

## A Foucaultian Study of Misrecognized Female Subjectivity in William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*

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### ABSTRACT

Regarding how William Morris handled women, academics are split. *The Wood Beyond the World*, his prose romance written from a female perspective, is instrumental in unraveling this problem. This paper utilizes Foucault's theory of power to examine the topic of female subjectivity from the perspective of subjectivity as an entry point. Furthermore, it contends that the establishment of female subjectivity in the work is dependent on the sexes' relationship and the presence of the male gaze, and that, as a result, women should not compare themselves unfavorably to men when doing so, but rather use themselves as a point of reference and work to cement their place in the evolution of human thought and culture.

**Key words:** Female, Subjectivity, William Morris, Power

William Morris frequently depicts female characters in a seemingly positive way, such as sensible Ellen and gentle Clara in *News from Nowhere* and the graceful young girls in *The Well at the World's End*, all of whom give the impression that Morris speaks highly of women. Morris's thoughts on sex equality, however, remain ambiguous because the female subjective experience has been largely ignored in studies of him. In other words, a woman's identity is more important than any amount of praise from a man to guarantee her subjectivity. *The Wood Beyond the World*, a prose romance by Morris, is essential to understanding this issue because it focuses on the description of women in which the female character is on a higher level than the male character. In contrast to the inactivity of the male protagonist, Morris focuses his writing on three female characters (the ex-wife, the lady, and the maiden) whose appearances serve as both reason and motivation for the male protagonist, paying special attention to the female body and identity.

Few studies have examined Morris's views on gender in relation to this work, however. Feminist interpretations of Morris's life and art have benefited in a distinctive way from the prevalence of empathy theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wiens ch. 1). Campbell contends that "his opinions on gender equality remain clouded by avoidance and contradiction," citing Morris's medieval writing of the prose romance *The Wood Beyond the World* as evidence of his complicated gender attitudes and pointing out that feminist scholars in the early twenty-first century are divided over whether Morris subscribes to gender equality (Holloway & Palmgren 169). Domestic scholars have also taken note of the international debates surrounding Morris's views on women. Beginning

with Morris's canonical works such as *News from Nowhere*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *Art and Socialism*, Zhu Haifeng and Yang Jincai (104) contend that Morris implicitly reflected the prevailing eugenics narrative in British society during the Victorian period. Morris's poem *The Lovers of Gudrun* is both a "new icon of Victorian women in a period of transition between tradition and modernity" and a "re-examination of the value of women," as Chen Yanxu and Ji Yuntong (122–123) pointed out in their analysis of the poem from the perspective of mythological archetypes and its adaptation of the Nordic medieval saga *Laxdaela Saga*.

Therefore, the great literary value of this work and its profound intellectual artistry deserve further discussion and analysis, especially given the female subjectivity it portrays. In *The Wood Beyond the World*, after avoiding it in his previous works, Morris finally incorporates the concept of virginity as a plot element in relation to the female body. The control of the female body can be traced back to the emergence of the sexualized imagery of women in eighteenth-century Western society, when women were divided into two types: motherhood and hysteria. Motherhood describes a woman who abides by her duty scrupulously as a mother, that is, to give birth to babies and bring them up, while the image of hysteria depicts women who could not perform these duties. Gradually, the image of motherhood spread to other spheres based on the nature of biology, which is the result of the exercise of disciplinary power according to Foucault.

The body is the initial point of focus in any form of discipline, with the individual serving as the instrument. The power of discipline, for example, in factories and barracks, creates a kind of unitary individuality by ordering the space

of individuals. Due to the body's apparent innate suitability for the practice of discipline, being confined to a small space allows one to develop a sense of organic individuality through the disciplined control of one's actions. Additionally, discipline is a progressive need for the body to submit to a desired outcome, building a manufactured identity as physical activity is regulated. Last but not least, discipline creates a combined individuality for the sake of efficiency by combining with other bodily associations. The question of how one's subjectivity is formed is now raised in relation to the construction of subjectivity. Since a historically constructed form of subject is not universal and contingent, it follows that the purpose of the construction of subjectivity is not to establish a new subjectivity or to discover what the subject is; rather, it is to reject the existing subjectivity and imagine possible forms.

At this point, the disciplinary power shifts from the micropolitics of human anatomy to the macropolitics of demographic life. From the medical perspective, the image of female motherhood has been infinitely magnified and gradually established as its biological essence since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when women's basic fertility made them the focal point in the construction of bio-power in the West. Women's intense sexual desire outside of the context of reproduction was seen as a symptom of hysteria and insanity. As shocking as this may seem, it actually bolsters the workings of life's power and is a revelation about women.

Foucault's criticism of the philosophy of the universal subject provides the theoretical foundation for the construction of female subjectivity, as he believed that the subject is a form, not a substance, and that it is constructed by power rather than being universally consistent. As a result of Western civilization's efforts to reduce its population in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, women became the focus and object of power construction that was inherently based on their sexuality. The scope of women's reproductive responsibilities grew steadily and eventually became the defining characteristic of female subjectivity. Although Foucault seems to avoid discussing women when addressing the nature of sexuality, he believes that women have always been constructed in Western society (Foucault, *Sexuality II* 40). The construction of female subjectivity is a potent manifestation of the power to control the subject.

### SEXUALIZED BODY: POWER OF CHASTITY

Morris's late fantasy novels and his in-depth exploration of women's issues begin in *The Wood Beyond the World*. The entire plot revolves around the concept of female chastity, from the hero's decision to embark on a quest after learning of his wife's infidelity to the ultimate goal of that quest: locating the mysterious Lady, Maiden, and Dwarf who appear before him. Although he is initially drawn to the beautiful and noble lady, the story ultimately centers on Maiden due to their instant and profound attraction.

In the beginning of the story, Lady rules the wood and claims Maiden's body as her own, and any contact between Maiden and a man, even through clothing, is immediately detected by Lady. Lady gains strength and youth from

Maiden's chastity in order to satisfy her vanity of beauty by pursuing young, handsome men; the hero is her third and final victim. Even Walter seems to be hypnotized by Lady's sweet but overpowering body scent and soft skin.

Unlike Lady, who loses control of her sexual urges in a fit of hysteria, Maiden is able to keep her emotions in check and refrain from any physical contact with Walter, even though it was love at first sight between them and she almost lost her virginity while under the prince's lustful authority. It wasn't until Maiden coerced Lady into suicide that she mustered the nerve to grab Walter's hand and have her first experience with physical intimacy with the hero. As she revealed her true identity, Maiden made it clear that she had relied on "the wisdom of a wise maid, and not of a woman" (Morris, *Wood* ch. 24). Maiden's mystical strength and the weapon she uses to overthrow Lady's imprisonment both stem from her vow of purity.

As one of the Victorian ideals of femininity, chastity represents the Western control of the female body. It was assumed by the Victorians that women, in particular, should be chaste in their interactions with men, while in ancient Greece, physical chastity was still associated with health and well-being. In *The Wood Beyond the World*, Maiden has excelled to the status of a benchmark woman because of her ability to stifle her feelings for Walter and maintain an emotional distance from him. On the other hand, the ex-wife and Lady are the polar opposites of chaste women: the former engages in extramarital affairs while still married, and the latter uses her physical attractiveness to woo eligible bachelors.

Chastity, as evidenced by the final three women, clearly plays a significant role in female subjectivity. The former wife suffers a tragic end as a result of the Walters' decision to cast her out of the house. Similarly, the formidable Lady takes her own life in spite of her status and influence. Though she was capable of killing both Maiden and Walter, she ultimately decided to end her own life. Because of this, there are those in the academic community who are disturbed by Lady's suicide and who argue that the plot's design is the primary issue of concern (Allen 188). Lady's preference is open to interpretation because she equates sexuality with romantic love. However, chastity was viewed as a subjective trait of women at the time. The status of the first man she seduces is currently unknown (likely the old man Walter met in the wilderness), and the second man, the prince, changes and falls in love with the maiden and plans to abandon Lady as well. Walter is the third man she seduces, and he wants to elope with his beloved Maiden from the start. As soon as the fun was over, all three men obviously decided to leave. Based on Maiden's plan, Lady accidentally killed the prince and subsequently committed suicide. This tragic end likely occurred when Lady realized that she was responsible for the death of the prince, whom she had come to associate with the death of the first man. Having men leave one by one has led Lady to believe that she can no longer indulge in sexual activity, which she equates with feeling unloved by men. However, sexual desire and romantic love are not the same thing, and the Victorians outlawed the kind of greedy sex that leads to

sexual explosions. This normative framework gave rise to a more relative understanding of female chastity.

### METAPHORICAL REPRODUCTION: MAGICAL FERTILITY

If chastity was the standard that Victorian women demanded of themselves, then fertility drove home the point that a woman's role in a marriage was to reproduce. As stated above, motherhood served as the primary definition of female subjectivity in Western society during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the role of women evolved over time to include not only giving birth but also raising children. What this means is that, whereas previously women were expected to assume the role of giving birth, society now expects them to take on the role of nurturing as well.

There are no literal births in *The Wood Beyond the World*, but the female role of giving birth is metaphorically represented by the maiden, who tends to the growth of everything like a bountiful summer. Maiden wore summer on her body and dressed like a real goddess as she and the hero made their escape through the forest with only the plants and flowers they had found. Morris likens Maiden's face to a pleasant summer day and her abilities to the vivacity of nature. Her abilities have more than a few fertility overtones, and it is indeed Mother Nature who brings forth the world's flora and fauna.

Not only is Maiden born with the ability to bear children like nature, but she can also become the mother goddess of a nation, blessing the people and bringing them well-being, as exemplified by her rule over the Bear Kingdom. After promising to pray for rain in exchange for being worshiped as the new goddess of the bear country, Maiden succeeded in dethroning Lady, and the bears once again flourished in the fertile pastures that surrounded them. This allowed the bear herders to once again earn a living, and the nation recovered. Then, Maiden established the laws that would govern the bear country, including the fact that they would welcome honest outsiders to become citizens. As an added bonus, when Maiden finally made it back to the Bear Kingdom after losing her chastity, she brought farming techniques with her, allowing the nomadic bear country to diversify its economy with agricultural pursuits. It's clear that in this case, Maiden isn't just a symbol of birth and sustenance; she's also a national leader, responsible for reviving the culture, instituting order, and fostering progress. Those passages are metaphorically saying that not only do women have the obligation to give birth, but they also have the duty to nurture their young.

Rather, the ex-wife failed in her role as a wife by not bearing children. If the lady kills herself because she can't rein in her sexual urges, then the ex-tragic wife's end can be explained by the fact that she was in a position of authority but chose to ignore her responsibilities. She is unable to produce sexual pleasure with Walter and, by extension, cannot fulfill her maternal responsibilities. Differences in the endings of the ex-wife and Maiden provide insight into a subjective feature of Victorian culture: the high value placed on a woman's ability to bear and raise a large family.

### PRISON OF THE BODY: UNWITTING BIDDABILITY

Discipline, whether in the name of chastity or fertility, investigates the production of power over the female subject at the level of the individual body before moving on to the level of bio-power, which produces an overall female subjectivity.

Furthermore, its mastery of the mind through training is an intriguing topic. Foucault adopts Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon" as a metaphor for today's society, in which individuals are subject to their own surveillance. To put it another way, "Panopticon" implies not only the taming of the body in terms of the power of discipline but also the concept of self-monitoring. Besides, Foucault's well-known statement "power/knowledge" illustrates how knowledge can be used as power to subjugate not only the body but also the mind. He views modern man as one who is confined in the panopticon and who is able to self-regulate his or her behavior because he or she is aware that they are being watched (qtd. in Taylor, 71–72). He states that the default modern knowledge system has been internalized so that man has no awareness of any control.

This means that contemporary women, as a result of the control of knowledge, are expected to conform to a set of standards of femininity that are typically more in tune with the nature of sexuality and maternal duties under bio-power. In other words, knowledge has the power to tame the mind from the inside out as a result of man's gradual internalization and acceptance of social standards without awareness. Morris's appeal of a loyal and moral woman is clarified in *The Wood Beyond the World*, which features prominently in its discussion of the writing of female nobility in ethics and morality.

This touches on a central issue in the history of Western philosophical inquiry into the connection between the physical and the immaterial. Western philosophers have prioritized the concept of the soul over the physical body since Plato. Foucault, on the other hand, sees a history of the body rather than the history of the soul, and his disciplinary power reflects this. There is a gradual staining effect of "knowledge/power" that causes the material body to become organic and creative as it moves from unit to combination under the regulation of power; and the soul within the body does the same under the subtlety of the ruling (*Discipline* 41). Because of these spiritual rules and regulations, the body continues to operate under the control of its own soul even after it has been released from its physical prison.

In *The Wood Beyond the World*, the idea that the soul is the prison of the body is beautifully put across. Maiden is another case in point. Leaving the realm of nature behind, Maiden finds herself suddenly enslaved by the male gaze in the secular world. Despite Walter instructing his servants to allow her to wear whatever she liked to meet himself, the new king, she dressed like a simple lady-in-waiting, with none of the pomp and circumstance befitting a Bear Kingdom's goddess, and instead looked like an accessory to Walter's loyalty. It's clear that even when the maid loses surveillance from outside, she still bows to whatever authority she recognizes within herself.

Misconceptions about women's ability to establish their own subjectivity echo this reasoning. As mentioned above, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Western world, the biological nature of women began to be equated with the female essence, and as a result, the sexualized body became the subject during this time. In this case, women looked to men as a point of reference when attempting to establish their own subjectivity, and they did so by analyzing the male gaze. A deformed and crippled female subject is established, however, when the establishment of subjectivity necessitates reference to others. As a result, women shouldn't accept the subjectivity that has been established for them in opposition to men but rather should look to themselves as a point of reference in order to establish their own subjectivity over time.

Although Morris' frequent use of female characters suggests that he has a positive and progressive view of women, a few feminists, especially Marsh and Sypher, have criticized his works for being "a masculinist vision of paradise" as well as "a literary text deeply imbued with the feeling and language of male desire" (Holland 51–52). Morris's preconceived notions of women's roles in society limit them to the home. In other words, even progressive men such as Morris, who want to celebrate women, are entrapped by the manipulation of power over female subjectivity, and their unconsciousness of this fact is a product of the discourse of power. *The Wood Beyond the World* is an academically undervalued work, but it provides new evidence for understanding female subjectivity. And this paper does not aim to agitate feminism, but to demonstrate that the establishment of female subjectivity cannot be achieved solely through opposition to men; rather, female subjectivity must be traced back to the construction of power in order to comprehend its essence and generate new ideas for reconstructing female subjectivity.

The search for female subjectivity must begin with the body, as the body is the starting point for any understanding of history. Women in Morris's depiction are first and foremost expected to be chaste from the perspective of the individual unit. Second, in the context of the interaction between the sexes, particularly in the context of marriage, it is expected of women to have a high fertility rate. Lastly, as a result

of the soul's constant vigil over the body, Victorian women were submissive to the authority of power/knowledge. Nevertheless, denial of chastity, fertility, and biddability before the male gaze should be the first step in the process of establishing true subjectivity; this will allow for the establishment of female subjectivity.

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