My first attempt to study the work of William Morris ended in disillusionment. I learned that my favourite poems by Morris were not the result of his great genius, but seemed instead to be the result of careless haste and accidents. For instance, anyone who first reads ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ is struck by the poem’s dramatically abrupt opening:

But knowing now that they would have her speak  
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow  
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek.

Morris takes for granted that we know the Arthurian story of Guenevere being accused of adultery with Sir Launcelot, but it is still a bold decision to risk sacrificing dramatic tension by leaving it up to us to imagine the opening scenes of the trial, of her silent reaction to the accusations being made, and finally of her being confronted with all the angry faces turned towards her. Instead, we simply encounter this undramatic ‘they’ who appear to be demanding to hear what she has to say for herself. It is a risk that makes the poem more powerful than ever.

However, when I started studying Morris and his critics, I came across this modest dismissal: ‘The dramatic opening of Guenevere was pure luck due to a mistake by the printer, who started with the second page of the manuscript.’

Another favourite poem is the sonnet ‘Near but Far Away’ which has a concluding line as dramatically abrupt as ‘Guenevere’s’ opening line. The sonnet is about a man abandoned by his beloved, but for a moment ‘She wavered, stopped, and turned... and drew him into her arms. But then her feet were gone:

and, left alone,  
Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone,  
While at my back there beat the boundless sea.

However, I soon learned that Morris’s daughter was responsible for this sonnet. One of Morris’s biographers (Philip Henderson) explains how ‘May Morris printed “Near but Far Away”... without the lines that immediately follow it in the manuscript.’ I learned that there are six more lines after the dramatically abrupt Marvellian image of entrapment with which Morris had allegedly concluded the poem:

Nay what is this and wherefore lingerest thou?  
Why say’st thou the thrushes sob and moan
And that the sky is hard and grey as stone?
Why say'st thou the east wind tears bloom and bough?
Why seem the sons of men so hapless now?
Thy love is gone, poor wretch, thou art alone.

Thus, what had read like a powerful sonnet, now wears itself out in twenty belaboured lines.

One more example that fed my disillusionment is the poem ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ which George Moore had called a perfect poem. This assessment made W.B. Yeats laugh because he had seen Morris scribble the poem with his left hand to fill out the last two pages for the printers:

‘Now I'll tell you something,’ said Yeats. ‘When I was down with William Morris at Kelmscott, in came the printer’s devil and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Morris, but there are two blank pages at the end of your book of poems which we'd like filled in.” And Morris said, “Excuse me, Yeats!” and with his left hand he scratched in that nonsense about Goldilocks, and that’s what Moore gave you as perfect poetry.’

By this point I was about to abandon Morris in favour of some conventional poet who knew what he was doing. Morris, in fact, once shrugged to some fellow-students at Oxford who were admiring his work—‘Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write.’

The question that was arising is one that appears to have undermined the scholarship of many of Morris’s critics: how seriously should we study the poetry of a man who didn’t really know what he was doing? About to turn away from Morris, I turned at last to his manuscripts. There I discovered that Morris’s reputation as one who showed much haste and little thought was founded on no evidence.

First I examined the allegedly misplaced first page of ‘The Defence of Guenevere’. It contains nine stanzas written in the interdependent terza rima verse form. Here are the last two stanzas from the omitted page followed by the first stanza of the published poem:

So he was missed too; ever more and more
Grew Gawaine’s nets round Guenevere the Queen.
Look round about what knights were there that wore
Sir Launcelot’s colours, the great snake of green
That twisted on the quartered white and red—

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek.

The last stanza from the omitted first page requires a third line that must end with a word rhyming with ‘green’ to complete the terza rima verse form. If the present opening page originally was intended to be the second page then its first line would have had to end with a word rhyming with ‘red’. Thus the form of the terza rima proves that the dramatically abrupt opening was never meant to follow directly the ninth stanza of the rejected page. Wherever the opening stanza originally was intended
to stand, its present position cannot be dismissed as the result of a fortunate mistake or a last minute decision to omit the first proof sheet.

Next, when I looked at the manuscript for the sonnet ‘Near but Far Away’, which supposedly had six lines pruned by Morris’s daughter, I found that there were two drafts for this sonnet. At the bottom of one draft was the draft of another sonnet entitled ‘May Grown A-Cold’. Here we find that the alleged six lines pruned from ‘Near but Far Away’ are really the sestet of this other sonnet. The biographer, Philip Henderson, added the sestet of one sonnet onto the end of another sonnet in order to support his argument that Morris and his wife recognized how incompatible they were with each other. (Morris—being interested in chivalry and having written the defence of Guenevere’s adultery—went to Iceland for six weeks to allow his wife and friend, Dante Rossetti, time to make up their minds about their interest in each other.)

The Yeats story about Morris filling in the last two blank pages in his new book is a preposterous joke. ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’ is 345 stanzas long. It fills out the last 30 pages, not the last two. The story was told not to discredit Yeats’s old idol—William Morris—but to discredit his old enemy—George Moore. Moore once had made fun of Yeats’s dandy dressing, comparing Yeats to an ‘umbrella that somebody had forgotten at a picnic’.

But why have these stories remained part of the conventional notion of Morris’s artistry? Perhaps because it is so difficult to comprehend how modest, diligent, and prolific he really was. One physician diagnosed the cause of Morris’s death as ‘simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men’. Because his work encompassed more than ten professions—poet, painter, printer, novelist, architect, furniture and interior designer, manufacturer, editor, and socialist—normal mortals assume that he had little time for polishing and revising his poetry.

Morris admitted that composing poetry was hard work: ‘That talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense. I may tell you that flat. There is no such thing. It’s a mere matter of craftsmanship.’ Yet his own admission is passed over for stories that depict his writing in terms of spontaneous bursts of creativity. One of his Oxford friends, Canon Dixon, told J.W. Mackail that Morris had destroyed his early manuscripts after publishing The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems: ‘It was a dreadful mistake to destroy them. But he had no notion whatever of correcting a poem, and very little power to do so.’ Mackail then elaborated:

This incapacity or impatience of correction remained characteristic of Morris as a literary artist. The manuscripts of his longer poems show little alteration from the first drafts. When he was dissatisfied with a poem, he wrote it afresh, or wrote another instead of it.

Thus in 1969, Jessie Kocmanova tells us that Morris’s manuscripts indicate that he worked on his poems much as a mason would work on a building. In his effort to ‘find the perfect medium for expressing a particular meaning, . . . he rejected whole blocks of poetry rather than individual lines or images, until the precise metre suitable for his subject was hit upon’. In 1979, after demonstrating Morris’s sophisticated artistry, John Hilmer still feels compelled to acknowledge that ‘it is no doubt true that
News from Nowhere is slightly constructed, or at least rapidly, as indeed all of Morris's work was constructed: we have been told, for example, that he preferred to write brand new verses for The Earthly Paradise rather than re-write those he considered unsatisfactory. And in 1980, Frederick Kirchhoff is claiming still that Morris 'preferred to rewrite whole or large sections of his poems rather than submit them to minor revisions'.

These misconceptions about Morris's manner of composition are supported by stories that characterize Morris's work in terms of speed and bulk. Philip Henderson records Charles Faulkner's story about the speed with which Morris could compose: 'On one occasion he began work on Jason at four in the morning and wrote 750 lines at a sitting. Another memorandum at the foot of the same manuscript records “350 lines after 10 p.m.”'. Mackail quotes from a letter by Morris about his progress with The Earthly Paradise: 'Yesterday I wrote 33 stanzas of Pygmalion. If you want my company (usually considered of no use to anybody but the owner) please say so. I believe I shall get on so fast with my work that I shall be able to idle.' To Dante Gabriel Rossetti's teasing jibe that a Blue Closet in Morris's residence at Queen Square was 'full from top to bottom with Morris's poems' may be added Morris's remark: 'If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry, he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all.'
Between 1861 and 1870, Morris composed and published *The Life and Death of Jason* and the longest poem in the English language: *The Earthly Paradise*. *Jason* was intended to be part of *The Earthly Paradise* but was published separately when it grew too long at 10,534 lines. May Morris asks us to try to imagine 'the capacity for sheer

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*Passage from Morris's fair copy of his draft of the Story of Aristomenes in the British Library: even this shows him making corrections. This story was never published in *The Earthly Paradise* for which it was originally written.*

hard work in this master of many crafts' whose 'brain was always at work, but his hand was seldom still':

If you had seen and handled those seven great folio volumes of *The Earthly Paradise*, fair copies and drafts, you would be particularly impressed by the work this perfectionist put into his poetry. You would have to remember, also, that some twenty or so other MSS of single stories exist in one form or another; that the writer was at this time cutting on wood, designing and busy over the hundred and one matters that the head of a personally-conducted business has to attend
to; that he kept no amanuensis and did all the writing of notes and drafts and scripts in his own hand.\textsuperscript{18}

Actually, Morris appears to have written more drafts for his poems than even his daughter realized. What have been called the first drafts of his work appear to be only his first transcriptions. When I examined Morris's manuscripts in order to work back towards his initial moment of creation, I discovered a few discrepancies in an otherwise consistent (but suspiciously too consistent) collection of drafts.

Most of Morris's so-called first drafts are on long, blue, 34-lined folios. For example, the manuscript identified by T.J. Wise as the first draft of 'The Story of Aristomenes' (which Morris intended for \textit{The Earthly Paradise} but did not publish) is on such folios. Wise identified the date of composition as 1868, but the folios are watermarked with the date of 1870.\textsuperscript{19} Another manuscript consists of six pages from a small four- by six-inch oblong pocketbook. It presents two scenes from 'Aristomenes' to which Morris refers in the watermarked folios by drawing a line and writing 'pocketbook'. The pocketbook scenes conclude with a 'Query' scrawled across the last page outlining the direction of the plot—

Query as to the way of betrayal—say he arranges with certain merchants and they are taken by the Spartans who are lurking close by. The door is opened, and Glauce is killed and Lausus taken and stoned afterwards by the Spartans about the same time that A. is chucked into the hole at ######. Scene in which G. says to A. love me, he says can't she makes a noise but is relieved and goes off to L—\textsuperscript{20}

—the very plot which Morris then follows after the line drawn across the long folio. Hence the pocketbook was written before the long folios. The folio copy then is not the first draft, nor was it written in 1868 but in 1870 (since it is on 1870 watermarked paper, the last volume of \textit{The Earthly Paradise} was published in December 1870, and a letter from Dante Rossetti written in September 1870 describes how Morris had abandoned the tale).\textsuperscript{21}

Here are two very different images of the poet at work. One is of Morris revising and transcribing passages from these six folios of the small notebook and feeling the need to conclude them with a note outlining his subsequent scenes. Then, at the other extreme, we see the ease with which Morris appears to have written most of his other alleged first drafts (which all look like these clean, long folios).

If the notebook fragment suggests that the alleged first draft is really a transcription of an earlier draft, then another fragment—one from a prose romance—takes us another step back in Morris's creative process. This other fragment is written on a small, folded letterhead paper.\textsuperscript{22} Written in pencil on the verso of the folded letter is a heavily revised verse showing more deletions and revisions than most of Morris's manuscripts. It is a draft for a simple verse sung by a carle to a king in an unpublished prose romance ('The Folk of the Mountain Door'). This verse is one of Morris's least demanding poems; it is simply a relaxing digression from the prose story, and yet Morris revised \textit{two drafts} for it, the first draft heavily revised on scrap paper. The second draft\textsuperscript{23} shows the typical characteristics of those manuscripts alleged to be Morris's first
drafts: the watermarked long folios, the careless punctuation, and occasional revisions. Yet it is a revision of a previous draft which reveals no clear vision of the poem’s rhyme or rhythm. Here is the first draft from the letterhead scrap followed by the revised draft from folio 14 of the prose romance. The first draft I have numbered with the corresponding line numbers of the revised folio. I have used the following sigla to signify deletions <##> (words Morris has crossed out) and additions \##/ (words Morris has inserted):

3  <W> <Twe> \Th/ere bale & bane
4   Ye scarce shall chain
5   There the sword is ground
6   And wounds abound
8   And the love-nets there
7   Weave women fair
9   Merry <heart> <days> \hearts/in the mountain
10  Dales <Shepherd> \shepherd/men<yet may/> <bear> <wear>
11   \keep/
12   And about the Fair Fountain<s> heed\more than their sheep/
Of
13-14 The Dale of the tower <men named> <\thou knowest/><from of yore>
15-14 \In the sun slaying, Where springeth the well/
16  When the even clouds <lower> full oft do they tell
    Often
    <And they ma\vel why ever>
    <The dale had its name>
17-18 And often they wonder whence cometh its name
19-20 What tale lies there under of <praise or of blame>\honour or shame/
21-22 <For beside the fount welling no house>

1   Wide is the land
2   Where the houses stand
3   There bale and bane
4   Ye scarce shall chain;
5   There the sword is ground
6   And wounds abound;
7   And women fair
8   Weave the love-nets there.
9   MERRY hearts in the mountain
10  Dales shepherd-men keep
11  And about the Fair Fountain
12  heed more than their sheep
13  Of the Dale of the Tower <Wh>
14  Where springeth the well
15  In the sun-slaying <they talk> hour
16  They talk and they tell;
17  And often they wonder
18  Whence cometh the name
19 And what tale lies thereunder
20 for honour or shame.
21 For beside the fount welling
22 no castle now is;
23 Yet seldom foretelling
24 Of weirds runs wends amiss.

The transcription on the folio spells MERRY in the upper case in line 9 to signify the shift from rhyming couplets to quatrains. The numerous revisions of this and the subsequent line in the first draft appear to have left Morris uncertain as to whether he was writing longer couplets or quatrains. As the first draft reveals,

Merry heart hearts in the mountain
Dales Shepherd men bear (ll. 9–10)

is revised to

Merry hearts in the mountain
Dales men yet may bear.

The tenth line is further revised:

Dales shepherd men keep.

From here Morris proceeds tentatively:

And about the Fair Mountain heed
Of
The Dale of the tower men named from of yore
When the even clouds lower full oft do they tell. (ll. 11–16)

This is revised unsatisfactorily to:

And about the Fair Mountain heed more than their sheep
Of The Dale of the tower thou knowest
In the sun slaying, Where springeth the well
When the even clouds full oft do they tell.

Here the approach of evening is made more dramatic. Whereas it was first described as lowering the clouds, it is now described as slaying the sun. But turning to the revised folio, we find that Morris is still searching for the right words to describe this change:

In the sun-slaying they talk hour
They talk and they tell. (ll. 15–16)

The letterhead scrap paper shows how hard Morris had to work on even the simplest verses. It suggests that the typical long folios are not the first drafts of Morris’s poems. His belief that ‘inspiration is sheer nonsense’, that poetry is a ‘matter of craftsmanship’ is not inconsistent with Edward Burne-Jones’s caricature of Morris as old Topsy buzzing at the bench of a loom. The buzzing refers not to spontaneous outbursts of long lines of poetry composed in his head while weaving tapestries. Rather he might murmur aloud bits of poetry until he had a few lines in his head whereupon he would
Each generation of critics has repeated the same stories to illustrate Morris's haste and carelessness as an artist. But the revisions in his manuscripts reveal a serious craftsman's careful attention to detail. Considering his emphasis on the craftsman's unified sensibility, it is surprising that some critics would have us believe that Morris left behind the romantic dreamer's interest in poetry and interior design when he crossed the 'river of fire' to become a committed socialist.24 The manuscripts disprove this notion. In a passage from a socialist lecture entitled 'Commercial War', Morris angrily concludes that 'all workmen are exploited'. As he crossed the 't' in the word 'exploited' he extended the cross down the right margin into an acanthus leaf pattern similar to a design for one of his chintzes or wallpapers. In his lecture on 'Communism', notations such as 'old age pensions' and 'luxury or necessity' are wrapped in ornamental floral designs. The versos of the last two folios of 'Socialism' are filled with floral designs. On folio 6 of 'Communism, i.e. Property', the margins and the ends of the paragraphs are decorated with foliage. These lectures were written and delivered between 1885 and 1892.25 Morris apparently remained enthusiastic about all of his interests throughout his life.

NOTES

5 Tinker Library [1595], Yale University. Printed by May Morris in CW, I, p. xx.
7 Poems by the Way (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1891).
8 Mackail, II, p. 336.
9 Mackail, I, p. 186.
10 Mackail, I, p. 52.
The following letter from Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 8 September 1870, is in the Troxell Collection, Princeton University Library, Trox. n. 14.: 'Morris wrote a long poem about Aristomenes and the Revolution of the Messenians against Sparta, but it got longer & longer till at last he couldn’t get it into the EP at all & had to give it up. . . . The Aristomenes was very fine especially in the fighting parts.'