"Twist me a crown of wind-flowers": Ford Madox Ford's Homage to Christina Rosetti in *The Queen Who Flew*

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In his memoir, *Mightier than the Sword* (1938), Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939) recalls meeting the writer Thomas Hardy for the first time: "I must have been eighteen to the day—I found myself telling a very very kind, small, ageless, soft-voiced gentleman with a beard, the name of my first book, which had been published a week before" ("A Mr Hardy" 76). According to Ford, after hearing that the title of the book was *The Brown Owl* (1891), Hardy seemed to think it was a book about owls and started to discuss the title and suggested onomatopoeic alternatives that would have suited the book better. Ford was flustered by Hardy's response: "Yes, I was horrified . . . because I had let that kind gentleman go away thinking that my book was about birds . . . whereas it was about Princesses and Princes and magicians and such twaddle. . . . I had written it to amuse my sister Juliet" ("A Mr Hardy" 78).

For those who associate Ford with his modernist novel *The Good Soldier* (1915) and the novels he wrote that make up the *Parade's End* tetralogy as well as the *Fifth Queen* trilogy, to find out that his first published works were Victorian fairy tales may come as a big surprise. The three often overlooked fairy tales—*The Brown Owl*, *The Feather* (1892), and *The Queen Who Flew* (1894)—were published by the time he was twenty, under the name Ford H. Madox Hueffer (though for the third book, Ford Hueffer) which is his birth name, Ford Hermann Hueffer, with "Madox" added in honor of the painter Ford Madox Brown, his maternal grandfather who was a mentor to Dante Gabriel Rossetti as well as many other Pre-Raphaelite artists. (Though these fairy tales were originally published under

the name Hueffer, they have been subsequently attributed to Ford Madox Ford to avoid confusion; I also adhere to this practice.)

The Victorian fairy tale was a fanciful literary genre that took inspiration from traditional classic fairy tales by invoking them, parodying them, rewriting them, and often infusing them with comedy. As Michael Newton points out, "Victorian writers love to refer back to their famous predecessors. Everywhere these stories contentedly expose the fact that they are indebted to other stories" (xii). Michael Patrick Hearn notes that "[a]rguably, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood made the greatest contribution to Victorian fairy literature" (xxiii-iv) because they illustrated fairy- and fantasy-themed poetry and fairy tale collections as well as wrote in the genre. Hearn goes on to state that Ford represents the last stage of these Pre-Raphaelite fairy tales (xxiv).

Ford's fairy tales are certainly Victorian in style as well as content. They conform to the familiar formula by starting with "Once upon a time" and continuing with "Princesses and Princes and magicians and such twaddle" while depicting worlds that remind the readers of paintings in the Pre-Raphaelite style. Ford's fairy tales are particularly intriguing because they spin off into a pastiche of references to not only classical fairy tales but also his family circumstances, especially the women in his family.

Whereas *The Brown Owl* and *The Feather* were written for and dedicated to his younger sister, *The Queen Who Flew* is obliquely dedicated to a young woman whom Ford was courting and later married: Elsie Martindale. She was a school friend of Ford's and three years younger than he was. Her parents were not happy with Ford's courting their daughter, so it took some scheming and Elsie's flight from home for them to marry. Like Elsie, Queen Eldrida, who is the protagonist of *The Queen Who Flew*, takes flight from her oppressive environment but she does this by soaring through the air. This double meaning is what propels most of the fairy tale's plot and is mirrored in the book's border design featuring flying geese by C. R. B. Barrett (fig. 1).

Furthermore, *The Queen Who Flew* cleverly constitutes an homage to another

woman in his family circle: the Pre-Raphaelite poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). By repeatedly referring to one of her short poems, "Twist me a crown of wind-flowers," Ford manages to weave a tale that transforms the anxieties and desperation of the original poem into a charming and imaginative story of female empowerment.

Ford's Pre-Raphaelite lineage started with his maternal grandfather, the artist Ford Madox Brown. Though not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Brown was a mentor to many in that circle as well as to artists and writers adjacent to the movement. Brown was responsible for the publication of Ford's first book. He urged a family friend, Edward Garnett, then a literary consultant to the publishing house T. Fisher Unwin, to take Ford's manuscript to them so that it may be published. Brown promised illustrations for his grandson's book; as a result, *The Brown Owl* and *The Feather* both have frontispieces by Brown and the fairy tale published after Brown's death, *The Queen Who Flew*, has one by Edward Burne-Jones, a Pre-Raphaelite artist and family friend (fig. 2). Ford, as a child,

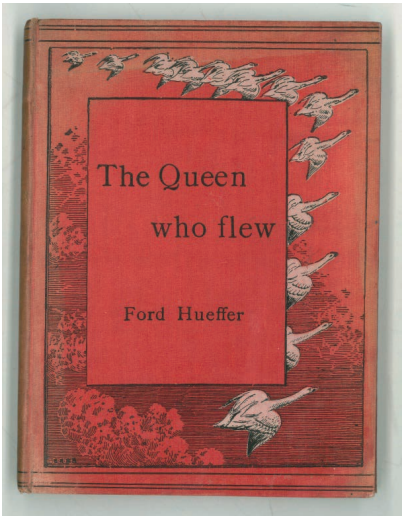

Fig. 1. C. R. B. Barrett, border design, *The Queen Who Flew*, 1894.

Fig. 2. Edward Burne-Jones. Frontispiece, *The Queen Who Flew*.

often sat as a model for his grandfather; two years after *The Queen Who Flew*, his next book, a biography of Ford Madox Brown, was published and in his many memoirs there are essays reminiscing about his grandfather's circle.

Ford Madox Brown had three children: Lucy, the oldest, by his first wife Elizabeth Bromley, and Catherine and Oliver by his second wife, Emma Hill. Catherine married the German musicologist and critic, Francis Hueffer and they produced three children: Ford, and then his younger siblings Oliver, and Juliet. It was Lucy's marriage to William Michael Rossetti that gave Ford his Rossetti ties. William was a civil servant—secretary of the Inland Revenue—and a critic, as well as an original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood member, who encouraged young Ford's reading (Judd 24). William Michael Rossetti's older brother was the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his younger sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, making her Ford's aunt by marriage.

The Hueffers and the Rossettis and the Browns lived close to one another in London. This close contact with the Rossettis on one hand engendered a sense of inferiority on Ford's part which he explains in an essay called "My Cousins, the Rossettis":

> My cousins, the Rossettis, were horrible monsters of precocity. Let me set down here with what malignity I viewed their proficiency in Latin and Greek at ages incredibly small. Thus, I believe, my cousin Olive wrote a Greek play at the age of something like five. And, they were perpetually being held up to us—or perhaps to myself alone, for my brother was always very much the sharper of the two—as marvels of genius whom I ought to thank God for merely having the opportunity to emulate. (238)

The humor and exasperation, coupled with sarcasm, serve to highlight how well the cousins knew each other. Later in the essay, he mentions nonchalantly that many of the broken bones suffered by the Rossettis were the result of playing with the Hueffer children.

On the other hand, Christian Rossetti's literary influence on Ford was

profound. Max Saunders notes how Ford's "literary personality inherited [the imagination of his own death] from his aunt by marriage . . . whose poems were to inspire Ford" (65). After the death of Tennyson in 1892, at a dinner where speculation about the next poet laureate included Christina Rossetti as a possibility, "Ford proved more feminist, at least in Christina's presence, by proclaiming that 'hundreds of people' thought the honour should go to her" (Marsh 559). Even in his sixties, when asked by Paul Palmer, the editor of *The American Mercury*, to propose subjects for a series of articles on English, American, and French writers, Ford lists Christina Rossetti among the twelve he had in mind and is the only woman writer he was willing to write about (Ludwig 237).

In *The Queen Who Flew*, the protagonist, Queen Eldrida of the Narrowlands, gains the power of flight from a carcanet (a circlet or crown) of wind-flowers. Unlike the heroines of Ford's two previous fairy tales who can fly because birds carry then, Eldrida is able to fly on her own. These wind-flowers are a direct allusion to a Christina Rossetti poem from her 1872 collection of nursery rhymes entitled, *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book*. The short poems contained in this volume are rhythmically sing-song, usually in iambic lines of dimeter, trimeter, and tetrameter in different combinations. These poems are meant to be read aloud to children and the overall narrating persona is maternal. Wind-flower is "the common name for the wood anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*)" (Humphries 456) and the speaker in this poem wishes to use them to "fly away."

Twist me a crown of wind-flowers;
  That I may fly away
To hear the singers at their song,
  And players at their play.

Put on your crown of wind-flowers:
  But whither would you go?
Beyond the surging of the sea
  And the storms that blow.

Alas! Your crown of wind-flowers
    Can never make you fly:
I twist them in a crown to-day,
    And to-night they die. (201)

Three stanzas long, with alternating iambic lines of tetrameter and trimeter (a kind of meter often used in song), this poem is a conversation between the first speaker, who, in the first stanza, asks—or rather commands—the second speaker to make a crown of wind-flowers so that she may fly off to a more exciting place where singers sing and players play. The second speaker responds by asking where the first speaker would go, to which the first speaker answers, beyond the sea and storms. The last stanza shows that the second speaker gets the last word by negating everything that the first speaker hopes for: wind-flowers cannot enable flight and besides, they will die by nightfall and be useless.

This poem was especially significant for Ford. In his biography of Ford, Saunders recounts an evening Ford and his wife Elsie spent at the home of family friends, the Garnetts, with "Ford playing and Elsie singing 'Twist me a Crown of Windflowers'" (83). Rosetti's poem was set to music by Ford's late father, Francis Hueffer, so having his wife sing this song made it very much a family affair for Ford. In *The Queen Who Flew*, Ford recognizes the importance of not only wind-flowers but of flight, and uses Rossetti's poem as a template for his fairy tale; in doing so, he manages to give it a happier ending than the original.

Ford's marriage to Elsie and her parents' efforts to keep them from marrying also figure into the story. On March 16, 1894, Elsie fled from her parents' home to Ford's family friends, the Garnetts, who were sympathetic to the young couple (Judd 40). Elsie's father, Dr. Martindale started legal proceedings to make Elsie, who was seventeen, a ward of the courts. To thwart further legal action, Ford and Elsie lied about their ages and got married at a register office in Gloucester on May 17, 1894 (Saunders 82).

The Queen Who Flew was published ten days before Elsie's flight. Ford had a journalist friend, George Perris help "to publicise the link between the elopement

and *The Queen Who Flew*. A number of papers carried the story" (Judd 41) including the *Star*, the *Morning*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and The *People* between June 6-8, 1894, as well as *The Times* on June 25 (Saunders 517 n19).

The fairy tale begins like all fairy tales with "Once upon a time" but soon exposes how Queen Eldrida does not have control over her own realm or even her own person. Ford writes: "she was Queen over a great and powerful country, [but] she led a very quiet life, and sat a great deal alone in her garden watching the roses grow, and talking to a bat" (1). While she is isolated in the garden, constant power struggles rage through her land: "Instead of trying to get rid of the Queen altogether, the great nobles of the kingdom merely fought violently with each other for possession of the Queens's person. Then they would proclaim themselves Regents of the kingdom and would issue bills of attainder against all their rivals, saying they were traitors against the Queen's Government" (2).

Though she recognizes that she is Queen of the "most prosperous and contented nation in the world" (5), Eldrida does not understand what that means. The circumscribed life Eldrida leads, with overbearing men like the current Regent Lord Blackjowl making decisions for her, echo not only the situation many Victorian women found themselves in, but also Elsie's circumstances and her father trying to thwart her marriage to Ford.

To change her way of life, Eldrida asks the bat, "'Would it be possible for me to fly?' for a great longing had come into her heart to be able to fly away out of the garden" (5-6). This corresponds to the second line of the Rossetti poem: "That I may fly away." The impulse to fly shares the poem's first speaker's sense of tedium and despair as well as Elsie's desire to get away from a patriarchal environment that deprives her of romantic love and agency.

The wind-flowers represent the first step toward freedom for Eldrida. Her only friend, the bat says, "Well, there's a certain flower that has two remarkable properties—one, that people who carry it about with them can always fly, and the other, that it will restore the blind to sight" (6-7). In exchange for some meat and red flannel for his rheumatism as well as some opodeldoc liniment,

the bat discloses that the wind-flowers underfoot have magical powers. Eldrida immediately "twine[s] them into a carcanet, [and winds] them into her soft gold-brown hair, beneath her small crown royal" (20). This directly references Rossetti's poem, but here we see that Eldrida, rather than commanding someone else to make the circlet of wind-flowers for her, chooses to do so herself, most probably because there is no one else to do so.

Once the wind-flowers are made into a circlet, the story unfolds over six flights taken by Eldrida. The first three flights take her away from her kingdom but she must endure abuse by her own people, a neighboring king, and a witch before she gains freedom after her fourth flight. All mark milestones in her understanding of how the world works.

Eldrida's first flight takes her over the garden wall and into the city and reveals her ignorance as well as her disempowerment. She encounters a ragged man who she identifies as poor and takes him to a honey-cake shop to feed him. When the shop owner asks her to pay, she shows no sign of understanding what that means and says, "I am the Queen; I never pay for what I eat" (27) which alarms the honey-cake maker, but she gives him her signet ring as a token. Eldrida's ignorance of money and economics, and her casual parting with a piece of jewelry point to her overall naiveness. When the palace soldiers catch up with her, they prioritize following the orders of the Regent instead of her commands, and they try to take her back to the palace. Eldrida is sick and tired of the antics of the nobles who fight over who can have access to her power so she flies away.

Eldrida's second flight takes her from her realm to one ruled by King Mark where she demonstrates that she can speak for herself and not be cowed by despotic men. Fleeing from the soldiers, Eldrida first sets out to survey her land from the mountaintop and gazes at the town her palace is in, situated in a narrow valley with one side facing the sea, with a harbor. She decides to make her way upland, but during the night, she falls asleep while flying and drifts to a neighboring country. Hungry, and without money so that none of the villagers will give her food, she goes to see King Mark, "an enormous, black-bearded man . . . a

great deal more ugly than the Regent at home had been, and his red eyes twinkled underneath black, shaggy brows, like rubies in a cavern" (40) whose overall aspect is demonic. In exchange for food, King Mark demands that she marry him but Eldrida declines: she considers him cruel because of how he treats his people and does not like his pronounced ugliness. In her own kingdom, Eldrida was listless in dealing with governmental matters, signing when she was told to sign and not bothering to read documents (17) but here, she shows that she has some gumption in standing up to the King, even though it is more of a knee-jerk reaction than a well thought out plan.

When King Mark (who Alison Lurie implies may refer to Elsie's father, Dr. Martindale (136)) throws her off the top of a palace tower, Eldrida rises and flies away until she reaches the hut of a witch, where she has adventures that allude to classic fairy tales. The witch agrees to feed Eldrida in exchange for work but Eldrida realizes the witch means to eat her (shades of "Hansel and Gretel") so she flies away. The witch on her broom as well as her flying cat are in hot pursuit of Eldrida when Eldrida dodges a blow which results in the witch hitting her cat. The witch and her cat furiously fight till they destroy each other while Eldrida survives.

Ford continues to reference classic fairy tales. Eldrida lives for some time in the witch's hut and cares for the geese that used to belong to the witch, chatting with them because they understand bat language which she can speak. Two men, the Prince of Kamschkatka and a shepherd of Pendleton, who seek the Elixir of Life which is the water from the witch's well, as well as a demon, appear. In an amusing allusion to the Grimm fairy tale, "The Goose Girl," it is the prince and the shepherd who change places instead of the princess and her maid of the original story. The prince and the shepherd mistake Eldrida for the witch and a goose girl and think changing places would give each of them a better chance of getting what they want, but she sees through their ruse by analyzing their appearances and does not heed their loud offers of marriage.

The demon mistakes Eldrida for the witch who has signed away her soul

to the devil but when the time for him to collect her soul comes and goes, he realizes his mistake and begs her to marry him, because the Elixir of Life is also the Elixir of Love which makes everyone love whoever drinks it. The Faustian demon tempts her with riches, power in the form of becoming a queen, a flying broom, and the elixir but Eldrida does not succumb and retorts that she is already rich, a powerful queen, can fly, and has had enough elixir (69-70). By the time the demon gives up and leaves, the hut and the well disappear and disenchanted geese become human. With all the clamoring and offers of marriage—a result of her drinking the elixir for a prolonged period of time which makes her irresistible to many—Eldrida decides to move on. Like the courtiers at her palace who fight for the chance to wield her power, here the men are motivated by magic; neither the palace nobles nor the prince, shepherd, or demon want to know her as a person.

Eldrida's fourth flight has an unusual religious moment which can be read as a nod to Rossetti's Christian devotion. After leaving the witch's hut, Eldrida flies higher and higher, thinking, "Suppose I were to fly right up to the sun; what fun would it be!" (74). She hears "strange harmonies, as though ten thousand Aeolian harps were being breathed upon in accord by a great wind" (74) and watches planets whir and spin and stars gleam and flies until she comes to "a great bow of iridescent colours, and rising from it a great array of white steps that ran up, up, so high that it took away her breath to look upon them" (74-75). She hears a voice that cautions her, "Maiden . . . so far and no further" and then commands, "Go down this bow back to the earth, and do the work that is to be done by you. Be of use to your fellows" (75). She hears glad voices full of joy but is unable to see anyone. The God-like voice that sends her back to earth checks her unknowing hubris and reminds her that she needs to be a useful part of a community, something she has yet to achieve in life.

Eldrida fulfills the seventh and eighth lines of Rossetti's poem ("Beyond the surging of the sea/ And the storms that blow") when she lands back on earth because she finds herself in the land of Happy Folk which lies beyond the sea from her realm. She has weathered stormy encounters with strangers but here she

meets a gentle a blind ploughman. That he is blind is a blessing for her because he is immune therefore to the effects of the elixir. As she helps him lead the horses that pull the plough so that the furrows will be straight, Eldrida "felt a new happiness come over her, at the thought that she was of use in the world" (78). The ploughman invites her home for supper but again, she realizes that she has no money to pay for food. However, the ploughman and his mother are kind and take her in. It is in conversation with then that she has come beyond the Narrow Seas to the land of the Happy Folk which is ruled by no one because "it gets along very well as it is" (84).

Eldrida finally is in a happy place where she can listen to the ploughman sing and spend time with him and his mother quietly and companionably, reminding us of the third and fourth lines of Rossetti's poem ("To hear the singers at their song,/ And players at their play"). They listen to her story and understand that she is a queen but treat her as an equal. She works with them on the farm and at home, enjoying autumn and winter and the quiet rhythm of their lives. At this point, Eldrida has fulfilled the wishes about which Rossetti poem's speaker can only dream.

Eldrida's fifth and sixth flights take her to and from her kingdom where she ties up loose ends and actively pursues her own happiness. What is significant is that in these two flights, Eldrida is no longer fleeing from anything haphazardly: she has a concrete destination as well as distinct goals to that she means to achieve. In the spring, she remembers that the bat once told her that wind-flowers can cure blindness so her initial goal is to fly to her kingdom to consult with the bat about this. She learns from him that wind-flower tea cures blindness but is disappointed that the flowers no longer grow in the garden.

A subsequent goal, after learning that the Regent is faking her signature on documents and is about to announce his fake marriage to her, is to reveal the Regent's treachery to her people and because she does not want to rule the kingdom, enthrone the bat to do so in her stead. She chooses the bat because

> he is not likely to be partial, since he is in this vast assembly

> the only one that is not in love with me. He will be very economical, because he neither needs much food, not cares for rich robes. Therefore, the taxes will not be heavy; and, even if he is a little weak-eyed, he will not be a bit more blind to your interests, perhaps, than you are yourselves. (110)

Though uninterested in ruling the country herself, she can make a reasoned choice for her people, illustrating that she is now conversant with some of the ways of the world.

Eldrida's goal on returning to the land of Happy Folk is to cure the blind ploughman by making an infusion of her wind-flower crown, the only wind-flowers she has. Late in the day, she finds him wading to cross a stream. When he hears her voice, he confesses, "it was all so silent and so dreadfully lonely, that I could not stand it, and I was about to set out to search for you through the world" (116). Like Rapunzel, who cures her lover's blindness with her tears, Eldrida gives the drinking-horn full of wind-flower tea to the ploughman and he regains sight. He professes his love for her, which she does not reject. After she tells him about the wind-flower crown, he replies, "I dare say you won't want it again, unless you get very tired of me" (117). They go home to his mother and are married the following day and lived out their happily ever after "together . . . hand in hand" (118).

Edith Lazaros Honig, in a chapter entitled "Spinsters: Life Still Held Some Charm" in her book, *Breaking the Angelic Image: Women's Power in Victorian Children's Fantasy*, devotes a couple of pages to *The Queen Who Flew* and chides Ford for creating an independent female protagonist, only to have her give up her crown and become the wife of a ploughman who may, now that he is no longer handicapped, treat Eldrida poorly and not as an equal. Honig points out that despite the happy ending, "girls can read another subtler, perhaps even subliminal message: You can be a productive, independent person, controlling your own destiny and that of others so long as you do not marry. Marriage may bring a happiness of sorts, but subjugation is an intrinsic part of the picture even if it is

self-inflicted" (52).

I disagree. For Eldrida, being Queen means being kept in the dark about how to rule one's realm, being kept from understanding the everyday lives of those she ruled and being belittled for being a girl/woman by older men who constantly fight violently for power that they believe should be theirs. Through her journey to self-awareness, she repudiates those values that would put her on the throne as a puppet. Not everyone needs to be, or wants to be, a queen. Eldrida now has options, and she makes her choice. She executes her royal authority one last time to enthrone her friend the bat who she deems a suitable leader for her ridiculous people. In a comic move, Ford shows us how the court and courtiers pay obeisance to the bat and in doing so, make everything bat-like fashionable in a batty way.

Furthermore, Eldrida's husband, the ploughman is the only suitor in this fairy tale who is immune to the elixir (probably because of his blindness) and to her status as a queen (since she is not in her own country). He does not try to usurp her throne or threaten her if she does not obey, nor does he talk down to her. They live and work companionably and Eldrida discovers a peaceful life in which she is useful, which is the mandate given to her by the celestial voice. She makes the choice to use her crown of wind-flowers to cure the ploughman of blindness since she no longer needs to flee an undesirable situation. It is not a heart-wrenching sacrifice since she no longer needs to fly away from anything. She is living with her new happy family in a land where everyone gets along and she is appreciated for who she is and what she does, not because she is a queen. That the ploughman professes his love to her after he regains his sight seems like a logical extension of his months of getting to know her, not the result of the elixir working its annoying magic.

Ford's rewriting of Rossetti's poem in this fairy tale changes the tenor of the last stanza. Instead of a negative lament that reminds the speaker that she must remain where she is without hope of flight, in *The Queen Who Flew*, wind-flowers do indeed make Eldrida fly and once made into a crown, keep their powers indefinitely, until made into a tea. Unlike the elixir found in the witch's well which

causes Eldrida more trouble than not, the wind-flower tea is a real elixir that cures blindness and improves the quality of life for not only the ploughman but also his mother and of course, Eldrida. She has agency and chooses to use it; she is not subjugating or being subjugated but rather making a measured choice that will ensure her happiness.

In *The Queen Who Flew*, the allusion to Rossetti's poem seems incidental, but as I have demonstrated, it is a whimsical imaginative response to and a rewriting of that poem that reveals young Ford's respect for Christina Rossetti coupled with his youthful desire for a happier ending to the poem: a successful flight to a better and fulfilling place. *The Queen Who Flew*, written during his courtship of Elsie Martindale, also predicts a quiet happy ending that he and Elise hoped to share. Lurie explains: "Ford thus expresses the hope that Elsie will choose love in a cottage with him over London luxury and loneliness. He also echoes his recurring dream of a self-sufficient rural life" (136-37).

Rossetti passed away in December of the year this book was published, and Ford and Elsie's marriage eventually ran into difficulties. However, that they chose to name their firstborn Christina seems fitting proof that their initial "happily ever," whatever its duration, owed much to Ford's beloved Aunt Christina.

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