

The dream, image, vision, wizardry, and erotic in Morris's work

Norman Kelvin

In the *Envoi* to *The Earthly Paradise* Morris describes himself as 'Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time', and

Folks say, 'A wizard to a northern king
At Christmas-tide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow'.

'The Prologue' adds in part

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke ...
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean, ...
While nigh the thronged wharf Geoffrey Chaucer's pen
Moves over bills of lading, – mid such times
Shall dwell the hollow puppets of my rhymes.¹

I shall call the 'dreamer' a creative or imaginative teller of tales, and 'the dream' a persuasion to anticipate pleasure in what follows.

The first of Morris's works to be named such is *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), set in the Peasants Revolt of 1381. Written after Morris had embraced socialism, it is context for memorable words. John Ball, a priest and a leader of the Revolt, preaches under a banner reading 'When Adam Delved and Eve Span/Who was then the gentleman?' The tale also allows Morris, the dreamer, to attribute to John Ball, the words, 'fellowship is heaven, and the lack of fellowship is hell'. And when the Revolt fails, Morris writes, 'But while I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle ... and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name ...'.²

News from Nowhere (1891), also a socialist tale and a dream, shifts time forward to the twenty-first century. Guest, the protagonist, visits an idealised future-England. It is no surprise that some of the buildings are medieval in style,³ but what is most envisioned is revolutionary change. Hardly an aspect of society and human relations has not been radicalised. Money and politics have disappeared; the Houses of Parliament are used to store dung, handicraft products constitute art. 'Force' vehicles and ships have replaced Morris's abhorred 'piston-stroke'. An everyday article such as a tobacco pouch is so decorative as to be a pleasure to the maker and user. Relations between the sexes have been rationalised, and marriage lasts only as long as husband and wife desire it; though remarriage is possible, as Dick and Clara's second marriage illustrates. Most of what Morris advocated in lectures such as 'The Art of the People' (1879), 'How We Live and Might Live' (1884), and 'Useful Work vs. Useless Toil' (1884) has been realised.⁴

The idealised woman of the twenty-first century is Ellen, who is healthy, strong, and cheerful, and as much at home in a hayfield as in an idealised house (which turns out to be Kelmscott Manor). At the Manor, where Guest and Ellen arrive after a trip up the Thames, Ellen touches the wall and cries out, 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it, – as this has done'. And Guest's final words, as he wakes, in the nineteenth century, in his bed at Hammersmith: 'Yes – surely! And if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'.⁵

I submit that neither dream nor vision mean what they do in the fantasy tales of Morris's last years. The dreams *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* are metaphors, embracing the entire texts and delivering socialist messages to the real world; whereas in the fantasy tales dreams and visions are elements *within* the text.

Before discussing the fantasy tales, it should be said that all the terms in my title, with the possible exception of the erotic, are at work in the Icelandic literature and also in the somewhat related *Le Morte d'Arthur*. My paper is not to discover these terms as if they had no origin in Morris's reading, but to see how he uses them in his own tales.

The Story of the Glittering Plain Which Also Has Been Also Called The Land of the Living Men or The Acre of the Undying (1891) is the first of the fantasy tales which do not pretend to deal with the real world. It is apt, here, to quote Fiona MacCarthy, who writes that these stories 'are pervaded by extreme eroticism'.⁶ In *The Glittering Plain* the protagonist, Hallblithe, lives in Cleveland-by-the-Sea and is of the House of the Raven; his betrothed, The Hostage, is of the House of the Rose. Both are kidnapped and separated. In the light of Anna Vaniskaya's persuasive argument that the heroes of *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountain* fight for their community rather than individual glory,⁷ in *The*

Glittering Plain, vaguely medieval English and Norse, Hallblithe's quest to find The Hostage is an individual goal. Dreams and visions move the narrative. In a dream, Hallblithe 'was lying in the House of the Raven and his sisters came to him and said, "Rise up now, Hallblithe!"'. For it is his wedding day and they urge him to claim The Hostage. Later, he dreams or sees a vision of The Hostage standing over him and saying, 'Hallblithe, look on me'. As the dream continues, she says, 'Harken then. I am in evil plight, in the hands of strong-thieves of the sea, nor know I what they will do with me, and I have no will to be shamed; to be sold for a price from one hand to another, yet to be bedded without a price, and to lie besides some foeman of our folk. ... And now must even this image of me sunder from thee. Farewell!'⁸

Hallblithe reaches The Glittering Plain, but his quest to find the Hostage runs into difficulty. The King's daughter has fallen in love with Hallblithe and presents herself to him through images in a book. Calling a servant, she says, 'O maiden, bring me hither the book wherein is the image of my beloved ... that I might fill my heart with the delight thereof'. She then calls for another book, as Morris indulges his love of illustrated manuscripts, and Hallblithe sees an image of himself 'and over against me was the image of mine own beloved, The Hostage of the Rose, as if she were alive'; but the King's daughter says, 'O my beloved, why dost thou delay to come to me ... Oh come to-morrow at the least and latest ... Or else why am I the daughter of the Undying King, the Lord of the Treasure of the Sea?' In a moment of peril, Hallblithe says, aloud, though there was none to hear: 'Now foresooth beginneth the dream which shall last forever. Nowise am I beguiled by it'. Later on, Hallblithe dreams three times in one night of the King's daughter. In an illustrated book, she shows him over against his own image that of The Hostage, and turning the leaves, she again reveals The Hostage, but on the other leaf is Hallblithe in a boat and sailing away. In fact, Hallblithe does build a boat and sails to the Isle of Ransom, where he finds Puny Fox, an old enemy now turned friend; and who says he will serve Hallblithe. There is a hint here that Puny Fox is descended from the dwarfs, though this is not made explicit.⁹

In the hall on the Island, Hallblithe fights with a sea champion who turns out to be Puny Fox, and though Hallblithe is the victor, he announces that he knows that the battle was a sham. Puny Fox, in turn, says he is indebted to Hallblithe. The Chieftain of the Isle invites Hallblithe and Puny Fox to sit beside him at the feast, and after some debate among others as to whether Hallblithe should be slain or honoured, the Chieftain decrees he shall be honoured. The Hostage is then brought in and Hallblithe says, 'Art thou a woman and my speech-friend? For many images have mocked me, and I have been encompassed with lies, and led astray by behests that have not been fulfilled'. She answers, 'Art thou verily Hallblithe? For I also have been encompassed by lies, and beset by images of things unhelpful'. The next day, the lovers depart for Cleveland, and Puny Fox

goes with them. At home Hallblithe and The Hostage are married, Puny Fox renounces his wizardry (at one point he had changed his skin) and 'neither they nor any man of the Ravens came any more to the Glittering Plain, or heard any tidings of the folk that dwelt there'.¹⁰

There are enough allusions to Norse legend, particularly to *Sigurd the Volsung* (1870) to locate both the Glittering Plain and the Isle of Ransom in the North of England. In his own saga, Sigurd,¹¹ before reaching and wooing Brynhilde, encounters 'the glittering heath', where the evil Fafnir guards a hoard of gold, and is slain by Sigurd. (Perhaps the gold causes the heath to glitter. Perhaps, too, the wish for eternal youth, characterising all who seek the Glittering Plain, is, for Morris, equivalent to Fafnir's lust).

In *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, when the lovers and Puny Fox prepare to leave the Isle of Ransom, the Chieftain cuts a strip of turf 'and propped it up with two ancient dwarf-wrought spears'¹² – another image from Sigurd's story. There is also, on the Isle of Ransom, a reference to the Norns. As for the Glittering Plain itself, descriptions of the land echo what Morris saw in Iceland. Morris has conflated early England, its Middle Ages, and Icelandic sagas in order to create the setting for the Glittering Plain, as if he were reluctant to separate genres out of material all of which lies within the compass of Germanic legend.

Dreams and images are both bad and good. Who or what is in control? For Morris, an atheist but a lover of myth, the suspension of disbelief for the sake of aesthetic continuity allows the presence of the supernatural, expressed through dreams, images, visions, and wizardry, in this work and all the other fantasy tales which follow.

The Wood Beyond the World (1894) moves almost entirely through dreams, visions, and 'wisdom' – i.e. wizardry. They shape the narrative. Again, a protagonist will endure for his own sake, not his community's. In a beginning which is almost irrelevant, Boenig, in his Introduction, sees an allusion to Jane Morris, for the story begins by telling of the unhappy marriage of Walter, the protagonist, who lives in Langton on Holm. His father sends Walter's wife back to her family, and a feud between the two families ensues, leading to the death of Walter's father. But the unhappy marriage also sends Walter abroad as representative of his father's merchant business, a detail which tells us that in the vague location of time, we seem to be in the English Middle Ages (though further details will also suggest the Norse period). Standing on the wharf, ready to depart, Walter sees an image of three figures; A Lady, a Maiden, and a dwarf. It is an image, but substantial enough for the three to board their own ship. As we move further into the tale, wizardry; for good and bad, will occur and be so intertwined with the erotic as to make their combination almost another force in shaping the tale. As for community, Langton is Walter's point of departure, but he will never return to it.¹³

He boards his own ship, and, blown off course, the ship's company alight at the Wood Beyond the World. Here we learn that the Lady, whose image Walter has now seen three times, has drawn him through wizardry to replace the King's Son, a lover of whom she has tired. But as soon as Walter and the Maiden meet, they fall in love. She is the 'thrall' of the Lady, and knowing of the Lady's own desire for Walter and hatred of herself, she warns Walter not to disclose their love.

The Lady entices Walter into her bed, while the King's Son plans to seduce the Maiden or if necessary rape her. Walter and the Maiden eventually escape, in a manner combining wizardry and sexuality. The Maiden sends the Dwarf to tell the Lady that she has invited Walter to her own bed. At the same time, she invites the King's Son to come to her. When he arrives she subdues him with a sleeping potion, then lies down on the bed to leave the impression of her body. The Lady is now intent on killing Walter, but the Maiden is also learned in wizardry and casts Walter's shape over the sleeping King's Son. The Lady enters the Maiden's chamber and knifes the sleeper, then kills herself out of grief for the supposed death of Walter.

Walter and the Maiden escape. Then follows their encounter with the wild men known as Bears, who worship a woman as a deity, the goddess re-embodiment of herself in a succession of humans, the Lady having been the most recent. The Maiden tells the Bears that the Lady is dead; and by causing wilted flowers to bloom and bringing much needed rain, convinces them that she is the new embodiment of the goddess.

Walter and the Maiden travel and reach Stark-Well, where Walter is chosen king and raises the Maiden to be his queen. Thus Walter, who was a merchant in Langton, has in his new city been elevated to monarchy. Stark-Well is a medieval Christian city, in whose church Walter's kingship is consecrated and the couple are married. The Maiden, as she predicted, loses her wizardry as she loses her virginity. This negative bond between sexuality and wizardry casts the latter as protection of the first, all in contrast to The Lady's seeking sexual gratification through evil wizardry; and the contradiction demonstrates the ambivalent wizardry Morris found in Norse sagas and *Le Morte d'Arthur*. At *The Wood's* conclusion, we are told that Walter and his queen provide Stark-Well with many generations of rulers, emphasising again the irrelevancy of Langton. It is also worth noting that the 'bears' also provide continuity with Norse myth, in which the bear signifies health and strength.

Chronologically, *The Well at the World's End* (1896) is the next of Morris's fantasy tales. Ralph of Upmeads, the hero, echoes Arthur's knights when he makes it clear that seeking adventure is the serious business of life. When he meets Ursula, who will be his second love, he says, 'I am a knight adventurous; I have nought to do save to seek adventures. Why should I not go with thee [to seek the Well at the World's End]?'¹⁴ The tale divides roughly into two parts, the first domin-

ated by the love between Ralph and the Lady of Abundance, who tells him of her upbringing and her 'Teacher of Lore' but who is killed by the Knight of the Sun. The second part embraces the love of Ralph and Ursula, their reaching the Well, their marriage, their return to Upmeads, and Ralph's anointment as King. Ralph's and Ursula's incredibly long and healthy life after drinking the waters of the Well, reminds one of King Arthur, transported by water to Avalon after he was allegedly slain by Sir Mordred.

Dreams and wizardry are present through the tale. In Ralph's first dream, he was fishing at Upmeads, and he caught many fish, 'but after awhile whatsoever he caught was but of gilded paper stuffed with wool, and at last the water itself was gone'. The meaning possibly is that Ralph will obtain either illusions or transient success, perhaps his love for the Lady of Abundance, who is fated to die. Not only can she not escape death despite her sorcery, but in addition while she still lives, she is a different person to different people. One of the men of the Burgh complains they cannot crush the Men of the Dry Tree, their enemy, because 'sorcery goes with them, and the wiles of one who is their Queen'.¹⁵

The book as a source of information and imagery appears in the Castle of Abundance. Ralph 'read again in the book that night, till he had gotten the whole tale into his head, and he specially noted ... that it told not whence that Lady came, nor aught else save that she was in the wood by herself, and was found therein by the King's son'. Talking to the Lady about a dream he has had, Ralph says, 'I woke up happily ... for me-dreamed that my gossip [Katherine] came to me and kissed me kindly; and she is a fair woman, but not a young woman'. In the woods Ralph, the Lady of Abundance, and The Knight of the Sun are momentarily together, and the Knight invites Ralph to accompany the Lady and himself to his castle, where he plans to kill Ralph. The dream Ralph has had may signify that Dame Katherine is warning and protecting Ralph, for it was she who gave Ralph the beads required to seek the Well.¹⁶

As for sorcery, the Lady, as Ralph watches, makes a circle of her fingers, 'and she spake something therewith in a low voice'. Later, she speaks of the House of the Sorceress, where she was raised, and where, like Birdalone to come after her, she had a kind helper, whom she calls 'the Teacher of Lore'. She says to Ralph, 'in those days I learned yet more wisdom of the Teacher of Lore, and amidst that wisdom was much of that which ye call sorcery: as the foreseeing of things to come, and the sending of dreams of visions'. She asks Ralph does he shrink from a sorceress who has done good deeds.¹⁷

Ralph and the Lady are wedded, but the Knight of the Sun kills her, and Ralph hears her say, 'I am come to bid thee farewell ...'. And as the dream continues, the voice and image change to that of Ursula, who call herself Dorothea, and says 'I am a sending of the woman whom thou hast loved, and I should not have been here save she had sent me ... and it is good that thou shouldst go seek the Well at

the World's End not all alone ... I hight Dorothea'. Since 'Dorothy' means 'gift of God', this misnaming of herself may signify that Ursula will be a treasure in Ralph's life.¹⁸

But Ursula will become a captive 'thrall' of the evil Lord of Utterbol, and Ralph at that time will have a vision, 'and it seemed to him that he could behold her through the darkness of night ... and she bewailing her captivity and the long tarrying of the deliverer as she went to and fro in a great chamber builded of marble'. Ralph 'deemed this it be a vision of what then was, rather than a memory of what had been; and it was sweet to his very soul'.¹⁹ Finally, through the actions of the Queen of Utterbol and her thrall-servant Agatha, Ursula escapes and is united with Ralph.

Then, after more adventures, the couple come upon the Sage of Swevenham, who, like the Lady of Abundance, has been to the Well and will help Ralph and Ursula reach it. He shows them a book and says 'this book was mine heritage at Swevenham or ever I became wise, and it came from my father's grandsire', but it was not until he reached manhood that he 'turned to it, and read it, and became wise ... Now herein ... is written of that which ye desire to know, and I will read the same to you and expound it'.²⁰ Ursula and Ralph eventually reach the Well, drink its waters, become perfect in body, and are destined for long life.

Through hazards again, they make their way back to Upmeads, to find it under attack. Ralph rescues the kingdom and his father turns the kingship over to him, but before doing so there is a curious return to early England. An old man, Giles, says, 'there is a woman who dwells alone; not very old, for oft, when she was young, would she foretell things to come to me, and ever it fell out according to her prophecy'. She urges the old man to seek Ralph, 'who is well-beloved of Bear-father'.²¹ This reference to the Bear-father, repeating one near the tale's beginning is curious. It may be a reference to the Bearings, or members of The House of the Bear, who ally themselves with Thiodolf and the Wolfings in the war between the Goths and the Romans, in the tale named *The House of the Wolfings* (1888),²² and thus a reluctance on Morris's part to divide the Middle Ages in England from what he regards as the nation's ancient culture. In any interpretation, Morris is taking advantage of the unspecified historical date of the *Well* to anchor his characters in what he regards as their ancestors' ancient tribal beginnings.

Giles says, 'they are naming the ancient father of our race; and as he spoke, there was a chant, sung by many folk: "Smite aside the axe, O Bear-father"'. Ralph is made captain of the host, assembled to defeat Upmeads' enemies, his father has already turned the kingship over to Ralph, and Ursula and Ralph 'see four generations of her children wax up, and Ralph and Ursula die on the same day'.²³

What, then, is to be said about the dream and its associated terms in the *Well at the World's End*? The dreams serve two purposes: to move Ralph toward the Well,

and to transfer his love from the Lady of Abundance to Ursula. It would perhaps be inaccurate to speak of the magic power of the Well as the operation of sorcery, but magic has to be seen as the plausible accompaniment of wizardry. The varied wizardry the Lady learned in the Dale of Lore was a power throughout her life, but not strong enough to protect her from the death which substitutes Ursula for herself in the quest for the Well. Her mortality may be also regarded as a touch of realism and an anticipation, as such, of a realism of a different nature which will be part of the mix in the next tale.

The Water of the Wondrous Isles (1897) is the most complex, as well as the most clearly plotted of Morris's late fantasy tales. At first the story seems a huge contest between evil and good sorcery, with little else to note, but this is an over simplification. Of equal interest is the way Morris weaves magic of various kinds with realism, the latter often subtle. The protagonist, Birdalone, is placed in a context in which most of these factors operate. As a young child, stolen from her mother by a witch, she grows up in an atmosphere in which the complexities begin to appear. Although a witch is a witch, so to speak, she allows Birdalone to roam the woods, where all wildlife is her friend, and where she learns to fish and hunt (using bow and arrow) to bring home food. Yet, the witch is evil, and the matter of supernatural forces, for good or bad, has been introduced. When Birdalone is seventeen, she meets Habundia, who is the embodiment of good (and a successor to the Lady of Abundance's Teacher of Lore). The eventual question will be, are the forces of evil and good equal in power? Late in the tale, when Arthur asks Habundia whether she is a sorceress, she says, 'Something more than a sorceress'.²⁴ In fact she represents the Faery realm. Her first gift to Birdalone is to take on herself Birdalone's physical identity: to be a mirror for her and make her conscious of her beauty. She then helps her escape on the witch's 'Sending Boat', and at the same time, a kind of eroticism is introduced, for Birdalone has been swimming and has removed her clothes, enabling the ever-watchful witch to do away with them. For the next three days Birdalone will be naked.

Her initial travels are all within a great lake, and the 'Sending Boat', having a will of its own, first lands her, naked as she is, on the 'Isle of Increase Unsought', whose Queen, a sister of the witch with whom Birdalone has lived, keeps three beautiful young women, Viradis, Aurea, and Atra in captivity. Birdalone is finally clothed by the three captives and sent by them to find the three knights who are their lovers; tell the knights where they are; and what their plight is. Birdalone, traveling always by the 'Sending Boat', makes several more landings on isles where the unnatural rules; and finally arrives at the Castle of the Quest, which is on the mainland. Here she meets the three knights: Baudoin, Hugh, and Arthur. She tells them about their beloveds; and when they leave to rescue them, promises to wait within the Castle. However, she becomes restless, and in exploring the strange land about the Castle becomes the prey of the evil Red Knight, who

would make her his 'bed-thrall' and presumes she has been the whore of the three knights. But the knights, having rescued their beloveds, return in time to save Birdalone, killing the Red Knight, though Baudoin dies in the battle. The erotic had appeared again when the Queen seduced a reluctant Arthur while the knights were on the Isle, and before they escaped with the three captives.

When their fellowship is assembled, Morris begins a gradual, naturalistic depiction of Arthur and Birdalone falling in love. He begins with Birdalone, and tells us, 'Yet, despite of all, trouble and care was on Birdalone's soul betwixt the joy of loving and being beloved, and the pain of fear of robbing a friend of her love. For Atra's face, which she might not hate, and scarce might love, was a threat to her day by day'.²⁵

What is striking is that wizardry is not needed to aid their love to develop. The love is a reenactment of Morris's love-trio, this time between two women and a man, for Atra will be supplanted. The love between Birdalone and Arthur is also a fulcrum on which the plot turns. Overwhelmed by the pain she causes Atra and by the guilt she feels for Baudoin's death, a result of her wandering from the Castle and the fight to rescue her which ensued, Birdalone departs, and she will trace a path by land which will lead her to Utterhay, where she was born. One stop in her travels is in the City of Five Crafts, where, a skilled needlewoman, she is admitted into an appropriate guild, allowing Morris to express his favourable view of the Medieval guild system, while at the same time continue to develop the plot; for in the guild Birdalone is reunited with her mother Audrey, another fine needlewoman.

But to focus on the mother-child relationship would divert Morris from his purpose, and Audrey is eliminated by a sickness which sweeps through the town. Now Morris pursues his main goal, the reunion of Birdalone and Arthur and the restoration of the fellowship. For these tasks, Habundia will be called upon. Remembering that the entire tale is a war between supernatural forces of good and evil, with the exception of Birdalone and Arthur's love, it is noteworthy that Morris re-introduces wizardry in order to overcome the difficulties which the reunions impose. Habundia's first accomplishment is joining the half-mad Arthur with Birdalone, and Morris shows Habundia achieving this with psychological realism. It would be too much for Arthur to be immediately re-united with Birdalone, so Habundia devises a step-by-step procedure, first restoring Arthur to his senses, then leading him to the House in the Woods, where Birdalone is waiting. Habundia then brings Aurea, Viridis, Atra, and Hugh into the company of the two lovers, and Morris, with his eye on the restoring of the fellowship, uses language which in tone and excitement borders on anxiety.

But the reunions are accomplished, and when Birdalone, for the sake of being near Habundia, chooses Utterhay for the fellowship's home, Hugh, now married to Viridiris, and the father of two daughters, brings the children from the Green

Mountain to where his wife and the others are assembled. Then Morris ties up loose ends. Atra becomes a devotee of Habundia, visiting her often and learning from her the wisdom of the earth, and Aurea marries Robert Gerardson, first met in the City of Five Crafts; and to the extent that it possible for a Faery to join a human fellowship, Habundia does so. She makes an annual visit from Birdalone a condition for bringing the fellowship together, and develops a friendship with Atra, compensating for her loss of Arthur.

As for dreams, images, and shape-changing, they exist throughout the tale. After leaving the Castle, Birdalone dreams that 'she was alone in the Castle of the Quest, and that her old mistress came to her from out of the Sending Boat to fetch her away, and brought her aboard, and stripped her of her rich garments . . . and she thought that she knew that her friends were all dead and gone, and she had none to pity and defend her. Then somehow were they two, the witch and she, amidst the Isle of Nothing, and the Witch drew close anigh her, and was just going to whisper something of measureless horror, when she awoke'. There is also Arthur's dream or vision. He says to Habundia, when they have first met, 'First I saw the shape of her my soul desireth, and wept and lamented me, and another image blamed me and threatened me'. Atra, too, has a vision of a woman who was Habundia. As for shape-changers, both the Witch and Habundia are capable of it. The tale touches gingerly on a war between two supernatural forces; Evil, and the power of Good, especially when it locates itself in love, for in the 'company of friends . . . love never ends'.²⁶

The dominant power in *The Sundering Flood* (1898) is that of the dwarfs, who, as are many in Icelandic literature, contrast with the evil dwarf in *The Wood Beyond the World*. *The Sundering Flood* is a *bildungsroman*, with the dwarfs exerting a strong influence on the developing lives of the protagonists, Osberne and Elfhild, whom we meet when they are nearing thirteen. Osberne, and his farm, Wethermel, lie on the east bank of the Sundering Flood, a river which cannot be crossed, and Elfhild lives with aged relatives on the west. Thus, Osberne and Elfhild are unable to physically meet, but where the river is narrow they converse across the Flood, and their talk, becoming more meaningful as they grow older, quickly develops into love.

Meanwhile, the dwarfs have been busy on their behalf. Steelhead, a dwarf who has taken ordinary human form, has endowed Osberne with strength beyond what is normal for a boy of his age; has given him a knife; a bow with arrows which never miss their mark; and a mighty sword, Boardcleaver. The first use for the knife is the slaying of three wolves who have afflicted the sheep of Wethermel, and eventually Boardcleaver will enable Osberne to slay Hardcastle, an intruder who intends to make Wethermel his own. The dwarfs have also given Elfhild a pipe which gathers her sheep when she plays it.²⁷

Eastcheaping, the town at the head of the dale in which Wethermel is located,

is eventually at war with the Baron of Deepdale. Osberne and his neighbors are recruited by Sir Medard, the knight who will lead the battle. Osberne distinguishes himself in combat, and even kidnaps the Baron of Deepdale, with the help of 'Stephen the Eater', a hired man at Wethermel, who is again endowed with 'wisdom'. Sir Medard would like to make Osberne a knight, but he declines, saying 'such had been no wont of his fathers before him; and [I] looked never to go very far from the Dale and for no long while. "And even if I may not live there ... I look to die there"'.²⁸

While Osberne was at war, Elfhild had come to the attention of one of the Red Skinners, the worst thieves in the area, and they will eventually carry her off to be sold into slavery. When Osberne hears of the one who has been in Elfhild's home, he is enraged, exclaiming, 'I would I had been there to cleave his skull! Many a better man have I slain for less cause'.²⁹ But he is also prepared for what lies ahead, which is service to Sir Godrick, a knight whom he meets in Sir Medard's castle. His adventures in Sir Godrick's service are many, culminating in a battle for the City of the Sundering Flood. Sir Godrick, who has made Osberne a captain, and allied himself within the City with the Lesser Crafts, a move Morris would favour, is victorious. He deposes the King who had ruled the City, Godrick himself is elected Burgrave, and will govern along with the Council. All this allows Morris to express his pleasure in the Middle Ages and the lesser crafts, and add a hint of socialism to the tale.

Osberne and Elfhild are at last re-united, the latter having been sustained through her perils by her 'carline', an old woman who has much wisdom. At the conclusion of the tale, Elfhild discovers that her pipe has lost its power to gather sheep, and Broadcleaver, like Excalibur, is thrown into the water by Osberne, where it is drawn to the dwarfs' cave from which it came. It would seem that human love, once achieved, dispenses with need for non-human aid. On a related note, when Sir Godrick, still at war, passes near Osberne, who offers to join him, he discourages the offer. He reminds Osberne of the love he has achieved, and says 'I have seen thee in a dream of the night and in a dream of the day living at Wethermel and dying on the field near the City of the Sundering Flood'.³⁰

Of interest is how much has been owed to the Church. At the very beginning, the narrator, somewhat ambiguously, says that 'I, who gathered this tale, dwell in the House of the Black Canons'. And in addition to the Arthurian hermits, who are learned in 'leechcraft' (one heals a wounded Osberne), people in holy orders enable Elfhild to overcome obstacles on her way to Wethermel and the waiting Osberne. Elfhild, speaking to a sub-prior on her perilous final journey, says of her companion, 'And this good dame here, who is my very fostermother, and is somewhat wise, though I would hope not more than Holy Church alloweth, has always bidden me to hope to see my champion again'.³¹ Does Morris feel a need to balance the powers of the dwarfs and of Elfhild's fostermother with the powers

of Church in medieval history and literature?

It would be unprofitable to speculate whether the dying Morris, who was forced by ill health to dictate the last lines of the tale to Sidney Cockerell, was, though an atheist, turning his thoughts to religion. It is probably a better conjecture that having called on wizardry throughout the tales written during the last years of his life, Morris was negotiating a truce between Norse sagas and the one main, non-literary institution in medieval English history, the Church.

NOTES

1. *The Earthly Paradise*. 4 vols, London: Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1905, Vol. I, p. 3.
2. *A Dream of John Ball*, in May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 24 Vols, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910–1915, Vol. XVI, pp. 228, 230, 231. (Afterwards *CW*)
3. *News from Nowhere*, *CW*, Vol. XVI, p. 13.
4. 'The Art of the People', *CW*, Vol. XXII, pp. 28–50; 'How we live and how we might live (1884), 'Useful work versus useless toil' (1884), *CW*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 3–26, 98–120.
5. *News from Nowhere*, *CW*, Vol. XVI, pp. 201–202, p. 211.
6. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris. A life for our time*, London, Faber & Faber, p. 634. (Afterwards MacCarthy).
7. Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History, and Propaganda, 1880–1914*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 61 and *passim*.
8. *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, London: Reeves & Turner, 1891, p. 14, pp. 23–25. (Afterwards *Glittering Plain*)
9. *Glittering Plain*, pp. 83, 84, 104–105, 123–124.
10. *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Nibelungs*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922, pp. 63–64.
11. *Glittering Plain*, pp. 160, 172.
12. *Glittering Plain*, p. 165.
13. Robert Boenig, ed, *The Wood Beyond the World*, New York: Broadview, 2012, Introduction, p. 11; p. 50.
14. *The Well at the World's End*. London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903. 2 vols; Vol. I, p. 60. (Afterwards *The Well*)
15. *The Well*, Vol. I, p. 36; p. 90.
16. *The Well* Vol. I, p. 129; p. 144.
17. *The Well* Vol. I, p. 149; p. 210.
18. *The Well* Vol. I, pp. 248–249.

19. *The Well*, Vol. I, pp. 293–294. The recurrence of women in captivity, especially as ‘bed thralls’, as Ursula is in peril of becoming, is a theme in Morris’s late romances which could be pursued but is not relevant to my purposes here, as similarly could be Fiona MacCarthy’s accurate discussion of armed women (MacCarthy, p. 636).
20. *The Well*, Vol. II, p. 33.
21. *The Well*, Vol. II, p. 225.
22. *The House of the Wolfings*, Newcastle: North Hollywood, 1978, 200 pp. (Afterwards *Wolfings*)
23. *The Well*, Vol. II, p. 233; p. 279.
24. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. 2 vols. London: Longmans, Green & Co., Pocket edition. 1914, Vol. II, p. 193. (Afterwards *Wondrous Isles*)
25. *Wondrous Isles*, Vol. II, p. 67.
26. *Wondrous Isles*, Vol. I, p. 187; Vol. II, p. 197; Vol. II, p. 247.
27. This is not first time dwarfs and their magic are helpful in Morris’s tales. Their handiwork is also central to *The House of the Wolfings*. The goddess Wood Sun gives Thiodolf, the warleader, a hauberk made by a dwarf. It will protect his life in battle. The hauberk is, abstractly, a ‘good’, even though Thiodolf eventually casts it off, for it separates him from the community he is fighting to protect from the Romans. An ancient man has said, ‘this mail is for the rescue of a man and the ruin of a folk’. (Richard Mathews, Introduction, *Wolfings*, p. 105)
28. *The Sundering Flood*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 2 vols, 1914; Vol. I, p. 129. (Afterwards *Sundering Flood*)
29. *Sundering Flood*, Vol. I, p. 142.
30. *Sundering Flood*, Vol. II, p. 156.
31. *Sundering Flood*, Vol. I, p. 2; Vol. II, p. 146.