In the last years of my father's life his mind teemed with all kinds of romantic imagery, fleetingly expressed in beginnings of tales which, though but the gleanings of the harvested field, I would not have altogether untasted. To print them or quote from them, I admit, is like putting to paper a changing dream with its wayward unfinished adventure that leads but to awakening and the grey of dawn. It is possible that all the fragments did not allow of working out, but their broken lights, the half-explored pathways whose promise of new wonder ends in the half-filled page, have the tantalizing charm familiar to all dreamers, and in each there is some variety of invention, some new setting of the old tale of love and marvel-hunting, a new grouping of the personages. (XVII:xxv)¹

To anyone familiar with the world of Morris's late romances, May Morris's comments cannot fail to be intriguing. An exploration of the manuscripts in the May Morris Bequest at the British Library does indeed reveal the existence of a collection of unfinished prose romances, most of which are alluded to by May Morris in her Introductions. These include "Giles of the Long Frank", "Kilian of the Closes", "The Folk of the Mountain Door", "The Story of Desiderius", "The Peacock" and the brief opening of a tale about "the Wasted Land" which begins: "I have heard say that there was once a fair house built by the side of a forest wherein dwelt a lady, and how that in this house there were no men, but a great many damsels ..." (XVII:xviii).² All these fragments deserve attention and merit publication, but particularly intriguing is an unfinished tale of considerable length entitled "The Widow's House by the Great Water".

"The Widow's House by the Great Water", which forms B.L. Add. MS. 45324, fols. 1-47, is manifestly an early version of the tale which was finally published in 1897 as The Water of the Wondrous Isles. According to May Morris (XX:xvij) "The Widow's House" was "superseded" by The Water of the Wondrous Isles, and she gives an account of the history of the evolution of the published tale. Referring to entries in the diary of Sir Sydney Cockerell for the year 1895, she suggests that "The Widow's House" was the first version of a romance which Morris then recast in verse on February 4th.³ Cockerell's diary records the beginning of yet another version of the tale in prose and verse on February 8th. This is presumably the version May Morris is referring to when she talks of the next stage "of mixed prose and verse" and, since she tells us that "after the first dozen pages, the few snatches of verse are struck out, and prose substituted ..." (XX:xviii-ix), this may well be the main draft of The Water on which some of the published version is based.⁴
Despite her rather dismissive reference to "The Widow's House", May Morris does give a brief synopsis of the plot (XX:xvij-xviiij) which she prefaces with the comment that it contains "a few of the ideas of the published tale ... floating about in an unsettled condition, amid a great deal of matter that the writer rejected" (XX:xvij). It is open to question, however, whether she is right to see "The Widow's House" as nothing more than a false start to what was to be a more successful story. A brief consideration of what the two versions of the story have in common and how they differ should make it easier to decide the matter. As to the date of composition of "The Widow's House", there is, to my knowledge, no specific evidence about this, other than the fact that it must obviously pre-date the start of the verse version on February 4th 1895. The similarity of style and setting, however, suggest that it cannot have been written very long before the final version of The Water. A date in January of 1895 is therefore suggested as likely.

"The Widow's House by the Great Water" is written in black ink on white, blue-lined paper. The handwriting is that of Morris's latter years: it is very clear and decorative and shows the influence of his interest in calligraphy and printing. The ornamental capital letters which open the paragraphs imitate those of a medieval manuscript. After a slightly hesitant opening, the story proceeds confidently with only minor deletions and a clear sense of style and patterning. Beginning (like all the best story-tellers) with the words "Once upon a time", Morris tells of a widow and her daughter who live in a modest dwelling on the shore of a great water (fol. 1). The woman's husband is dead and she and her daughter have to work to maintain themselves, but they're not in the destitute state in which we find the child Birdalone and her mother, Audrey, at the start of The Water. Birdalone's mother tells the sinister witch-wife whom she meets at Utterhay that she and her child have been virtually starving ever since her husband died. She is easily tricked in this desperate state and robbed of her daughter.

Joan, the widow of the earlier tale, has, by luck or judgement, managed to hold on to her child, Katherine, and bring her up in relative prosperity. Joan is far better circumstanced than the poor widow of Utterhay. In fact, she seems to be almost as wealthy as the witch-wife who kidnaps Birdalone in the published tale, for her house is situated in a virtually identical spot to that described in Chapter II of The Water:

Now this house stood on the shore of a great water so that there was nought betwixt save a narrow wale of greensward and a strand of pebbles. That water was not of the sea, but, was sweet: nevertheless so great it was, that when one looked up it, that is to say westward, the southern shore presently melted way into the air & the water, and it was like looking out over the ocean. (fol. 1)

In the description of the setting of the witch-wife's house, the basic ideas are much the same:

... before the sun was set, came they to the shore of a great water, and thence was no more land to be seen before them than if it had been the main sea itself, though this was a sweet water ...

Now the ending of the wood left a fair green plain betwixt it and the water, whiles more than a furlong across, whiles much less ... But the place whereas they came from out the wood was of the widest, and there it was a broad bight of greensward of the fashion of the moon seven nights old ... Through the widest of
this meadow ran a clear stream winding down to the lake, and beside a lap of the
said stream, two bow-shots from the water, was a knoll, whereon stood, amidst
of a potherb garden, a little house strongly framed of timber. (XX:6)

Morris's choice of vocabulary in his prose romances has sometimes been criticized as
too archaic and decorative to be readily comprehensible. However, a comparison of
these two descriptions of what is basically the same scene shows that when Morris
worked on a passage of descriptive writing, he did not so much increase the number
of "decorative" adjectives employed as seek to create a more exact and well-defined
picture for his reader. In the passage as it was finally published in The Water, Morris
omits the archaic "wale" (a sixteenth-century word of Old English derivation, which
was applied to a ridge or raised line in a textile fabric), in favour of a much more
precise description of the "green plain" with its distinctive half-moon shape.

Birdalone, the protagonist of The Water, whose very name confirms that Morris
can be most economical in his use of words, grows up in total seclusion, seeing no
one but her harsh mistress. This is a complete departure from the situation in "The
Widow's House" in which the heroine and her mother have several helpful
neighbours. As all these neighbours seem to be male, Katherine is far more
conversant with what are referred to as "the longings of carles" (fol. 23) than
Birdalone is when she first arrives at the Castle of the Quest. The widow's
neighbours include a community of "Black" (Dominican?) Monks ("the fathers of S
Peters [sic] cell"), a woodman and his son, and a fisherman and his son. They are a
sufficiently mixed bunch to provide our heroine with varied learning experiences
about the opposite sex, and this seems to be their main function in the story. It goes
without saying that all these men, high and low, fisherman and prelate, are besotted
with Katherine, for she is one of those girls whom Morris in his younger days might
have called a "stunner". In a passage in the manuscript which Morris deleted,
Katherine is described with relish:

For indeed it was not only that she was as straight as an arrow, as well-knit as the
ten-year oak sapling in the close set coppice; as supple as the willow-branch in the
wind; it was not only that her chin was round and her lips full & red, her eyes
grey and open, her hair soft waving & silky-golden brown: nay nor that she was
fashioned, face and body, & limbs, as fine & delicate as might be: but she was to
boot gentle & winning & alluring of all her ways, and yet withal stately & proud
... (fol. 3)

This is plainly the first version of the description of Birdalone given by Habundia
when she offers to be the maiden's "mirror" (XX:16-18). As with the description
of the house on the shore of the Great Water, the published version is far more detailed
than its predecessor. It is worthwhile noting in passing that to Morris, particularly
in the fiction of the 1890s, feminine beauty is always synonymous with robust
physical health. (See the remarks on sickly Victorian ladies and their "hour-glass"
figures in Ch. VI of News from Nowhere.) It also requires some integrity of
character. Morris seems to assume that beauty and goodness will generally go
together - in the world of his romances at least. The witch-wife's younger sister in
The Water is physically beautiful, due to daily draughts of the Water of Might.
However, Hugh, the Green Knight, is not taken in. He notes that while she "might
have been called a fair woman, as to her shaping," she has a face "heavy, yet hard-
looking, with thin lips and somewhat flagging cheeks, a face stupid, but proud and cruel" (XX:221-22).

When “The Widow’s House” opens, Katherine “had seen her twentieth winter” (fol. 5). She has had an easy childhood, for Joan dotes on her and does all the hard work around the house herself (a state of affairs which the enigmatic “spaewife”, who visits them later disapproves of). Katherine’s childhood has some of the features of Birdalone’s. She roams the wood and is closely attuned to the rhythms of the natural world. However, Katherine has more personal freedom and fewer worries. While Birdalone spends her childhood barefoot and ill-clad, Katherine has good clothes and footwear. Her mother even does her long hair for her, as though she were her daughter’s “tire-woman”. Although she has reached the age of twenty, we are told that Katherine is not discontented with her life spent fishing, hunting and talking to any chance wayfarers. Indeed, why should she yearn to leave so comfortable a home for the uncertainties of the outside world? She is not driven like Birdalone to flee from an increasingly unbearable subservience to another’s will. In view of the fact that one of the features of the story which Morris changed most had to do with the circumstances of the heroine’s upbringing, one wonders if he felt that anyone raised in such security, free from any real hardship or unpleasantness, would really have developed the strength of character and self-reliance to undergo the trials which he had it in mind for his heroine to undergo.

The three Black Monks on their island have no real parallel in The Water, unless it be the hapless Leonard, the Chaplain of the Castle of the Quest, who prevails upon the castellan, Sir Aymeris, to show Birdalone some hospitality. He is described as “a younger man than the others, it might be of five and thirty winters, and he was fair of favour” (XX:105). Leonard is well-educated and attractive, and yet there is something in Morris’s portrait of him that suggests he is not to be taken seriously and is inadequate in some way. This is most noticeable during the episode where he helps Birdalone to ride off on her own to the Black Valley of Greywethers without telling the castellan, who has orders to confine her to the Castle of the Quest. Leonard is “bookish” rather than active and energetic. He teaches Birdalone to read and to write beautifully, but when something “important” is toward, he is impatiently brushed aside by Sir Aymeris who declares: “Thou shalt be put downstairs, priest, if thou hold not thy peace” (XX:187).

This attitude is in tune with the strong anti-clericalism which is evident in Morris’s work as early as the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine romances (1856). In “Lindenborg Pool”, for example, the young Morris, who had but recently turned his back on Holy Orders, dabbles with considerable delight in an unholy tale based on a story in Thorpe’s Northern Mythology (1851-52), in which an unfortunate priest is tricked into giving the last rites to a large pig.5 Morris always avoided discussing his views on religion, as both W. B. Yeats and J. Bruce Glasier attest.6 He transferred his allegiance to socialism as a more practical and vibrant faith. However, he remained expert on and intrigued by the trappings of religion and, in the “medieval” world of his late prose romances, the Church obviously had to play a part, though usually one opposed by the “natural” religion, the worship of the earth, which is expressed by Ellen in News from Nowhere.

It is necessary to explain the ambiguity of Morris’s attitude to the Church, for it
seems likely that Katherine's relationship with one of the Black Monks was to form an important theme in "The Widow's House". A common feature of both the unpublished romance and *The Water* is the idea of a priest who is tormented by an intense physical desire which he cannot either control or satisfy. On the island of Black Monks, as well as the elderly (and foolish) Father Eleutherius and the sour Father Paul, is the rather more appealing Father Aloys, “a young man exceeding fair” (fol. 6). Father Aloys is even more besotted with Katherine than Leonard is with Birdalone. When *in extremis*, he resorts to racing about the woods in a frenzy and falling on the grass in a desperate attempt to bring his feelings under control. Compared to this, Leonard's meek depression when Birdalone rejects him seems very mild. Indeed, at this point in the text, Father Aloys seems to have far more in common with Arthur, the Black Squire of *The Water*, who literally loses his wits when Birdalone leaves him and is later discovered in Evilshaw, dressed in skins and playing the harp in a Tristram-like state of distraction. This parallel seems to confirm that Aloys was destined to become Katherine's lover at some point in the story. The connection between Arthur and Aloys seems even closer when we hear of the former giving out that he “would enter into religion”, and going off on his own (XX:347). However, Morris seems to have had second thoughts about his heroine loving a priest. Like Sir Aymeris, Morris had little time for priests unless, like John Ball, they had the sense to be involved in popular uprisings rather than hopeless love affairs.

Like Father Aloys, Peter, the fisherman, and his appropriately-named son, Grim, are obsessed with the widow's daughter. The biblically-named Peter is clearly worried about his son, for Grim is the stern, silent, brooding type. Giles and Hubert, the woodmen, on the other hand, are more sanguine and good-natured, always behaving with a keen awareness of Katherine's feelings, whatever their own may be. Nonetheless, it is small wonder that, with all these admirers, Katherine begins to feel rather harassed. The only one of them for whom she feels any decided preference is the handsome and interesting Father Aloys but “fear of what might befall mastered the feeble stirrings of desire in her ...” (fol. 9). As the story progresses she patently stands in need of some good advice, which she duly receives in the form of three “spaedoms” coming from three mysterious strangers. These episodes alternate with two contrasted declarations of love, one from Hubert the forester and the other from young Grim the fisherman. Whether Morris intended Katherine to receive a third declaration of love from Father Aloys is unclear.

Amiable Hubert takes Katherine hunting in the Greenwood and uses this occasion to tell her of his feelings for her. She rejects him in some distress, as she is genuinely fond of him in a sisterly way. He takes his dismissal very well and does not pester her further. Grim the fisherman, however, is much less easily disposed of. He takes Katherine fishing and, whilst they are having a rather tense lunch on a convenient reef, he makes his inner torment all too plain. The scene has a comic element which Morris was surely not unaware of. Grim sits weeping over his lunch, trying to get up the courage to speak of his love, and Katherine feels wretched. However, he too must be rejected. He does not take his dismissal as equably as Hubert but rants and raves and threatens, with a fine touch of melodrama, to drown himself if she will not have him. Fortunately, the unhappy pair are interrupted by a mysterious old man.
who just happens to be passing the reef in his boat and who finds their awkwardness comic enough. The old man proves to be the last of the enigmatic beings who “spa” Katherine’s “weird”. The first “spaedom” comes from a sinister, well-dressed woman of about forty, wearing a fetching jewelled circlet. She seems at first glance to be uncomfortably akin to Birdalone’s witch-wife, but despite this she does no harm to Joan or her daughter. She tells Katherine’s “weird”, which involves the girl becoming “a baron’s wife and a King’s wife” and finally a queen (fol. 16). She leaves the girl a sapphire ring.

The second, and much the most interesting, fortune-teller is a creature who is plainly a first version of Habundia. She wears a transparent or translucent garment which “scarce changed the colour of her fair flesh, so thin and fine was the web thereof …” The only decoration is “a gay garland of gold silk flowers” (fol. 24) about her middle. Like the figure of the wood-mother in The Water, the nameless lady of “The Widow’s House” seems to be derived from Morris’s reading of Grimm’s Teutonic Mythology (1835) in which there is a discussion of “the legend of a domina Abundia or dame habonde, supplied by the French authorities of the Mid. Ages.” She also appears as “Abondanza” wearing a gold-embroidered green garment and a wreath of flowers while bearing a cornucopia, in Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia, of which Morris had an illustrated 1669 edition. Katherine offers to show the Habundia-figure the way out of the wood and it is noteworthy that, unlike Habundia, this lady initially bears no resemblance to Katherine. It is only after the girl has hidden her face in the grass that her companion turns into an image of herself. Katherine tells her new friend everything about herself and the people she knows, but most significantly she tells her, as the most secret of her thoughts:

… how she loved to be at mass in the church on the isle when the sun shone bright and all was clear to see (since the windows were not right wide) and how fair father [sic] Aloys looked as he went past her clad in his mass-hackle; and again how many things he had told her, as they walked together whilst amidst the woodland thickets; and those not only of godly and pious matters, but of the ways of the world, and stories of time past, both long ago, and but of late. (fol. 28)

When they reach the road, Katherine falls asleep and wakes to find her double turned back into a glittering faerie creature again. Before leaving, the lady also tells Katherine’s “weird” but it is not a promising one, being “of shame & grief and sore need and terror and shame & grief and misery …” (fol. 30). She gives the girl a small iron ring, which seems to indicate that Katherine is not to look to her for predictions of worldly pomp and wealth.

The final “weird-spaeman” is the old man in black who sails up to the reef on which Katherine is trying to deal with the distraught Grim. The latter remembers his manners sufficiently to offer to take the old man to lodge with the Black Monks, but the traveller proves to be another disliker of priests, declaring intriguingly: “Nay I will not go to the priests unless needs must: I love them not much, & maybe they would love me less still if they were to know all about me” (fol. 40). He therefore goes to stay with Katherine and Joan. On the following morning, as he departs, he asks Katherine to accompany him on his way into the wood. She asks him to tell her of things “that verily get done out in the world; for my heart tells me that I shall not dwell here ever” (fol. 45). Then he tells her “grievous” tales which are surely meant
as some kind of a warning to her:

... and especially he told her of how a fair lady who was wedded to a good knight was taken in the snare of love with a certain monk, a priest to wit, and how their love was hidden but a little and they were both brought to shame; and of the vengeance which the baron of the lady and her kindred took on the said monk; and of the penance [sic] of the said lady and the pinning [sic] of her flesh. (fol. 46)

When they pause to rest, the old man notices the two dissimilar rings on Katherine’s fingers and seems about to give her a third at the point where the manuscript breaks off. His prediction of her future has simply been “that thou shalt be wedded to a good & true carle who shall love thee dearly, and thou him some deal” (fol. 47). It is at this rather uninspiring point that the tale breaks off. Events usually come in threes in the world of myth and fairytale and there is much use of the number three in the patterning of _The Water_ where, for example, Aurea, Viridis and Atra are initially paired with Baudoin, Hugh and Arthur. One therefore expects something significant to follow this third spadedom, some clear indication of the direction in which the tale was going to proceed and a hint of when Katherine is going to leave home.

One is left to conclude that Morris had either run out of ideas (which seems unlikely given the fertility of his imagination), or that the plot or characters were developing in a way that he had not intended, or that some aspect of the story which he had written involved dealing with a subject which he did not wish to deal with. Maybe Morris also felt that the story was not “marvellous” enough. “The Widow’s House” is noticeably more prosaic (spadoms apart) than the tale that was eventually published in 1897. There is no child-snatching, no sinister witch-wife and no Sending Boat which requires blood to get it going. Nor is there the undercurrent of violence and sadism which appears in the witch-wife’s bullying treatment of Birdalone. Katherine has apparently had an untroubled childhood and seems to live with her doting mother in perfect amity. Her world seems free of violence and malice.

On the other hand, given the manner in which its significance is reduced in _The Water_, the stumbling-block may have been the theme of a relationship between the heroine and a monk or priest. All the indications are that Morris intended there to be some kind of relationship between Katherine and Father Aloys: a forbidden love because of his priestly vows of chastity and also, perhaps, because Katherine was to be married to someone else. Morris seems to have thought better of this theme for some reason, and it is made clear in the published romance that Leonard the chaplain does not have a chance of gaining Birdalone’s affections. Birdalone’s love of Arthur is impeded, not by priestly vows, but by his prior commitment to another woman. However, there is no obvious reason why Aloys should not have broken his priestly vows and pursued Katherine into the world beyond the Great Water, there to marry her in the fullness of time. Far from regarding such an abandonment of religious vows as wrong, Morris would doubtless have thought much better of Aloys if he had acted in this way.

We shall never know exactly why Morris abandoned “The Widow’s House by the Great Water” and recast it, after several failed attempts, into another form. Had he
pursued it, the story would in all likelihood have turned out quite differently from *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The one strikingly original feature that the two tales *do* have in common is the use of a female protagonist. In Morris's earlier romances the main character, the quester, was always male, though female characters play an increasingly dominant part in the action. Morris was always theoretically egalitarian in his attitude to the relative rights of men and women, though there sometimes seems to be little scope for women who are not beautiful in the world of his prose romances. (The ugly women are usually also evil.) In *The Water* and its predecessor, Morris, perhaps influenced by his attitude to his now grown-up daughters, accords Katherine and Birdalone independence, intelligence and as much courage as any Golden Walter or Ralph of Upmeads. That they also have to be breathtakingly lovely can perhaps be excused as a weakness of the decorative artist who was acutely sensitive to ugliness and tried to make everything beautiful if he could. Morris had plainly decided that his next questing character had to be female, but in "The Widow's House" he presents us with a heroine who is not entirely promising material.

The fundamental reason for Morris's dissatisfaction with the unfinished tale seems to lie in the personality of its heroine. Katherine lacks initiative. Her formative years have been made easy and pleasant and she seems tamely contented with her lot. True it may be uncomfortable to be feverishly desired by all the men of her acquaintance, but it might be worse not to be desired at all! As Morris slyly comments after his heroine's rejection of Hubert: "... the man was goodly & valiant and kind and fair-spoken, and as befalls with maidens it was somewhat sweet to her that a fair man should look on her with desire so strong" (fol. 23). Katherine basically enjoys the admiration of Hubert and Grim, and more than enjoys the attentions of Aloyis, though they may alarm her because of his position and because she responds to them. However, in making his protagonist so universally loved, Morris has made it difficult for her to be active and adventure-seeking. The Habundia-figure declares of Katherine that "both youth and eagerness stir in thee to go further afield ..." (fols. 29-30), but what is to prise Katherine away from her mother and admirers? Perhaps only an alarmingly impassioned declaration on the part of Father Aloys would be enough to make her feel that she must get away from him. Moreover, once she is embarked on a quest of some sort (presumably in the boat which the old man has conveniently left behind), is Katherine as well-fitted as Birdalone to cope with the perils of the journey? Birdalone may be naked when she sets out, but her upbringing has made her resourceful and self-reliant. Katherine, complete with her quiver and arrows, is not nearly so well-prepared to deal with the perils of the outside world.

Having chosen a woman as his protagonist, Morris clearly thought very hard about the qualities which she would require. Katherine was turning out to be too much like the stereotypical heroine-figure, letting things happen to her rather than initiating them. He needed a character who would have the strength and self-confidence of the Maid in *The Wood Beyond the World* or the Lady of Abundance in *The Well at the World's End*. Perhaps this is how Katherine's more vibrant "younger sister", Birdalone, came into existence. Nevertheless, we can still regret that Katherine never left the house by the Great Water and journeyed forth in search
of her destiny. We can still sigh as the “promise of new wonder ends in the half-filled page”.

NOTES
Acknowledgements to the Society of Antiquaries and to the British Library Board for quotations from the manuscripts in the British Library.
1 References to the Collected Works of William Morris, introd. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-15) are given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.
2 These unfinished tales are described by May Morris in XVII:xviiij-ix and xxv-xxxvij.
3 This version, which had already become “The Water of the Wondrous Isles”, still exists as B.L. Add. MS. 45325, fols. 1-17.
4 The draft now forms B.L. Add. MS. 45322, fols. 1-443. B.L. Add. MS. 45323, fols. 1-201 forms the printer’s copy which breaks off at the end of Chapter XIV in the Fourth Part. R. Flower, in his article on “The William Morris Manuscripts,” British Museum Quarterly, 14 (1940), 8-12, gives the date of the start of composition of the first draft as 4th February 1895, but gives no evidence to explain why he differs in this both from May Morris and from the B.M. Catalogue itself.
5 There is more anti-clericalism in The Well at the World’s End (1895) where “the Vicar appointed by the Fathers of the Thorn to serve the church of the Little Plain and the chapel of St. Anthony yonder in the wood …” (XVII:113) is tormented with desire for the Lady of Abundance. Earlier, in Child Christoper and Goldilind the Fair (1895), a black canon at Greenharbour castle looks on the heroine “with lustful eyes” and offers her “ease and surcease of pain” if she will submit to his desires (XVII:191).
7 Morris initially calls him Brother Aloys, but promotes him after a while, rather as he decides to make Arthur, the Black Squire of The Water, into a knight.
8 This outfit is remarkably similar to the diaphanous gown of silky grey material, also embroidered with flowers about the middle, worn by the Lady of The Wood Beyond the World (1894) when she is bent on seducing Golden Walter (XVII:64). Perhaps this is why Morris decided against dressing Habundia in this style in her final incarnation in The Water. Her nakedness is more honest and in tune with the natural world around her. All suggestion of the seductress has been removed.
The *doppelgänger* idea, which is more fully developed in *The Water*, is also a legacy from German folklore. Morris must have been familiar with Rossetti’s treatment of the theme in *How They Met Themselves* (1851-60).