A Rediscovered and Partly Unpublished Morris Notebook

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In 1998 The British Library acquired a partially unpublished and ‘lost’ album of early verse and sketches by William Morris. At least some of its contents were used by May Morris in her preparation of The Collected Works, but it has only been known of since cursory and inaccurate descriptions given in various sales catalogues. The Index of English Literary Manuscripts lists the manuscript as the fourth in a group of six volumes of early manuscript material probably given by Morris to his friend and assistant Charles Fairfax Murray. From the successive and often misleading catalogue descriptions upon which it draws, however, it can only assume the album to have been broken up and, with the exception of one poem, lost to scholars. In fact, the majority of the album – which certainly dates in part from before 1858 – survives intact.

The original owner of the album was indeed Charles Fairfax Murray, who evidently instructed De Coverley to bind the several disparate fragments of manuscript verse and sketches in green morocco. The album bears Murray’s book label, printed at the Kelmscott Press, and his list of contents on a preliminary flyleaf. This relates to his own pagination and thus (one assumes) ordering of the sequence. Murray is by no means certain of the accuracy of his textual identifications, a fact amplified in his brief bibliographical notes, also written on the flyleaf. He cites ‘Romance of the Wooers’ as the first piece, but can only guess at the number of pages it comprises, estimating it to be 17 before noting it to be ‘in such a fragmentary state that it is difficult to be sure that all the pieces here united really belong to it’. The second piece is given as ‘The Long Land’, which Murray notes as seven pages, but which ‘has lost a page <by accident> probably torn out by the poet. It was fair copied for publication but finally omitted from the Defence of Guenevere & other poems 1858’. ‘Summer Dawn’, a ‘draft of published poem’, is given as the third in the sequence, with Murray further describing it as an ‘<Interesting> draft of the exquisite little poem published October 1856 in the Oxford & Cambridge magazine & repd <with slight alteration> in 1858 with the alteration of a word only’. ‘Sir Giles War Song’, ‘with extra lines’, is listed as the fourth poem in the album, with the fifth and final being ‘The God of the Poor’, identified by Murray as ‘[2]5 verses published in the Fortnightly Review’.

Murray’s tentative attributions and notes form the basis for later descriptions of the album as it passed from salesroom to collector and back again. It is transcribed, for example, in Maggs Bros. catalogue 517 of 1929, which otherwise describes the album (lot 999), as ‘Original Manuscript Poems, Entirely in the Autograph of William Morris’, briefly elaborating: ‘an interesting series of Morris’s poetical Manuscripts, written in ink and pencil, and on the reverse of
several are various sketches by him'. The album is offered with a number of other Morris manuscripts, being the most expensive at £48. It had been acquired by Maggs for the sum of £25, presumably after Murray's death in 1919 and was evidently sold, on this occasion, to Hugh Walpole, whose Brackenburn booklabel it bears.\(^5\)

It appears again as lot 46 in the Christie's catalogue for the Walpole sale of 2 July 1945.\(^6\) The description notes 37 pages comprising 'Romance of the Woods' [sic], 'The Long Land', 'Summer Dawn', 'Sir Giles War Song' and 'The God of the Poor'. It was once again acquired by Maggs, for £30, presumably for John Roland Abbey, who added his leather booklabel and accession mark at the rear. Sotheby's catalogue of 14 December 1976 next features the album as lot 218. A marked up copy of the catalogue in the possession of Maggs Bros. suggests the manuscript to have sold for £1400 to 'Mrs Hilmer', but it evidently failed to sell. The catalogue lists 'The Romance of the Wooers', 'The Long Land', 'Sir Giles War Song' and 'The God of the Poor'.

The description, which goes into some detail, is erroneous on various counts, partly as a result of the cataloguer following Murray's speculative attributions. It does, however, reveal the loss of the manuscript of 'Summer Dawn', which had presumably been removed from the album at some stage following the Walpole
sale. It is no longer present and the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* presumes that it is now HM 6480 in the Henry Huntington Library. According to the Huntington Library, HM 6480 is bound into a green morocco binding with two other Morris manuscripts and was probably acquired circa 1913–18. Certain physical characteristics of the Huntington manuscript, together with page numbering and a note by Morris suggest that it may well have once belonged to Murray Volume 4 – a theory which, however, clearly relies upon the cataloguer of the Walpole sale having been particularly slapdash.

The album’s contents are next partially recorded as two lots in the Sotheby’s sale of 17 December 1981. Lot 250, ‘The God of the Poor’, is described as 118 lines arranged in five-line stanzas written on the rectos of ten pages, and evidently sold for £720 to Rota. I have traced this to a private collection in the UK. Lot 251 is described as an ‘Autograph fair copy of an apparently unpublished dramatic poem entitled “The Long Land”’. A marked up catalogue records this as ‘sold to Shearer’ but it was, in fact, bought in and re-united with the album which was consigned, in 1998, to a provincial salesroom and bought yet again by Maggs Bros., who offered it to the British Library.

The album, now in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Library, has suffered, then, in the course of its history, the loss of two of its original contents: ‘Summer Dawn’ and ‘God of the Poor’, only one of which is known to survive for sure. Despite this, the remaining contents can now be accurately described. The first poem is a relatively clean draft of the poem ‘The Romance of the Three Wooers’ , written in ink and pencil on four leaves, the first three of which are written in ink and comprise window mounted octavo sheets of fine cream paper bearing a small fleur-de-lys blind stamp. Morris has used his own idiosyncratic pagination for the first three leaves, with the recto of the fourth leaf (folio 10r) written entirely in pencil, almost certainly on a different occasion to be united with the rest later, on a quarto sheet of blue-lined paper, mounted on a guard.

The poem was published by May Morris in volume 24 of *The Collected Works*. For my own pleasure’, she notes in the introduction, ‘I have brought in the few fragments of “Arthurian” verses that could be found’. Except for the addition of punctuation the published version closely follows that of the manuscript, which almost certainly provided the copy text. One noteworthy feature of the manuscript is the presence (folio 8) of William Morris’s later more calligraphic hand overwriting (but not changing) some 11 lines originally written in faint pencil.

On the reverse of the last page of ‘The Romance of the Three Wooers’ (folio 10v) is written a fragment first published, untitled, by May Morris in her introduction to volume 21 of *The Collected Works*, an introduction in which she notes that ‘I have been reading again all the sketches and fragments of my father’s early writing that can be come at.’ The following four sheets, of the same blue lined type, make up the rest of the published text and it is again almost certain that the present manuscript provided its source. As indicated in his list of contents, Murray tentatively suggests that this fragment forms a continuation of ‘The Romance of the Three Wooers’, a theory obviously not shared by May Morris. The manuscript, written in ink and pencil, reveals some significant omissions from the printed text. After the eleventh published stanza, May
Morris provides two lines from the next, 'I used to think it was a sort of right / That I should get each day some happiness', before indicating an omission with ellipsis. The unpublished lines continue:

In which time clean forgotten was the night
All its dull pain, and truly more or less
The happiness came to me which I sought
After when more years more cares to me brought
Some part of each day that I schemed or fought
I claimed for dreams enjoyment now not Happ[iness]

The next ellipsis indicated by May Morris comes in the middle of the fourth line of the eighteenth stanza. The published lines of the stanza read:

For if I were to see only her stately mien
There would no longer be a chance to me
Of dying but for ever I should live
Walk slowly in the sun . . .
The unpublished lines continue:

But [...] flee
Through purple shadows that the beech trees give
O love my royal snow white Eleanore
I pray thee come & stand by me no more
And weep through thy thin hands & shadow oer
My hot hot steel gear wishing me alas to live

One final stray line is missed by May Morris, the last in the manuscript fragment: 'And I now shall not see her body any more'. After setting out her bowdlerised version, she declares that 'I think no apology is needed further for preserving here my father's first attempt at verse. It was treasured by one and another of his early friends in their pride and love of him, and has more fitly a place here in my wandering notes than among the fragments collected to form a volume of verse'.

The statement is pertinent, given that the entire next fragment in the album—again putatively identified by Murray as a continuation of 'Romance of the Wooers'—remains unpublished. The verse is written on three pages on two sheets, of a type similar to the first three in the volume. The transcription below follows the order in which the leaves are bound, but none of the three pages of text follow on from any other. This suggests their survival as fugitive extracts from a longer work, perhaps written, as typical with Morris, first on the rectos of each sheet before being continued in a separate sequence on the reverse of the same sheets.

Sir Jaques prayed, then rose with a pale face,
And we went on quite silent till at last
I said fair knight that cross we have past
What happed thereby: he said it grieveth me
Each time I tell this tale so piteously
They ended. he stopped there for courtesy's sake
I said no word until he pleased to break
The silence and begin ah trust me though
But I was Eager as we rode on So.
Sir Peter, said he prey you did you note
Hard by the Cross that Castle God has smote
With utter ruin yea I said: well Sir
I who am old now was a squire there
When I was young, Sir Miles du grand [Martyr]
Was Lord of it and me, he held it well
Through many troubles, but a certain Lord
That hight Sir John Bourdville he having scored
High vengeance gainst him took it suddenly.
But stay Sir Peter now and answer me
What think you Sir has man or woman yet
Died of pure love, or do all men forget
Live and be happy afterwards: nay nay
Sir Jaques answered I what shall I say
But that I never knew it so perdie
It seemeth not a little thing to die
Look you Sir Knight your sword has gone right through
Full many a man who has died by you
In spite of all the blood, and if the Lord
Has made it hard with a bright heavy sword

I who am curious about many things
Considering how that Rumour, though with wings
She flyeth fast, yet halteth in her speech
And wishing well that true record should reach
Those that come after: have with care & pain
And diligent sifting over & over again
Written this book wherein is nothing set
I do not hold for pure truth, though I let
Some words stay as I heard them; telling men
Myself who said them how and where & when.
And for that Lords and Knights should have no lack
Of this my book in good fair red & black.
Full many clerks have written it & chief
This mighty volume whereof lefe by leaf
I turn just now by Alexandre le blau
Clerk of S. O[mer] that my lord might know
The wonderful deeds of arms done in these lands
Was well-illuminate for my Lords hands.
I say I turn it over leaf by leaf:
I am grown old, shall die soon little grief
Or fear this gives me, I could die just now
Most peacefully the wrinkles on my brow
Seem all unfolding and all deeds of mine
Both good and bad grow faint to me or Shine
As deeds of other men; and this book here
Which line by line was poured into mine ear
And moulded in my brain and heart is grown
Strange stories of an unknown land as shewn
By some old man long dead, ah leaf by leaf
I told [...] [...] [crowns] upon a [...] chief

[folio 22]

She slipped from out the castle and the sight
Of Lord John Bourdville: therefore I praise God
For I went with her, down upon the sod
He bent his old eyes saying this — Miles came
And met her amid the trumpets and the flames
Of the great torches welcome Lady fair
He said and stood bareheaded bowed to her
And would have kissed her cheek but suddenly
Meeting her eyes their lips met yea and she
With a long wild sigh threw her arms around him
But never moved her lips all these things swim
Like pictures through my brain I mind too how
He had her off his face flushed to the brow
Red in the torchlight, and he held her arm
Below the shoulder as he feared some harm
Might take her from him; the days [...] I
was made Miles Squire, often I
Have seen him wander for mere happiness
Restless and ill at ease, less and less.
He counted Bourdvile’s threats his jewel
Shut so safe up in his strong castle fair
Alas though on a day she rode alone
A little way and her not wither gone
A three days journey off perforce, night came
The next poem in the album, 'The Long Land', first appeared in volume 24 of *The Collected Works*. That it provided May Morris with her copy-text is evinced by the fact that she notes 'a page of the manuscript missing', a lacuna reflected in Murray's note and apparent in the album itself when bound. There are nevertheless a number of minor variants, which can probably be attributed to a desire, on the part of May Morris to 'improve' the original text. The poem survives on seven blue lined sheets (with later guards), the last of which has, on its verso, a version of 'Sir Giles' War Song'. The manuscript indicates but omits the full text of the chorus as published in *The Defence of Guenevere* and, later, volume 1 of *The Collected Works*. It includes a final two lines (as noted by Murray) omitted from the published text:

Grinding of swords is good to hear  
And the fence of men right fair to see

In addition to the verse contained in the album, it is worth noting the presence of several doodles and sketches. The least significant (folio12) are marginal doodles typical of Morris. More interesting are the sketches of furniture (folios 12v, 18v) and ornamental devices (folios 24, 26), much in keeping with the Arthurian tone of the poetic fragments and resembling, for example, the neo-gothic chairs produced by Morris during this early period and the decorative page designs printed by Bell and Daldy throughout *The Defence of Guenevere*.

Shortly after the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere*, Morris set fire to his manuscripts 'in a general massacre which he made . . . of the early poems which he did choose to include in that volume.' We should celebrate the fact that thanks to a mixture of care, luck and resilience, this album has managed to preserve some of those poems. It is survival, nevertheless, whose compositional history and early provenance, together with details of binding, mutilation and partial reconstruction, remains murky. For now, it is hoped that this short article will suffice to alert scholars to its permanent home and to encourage their closer scrutiny of its chequered history and noteworthy contents.

NOTES
1 British Library, Add. MS 74255.
5 I am indebted to Ed Maggs of Maggs Bros. Ltd for research relating to the album's provenance.
7 See Sotheby's *Catalogue of Valuable Autograph Letters Literary Manuscripts*.

8 Index of English Literary Manuscripts, p. 586. I am indebted to Sue Hodson, curator at the Henry Huntington Library, for examining on my behalf the manuscript in her care.


11 ibid., XXIV, p. xxvii.

12 ibid., XXI, p. xvii.

13 ibid., XXI, pp. xxv-xxx.

14 ibid., XXI, p. xxx.

15 ibid., XXIV, pp. 58-62.


17 J. W. Mackail, quoted in the Index of English Literary Manuscripts, p. 586.