"But he were king, or kinges eyr...": Morris's re-telling of *Havelok*

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According to David Latham and Sheila Latham's recent *Annotated Bibliography of William Morris*, there has been no substantial study of *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*. Morris printed the story in a handsome Kelmscott Press edition in 1895, to follow his first wholly heterocosmic fiction, *The Wood Beyond the World*. Apart from the *Collected Works* text, there is only one later edition, published in 1977 with an interesting introduction by Richard Matthews.

Three striking aspects of its thirteenth-century "source" ought to make us expect something special of Morris' re-telling. First, it is emphatically English, from the Danelaw, in language as unfrenchified as even Morris could have wished. Second, it juxtaposes, with great gusto, the harsh life of the labouring poor and the power-drives of the court, yet it is the hero's beauty and prowess that creates the happy ending; Morris was always attracted by tales in which the central character's beauty and luck were decisive. Third, it assumes the absolute priority of royal blood: specific "noble" virtues of temperament can only be found in royalty. Morris was so little reverent of the aristocracy of his own or any period that such naive royalism could not but be a challenge to him. Naturally, in a useful sense of that word, he pits the second aspect against the third – and it wins!

*Havelok* tells an ironic story of the defeat of usurpers who oppress children. Dying, the kings of England and Denmark both leave a single child; the first is an infant queen entrusted to a guardian and the other, a boy king entrusted to a regent, but both lords are corrupted by power. The poem begins with the heroic English king, Athelwold, on his deathbed. He is concerned that his death will leave Goldboru, his infant daughter, unprotected in a turbulent court:

That was so yung that sho ne couthe
Gon on fote, ne speke wit mouthe.¹

Earl Godriche swears a sacramental oath at Athelwold's deathbed that as regent he will both administer the country and guard the girl,

Til that she were tuelf winter hold,
And of speche were bold;
And that she couthe of curtesye
Gon, and spoken of luee-drurye... (192–196)
Then he will marry her to “The beste, the fayrest, the strangest ok” in England, and hand over rule of the country to her; since “strangest ok” means strongest oak, this metaphor may have been the stimulus to Morris’ invention of the kingdom of Oakenrealm. Later Godriche increases the age of betrothal to twenty, secludes her, and plots to bypass her and become king.

The poem’s hero is a small boy when his royal father, Birkabeyn of Denmark, dies and Godard becomes regent: when he sees his sisters’ throats pitilessly slashed, he is articulate enough to beg the murderer to spare him. When they see from his royal radiance that the boy is king, the fisherfolk Grim and Leue spare his life and sail off to England to take him out of Godard’s reach, thereby founding Grimsby and forwarding the plot. Havelok knows of his royal lineage throughout; it does not save him from going hungry and almost naked, but it also does not hamper him in selling fish, or tussling for a job as a cook’s porter and labouring wholeheartedly when he gets it. He is a strapping lad, but his royalty comes out in his lovely generosity of temperament:

Of alle men was he mest meke,
Laughwinde ay, and blith of speke;
Euer he were glad and blithe... (945–947)

Children adore him, which is always a good sign, especially in very large, very strong people. He wins any physical contest, but no one minds losing to so lovable a fellow:

Als he was strong, so was he softe;
They a man him misdede ofte
Neuere more he him misdede
Ne hand on him with eyuele leyde. (991–994)

This “softe” trait may be what attracted Morris to his story.

He also looks beautiful, once his master buys him new clothes, and his immense strength wins him instant fame in a stone-hurling contest. Earl Godriche realises he is the perfect husband for Goldboru: he fits her father’s deathbed specifications, yet no wife of a cook’s thrall could have a claim to the English throne. He forces the marriage, although Goldboru indignantly swears,

That hire sholde noman wedde
But he were king, or kinges eyr,
Were he neuer man so fayr. (1114–1116)

It seems strange, given this vow, that when the earl coerces her she simply gives in and “thouthe it was godes wille”! But she is right: after their wedding, she sees unquestionable proof of her husband’s royalty and prompts him to claim the Danish throne. The rest of the story alternates victories over brutal thieves with the fawning of royalists and vicious punishments for evil-doers.
Morris obviously enjoyed the thirteenth-century poem; he equally obviously felt free to alter whatever did not suit him. May Morris recalls her father’s advice on re-telling an established story: “Read it through... then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself.” In re-telling Havelok he entirely removes both the extreme pietyism of the poem’s virtuous characters – and its narrator – and the two miraculous proofs of Havelok’s royal blood. The birthmark is no great loss, but there is a splendid absurdity about Havelok’s royal radiance that must have been difficult to resist. Grim’s wife Leue realises that the boy is royal, and therefore she should not kill him, because

She saw there-inne a lith ful shir,
Also brith as it were day,
About the knaue ther he lay.
Of his mouth it stood a stem,
Als it were a sunnebem. (588–592)

Thriftily, the narrator uses exactly the same device to convince Queen Goldboru (helped by explications from an angel in a dream) of her husband’s royalty, and later to inspire Earl Ubbe to claim the Danish throne for him.

Along with their appalling religious penances, Morris removes all reference to the very rough justice dispensed by the two widower kings. Also excised are all other atrocities, whether perpetrated by villains (like the loathsome butchering of Havelok’s sisters by Marshal Godard, the wicked regent) or against villains in the name of justice (as with the flaying and hanging of Godard).

Havelok is a violent story in other ways. The hero’s arrival in Denmark is commemorated by a fight in which he defeats sixty-one thieves – with very little help. He sustains seven heroic wounds, but they don’t slow him down. On the occasions when he doesn’t prove his title by force, his loyal subjects respond to his body’s proofs of royal descent with appalling eagerness. The formidable Earl Ubbe’s response to the sleeping body of his rightful king is the most servile:

His fote he kisten an hundred sithes,
The tos, the nayles, and the lithes,
So that he bign to wakne... (2162–2164)

In Morris, the two kingdoms fall to Christopher and Goldilind with minimal – but memorable – violence. Since the wrongfully outlawed Jack of the Tofts is the man who discovers Christopher’s claim, and he and similar “wolf-heads” eagerly take the lead in proclaiming, supporting and advising the young monarch, their march through Oakenrealm resembles the Peasants’ Revolt rather than a royal pretender’s campaign. Christopher’s heavy swordblows make their contribution at times, but there is no major slaughter. The regent is murdered offstage by his own hired assassin Simon, who had narrowly failed to kill the innocent lad Christopher the previous year. Simon, aggrieved at the contemptuous reward offered for his treachery, tries to stab Christopher again, and is slain with a single punch by the righteously wrathful (and unarmed) young king. As to Earl Geoffrey, he has to resign the crown of Meadham to Goldilind, but then makes an excellent and repentant viceroy.

It is not obvious why Havelok begins with Goldboru; as the title suggests, her only
contribution to the poem’s action is being married to Havelok. As his title suggests, Morris begins his story with Christopher, but Goldilind has a much larger and more intriguing role than Goldboru. The vow about Goldilind’s marriage specifies that she be eighteen years old. Interestingly, she is twelve, not a baby girl, when her father dies and Earl Geoffrey becomes regent. This makes it impossible that she could have been brought up ignorant of her royal lineage and queenship. Her adolescence also implies the jealous sadism of her confinement and hypocritical chastisement by Dame Elinor; as always in Morris, her evil is less that she attempts to break a royal spirit than that she seeks to maim a healthy, sexually self-aware young woman. In her fine first confrontation with her guardian, Earl Geoffrey, Goldilind also reveals indignantly that her priestly confessor has been putting sexual pressure on her.

Morris’ Christopher is less indigent and less threatened than Havelok. He is also removed from the court at birth, so that he has no memory of his infant kingship. Morris puts the question of succession into a healthy non-royalist perspective by the lovely comment, applicable to any newborn child, “though he were but a babe, yea, and who had but just now been a king lying in his mother’s womb”. (134) That he is brought up in the depths of a country where “depths” means deep woods is both consistent with the obscurity theme and crucial to Morris’ view of individual and social development. The woodland after which Oakenrealm is named and which begins the tale is as decisive a social value, though not as recognisable a character, as the forests of Tolkien’s Middle-earth. Morris was, of course, as far before his time in ecological as in social morality, and the two ethics are one throughout this story. The Marshal’s court may pretend the boy is merely “some by·blow of the late King”, but his banishment makes him a natural “King Christopher”, taught by both woodland and peasant experience, as if there were,

tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.  
(As You Like It, II,i, 16-17)

Oakenrealm is not “wild nature”: in Morris city and country alike are shaped by human experience and labour. Even where the lovers meet, where the story is farthest from society, Christopher is tending cattle, not exploring rain-forest. Still, his natural magnanimity is celebrated with splendid alliteration:

He was such a youngling as most might have been in the world, had not man’s malice been, and the mischief of grudging and the marring of grasping. (147)

Though he is, like Havelok, a “gentle giant”, full of geniality and impulsive courage and affection, Christopher is also both acute and sensitive, with a true royalty of nature. He is a grown youth, a simple country forester, when the usurping Marshal Rolf, provoked by a dream, plots his death, choosing him to “guide” a cold, sardonic killer into outlaw country where a disappearance will raise few eyebrows. The big lad is wary, but no match for the suddenness of the professional assassin, and receives a serious knife wound. However, Rolf would not have been pleased to learn that Christopher’s recuperation cements his friendship with the outlaw family of Jack of the Tofts, a patriarchal rebel analogous to Grim, though with a far greater influence on the story. Even more significantly, it takes him into the remote woodlands where Goldilind meets him and turns his fortune around. Oft evil will shall evil mar.
That Middle-earth proverb is borne out by the forced marriage or Queen-Churl element of the romance. Christopher's convalescence is so deep in the greenwood of Oakenrealm as to be near the unmarked boundary with Meadham. Similarly, Goldilind has been hidden away in such remote confinement at Greenharbour Castle as to be closer to Oakenrealm's borders than to any Meadham town. When, in misery and indignant desperation, she steals a horse and rides off at a venture, the lovers' fateful meeting gratifies rather than surprises. It seems inevitable, which strengthens dramatic irony and is appropriate to an old tale.

Some critics, even the excellent Carole Silver, have mistaken Morris' narrative for the Havelok poet's: she says the book,

explores the adventures of the two figures named in its title as they strive to regain their rightful inheritances and to redeem and unite their lands.¹

Morris is concerned with neither the inheritance nor the uniting of kingdoms. Jack of the Tofts only proclaims Christopher rightful King, to the latter's astonishment, in chapter XXVI, well over halfway through the story, and he is crowned in XXXVI. Only 36 of the 128 pages in the Collected Works text deal with such striving, and it relates only to Oakenrealm; Goldilind's kingdom of Meadham is not striven for, and the two kingdoms are never united. Morris has re-constructed Havelok as a love-story — also a major component of the "striving" chapters — and royalty often hinders it.

The Queen-Churl marriage, merely a turning-point of the action in Havelok, Morris develops into a rich and delightfully strange series of love-conversations with implications critical of the power-hungry, and no Havelok counterparts. In the brief courtship's touching mixture of response and distance, narration, action and — above all — diction signal that one young lover will not for long pretend she is free to choose. Though the young queen, fleeing from a prison regime that enforced shameful mortification of flesh and spirit, recognizes in the churl untrammelled "natural" life and integrity, she is "naturally" frightened by a strange, huge young male. She answers his shy "May I speak with thee, maiden?" with, "Oh I beseech thee, bring me not back to Greenharbour!" (177) He assures her she has nothing to fear from him, and adds admiringly that he was fearful at meeting so beautiful a creature in the woods, since "some might deem that the Devil harb might here more than in other places". Goldilind is an innocent escapee, not a succubus, so the audience may reflect that the devil excels in courts and prisons rather than the wildwood. Still, innocent heroes have to learn.

With sincere, cumbrous gallantry, he tells her he had thought her,

"a wood-wight, or some one of the She-Gods of the Gentiles come back hither ... and ... yet so it is, that even now I fear thee somewhat. Yet I pray thee to be not wroth if I ask thee whether I may do aught for thy need."

"Forsooth, my need is simple, for I am hungry." (178)

The simplicity of her reply not only shames Christopher but also subverts the Queen-Churl pattern. She continues to speak directly until he flatters her again, then, after a silence, she replies, "Thou has been kind to us, wouldst thou tell us thy name?" He
recognises the royal plural and distanced tone, and immediately changes his form of address from “dear maiden” to “Lady”.

The conversation does not remain prickly, though she decides not to give her name. When he talks of friends, she summarises her past with some poignancy:

“I am a poor prisoner, and much have I been grieved and torment, so that my body hath been a thing whereby I might suffer anguish. Something else I am, but I may not tell thee what as yet.” (180)

The “something else” gives him another opportunity for erotic compliment, and again, after a silence, she carefully distances the dialogue: “If thou wouldst have us come to the house, thou shalt lead us thither now.” However, she can’t resist his piteous look when she begins to put on her shoes, so she walks barefoot, knowing that he, leading her horse, is admiring her bare feet.

The tender comedy of her responses intensifies the reader’s awareness of her difficulty. Christopher can simply be in love, certain that she is from now a part of his life, but she has to force herself to warn him off: “A part of thy life, how can that be?” Her carefully structured speech again avoids any overt statement of her rank, for which she has at least two motives: caution because of her enemies, in the Earl’s employ and elsewhere, and the desire not to frighten off a lovely young man:

“For if I become the poor captive again, how canst thou get to me, thou who art thyself a castaway, as thou hast told me? Yea, but even so, I shall be too low for thee to come down to me. And if I become what I should be, then must I tell thee that I shall be too high for thee to climb up to me; so that in one way or other, we shall be sundered, who have but met for an hour or two.” (182) [My italics]

Aware of the ironies of her situation and its grammatical emblems as Christopher cannot be, she has crowded into three sentences seven thee-thou-thy words and ten I-my words, only to end with a we that is a touching anomaly.

Christopher’s reply is direct, both in its amorousness and its innocent fourfold re-naturalising of the first person plural:

“Yea, for an hour or two; why then do we tarry and linger, and say what we have no will to say, and refrain from what our hearts bid us?” (182–3)

Queenship has meant only isolation, misery and humiliation, in all the years of Goldilind’s adolescence. Now, in the secluded cottage in Littledale, where nobody has to be important or aristocratic, and beneath the tapestry that depicts Adam and Eve in Eden, she is suddenly in love. This new Adam is about to embrace her, and she to step into his embrace – and then the moment is broken by Meadham warriors and violence.

The fight is brief, but fierce and convincing, especially Christopher’s stoically monosyllabic courage: “Now wilt thou take my life, but I shall yet slay one or two before I die.” (184) Knowing she has no actual authority and may well be laughed at, Goldilind is equally resolute in adopting the style of conscious royalty to save lives, especially Christopher’s:

“Do thou stand aside and let us speak that which is needful... Now it is our pleasure that ye lead us back to Greenharbour; but as for this youth, that ye do him no hurt, but let him go free...” (183)
In fact she cannot arrange for Christopher to go free. Still, she does what she can, fearlessly and well. She has lost her idyll, but not her spirit.

But to statesmen neither idylls nor spirit are impressive. Back at Greenharbour Earl Geoffrey's subtle and ruthless logic converts, or rather travesties, the idyll into instant matrimony. What had been about to be Goldilind's own free acceptance of the right true end of love is now degraded, and degrading. Her body had been entrusted with a prior duty, as her father's heir and Queen of Meadham, that the marriage defrauds. In this chilling royal perspective, the forced marriage changes the embrace of the man she loves, her lawful husband, into a more obscene version of prison. Is the body of a Queen to be deflowered by a Churl? The outward affront Goldboru resents is, for Goldilind, an inward agony.

There are complexities of vision and motivation in Earl Geoffrey too. When Christopher objects, “but overwonderful it is that a great lady should be wedded to a gangrel churl” (196), the Earl wryly quotes (or makes up) a wise old saw, “Many a ferly fares to the fair-eyed”. Furthermore, he explains to the naive bridegroom, an alliance with that mighty neighbour outlaw of Oakenrealm, Jack of the Tofts, would be well worth a wedding to Meadham. The Earl dresses the Churl so well that “he looked like a God of the Gentiles of old”, and makes him in the medieval phrase, good friends with his own fate, arranging for several trials of strength and skill, in all of which, especially in wrestling, the lad far outclasses Meadham's soldiers. Christopher needs little persuasion, in any case, to marry the girl he has loved at first sight, and Goldilind has ensured that he does not yet know her true rank. His healthy innocence contrasts with both the Earl's manipulation and Goldilind's indignant awareness.

Havelok is not presented with any modern novelistic concern for consistency of character: a mighty man of his hands as well as instinctively royal, he at first rejects any idea of marriage, and is correctly convinced that Earl Godriche intends only evil by arranging it. Yet he agrees to wed Goldboru – because Earl Godriche keeps on hitting him, and threatens to hang him! Morris, in contrast, is as concerned with motivation as other Victorian story-tellers, though he stops short of the minutiae of the psychological novelist. Christopher's pliability, since he is in love with Goldilind, is convincing, and Earl Geoffrey is three parts honest in coercing the Queen and the churl to wed; we need not blame or despise him for his plotting, or disbelieve his assertion that he never intended Goldilind's ill-treatment.

Goldilind's resistance, however, is a complex and intriguing “portrait of a lady”. The wicked (or politick) Earl forces her to consent to the wedding by identifying it with two specific wishes she has expressed: that, and that alone, will both guarantee her escape from Greenharbour and save Christopher's life. She has no effective counter, but is stung into very honest answers:

“Is it seemly for a King's daughter to wed a nameless churl? And now I know thee, Lord Earl, what thou wouldst do; thou wouldst be King of Meadham and put thy master's daughter on the road.” And she was exceeding wroth.

But he said, smiling somewhat: “Was it then seemly for the King's daughter to kneel for this man's life, and go near to swooning for joy when it was granted her?”

“Yea,” she said, “for I love him with all my body and soul; and I would have had him love me par amours, and then should I have been his mistress and he my servant; but now shall he be my master and I his servant.” And she was still very wroth. (198)
Crucial to Morris' narrative craft is the rule that, as in Jane Austen for example, the reader is told only aspects of what the experiencing character is thinking, and nothing of what goes on in the heads of other characters. Though Goldilind is here the experiencing character, this is the first the reader learns about her most unmaidenly plans; they may not have been part of her conscious mind until she expressed them.

What she says is amazingly frank for a teenage Lady in a Victorian romance. A Queen's case in favour of extra-marital sex would have been at least as amazing in Goldboru's mouth, in the earthier but pietistic world of Havelok, but since she had never met Havelok the matter cannot arise. The poem is not about young love, and the wedding and wedding night are not dwelt upon at all. The crux, as much for the poet as for Earl Godriche, is that they have been officially married.

Goldilind's wedding is not so anticlimactic. Once she is sure she has no alternative, "a great and strange joy grew up in her heart, mingled with the pain of longing" (199): she is a woman and in love, no matter what else she may be, and her contradictory impulses are convincing. This great and strange joy, like the youth, beauty and fine clothes of bride and groom, is set off in a pretty sardonicism by her awareness of the earl's coercion. That awareness is forced on Christopher too, after the ceremony, by the precise threat in the Earl's warning that Goldilind must not be brought to Meadham, "or else it may be that thou shalt cast thy life away, and that will bring her sorrow, as I see well." (200) They are ordered to ride away, of course in the Oakenrealm direction, as soon as the ceremony is complete.

IV

The complexity of the relationship of the lovers is necessarily all on Goldilind's side: she loves Christopher, but she knows both why the Earl wanted the wedding, and the "somewhat else" she is as well as a bride. Still, this does not prove any remarkable psychological depth in the portrayal. Her mixed responses might be not the conflicting traits of an acteur's "character", but simply the clash of two actant roles for the same conventional figure. These terms are derived from A.-J. Greimas. An actant has the traits required for that role in the story; an acteur has a "scatter" of traits more or less like a human being. Though her responses are interesting, the audience does not hesitate before them as challenges to interpretation. However, in the next chapter, "Of the Woodland Bride-Chamber", she is apparently an enigma even to the narrator.

At first they ride in silence. Christopher's is understandable enough: "for sweet shame that he was alone with a fair maid, and she his own, and without defence against him." (204) Both are probably thinking along the same lines: after all, they are newly-weds! Yet she looks askance at him, and sounds very aloof indeed: "So, Forester, now is done what I must needs do: thy life is saved, and I am quit of Greenharbour, and the prison, and its torments: whither away then?" (204) Christopher does not react to this neatly-packaged summary of her reasons for marrying him, because he is too preoccupied with the anger in her voice; few young women have spoken to him in that tone! The fact that she spurs her horse on, leaving him to catch up, is also an obvious rejection. He mildly replies that he can only think of the house in Littledale which she has already blessed with her dear body. This compliment is so germane to the thoughts of both of them that she flares again:
"A house of Woodmen and Wolf-heads. Is that a meet dwelling-place for me? Didst thou not hear men at Greenharbour say that I am a Queen?"

The distancing, highly conscious language that both sexes and all classes use in Morris romances is quite adaptable to insult, as with the cadence of these three sentences that end with fiercely opposed nouns and pronouns, plurals and singulars: "Woodmen and Wolf-heads" against "me" and "I... Queen":

"Hear them I did," quoth he: "but meseemeth nought like a Queen have they done with thee."

She said: "And dost thou mock me with that? thou?" and she burst out weeping...

"And thou, didst thou woo me as a Queen?"

"Lady," he said, "I wooed thee not at all; I was given to thee, would I, would I not: great joy was that to me."

Then said she: "Thou sayest sooth, thou hast not wooed me, but taken me." She laughed therewith, as one in bitterness. But presently she turned to him, and he wondered, for in her face was longing and kindness nought like her words.

Christopher has met kind looks from girls before, but not amid such a volley of rejections and reproaches. After another silence, deeply confused on his part at least, she renews the attack, skewering a part of his scrupulous and defensive syntax her previous reply had not answered:

"Wast thou given to me? Meseems I was given to thee, would I, would I not: the Queen to the Churl, the Woodman, the Wolf-head." And again she rode on, and he followed, sick at heart and wounded sorely.

His bewilderment is not removed when she later begins to chat about the woods and their creatures as if no rebukes - and no wedding - had taken place between them. He tries to answer, but it is clear that his major concern is still how she will respond to his physical longing for her; he has no answer to her verbal challenges except anxious politeness.

As they come to a woodland pool she is still playing the great Lady and he the deferential forester. For what he fears are obvious reasons, she makes the decisions, emphatically enough to pre-empt any honeymoon expectations he still has:

"Let tomorrow bring counsel; but now I am weary tonight, and if we are not to ride night-long, we shall belike find no better place to rest in. Wilt thou keep watch while I sleep?" (206)

Miserably, he says "Yea" and bows his head. Dismounting, they are very close, and both intensely conscious of it. She trembles, but looks full at him and gives him the whole royal-plural treatment:

"Forester, dost thou think it seemly that thou shouldst ride with us, thou such as thou hast told thyself to be, in this lordly raiment, which they gave thee as part of the price for thy leading us away into the wild-wood?"

"Lady, whether it be seemly or not, I see that it is thy will that I go clad as a woodland churl; abide a little while, and it shall be done."

Humiliated afresh, he goes into a copse to change, and she finds herself suddenly crying as she rapidly changes into her own old green dress - an action most readers
She tries to explain to her husband that she has been both seriously resentful, and ashamed, and ashamed of her shame, and highly apprehensive of the bridal bed, and feigning with the deliberate intention of hurting him, and hoping he would respond with male force and reassurance. She has managed to, as it were, re-dress these turmoils of feeling.

As the Queen had instructed him, he moves away to stand watch, but his wife asks if he intends to shame her by forcing her to make the sexual overtures. Without waiting for his reply, she does so anyway:

“I am not shamed in what I say to thee; if thou watch this night I will watch with thee; and if I lie down to rest this night, thou shalt lie by me. For my foemen have given me to thee, and now thou shalt give thyself to me.” So he drew next to her shyly, like unto one that hath been forgiven. And there was their bridal bed, and naught but the oak boughs betwixt them and the bare heavens. (208)

The conquest of both kingdoms begins here, in the consummation of their bizarre courtship. The paradigmatically human and classless celebration of love is also a conquest of “royalty” (the theme that vitiates The Lay of Havelok the Dane by excusing almost any conduct that seems good to its possessors). Unfortunately, Child Christopher does not develop after this point with the rich elaboration of The Well at the World’s End or the sweet ironies of The Water of the Wondrous Isles, so Goldilind does not contribute as much as Christopher’s naive charm, physical beauty and prowess to the rest of the story. Though her erotic authority is acknowledged at every stage of the triumphal revolution led by her husband and Jack of the Tofts, what is missing is an episode to identify her adequately with the emblem of Oakenrealm, the naked maiden with oak leaves around her loins.

Once only the royal lovers push farther the ironies of comparing royal rank with the higher estate of being lovers naked under heaven. The episode testifies to the insight of the emotionally unsophisticated husband:

then were the King and Goldilind together again, like any up-country lad and lass. But she stood before him and said: “O thou King and mighty warrior, surely I ought to fear thee now, but it is not so, so sore as I desire thee; but yet it maketh both laughter and tears come to me when I think of the day we rode away from Greenharbour with thee, and I seemed to myself a great lady, though I were unhappy; and though I loved thy body, I feared lest the churl’s blood in thee might shame me perchance, and I was proud and unkind with thee, and I hurt thee sorely; and now I will say it and confess, that somewhat I joyed to see thine anguish, for I knew that it meant thy love for me, and thy desire to me. Lo, wilt thou forgive me this, or wilt thou punish me, O Lord King?” (246)
This confession that there was both pride and sado-masochistic play in her conduct on their wedding night is, said in their royal bedchamber, another form of amorous play. It is also a test of human and erotic wisdom, which King Christopher passes:

He laughed. "Sweetling," he said, "messeemeth now all day long I have been fighting against raiment, rather than men; no man withstood me in the battle, for that they faced the crown on my helm and the banner over my head; and when those good men of the town brought me the keys, how should I have known them from borrel folk but for their scarlet gowns and fur hoods? And meseemeth that when they knelt to me, it was the scarlet gowns kneeling to the knighthly armour. Therefore, sweetheart, if thou fearest that the King should punish thee for wounding the poor Christopher of those days ago, as belike thou deservest it, bid the King do off his raiment, and do thou likewise, and then there shall be no King to punish, and no King's scather to thole the punishment, but only Christopher and Goldilind, even as they met erewhile on the dewy grass of Littledale." (246-47)

The radical assertion that royalty is merely costume, though made in private, constitutes a declaration of spiritual liberty, as is very directly expressed by Goldilind's silent reply. In the reading that expresses the greatest sexual eagerness, she has undressed both herself and her husband before he finishes his final sentence!

She blushed blood-red; but ere his words were done, her hands were busy with girdle and clasp, and her raiment fell from her to the earth, and his kingly raiment was cast from him, and he took her by the hand and led her to the bed of honour, that their love might have increase that night also. (247)

V

No critic would dream of complaining because Shakespeare did not write King Lear or Cymbeline in either Old English or Celtic or the common language of his own day. Far less would they complain that the plays contain "anachronistically conceived psychological conflicts of the heroes". Yet it has been regrettablly common for critics to rebuke Morris simultaneously for writing escapist and irrelevant medieval romance and for not writing in a medieval mode, either linguistically or in characterisation. Child Christopher is a clear example of a work whose medieval antecedent, enjoyable as it is, begins from moral and social premises that could be of little direct use to either Morris' contemporaries or the much later audiences to whom he seems to have directed his late romances. Morris's vocabulary, as faithfully English as Havelok, becomes the speech of Nowhere, the language of no actual period, but rather an invented noble, candid speech, in which all things worth saying may be said, a speech that allows eloquence to Queen and churl alike. As to story, he has adapted the poem's royalist mystique into an eventful, shrewd and occasionally muscular storyline that suits a charming young giant of a hero and a sharp, passionate heroine. Instead of God-ordained royalty (and righteous vengeance against usurpers) the romance celebrates royalty of spirit, with an abundance of sexual, communal and otherwise "natural" joy. In particular, the minor actant Goldboru becomes the complex and richly entertaining acteur Goldilind, who can experience "a great and strange joy" and yet have to strive, in bitter-sweet self-knowledge, against it.
Morris’ lucid approach to character and role goes beyond surface realism, inviting a more complex reader expectation and rewarding it richly. His narrative is realistic, for example in its refusal to guarantee the sincerity of any character, or any particular speech, where motives exist for lies, partial truths or other complex responses. To reconstruct for a psychologically aware audience a story with a traditional happy ending gives Morris the best of both narratological worlds. Again, an audience that anticipates the story’s outcome will privilege character-based dramatic irony, as with the shrewd cynicism of Earl Geoffrey’s tactics. Especially by contrast with the bewildered male protagonist, Goldilind is a vivid acteur, a woman with strong physical and emotional responses, and an awareness of chafing injustice to balance her healthy self-respect; she is also an actant, conscious of family traditions of social responsibility.

Morris’ late romances pretend to be far more medieval than they are. Their psychological precision authenticates links between the internalised experience of self-realisation in protagonists, of both sexes, and the outward narrative events. Each romance also has cultural and social implications based on intense and heroically-maintained convictions about the author’s observed world. A radical perspective on Victorian class and gender-role issues is essential to Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair. That such a perspective is developed, with typical energy and assurance, from a romance about the divine right of monarchs makes the work a unique achievement.

NOTES

1 Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991.
3 The Lay of Havelok the Dane, ed. W.W. Skeat, Early English Texts Series, Extra Series 4, 1868, lines 112–113. This is the text Morris used; later quotations from the poem are followed by line-numbers in brackets.
4 May Morris, Introduction to volume XVII of The Collected Works of William Morris, p.xvij. This is the volume that contains Child Christopher; quotations from it will be followed by a page-number in brackets.
6 Or 63 of the 218 pages of the Newcastle Forgotten Fantasy Classics edition.
7 By “Gentiles”, Christopher may mean the ancient Greeks. This usage, derived from the New Testament, is common in Medieval writing, though it does not occur in Havelok. However, Morris may have had in mind “gens, gentis”, which European anthropologists used to refer to any non-civilised tribes.