INTRODUCTION

The scales of literary irony have been loaded against *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* from the start. On one hand the romance has been robbed of its poignant significance as the last major work of its author’s life, because Mackail, his official biographer, manages to avoid mentioning the book at all. Instead he emphasizes how, some three weeks before his death in November 1896, Morris struggled with the disappointing *Sundering Flood*.\(^1\) Although Morris had lamented that ‘the rough of my tale’ of *Water* was nearly completed in August 1895, he seems to have been working on the proofs, the Fair Copy for the Kelmscott printers, both then and later.

Later biographers all follow Mackail, and ignore May Morris’s very specific record of her father’s last labours:

My father saw the first two Parts of the *Water* in proof, and that is all. His Fair Copy of the tale breaks off in the middle of Part IV, chapter 14 page 174 of this volume. Thereafter we are dealing with the first manuscript, and it must be understood that wonderful and clean as this manuscript is – page after page flowing smoothly off the pen, without a correction – in half a dozen places there are certain

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repetitions of words or repetitions of sound and one or two awkward sentences, all of which the author would have put right when he overlooked his work.²

The evidence of the Manuscripts, held in the British Library,³ confirms May Morris's account, down to the very page she nominates, though she conveys nothing of the extent and extraordinary quality of Morris's revisions.

On the other hand, Water, perhaps the crowning achievement of an extraordinary life, had no critical reception in its own right, but merely obituary notices. Theodore Watts-Dunton's review may be taken as representatively well-intentioned,⁴ in that he decides to say almost nothing about the book but to put on record his enthusiastic admiration of its author. He recommends the romances in general as 'artistic poetry' in prose, never hinting that there is any power or purpose in them as stories. It was perfectly possible for him to praise Morris for imaginative brilliance, magnanimity and independence of temperament, and vehement courage in his convictions, without looking for these qualities in the text before him.

One reason used for neglecting the romances is the tiresome chestnut that their language is mock-medieval 'Wardour Street English',⁵ decorative

² May Morris, Introduction to volume XX Collected Works p. xix.
³ See Textual Note. p. xxvii.
This odd misdescription still occasionally appears in spite of the lucid rebuttal by C.S. Lewis in his essay ‘William Morris’ in 1938:

most of the detractors when they talk of Morris’ style are really thinking of his printing: they expect the florid and the crowded, and imagine something like Sidney’s *Arcadia*. In fact, however, this style constantly departs from that of modern prose in the direction of simplicity. Except for a few archaic words...it is incomparably easier and clearer than any ‘natural’ style could be, and the ‘dull finish’, the careful avoidance of rhetoric, gloss, and decoration, is of its very essence.7

A second group of adverse reviewers, more discerningly, recognized that somehow or other these romances were at the heart of Morris’s case against the Victorian age, his concern for the cultural and ecological inheritance of England and Europe, his fierce longing for a more just, self-regulating and beautiful society. Some were not clear how the romances managed to subvert contemporary social and moral standards, but their instinct was correct. Some were respectable, and alienated by extra-marital sex and other indecorums; others were aesthetes, to whose sophistication Morris loudly preferred barbarism.

Since the demise of Empire Morris’s fiction has been discussed mostly by those sympathetic with his

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6 I have discussed the language of Water in my article ‘Whilom, as Tells the Tale’ *Journal of the William Morris Society*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 16-25.

political perspective. Yet many of these too have felt betrayed: these pointlessly pretty archaic idylls did not seem to forward the cause of the workers' republic at all. Even if Water were comprehensible, they felt uneasily, it would merely obscure the proletariat's comprehension of the class-struggle and present no indictment of the status quo: it was neither stimulant nor emetic. Surely Morris had 'gone soft in the head', through overwork, disappointment, senility or insufficient grounding in economic theory!

That fuzzy, mean-minded label 'escapist' has been especially malign in limiting and misleading Morris's audience. It implies that there is one natural form of story, called 'realistic'; that it is cowardly, immoral or sentimental of an author to invent, and a reader to become interested in, improbable or impossible contexts and events; and that a Gradgrindish reverence before circumstance ('facts' or statistical probabilities) is both rational and healthy. All these things are untrue, and the criteria implied by the label 'escapist' would be self-destructive when applied to the major stories of any culture; of course, they are not so applied, either to traditional or to 'classic' works.

More subtle discomfort is betrayed by those critics, conscious of profound implications in Morris's narration, who list the romances (whether or not with

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8 The quoted phrase, intended more in sorrow than in anger, appears in E.P. Thompson's William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955), and was adopted - with different motives - as the title 'Had Morris Gone Soft in the Head?' of an aloof essay by Robert Currie in Essays in Criticism, XXIX, (October 1979), pp. 341–56. In his 1977 Merlin Press revision Thompson adds a far more apposite 'Postscript 1976'.
honorific intentions) as 'high fantasy'. The atheistic Morris is certainly not 'high' in the 'High Church' or Heaven-focussed sense that pious, even pietistic, writers like Macdonald, Lewis and Williams are.

Gender-bound critics have found Water especially confusing. Morris is famous for preferring medieval European society to that of his own day, and for being very much 'a man's man', delighted to be mistaken for a ship's captain. How can this rugged William Morris have written a story in which a female character is 'the hero', obstructing the proper ending of a good healthy medieval quest-romance? Wouldn't she make the deeds of noble knights more or less irrelevant?

As to the female hero, Morris was an enemy of his age in its patriarchal as well as its economic, aesthetic and ethical assumptions. That he refused the role of righteously-wrathful betrayed Victorian husband is well-known, and his radicalism in matters of gender is consistent. His early childhood was dominated by a mother and two older sisters, and his delight in story, which began so early that he could not remember a time when he could not read, was formed among them. Probably his preference for reading aloud, rather than being read to, stems from childish determination to make his contribution to the family entertainment. Throughout his life (though monarchy of any kind often roused his scorn or fury) his country was ruled by a Queen. His own family, once the obnoxious Rossetti had left Kelmscott Manor, was all-

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9 Auden intends high praise by the term in his interesting essay 'The Quest Hero' (Texas Quarterly, IV, 1962, pp. 81–93). Rosemary Jackson dismisses Morris into pious company in the 'Victorian Fantasists' chapter of Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion (Methuen New Accents, 1981), and castigates them all as authors of 'high fantasy' on page 153.
female, and his closest extra-familial relationships always included women of vigour, vision and personality.¹⁰

Women play a major role in all Morris’s late romances except the very short time-travel novella *A Dream of John Ball*, and are central to all his important fiction. This was necessarily true of the title poem to his first collection, *The Defence of Guenevere*, and almost all the verse narratives within *The Earthly Paradise* frame, whether or not orthodox ‘love stories’. Signy, Brunhild and Gudrun similarly dominate *Sigurd the Volsung*. Morris was consistently aware, too, of the necessary conflict between goddess-vision and mortal women.¹¹

As to quest-romance, Morris was temperamentally aligned with the stubborn courage of uncourtly – even barbarian – warriors of northern story, rather than either vowed or errant knights. Two of his romances have privileged boy-heroes who go out ‘at a venture’, but the others are called, or driven, into their adventure. Moreover, even Goldmane and Ralph are ambitious of folktale deeds rather than knighthly achievements; the social, cultural and sexual realities that surround his protagonists, threatening both mind and body, are quite unlike those of a Malory or Chretien tale. Morris well understood why

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Tennyson’s King Arthur sees the Grail-quest as destructive of Camelot, just as he understood, and abominated, Arthur’s view of female sexuality.

Medieval courtly love or religious allegory did not much attract Morris. An expert translator and redactor of saga, epic and other traditional and popular narrative forms, he interweaves these with folk conventions in his last-decade stories. His protagonists, though physically pleasing and mentally stable, have no extraordinary wisdom or power; they respond to their ordeals in organic but innocent rituals of personal fulfilment. They are not representatives of or refugees from our homocosmic reality, but contend with a world that has its own phenomenal laws – including magic, which they never really understand, though helpers or lovers may do so.

Morris’s romances are an expansive English, adventurous form of the psychological fantasy, as in the German novella, where plot, setting and character offer radical analogies to inward self-knowledge. These late romances hive up wonder and relish into unparaphrasable recognitions. They offer self-renewal, through vicarious joy, to an attentive audience and celebrate, yet defy, the mortality of the individual and the brevity of social harmony. These ‘radical analogies’ can as readily be expressed in rhetorics derived from Freud or Jung as in the terms of social psychologists like Marx.

Only during this century, with the growth of heterocosmic fantasy into a major literary field, have audiences become conscious of the skills appropriate to reading these romances. Morris exploited the quasi-familial female audiences of his own life to represent this implied, attuned audience, but predomi-
nantly he aimed at audiences of the far future, in an energetic and responsive society like his Nowhere. ¹²

A brief introduction cannot do justice to the many aspects of this magnificently original fantasy. The emphasis here comes from my amazement, on my latest re-reading, at reaching the all-male Castle of the Quest and realizing that (apart from a toddler and a very old man) the story had travelled a hundred pages, a vast lake and two whole books without introducing a single male character. I have recently discussed the heroine’s brilliant subversion of quest-romance convention.¹³ Here I celebrate her overturning of other static institutions, including audience expectation.

Birdalome, so improbably and naturally named, is both an interrogation and a reconciliation of several traditional images of women. Like Rapunzel (on whose story Morris wrote a brief verse-play), she is brought up by a wicked witch. Like Cinderella, Catskin, and other hardworking poor girls she can, given the opportunity, excel in aristocratic contexts. Like Snow-White (of the Seven Dwarfs) she is hated by a powerful, implacable woman, and like Snow-White and Rose-Red she is tested and protected, loved and hated, in a woodland context far from all the resources of civilization. Like the sister of the Seventh Swan she plies her needle in silent determination to contribute something to the world around her.

But these are all folktales. When Birdalome escapes from her ruthless fosterer she enters the world of


magical quest, of heroic knight-errantry, where (before *The Lord of the Rings*) folktale conventions were rarely allowed entrance. Up to the point where Morris's Fair Copy revision stops, his psychomyth is a complex interweaving of ironic Bildungsroman, magical wonder folktale, and pastiche of chivalric adventure, satiric of Victorian social conventions as of male world-views.

The first chapter is Bildungsroman, describing Birdalone’s kidnapping by the witch-wife from Utterhay, a microcosm of urban capitalism. The baby can be stolen because here money can do most things, even defy and outrage nature, while poverty can hardly keep itself alive. Only as the witch hurries fearfully through the almost trackless forest Evilshaw with her prize does the narrative first hint at its wonder-tale aspects.

The enmity between wood and witch-wife here foreshadows a struggle for Birdalone’s will between wild nature and the solitary power-woman. But the ill-named woods are kindly, constantly offering the lonely girl the beauty and abundance of nature, and the woman is all cold, fierce, witch-crafty ego. As Birdalone grows up, between natural magic and arcane ritual knowledge, the participation of the wood-spirit Habundia in her life seems entirely benevolent, but her human society is limited to one human being, the wicked stepmother as remorseless tyrant, far more obviously powerful and magical than the inhuman spirit. The witch shackles the child to hard day-labour in her cottage and fields by the shore of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, enforcing obedience, mostly by beatings but also by menacing her slave’s physical form by magical shape-changing.
Habundia, by contrast, opens the life of the wildwood to the child’s wondering gaze, and – by appearing in her image – also reveals to her her own body, a natural perspective more wonderful than anything in *Twelfth Night*. The wood-spirit may not understand human love or tears, but she definitely understands delight in beauty.

Why does the witch want Birdalone, apart from slave-labour? Here the interlacement of irony-based Bildungsroman and delight-based wonder tale is eloquent. She is to be a sexual bait for men, and eventually to be taught witchcraft, to be the core of another generation of wickedness. But before her hideous training begins, Birdalone flees from her tutor’s fury, naked and alone, carried off across the Water in the witch’s own sinister magical boat, which can be propelled (but not steered) by a smear of her blood.

The Sending Boat takes this graceful, candid, naked, teenage fugitive, whom not even King Lear in his madness could call sophisticated, to the Isle of Increase Unsought, earthly paradise of the Queen of all the Wondrous Isles that give the lake its name. She steps ashore into the complex world of courts, classes, knight-errantry, lovers’ vows and sexual longing, prison, and other social constraints, and meets three beautiful and heraldically colour-coded upper-class girls, Viridis (green), Aurea (gold) and Atra (black). These maiden heroines of a fine chivalric romance, shamefully enslaved by the Queen, send her as messenger to their three brave, handsome true-love knights. They each provide an emblematic garment which, offered to the knights with appropriate information, will stimulate them to the last phase of
their amorous quest, heroic rescue and victory. After that satisfactory climax, she can go away, presumably, and the three couples settle down to live happily ever after.

Of course, that pattern is subverted by the very fact that the messenger is here the central character, and the ladies, initially at any rate, mere graceful figures in tapestry poses around her sublime nudity. The most perceptive of the three, Atra, recognizes almost at once that this is a female hero, not a helper, adjuvant, auxiliary at all! She has every right to be apprehensive, especially when they have to explain about sex to this naked teenager:

They were silent now a little, and it was as if some sweet incense had been burned within the chamber. For Birdalone, the colour came and went in her cheeks, her flesh quaked, her heart beat quick, and she was oppressed with the sweetness of longing. More daintily she moved her limbs, and laid foot to foot and felt the sleekness of her sides; and tender was she of her body as of that which should one day be so sorely loved (II, 5, 66–7).

This passage and its heroine could hardly be less Victorian.

The ludicrous name of the Isle and the hilarious incompetence of its Queen’s mingled malevolence and voluptuosity help to deconstruct the audience expectation of quest-romance patterns of closure. Whom will these gallant knights, personifications of chivalry, have to joust with to rescue their darlings? And with what weapons?

If the misnaming of the lovely Evilshaw and the destructively ambiguous Wondrous Isles invites
interrogative rather than trusting responses, so does the unforgettable Queen of those Isles. She is splendidly built, with abundant golden hair, but when Birdalone is brought into her royal presence her effect is spoiled by her vicious expression,

a look both proud, foolish, and cruel; terrible indeed, sitting in judgment in that place on a shrinking naked creature (II, 3, 58).

Her impact is like that of Swinburne’s chant ‘Dolores’, though the tone is contempt rather than perverse fascination:

Thou art fed with perpetual breath,
And alive after infinite changes,
And fresh from the kisses of death;
Of langours rekindled and rallied,
Of barren delights and unclean,
Things monstrous and fruitless, a pallid
And poisonous queen.

Birdalone indeed sees the palace of the Queen’s artificially maintained glamour as ‘The House of Death’.

The Queen has magical resources, yet not from any personal qualities; they come from either an inexhaustible chest of ‘Increase Unsought’, the Wonder-Coffer, or an *aqua vitae*, the Water of Might (names clearly connected with the book’s title and the lake-realm she rules), or her big sister. She has power, for example over the three ladies who are her servants, and feels intense erotic pleasure at her dominating them, yet because it was her sister who captured them for her, she is forbidden to maltreat them physically while they are obedient. However, this constraint does not apply to her new, naked
captive, since the Queen’s powerful sister is the very witch-wife from whom Birdalone has ‘stolen herself’.

But much as the Queen looks forward to torturing such a young, beautiful female, Birdalone is not in such very great danger when she is brought before the throne: the Queen’s memory is so bad that she will have forgotten the event the next day. Her combination of spite and smug incompetence caricatures the ruling class of the British Empire. Thus her Increase Unsought and condescending cruelty equate with capitalism’s unearned income and colonial tyranny; her pomp and her magnificent island palace correspond to the fineries and the lovely country-houses of England’s aristocracy; her ignorance, stupidity and amnesia are necessary attributes of the Tory reactionaries, pretending to conserve a cultural tradition they neither respond to nor care about.

This ornate double of Birdalone’s ‘terrible mother’ rules an Earthly Paradise where there is no work but a ruthless reign of pleasure and a constant production of commodities; she needs a supply of cultured slaves to amuse her (and to keep track of things). Her elder sister spoils her with expensive presents. Her coffer is like a factory system, invisible from the windows of the Big House; her wondrous wealth, like the profits of usurers, brokers and bankers, is unsought by either joy or labour.

High Tory capitalism is a hypocrisy not even very skilfully maintained. The gracious and beautiful ladies Viridis, Aurea and Atra, taking their ease in the sunlit garden, are in fact slaves. The pleasure-house is a prison and the gorgeous chest holds instruments of torture. The breaking of her spells is long overdue.
Like the real-life authorities on church architecture who marred and desecrated the buildings they claimed to ‘restore’, she discounts other people’s active human experience as worthless; like the fictional Bounderby, she projects her selfishness onto those subject to her power, blinding herself to indomitable energies of class-solidarity, fidelity and pity, the active love that sets Birdalone free.

In all this the Queen is the ‘civilized’ antonym of ecologically sustainable nature. Where the nature-spirit Habundia gives wealth, the Queen wields riches (Morris was fond of this distinction); Habundia celebrates and reflects Birdalone’s human beauty, but the Queen hates, fears and would mar it. She later usurps Birdalone’s place as Arthur’s bedfellow; later still it is Habundia who restores his sanity and leads him to Birdalone’s bed. Obviously, the Queen’s splendours are no natural abundance, but a disguise for her island’s foul and unnatural blight.

On this theme of sexuality, of love and the right true end of love, the wonder-tale is as perceptive and forthright as the Bildungsroman or the chivalric satire. The Queen affects the role of femme fatale, la belle dame, who can give her merci to her adorers or withhold it. But she is no irresistible, quasi-unattainable courtly-love queen, merely a lecherous, proud, domineering and insecurely promiscuous seductress. None of the castaways that have come to the island have fallen in love with her, so in mortification she has tortured and destroyed them – and of course forgotten them. Her blatant lust to get the three questing knights into her bed (true lovers all, though Arthur’s emotions are in upheaval) is what destroys her: rather than ruling a Court of Love she is condemned by its laws and executed by its justice.
Birdalone’s four-lobed journey is the structure of the book. To deliver the emblem-clothes and messages of Viridis, Aurea and Atra to their knights, she must sail to each of the Queen’s Isles that give the book its title. All are beautiful, stupid, malevolent traps, worthy of their mistress, and forbidden change while she lives. The Sending Boat ends at the Castle of the Quest, built where the maidens were abducted. Like the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* (but much more briefly evoked) each isle has its own mystery and implied narrative, and on both visits Birdalone glimpses fragments of each story as it pierces the frame, so to speak, of her own.

When Birdalone retraces this *imram*, well after the Queen’s death, the other Isles are radically alive and changing, but *Increase Unsought* is totally deconstructed. The Tory paradise is now revealed as a waste land, its only life thorns, lizards and beetles, adders and ‘great carrion flies’. On this sterile shore the Sending Boat breaks up and Birdalone has to try to swim several miles of the Lake unaided. Only by Habundia’s aid does she survive, returning to the witch’s house as naked as she had left.

The Isle of the Young and the Old obscenely preserves the innocence of childhood and the poignant incompetence of second childhood: the permanent children have been reduced to ‘images’, scarcely more human than the rabbits in the grass, and their guardian to a useless alternation of maundering and senile content with maundering and maudlin fragments of displaced memory. When change rushes upon them, the old man is released into restful death and the young begin to grow up. Birdalone’s second visit may stimulate some structure and vision of a
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good society to direct towards wisdom their thronging human impulses.

The Isles of Queens and of Kings are obviously a pair, both dominated by imposing castles. The first has a congregation of noble and beautiful ladies appropriate in pathos and passion to its magnificence, the second an all-male garrison of martial dignity to match its stern and warlike grandeur. Both are parodic of the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ folktale – and not only of its gender stereotypes. Every inhabitant is immobilized, but would awaken from the magical trance if the central figure in the tableau were kissed awake. But there will be no happy endings: the lovely woman in the Kings’ castle and the tall king in the Queens’ are emphatically dead, not sleeping. It may be that they killed each other in some neurotically formal version of the war of the sexes.

When Birdalone revisits these islands, the Kings’ is inhabited by a group of nubile and man-hungry virgin huntresses, the Queens’ by a similar throng of virile hunters. Both try to trap her into joining them; the maidens use contemptuous and spiteful giggling at her male armour, because they assume any male is superior to the bravest woman; a man tries to capture her, with cheerfully cynical lechery, but another prevents him, expressing a youthful and healthily idealistic chivalry. These Isles have unreassuring implications for single-sex education systems, clubs and associations...

The last Isle of the five, the Isle of Nothing, is a wide, low featureless bank of gravel, and when Birdalone ventures inland an equally featureless grey mist grows and thickens around her. By natural magic, burning a lock of hair Habundia had given her,
she conjures upon the mist a vision of the spirit – or of herself, since Habundia always appears to her in her own image – and escapes by following it back to the shore. Natural beauty is, it seems, the antidote to metaphysical doubt and nihilistic isolation.

Birdalone finds this Isle intensely different on her return. Though only five years have passed, tall young trees crowd much of the island, and a small pastoral tribe pastures its sheep, goats and cattle there, and of course breeds children. They recognize her visit as a blessing by their very own goddess, because Habundia had been the first power evoked here, and in the image of Birdalone.

Between these two imrams, Birdalone has delivered her message to the Castle of the Quest, built and garrisoned by the heraldically yearning but helpless knights, betrothed to Viridis, Aurea and Atra. Once she also gives them the blood-drinking magic boat and tells them precisely what to do, and where, they sail off to rescue their ladies. Their serio-comic, largely accidental success is what destroys the Queen. This male triumph is told in a fairly straight-faced flashback chapter, as a mere episode in Birdalone’s foregrounded story.

But what story? What can a female hero actually do? According to audience expectations shaped by male quest, her role is over with her message. Can healthy, passionate Birdalone be trapped in an all-male castle, being taught to read, write, embroider, and be a lady? Of course she soon sickens, confined by the Norman-French expectations of aristocrats and clergy.

The sickness is love: she has fallen in love with Arthur, the betrothed of her friend Atra. And she is
expected to wave him prettily goodbye as he sails off to be united with Atra! Perhaps a well-bred young lady would have repressed desire, or at least suppressed her natural activity of spirit to pine picturesquely, but neither slavery under the witch nor communion with wood-spirits is conducive to this skill. Instead Birdalone acts - and bears the blame for female wiles, broken oaths, death, ghosts and ruin, and madness. No better test of individuation and maturity than such autonomy could punctuate a Bildungsroman!

Birdalone learns of an ancient earth-magic area, the Black Valley of the Grey-Wethers (one of Morris’s superb Icelandic landscapes), and escapes there to intercede for her love. She lays her hand on the huge kingstone, praying with absolute directness:

O Earth, thou and thy first children, I crave of you
that he may come back now at once and loving me.

(IV, 9, 159.)

Her prayer is granted, literally and immediately, but she does not realize this. The prayer is also instantly answered in travesty: from behind the stone steps an ironically different Black Knight, emphatically ‘at once’ in love with Birdalone!

He is a bad Black Knight, lieutenant to a wicked and depraved mage, the Red Knight, who rules the loathsome Red Hold. Though contact with Birdalone quickly turns Sir Thomas from evil, the Red Knight viciously murders him before he can do specific good. When the heroes of the quest, including her love Arthur, come to rescue her, they see her at the nadir of her young life, walking tethered behind the murderer’s horse, soaked with blood because Sir Thomas’ severed head hangs from her neck.
They ambush and kill the Red Knight, but the noble Golden Knight, Baudoin, is also killed. The chivalrous company of knights and ladies is broken. Aurea’s love is dead and Atra’s alienated: no one has any doubt that Arthur loves Birdalone rather than his official fiancée. Viridis and Sir Hugh have each other, but necessarily share the general mourning.

Is this all Birdalone’s fault? Definitely not. The innocent maiden from the wildwood cannot be bound by male-centred rules or the expectations of upper-class courtly lovers, however neatly colour-coded. Without her the ladies would still be slaves, and the knights still gazing out across the lake in futile postures of devotion. Now, as Arthur, Hugh and their allies plan to exterminate the remaining vermin of the Red Hold, at last employing their warrior prowess for the benefit of their neighbours inland, Birdalone is assured by all, including Aurea and especially Atra, that she is not to blame. This is when she and Arthur confess their love and exchange their first caresses of love (once she has reassured him about her relationship with Sir Thomas).

After Hugh’s charming account of the unheroic expedition that rescued the ladies from the Isle of Increase Unsought, the war against the Red Hold begins. At once Birdalone acts again, rebelling against that other courtly-love staple, the eternal triangle, by stealing away secretly to hide from both Arthur and Atra. She survives, in fact succeeds brilliantly, as a craftswoman in a middle-class mercantile city. She even meets her true mother, and brightens her last years.

It must be admitted at this point that Morris’s revisions for the printers’ Fair Copy of Water make a
very great difference to the quality of the writing. He may have pretended that he could toss off romances with careless ease, but in fact he revised industriously and often brilliantly, with keen awareness of both cadence of expression and nuance of meaning. The Fair Copy emendations stop at Birdalone’s dealings with Sir Thomas, and there is a certain thinness about some later episodes, especially Birdalone’s reunion with her mother. A convenient dream sends her back to the Castle of the Quest, and she resolves to seek Habundia again, thus completing the water-lobed of her journey. This is when she sees the Isles in the throes of change, ending with the prospect of a lonely and pointless death on the dead Queen’s own blasted Isle.

After her epic swim and the natural-magical aid of the floating tree, Birdalone finds her witch-wife mistress dead, and humbly begins to render the cottage livable again, while waiting to meet Habundia. The spirit still looks identical to Birdalone, which makes precarious the task of bringing her lover back to sanity, for after a savagely successful military campaign Arthur has suffered a breakdown: he emulates Tristan and Lancelot, wandering skinclad and wildwood-mad, a starved but dangerous harper. To see plural Birdalones would have unhinged a much less unstable lover.

Birdalone was un-Victorian enough in her frequent nudity and her courageous activity, but when clear narratorial approval is given to her leadership in enthusiastic extramarital sex, she is at her most alien to public versions of Morris’s contemporary audience:

Then Birdalone drew in her love, and went about lighting the candles and quickening a little cooking-
fire on the hearth, till the yellow light chased the moon away from the bed of their desire.

(VI, 27, 353.)

After this Bildungsroman climax (in books III–V she was wooed by many contrasting men, as is but natural given that she is physically beautiful and exudes ‘naturalness’), she and Arthur live and work together until he is physically strong again, and are then comrades-in-arms in a Robin-Hood style rescue of Viridis, Hugh, Aurea and Atra.

The story ends anticlimactically. Birdalone completes the fourth lobe of her life’s journey, returning to her birthplace as a pledge allying the townspeople with her husband and his aristocratic allies. Given the Utterhay attitude to human values in the first chapter, Morris would undoubtedly have sharpened the ironies of this ‘happy ending’ when he came to its Fair Copy revision. As it is, not only has the town turned, non-satirically, into a Good Place, but the female hero seems almost subjugated to both political exigency and her husband’s prowess in generalship.

First, the Bildungsroman element requires no return to Utterhay: Birdalone’s competence with urban, mercantile and maternal realities has been proved in her exile in Five Crafts. Second, the aristocratic masculinist elements so fiercely satirized in earlier episodes are now acceptable to the bourgeoisie. Third, the wonder-tale aspect, the strife between Habundia’s natural magic and the Witches’ control-magic, has been resolved, and the victorious ecology can now be thought of again as ‘out there’, where it always had been for the burghers of Utterhay.
Still, the achievement of this extraordinary book cannot be lessened by the mortality of its author. With typical rediscovery of the energy intrinsic in a set medieval phrase, he gives his characters the epitaph appropriate to himself:

their love never sundered, and...they lived without shame and died without fear (VII, 4, 387).

Norman Talbot
University of Newcastle,
New South Wales, 1994