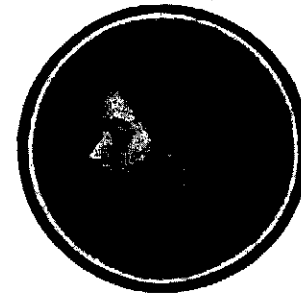


Victorian Poetry

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An issue
Devoted to the Work of
William Morris



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Special Editor

West Virginia
University

Refocillations

There's an eminent Poet named Morris
Who all day for his grub swears & worries.
What with belly & oaths,
It's a wonder the clothes
Do not burst all their buttons on Morris.

(British Library Add. MS 57772)

Morris on D. G. Rossetti

What can I say about Gabriel's death, but what all his friends or almost all, must feel? It makes a hole in the world, though I have seen so little of him lately and might very likely never have seen him again; he was very kind to me when I was a youngster. He had some of the very greatest qualities of genius, most of them indeed; what a great man he would have been but for the arrogant misanthropy that marred his work, and killed him before his time; the grain of humility which makes a great man one of the people, and no lord over them, he lacked, and with it lost the enjoyment of life which would have kept him alive, or sweetened all his work for him and us.

(From Morris' letter to W. B. Scott, 1882.
Princeton Library -
Troxell Collection)

Swinburne on Morris

I have just received Topsy's book; the Gudrun story is excellently told, I can see, and of keen interest; but I find generally no change in the *trailing* style of work; his Muse is like Homer's Trojan women *ἔλκεσίπηνλους*—drags her robes as she walks; I really think a Muse (when she is neither resting nor flying) ought to tighten her girdle, tuck up her skirts, and step out. It is better than Tennyson's shortwinded and artificial concision—but there is such a thing as swift and spontaneous style. Top's is spontaneous and slow; and especially, my ear hungers for more force and variety of sound in the verse. It looks as if he purposely avoided all strenuous emotion or strength of music in thought and word: and so, when set by other work as good, his work seems hardly done in thorough earnest. The verses of the months are exquisite—November I think especially.

(From Swinburne's letter to D. G. R.,
December 10, 1869. *Swinburne Letters*, edited by
C. Y. Lang, II, 68)

(Continued on page 60)

Erotic Murders: Structural and Rhetorical Irony in William Morris' Froissart Poems

DIANNE F. SADOFF



ESPIE Lionel Stevenson's statement that Morris' early poetry is "outrageously trite," with characters lacking any "inner ethical conflict" and having the "life of automata rather than of people,"¹ most critics have begun to take Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere* seriously; the belief that Morris' medieval poems adopt a nostalgic, escapist stance through regression to a medieval past no longer appeals to modern readers.² Morris sets his poems in the past not to create decorative Pre-Raphaelite paintings in verse, but rather to explore dualistic notions of human struggle; he tests dream and imagination against reality, past against present, sexual involvement against sexual frustration, all in an effort to discover the dialectic of circumstantial irony and the human struggle for transcendence. Ralph Berry describes *The Defence of Guenevere* as expressing "a continuing and central symbol, or rather situation. That situation is defeat, coupled usually with sexual frustration though not stemming directly from it" (p. 277). Berry quite correctly points to the central problems in

¹*The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. 149. Many Morris commentators, both pro and con, have similar trouble finding meaning in the *Guenevere* poems. Alfred Noyes, *William Morris* (London, 1908), p. 21, thinks them "somewhat chaotic mediaeval scraps of wind-music . . . [which] contained nothing of very great intrinsic importance"; Mackail (I, 133-138) enthusiastically but vaguely discusses their "beauty" with the "emotional effect of music"; Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (London, 1967), p. 169, thinks them a "series of vivid visual scenes, like a mediaeval fresco"; Philip Henderson (pp. 52-53) describes their "dreamy, fairy-tale atmosphere with its sinister undertones" and their "startling air of reality."

²Believers in Morris' escapism include Graham Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London, 1949), p. 120, and Oscar Maurer, Jr., "William Morris and the Poetry of Escape," in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, ed. Herbert Davis, et al (New York, 1968), pp. 247-276. Opponents of this position include John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Lucas (London, 1971), pp. 221-280; Margaret Gent, "To Flinch from Modern Varnish: The Appeal of the Past to the Victorian Imagination," in *Victorian Poetry*, gen. ed., Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London, 1972), pp. 11-35; and Ralph Berry, "A Defense of *Guenevere*," *VP*, 9 (1971), 277-286.

Guenevere, but chooses not to examine texts closely to support his argument. Berry also fails to define the exact motivational and rhetorical relationships between such complex ideas as death and sexuality, and defeat and sexual frustration. The poems in fact define their meaning very carefully through structure, rhetoric, and setting: in "The Haystack in the Floods," "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," and "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," sexual involvement is desired and motivationally associated with a recollected past which may allow the expression of sexual desire and fulfillment; that past has often been naively constructed by a character who hopes to make the present like the past, and that recollected past often turns out to be a reverie, a dream, or a half-dream. During the process of these poems, characters often confuse the need for sexual release with the experience of death; in all three poems, tone and structure replace sexuality with defeat, frustration, and death. In order to thwart time and death, characters attempt vainly to become historical; but the poet, demonstrating the ironies of the desire to be immortal, makes his characters immortal nonetheless. In all three Froissart poems, then, Morris explores the personal and historical dialectic created by conflict, struggle, and the need for choice under stress.³

I

The Froissart poems are all set in or just after the Hundred Years' War: they explore and exploit its violence, its conflicting loyalties, its personal and historical crises. The most basic conflict in the poems is between the English and the French. In "The Haystack," the French Jehane and the English Robert attempt to escape to more neutral territory across the "Gascon frontier" (l. 47), but the French Godmar thwarts their plans. In "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," national loyalties become more complex; Sir Peter is "a Gascon with an English name" (l. 504), and his loyalty to St. George determines the central conflict in the poem between Peter and his cousin, Lambert. Both cousins understand that the war approaches its culmination:

times are changed,
And now no longer does the country shake
At sound of English names; our captains fade
From off our muster-rolls. . . .
Edward the prince lies underneath the ground;
Edward the king is dead; at Westminster
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.
Everything goes to rack—eh! and we too. (ll. 34-37, 44-47)

³Although Berry counts eleven vaguely "Froissartian" poems in *Guenevere*, this paper follows John M. Patrick—in "Morris and Froissart: 'Geffray Teste Noire' and 'The Haystack in the Floods,'" *N&Q*, 5 (1958), 425-427, and "Morris and Froissart Again: 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,'" *N&Q*, 6 (1959), 331-333—and defines these three poems as the most recognizably "Froissartian."

Lambert exploits this coming crisis, telling Peter, "Look you, our house . . . / Had better be upon the right side now," since France will never "draw two ways again" (ll. 171-173, 177). Lambert thinks Peter "a traitor, being, as you are, / Born Frenchman.' What are Edwards unto you," he asks, "Or Richards?" (ll. 230-232); Lambert also exploits Peter's apparent double disloyalty by telling Peter's beloved, Alice, that "Peter's talk tended towards the French" (l. 79). In "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," national loyalties become more basically confused: Teste Noire is

a Gascon thief,
Who, under shadow of the English name,
Pilled all such towns and countries as were lief
To King Charles and St. Denis. (ll. 5-8)

The national loyalty of the speaker of this dramatic recollective narrative becomes questionable, since he calls himself both "John of Castel Neuf" and "John of Newcastle" (ll. 3, 43), the first in the poem's present, the second in the past of the War. The depth of personal conflict arising out of national conflict is suggested when the narrator implies, without understanding the situation, that his listener, Alleyne, killed his own brother at Auvergne (ll. 21-28). Morris sets these poems in the Hundred Years' War, then, to explore the ironies of geographical, international, familial, interpersonal, and historical conflict.

Morris' involvement with conflict in these poems embodies and creates the necessity of choice; characters must act on choices, and must accept the consequences for and pay the price of choosing. The making of choices in these poems becomes complicated by the threat—often the actuality—of betrayal and treachery, and by the many levels of irony such conflicts create. Sir Peter Harpdon, for example, arms himself against his cousin Lambert with a "secret coat of mail" and a "little axe" with "Paul wrought on the blade" (ll. 154-156); Morris' details combine feudal warfare ironically with reference to Christian doctrines of justification by faith. John Curzon responds, "How, sir! will you attack him unawares, / And slay him unarm'd?" (ll. 163-164); the reader immediately suspects Sir Peter of treachery, having no information about Sir Lambert. Ironically, Sir Peter *should* arm himself against his cousin, who attempts to slay Peter "unawares." What appears at first a betrayal becomes a necessary protective measure against another, more predictable, betrayal: the betrayer is betrayed.

The central choice in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" involves yet another ironic turn on treachery. The betrayer having been betrayed, Peter has the right to torture and kill his rival: "What sort of death do you expect to get, / Being taken this way?" (ll. 257-258). Sir Peter, however, decides to celebrate his triumph by mutilating Lambert instead of killing him. When Lambert squirms under this humiliation, Peter sardonically dangles the choice before Lambert, allowing Lambert to think he can influence the choice:

That's your choice,
To die, mind! Then you shall die—Lambert mine,
I thank you now for choosing this so well,
It saves me much perplexity and doubt. (ll. 292-295)

.....
And choose again: shall it be head sans ears,
Or trunk sans head? (ll. 313-314)

But Peter has the winner's power to choose, and he allows his cousin to live, but mutilates Lambert as punishment. Ironically, the conditions and codes of feudal warfare allow only such "bad" choices; in humanitarian terms, Peter makes the "better" of two terrible choices, but he does not live in a humanitarian world, and his choice turns out to be the "worse" choice given the feudal circumstances under which he lives. Peter never considers simply letting Lambert go; that choice seems no choice.

Immediately following Peter's decision to mutilate Lambert, the poem's structure reverses their positions: Peter has been captured by Lambert's colleagues, and Lambert unhesitatingly chooses that Peter shall die. He chooses, too, without being responsible for the choice, since Guesclin has been forced to swear vengeance on Peter for mutilating Lambert. Morris' economical use of dramatic irony here reinforces and emphasizes the irony of Peter's initial choice: Peter knows early in the poem that his capture is inevitable, that his English castle in Poitou is "weak in walls and men" (l. 33), that if Guesclin attacks, just "An hour's steady work with pickaxes, / Then a great noise" and "little more cross purposes on earth / For me" (ll. 66-67, 69-70). Peter's choice to spare Lambert, then, proves fatal; Peter knows this, and knowing, still chooses not to murder his cousin. Peter's choice becomes ironic; embodied as it is by death and circumstance, such compromises with feudalism merely waste life and energy.

In "The Haystack in the Floods," Jehane's great choice also becomes ironic as a result of betrayal and the ironies of feudal circumstance. When Godmar ambushes them, Robert reminds Jehane they are outnumbered "scarcely two to one" (ll. 44), as he was when heroically victorious at Poitiers. But Robert's own men betray him: when he cries "St. George for Marny!" "no man of all his train / Gave back that cheery cry again" (ll. 61-64); his men throw a kerchief around him from behind and bind him with it. As in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," heroism becomes ironic and wasteful because of crisis, treachery, and betrayal. Circumstances, however, force Robert into this dangerous pose, and, as a result, circumstances again force Jehane into a crisis demanding a choice which is no choice at all:

"For in such wise they hem me in,
I cannot choose but sin and sin,
Whatever happens." (ll. 95-97)

Jehane must choose betrayal and death: she will become Godmar's lover then kill herself rather than live with such humiliation, or Robert will die

immediately and she will be taken back to Paris to face trial by water and probable death.⁴ Either way, Robert may die, and Godmar may rape Jehane:

"What hinders me from taking you,
And doing that I list to do
To your fair wilful body, while
Your knight lies dead?" (ll. 85-88)

Jehane heroically chooses to uphold her integrity, and therefore to betray Robert and cause his violent death. The ironic circumstances in which Jehane is placed make it virtually impossible to distinguish betrayal from integrity.

Because of ironic circumstance, conflicting loyalty, and "choice," these poems all end in death, and the reader must therefore judge the characters partially on the basis of how they face inevitable death. In "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," Lambert squirms under the threat of death, asking Peter to spare him time to compensate for his sins before meeting God; he bribes Peter with "more gold crowns / Of ransom than the king would" (ll. 265-266). Peter understands the inevitability and irrevocability of death, and rather manipulatively reminds Guesclin and Clisson that killing him merely to fulfill a pledge threatens their future immortality. But in the face of death Peter also recognizes his own weakness: "Ah, me! shamed too, I wept at fear of death. . . So wrong and hopelessly afraid to die" (ll. 486, 495). The reader experiences for Peter both sympathy and the need to judge characteristic of the dramatic monologue.⁵

"The Haystack in the Floods" also juxtaposes sympathy with judgment as Jehane, like Peter, faces death with fear but firmness:

Being waked at last, [she] sigh'd quietly,
And strangely childlike came, and said
"I will not." (ll. 123-126)

Jehane must be judged for failing to compromise with her world, but this same "failure" makes her also admirable.⁶ Robert also faces death without tears and with lips firm; we admire him for seeming to accept, almost to concur with, Jehane's hopelessly heroic choice. In our third Froissart poem, "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," the speaker looks to the past and comments at first unknowingly on his own lack of values. Although he faces

⁴I agree with John Hollow, "William Morris' 'The Haystack in the Floods,'" *VP*, 7 (1969), 353-355, in his response to Dougald B. MacEachen that Morris sees this situation as offering no escape, despite its possible historical inaccuracies with regard to saving those judged innocent by trial by water.

⁵Although "Sir Peter Harpdon" is a dramatic poem with many monologues, Robert Langbaum's well-known formula for response to the dramatic monologue applies here as well (*The Poetry of Experience* [New York, 1957], ch. II).

⁶Although Gent, p. 35, thinks we "make our own, presumably unfavorable, judgment" of Jehane's choice, the reader must respond with a more sympathetic understanding of the complex circumstances and values Morris chooses to surround Jehane with than Gent allows.

death many times, he never confronts the possibility or meaning of his own death, and fails to feel himself responsible for killing others—especially the uppity lower classes. Through his monologue, Sir John assimilates his past into his present, suddenly experiencing insight into the inevitability of aging and death; his newfound consciousness creates sympathy for a character earlier judged as callous and culpable.

II

In all three Froissart poems, violence and death become motivationally linked with sexuality: conflicts of national and personal loyalty mirror conflicts between men and women; sexual conflict also exaggerates all conflict in the narratives. Lambert lies about Peter's loyalty and courage in "Sir Peter Harpdon" in order to damage Peter's relationship with Lady Alice de la Barde, then sadistically reminds the captured Peter that death destroys bodily beauty and ends sexual pleasure:

You are so handsome, I think verily
Most ladies would be glad to kiss your eyes,
And yet you will be hung like a cur dog
Five minutes hence, and grow black in the face
And curl your toes up. (ll. 400-404)

Lambert taunts Peter with death and frustrated sexuality because, as the poem implies, Peter's mutilation of Lambert extends from slicing off his ears to castrating him. Lambert bitterly recounts the night "A whore came up and spat into my eyes, / . . . While I lean'd on my staff, and look'd at her, / And cried, being drunk" (ll. 393, 398-399), then taunts Peter with the perverted sexuality he has created:

Do not go just yet,
For I am Alice, am right like her now,
Will you not kiss me on the lips, my love? (ll. 444-446)

At this point in the poem, the reader's sympathy retreats from Peter, despite the situation he finds himself in; Lambert's mutilation now appears little "better" than death, and becomes, in fact, a form of death for Lambert.

Peter, like Lambert, associates sexuality with facing death. He thinks the purpose of life is to love, and as a result fantasizes that love and sexuality transform death:

I only wept because
There was no beautiful lady to kiss me
Before I died, and sweetly wish good speed
From her dear lips. O for some lady, though
I saw her ne'er before; Alice, my love,
I do not ask for; Clisson was right kind,
If he had been a woman, I should die
Without this sickness: but I am all wrong,
So wrong and hopelessly afraid to die. . . .

My God! how sick I am,
If only she could come and kiss me now. (ll. 487-497)

In his struggle to accept death, Peter confounds a desire for Alice's transcendent love with a near-perverse desire for any anonymous experience of deathly release and destruction through sexuality; fear of death creates sexual need which resembles transcendence downward toward "sickness" rather than transcendence upward toward eternal love.

The contexts of the poem also make Peter's desire for transforming love ironic. Immediately following his words, the poetic structure creates dramatic irony by shifting scenes to Lady Alice sitting by a window, alone and longing for knowledge of Peter's fate. The poem also implies throughout that women cannot be trusted, that the desire to transform the self through contact with their love is naive. In glorifying the heroism of the Trojan War, Peter links sure defeat to mass sexual desire for the dangerous Helen:

There! they were wrong, as wrong as men could be;
For as I think, they found it such delight
To see fair Helen going through their town:
Yea, any little common thing she did
(As stooping to pick a flower) seem'd so strange,
So new in its great beauty, that they said:
"Here we will keep her living in this town,
Till all burns up together." And so, fought,
In a mad whirl of knowing they were wrong. (ll. 193-201)

This story out of the distant past parallels the dramatic action of the larger poem: Peter fights to prove himself to Alice, and knows, like the Trojans, that the fight is futile. Peter sympathizes with the doomed Trojans, thinking "Hector the best knight" (l. 208); like Hector, Peter believes himself courageous and heroic, but the world will also reward Peter's heroism with death.

The form of "The Haystack in the Floods" also creates a motivational link between death and sexuality by substituting violence and death for desired sexual experience. Because the poem describes an attempt to love, we expect the scenic agents, especially the omnipresent rain, to presage sexual release and fulfillment, but the tone of grayness and drizzle introduces a threatening note into the poem which cooperates with the narrator's questioning tone. The rain is associated throughout with filth: Jehane bears the "dirt and rain," and the "mud splash'd wretchedly" to her knees (ll. 3, 10); the rain is oppressive, and "dripp'd from every tree" in the "dripping leafless woods" (ll. 11, 6). The rain becomes mingled with, even indistinguishable from, Jehane's tears: "The tears and rain ran down her face" (l. 14). The rain impedes her ability to ride toward freedom: "Her slender fingers scarce could hold / The wet reins" (ll. 26-27). The rain, then, actually presages the release of pain and fear; as Kenneth Burke might say, the poem imitates

micturition, centrally related to psychological experiences of fear.⁷ The haystack as a scenic agent appears to presage sexual security and delight, but the haystack is soaked and rotting, and actually presages danger, since it shelters Godmar and prepares for ambush. The poetic scene, then, threatens rather than supports fulfillment, and fully embodies the replacement in the poem of sexuality with violence.

The poetic scene also assumes the aggressive attributes normally associated with a medieval hero; the scenic agents emasculate Robert rather than protect him. In contrast to the weeping landscape, Robert stoically accepts his fate; his "eyes were dry, / He could not weep" (ll. 129-130). Robert's sexual frustration, here associated with dryness, finds its counterpart in Godmar's thwarted desire; when Jehane says she will not become his mistress. Godmar's "face burn'd" (l. 128) with both anger and sexual passion.

Structurally, Godmar's killing of Robert replaces desired sexuality with violence and death. After Jehane announces her decision, she and Robert vainly attempt to express their love:

He tried once more
To touch her lips; she reach'd out, sore
And vain desire so tortured them,
The poor grey lips, and now the hem
Of his sleeve brush'd them. (ll. 132-136)

Lips manage to touch only sleeve, not flesh. Godmar's violent attack on Robert frustrates this reaching out, and destroys the possibility of love and fulfillment. Jehane watches

The long bright blade without a flaw
Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand
In Robert's hair; . . . she saw him send
The thin steel down; the blow told well,
Right backward the knight Robert fell. (ll. 141-146)

As in "Sir Peter Harpdon," the confrontation with death is motivationally associated with aggressive attack of one male on another which denies sexual fulfillment and replaces desired erotic experience with murder. This passage also emphasizes Jehane's forced watching of the murder; the replacement of sexuality with death frustrates and punishes a sexually uncooperative woman.

In addition to replacing sexuality with murder, the poem makes murder erotic. In the passage quoted above, the violence which replaces sexuality is itself sexual; the rhetoric of attack becomes aggressively phallic. In the climax of the attack, sadism replaces orgasm, as Godmar's men "ran, some five or six, and beat / His head to pieces at their feet" (ll. 150-151). The murderer achieves the only sexual pleasure available in the poem, as his frustrated

⁷"The Thinking of the Body," in *Language as Symbolic Action* (Univ. of California Press, 1966), pp. 308-343. Morris clearly uses weather in "The Haystack" for more than "immediacy and veracity" (Berry, p. 283).

desire for Jehane unleashes itself on Robert, an unacceptable, almost perverse, sexual surrogate in the context of the poem. Godmar's earlier threat to turn Jehane over to the French court also makes violence sexual:

"This were indeed a piteous end
For those long fingers, and long feet,
And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet;
An end that few men would forget
That saw it." (ll. 110-114)

Violence and threatened death become erotic through rhetoric: the repetition of "long" stretches the lines out sensuously; the addition of "smooth" adds a round, ripe variety to the slowness of the "o" sounds in "long," and introduces the sense of touch into the visual imagery of length. This pervasive visual imagery culminates in the implicit scene of voyeurism at the end of the passage, which stresses the sexual pleasure derived from watching a beautiful young woman die. Killing becomes the only male sexual experience available, dying the only female one.)

III

In these Froissart poems, the past becomes associated with the possibility of experiencing sexual fulfillment as well as with ironic frustration of such desires. In "The Haystack," the dramatic situation places the poem within the past of the Hundred Years' War, and the narrator foreshadows the events of the poem at its beginning: his questions immediately appear rhetorical, as his language sounds a note of passive and futile endurance plus eventual and inevitable separation and death. The repetition of this augury as fact at the poem's close telescopes the five lines of question into two of flat assertion, while repeating the closing line without any possibility of interrogative:

Had she come all the way for this,
To part at last without a kiss?
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain
That her own eyes might see him slain
Beside the haystack in the floods? (ll. 1-5)

.....
This was the parting that they had
Beside the haystack in the floods. (ll. 159-160)

This repetition creates a "dramatic," because narratively progressive, irony with regard to a closed world which only allows such circumstances of parting—and which the narrator and the reader realize at once as probable fact. This repetition also creates a narrative "frame," which appears to place the poem in a past-within-a-past; the narrative exists within the experience of the narrator who lives in an ambiguously defined past after the Hundred Years' War. Like the conclusion to Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," this framing of the poem legendizes "The Haystack," makes the past-within-a-past

both fixed in a past and at the same time timeless and eternal; the poem becomes a legend which is universal and therefore relevant to all human situations of loss and separation. Events are fatally bound to take the turn they do; violence replaces sexuality and then itself becomes sensual, yet ironically, desire might have been fulfilled had the dramatic situation been different.

In "Sir Peter Harpdon," the past appears to offer circumstances which provide sexual gratification, primarily because the past becomes linked with the dream. Sir Peter, exiled in a rotting fortress and aware that he will die in battle, imagines the past as a time when he loved a responsive Lady Alice. He thinks "a month ago," and "a few minutes' talk had set things right / 'Twixt me and Alice" (ll. 70-72); he ruminates on the way things might have gone:

I like to think,
Although it hurts me, makes my head twist, what,
If I had seen her, what I should have said,
What she, my darling, would have said and done.
As thus perchance:
To find her sitting there,
In the window-seat, not looking well at all,
Crying perhaps, and I say quietly,
"Alice!" she looks up, chokes a sob, looks grave,
Changes from pale to red. (ll. 84-91)

Peter becomes so involved with his thoughts that he slips into the present tense as he imagines speaking to Alice. But ironically, his thinking "what might have been" recalls what has in fact not been; throughout the passionate reconciliation which follows, the subjunctive "would" resonates threateningly. Peter's involvement with the past displays his need to rid himself of the guilt of failure, and Alice provides him an outlet for such wish-fulfillment. Peter imagines Alice adopting a perfectly non-judgmental attitude toward his failures because she cannot understand such things; she asks "'Please a poor silly girl by telling me / What all those things they talk of really were'" (ll. 109-110). When Peter awakens from his reverie, however, he remembers that "my lord but sent and said / That Lambert's sayings were taken at their worth" by Alice (ll. 134-135); the wished-for past comments ironically on personal failure, on illusion, and on the lack of satisfying sexual relationship. And yet, after Peter's death, Alice assumes the same forlorn position, "looking out of a window," that Peter here assumes; dramatic structure creates an irony on the irony of Peter's dream of the past: his dream might well have become reality since, although he never knows it, Alice does indeed love him. The past, then, becomes doubly ironic when combined with the dream: within the setting of the Hundred Years' War exists a reverie of a more remote past which might have transformed the poem's present had circumstances allowed the fulfillment of sexual desire.

The poem deals more specifically, however, with the nature of the dream and its effect on sexual desire and frustration by removing it from association with the past. As Lady Alice sits looking out the window, she appears another version of Rapunzel: repressed, unhappy, and desiring sexual release. "My love! my love!" she moans, "O, if I lose you after all the past, / What shall I do?" (ll. 522-524). Alice, like Peter, associates the past with fulfillment, love, and sexuality, and the present with threat, fear, and loss. Because Alice cannot deal with her fears, she decides to escape them by falling asleep:

I think
That I shall go to sleep: it all sounds dim
And faint, and I shall soon forget most things;
Yea, almost that I am alive and here;
It goes slow, comes slow, like a big mill-wheel. . . .
Lying so, one kiss,
And I should be in Avalon asleep,
Among the poppies and the yellow flowers; . . .
Ah!
I was half dreaming. (ll. 529-549)

Lady Alice's half-dream exudes sensuality: flowers brush her cheek, animals creep over and around her body, water flows softly near her, her hair spreads itself among the flowers. The dream imagines sensual expectation, in which frustration is only a momentary waiting for the lover to return.

But the "trumpet" of Alice's dream proves "true" (l. 549), and announces the squire who tells of Peter's death. The story of that death so horrifies Alice that she assumes "'tis a made-up tale" (l. 614). Alice attempts to deny the validity of death by seducing the squire into her own sensual death:

But you weep
Almost, as though you loved me; love me then,
And go to Heaven by telling all your sport,
And I will kiss you then with all my heart,
Upon the mouth. (ll. 620-624)

Although she attempts to "keep from going mad" (l. 657), Alice's fears lead her inevitably to madness. Her mad and vain longing for Peter causes her to fantasize a sexual relationship with Christ as Peter's stand-in which combines and fulfills the desire for sexuality, death, and loving union:

Come face to face,
O Christ, that I may clasp your knees and pray
I know not what. . . .
Let us go, You and I, a long way off,
To the little damp, dark, Poitevin church;
While you sit on the coffin in the dark,
Will I lie down, my face on the bare stone
Between your feet, and chatter anything
I have heard long ago. . . .

Until you love me well enough to speak,
 And give me comfort; yea, till o'er your chin,
 And cloven red beard the great tears roll down
 In pity for my misery, and I die,
 Kissed over by you. (ll. 661-680)

Although Alice fantasizes death as sexual, and desires physical union through death, the squire's earthly responses relate paradoxically to the issue of the immortality of love: Peter "waits," the squire tells Alice, "Still loving you, within the little church" (ll. 649-650). But the narrative proves that Peter's stunted sepulcher symbolizes and embodies separation, not union through transcendent love; Alice must wait for death, and be frustrated by her separation from Peter.

In "The Haystack in the Floods," dream cannot soothe or create ironies of sexual contentment. When Jehane has one hour to decide about her future, Morris pointedly mentions that she

fell asleep: and while she slept,
 And did not dream, the minutes crept
 Round to the twelve again. (ll. 121-123)

Despite the emphasis throughout *The Defence of Guenevere* on the dream and its relation to desire, "The Haystack" emphasizes the lack of dream, the mere escapism of sleep, and the inevitable and monotonous passing of time. Sleep merely releases Jehane for a short hour from the overwhelming and inevitable choices she must make; no real escape is possible.⁸ The poem stresses the inevitable necessity of making choices in a world filled with violence and death. Neither the past nor the dream transform the world in which Jehane lives.

Both the past and the dream create structure in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire." The poem is set in an indefinite medieval past after the Hundred Years' War; John of Newcastle, now old, tells Alleyne of the ambush of Teste Noire during the War, when John was a young soldier. This past-within-a-past then includes memories of yet more distant pasts, including the time John killed the Jacquerie with his father when he was fifteen years old. The sudden realization that he felt "very hot" and "faint with smelling the burnt bones," that he was "sick of such a life" (ll. 113-115) snaps John further back into the third layer of past time, when the skeletons he has just discovered were killed. The bodies have rotted away to bones, and "the long time blurs / Even the tinder of his coat to nought" (ll. 80-81). John imagines their deaths "clear without a flaw" (l. 120): while they attempt to escape, an

⁸Littleton Long, "Morris and Timekeeping," *VN*, No. 35 (1969), pp. 25-28, finds Godmar's one hour deadline inconsistent with the historical facts of fourteenth-century concepts of time and measurement. While Long proves his case convincingly, it is more probable that Morris merely intended to heighten his nineteenth-century reader's awareness of crisis.

arrow kills the woman. As in the other Froissart poems, violence and death have replaced sexuality and destroyed love. John also imagines the ironies of such circumstance: the lover "died scarce sorry" (l. 135), thinking his beloved still alive; he gives his life for her safety, but his heroism, like Sir Peter's, is vain.

But more interesting to John than the bones are thoughts of the woman the smaller skeleton once was. "Over those bones [he] sat and pored for hours, / And thought and dream'd" until the bones fade away, and "evermore" he "saw the lady" (ll. 141-144). At the center of a succession of pasts within pasts lies the dream of a sexually vibrant woman, and the possibility of courting her. Like Sir Peter Harpdon, John becomes so involved with his dream that he can no longer define reality and dream, and he too slips into the present tense:

[Her eyes] are most sly to glide forth and to steal
 Into my heart; I kiss their soft lids there,
 And in green garden scarce can stop my lips
 From wandering on your face, but that your hair
 Falls down and tangles me, back my face slips. (ll. 160-164)

.....
 And when you talk your lips do arch and move
 In such wise that a language new I know
 Besides their sound; they quiver, too, with love
 When you are standing silent. (ll. 169-172)

In his dream, John becomes the lover of the skeleton-become-woman; the dream becomes associated with the possibility of experiencing an idealized yet sexual love. But John's dream of love and sexuality is undercut throughout the passage by situation and rhetoric. Situationally, while John rhapsodizes about the beauties of this woman, the reader remains aware that he gazes upon a skeleton; the gap between the sensual, nearly enacted desires of the dream and the situational reality creates ambivalence and irony—even repugnance for the reader. This dream of love is a necrophilic fantasy.⁹

Rhetorically, the dream creates ambivalence through repetition of half-recognized threat. In the lines quoted earlier, the lover's sensuous kissing of lids does not lead to further kissing because the woman's hair entangles him, pushing him away instead of embracing him: the dream builds in the need for distance beside desire, and for the frustration of extended desire because of the dream's dangerous combination of death and sexuality. The rhetoric of sexuality in John's dream also contains many references to violence, until sexuality assimilates violence:

⁹Gent, p. 28, also makes this point in support of her thesis about the Lazarus theme in Victorian literature.

I saw you kissing once, like a curved sword
That bites with all its edge, did your lips lie,
Curled gently, slowly, long time could afford
For caught-up breathings; like a dying sigh. (ll. 173-176)

The rhetoric of sexuality, "slowly," "long time," "caught-up breathings," and "dying sigh" accumulates ambiguous references to the similarity of sexuality and death. John realizes the beautiful woman is dangerous, that her mouth resembles a sword that bites. This woman who threatens violence and death is also, like Alice, not trustworthy; as she drinks wine which sinks slowly, even sensuously, into her body, John thinks "some wild fate might twine / Within that cup, and slay [her] for a sin" (ll. 167-168)—a sin which combines female sexuality and deathliness. The woman is also dangerous because her love is both transient and changeable. Her smiles "gather'd up their lines and went away . . . / As likely to be weeping presently" (ll. 177, 179). John's dream of sexual union, then, is a necrophilic fantasy of transience, of distance and desire, of fear and threat, and ultimately of death.

The collapse of the dream in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" is upheld by the structure of the poem. As John signals the virtual extinction, through attenuation of the dream and its wish-fulfillment sexuality, the ambush curtly ends it. John's actions during the ambush demonstrate that the dream of love and sexuality exerts no influence on his actions, values, or experience:

I cried, "St. Peter!" broke out from the wood
With all my spears; we met them hand to hand
And shortly slew them. (ll. 182-184)

The tone of the ambush scene parallels that of the past *Jacquerie* slaying:

God help again! we enter'd Beauvais town,
Slaying them fast, whereto I help'd, mere boy
As I was then; we gentles cut them down,
These burners and defilers, with great joy. (ll. 101-104)

The dream, then, already attenuated and threatened from within, is replaced structurally by violence and murder, as it was in "The Haystack" and "Sir Peter Harpdon." The dream of a chivalric past has little effect on the present of the narrator.

The failure of the dream and the wished-for past creates in the Froissart poems the need to immortalize experience in order to defeat death. Whereas "The Haystack" does legendize its experience successfully, the other two Froissart poems wring ironies on the need to become history. John of Newcastle wants his story to be chronicled, and asks Alleyne to relay his information to John Froissart, who "knoweth [Teste Noire] is dead by now, / No doubt, but knoweth not this tale just past" (ll. 190-191). Although John of Newcastle cannot know his tale will never appear in the *Chronicles*, the

reader does, and John's naivete becomes ironic.¹⁰ His desire to make permanent his dream of sexuality amidst ambush emphasizes the absurdity of attempting to make things immortal; despite the "little chapel of squared stone," the coffin statuary of the two lovers "with stone-white hands" and "hair made bright with gold" (ll. 194-198), only a fleeting memory which was illusory becomes immortalized. The sepulcher sculptor, Jaques Picard, carved this "immortality"; notwithstanding his fame and wisdom, John suddenly realizes Picard is "dead now—I am old" (l. 200). The rhetoric trails off with a sound and sense of loss and consciousness of frailty, and John finally understands the irony of such attempts to cheat time and death.

The conclusion of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" asks similar questions about the attainability of human fulfillment and permanence. Lady Alice, once more looking out her window alone, hears men sing of "Launcelot, and love and fate and death" (l. 710). Alice hopes Sir Peter, like Launcelot, will be remembered for his attempts to achieve greatness and fulfillment, despite his failures:

They ought to sing of him who was as wight
As Launcelot or Wade, and yet avail'd
Just nothing, but to fail and fail and fail
And so at last to die and leave me here
Alone and wretched; yea, perhaps they will,
When many years are past, make songs of us. (ll. 711-716)

Alice's desires for immortality become ironic in the light of Peter's dying hopes that history will retell the story of his love and heroism, as it did Hector's:

Men will talk, you know,
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago,)
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung
To what he thought the right; of how he died,
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed
Few men would care do now, and this is gain
To me. . . .
Moreover, too, I like the straining game
Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
So one becomes great. (ll. 211-220)

Morris' rhetoric combines ironically Peter's truly heroic struggles and his self-inflated desire to be famous.¹¹ It is also ironic that Alice chooses to compare Peter with Launcelot, a hero more reviled for his treachery than remembered for his great love of Guenevere and Arthur. The clash of Launcelot and Hector as great heroes creates more irony in the desire for

¹⁰Both Gent, p. 32, and Patrick, "Morris and Froissart: 'Geffray Teste Noire' and 'The Haystack in the Floods,'" p. 426, make this point.

¹¹Berry, pp. 284-285, assumes Peter speaks for Morris, and believes this a "motto-statement" of Pre-Raphaelitism. Certainly Berry misses the ambiguity inherent in this speech, which must be read in the context of the poem's pervasive ironies.

historical immortality—Peter's life is neither so memorable nor so great; he cannot match the heroism or the treachery of either. Yet the song Alice hears reevaluates Launcelot's courage and failure: he was

*Right valiant to move,
But for his sad love
The high God above
Stinted his praise.*

(ll. 728-731)

Although Launcelot failed to achieve the grail and destroyed Camelot and its ideals because of his illicit love for Guenevere, "he wan crownes ten, / If he wan not twelve" (ll. 738-739); these singers are men, and they praise Launcelot for having attempted to experience fulfillment, despite his overreaching of human limitations.

The song concludes on a "historical" note:

*Omnes homines benedicite!
This last fitte ye may see,
All men pray for me,
Who made this history
Cunningly and fairly.*

(ll. 744-748)

The balladeer's self-praise and historical awareness legendize the poem, as the narrative frame of "The Haystack" did. The minstrel sings of a legendary medieval past which, juxtaposed with Sir Peter's story, places the reader with regard to Peter in the same position as the balladeer with regard to Launcelot. This distancing, this making-past, however, recalls ironies constantly recurring through many layers of time, and the structure of the poem paradoxically removes distance through legend, implicating the reader's life in its ironies of courage and failure. Yet, in a final irony, Morris *has* immortalized Peter and Alice's story, as they wished: the poem itself becomes the history they hoped for. Yet again, they are but creatures of the poet's invention, and are not truly "historical" at all; the poem undercuts the concept of "history" at all levels.

In his Froissart poems, then, Morris legendizes tales of human desire for fulfillment, courage, and heroism, and of ultimate and ironic failure. In each of the three poems, violence and death displace and destroy frail human desires for sexual and interpersonal fulfillment. Morris intensifies his ironic reminders of human failure by juxtaposing defeat with courage and heroism, however small and insufficient, in the face of conflicting loyalties and entrapping circumstance. The medieval setting of the Hundred Years' War personalizes courage for the industrialized and depersonalized nineteenth century; combat between individual men over individual women reveals clearly the dynamics of success and failure. Rather than escape his time, Morris creates moral tales for his time in medieval dress.

The Earthly Paradise: Lost

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THE ATTITUDE of critics toward *The Earthly Paradise* is a record of changing literary tastes. The poem of 1868-70 which made William Morris a famous poet in his own era has been largely ignored in ours, and Morris' half-serious comment that "the title is the best part of it and will have a meaning for men when the rest is forgotten"¹ has been sadly prophetic. Paul Thompson speaks for the majority of contemporary scholars in suggesting that "*The Earthly Paradise* is an excellent way of passing a train journey, but it is not always easy at the end of the journey to remember what was in it."² The poem has been censured for pallor, diffuseness, and dullness or dismissed as the empty song of an idle singer. It has been attacked for representing an escapist tendency in Morris, who, unable to confront either his marital crisis or the problems of his era, turned his back on the world and retreated into the simplistic retelling of worn-out legends.³

One of the reasons for the eclipse of a poem once considered Morris' major work is the change in literary taste and critical theory in the past century. Our era no longer enjoys long, romantic verse-narratives, nor does it consider pathos, sweetness, and passion the vital tones in poetry. Diffuseness and occasional monotony, considered minor flaws by Morris' contemporaries, are cardinal sins to modern formalist critics, and lack of social and ethical relevance are anathema to critics of the neo-humanist and social schools. Readers of today favor brief, intense, and highly concentrated poetic experiences; they prefer irony, paradox, and tension to lucid and harmonious verse-narrative. Equipped to handle complexities of image or symbol, they are unable to deal with transparent surfaces and simple effects.

The other reason for the neglect of *The Earthly Paradise* is a lack of awareness of the poem's purpose, theme, and structure and, equally important, of its central role in its creator's life and thought. *The Earthly Paradise* reveals Morris' brilliance in using preexistent materials, as well as his

¹ Alfred Noyes, *William Morris* (London, 1908), p. 144.

² *The Work of William Morris* (London, 1967), p. 171.

³ See E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955), pp. 144-162; Henderson, pp. 87-92; and Jack Lindsay, *William Morris, Writer* (London, 1961), pp. 12-15.