

MORRIS'S "THE CHAPEL IN LYONESS": AN INTERPRETATION

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While giving William Morris's early Arthurian poems ample credit for beauty of color, power of mood, and even depth of passion, most critics have followed Swinburne in censuring them for lack of structure and narrative consistency.¹ The poems have been described as emotionally effective but formless tapestries of chance reminiscence from Morris's reading in Malory. But a close examination of a representative poem, "The Chapel in Lyonesse," tends to show that these Arthurian poems have considerable intellectual and narrative structure. For though he does not use allusion and symbol with self-conscious precision, Morris employs a reminiscent and symbolic technique to construct a tightly integrated and dramatically effective poem. Like a number of other later Victorians, he was in this period of his career writing in a fashion not essentially different from that of twentieth-century poetry. His own diffidence in regard to these poems² may well have sprung from a consciousness that they were innovations.

"The Chapel in Lyonesse" was first published in the September, 1856 issue of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* and later included in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858). Read without reference to its background in Arthurian romance and to the symbolism of the medieval church, it appears a poem merely of mood and color, and so it has usually been viewed. But interpreted in the light of Arthurian legend, "The Chapel in Lyonesse" reveals a coherent and forceful spiritual drama. The general outline of the poem's meaning was briefly pointed out in a paragraph by Lucien Wolff in his excellent article "Le sentiment médiéval en Angleterre,"³ but the poem bears detailed interpreta-

¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Morris's Life and Death of Jason," *Essays and Studies* (London, 1875), pp. 112-15.

² "Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write" (J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* [London and New York, 1899], I. 52).

³ "Moins épisodique, *The Chapel in Lyonesse*, recrée plus fidèlement encore l'atmosphère complexe de la légende médiévale. Sieur Ozana le Cure Hardi,

tion. Very helpful in this connection are the textual revisions which Morris planned but never actually incorporated into any printed edition of the poem.⁴ All of these revisions are calculated to clarify and enforce the dramatic meaning.

In the poem *Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy* lies sorely wounded in the chancel of a chapel in that mysterious land of Lyonesse from which King Arthur also departs to another life. Deep in his breast is the truncheon of a spear. Sir Galahad has watched over him as he has lain in a speechless trance "from Christmas-Eve to Whit-Sunday." To them comes Sir Bors. Soon after his arrival Ozana dies. The principal difficulty of the poem lies in the interpretation of the change in spirit that Ozana experiences just before his death. At the end of his first speech he says, "Ah me, I cannot fathom it." But immediately before he dies he says, "Now I begin to fathom it." What has he begun to fathom? What has caused his increased understanding?

In the poem Morris's technique is to put himself in the place of the medieval author of an Arthurian lay and to make his drama's spiritual purport depend on the associations and connotations its characters, incidents, and symbols would have for the reader versed in the Arthurian tradition. Morris is implying and demanding on the part of his reader an almost medieval familiarity with the Arthurian cycle. No other poet of his time could so thoroughly

blessé grièvement au cours de sa quête du Saint-Graal, et racheté par l'amour fraternel des Elus, trouve en la mort l'amour terrestre suprême et la réconciliation parfaite avec Dieu. Evocation qui procède directement d'un rêve où les souvenirs de l'oeil et les aspirations morales se sont étroitement entrelacés; souvenirs du choeur d'une chapelle éclatante où le soleil couchant reflète sa flamme: vision de la fleur mystique de la pitié céleste, désaltérant les lèvres du fervent d'idéal qui succombe en sa mission: apparition fugitive de la silhouette d'un Galahad, dont le regard, à travers la beauté du ciel, perce jusqu'au mystère divin" ("Le sentiment médiéval en Angleterre au XIX^e siècle et la première poésie de William Morris," *Revue anglo-américaine*, II [October, 1924], 35).

⁴ The revisions referred to throughout this article are the alterations made by Morris in a copy of the first edition of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* probably at the time of the Ellis reprint in 1875. They were not used, however, in that edition. They are printed in the introduction to *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (24 vols., London, 1910-1914), I, xxii-iv. The text of "The Chapel in Lyonesse" I have used is that of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, Reprinted from the Kelmscott Press edition (London and New York, 1900), pp. 56-64.

assimilate the connotative values of another age. Even Swinburne, the master of stylistic pastiche, in neither his Greek nor his Arthurian poems ever succeeds in absorbing symbolic connotations as completely as Morris does. But, as Mackail says, the love of the Middle Ages was "born" in Morris.⁵ His boyhood interest in chivalry, his enthusiasm for Anglo-Catholic ritual at Marlborough, his love of medieval art and architecture, his vigorous searches after illuminated manuscripts in the Bodleian, and his omnivorous reading had made him even as early as 1856 able to imagine himself in the distant past.⁶ It is indeed this facility for absorbing the past without losing his own nineteenth-century personality that is a potent factor in all Morris's best literary work. Thus in "The Chapel in Lyonesse," though the words and mood are Pre-Raphaelite, the connotative symbolism by which alone the poem can be explained is thoroughly medieval and based on accurate yet imaginative reminiscence of Arthurian legend.

"The Chapel in Lyonesse" becomes meaningful and dramatic when it is interpreted in the light of two groups of legends: those dealing directly with Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy and those dealing with the search for the Holy Grail. In the Arthurian cycle Sir Ozana is of no great stature as a hero and is nowhere specified as one of those knights who sought the Grail. Usually he is mentioned only as one of a group. He fights in battles; he is smitten down in tournaments; he is captured while vainly guarding the Queen; he fails to heal Sir Urre; he is imprisoned; he serves before the King at table. Often he and his fellow second-rate knights of the Round Table are defeated and have to be rescued. More than once he is

⁵ Mackail, I, 10. Elsewhere Mackail says, "To Morris the Middle Ages, out of which he sometimes seemed to have strayed by some accident into the nineteenth century, were his habitual environment: he lived in them as really and as simply as if he had been translated back to them in actual vision." Mackail comments on his "amazing power of realization" of the medieval period (I, 132).

⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapters I-III. Mackail points particularly to Morris's "rapid and prodigious assimilation of medieval chronicles and romances" (I, 39). The poet's particular interest in Arthurian material was shown by the fact that his first painting was on an Arthurian subject (*ibid.*, I, 115), that he planned a cycle of poems on Arthur (*ibid.*, I, 134), and that he and Burne-Jones at one time envisaged an Order of Galahad (Paul Bloomfield, *William Morris* [London, 1934], p. 43). Morris and his friends were working on the Arthurian paintings in the Oxford Union (Mackail, I, 118).

grievously wounded. He is one of the forty foolish knights who pledge themselves under Gawain to find the missing Launcelot or die in the quest. As King Arthur predicts, they are unsuccessful and therefore forsworn.⁷ Another story tells how Sir Hector comes to the court of Sir Ozana's parents, who have not seen their son for ten years. During Ozana's absence an evil knight named Hervi has demanded Ozana's beautiful sister. For love of Ozana, Hector defeats Hervi and saves the sister from dishonor.⁸ Thus Morris, who as this and his other Arthurian poems demonstrate was thoroughly familiar with the old legends and who for a time made the *Morte d'Arthur* almost his Bible,⁹ is undoubtedly taking Ozana as a typical, frequently unsuccessful knight of the Round Table, a man who can represent the ordinary unheroic person. Ozana is not Prince Hamlet, merely an attendant lord. In some respects he is made to resemble Sir Perceval, but Morris's dramatic purpose would not permit him to choose so commanding a figure as that holy knight. Like the badly wounded Arthur in later days, Ozana lies near death in a chapel in Lyonesse. But the spiritual drama of his passing is far different from that which involves the hero King. For unlike Arthur's, Ozana's "life went wrong." This comment applies generally to Ozana's whole career, but it may refer particularly to Ozana's failure to be present to help his family in their hour of need. In that case the golden tress which he cherishes may possibly be from the head of his beautiful sister, whom he failed on earth but with whom he hopes to be reunited in heaven.

But the legends of the search for the Grail, which Morris has skillfully combined with the stories about Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy, provide even better foundation for symbolic interpretation. The quest of Ozana and Gawain for Launcelot is fused with that of Galahad for the Grail. That Morris is thinking of a search in which Launcelot is concerned is made clear by his revision of the second stanza of Galahad's first speech to specify that Galahad's

⁷ *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, ed. H. O. Sommer (Washington, 1913), II, 148, 305, 320; III, 228; V, 236. Sir Thomas Malory, *The Morte d'Arthur*, Bk. X, Chaps. xi, xiii; XVIII, x, xi; XIX, i.

⁸ *Vulgate Version*, V, 432-40. Perceval was also the cause of trouble to his mother.

⁹ Mackail, I, 81.

heart grew hot,
About the quest and Launcelot
Far away, I ween.¹⁰

Since there is no record that Ozana was among the knights of the Grail, this "quest" would at first seem to be that for wandering Launcelot. But the presence of Galahad and Bors, the scene in the chapel, and other circumstances of the story make it clear that Morris also has in mind the legend of the Grail. According to the tradition, Galahad finds his red-crossed shield in the abbey where Nascien lies buried.¹¹ At one point in his travels he comes to an old chapel and, unable to enter, hangs his shield outside. Within the chapel is a sick knight, one of the knights of the Round Table in search of the Grail, who cannot be healed even by the Grail because of unconfessed sin.¹² So in Morris's revised version of "The Chapel in Lyoness" Bors sees Galahad's shield outside the chapel door.¹³ Within the chapel is the sick Ozana, evidently nursing in his heart his sense of failure or sin. The Galahad of the old legend once watched over his wounded squire Melians and pulled out a spearhead embedded in his body.¹⁴ At another time he entered a chapel where entombed lay a knight whose body was possessed by a devil. Through his purity he drove out the devil and brought the knight peace in death.¹⁵ In a similar manner he cares for Ozana, also wounded by a spear, and through his virtue brings to the troubled knight a peaceful death. In another incident Mordrains asked to die in the arms of the virgin knight. Galahad embraced him as he died.¹⁶ He also held the expiring Count Ernors.¹⁷ So in Morris's poem Galahad kisses Ozana immediately before the latter's death. One of the principal symbols of the Grail legend was the bleeding spear, often associated with a dying

¹⁰ *Collected Works*, I, xxiii. In "Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery" Morris also pictures Galahad longing for Launcelot and asking Bors about him (*Defence of Guenevere*, ed. cit., p. 55).

¹¹ Gautiers (or Walter) Map, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, ed. F. J. Furnivall (London, 1864), pp. 29-30. William Wells Newell, *The Legend of the Holy Grail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1902), pp. 51-52, 57.

¹² Malory, Bk. XIII, Chaps. xvii-viii.

¹³ *Collected Works*, I, xxiii.

¹⁴ Map, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32. Malory, Bk. XIII, Chap. xii.

¹⁶ Map, pp. 232-34. Malory, Bk. XVII, Chap. xviii.

¹⁷ Map, p. 208.

knight. Sometimes it is said to lie on a white and red cloth on the altar where the Grail stands.¹⁸ In "The Chapel in Lyonesse" the spear lies deep within Ozana's breast, and red and white samite is spread over his knees. The spear and the bleeding here are invisible, for Morris is taking them as spiritual symbols. Flower symbolism was common in the ancient Grail stories as in other medieval literature. The lily and the rose, the white and the red, were symbols of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. They were often connected with the purity and grace of Christ and of the Christ-like Galahad.¹⁹ Morris makes Galahad pluck a red rose among white lilies. This rose, which is placed by the mouth of Ozana, is clearly, as in medieval tradition, the mystic flower of salvation. It is to be found among the lilies of purity. The golden tress itself which Ozana treasures, although it might possibly belong to Ozana's sister, is most probably from the head of Sir Perceval's sister. According to the old legend, she especially prided herself on her beautiful hair but cut it off to provide golden hangings for the holy sword. Malory clearly implies that her hair was golden.²⁰ Thus though Sir Ozana's legendary history is alluded to—his wounds, his entrance on a quest, his failures—the basic situation and symbolism are those of the Grail legend. The emotion of Galahad over Launcelot, for instance, fits the Grail legend as well as it fits the story of Gawain's quest for the errant hero. Morris has given his poem deeper meaning by bringing his bewildered and mediocre knight Ozana, after all his failures and doubts, into the mystically symbolic legend of the high search for the Holy Grail.

Only after the situations and symbols of Morris's poem have been thus related to the Arthurian stories is a full interpretation possible. Sir Ozana's strange, invisibly bleeding wound is a wound of the

¹⁸ Newell, p. 52. Jessie L. Weston, *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (London, 1913), pp. 35-36.

¹⁹ Newell, *loc. cit.* Morris himself in "Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery" pictures Christ clothed in red and white appearing to Sir Galahad (*Deference of Guenevere, ed. cit.*, p. 50). At Whit-Sunday in Italy rose leaves were dropped from the ceilings of the churches as symbols of the Pentecostal tongues of flame. Pentecost was even called Pascha Rosatum (F. G. Holweck, "Whit-Sunday," *Catholic Encyclopaedia* [New York, 1912], XV, 614-15). The colors are traditional, since red vestments are worn on Whit-Sunday (White-Sunday). The fact that Sir Ozana has not eaten may be connected with the fast before Whit-Sunday.

²⁰ Map, pp. 202-3. Malory, Bk. XVII, Chap. vii.

soul that cannot be seen by physical sight. Ozana lies alone in penitence and fasting "from Christmas-Eve to Whit-Sunday" in the chancel of the chapel behind the screen. This period symbolically encompasses the whole of the life of Christ, from his birth through his Passion to the descent of the Holy Spirit on his Disciples at Pentecost. It is at Pentecost, then, the day on which wonders frequently happened at Arthur's court,²¹ the day on which the Holy Grail had originally appeared,²² that this poem's action takes place. From the time of his wounding to Whit-Sunday, Ozana has lain in a trance like that of the Ancient Mariner after he has been won by Death-in-Life. Even though he is in a holy place, like Coleridge's thirsting Ancient Mariner he does not have sufficient grace to be able to pray. Until the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, he cannot find the absolution and peace for which he longs. Though he knows that physically he is not dead, sometimes he thinks he is dead, for life-giving grace has not yet filled his spirit. He knows, however, that he has been a "true" knight, that he has been obedient to the laws of knighthood. But loyalty or "truth," he begins to understand, is not enough. Something more is needed, although what it is he does not know. It is this problem, then, that he "cannot fathom."

Through merely watching over him and singing songs, through mere mortal means, Galahad can do nothing to help Ozana. It is only after Galahad experiences his own Pentecost through yearning thought of his beloved Launcelot and of the quest of the Grail that, inspired by this love and longing for the ideal, he can pluck the rose of grace, the dewdrops from which can cure Ozana's spiritual drouth. In the revised version Morris makes the symbol of the water of life clearer by saying that Galahad "bore him water for his drouth."²³ Thus the Pentecost has come; the Holy Spirit, symbolized in some medieval church rituals by falling rose leaves, has descended on Ozana. The rose touches his mouth. Immediately his speech, like that of the Disciples when they were filled with the Holy Spirit and that of the Ancient Mariner after he had blessed the water snakes, is loosed. He holds up the golden tress which is the symbol of his own treasured but hitherto unattained

²¹ See, for instance, Malory, Bk. I, Chap. vii; XIX, xi. Cf. R. Chambers, *The Book of Days* (Edinburgh, 1863), I, 630.

²² Map, pp. 13-14.

²³ *Collected Works*, I, xxiii.

love and ideal. To represent the light and beauty shed on his ideal by his entrance into grace, and as earnest of the golden glory he will attain when his life has closed, the tress gleams in the setting sun. If the tress is that of Ozana's sister, it stands for his golden absolution from his failure to be present to help her at the critical hour. More likely it is a tress of Perceval's holy sister, who has herself died in giving her blood to cure a leper²⁴ and who was the woman most important in inspiring the quest for the Grail. In this case the lock would symbolize the fact that Ozana has at last attained the high and holy quest of the Grail in contrast to his earlier false quest with Gawain for Launcelot; he has found his true ideal. According to either interpretation, the revelation of the truth has come to him only at death: he has had to lose his life to save it.

Hence when Sir Bors, another of the knights of the Grail, enters the chapel, he sees Galahad give Ozana the kiss of absolution or benediction appropriate to one dying in a state of grace. In the revised version of the poem, for the first two stanzas of Bors's speech three others are substituted and the last stanza is altered significantly in order to emphasize the spiritual victory Ozana has won in death. Thus the final two stanzas read:

I said: "If all be found and lost?"
 And pushed the doors and raised my head,
 And o'er the marble threshold crossed
 And saw the seeker nowise dead.
 I heard Ozana murmur low,
 The King of many hopes he seemed,
 But Galahad stooped and kissed his brow,
 And triumph in his eyen gleamed.²⁵

Since Bors has seen at the door the red-crossed shield of Galahad and presumably does not know that Ozana is behind the screen, the "seeker" must be Galahad. Hence Bors must fear that this is the Chapel Perilous and that Galahad has died in finding the Grail. But Galahad is "nowise dead." In one sense, however, this is the Chapel Perilous and the Grail has been found, for through the

²⁴ Map, pp. 213-15. Malory, Bk. XVII, Chap. xi. Newell, p. 58. Morris mentions her in connection with the three knights who eventually attain sight of the Grail in "Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery."

²⁵ *Collected Works*, I, xxiv.

virtue of his purity and his holy quest Galahad has brought grace to the dying Ozana. In the published version of the poem, Morris has Bors picture Ozana as still gloomy and bewildered, still seeking for peace and love: "There comes no sleep nor any love." But in the revision the poet clarifies the effect of Galahad's bringing the red rose of salvation to Ozana by having Bors describe the dying knight as "the King of many hopes" with triumph gleaming in his eyes.

Thus at the last moment of his life Ozana begins to attain spiritual understanding, "to fathom it." Having received the Holy Spirit through Galahad, he sees that his trance without sleep or love was not the dreadful thing it seemed. It was in part a necessary penance, a waste land through which he had to pass to reach the springs of salvation. But even more it is a symbol of heaven, where there is neither sleep nor mortal love but an awakening from mortal life into a truer reality and a realization of divine union far more nearly perfect than earthly love. Until this last moment Ozana has misunderstood. Hence his life spiritually as well as physically has gone wrong. But now, as in *Prospice*, "the worst turns the best." He begins to see that the true significance of the apparently dreary phrase about sleep and love is really one of hope and joy. He will no longer be in a sleepless trance without love. Thus in the past he has been merely a "true" knight. Now he has become a "good" knight also. The progression from "trueness," or mere obedience, to goodness is therefore the basic drama of the poem.

As yet, however, Ozana himself does not fully understand; he only "begins" to fathom it. The implication is that only in heaven will he comprehend fully the mystery of salvation. But Morris does not leave the reader in similar doubt. In the epilogue Galahad gazes at Bors with eyes that see past this world into the next. The revised form of Bors's speech after Ozana's death shifts the emphasis from Galahad's "great blue eyes" to what Galahad sees.²⁶ Bors recognizes that Galahad is in a visionary state and blesses him. Galahad, however, does not pray for the soul of Ozana, since he understands that for Ozana prayer is no longer necessary. Ozana has now achieved the summit of his ideal—spiritual union with the woman who, like Dante's Beatrice, represents the ideal of heavenly

²⁶ *Ibid.*

love and salvation. In a picture of Ozana in heaven that, despite its Biblical allusion and hint of the myth of Berenice, is more Pre-Raphaelite than religious,²⁷ Morris brings to a close his symbolic drama of salvation by grace. Sir Ozana le Cure Hardy, though only a mediocre knight of the Round Table, twines his fingers in the gloriously shining hair of his lady beside the jasper sea. Thus through the whole poem, involving almost every detail, runs a coherent and meaningful symbolism. This dramatic and intellectual consistency seems too great to be merely accidental.

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²⁷ As the poem was printed in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the organ of the later Pre-Raphaelite group, Sir Galahad's final speech was only one stanza in length:

Ozana, shall I pray for thee?
 Her cheek is laid to thine;
 Her hair against the jasper sea
 Wondrously doth shine.

There are no other differences in wording.