

Forms of Friendship in *The Roots of the Mountains*

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The fellowships imagined by William Morris are communities that flourish through mutual cooperation, sacrifice and friendship. Fellowship, for Morris, also implies the absence of hierarchy. In the prose romance *The Roots of the Mountains* this implication holds true, to a certain extent, even in relations between the sexes. Within the individual bonds of friendship that make up and strengthen the larger fellowship, Morris gives us female characters who are in every way equal to their male counterparts. Such is the case with Sun-beam and Bow-may, friends both with each other and with the warrior Face-of-God. As comrades – “fellows” as it were – these characters are equals, transcending the notion of natural sex roles. This equality is limited, however, for once friendship becomes romantic love – as between Sun-beam and Face-of-God – traditional roles reassert themselves, and the male character becomes dominant.

Within these limitations, Morris succeeds in creating finely drawn portraits of women and their relationships. The relationship between Sun-beam and Bow-may is that surprising thing in a work written by a man, a fully explored friendship between two equally strong female characters. Their relationship suggests that among Morris's Goths, women – at least unmarried women – can choose from among many different lives, and respect each other's choices. Although their roles in the story are quite different, both Sun-beam and Bow-may are equal in status to the male characters. The Sun-beam is a political leader of her people. It is she who calls for the battle with the Dusky Men and arranges the partnership with Face-of-God and the people of Silverdale. (Vol XV, p.109)¹ She is also included in the council of the chieftains. (p.248) Bow-may, whom Florence Boos calls Morris's “most fully and sympathetically” portrayed female character,² is a warrior by choice, preferring the trappings of the soldier to “feminine” things. As a gift for saving Face-of-God's life (p.143) she asks, “might I have a hauberk and helm of [Iron face's] handiwork.” (p.149) Morris, describing Bow-may, says “if she had not the might of the mightiest, yet had she the deftness of the deftest . . . she seemed to men like to those on whose heads the Warrior hath laid the Holy Bread.” (p.345)

Not only are Bow-may and Sun-beam equally strong, but they respect each other and their choices. Bow-may has appointed herself a sort of knightly protector to the peaceful Sun-beam, and is “fain” to “ward [her] body from the foemen.” (p.247) This is not a question of one woman being more or less feminine, or more or less brave, than the other. True, Sun-beam separates herself from the rest of the warrior maids, explaining after an encounter with the Dusky Men: “Did I not tell thee that I am no warrior like Bow-may here? Such deeds make maidens pale.” (p.144) Bow-may defends Sun-beam, however, suggesting that her squeamishness about battle shows a fear for Face-of-God's safety rather than her own. (p.144) Bow-may

characterizes Sun-beam as a woman of great worth: “she is not to be dealt with as if she were the daughter of some little goodman with whom one may tryst in the meadows.” (p.239) Sun-beam returns Bow-may’s respect and affection, praising her skill and valour in saving Face-of-God’s life: “I saw thee, Bow-may, and good was thy shooting. I love thee for it.” (p.144)

Roots is also one of many Morrisian romances to portray true friendship between men and women. We see this in Bow-may and Face-of-God’s relationship as comrades in arms. Face-of-God-considers her “wise in war,” (p.144) and accepts her as part of his company. (p.82) Not only does Bow-may save Face-of-God from death, but he saves her from being “slain thrice over”. (p.327) The relationship between Sun-beam and Face-of-God also begins as friendship. Sun-beam does fear Face-of-God’s death in battle, crying out as if in pain: “Thou shalt not die, thou shalt not die!” (p.264) Yet she is able to control that protective impulse. Not only is the Sun-beam able to let go of Face-of-God for the sake of the people, she is willing to help him in his struggle. She swears her, and her people’s, allegiance to him in battle: “My friend, the Wolf shall lead thee nowhither but where I also shall be, whatsoever peril or grief may beset the road or lurk at the ending thereof. Thou shalt be no thrall, to labour while I look on.” (p. 104) Sun-beam considers herself a committed “friend” to Face-of-God, not an ideal maiden to be worshipped by her lover. At the onset of the final battle with the Dusky Men, Face-of-God returns Sun-beam’s pledge of comradeship: “Thus then we depart from this Valley of Shadows, but as thou saidst when we first met therein, there shall be no sundering of thee and me, but thou shalt go down with me to the battle.” (p.302) If Sun-beam and Face-of-God are comrades in the struggle for freedom, they are also comrades in their preference for peace and “civilian” life. This reiterates the idea that Sun-beam’s disdain for battle may not be a result of her being a woman but rather of a simple human choice. Face-of-God assures her that he does not want to lead the life of a warrior either. (p.140) If only “the grief of our folk were but healed,” (p.141) he says, he would rather be a farmer.

There are, however, limits on the equality that friendship allows Sun-beam in her relationship with Face-of-God. The more the two of them “fall in love,” the more the balance of power shifts in Face-of-God’s favour. At first, this could be seen simply to reflect Sun-beam’s rejection of a position as ideal courtly lady, a goddess to be worshipped from afar. On first seeing the Sunbeam, Face-of-God considers her a “Goddess . . . not mortal.” (p.39) As Face-of-God gains strength as a warrior, though, their relative powers do not simply even out. Rather, Sun-beam begins to see Face-of-God as her superior, telling him, “O friend, I mock myself thus: that erst thou dreamedst me a God and fearest me, but now thou seemest to me a god and I fear thee.” (p.263) The fact that Sun-beam’s transition from goddess to simply “a young maiden of the kindred” compared to the “great chieftain” Face-of-God (p.261) is a result of romantic love becomes more evident with the loss of her foreseeing power. She tells him, “So it oft befalleth foreseeing women, that the love of a man cloudeth their vision . . .” (p.265) This power has been of so little importance to the story up to this point that it seems to be introduced only to be dismissed, thus moving Morris’s Goths past the need for any special power that can be associated with women. At the same time, the men in the romance retain their traditionally male military and political power throughout the entire narrative.

Ironically, it is the submission of women in individual relationships, their renunciation of power, that helps secure the fellowship on a larger scale. The lessening of Sun-beam's power relative to that of her lover is indicative of what happens to all the active powerful women in *Roots* once the war is over. Despite Face-of-God's insistence that Sun-Beam has "lifted" him up to her level, (p.261) the circumstances of their marriage tell a different story. The marriages of Sun-beam to Face-of-God, and of another woman, the Bride, to Sun-beam's brother Folk-might, return us to the concept of women as property. Because marriage is still an important political tool among the Goths, Sun-beam and the Bride are considered trade items, cementing the peace-time alliance. Iron-Face asks Folk-might, "what gift wilt thou give us for the maiden?" (p.376) Folk-might offers Sun-beam in exchange. The exchange complete, the women must follow their husbands wherever they go, making us wonder why a woman would fight so hard for her home only to leave it. (p.382) Once they arrive at their new homes their domestic role is clear: the Silverdalers' biggest disappointment at the loss of the Bride is that she will bear children for another tribe. (p.382) Even the valiant Bow-may is eventually "domesticated." When she visits Folk-might and the Bride after many years, Folk-might asks her, "art thou wedded Bow-may? shalt thou never bend the bow in battle again?" (p.409) Her answer, "Who knoweth?," suggests that the role of wife and mother is one she would not have chosen for herself. In the end, Bow-may's marriage may be seen as both a sacrifice for the good of the larger fellowship and a symbol of her friendship with Sun-beam and Face-of-God. After all, she continues, "Sun-beam bade me wed him when he pressed hard upon me ... Face-of-god also deemed I should not nay say the man ..." (p.410)

The fact that Bow-may must be coaxed into traditional domestic life may demonstrate Morris's own reluctance to relegate women to a submissive role in their relationships. In *The Roots of the Mountains*, Morris can not yet see the possibility for coexistence between romantic/sexual love and equal fellowship between men and women. Despite the eventual reassertion of natural sex roles, however, Morris's sensitive depiction of friendships among men and women suggests an impulse towards a kind of gender equality that he is simply not yet ready to articulate or accept.

NOTES

- ¹ All *Roots* citations are taken from May Morris, editor, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 1910-15; New York: Russell and Russell, 1966, 24 vols. Vol. XV.
- ² Boos, Florence, 'Morris's German Romances as Social History,' *Victorian Studies*, Spring 1984, 27(3), 321-342.