The Influence of De La Motte Fouqué’s *Sintram and His Companions* on William Morris’s *The Wood Beyond the World*

Hilary Newman

In her biography of William Morris, Fiona MacCarthy describes how Morris and Burne-Jones discovered a translation of *Sintram and His Companions*. They found this early nineteenth century romance, by the German Baron Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, whilst at university at Oxford. MacCarthy comments: ‘The solemn mystic story of the hero travelling through the icy landscape, embattled with his own wild and troubled temperament, sets up reverberations which would last for life for both’.¹ This article will argue that, consciously or unconsciously, Fouqué’s prose romance influenced Morris some forty years later when he came to write his own late prose romance *The Wood Beyond the World*. Of particular interest are the form of the romance and the figure of the dwarf, outstanding in both tales.

Both *Sintram and His Companions* and *The Wood Beyond the World* are typical of the romance form as described by Northrop Frye:

The complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a complicated form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages respectively, using Greek terms, the agon or conflict, the pathos or death-struggle, and the anagnorisis or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero, even if he does not survive the conflict.²

Indeed, while both the quest in *Sintram and His Companions* and that in *The Wood Beyond the World* involve literal travelling, the theme of the quest also functions metaphorically for the journey to the centre of the self, the journey of self-discovery, self-acceptance and self-fulfilment. While Fouqué’s Sintram only travels about within the country of his native Norway, Morris’s Walter journeys across the seas to an unknown land.

Both authors were attracted to the past for the time-setting of their romances. Time locations for both may be approximately, if not exactly, deduced from
internal evidence in the texts. Sintram and His Companions is a romance about a Christian knight tried by the devil and tempted to commit sinful actions. The fact that Sintram’s father, Biorn, still wishes to appease pagan Norse gods suggests a fairly early dating for the tale. Although it seems that Christianity is generally accepted in the western world, there are still pockets of heathenism in Norway (and probably elsewhere). Sintram’s father and the ideal Christian knight, Folko, fall out over Biorn’s wish to sacrifice to a pagan image. This suggests a date around the era dealt with by Morris in his translations of Icelandic sagas, probably during the tenth century. Morris also treated this period in his Nordic tale ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ in The Earthly Paradise. In that tale the Norwegians accept the faith before the Icelanders were Christianised.

These tenth century sagas of Iceland fascinated Morris, even though his dominant emotional attachment to the past was to the medieval period of Chaucer. The Earthly Paradise is redolent of this period and Chaucer’s formal poetic devices. Morris’s late prose romances are all set in an imagined medieval setting. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to the second generation of which Morris and Burne-Jones belonged, was also passionately attracted to the Middle Ages. Although Fouqué’s story is set at an earlier period, his hero Sintram might have featured as a medieval knight of Malory’s creation, with his quest for perfection of self and acceptance by God. As in Malory, for Fouqué sexual purity is necessary above all else. By contrast, Morris’s The Wood Beyond the World is much more original in its treatment of relationship between the sexes. For Morris, sexual love is good, provided it is built on emotional commitment and compatibility.

The beginnings of both Sintram and Walter’s quests are initiated by other people rather than through catalysing faults of their own. Sintram is afflicted through a heathen vow made by his father when he was seven years old. After discussing the German merchants and how to curb their increasing pride, Biorn swears by the image of the golden boar (a pagan idol) to kill whatever German trader falls into his hands. Immediately comes news of the arrival of two German travellers. Biorn is horrified but feels bound by his oath. That night Sintram’s mother Verena and his faithful servant Rolf see two figures appear who from now on, through Sintram’s boyhood and manhood, will torment him. One of these figures is a hideous dwarf. As his father’s rash and pagan vow afflict Sintram, so, in Morris’s romance, a faithless wife who makes his domestic life intolerable propels Walter into action. It seems that both Sintram – who was a child at the time of his father’s defiance of Christianity – and Walter, have to expiate and work through the sins others have committed against them. Both Sintram and Walter are further punished by the loss of a parent through the action of the person who has already wronged him. Biorn’s heathen brutality and failure to repent so appals his wife that she abandons not only her husband, but also her young son, Sintram, and then retires into a convent. Although Verena seems to be aware of Sintram’s struggles against evil forces – symbolised by the dwarf – she does not directly intervene to help him. Only when he has resolved his inner conflict and literally and metaphorically banished the dwarf, is he considered good enough to meet his mother in the convent. He appears to have never resented his early abandonment.
In *The Wood Beyond the World*, Walter is driven into exile by the infidelities of his wife. His father, Bartholomew, remains in Langton and has to resolve the situation his son has left behind him. Bartholomew evicts Walter's wife, and this brings him into conflict with his daughter-in-law's family, the Reddings. Bartholomew is killed whilst pursuing Walter's quarrel with his disloyal daughter-in-law. So Walter is left alone in the world. Although he considers returning to avenge his father, he never does. Sintram never questions the reality of his visions of the dwarf and the mad pilgrim, but Walter is less sure of the reliability of his own senses. Walter's first glimpse of the dwarf, the maid and the Lady occurs in daylight at the port: he sees the trio passing him and walking across the gangway of a ship. His perception is detailed and evocative:

First came a dwarf, dark-brown of hue and hideous, with long arms and ears exceeding great and dog-teeth that stuck out like the fangs of a wild beast. He was clad in a rich coat of yellow silk, and bore in his hand a crooked bow, and was girt with a broad axe.

After him came a maiden, young by seeming, of scarce twenty summers; fair of face as a flower; grey-eyed, brown-haired; with lips full and red, slim and gentle of body. Simple was her array, of a short and strait green gown, so that on her right ankle was clear to see an iron ring.

Last of the three was a Lady, tall and stately, so radiant of visage & glorious of raiment, that it was hard to say what like she was; for scarce might the eye gaze steady upon her exceeding beauty, yet must every son of Adam who found himself anigh her, lift up his eyes again after he had dropped them, and look again on her, and yet again and yet again.³ (pp. 4-5)

Walter wants to ask Geoffrey, the shipmaster, what he knows of the ship they are boarding. However, he does not do so because he doubts the evidence of his own eyes: 'it came into his mind, that all this was but an imagination or daydream of the day, and that he were best to leave it untold to anybody' (p. 6). When Walter returns to the house, he again seems to see the three figures. But when he looks once more, there is nothing between him and the walls of the house. This confuses Walter, who does not know what to make of it, and cannot decide whether the trio 'were but images of a dream or children of Adam in the very flesh' (p. 6). Nevertheless, Walter becomes obsessed by the three figures and longs to find them.

Morris is subtler than his predecessor, Fouqué. Morris's prose romance could be either a psychological experience or an actual journey into the unknown. Nevertheless, on either level, Northrop Frye's description of the romantic quest with its three different phases can be fruitfully applied to both Morris and Fouqué's prose romances. Both Sintram and Walter experience Frye's stages of conflict, death struggle and discovery or recognition of the hero. While Sintram only travels between his father's castles in Norway, Walter's quest (as so often in Morris) takes him overseas. Once in a strange land, Walter pursues his outer and inner quests by a symbolic journey into the heart of the land. He leaves his companions behind.

The first creature that Walter meets after several days of journeying inland is
the dwarf. There is also a dwarf in *Sintram and His Companions*. Both dwarfs while appearing to be actual physical presences, also function metaphorically. As Tom Chetwynd has observed, dwarfs ‘and other deformed or stunted figures: [represent] unconscious impulses that are still only half-formed, [and] primitive’. Self-mastery for both heroes will require rejection and victory over the dwarf. In Forqué’s *Sintram and His Companion* every time the eponymous character is sexually tempted by the already married Gabriela, the dwarf appears. The dwarf always tries to persuade Sintram to let the evil in his character gain the upper hand. He tempts Sintram with ideas of abducting Gabriela or killing her husband Folko. Although others can see the dwarf, it is soon apparent that he is partly a personification of Sintram’s personality. It is this struggle with his own worst or ‘primitive’ instincts, which comprises the major events of the romance as they affect Sintram. (There is a parallel plot where some of Sintram’s companions make the same, although less recorded, spiritual journey.) These plots are encapsulated in Frye’s category of conflict in romance. Forqué’s dwarf is a simpler figure than that depicted in Morris’s romance: Forqué’s is clearly a manifestation of the devil, which can only be overcome by prayer. Morris avoids such a reductive figure.

In *The Wood Beyond the World*, Walter first hears the dwarf in the new land ‘roaring and braying’ (p.35). It seems to Walter that the sound is unlike that of any beast he knows. He is so terrified when he sees the figure of the dwarf before him that he ‘gave a great cry and tumbled down in a swoon’ (p. 36). When Walter recovers consciousness, he finds that although the dwarf’s voice is still fearfully harsh, he can now understand his language. It transpires that the dwarf has been sent to find Walter. The dwarf does not say who sent him on this search, but mentions ‘the Wretch, the Thing’ and his ‘Lady’. Walter asks the dwarf about these people. The dwarf’s description of the maid is sexually voyeuristic and his voice disintegrates into ‘gibber and yelling’, showing how sex divorced from love and consideration degenerates into the bestial. This is a warning pertinent to Walter, who has already been married to an outwardly beautiful, but inwardly corrupt woman. However, unlike the narrow and puritanical view of the sinfulness of sexuality presented in *Sintram and His Companions*, Morris does not condemn, but rather encourages sexual love when freely and willingly given. This is true of all his late prose romances.

The romance phase of conflict in *The Wood Beyond the World*, like that in *Sintram and His Companions*, comprises most of the novel. Unlike Sintram, however, Walter has to learn his way about in a different environment and among unknown people. Thus he does not condemn the dwarf outright to the maid when he first meets her, not knowing what her relationship with it might be. The maid soon indicates that the dwarf is also abhorrent to her. Even mentioning the dwarf produces the same kind of extreme physical reaction in the maid as his first encounter with him did to Walter. As it is love at first sight between Walter and the maid, it is clear that they will be allies against the dwarf and the Lady. The maid says the Lady is ‘an evil mistress, of whom I may say that scarce I wot if she be a woman or not, but by some creatures is she accounted for a god, & as a god is heried, and surely never god was crueler nor colder than she’ (p. 46). The maid warns Walter that her mistress is a ‘wanton’. The Lady represents exploitative
sexuality that is unconnected with love or respect (like Walter’s abandoned wife). According to the maid, Walter is her mistress’s ‘latest catch’ (p. 46), whom she has brought to this land by sorcery. It is apparent that the Lady, and her evil sidekick the dwarf, must be defeated by Walter with the help of the maid.

The conflict that Walter faces is between his love for the maid and his sexual attraction to her mistress. When he is first tempted by the Lady’s body the dwarf immediately materialises. Again Walter find him repellent. This should have warned Walter against involvement with her. The dwarf is so closely allied with her that later he wants to kill the maid, claiming that she has slain ‘the Lady that was our Lady, and that made us; she whom all we worshipped and adored’ (p. 104). The other inhabitant of the new land is the King’s son, Otto, with whom the Lady has been amusing herself. Between the two now, however, exists a mutual dissatisfaction, and both wish to find new sexual objects. Otto wants to have Walter killed immediately. The Lady suggests that they first find out what Walter is and where he comes from. If he is not satisfactory, they can easily be rid of him: ‘it is but a word to our Dwarf-King and it will be done in a few minutes’ (p. 57).

Unlike the dwarf in Sintram and His Companions, who is a spiritual danger only, the dwarf in The Wood Beyond the World is both a mental and physical threat. The land Walter has come to is a nest of both legitimate and illegitimate love. He and the maid have to work together to ensure that they both acquire the right sexual partner – each other. The dwarf, both as part of Walter’s unconscious, and as a physical presence, is apparent when he allows his sexual feeling to be disturbed by the physically attractive, yet inwardly rotten Lady. The other wrong sexual partnering – Otto plans to seduce or rape the maid – also produces visions of the evil dwarf. As Rolf and the chaplain in Sintram and His Companions give as much help to the beset hero as they can, so in Morris’s tale, Walter has an able assistant in the maid. In fact, during the conflict stage, the maid is more active in bringing about the safe escape of herself and Walter than the young man himself. As is often the case in such stories, the maid only retains her special powers while she preserves her virginity. So even when they are free, Walter and the maid must postpone the physical consummation of their love. After the sexual hothouse atmosphere created by the Lady and Otto, a period to test mental companionship seems appropriate. However, unlike in Fouqué’s tale, their abstinence is rewarded later by sexual gratification.

However, before this can happen they must first escape and return to civilisation. Although Walter does not trust the Lady, he is eventually seduced by her beauty and becomes her lover. They enter a garden-like enclosure which is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. This is symbolic of the fallen world that the Lady and Walter now inhabit: ‘then they loved and played together, as if they were a pair of lovers guileless, with no fear for the morrow, and no seeds of enmity betwixt’ (p. 86). Immediately after this scene, Walter meets the maid and the dwarf appears again. Thanks to the maid, who succeeds in getting the Lady to slaughter the enchanted Otto and herself, she and Walter are able to escape. They are then pursued by the dwarf who is intent on avenging the death of the Lady.

We now reach the stage which Frye defines as the death-struggle. The dwarf is no match for Walter who easily slays him. If he had not done this the dwarf would have killed both himself and the maid. With the death of the dwarf, the
maid is freed from her death-in-life existence. Both she and Walter are now fully alive again having defeated the evil that had threatened them.

Sintram’s conflict in Fouqué’s romance also saw the overthrow of the evil dwarf. But as already indicated, Sintram could only use spiritual weapons to overcome his enemy. In doing so, he also conquers his own worst instincts. Although Sintram does not actually kill the dwarf he destroys his evil influence over his life.

Morris’s dwarf in *The Wood Beyond the World* is more complex. He does not exist only as a metaphor for the maid and Walter’s emotional and spiritual condition, but also as a physical being. Both Walter and the maid take a part in the death-struggle with their enemies: the maid destroys Otto and the Lady by sorcery, while Walter destroys the dwarf by physical means.

Now, according to Frye’s theory of romance, we await the recognition of the hero. However, as Morris’s world is not as patriarchal as Fouqué’s, we have first the recognition of the heroine, as she persuades the Bear Folk to hail her as the new incarnation of their goddess. Walter is then given recognition as a hero when he is given the kingship of the land of Starkwall. *The Wood Beyond the World* therefore ends in the true romance tradition with two lovers committed to the duties of monarchy.

Similarly, Fouqué’s romance ends with the recognition of the hero. Once Sintram has won his spiritual battle and banished the dwarf, he becomes a good and effective man. At last he can be reunited with his mother Verena. She tells him that it is not his destiny to enter the religious life — instead he ‘enters on his life of heroism’ (p. 188). Now and then Sintram wonders whether Gabriela and Folko have forgiven him for lusting after her. The question is eventually answered in the affirmative when, many years later, their son Engeltram is sent by his parents to be squire to Sintram.

Both Forqué’s *Sintram and His Companions* and Morris’s *The Wood Beyond the World* fall into the patterns Northrop Frye identified as being those of romance. They are both set in distant times and places and involve quests for self-fulfilment. In both dwarfs function on literal and metaphorical levels. They are not good or helpful dwarfs: rather they personify the worst propensities of the heroes. As such, the heroes must be engaged in conflict with them, culminating in a death struggle. Finally both heroes — along with Morris’s heroine — achieve true recognition of their heroic qualities and devote themselves to their respective communities. In *The Wood Beyond the World* the lovers also devote themselves to each other as well. Both works end on an optimistic note. It is easy to see why Forqué’s romance captured Morris’s imagination. However, as indicated, Morris’s use of the romance form was far more complex than that of Forqué’s. Morris also has far less conventional attitudes; especially in his views regarding sexual relationships.
NOTES


3 All references are to the Oxford University Press edition of William Morris’s, *The Wood Beyond the World* (1980).


5 All references are to Methuen & Co’s edition of de la Motte Fouqué’s, *Sintram and His Companions* (1908), translated by A. C. Farquharson.