
King Arthur Through the Ages

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¹²Swinburne, "Dedicatory Epistle," in *Swinburne Replies*, 99-100.

¹³Swinburne, "Dedicatory Epistle," in *Swinburne Replies*, 105.

¹⁴Staines, "Swinburne's Arthurian Poetry," 65-68.

¹⁵See my article, "Swinburne's Concept of the Hero in *The Tale of Balen*," *Arthurian Interpretations* 1 (1986), 48-53.

Justice and Vindication in William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere"

Florence Boos

William Morris was the only major Victorian poet who chose medieval settings for most of his poetry, a choice which often contributed to dismissals of his work as "escapist."¹ Some critics granted partial dispensation from this epithet to the dramatic monologues of *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), but the conventional view of this work was reexpressed as recently as 1981 by Margaret Lourie, in her introduction to the Garland scholarly edition of *The Defence*:

[The] *Guenevere* poems refused to confront a single moral or intellectual question of their own age or any other. So far from displaying "the powerful application of ideas to life" later recommended by Arnold, they displayed no ideas at all.²

Her subsequent oblique "praise" of Morris follows similar lines: "Like Yeats, Morris refused to compose the Victorian poetry of social responsibility."³

Such "modern(ist)" judgments of Morris seem to *accept* uncritically, rather than repudiate, the "moral" and "intellectual" categories of his more censorious Victorian critics. A related middle view grants Morris's stark medieval projections a kind of alternate psychological realism, but waives further inquiry into their intellectual and emotional coherence. I will argue that *The Defence* does not evade controversy on its own terms, and that its powerful evocations of stress, rupture, and violence reverberate in a world of stark ethical imperatives. Morris's contemporaries found these imperatives appallingly bleak; most critics who interpret him as a precursor of the *fin-de-siècle* simply ignore them.

Similarly, I will suggest that the many narrative, chronological, and spatial dislocations of consciousness in *The Defence of Guenevere* are not signs of lapses in authorial control, but deliberate choices which witness the power of the principal characters' anxieties and the passions which overwhelm their lives. Many of these characters suffer near-dislocation and abrogation of the usual structures and boundaries of identity, but no comforting censor orders or inhibits their direct responses to a world of mingled desire and pain.

On this account, then, Morris's narrative disjunctions and symbolic juxtapositions anticipated techniques sometimes called "modern" or "postmodern" in ambiances which remain recognizably Victorian. The world of the *Defence* poems is decaying and war-torn, and it is inhabited by lonely men and suffering women who often seek consolation in edenic memories of childhood and fantasies of visionary reunion with nature in the moment of death. Amid these lost struggles, the *Defence* poems enjoin their protagonists to preserve a tenuous vision of beauty, at the risk of life, and often in defiance of certain failure and annihilation. The poems' testing of imagined identities against hostile forces reflects two tacit assumptions: that no honorable compromise with such "defences" of beauty is possible; and that it cannot take place in any sheltered or even durable "palace of art." In Morris's work, no such shelter exists. He was anti-puritan, and he deeply disliked conventional devices of didactic literature, so his presentations of this rigoristic ethic is implicit, but his reluctance to preach the obvious should not obscure his poetry's coherence, subtlety, and emotional force. Much of the density and subtlety of Morris's early work emerges in the passionate rhetorical indirection he used as a mode of expression for an unusual clarity of vision.

Critical considerations of the title poem, "The Defence of Guenevere," have responded to the principal question about it which I have raised above. Does the poem provide a coherent intellectual, moral, or artistic "defence" of Guenevere? Or is her monologue simply a painterly flourish of deviously emotional

self-revelation? What interpretations can be found for the angelically imposed "choice of cloths"? Her refusal to account for the blood-spattered bed? Her allusion to her own weakness and beauty? Or her threat that Launcelot will save her once gain, in trial by combat?

One view of the poem, that of Laurence Perrine, presents it as a rhetorical *tour de force*:

... But Morris no more necessarily condones Guenevere's conduct than Milton does Satan's when he describes the archfiend as a "great Commander" and as possessing "dauntless courage." Morris has merely taken one of Malory's characters in a moment of stress and brought her intensely alive. His task has been not to excuse or blame, but to vivify.⁴

Perrine bases his argument in part on a specious analogy with Browning: "... there is no more reason for supposing that Morris is justifying [his] characters than there is to believe that Browning is defending the Duke of Ferrara or the Bishop of St. Praxed's."⁵ Perrine's point is undercut by the fact that the ironies of Browning's early dramatic monologues usually underscore the sort of moral judgments which, according to Perrine, Morris supposedly waives. We enjoy the process of uncovering their systematic deceptions *because* the Duke of Ferrara and Bishop of St. Praxed's are manifestly evil—arrogant, grasping, murderous hypocrites. Nor do they draw our sympathy by tremulous courage in the face of public humiliation and a threatened execution at the stake.

Morris's own 1856 review of *Men and Women* also makes clear that he preferred the poems of heroism and love ("Before," "After," and "Childe Roland," for example), and he conspicuously failed to share Browning's fascination with devious hypocrisy: of Bishop Bloughram, for example, he remarks bluntly that "for my part I dislike him thoroughly."⁶ In "The Statue and the Bust," Browning had carefully left questions about the morality of adultery in suspension, but criticized the cautious lovers as follows:

... the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Is—the unlit lamp and ungirt loin

In his review, Morris essentially agrees. He quickly passes over the sin of adultery, but expresses strong moral contempt for the hypocrisy of time-serving and “cowardly irresolution”:

Yet were the lovers none the less sinners, therefore, rather the more in that they were cowards; for in thought they indulged their love freely, and no fear of God, no hate of wrong or love of right restrained them, but only a certain cowardly irresolution.⁷

Such remarks express an early form of his lifelong belief in the moral value of “resolute” action and liberation of “frustrate ghost(s),” tempered by a personal ideal of fidelity which he never abandoned.

A somewhat different view of Morris’s Guenevere emerges in Carole Silver’s “The Defence of Guenevere: A Further Interpretation.”⁸ Like Perrine, Silver assumes Guenevere’s moral culpability, but she argues that

Our sympathy remains with Guenevere and her great but guilty love. The passion in whose name she has transgressed remains more important than her transgression. Guenevere’s testimony, looked at in full, is to the awful power of a love that dissolves all—morality included—in it. Through this testimony we can plainly see Morris’s profound grasp of illicit romantic passion.⁹

This interpretation is more faithful than Perrine’s to the poem’s rhetorical surge toward sympathetic identification with Guenevere, who at great psychic cost has told the truth about her single-minded love for Launcelot. The “sympathy” Silver senses is clearly present in the poem’s strong identification of Guenevere with the elements of a verdant and joyous nature, in turn associated with the inherent moral worth of spontaneous and infelt

love. But Silver’s rhetoric offers only moderate hope that “the awful power of a love that dissolves all—morality included”—can suggest another, more comprehensive morality—one, say, that may have guided Morris himself, when he saw himself, ironically, cast as Arthur. In her 1981 book, *The Romance of William Morris*, Silver argues in more censorious fashion:

[Guenevere] seeks to excuse her sin by suggesting its universality, and she blames it upon the moral confusion in the universe: things are not what they seem. But she still must admit that, whatever the cause, she has done wrong.¹⁰

[She] intends a speech of self-vindication, but her words and actions persuade the reader of her adultery. . . . She does not yet recognize in her cruelty to her opponents, her glee at the death of Meliagraunce, and her threats to destroy her enemies and the kingdom, the signs of her moral and emotional deterioration.¹¹

Other, less austere readings appear in several articles published in the 1970’s. John Hollow’s “William Morris and the Judgment of God,”¹² for example, correctly observes that Morris often pointed a moral in his early work that “[men] who concern themselves about God’s judgments tend to take their own judgments for His. . . . For this reason, men should not concern themselves about God or his judgments. . . .”¹³ (a later, more secular variant occurs at the end of “The Hill of Venus,” in the blossoming of the Pope’s staff). Here, Hollow argues, “Morris’s Guenevere does not deny adultery, she denies Gauwaine’s claim to know God’s judgment of her.”¹⁴

A more “aesthetic” vindication appears in Patrick Brantlinger’s 1973 article, “*The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*,”¹⁵ which suggests that Morris elevates Guenevere’s sheer beauty to a moral force. Guenevere’s defense, Brantlinger remarks, is part of a “dialectic between art and life” in which Guenevere expresses a higher morality based largely on aesthetic

response: "the substance of [Guenevere's] defense is largely that she is so beautiful and love is so beautiful that she ought to be forgiven."

In "Guenevere's Critical Performance" (1979),¹⁶ Jonathan F. S. Post dismisses moral issues altogether, and construes Guenevere as a rhetorician who, "like all of us, constructs dramas and comes to accept these imagined creations as perhaps the only form of truth we might ever know in this world."¹⁷ Perhaps—yet Browning's murderer Guido "constructs" as consummately as Guenevere. Even Post adopts a mildly normative tone in his conclusion that "Guenevere's defense seems also a young author's defense of poetry, while the most basic denial of Gauwaine and his accusations, whatever they are, is the poet's refusal ever to let him speak."¹⁸

A deeper point emerges in Dennis Balch's 1975 "Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb,'" which attempts for the first time to read Guenevere's allegory of the blue and red cloths as a coherent representation of her situation. He too assumes her "guilt," but remarks perceptively that Morris

[p]erhaps . . . realized that the Arthurian legends embodied a system of values contrary to the values he himself was developing which would depend on the central importance of the individual sensual experience rather than a denial of man's animal nature.¹⁹

Aspects of several of these views seem to me right, but I would stress the extent to which Morris was no more willing than the author of "The Palace of Art" to accept *any* casuistry that there is an underlying antagonism between morality and beauty, life and art. Guenevere's beauty would be insufficient, were it not aligned with a "truth" which it enhanced—a truth which Morris found largely in sympathy with her victimization. For Morris, such sympathies clearly overrode any questions about conventional transgression of arbitrary sexual codes and harmonized with deeper

loyalties that guided his evolving sense of social and political morality.

Morris and his friends were of course familiar with discussions of that great Victorian codification of the double standard, the Divorce Law of 1857, which permitted men but not women to sue for divorce on grounds of adultery. Morris composed most of *The Defence* poems in 1857, and he and his rather idealistic and iconoclastic friends wished to make clear their support for a single standard of romantic and marital obligation based on affection, not legal compulsion. In keeping with this ethic, Guenevere eventually claims a right to tolerance and freedom from censorious male judgment, and she avers that she and Launcelot have both acted rightly, even heroically, in a context which is both restrictive and oppressive.

All the critics cited assume that Guenevere has in fact committed adultery, but Morris's poem actually leaves the issue in suspension, which suggests that the question of technical innocence may have been a matter of relative indifference to him. As Angela Carson and others have pointed out,²⁰ Malory had presented two possibly conflicting accounts of the lovers' conduct. The incident which resembles Morris's poem more closely occurs in "The Knight of the Cart" (Book XIX of "The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere"); in it, Malory makes clear Guinevere's innocence of the rather ludicrous charge that she has slept with one of her wounded knights, but describes with amusement the assignation between Launcelot and Guinevere which precedes Mellyagaunte's discovery of the blood-stained sheets.

On the other hand, in Book XX, "The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon," Launcelot's assertion that she has been "trew unto my lorde Arthur"²¹ is given what seems to be the author's endorsement. After the queen invites Launcelot to her bedchamber (as she does in Morris's poem), Malory's narrator becomes studiously coy: "whether they were abed other at other maner of disportis, me lyste nat thereof make no mencion, for love that tyme was not as love ys nowadayes" (821). Throughout Book

XX Launcelot also defends the queen's "honor" with apparent sincerity:

. . my lady, quene Guenyver, ys as trew a lady unto youre person as ys ony lady lyyng unto her lorde. . . . (837).

and he explains his regrettable abduction as follows:

"Sir, hit was never in my thought. . . to withholde the quene frome my lorde Arthur, but . . . mesemed hit was my parte to save her lyff and put her from that daunger tyll bettir recover myght com" (842).

The apparent discrepancy between Books XVIII and XX remains unresolved, but some aspects of Morris's Guenevere may be consistent with the Guenevere of Malory's Book XX, Launcelot's faithful lover in spirit, who may or may not have remained loyal to her husband.

Malory's account of Arthur's kingdom also includes an immense range of other material which Morris simply omits, whose cumulative effect is to make Launcelot and Guenevere's affair one node of an elaborate network of social and political loyalties, disloyalties, and intrigues. Malory's Arthur and Guenevere are on fairly good terms, and Gauwaine's anger is partially provoked by Launcelot's killing of his two brothers Gareth and Gaheris—as in Icelandic sagas, deaths of Malorian kinspeople require reparation. Malory narrates a tragedy of inevitable conflict between honorable persons, who love and respect one another, and generally subordinate brief moments of sexual passion to more important considerations of friendship, political honor, or loyalty to kin.

Morris's "Defence," by contrast, ignored the personal ties between Malory's Arthur and Launcelot, suppressed Arthur's good nature, and modified Malory's account of a military caste's interlocking feuds and attachments, to recreate a tale of two lovers whose overarching attraction and pained loyalty overwhelm their lives. In Morris's poem, narrative intensity and analysis have migrated inward, to make Launcelot and Guenevere's love a con-

sequence of alienation rather than courtly intrigue. Morris's anguished heroine seems especially remote from Malory's politically shrewd, cheerfully energetic, and self-respecting queen: Malory's Guenevere is routinely self-protective and resilient under stress; Morris' Guenevere blurts out her defense in a rush of inspired compulsion; Malory's queen is aloof and autocratic; Morris's intense and vulnerable. Confronting "such great lords," Malory's Guenevere might feel a prudent mixture of anger and apprehension; but never Guenevere's "awe and shame." Against the densely textual background of the poem's modified loyalties and passions, Morris seems to have intended his silence to suggest that the victim's technical "guilt" or "innocence" was not a significant moral issue.

Guenevere, in any case, is one of several *Defence* heroines characterized by physical vulnerability, courage in defense of passionate emotions, and vicarious identification with deeds of *prouesse* performed by their male lovers, a recurring pattern throughout Morris' early and middle writings. Morris's early poetic world is especially stark in its polarization by genres: in "The Defence" and its companion poem "King Arthur's Tomb," a stereotypically manly life of action and military self-defense drives Launcelot forth into the world, while Guenevere waits, confined in castle and nunnery, for external forces to determine her fate. His is an oppression of sustained arduous effort and repeated risk of life, hers of self-conscious constriction and inactivity.²² The queen's defense is a great but isolated act, wrung from her in a state of acute distress. Memories of her moments in the garden with Launcelot provide some release from her burden of anxiety, but she remains essentially alone throughout the poem. As in the rest of *The Defence*, only the rarest and most exceptional moments of freedom from constraint bring happiness and love unmarred by fear.

The extreme rigidity of the poem's sexual roles also explains why so much of Guenevere's "defense" must indict her own victimization. She vindicates her passion as the mature love of a

woman in special circumstances—married at any early age, for reasons of state, to a distinguished but neglectful spouse, she has preserved for years a singleminded, faithful attachment to another man whom she would have preferred to marry. A powerless woman falsely judged by powerful men, she demands that she be permitted to construe “duty” and “fidelity” in terms that are intelligible in the actual circumstances of her life.

When she lifts her downcast gaze and begins to accuse her accusers, she also pleads her need to escape a life of weakness and repression, and defends the transforming strength of her love for Launcelot, her only human contact in a world of arbitrary manipulation and intrigue. She avers that she has violated no genuinely moral ideals; her offense is that her physical beauty and love of Launcelot embody natural and creative forces which shame the destructive malice of Gauwaine, Mellyagraunce, and, by implication, Arthur himself. Her love is both the flower and the green fuse through which it drives. Nor is she altogether specious, as several prior critics have assumed, in her claim that her beauty and Launcelot’s heroism attest the virtue of their cause. To defend herself before her accusers, she has had to conquer internal voices of uncertainty and shame, and give articulation to modes of self-respect which are based on belief in natural human love. Launcelot’s final rescue only confirms the psychological freedom she has already won from within.

The opening passages of “The Defence” present Guenevere as a desperate human being, constricted by her clothes, confined, and about to be bound to the stake. Her emotions are painfully immediate; her forehead is clammy with sweat, and her face stings as though she had been hit. Every thought and gesture is choked, strained, and constricted (“She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,/ Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek”), as

“knowing now that they would have her speak,” she begins her defense with a rote gesture of rhetorical deference:

“God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right, such great lords—still. . . . (ll.
13-15)

She does not beg for forgiveness, however, and retains a measure of autonomy from the first. Speech steadies her, and soon prompts her to defend herself. Consider, she asks, how life would seem to you in my stead:

“Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying. . . (ll. 16-18)

. . .

Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:

“‘One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
I will not tell you . . . (ll. 21-24)

In her allegory, the commanding patriarchal presence of a “great God’s angel” presents the cloths, and demands that a bizarrely fateful choice be made without preparation or foreknowledge:

“And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two.

After a shivering half-hour, suppose you said:
‘God help! heaven’s colour, the blue,’ and he said, ‘hell.’
(ll. 30-38)

Some critics have argued that the blue cloth symbolizes her adultery with Launcelot, but I agree with Balch that it represents more plausibly her "choice" to marry Arthur, forced upon her by "great lords" for solemn reasons of duty and state ("heaven's color"). In retrospect, the vow of her arranged marriage has now become "a little word,/ Scarce ever meant at all." When Launcelot arrives, he turns her inner world "white with flame," and prompts the agonized recognition that things might have been different, a recognition that utterly transforms the premises of her emotional life.

The perverse arbitrariness and opacity of Guenevere's "choice" makes clear that it was no choice (perhaps the response to "red" would also have been "hell?"); her real point is that human emotional life ought not to be subject to arbitrary manipulation. The same outraged sense of good faith betrayed also underlies the sudden force of her thrice repeated defense:

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever may have happened through these years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie." (ll. 46-48)

For a time, at least—indeed, for most of her marriage, if not all of it—she has dutifully followed the forms of fidelity to her husband (the "blue cloth") as propriety, religion, and the angel required her to do. The results have been devastating.

As her defense gathers rhetorical force, so, suddenly does her physical presence:

Though still she stood right up, and never shrunk,
But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!
Whatever tears her full lips may have drunk,

She stood, and seemed to think, and wrung her hair,
Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,
With passionate twisting of her body there: . . . (ll. 55-60).

The narrator's admiring tribute, "glorious lady fair!" is the poem's most direct authorial judgment). As Guenevere makes her life's most public declaration, she has thus shed her earlier "shame," and speaks without self-consciousness, as much for her own satisfaction as to persuade her accusers. Later in the poem (ll. 223-238), Guenevere almost comes to embody the beauty and energy of nature, a surge of elemental forces, winds, waters, and seasonal progressions:

"Yea also at my full heart's strong command,
See through my long throat how the words go up

. . .
. . . yea now

This little wind is rising, . . . (ll. 228-29, 232-33).

In keeping with this near-apotheosis is an identification of her love with seasonal change: Launcelot has first appeared to her at Christmas, and summer brings surges of emotion that are literally elemental:

"And in the Summer I grew white with flame,
And bowed my head down—Autumn, and the sick
Sure knowledge things would never be the same,

"However often Spring might be most thick
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew
Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick

"To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through
My eager body. . . . (ll. 68-77)

The climax of her longing comes when she again meets Launcelot, in an emblematically walled palace garden, whose immurement paradoxically heightens her sense of pleasurable longing:

I was half mad . . .
walled round every way;

I was right joyful of that wall of stone,
That shut the flowers and trees up with the sky,
And trebled all the beauty: . . . (ll. 110-114)

In the epiphanic vision which follows, a strange interfusion with nature almost impels her to the edge of rational control. Her "tenderly darkened fingers" merge eerily into the light, and "join" the variegated "yellow-spotted singers," which sing in the trees, all "drawn upward by the sun."

"A little thing just then had made me mad;
I dared not think, as I was wont to do,
Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had

"Held out my long hand up against the blue,
And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,

"There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers,
Round by the edges; what should I have done,
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,

"And startling green drawn upward by the sun?
But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run

. . . I lose my head e'en now in doing this. . . . (ll. 118-130)

In this altered state, Launcelot's oddly adventitious arrival ("In that garden fair came Launcelot walking. . . .") is quickly subsumed into her epiphany. She now rejects forever the lesser-souled Arthur, as a man of "great name and little love."

The lovers' dreamlike garden tryst is appropriately beatific, but also leaves a puzzling question: "After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?" (l. 13). One obvious answer—continued longing—would account for the return of the lines which follow, her second indignant refrain of denial:

"Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever happened on through all those years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. (ll. 142-44)

Passages such as these bear the interpretation that Guenevere and Launcelot, for the most part at least, have been "courtly" lovers, whose observance of the code's formal proprieties makes possible her repudiation of Gauwaine's charge—"Being such a lady, could I weep these tears/ If this were true?"

In any case, she now shifts to attack. She reminds Gauwaine that his mother had been beheaded on a similar charge of adultery, and warns him rather bizarrely that her slain spirit may return to haunt him, as a kind of malign variant of the speaker in "Ode to the West Wind":

. . . let me not scream out
For ever after, when the shrill winds blow

"Through half your castle-locks let me now shout
For ever after in the winter night;
When you ride out alone (ll. 158-62)

The threat only underscores once again her actual helplessness, for of course it can only be realized in another world.

In this one, more mundanely, she next reminds her accusers of Launcelot's physical *prouesse*, which has already defended her against Mellyagraunce's invasion of her bedchamber and observation of "blood upon my bed."

Whose blood then pray you? is there any law
 "To make a queen say why some spots of red
 Lie on her coverlet? (ll. 174-76)

Silver interprets the "spots of red" as evidence of a thwarted rape attempt by Mellyeagrance,²³ but Elaine and English Showalter have observed that the Victorians heavily censored any reference to menstruation, the most obvious alternate explanation of the "spots."²⁴ Morris's homely retention of this Malorian detail may have seemed to contemporary readers more daring than ludicrous.

In any case, Guenevere gleefully recalls Mellyyagraunce's fate at the hands of her "half-armed" champion, and two brief passages then precede the poem's ecstatic conclusion. The first is a remarkable set-piece, a climactic final evocation of her epiphanic self-image as a powerful force of nature:

. . . say no rash word
 Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,
 Wept all away to grey, may bring some sword

"To drown you in your blood; see my breast rise,
 Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
 And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,

"Yea also at my full heart's strong command,
 See through my long throat how the words go up
 In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

"The shadow lies like wine within a cup
 Of marvellously colour'd gold; yea now
 This little wind is rising, look you up,

"And wonder how the light is falling so
 Within my moving tresses: will you dare,
 When you have looked a little on my brow,

"To say this thing is vile? or will you care
 For any plausible lies of cunning woof,
 When you can see my face with no lie there

"For ever? am I not a gracious proof— (ll. 223-41)

Notice how remote are the elements of this self-portrait from conventional images of female sexual beauty. Even the more obviously erotic descriptions ("see my breast rise/ Like waves of purple sea") have an oddly impersonal intensity (not "see how I move my arms" or "how I speak," but "see how my arms are moved in wonderful wise. . . how the words go up in ripples to my mouth"). Such language suggests that she represents a generalized force of natural goodness, an alignment of id and superego curiously without ego. Her "face with no lie there/ For ever" also provides a "gracious proof" that innocence of spirit can embody itself in an appropriate outer form. This near-Keatsian assimilation of beauty to truth is obviously circular in its celebration of "beauty" as some kind of heterosexual lifeforce, but it is at least intelligible in these terms, and it also provides a kind of abstract formal design of human emotions under stress. After these lines the epiphanic vision fades, but Guenevere remains a person who has become conscious of her own dignity for the first time in the face of acute pain and likely death.

In the next passage, she recalls her last tryst with Launcelot, but refuses to repeat his parting words: "By God! I will not tell you more to-day,/ Judge any way you will— what matters it?" (ll. 277-78). Launcelot's last words, of course, may have included a promise of the rescue which follows (as they had in Malory), but her defiant reticence also expresses her claim to privacy and autonomy. She stands exposed to derision and judgment, and will hold private her last conversation with her lover, if necessary to death. Accordingly, she will contribute no more to her own defense: she can remember

— all, all, verily,
But just that which would save me; these things flit (ll. 281-82).

Those who view Guenevere as deceptive presumably consider this another evasion. I would rather believe that her "defence" leads naturally to this silence, a form of emancipation from her accusers; in the end their judgments do not matter to her, or to Morris, and she refuses to yield further to their compulsion.

After all this, there is admittedly something anticlimactic, if opportune, about Launcelot's subsequent arrival on a "roan charger," at "headlong speed," a kind of *equus ex machina* who quickly but abruptly concludes the physical action of the poem. Guenevere has already won her psychological independence, after which the narrative then conveniently provides a form of external confirmation—the "judgment of God." Appropriately, too, for the first time in the poem, Guenevere's physical movements now embody happiness in simple ways: "She lean'd eagerly, / And gave a slight spring sometimes." Such small, human motions are consistent with the earlier idealized descriptions, quoted above ("... she stood right up, and never shrank / But spake on bravely. . ."). But they are also less emblematic and more natural than the earlier apotheosis of Guenevere as the "glorious lady fair."

What, then, are the grounds Morris assigns for Guenevere's "defence"? Earlier, I reviewed several alternate interpretations of its substance. Some would construe her argument as one of obliquity, cunning, and deceit, or hold that her defense, though sincere, is based largely on grounds of grand but helpless passion, and shifts and turns which tellingly reflect her need for evasion and lack of more "rational" justifications. Others have argued that the poem's principal criteria for judgment are aesthetic or rhetorical rather than moral. All these views seem to me inadequate or incomplete, for I believe Morris wished to make the stronger case

that Guenevere is essentially guiltless—and that her claims are not only coherent but ultimately persuasive. Her defense's *anacolutha* follow a deeper logic of justice, reason and emotion, and eventually create a sense of personal and psychological liberation.

On this interpretation, Morris comes out well in the spectrum of mid-Victorian debates on the nature and role of women.²⁵ Apart from the Brownings, no major poets of the 1850's permitted their heroines to indict the straitened circumstances of their lives, much less align themselves rhetorically with liberating forces of nature.

To women who were obviously denied the most rudimentary forms of personal autonomy in contemporary Victorian society, a heroine who tries, however spasmodically, to break free of such constraints may have been an attractive figure. Compared with other adulterous women in English poetry of the 1850's—Bulwer-Lytton's passionately lonely but cruel Clytemnestra (*The Earl's Return and Other Poems*, 1855), or the abjectly "sinful" Guinevere of Tennyson's 1859 *Idylls*—Guenevere is also a virtual paragon of beneficent self-determination.

Clearly, though, some of the poem's tacit premises severely limit its value as an assertion of female autonomy. At her weakest, Guenevere is an idealized male projection of single-minded heterosexual passion, born, like Byron's "woman," "for love alone." In the entire poem she mentions no human ties but Launcelot, and apparently has no significant obligations besides fidelity to Arthur's "little love." Guenevere's "defence"—that she has been forced into a loveless marriage for reasons of state—takes her social and physical powerlessness for granted, and Morris clearly exaggerates her "feminine" helplessness to exacerbate the stifling intensity of her repressed emotions at the beginning of the poem. The overarching assumption of physical helplessness which underlies the poem's chivalric ethic assigns vastly different levels of responsibility to women and men. To impose *more* responsibility on women in sexual matters is bigotry, of course; but the reverse

mixes compassion and empathy with kindly condescension and *noblesse oblige*.

So the evidence is sympathetic but mixed. Only in flashes at first does Guenevere speak with conviction, analytical power, or noticeable insight. But the insights do come, and at her best—during her brief quasi-transfiguration as a benign force of nature—she becomes for Morris an archetypal voice of liberation from the crippling social and sexual constraints that closed in on Victorian women like a vise. It is no accident that twelve years later the creator of Guenevere quietly but steadfastly refused to abide by Victorian social codes which almost enjoined on him the role of a Gauwaine or an Arthur.

At any rate, "The Defence of Guenevere" seems to me a genuine vindication of a limited but admirable female psyche. Her "defence" is really twofold: first, a weaker argument, that mercy is justice for those whose natural desires have been repressed; and a second, stronger one, that those who seem to require "forgiveness" may represent forces more natural and vital than those who "forgive" them. In poetry at least, the meek can inherit the earth. When Guenevere consciously identifies her passionate energies with the elements of nature and an idealized sanctity of natural emotion, her real self grows in dignity, self-respect, and strength.

Thus it seems to me that Guenevere's evocations of her past, her strange allegory of the opaquely ominous "cloths," her flashes of insight into herself and her accusers, and her triumphant repudiation of the self-blame and constriction which oppressed her are coherent and persuasive. In the end, Morris's rare combination of anti-puritanism, contempt for hypocrisy, and temperamental identification with victims of oppression helped him create one of the century's better vindications of a heroine's right of self-determination.

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NOTES

¹A shift away from the "escapist" line in Morris criticism occurred with Patrick Brantlinger's "The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems," *Victorian Newsletter* 44 (Fall 1973), 18-24.

²Margaret Lourie, ed., *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (New York, 1981), 22.

³Lourie, 22.

⁴Laurence Perrine, "William Morris' Guenevere: An Interpretation," *Philological Quarterly* 39 (1960), 241.

⁵Perrine, 241.

⁶*The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris. 24 vols. (London, 1910-15), I:330.

⁷*Collected Works*, I: 344.

⁸Carole Silver, "The Defence of Grenevere': A Further Interpretation," *Studies in English Literature* 9 (1969), 695-702.

⁹Silver, 702.

¹⁰Silver, *The Romance of William Morris*, (Athens, Ohio, 1981), 21.

¹¹Silver, *The Romance*, 24.

¹²John Hollow, "William Morris and the Judgment of God," *PMLA* 86 (1971), 446-51.

¹³Hollow, 450.

¹⁴Hollow, 447.

¹⁵Brantlinger, 20.

¹⁶Jonathan F. S. Post, "Guenevere's Crticial Performance," *Victorian Poetry* 17 (1979), 317-27.

¹⁷Post, 319.

¹⁸Post, 327.

¹⁹Dennis Balch, "Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in 'Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb,'" *Victorian Poetry* 13 (1975), 70.

²⁰Angela Carson, *Philological Quarterly* 42 (1963), 113-34; Silver, " 'The Defence of Guenevere'," 695-96; David Staines, "William Morris' Treatment of His Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere*," *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973), 439-64.

²¹Eugène Vinaver, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (London, 1962), 848. Page numbers in text are from this edition.

²²Please see my "Sexual Polarization in *The Defence of Guenevere*," in *Browning Institute Studies*, vol. 13 (1985), 181-200.

²³Silver, *The Romance*, 20.

²⁴"Victorian Women and Menstruation," in Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1972), 38-44.

²⁵Post correctly observes that Guenevere's eristic fluency is unusual in itself: "Tennyson's submissive Guenevere [sic] or his repeatedly hushed Enid are more faithful to the original conception of women in romance, if somewhat less interesting as characters, than Morris's Queen" (318).

King Mark in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*

Henry Hall Peyton III

In 1854 Richard Wagner wrote to Franz Liszt about a new idea for a music-drama, an operatic version of the legend of Tristan and Isolde. It was to be "a simple work," but a "most full-blooded musical conception."¹ Again, in an 1856 letter to Liszt, Wagner wrote of "a simple work such as *Tristan*."² The completed work was to be on a moderate scale, which Wagner thought would make it easier to perform.³ Thus, Wagner informed Liszt about the inception of the composition of a music-drama which has been called "one of the supreme achievements of mankind."⁴ From Wagner's comments, particularly the repeated use of the word "simple," one would expect a work of modest proportions and meager significance. Yet, in his Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1972, Leonard Bernstein viewed *Tristan* as a highly sophisticated and complex musical composition, speaking of its ambiguity exploited "in all three of the linguistic modes. . . ."⁵ In fact, Bernstein, who devoted much attention to an analysis of the Prelude, found it fascinating in development and intricate in composition to the degree that there is question as to whether the beginning section is written in the key of A minor or in no key at all. Bernstein concluded that "*Tristan* is the crisis work of the nineteenth century."⁶

Bernstein's analysis of the chromatic ambiguity of the music of this "crisis work" emphatically denies the claim of the composer that he was writing a "simple" work, for the Prelude to *Tristan* introduces a concept of musical time different from that of any previous composition. As Bernstein puts it:

And this is what gives *Tristan* its true semantic quality—quite apart from the obvious semantic facts of the text, of Wagner's own poetry; of chivalry and magic potions and betrayal; and apart from leitmotifs signifying desire or death. I am speaking of musical semantics as we