and wear;
Blossom of the rose undying brings undying springtide there.
O for the hope of it, that I might hope it! O for the days to be and the assuaging of sorrow: I speak the word, and the hope springeth; the word is spoken, and there abideth desire barren of hope!” (215).

Were it not for her own passion, the Franciscan advertisement for loving-kindness might seem bland or sentimental. “The Blessed” are a classless, sexless group, and much has been lost to achieve the unification of active doers and passive sufferers – nothing is left either to do or to suffer. In The House of the Wolfings Thiodolf seems to be in this state when he wears the dwarf-wrought hauberk; he does not realise he is in an earthly battle, with friends and kindred depending on him. In The Story of the Glittering Plain, Hallblithe Raven is trapped in such a paradise, and hates it. In The Well at the World’s End, no one would have expected the Innocent Folk to survive on this side of the Wall of the World.

Male wrath and female desire, perhaps, are converted to loving kindness, or do all emotions belong to both sexes? The most telling phrase is “the anguish of forgiveness”; the Christian attempt to forgive even our friends is neither easy nor easily made possible. In any case, who should forgive and forbear in a relationship for which no one is at fault, like this emotional triangle? The seasonal metaphors of the pious couplet remind us, as in John Keats’ ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ or Wallace Stevens’ ‘Sunday Morning’, that we live in a changing world, and would be alien where undying spring never came to fruition. Atra may or may not realise that the heaven-haven is alien to humanity, but her next electrifying phrase clarifies what she really wants. Her description has not been of Paradise but of mortal human art longing for Paradise, and she longs to share that longing, to want no more from this world: “O for the hope of it, that I might hope it!” If she could really want the meads of Heaven, could turn from this world – and from Arthur – without regret, that in itself would be some sort of a solution.

The last two clauses divide the instant of speaking from the moment when it is spoken, as the process of articulation denies what might have been felt still if left below the conscious mind. This theme occurred before Morris, in Browning’s ‘Two in the Campagna’, and occurs later too in the colder tones of T. S. Eliot:
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow.

For Atra, the mind does seize upon ideas and realise them – or dismiss them – as facts. In her undeceived state there is no cure for the one love of one’s life, and no comfort in trying for a comfort after death. Maybe there is a state after death, but she has not yet either seen desire changed to loving-kindness, or honestly wanted her desire to be changed. She sees herself trapped by the twin desires of the lover and of the hoper for the transcendent ability to hope.

Even as, like a good feminist, she wishes Arthur were nobly dead so that she and Birdalone could be sisters again rather than rivals, her sharp-edged mind is moving them and the audience back into the plot again. Very briefly, she weeps, and then reminds Birdalone of their first meeting when Birdalone was destitute: on that basis she demands a powerful because indefinite promise from Birdalone, that when need and chance are plain she will act to comfort, help and save Atra in turn. Of course Birdalone agrees, and Atra is grateful – but that does not cure her need of wisdom. She realises that in fulfilling her promise Birdalone may “be the better for it in the long run belike: for thou art a happy woman.” Immediately afterwards, with that quirk of bitter humour Birdalone can never quite understand, Atra is cursing her own “unhap” because she knows Arthur has returned and seen her face momentarily twisted by a sudden renewal of her resentment of Birdalone. Her mind has reached out into past and future, seeking to control both by wisdom, but her present pain is not relieved by all. With less self-knowledge, Birdalone knows that her conscious mind only wants to love and be loved by everybody – though Arthur most of all – and sympathises passionately with Atra. She is shaken to feel an explosion of joy, an ironic counter-intensity, because she now has proof that Arthur really does love her, above all others.

There are no significant patterns of alliteration or cadences of public rhetoric in this conversation between the women who love Arthur, but the eloquent use of the frame-description of the mural stimulates any audience to understand something of Atra’s complex mind and temperament. It seems that even though the characters must all speak in the tale’s overall idiom, this need not blur them as characters.

V

The eloquence, richness of texture and efficient psychological and narrative development of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* deserve a far more detailed analysis than this. The late twentieth century, like Morris’ own age, cannot qualify any part of its society to become the ideal audience for such a work – as, say, a group of Irish monks on a long winter evening would be the ideal audience for a page of the Book of Kells – but as individuals we can hope to train ourself for that remarkable experience. A crucial aspect of that training is to recognise that Morris’s world and his delight in it is conveyed by a masterly and elaborately crafted style.
NOTES


4 My comments on these two words and on the first sentence also appear in ‘Heroine as Hero’ in J.S. Ryan, ed. *The Nameless Wood* (St Lucia, Queensland, 1987).