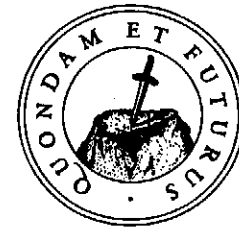


# ARTHURIANA



SPECIAL ISSUE ON WILLIAM MORRIS AND KING ARTHUR

EDITED BY

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'the most wonderful reproduction of the tone of thought and feeling of a past age' (J.H. Shorthouse, as quoted in Faulkner 49).<sup>2</sup> Modern scholars agree, finding Morris's Arthurian vision 'strikingly original and...yet surprisingly true' (Cochran 95). At the same time in his life, Morris began to portray the legend in art, producing a painting, a mural, and a few drawings, as well as a number of designs for craft production. He also encouraged his friends to seek subjects in the legend, organizing projects in tapestry and stained glass. While Morris's actual involvement with the legend was limited—particularly to the first decade of his career—the realm of influence of that involvement was astonishing, inspiring poets and painters of succeeding generations and leading modern scholars to rank Morris's voice with that of Tennyson's in the nascent Arthurian revival.

This year marks the centenary of Morris's death, and his contribution as a designer, writer, polemicist, and publisher is being celebrated in exhibitions and conferences throughout the world.<sup>3</sup> In this special issue of ARTHURIANA we also observe the centenary, turning our attention to Morris's contribution to the legend. While many avenues of his interpretation have been explored—the critical heritage, his reading of Malory, his difference from Tennyson, his feminist viewpoint—we seek fresh perspectives, asking new questions to come to a greater understanding of both the man and the myth, revealing how visions of the past shaped Morris's ideals and how those ideals have endured as integral to the Arthurian tradition.

DEBRA N. MANCOFF

#### NOTES

1. William Morris, 'The Earthly Paradise,' in *The Collected Works*, 3. ll. 22–23. (*Collected Works* cited throughout this issue as CW).
2. For a cogent discussion of the disparity of critical views, see Cochran 75–80.
3. A full record of centenary celebrations is being compiled by the William Morris Society in the United States. For further information, contact Mark Samuels Lasner, President; William Morris Society in the United States; 1870 Wyoming Avenue, NW; Apt. 101; Washington, DC 20009.

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Plate 2. Edward Burne-Jones. *Shields in a Thicket*, from *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Merton Abbey Tapestry Works, 1891–94. Courtesy of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.

## 'The glory and the freshness of a dream': Arthurian Romance as Reconstructed Childhood

FREDERICK KIRCHHOFF

Morris's discovery of the *Morte Darthur* marked a turning point in his artistic development; his subsequent loss of interest in Arthurian romance is fully as revealing as his initial enthusiasm for it. (FK)

William Morris's encounter with Sir Thomas Malory was an event that shaped his early work as a writer, but Morris's later turn away from these materials marks an equally significant development in his career. His first acquaintance with the *Morte Darthur* is a classic literary anecdote. In September 1855, Edward Burne-Jones showed him a copy of Robert Southey's edition of *The Byrthe, Life, and Actes of Kyng Arthur* (1817) in a Birmingham bookshop. Flush with cash, Morris bought it on the spot, and the two young men—Morris was twenty-one at the time—read and reread the work together in the months that followed. Georgiana Burne-Jones later observed that 'the book never can have been loved as it was by those two men' (1.116). The event

gave direction to both their careers. Both tried their hands at painting scenes from Arthurian romance—a subject Burne-Jones retained in his later work—and Morris established himself as a poet with the Arthurian verse he published in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858).

Doubtless Morris had already known something about the legends associated with Arthur. They were national folklore, and from boyhood Morris had been drawn to the Middle Ages. He had certainly read Tennyson's earlier Arthurian poetry by 1853, when Tennyson's work was in vogue among his Oxford circle. However Morris's only recorded response to these poems is the laconic observation that Tennyson's Galahad was 'rather a mild youth' (Mackail 1.45), and there is little reason to assume that he attached any particular, personal importance to the Arthurian materials before 1855. Arguably, then, his profound reaction to Malory was not a response to the subject but to the manner of its telling. Malory's realism enabled Morris to imagine the events of Arthurian legend in a wholly new way; far from 'mild,' they were violent and erotic, teeming with an affective life very different from the quasi-monastic ideal Morris had come to associate with the Middle Ages. Consequently, Malory provided Morris with a vehicle for expressing untapped creative energy, for imagining a new self, medieval in its accouterments, but charged with a vital force capable of asserting itself in the nineteenth century.

Yet, just as striking as Morris's initial reaction to Malory's rendering of the Arthurian stories is the little trace of Malory or Arthur in Morris's later writing. In his 1886 letter to the Editor of *Pall Mall Gazette* listing his 'Best Hundred Books,' Morris describes Malory's *Morte Darthur* as 'an ill-digested collection of fragments' chiefly valuable because it abbreviates its prolix sources. True, he stars it as one of the books that have some link to primary texts ('Bibles') like Homer and Beowulf that 'are in no sense the work of individuals but have grown up from the very hearts of the *people*' (*Collected Letters* 2.515–6). But it is clear that Malory's work is of secondary importance. Significantly, in the last years of his life, when Morris used the Kelmscott Press to commemorate the literature closest to his heart, he included Jean Froissart, the other late medieval influence on his poetry of the 1850s, but he omitted Malory. It was as if Malory had become a piece of his past he was no longer interested in preserving, perhaps even embarrassed about enough to wish to conceal.

No single factor explains Morris's loss of interest in Malory. Doubtless Tennyson's growing claim to Arthur and his court would have discouraged any younger poet from writing a major narrative poem on the same subject. But there are other, more personal reasons for Morris's change of heart: the nature of Malory's materials, his inadequacy as a role model, and the personal

associations that linked Malory with this particular time in Morris's life. From start to finish, his own medievalism was an effort to recover 'the very hearts of the *people*' who had shaped England's past. By offering a sense of human actuality that he had missed in Tennyson's Arthurian poetry, Malory seemed on first reading a clue to this past. But as Morris's knowledge of the Middle Ages developed, he faced the limitations of the *Morte Darthur* as history. Even Malory's realism turned out to be an anachronism—a fifteenth-century distortion of the earlier French romances that were themselves far removed in spirit from their Celtic sources. Moreover, despite his own Welsh ancestry, Morris came to think of England as a Teutonic nation, owing little to its Celtic indigenes. For these reasons, there was little to be learned from Malory. And at the same time Malory himself turned out an inadequate model for the medieval artist. Familiarizing himself with the concrete details of the Middle Ages led Morris to the larger challenge of entering into the imaginative mindset of the medieval artist. The mediated poetry of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870) was thus a logical consequence of the very different realistic poetry of *The Defence of Guenevere*. The latter may evoke in modern readers a sense of intense vitality, but this realism was not in itself a medieval value. Morris could imagine himself one of the characters in the *Morte Darthur*, but he could not imagine himself their author (as, a few years later, in writing *The Earthly Paradise*, he was able to imagine himself akin in spirit to Geoffrey Chaucer).

My third explanation for Morris's turn from Malory and Arthur reflects both the particular circumstances of this period in Morris's life and the properties of the Arthurian texts he produced during this period. To Morris, the *Morte Darthur* was not just a book; it became the sign of a complex set of human relationships and aspirations characterizing his life during the late 1850s. Malory was one of the common interests that drew Morris and Burne-Jones to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1856, and Morris's Arthurian poems have their graphic counterpart in the ten murals (or so-called 'frescoes') from the *Morte Darthur* that, a year later, Rossetti enlisted Morris, Burne-Jones, and a group of other young enthusiasts to help him paint in the library of the Oxford Union. This experience of association in a communal enterprise—always attractive to Morris—is thus connected with, perhaps even an equivalent to, the notion of Arthur and his Round Table. As the leader of this band of young artists, Rossetti was himself playing the role of Arthur. Arguably, then, when Morris took up with the young woman whom Rossetti had met at an Oxford theatre and persuaded to sit as a model, Morris was effectively assuming the part of Lancelot. Interestingly enough, Rossetti used Morris's head for the

figure of Lancelot he drew for Moxon's 1857 *Illustrated Edition* of Tennyson's poetry, while Morris in turn painted Jane Burden as Guenevere in his 1858 oil. Morris had earlier drawn her as Iseult, another woman who betrays her husband. It is tempting to treat these representations as foreshadowings of Jane's later liaison with Rossetti—I have succumbed to this temptation myself—but it is more reasonable to assume that in imaging Jane as an adulterous wife Morris fantasized himself as her fortunate lover.

Granted, it may be equally reasonable to attribute to these connections no special significance whatsoever—other than the willingness of a group of friends to sit as models for one another. However, I raise the issue not to postulate a causal relationship, but to suggest the heady mix of life, art, and legend that characterized this time in Morris's life, a time when his belief that he would become an artist was inseparable from his belief that his life would be an embodiment of what he took for medieval ideals. In such an atmosphere, the characters and events of Arthurian legend easily became vehicles of self-expression, liberating desire by giving it a safely anachronistic mask. This is the period in Morris's life when he found a sense of personal identity and became more comfortable in asserting his opposition to the values of his middle-class family. It was also the time in his life when Morris seems to have first thought of himself as a sexual being. Like the patronage of Rossetti, Malory and his Arthur cannot but have been permanently associated in Morris's mind with this stage in his development as well as with the set of relationships that defined it. Like Rossetti, Malory played a leading role in Morris's coming to imagine himself as an adult able to determine his own conduct and to impose his will on the world around him.

But, I would argue, Morris's intense fascination with Malory's stories did not derive simply from their offering an abrupt break from his earlier experience. Rather, it took strength from Malory's confirmation of what had been there all along in his imaginative life. One of the anecdotes associated with the Oxford Union adventure is the account of Morris's commissioning a helmet and chain mail and wearing them to meals. Extraordinary as this is—and I think we should not forget that this behavior was, indeed, extraordinary—it was not his first suit of armor. Comparable gear had been made for him as a child, and he had worn it, we are told, riding his pony through Epping Forest. Playing Lancelot was thus a mature(r) version of the knights-in-armor games Morris had played in boyhood. What made Malory's text so exciting to Morris was his recasting of the materials of his childhood into stories about adults told by an adult and appropriate for adult readers.

The *Morte Darthur* thus enabled Morris to create and sustain a significant connection between childhood and adulthood, and the undeniable energy of poems like 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb' derive from this linkage. Indeed, the energy of this whole period in his life seems to entail an upswelling of earlier interests and desires, given new sanction by Rossetti, a surrogate father who acted very much like a child himself, but who nevertheless linked this behavior to adult sexuality and an adult career.

Comparable behavior is not difficult to find. The college graduate who uses the proceeds from a first well-paying job to act out a childhood fantasy has something in common with Morris. But Morris, who had sufficient income to abandon the profession he entered on first leaving college, is a special case. During the five years following his discovery of Malory, Morris had the financial wherewithal to act out a series of personal fantasies. It was not until 1861, the year in which he co-founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company and also became a father, that he began to experience what I take to be the ordinary constraints of adulthood. Like Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, whose year of wandering with a theatrical troop was, in effect, an extension of the puppet theatre he had played with as a child, Morris's five years experimentation with being a grown up enabled him to mobilize considerable material from his own earlier life and integrate it into the habits of adult living. This process accounts, I believe, for the tenor of these formative years, but it also accounts for the kind of man he ultimately became: a man who never lost his belief that it was possible to make significant decisions about the direction of his own life, a man with a profound sense of the connections between past and present, art and reality. Malory cannot account for this process, but Morris's discovery of Malory in 1855 clearly had something to do with its initiation.

I take my title from Wordsworth, not just because the phenomenon I am describing seems to confirm Wordsworth's belief that the artist has a special relationship with his own childhood, but also because the Wordsworthian poems with strongest affect are those that in some way recapitulate the events or scenes of his own past. Morris's Arthurian poems have as their subject the medieval world closely associated with Morris's early years in Walthamstow. Writing about Guenevere and Lancelot and particularly Galahad, he is exploring an imaginative setting as strongly linked to his own past as the Lake Country scenery was to Wordsworth's. The poems provide a medium in which the newly adult poet is able to make sense of the materials of childhood and thus confirm, not only the connection between past and present, but the power of his adult self to manipulate that past. For this reason, they are

unexpectedly comparable to the adult fantasy of childhood one encounters in texts like Wordsworth's *Prelude* or Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*.

Which is not to suggest that Morris sounds anything like Wordsworth or Thackeray. It is difficult not to be struck—especially if one is steeped in Tennyson's Arthurian mode—by the unmediated presence of Morris's Arthurian characters. Nor is Thackeray's ironically distanced narrative voice anywhere to be found. The past tense of Morris's narrator in 'The Defence of Guenevere' belongs to recent memory, not history. It is a voice which offers minimal interpretation and little capacity for coherent moral commentary. Things simply happen, without being sorted out as they are sorted out by Wordsworth and Thackeray. Nevertheless, the three writers are linked by their concern with the representation of states of being in which the line between self and other is uncertain and in which, as a result, the self enjoys a primitive grandiosity that spills over into its natural setting.

Morris's earlier writing set in the Middle Ages—the short prose pieces he had published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856—had focused on the act of long-term recollection. Fictions like 'The Story of the Unknown Church' were about the process of reconstructing the past and the difficulties inherent in this process. The very nature of this subject questioned the reliability and therefore the mediacy of the narrative personae. In contrast, the new poetry of *The Defence of Guenevere* assumes a medieval world that can be read as a more liberated, heightened version of Victorian England. For Morris, the power of the late 1850s was his passing belief that he could overcome that barrier between past and present—that there was no difference between the modern and the medieval that could not be bridged by the imagination. Under these conditions, nostalgia is no longer an appropriate response to history; instead, the possibility of expanding the self into the historical past becomes a cause for manic elation.

Critics who ponder the morality of a text like 'The Defence of Guenevere' or seek to unravel the logic of Guenevere's rhetorical strategy miss the boat. This is not a poem that weighs moral principles, much less a carefully structured argument. Guenevere's 'defence' is the force of her self presentation—her simply being there in a way that outpowers her adversaries. The poem is about her overwhelming presence. But it is also about the presence of an implied narrator whose identity is entangled with that of his persona. Guenevere's energy is an expression of the energy of a William Morris who believed he could master time.

This entanglement is directly related to the circumstances of the poems' composition. It is easier to imagine yourself Galahad if you wear chain mail

to the dinner table. But if adulthood, as Wordsworth suggests, entails the recognition of what cannot be recovered from the past, then denial of this recognition is logically experienced as an accession to the timelessness of an earlier stage of mental development. Appropriately, then, other characteristics of these texts link immediacy with a kind of thinking that can be associated with childhood.

The poems in Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* volume provide many examples of this thinking. Consider the opening lines of 'King Arthur's Tomb':

Hot August noon—already on that day  
Since sunrise through the Wiltshire downs, most sad  
Of mouth and eye, he had gone leagues of way;  
Ay and by night, till whether good or bad

He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance  
That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight  
Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,  
Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right.

Nay, he knew nothing now, except that where  
The Glastonbury gilded towers shine,  
A lady dwelt, whose name was Guenevere;  
This he knew also; that some fingers twine,

Not only in a man's hair, even his heart,  
(Making him good or bad I mean,) but in his life,  
Skies, earth, men's looks and deeds, all that has part,  
Not being ourselves, in that half-sleep, half-strife,

(Strange sleep, strange strife,) that men call living  
... (CW 1.1–17)

Deciding how much to quote is difficult. The sentence that begins in line 9 does not end until line 28. The tangle of confused thought resists closure, one idea suggesting another, details piling upon details. Morris's narrator employs a version of free-indirect style, mirroring the thought processes of his protagonist. Granted, he is not consistent in this identification. While the 'Nay' of line 9 is clearly Launcelot's, the parenthetical 'Making him good or bad I mean' not only intrudes a narrative concern for explanations; it also confuses the point of view of the phrases that immediately precede and follow it. (Is it Launcelot or the narrator who is imagining those fingers twining 'even [in] his heart?') Morris is able to dramatize Launcelot's confused consciousness only by presenting it through an equally confused narrator. In this context, even Guenevere's name has become secondary. Indeed, Launcelot's

knowledge of his own name has become a matter of chance, and the thinking represented in lines 12–17 entails an essential blurring of the distinction between what is and what is not the self.

That this confusion rings true for a man in Launcelot's circumstances who has ridden all day in the hot August sun does not deny its essentially regressive nature. Morris presents a state of mind prior to naming, in which inside and outside, sleep and waking are only partially differentiated. His representation of a medieval consciousness is thus also a representation of a mind just beginning to know itself through the processes of differentiation and naming—of a mind at that moment, in other words, when great confusion and great power are inseparable.

Guenevere's thought processes are similar. After spending the night in anticipation of Launcelot's arrival, the light of dawn brings an abrupt shift in her feelings:

—when suddenly the thing grew drear,  
In morning twilight, when the grey downs bare  
Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere. (CW 1.138–140)

We are free to interpret this as an effect of guilt, brought on by the symbolic coming of daylight. But Guenevere's state of mind is not a consciousness of wrong-doing; it is simply a depression of spirits that causes the world to look different to her. True, she later relates this 'dismal' mood to her betrayal of Arthur, but she never has a clear sense of responsibility for her actions: she is a victim of mood swings beyond her control, and her efforts to counter these feelings reveal her inability to imagine anything beyond her own immediate sensual gratification:

' . . . O Christ! must I lose  
My own heart's love? see, though I cannot weep,  
'Yet am I very sorry for my sin;  
Moreover, Christ, I cannot bear that hell,  
I am most fain to love you, and to win  
A place in heaven some time—I cannot tell—  
'Speak to me, Christ! I kiss, kiss, kiss your feet;  
Ah! now I weep!'—The maid said, 'By the tomb  
He waiteth for you, lady,' . . . (CW 1.175–183)

This is not guilt, but the fear of punishment; Guenevere's struggles to manipulate her world through sex appeal indicate how little she has learned from her experience. She imagines religion in the same terms she imagines her relationship with Launcelot.

The 'he' in line 183 of course is Launcelot, but juxtaposed to the lines preceding the maid's speech, the 'he' waiting 'by the tomb' may at first seem Christ. And this conflation of imagery reappears later in the poem, when Guenevere recalls going to mass in the chapel, where 'Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,/Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,/Mingled with dreams of what the priest did say' (CW 1.306–308), and where her awareness of the applicability of the Priest's 'Grim curses out of Peter and of Paul' (CW 1.309) associates itself with the painted representations of Mary Magdalen. In both 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb,' feeling is undifferentiated from perception, real figures from artistic representations.

In refusing to take responsibility for their own actions, Morris's Guenevere and, to some extent, his Launcelot are not so much childlike as the expressions of a childlike view of adult power. What is adult about the texts is their recognition that these figures are essentially dysfunctional. Guenevere is a fantasy of female sexuality that refuses to accommodate itself to the world of duty and compromise. In 'The Defence of Guenevere,' she is able to pull it off by sheer bravado; in 'King Arthur's Tomb' this reliance on instinct becomes helplessness. Her final gesture is a giving of herself over to chance:

'Alas, alas! I know not what to do,  
If I run fast it is perchance that I  
May fall and stun myself, much better so,  
Never, never again! not even when I die.'  
(CW 1.389–92)

Significantly, both poems end with some kind of running away, and this dissolution repeats itself in the concluding lines of 'Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery' and 'The Chapel in Lyonesse.'

Morris's Galahad is equivalent to Wordsworth's Boy of the Winander: a figure able to escape adulthood by being absorbed in his own fantasy of religious or natural power. For both, this apotheosis is clearly equivocal. Wordsworth's semi-autobiographical boy dies; Morris's Galahad is saved from being 'a man of stone' (CW 1.23) only by his passive acceptance of an heroic fate that has next to nothing to do with the human world.

The narratives that Morris attempts to apply to the timeless selves of Arthurian romance are all ultimately unsatisfactory. The adult who is also a child confronts us with an intensity of being that resists diachronic analysis. None of Guenevere's stories about herself really get to the essence of her being. If her real 'defence' is her presence, her verbal 'defence' shows how little she understands—or is willing to understand—about herself. Galahad's promised

adventure with 'the spindles of King Solomon' is merely absurd. The Angel who prophesies the events of his successful quest for the Sangrael represents an order with little relevance to the affective state of the hero. The Galahad Morris is able to imagine by erasing the border between past and present can only conceive of his legendary fate as a meaningless set of words.

Thus, the sense of intense being that Morris discovers himself able to project in his Arthurian poems resists the literary form—narration—that would impose change and, finally, closure on his dramatic personae. The poems are powerful because they do not go anywhere, because they revel in the timelessness of Morris's own childhood recaptured through the denial of historical separation. But for this very reason neither they nor Morris really go anywhere. They release a power, fascinating in itself, but ultimately incapable of direction toward a goal or purpose. Like Wordsworth's 'Boy,' they are fragments of being that disrupt narrative by denying the possibility of change in time.

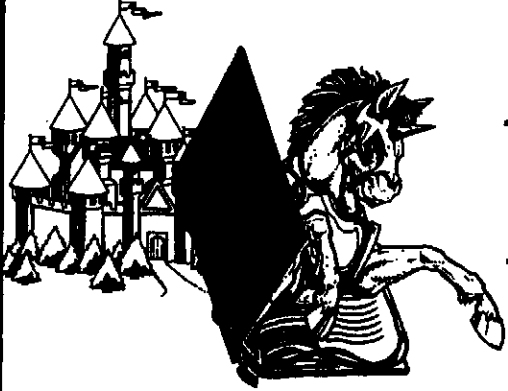
I have suggested several reasons why Morris, while continuing to write on medieval themes, turned his attention away from the Arthurian materials. The most important reason would appear to be that the Arthurian materials took him to a dead end. Just as he left Red House to rethink himself as an artisan-businessman, he left Malory to rethink himself a narrative poet. And yet, if Malory represented a stage in his life Morris had reasons to cast aside, the stage itself continued to fascinate him. His late romances fixate on the transition between adolescent and adult and on the means by which the potency of childhood can be sustained through the process of growing up. It is as if Morris, in his last years, sought rejuvenation through the recapitulation of his own passage into adulthood, not to recapture a lost time, but to affirm the sources of his energy. Malory may have no explicit role in these romances, but they could not have been written without him.

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