Knight and Lady as One: The Reclamation of the "Feminine" in William Morris's Decorative Art Designs

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<1> British artist and socialist William Morris (1834-1896) has been long recognized as the founder of the arts and crafts movement and an innovator in design that laid the groundwork for such modernist institutions as the Bauhaus. Without rejecting this longstanding approach, a gendered analysis of Morris's career can deepen our understanding of his already well-known body of work and shed light on the construction of gender in Victorian times. Morris's "holy warfare against the age," characterized by his friend Edward Burne-Jones, was a campaign not only to restore dignity and meaning to labor and reintegrate art into the center of life, but was also a reclamation of values construed as feminine and thus marginalized by Victorian society. Feminine endeavor was relegated to the realm of domestic life, while "manly labor" in the form of capitalist production and entrepreneurship everywhere reigned in business, politics, and the public sphere. That Morris's public persona was in keeping with hegemonic notions of gender is evidenced by a statement made by a working class associate: "They tell me you are a poet, Mr. Morris? Well, I know nothing of poets and poetry, but I'm blooming well sure I know a man, and you are one, by God" (qtd. Thompson 673). While Morris's success in business shows that he met the challenge of creating an unassailable masculine persona, it conceals nevertheless the instability of his own gender identity and that of men in Victorian times in general:

> In some ways it is ironic to analyse William Morris as a model of Victorian masculinity, for in numerous respects he opposed, challenged, and refused its prevailing ideology, both in utterance and in practice. But to ignore this significant social context and leave unexplored the ways he conformed and diverged from its ideals and habits is to erase a whole dimension shaping his words and actions (Marsh 199).

<2> This "whole dimension" refers to Morris's innate proclivity for the feminine which continued to haunt his life and work. The issue of how to reconcile his masculine and feminine sides would play a role in Morris's creativity throughout his mature working years, beginning around 1860 when he chose the decorative arts over painting. Though he claimed he had no talent for painting, the choice of decorative arts gained him both the conventional notion of manliness through his entrepreneurial enterprise and his manly—or hands-on-labor. It also left the door open to express the feminine through involvement in the domestic sphere and the utilization of the "feminine" language of nature. The highly haptic dimension of the decorative

arts, especially textiles, connoted the realm of "feeling," and certainly was considered a womanly trait in Victorian times. Along with his more overt activist stances and manly production as a businessman, Morris's achievement can also be considered a reclamation of what was construed as "feminine" in Victorian times. More important, through his achievement Morris affected a dynamic balance of masculine and feminine elements in his personal psychology. I will argue that this balance is in keeping with neo-Freudian ideas about psycho-sexual maturation.

<3> Morris's business enterprise and artistic creativity were the terrain on which he came to terms with his own gender identity. While he created a solidly masculine persona in his maturity, feminine elements of his personality continued to inform his design work. His early artistic efforts such as *La Belle Iseult* (also known as *Guinevere*) of 1858 emulate the Pre-Raphaelite trope of woman contained or held captive. Over time, figural representations of women in his art disappear, subtly replaced by expressions of the feminine, indicated indirectly as plants, animals, flowers, and other natural phenomena. Morris's masculine persona became the outward, public structure that organized, supported, and defended his creative core, which can be considered an unspoken discourse of the feminine. In his designs we can read masculine structuring elements coupled with freer, more spontaneous expressions of the feminine.

<4> In Morris's time the idea that abstract thought was the province of men whereas feeling, in both the affective and physical senses, was the province of women was widely accepted (Russett 40-41). In his first design for a wallpaper, *Trellis* (1862), the "masculine" geometric grid is represented directly by the strictly quadrilateral form of the trellis, complete with wood grain and nails.[Figure 1] The wooden framework holds in place the creeping, chaotic growth of the rose hedge, accompanied by the active flitting of numerous blue jays that perch, fly, and squawk in a seemingly random pattern. This is an early and rare instance in which the masculine, rational order serves to keep in check the all but random nature of feminine organic life. In Morris's later designs for wallpaper and textiles natural "feminine" forms of plants and flowers, although constrained by the underlying abstract, "masculine" geometric pattern, rarely constrain the feminine through overt geometry. At times, the geometry is so subsumed by the organic that it is difficult to perceive the underlying pattern at all. His designs for *Jasmine* (c. 1872) and *Willow* (1874) perhaps go furthest in this direction.[Figure 2] The pattern repeated in *Jasmine*, for instance, is barely discernable, lost in a welter of chaotic tangle that looks more like the random growth of an actual plant than a stylized pattern.

<5> Although the issues at stake in interpreting Morris's designs as a reassertion of the feminine must be situated in the context of Victorian discourse, it is important not to lose sight of the immediate impression Morris's designs make: they *look* feminine. Such an instinctive, uncritical perception does not go far enough in the end, but can serve as a starting point. Morris's *Tulip and Willow* (1872), for example, one of many textile and wallpaper designs Morris executed in the 1860s, 70s, and 80s, has an immediately recognizable "frilly," quality that we instantly perceive as feminine, appealing to our eyes through an imagined sense of touch, with its softness and delicacy. [Figure 3] In a discussion of feminine and masculine qualities in instrumental music, Susan McClary argues that there is plenty of room for such instinctive reactions, and music—and here we can add visual art—is first a sensuous medium before it is intellectual: "mere gut reactions…are only the beginning—although without these it would be impossible to discuss signification at all" (23). In many of Morris's designs there is a tension or

balance between a masculine ordering principle such as the grids underlying the designs, and the feminine quality of the burgeoning organic lines forming the subjects of the designs themselves.

<6> We do have to be cautious, however, about such "instinctive" responses. Even in the nineteenth century, progressive thinkers like John Stuart Mill noted how socially constructed notions can masquerade as self-evident truths (952). Feminist scholars in recent decades have toppled the monolithic social structures that once naturalized gender inequality, and researchers on gender and sexuality have argued persuasively in favor of constructivist understandings of masculinity and femininity. Following the work of post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, gender theorists now characterize notions of gender as social constructs, determined by language, custom, norms of thought and behavior. Pierre Bourdieu has gone further in arguing that the *biological* basis for gender itself is socially constructed (15). More important, however, if we are to consider Morris's designs as exhibiting a "discourse" of femininity, however unconscious, is to review how Victorians themselves constructed notions of masculinity and femininity.

<7> Scientific findings, including those that were ostensibly empirical such as phrenology, reinforced the reigning notions of the inferiority of women, couching them at times in the latest evolutionary theories of Darwin, which though they argued for an adaptive role of gender distinction, found women to have evolved functionally to a lesser extent than men. In her study of several nineteenth-century male writers, including John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, Thomas De Quincey, and William Wordsworth, Catherine Robson argues that femininity in Victorian times was widely construed as the inborn, underlying ground for *both* men and women. The feminine was equated with the natural world, a natural endowment for both sexes, and men and women differed in that men had the added task of pulling themselves out of this given feminine state in order to *become* men (4). Evolutionary advances needed to be recreated anew with each living human being, developments which progressed in turn through morphological stages akin to those of fishes, amphibians, and lower mammals before developing fully recognizable human traits. That individual men had to struggle to continue this evolutionary trend in their own lives suggests that such gains were relatively recent and needed to be solidified through struggle. To the Victorian mind the feminine *was* nature, embedded *a priori* in all human beings. As bearers and nurturers of children, women already were gendered beings, and their task was simply to remain so, close to nature, in order to raise children and provide men nurturance while the latter developed their masculinity by facing external conflict.

<8> This attitude is evident in statements made by Ruskin in two lectures he delivered in 1864 and 1865 and published as *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), where he incorporates hegemonic Victorian conceptions of gender: "You may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be a better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does" (151). Ruskin divided *Sesame and Lilies* into two parts, with "Sesame—of King's Treasures" presenting the proper attributes of men and "Lilies—Of Queen's Gardens," that of women. The "king's" treasures include finances, wealth, commerce, and culture, while the "queen's" gardens left women "as strange, arbitrary, and mysterious as nature" (Higgens 24-25).

<9> The assumptions underlying the need for men to *become* men are evident in a number of

social practices and customs such as breeching which were thought to promote the acquisition of masculinity by boys. Education among other boys (exclusively) was also deemed essential for gaining manhood and "school taught boys to despise the weak and scoff at their sisters" (Tosh 104). Separation from the domestic environment was essential in creating a man out of a child: "while mummy, matron and the maids serviced the boys' physical and emotional needs, the achievement of manhood depended on a disparagement of the feminine without and within" (Roper and Tosh 13). Femininity was seen as the underlying ground for both genders and seen as fixed; masculinity was seen as unstable, and the transition from childhood to boyhood to manhood fraught with difficulties and ambiguities as young males strove to become adult men. William Morris's own journey from childhood to manhood underscores both the certainties and ambiguities surrounding masculinity in the mid-nineteenth century, showing how he negotiated contradictory and confusing issues of manhood to arrive not only at a solidly constructed masculine persona, but also a critical perspective that allowed him wide latitude for retaining the "feminine" at the core of his artistic and social projects.

<10> That Morris himself struggled with demands to make himself a "man" is evident, especially, in accounts of his early adulthood and writings (Kirchhoff). J.W. Mackail describes the young man Morris as "fond of mooning and talking to himself" (I 15), by which he meant indulging in the reverie and inwardness associated with being "soft and womanish" (I 19-20). In an early work of fiction, written during his Oxford years, Morris himself makes the link between inner life and the feminine:

> I walked on, my mind keeping up a strange balance between joy and sadness for some time, till gradually all the beauty of things seemed to be stealing into my heart, and making me soft and womanish….I noticed every turn of the banks of the little brook, every ripple of its waters over the brown stones, every line of the broad-leaved water flowers; I went down toward the brook, and, stooping down, gathered a knot of lush marsh-marigolds; then, kneeling on both knees, bent over the water with my arm stretched down to it, till both my hand and the yellow flowers were making the swift-running little stream bubble about them….(Mackail I 19-20).

<11> At the same time period, however, we find recounted tales of Morris's dramatically "masculine" exploits, his feats of athletic heroism and his violent rages. Morris had little tolerance for frustration, and he would at times react by "beating his own head, dealing himself vigorous blows, to take it out of himself" (Mackail I 43). He had similar reactions to his early attempts at creating art works: "Price sat to him for a clay head which he was modeling; it was never finished, because whenever Morris grew impatient he flew at it and smashed it up." Morris's abandonment of easel painting, his relinquishing of fine art for the decorative arts can be explained in part by this very character trait, for as hard as he worked in later life at what he loved, he could not tolerate failure, and in explaining his rejection of painting Morris insightfully wrote:

> Little hope can I have ever to do anything serious in the thing [painting]. I never…had the painter's memory which makes it easy to put down on paper what you think you see, nor indeed can I see any scene within a frame, as it were, round it, though in my own way I can

realize things visibly enough to myself. But it seems I must needs try to make myself unhappy with doing what I find difficult or impossible (qtd Mackail I 301).

<12> In contrast to rendering forms three-dimensionally, Morris effortlessly drew repeating patterns. While at work on the murals for the student union hall at Oxford, the 21-year-old Morris discovered the ease with which he could compose repeating patterns, covering the ceiling fluently with the vine-like patterns that would appear frequently in his later designs (Mackail I 120). At about the same time, he discovered a similar proclivity with words, and he wrote lines of verse without effort. Canon Dixon was one of several friends who discovered Morris's poetic ability when Morris (whom he called "Topsy") was still a young man:

> One night Crom[well] Price and I went to Exeter, and found him with Burne-Jones. As soon as we entered the room, Burne-Jones exclaimed wildly, "He's a big poet." "Who is?" asked we. "Why Topsy." We sat down and hear Morris read his first poem….It was a thing entirely new…extremely decisive and powerful in execution…I expressed my admiration in some way as we all did; and I remember his remark, "Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write (qtd. Mackail I 51).

<13> Morris discovered pattern designing and poetry as strengths that needed no alteration, no struggle or frustrating development. After a protracted period in early adulthood when Morris, careened from one impulsive career choice to another, he happily discovered a way to capitalize on his feminine instincts while forging an unassailably masculine identity: Morris demonstrated his prowess in business by making of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, and Company (later simply Morris and Co.,) a success, but a success in the service of his deeper ambition. He dedicated himself to the inner, softer core of creativity while vigorously advocating its reclamation in the daily life of all people. Because of the exigencies of forging a masculine persona, Morris combined his artistic impulses with a business enterprise in a display of manly behavior. But he also chose to devote this effort to works of art largely aimed at the domestic sphere, the realm of the feminine. In this way he satisfied both halves of his nature: he could retain the feminine aspects—closeness to nature, intimacy, emotional expression—while simultaneously performing an outward show of masculinity. It is in his works of art, his designs for fabrics and wallpapers, books, and carpets that we can read the persistence of the feminine in Morris's character and art work.

<14> In Morris's earliest visual production when he still strove to become a painter, he expressed the feminine literally through images of female figures. In his study for the *St. George Cabinet* (1861), the identity of woman with nature is made clear by the female figure that is literally chained to nature in the form of a tree. Whether or not Morris was conscious of the linkage between woman and nature in this image, we can later trace an evolution of his subject matter after this early easel painting period, when he abandons the female figure and substitutes nature in her place, in the form of plants and animals. These he could draw effortlessly—as effortlessly as he could write lines of poetry. Design and impulse are perfectly united, growing "as a flower grows" (Ruskin 151). In some instances, Morris's purely ornamental designs seem to convey the idea of female gestation, the feminine as the source of life and growth. In an embroidered *Acanthus Wall Hanging* (1880), for example, whirling acanthus leaves and spiraling flower stems

are accompanied by ripening grain scattered throughout.[Figure 4] The central, bilaterally symmetrical section stands out as a predominant focus, as if there is a "subject" in this hanging rather than mere decorative ornament. The central "figure" of the hanging resembles nothing if not female reproductive organs. It is as if Morris "encoded" images of women and the "effortlessness" of female gestation into his designs even as the women themselves gradually vanished from them.

<15> In other designs, images of nature itself become the subject, with birds and animals much like those that had once accompanied his representational female figures and now serve as visual stand-ins for the feminine. Morris's *Bird* curtains (1877-78), *Dove and Rose* woven textile (1879), and his cartoon for *Acanthus and Peacocks* (1879-81) all encode the idea of the feminine, using vegetal motifs and birds as symbolic replacements. Another substitution can be read in the series of printed textiles named after rivers, which Morris designed after he had moved his workshops to Merton Abbey on the Wandle River in 1880. The series takes its names from various tributaries of the Thames, including the Wandle (Morris and his assistants used to wash the cloth for the textiles in the clear waters of the stream itself) (Mackail II 34). In *Wandle* (1880), as in each of the Thames tributary textiles, the curving flower stem alludes to the meandering pattern of the river itself, leading to a double encoding: the meandering stem is the river and both stem and stream encode of the notion of the feminine.[Figure 5] This reading is reinforced by the right hand panel of the "Miniatures of Venus," with nudes painted by Charles Fairfax Murray, where all three images are present—flowers, rivers, and the female form. In the illumination of Morris's poem "A Garden by the Sea," the image of woman is again coupled with that of a meandering stream, which, like the right-hand panel of the "Miniatures of Venus," courses past flowers and a standing figure of a lone woman. Images of women may have gradually vanished from Morris's designs after 1870, but the idea of the feminine continued through encrypted images of nature.

<16> The shift from predominant figures of women to that of vegetative, animal, and other natural motifs coincides with Morris's change from easel painting to decorative arts as a career focus. Even before he had finished his last known easel painting, *La Belle Iseult* (1858), Morris had already begun to explore the feminized world of decorative art through his early embroidery, *If I Can* (1857). It is telling that one of Morris's first completed works in the "minor arts" was an embroidery, for of all of the decorative arts needlework was most commonly practiced by women in the home. Morris may well have seen the potential to elevate this lowly feminine craft to the level of fine art—embroidery and tapestry making during the Middle Ages had once been on par with painting—and his making of *If I Can* seems to have signaled his interest in both reestablishing the legitimacy of the craft traditions as a valid art form in their own right, and of reclaiming the suppressed "other" of a feminized art form in a way that suggests there were deeper personal and cultural issues at stake.

<17> Morris developed a masculine persona in order to conform to the expectations of his times. His struggle to succeed in business was but the first of several arenas of contestation, of conflict he experienced. This was closely followed by his leadership of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and his increasing involvement in politics, including taking a position on the Eastern Question Association, and serving as a leader of the Socialist League. What characterizes all of these activities is their highly charged nature: The danger of returning to the "soft and

womanish" tendencies of his youth, "mooning" to himself, and quietly dreaming over nature were ongoing dangers that threatened a return to the chaos of his years of indecision. Like a knight rescuing the damsel in the St. George Cabinet, however, his battles were in the service of the defenseless—old buildings, the minor arts, and the victims of industrial capitalism. What the knight defends in the St. George cabinet may be seen as the marginalized feminine, even nature itself, but they are above all elements contained within Morris's persona. He defended an undifferentiated, instinctive self that was constantly revealed through vegetative pattern design and poetry even as he asserted his manly persona in the public sphere.

<18> This characterization of Morris as having two distinct "selves," one masculine and one feminine— knight and lady as one—is in keeping with a neo-Freudian reading of Morris's personality and activities. In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, ego differentiation and maturation in males only occur with the successful resolution of the Oedipus conflict. The child becomes a man only when he abandons his quest for union with the mother, and, instead of trying to kill the father to affect such a union, *becomes* the father through a process of identification. In Freud's drive principle, the child learns to tolerate the delay of gratification characteristic of the pleasure principle by holding to the reality principle, by learning to tolerate frustration, forestalled pleasure, and conflict in order to master the exigencies of real life. Neo-Freudians such as Margaret Mahler**,** Hans Loewald, and D.W. Winnicott, however, modify this linear process of development into a more nuanced understanding of drive theory that sees the "resolution" of the Oedipus conflict not as a one-time victory but as an ongoing struggle. One never achieves full maturation, but the trend toward ego differentiation and mastery are rather an ongoing, dialectical process of moving between the poles of the pleasure and reality principles. Moreover, these later analysts do not see the retreat into the pleasure principle as a loss of ego strength. Instead they see both the "inner psychotic core" of undifferentiated wholeness as important to psychological health as ego differentiation. Indeed, "lost narcissistic unity" with the mother can be an ongoing source of nourishment to the self through life as it constantly strives to face hardship and master reality:

> The Oedipus conflict is a constituent of normal psychic life of the adult, and as such is active again and again. A psychotic core, related to the earliest vicissitudes of the ambivalent search from primary narcissistic unity and individuation, also is an active constituent of normal psychic life (Loewald 43).

<19> Key to this process is shifting the locus of comfort from the mother herself toward a symbolic replacement, what Winnicott calls a "transitional object"—toys, stuffed animals, or pieces of fabric that become symbolic stand-ins for the mother. According to object relations theory, the process of growth is not a complete weaning from transitional objects, but a process of finding "age appropriate" transitional objects. For adults this can mean a love of art, music or science—anything on which one can project a sense of meaning (255).

<20> Looked at from a neo-Freudian perspective, then, Morris's lifelong pattern of engaging deliberately in conflict allowed him the means to individuate, but in the service of and fueled by the impulse of "lost narcissistic unity," his undifferentiated state that identified closely with the feminine, with woman, with nature, and with the domestic sphere. The structured masculine persona was a necessary counterpart to the undifferentiated creative core that fueled both his

drive to create beautiful, even "frilly" things, defend nature against the onslaught of industrialization, and fight for the rights of free individuals to control their own economic lives. By retaining the feminine within himself he above all sought to create a synthesis of masculine and feminine traits and on a social level attempted to heal the deep divisions within Victorian society.

Figures

Figure 1. William Morris, *Trellis* (1862)

Figure 2. William Morris, *Jasmine* (1872)

Figure 3. William Morris, *Tulip and Willow* (1872)

Figure 4. William Morris, *Acanthus Wall Hanging* (1880)

Figure 5. William Morris, *Wandle* (1880)

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