2. Richard Garnett, unsigned review, *Literary Gazette*

March 1858, xiii, 226-7

May Morris, in her Introduction to her father's *Collected Works* (London, 1910–15), IV, x, attributes this friendly review to Joseph Knight. But Knight was in Leeds until 1860 (see No. 7). The review was more probably the work of Richard Garnett (1835–1908), who had recently begun his career at the British Museum; it is attributed to him with convincing circumstantial detail in an article in the *Dublin University Magazine*, November 1878, n.s. ii, 537, entitled 'William Morris, M.A.', and in a later article by O. L. Triggs in *Poet-Lore*, March 1893, v, 116, entitled 'The Socialistic Thread in the Life and Works of William Morris' (when the date is given as 6 March 1859). May Morris refers to a review by Garnett of *The Defence of Guenevere* as 'cordial and discriminating' in *Collected Works*, I, xxi.

It might not be easy to find a more striking example of the indestructibility of anything truly beautiful, than the literary resurrection of King Arthur and his Knights, after so many centuries' entombment in the Avalon of forgetfulness. The Israel of this revival was Mr. Tennyson, the first peal of whose awakening trumpet sounded some twenty-six years ago in his marvellous 'Lady of Shalott,' followed by utterances of no inferior beauty, some made public for our delight, others, it is whispered, as yet withheld from us. But the movement thus inaugurated has taken a direction which Mr. Tennyson cannot have anticipated. We are not alluding to Sir E. Bulwer's elegant but affected and artificial 'King Arthur,' nor to Mr. Arnold's lovely 'Tristram and Iseult.' These are remarkable poems, but not startling phenomena. But the pre-Raphaelite poets and painters have made the Arthurian cyclus their own, by a treatment no less strange and original than that which has already thrown such novel light on the conceptions of Shakspeare and the scenery of Palestine. Not long since our columns
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contained a notice of certain fresco illustrations of Arthurian romance attempted at Oxford by painters of this school, who, being for the most part utterly unknown to fame, may be supposed to have been invented on purpose. One of these gentlemen has now enabled us to form some opinion of his qualifications for his task by the publication of the book before us; and we do not hesitate to pronounce, that if he do but wield the brush to half as much purpose as the pen, his must the pictures well worth a long pilgrimage to see.

In advocating the claims of an unknown poet to public attention, it is before all things necessary to establish his originality—a very easy matter in the present instance. It might almost have seemed impossible for any one to write about Arthur without some trace of Tennysonian influences, yet, for Mr. Morris, the Laureate might never have existed at all. Every one knows Tennyson’s ‘Sir Galahad’—Mr. Morris’s exquisite poem on the same subject is unfortunately much too long for quotation, but our meaning will be sufficiently illustrated by a few of the initiatory stanzas:

It is the longest night in all the year,
Near on the day when the Lord Christ was born;
Six hours ago I came and sat down here,
And ponder’d sadly, wearied and forlorn.

The winter wind that pass’d the chapel-door,
Sang out a moody tune, that went right well
With mine own thoughts: I look’d down on the floor,
Between my feet, until I heard a bell

Sound a long way off through the forest deep,
And toll on steadily; a drowsiness
Came on me, so that I fell half asleep,
As I sat there not moving; less and less

I saw the melted snow that hung in beads
Upon my steel-shoes, less and less I saw
Between the tiles the bunches of small weeds:
Heartless and stupid, with no touch of awe

Upon me, half-shut eyes upon the ground,
I thought: O! Galahad, the days go by,
Stop and cast up now that which you have found,
So sorely you have wrought and painfully.

The difference between the two poets obviously is that Tennyson writes of mediæval things like a modern, and Mr. Morris like a con-
temporary. Tennyson’s ‘Sir Galahad’ is Tennyson himself in an enthusiastic and devotional mood; Mr. Morris’s is the actual champion, just as he lived and moved and had his being some twelve hundred years ago. Tennyson is the orator who makes a speech for another; Mr. Morris the reporter who writes down what another man says. Whatever mediaevalists may assert, poetry flourishes far more in the nineteenth century than it ever did in the seventh; accordingly the Laureate is as superior in brilliance of phrase, finish of style, and magic of versification, as he is inferior in dramatic propriety and couleur locale. We might continue this parallel for ever, but shall bring the matter to a head by observing that Mr. Morris’s poems bear exactly the same relation to Tennyson’s as Rossetti’s illustrations of the Laureate to the latter’s own conceptions. We observed in noticing these designs that they illustrated anything in the world rather than Tennyson, and have certainly seen no reason to change our opinion. The more we view them, the more penetrated we become with their wonderful beauty (always excepting that remarkable angel in the Robinson Crusoe cap), but also the more impressed with their utter incompatibility with their text. Tennyson is the modern par excellence, the man of his age; Rossetti and Morris are the men of the middle age; and while this at once places them in a position of inferiority as regards Tennyson, it increases their interest towards ourselves, as giving us what it would be vain to expect from any one else. Who but Mr. Rossetti or his double could have written anything like this—

For these vile things that hem me in,
These Pagan beasts who live in sin,
The sickly flowers pale and wan,
The grim blue-bearded castellan,
The stanchions half worn-out with rust,
Whereto their banner vile they trust—
Why, all these things I hold them just
Like dragons in a missal-book,
Wherein, whenever we may look,
We see no horror, yea, delight
We have, the colours are so bright;
Likewise we note the specks of white,
And the great plates of burnish’d gold.

Just so this Pagan castle old,
And everything I can see there,
Sick-pining in the marshland air,
I note; I will go over now,
Like one who paints with knitted brow,
The flowers and all things one by one,
From the snail on the wall to the setting sun.

Four great walls, and a little one
That leads down to the barbican,
Which walls with many spears they man,
When news comes to the castellan
Of Launcelot being in the land.

And as I sit here, close at hand
Four spikes of sad sick sunflowers stand,
The castellan with a long wand
Cuts down their leaves as he goes by,
Ponderingly, with screw'd up eye,
And fingers twisted in his beard—
Nay, was it a knight's shout I heard?

Other pieces are yet more characteristic; for example, 'Golden Wings,' which seems to conduct us through a long gallery of Mr. Rossetti's works, with all their richness of colouring, depth of pathos, poetical but eccentric conception, and loving elaboration of every minute detail. After all, those who have read the beautiful poems, contributed by the painter to the defunct *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, will probably think this dissertation and Mr. Morris's dedication equally superfluous.

Another influence, however, has done something towards making Mr. Morris what he is. In spite of his having taken every precaution that human foresight can suggest to render himself unintelligible, it is impossible that so fine a poet and deep a thinker as Mr. Browning should remain without influence on a generation so accessible as our own to the fascination of genius. Accordingly his influence widens day by day, and he already counts several disciples of unusual talent, from Mr. Owen Meredith downwards. These, however, are too undisguisedly imitators to earn a higher praise than that of considerable adroitness. In Mr. Morris's volume we for the first time trace the influence of Browning on a writer of real original genius, and the result is very curious. 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' shows that Mr. Morris possesses considerable dramatic power, and is so far satisfactory, otherwise it appears to us ultra-Browningian, unpleasant and obscure. 'The Judgment of God' reads exactly like Browning's dramatic lyrics, but is, we think, better than any but the very best of them. By far the
best of these pieces, however, is 'The Haystack in the Floods,' where Mr. Morris's native romance and pathos unite with his model's passion and intensity to form a whole unsurpassed, we will venture to say, by any man save Tennyson, since the golden age of British poetry expired with Byron at Missolonghi. We regret that it is too long to quote here.

To describe any one as Rossetti plus Browning, is as much as to say that he is not a little affected and obscure. This, perhaps, is Mr. Morris's misfortune; his carelessness and inattention to finish is his fault, and a serious one. It has ruined the first two poems in his volume, which should have been the finest. A little trouble will, perhaps, make 'Queen Guenevere's Defence' what it ought to be, but 'King Arthur's Tomb' will never be fit for anything but the fire. We can only suppose Mr. Morris's frequent indifferent grammar, atrocious rhymes, and lines un-scannable on any imaginable metrical system, to be the consequence of an entirely erroneous notion of poetry. Let him be assured that poetry is just as much an art as painting, and that the selfsame principle which forbids his drawing a lady with three feet ought to keep him from penning an iambic verse with six. All arts are but modifications of the one archetypal beauty, and the laws of any one, mutatis mutandis, bind all the rest.

No fleck, happily, mars the pure beauty of 'Sir Galahad' and 'The Chapel in Lyoness,' pieces in which the rough chivalry of the middle ages appears as it were transfigured, and shining with a saintly halo of inexpressible loveliness. Of 'Sir Peter Harpdon' we have already spoken. 'Rapunzel,' the next poem, will be a fearful stumbling-block to prosy people, and we must own that it is, if possible, too romantically ethereal in its wild, weird beauty. Like Shelley, Mr. Morris is often guilty of what we may call luminous indiscretion. We are delighted with his poetry, but cannot very well tell what it is all about; 'we see a light, but no man.' This is particularly the case with those very remarkable pieces, 'Golden wings,' 'The Blue Closet,' 'Spell-bound,' and 'The Wind,' in which it is true that something exciting happens, but, as the courier in Little Dorrit has it, there is no why. We return to 'Rapunzel,' to borrow two passages of perfect beauty:

[quotes 'A Duel' and 'Guendolen']

The minor poems may be distributed into three classes, the Arthurian, the Froissartian, and the purely imaginative. Though bewildered
with a perfect *embarras de richesses*, we are fain to content ourselves with a single example of each:—

[quotes 'Riding Together', 'The Eve of Crecy' and 'Summer Dawn']

The barbarous rhyme, *dawn* and *corn*, is but a sample of that carelessness of which the author must get the better if he is ever to rank as a master of his art. Still his volume is of itself a sufficient proof that it is not necessary to be a master in order to delight and astonish. *Mr. Morris* is an exquisite and original genius, a poet whom poets will love.