Water in William Morris’s Late Prose Romances

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Water was important in the life of William Morris. Two of his houses were on the River Thames and, as Fiona MacCarthy has written, ‘The river was for him a spiritual investment, an essential human link back to antiquity and history’.¹ On a practical level, siting workshops on a river was also important to Morris as it was essential to various artistic processes. In three of his late prose romances – The Well at the World’s End (1894), The Water of the Wondrous Isles (published posthumously in 1897) and The Sundering Flood (published posthumously in 1898) – water is both a practical necessity in the siting of his pseudo-medieval communities, and integral to the spiritual, mental, moral and emotional development of the heroes and heroines. There are journeys to find water (The Well at the World’s End), over water (The Water of the Wondrous Isles) and to overcome a barrier created by water (The Sundering Flood). All three titles contain the idea of water of some sort.

All the heroes and heroines of these three prose romances are – at the outset – young and not fully developed adults. They begin in their familiar home environments, from which their various quests must take them away. The voyage is an ancient metaphor (at least as old as Homer’s Odyssey) for the journey of the individual into his or her unconscious and into the full development of all aspects of their personalities.

Thus these three novels could be described as Bildungsroman or novels of development. Although Morris does not spend much narrative time in the psychological analysis which is so common in the nineteenth century realist novel, nevertheless there are indications of growth. These are then tested by the return of the heroes and heroines to their original habitations, where their duty will be to improve the lives of their fellow citizens by putting into practice what they have learnt on their quest or voyage.

In the imaginary worlds which Morris creates in these three novels, the heroes and heroines begin as adolescents and the journey to, over or through water symbolises a kind of rite of passage to maturity. Malory’s description of the quest for the holy grail in his Morte D’Arthur probably influenced Morris’s The Well at the World’s End. Nevertheless, there are crucial differences, particularly in Morris’s idea that there is no need to abstain from full carnal heterosexual love during the quest. Thus when Ralph asks the elder whether his quest will be hurt by sexual love between himself and Ursula, the old man replies: ‘Nay son, we hear not that it shall be the worse for you in any case that ye shall become one flesh; and right joyful it is to us, not only that we have found the folk who seek to the Well at the World’s End, but also that there is such love as I perceive there is betwixt such goodly and holy folk as ye’ (II, p. 67).² Neither is the quest a religious one; although the well’s water bestows certain powers, it is more concerned with
promoting the secular virtues of making a good life in an earthly community than with preparing the searchers for eternity.

In *The Well at the World's End*, the story is of the quest of Ralph and Ursula to find the well. The subject is introduced early in the novel by Ralph's gossip, Katherine, who gives him a bead necklace. She also tells him of the well which, she says, she 'hear say is saveth from weariness and wounding and sickness; and it winneth love from all, and may be life everlasting' (I, p. 13). Ralph hopes to achieve both love and the quest in his passion for the Lady of Abundance, who tells him: 'for the Well at the World's End is no evil, but only the Quenching of Sorrow, and Clearing of the Eyes that they may behold' (I, p. 191). The Lady of Abundance, it would seem, has too chequered a past to be a suitable partner for Ralph in his quest for the well. However, she herself seems to accept this and prepares another female companion for him – Ursula.

There is also some doubt about whether the well actually exists; it may just be a fairy tale. At various stages of the narrative we hear of various people who set off for the well, but never return. The merchant Clement tries to dissuade Ralph from the quest, saying: 'For now I tell thee that I have known this while how thou are seeking the Well at the World's End; and who knows that there is any such thing on the earth? Come, then, thou art fair, and young, and strong; and if thou seek wealth thou shalt have it' (I, p. 299). Later, too, when Ralph is a captive of the Lord of Utterbol, one of the latter's captains, David, makes it clear that he does not believe in the existence of the well. Thus Ralph and Ursula have to maintain their faith both in the actual existence of the well and that they will ultimately reach it.

It is not until Book IV that Ursula and Ralph are reunited in the wood under the mountain. Ralph's quest for Ursula has been a quest within a quest, but now they are together they can devote themselves to the larger quest. They are assisted by the Sage of Swevenham 'till they were waxen wise in the matter of the Well at the World's End' (II, pp. 34-35). The Sage also warns them that if they drink of the well and then become tyrants, the draught of water will have been a curse rather than a blessing: 'But rather I bid you to live in peace and patience without fear or hatred, and to succour the oppressed and love the lady, and to be the friends of men, so when ye are dead at last, men may say of you, they brought down Heaven to Earth for a little while' (II, p. 43).

The water at the well is not desired by all. The Innocent Folk live much nearer the well than most people, yet they have not drunk of its water. This is because this folk already live without hate, sickness, pestilence, strife or war. Therefore they do not venture to drink of the water at the world's end, for it is possible that those who drank of it would lose their innocence. The Innocent Folk who had drunk its waters might then strive to establish their supremacy over those who had not, so making the latters' lives a burden to them. Nevertheless, the old man reassures Ralph that in the more experienced and complex world from which the young man comes, he should use the wisdom gained from the well to improve the lives of those in his community.

On the way to the well it is the heroine who provides the leadership and determination to succeed in the quest when Ralph wavers and tells her: 'And now I tell thee that I am minded to go back with thee to Upmeads straightway; for love
will prevail'. With greater wisdom Ursula reminds him: ‘that the perils of the homeward way shall overcome us, despite of love, if we have not drunk of the Well at the World’s End’ (II, p. 69).

It appears that having come so far, they have no choice but to proceed with the quest, even though they both fear they may be sundered before they reach the well. Moreover, Ralph questions whether there really is a well with healing powers. When they reach the desert and come upon many dead bodies, Ralph again suggests turning back from their quest. However, Ursula reassures him by pointing out that none of the corpses are wearing the bead necklaces which they themselves have.

Opposed to the idea of the fertility of water is the symbolically named Dry Tree, upon which Ralph and Ursula come in the waste. If water can be a symbol of life for Morris, he can also see it as the reverse: water can also be a destructive force. The water under the Dry Tree is heavy with venom. Ursula prevents Ralph drinking from it just in time. Her instinct about the venomous water is confirmed when they witness a crow drink from the water and then fall dead in mid-flight. Ralph seems bewitched, so Ursula has to distract and beguile him away from the water. He falls down unconscious, but Ursula revives him and persuades him to continue their quest. Ralph quickly returns to normality and praises Ursula’s wisdom. Ultimately, Ralph and Ursula achieve their quest and taste of the water at the world’s end: ‘It tasted good, and as if their love were blended with it’ (II, p. 95). They see the well and its surroundings as a kind of earthly paradise: ‘so it seemed to them that they had come into the very realm of God’ (II, pp. 98-99).

As is typical of Morris’s late prose romances, the story does not end here. He must show his characters returning to their former worlds, applying their newfound strength and wisdom to their social responsibilities. On the return journey the balance of power shifts from Ursula to Ralph. Back in the world they know, it is male warrior qualities which are required to subdue evil. As a man, Ralph takes a more prominent part in this than Ursula. Thus we see more in Ralph than in Ursula the positive effects of drinking from the Well at the World’s End. Nevertheless, despite her lower social origins, Ursula, having tasted of the well, is now a fit and equal partner for the son of the King of Upmeads. Ralph returns his original community to peace and well-being, and he and Ursula produce many descendants before they die in respected old age on the same day.

In *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the heroine, Birdalone’s, rites of passage are conducted through her journey over water. She has to discover friendship, love and loss before her final reunion with her lover. There is a sharp contrast between the two female influences which each try to initiate and influence her in their own particular view of the world: the wicked witch and the wood wife. Birdalone has to escape the wicked witch and learn to put into practice what she has learnt from her benevolent and wise wood mother. It is Habundia who tells her that the only way back to the world is over the water. To get there, Birdalone has to learn the witch’s spell for the Sending Boat, which needs to be marked with the passenger’s blood to start it. This is a doubtful vessel to take Birdalone back to wider communities, but she has no alternative. Ultimately, she escapes naked and destitute. She will be completely at the mercy of those to whom the Sending Boat brings her.

Like Ralph and Ursula, Birdalone’s journey is a voyage of self-discovery which
involves learning about friendship, love and what it is like to live in a mutually dependent community. While Ralph and Ursula's development occurred on their quest to find precious water, Birdalone's takes place through an actual journey over water. Birdalone first reaches the Isle of Increase Unsought, where she meets three captives of the wicked witch's sister. These three women initiate Birdalone into the knowledge of heterosexual love and female friendship. After meeting them her quest over the water has a definite objective: to alert the three young women's lovers to their imprisonment, so that the knights can rescue them.

The three maidens' tale reveals the possibly threatening nature of water. They were kidnapped by the wicked witch, who was able to use sorcery to make the water behave in such a way as would further her own bad purposes. Atra describes how the witch wife summoned a fog so that they could not return to the meadow. When the fog lifts, Atra angrily tells the evil woman that as she raised a foul wind against them, she can now surely raise a fair one. The wicked old woman mocks her and blasphemously says: "Deemeth me to be none other than the great God himself, to hold the winds in the hollow of my hand, and still the waves with a word? What! Am I wrought somewhat after his image kind ladies? And she grinned horribly therewith" (p. 77). 3 Although there are three of them, the young maidens are powerless against the old woman's evil control of the weather, winds and waves.

In their turn, the three knights in pursuit of their loved ones, also experience the wicked witch's manipulation of the waters. They are enchanted to see visions of Atra, Aurea and Viridis as captives on the water. Only Arthur's caution prevents Baudoin and Hugh from throwing themselves out of the Sending Boat to a watery grave. Then a boat approaches them and shoots arrows at them. All those in the boat laugh at and mock the three knights. Again Arthur has the presence of mind to convince the other two that this is merely show. But Arthur himself nearly succumbs to the evil enchantments of the witch when he apparently hears Birdalone crying for help. As well as showing evil at work on the water, this scene also economically shows which woman each of the knights cares for most. It is plain that while Baudoin and Hugh will remain loyal to their original love objects, Arthur has transferred his affections from Atra to Birdalone.

Water is ambivalent on the Isle of Increase Unsought. The queen drinking from the 'Water of Might' only sustains the whole awful way of life on this island and the witch's sister's beauty. When it is withheld from her, she degenerates into a beast. However, when the knights taste it, they are employing the queen's own weapons, and it enables them to see through her sorcery and rescue the three maidens from enchantment. When the ladies are given a few drops of the 'Water of Might' they are restored to health. The signs of the cruel queen's chastisement of them disappears from their bodies and 'made their eyes bright, and their cheeks full and firm, and their lips most sweet, and their hands strong and delicious' (p. 238). By contrast with the rejuvenating 'Water of Might', by which the queen had been preserving herself, she had given the three maidens 'a certain red water' (p. 242) which had made them so insubstantial that they could not be seen by the knights until the latter had drunken of the 'Water of Might'.

In spite of its intended use for evil purposes by the witch, the Sending Boat has enabled both Birdalone and the knights to achieve the first parts of their quests
and growth. After her unhappy experience of love for Arthur (unhappy because he is already betrothed to Atra), Birdalone flees from him. After some wandering, the re-discovery of her long lost mother and earning her living as a craftswoman, Birdalone determines to return to Evilshaw by the Sending Boat. This is a return to the origins of her conscious life and earliest remembered experiences. Returning as naked as she had left, she escapes drowning only thanks to the timely intervention of the wood wife Habundia.

This experience of nearly drowning is perhaps an objective correlative for her beloved Arthur’s state of mind. Arthur himself has been overwhelmed by his unconscious and has descended into madness. This may imply some equivalent crisis of consciousness in Birdalone after her long absence from her early home and her loved one. However, unlike Arthur she is not overwhelmed by her unconscious (symbolised by the waters which nearly drown her) and unlike him she does not become more beast than human.

On her return, Birdalone discovers that the wicked witch has just died. At the same instant, the Sending Boat, designed to pursue the witch’s evil purposes has disintegrated. The reign of the evil witch and the blood-driven Sending Boat have ended simultaneously. Birdalone even sees a serpent come from under the stern. Since the Garden of Eden, the serpent has been a symbol of temptation and evil and this is an image of both the witch and the Sending Boat. The waters of the isles, however, remain dangerous and when Hugh wishes to go and collect his belongings, Habundia tells him not to go by water, for: ‘that way lie many traps and wiles and many perils’ (p. 277). Like Ralph and Ursula, the ladies and surviving knights finally call a halt to their wanderings. All of them return to settle in Birdalone’s original home town of Utterhay. Here they will live and teach others how to live by enacting the values they have learned on their travels.

In The Sundering Flood the water forms a barrier separating the hero and heroine. It is a vast, flowing river, about which we are told: ‘none has been so bold as to strive to cast a bridge across it’ (p. 4). At the end of the novel the Carlne tells of ‘a great river which none might cross either by bridge or ford or ferry’ (pp. 291-292). The Carlne also tells of the youth and maiden who loved each other but might never touch ‘because betwixt these two was a river such as few upon earth, unbridgeable, unfordable, unferryable’ (pp. 291- 292). Elfhild and Osberne are only too aware of the water which separates them. Elfhild says to Osberne: ‘And look, heed it, which sunders us, this mighty Flood, which hath been from the beginning and shall be to the end’ (p. 55). The mysterious Steelhead is informed by Osberne that the young man thinks he could swim across the river. Steelhead replies: ‘no race of folk who have dwelt in the Dale from the beginning of the World have ever won across the Sundering Flood’ (p. 77).

It is suggested that Osberne and Elfhild must leave the security of their homes if they are ever to meet bodily. Although Osberne has already slain the bullying Hardcastle (and been compared to the Biblical David in his fight against a Goliath figure), it is likely that he must undergo some further rites of passage before he can reach maturity as a man and as a lover. His own original world is too narrow for him to develop his full potential in it. Although Elfhild’s adventures during their five-year separation are dealt with in less detail, she too must go on a journey of self-discovery.
Steelhead has informed the young Osberne: 'when thou mayst seek thou to the side of the Sundering Flood, for meseemeth that there lieth thy weird’ (p. 37). Osberne has already recognised 'that the folk thereof shall come into my life some day' (p. 29). Elfhild is living with a wise Carline who told her that she and Osberne 'shall meet body to body one day' (p. 104). Osberne, grown into a young man, longs to consummate his love for Elfhild. He considers leaving home to seek a way of crossing the Sundering Flood. He is finally driven into action when Elfhild disappears after a raid by the Red Skimmers. Steelhead, informed of Osberne's resolve to find Elfhild, reminds him: 'Call to mind what thou thyself saidst to Elfhild, that the only way to bridge the Sundering Flood is for one of you, or both, to wander wide in the world' (pp. 196-197). Their exposure to a wider world allows both Osberne and Elfhild to test their love for each other, which originally developed in their childhood, and to test its durability in an adult environment. Osberne becomes a tried and trusty warrior of great renown, but never forgets to pursue his enquiries about Elfhild. After five years of separation he has, in his own words, grown 'bitter and surly' (p. 272). Although he has won professional fame, his disappointment in his love quest makes him feel as if he has 'been overthrown and thwarted' (p. 273). He decides to make one last desperate effort to find Elfhild.

Many Victorian heroines fall into physical or mental decline when they reach an emotional impasse in their lives; in his late prose romances Morris turns this upside down, for this is the fate of his heroes. The Black Squire, Arthur, succumbs to mental illness in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and Osberne, after being attacked by the pool, falls into a long sickness, of which we are told: 'And he would have mended speedier, but he was sick at heart that his sudden hope had so failed him, and said within himself that now all hope was gone' (p. 280). While still convalescent the Carline leads him to Elfhild and he makes a complete recovery.

It seems fitting that after all their trials and their five-year separation — the same period which separated Birdalone and Arthur — Elfhild and Osberne should be reunited. Like the other heroes and heroines of the late prose romances, they return to Osberne’s place of origin by the Sundering Flood. Now they have proved their love and tested their endurance in the world, they must return to the original community and use their hard won knowledge for the benefit of its inhabitants. This is least clear in *The Sundering Flood* of the three novels discussed, because it remained unfinished at Morris's death.

From the survey of these three late prose romances it can be seen that water and journeys to, through, or over it, figure prominently. Morris himself loved being close to water and in *The Earthly Paradise* made his travellers cross the sea in pursuit of eternal life. Their quest fails, but the romances end in fulfilment. There is the suggestion in the late prose romances that the journeys undertaken by the young heroes and heroines are metaphors for the voyage into the self and self-discovery. Water is a symbol of life and as such is a positive benefit and pleasure (think how often the heroes and heroines of these novels enjoy a rejuvenating bathe in pond, stream or river). But water is also a destructive element; as well as bringing life, it destroys. Hence the evil witch's enchantment of water in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Also several murders or attempted murders occur when characters are relaxing in or by water. The Black Knight, Sir Thomas of Estridge, is slain by water; the Lady of Abundance is slain while Ralph is bathing in a nearby stream;
and Osberne is nearly killed when he is drinking from a pool. Ultimately, then, for Morris, water is both a positive and a negative, a life-saver as well as a life taker.

NOTES


2 All references are to *The Well at the World’s End*, (Stroud: Alan Sutton 1996), (intro.) Nicholas Salmon.

3 All references are to *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, intro. Norman Talbot, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1994).

4 All references to the Longmans Green and Co. edition of *The Sundering Flood*. 