WRITING ON THE IMAGE: READING WILLIAM MORRIS

David Latham

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Interdisciplinary nature of Morris's work that prohibits anyone from ever reaching the boundaries of Morris's literature, decorative arts, book design, politics, etc., 'etcetera' being a word on which I would never end an introduction for any other figure but Morris.

NOTE

1 'How Morris seems to know things,' admired Charles Faulkner. Richard Watson Dixon agreed: 'I observed how decisive he was: how accurate, without any effort or formality; what an extraordinary power of observation lay at the base of many of his casual or incidental remarks, and how many things he knew that were quite out of our way' (Mackail 1:44).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1.1 William Morris. Sunflower. Blue tile painted by Morris & Co., c. 1870–8. 6 x 6 in.
Fig. 1.2 William Morris and May Morris. Honeysuckle. Original design for wallpaper. Trustees of the Kelmscott House Trust. William Morris Society, London. Pattern produced as a hand-block printed wallpaper by Morris & Co., 1883.

Arthur’s Tomb (fig. 2.1; 1855) is Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s first painting of an Arthurian subject and, as such, has been generally recognized as occupying a transitional position between the work of the first and second groups of Pre-Raphaelites. Although dated 1854 the painting was actually executed in the late summer and autumn of 1855, some two years after Rossetti had declared the ‘Round Table’ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood ‘dissolved’ (Correspondence 1:163), and some two months before he made the acquaintance of Burne-Jones and, through him, Morris (Burne-Jones, Memorials 1:128–30). Nevertheless, as David Rogers observes, the ‘angularity of [its two] figures, particularly the Queen who was surely posed for by Lizzie Siddal, harks back to the early PRB style of 1849–50,’ and its subject – Launcelot attempting to kiss Guenevere over Arthur’s tomb – ‘inspired’ the poem of [nearly] the same title ... in The Defence of Guenevere, [Morrison’s] first volume of poetry, published in 1858’ (44). Perhaps because it occupies a liminal position between two stages of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Arthur’s Tomb has not occasioned the commentary that David Latham suggests it deserves either as a work by Rossetti or as an inspiration to Morris, a deficiency that this essay will attempt to remedy as it places the painting, the poem that it occasioned ('King Arthur's Tomb'), and Morris's wallpaper designs of the early 1860s in the context of Ruskin's Modern Painters 3, 4, and 5 (1856, 1856, 1860).

Despite the visual echoes of such works as John Everett Millais’s Christ in the House of His Parents (1849–50), James Collinson’s The Renunciation of
Queen Elizabeth of Hungary (1848-50), and Rossetti’s own drawing of
The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice (1849) that are generated by
the angular postures of Launcelot and Guenevere in Arthur’s Tomb,
several aspects of the painting detach it from the early Pre-Raphaelite
style. First, the use of watercolours casts it in a relatively informal
mode that is reinforced by the sketchy quality of the brushwork with
which its background and foreground foliage are rendered so as to
focus attention not only on Launcelot and Guenevere, but also on the
effigy of Arthur that surmounts his tomb and the scenes from the
history of the Round Table – the knighting of Launcelot and Galahad’s
vision of the Holy Grail – that decorate its length. Second, the
decoration of the tomb, its horizontal placement in the picture space,
and the horizontal dimensions of the picture space itself (23.5 cm x 36.8
are less evocative of the Early Christian art admired and emulated
by the original Pre-Raphaelites than of the woodcut of the tomb of
Adonis in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (1499) and Titian’s allegory Sacred
and Profane Love (1514) (see Colonna 371-3, Bentley, ‘The Hypnerotomachia’
280-3, and Grieve 277), two products of the Venetian Renaissance, the
characteristics and productions of which Ruskin had celebrated in
The Stones of Venice (1851, 1853) and would celebrate again in Modern
Painters 5. ‘It is in many ways a painful picture,’ observes Evelyn
Waugh in his sensitively astute reading of the painting in Rossetti: His
Life and Works; ‘three horizontals’ – the effigy and tomb of Arthur, and
the branches of the apple tree that impinge on Launcelot’s shield, and
Guenevere’s headdress – ‘constrict the composition until it aches with
suppressed resilience ... A lesser artist, certainly any other Pre-
Raphaelite, would have twisted [the trunk of] that apple-tree or garnaled
it and made a beautiful decoration of it; all Rossetti wanted was a clamp’ (95).
In characterizing Launcelot as ‘aflame with masculinity’ and Guenevere as an image of ‘threatened chastity,’ Waugh brilliantly
captures the sexual drama of Arthur’s Tomb, but in failing to discuss its
apple tree as a biblical allusion as well as ‘a clamp’ and in interpreting
Arthur’s effigy and tomb merely as manifestations of ‘obtrusive
mortality’ (94-5), he scants the Christian and moral dimensions of a
painting whose formalistic and ethical resonances are very much a
reflection of Rossetti’s preoccupation in (and after) 1853 with the
eschatological consequences of sexual transgression and the tense
relationship between sacred and profane love. The year 1853, it may
be recalled, was when Hesterna Rosa was drawn; ‘The Honeysuckle’
composed, and Found begun; 1855, the year of Paolo and Francesca da
Rimini, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and ‘Valentine – to Lizzie Siddal.’ Like
all these and other works of the mid-1850s, Arthur’s Tomb occupies the
transitional zone in Rossetti’s oeuvre between Girlhood of Mary Virgin
(1849) and Bocca Baciata (1859).
A third aspect of Arthur’s Tomb that detaches it from Rossetti’s earlier
work, aligns it with his thematic and stylistic concerns of the mid-
1850s, and, as important, signals it as a possible precursor of Morrisian
design is its use of an undulating or serpentine line of force to lead the
viewer’s eye through the picture space and across the rectangular
mass of Arthur’s tomb. Beginning near the top left of the picture,
where Launcelot’s grazing horse provides both a spatial and a
narrative prelude to the episode depicted, this line of force takes the
viewer’s eye along the knight’s shield, across the thematically
significant gap between his face and Guenevere’s, down the curvature
of the queen’s headdress, and out of the picture near the bottom right
of the picture space. Continuous despite interruption or, conversely, a
form of interrupted continuity, the serpentine line of Arthur’s Tomb
thus links Launcelot and Guenevere, reflects their separation, and
invites meditation on the (dis)continuity between sacred and profane
love. It is also a compositional allusion by way of the presence and
shape of the serpent in the bottom left-hand corner of the picture
space to the temptation and fall of Eve, a narrative to which the fallen
apple beside the serpent and the apple tree behind the figures also
alludes. As obviously as in Found, a moment of tension between sexual
innocence and experience is insistently referred to a Christian context
of judgment and consequences, though here, of course, it is the female
who is (newly) innocent and the male who desires to continue a life of
sin. That Guenevere wears a fastened girdle and Launcelot a passionate
red tunic is fully in accordance with the iconography of clothes in
relation to sacred and profane love that Rossetti began to develop with
‘The Blessed Damozel’ and used consistently in his poems and
paintings of the 1840s and 1850s, as witness, for example, the fastened
girdle of the innocent girl in Hesterna Rosa and the red flowers on the
prostitute’s dress in Found.² (That the red and white of Launcelot’s
tunic and shield are also liturgical colours adds a degree of complexity
to the painting that accords with its – and, later, Morris’s – suggestion of
a continuity as well as a distinction between sacred and profane
love.)³

Since Arthur’s Tomb so strongly evokes the biblical temptation and
fall, there is something to be learned from comparing it with a
medieval depiction of the Tree of Knowledge that was probably known to Rossetti at the time of the painting's execution: the 'somewhat late thirteenth-century Hebrew manuscript' in the British Museum that Ruskin entitles 'Appletree' in Plate 7 of Modern Painters (3:208). Although Modern Painters 3 and 4 were not published until early 1856 (their prefaces are dated 'Januari' of that year), they were almost certainly a topic of conversation between Ruskin and Rossetti during their composition in 1855 when the two men were teaching together at the London Working Men's College (from January to March they even taught on the same night). Indeed, 'Jan Marsh goes so far as to suggest that 'the inspiration [for Arthur's Tomb] surely [came] from the Gothic carvings, illuminated missals and early German woodcuts Ruskin was currently studying, praising, lending' (Dante Gabriel 148–9). (Ironically, it may have been Ruskin's tutelage of Rossetti in medieval art that caused him to be dissatisfied with Arthur's Tomb: 'The Guenevere and Launcelot is not my pet drawing, though Mr. Browning could not say too much of it,' he told Eleanor Heaton on 11 November 1855; 'it is one of my imperfect ones ... Launcelot is so funny bent under his shield, and Arthur points his toes so over the tomb, I dare not show it to Anti-Pre-Raphaelites, but I value it intensely myself' [qtd in Surtees 1:35]). Ruskin's primary reason for reproducing the thirteenth-century 'Appletree' in Modern Painters 3 is to illustrate the symbolic treatment of eternal nature in Christian art 'from the earliest periods down to the close of the fourteenth century' (after which imitation became the norm). His secondary reason is to refute Macaulay's 'very curiously foolish' interpretation of the figure wound around the tree of knowledge' in a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript as a 'snake' (3:206–7). In correcting the 'exquisite naïveté of the historian,' Ruskin provides a valuable gloss on the disposition of the figures in Arthur's Tomb:

Mr. Macaulay is evidently quite unaware that the serpent with the human head, and body twisted round the tree, was the universally accepted symbol of the evil angel, from the dawn of [Christian] art up to Michael Angelo; that the greatest sacred artists invariably place the man on the one side of the tree, the woman on the other, in order to denote the enthroned and balanced dominion about to fall by temptation. (3:207)

In, a realm that has already fallen by temptation, Launcelot and Guenevere are placed asymmetrically on the left (sinister) side of the tree of knowledge, as also are Launcelot's horse and the serpent, which appears to be crawling away after accomplishing its task. Viewed as a dramatic tableau, Arthur's Tomb is centred on the faces of Launcelot and Guenevere and the queen's upheld hand; viewed in the context of the Christian narrative and symbolic formality evoked by its apple tree and serpent, its central concern is with the 'fall by temptation' that destroyed the 'enthroned and balanced dominion' of the Round Table and thus warrants typological referral to the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. Not without reason does the shadow of the apple tree that falls across the depiction of the vision of the Holy Grail on Arthur's tomb divide all the knights but one (presumably Galahad) from the vision and, indeed, overshadows the eyes of the knight whose red cloak associates him with Launcelot.

In Morris's 'King Arthur's Tomb,' the serpentine line of force that parallels Launcelot and Guenevere with the serpent (and, it may be added, with the undulating branches of the apple tree) in the painting finds powerful expression in two passages that are remarkable both as expressions of the tension and continuity between sacred and profane love and as verbal variations on the painting's major thematic and formal elements. In the first of these, which is spoken after Guenevere has articulated her inability or reluctance to choose between sacred and profane love ('If even I go to hell, I cannot choose/ But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep / From loving Launcelot'), Launcelot echoes Christ's words on the cross as he attempts to kiss her and, in response, she characterizes both his appearance and his actions as serpentine:

'Lord, forgive her now,
That she not knowing what she does, being mad,
Kills me in this way - Guenevere, bend low
And kiss me once! for God's love kiss me! sad

'Though your face is, you look much kinder now;
Yea once, once for the last time kiss me, lest I die.'

'Christ! my hot lips are very near his brow,
Help me to save his soul! - yea, verily,'
'Across my husband's head, fair Launcelot!
   Fair serpent mark'd with V upon the head!
This thing we did while yet he was alive,
   Why not, O twisting knight, now he is dead?' (201–12)

In the second, which is spoken by Guenever, her comparison of
Launcelot with a viper⁸ is reinforced by several references to
serpentine shapes and supplemented by rhythmical repetitions –
'Banner and sword and shield ... Body and face and limbs' – whose
undulations simultaneously echo those shapes and reflect the erotic
physicability that she is striving to transcend:

'Banner of Arthur – with black-bended shield

'Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground!
   Here let me tell you what a knight you are,
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found
   A crooked sword, I think, that leaves a scar

'On the easter’s arm, so be he thinks it straight,
   Twisted Malay’s crease beautiful blue-grey,
Poison’d with sweet fruit; as he found too late
   My husband Arthur, on some bitter day!

'O sickle' cutting hemlock the day long!
   That the husbandman across his shoulder hangs,
And, going homeward about evensong,
   Dies the next morning, struck through by the fangs!

'Banner and sword and shield, you dare not pray to die,
   Lest you meet Arthur in the other world,
And knowing who you are, he pass you by,
   Taking short turns that he may watch you curl'd,

'Body and face and limbs in agony
   Lest he weep presently and go away.
Saying, 'I loved him once,' with a sad sigh –
   Now I have slain him, Lord, let me go too, I pray.

[Launcelot falls]

'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.'
(368–88; italics added except on 'falls')

The heraldic reference near the beginning of this passage ('Banner of
Arthur – with black-bended shield / Sinister-wise across the fair gold
ground!') echoes the asymmetry of *Arthur's Tomb* as a formal
representation of manifest evil and the allusion near its conclusion to
*Romeo and Juliet* ('Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast,' 2.3.94)
refers the relationship of Launcelot and Guenever to another pair of
rash and unfortunate lovers. The most remarkable aspect of the
passage, however, remains the unifying presence of the same serpentine
line that undulates through Rossetti's painting with an equivalent
erotic energy and typological resonance. The 'governing lines' that
'rule the swell and fall and change' of a 'mass' may not be discernible
to a 'careless observer' or to 'an ordinary artist,' writes Ruskin in
*Modern Painters* but they will be apparent to an artist who possesses
the 'acuteness of perception' that recognizes in a thing's 'outward'
form the manifestation of its inner 'growth and make' (4:192). Clearly,
Morris was no 'careless observer' or 'ordinary artist.'

III

Possibly 'inspired by the rose trellises at the Red House,' *Trellis* (fig.
2.2; circa 1862) was apparently 'Morris's first wallpaper design'
(Burdick 75) and certainly among the earliest produced by Morris,
Marshall, Faulkner and Company.⁹ Excluding the birds in various
animated postures that were contributed to the design by Philip Webb,
its most notable feature is not the trellis that gives it its title but the
climbing rose that ascends vertically and diagonally through its space
with its leaves and most of its flowers facing the viewer. Particularly
when the stems, leaves, and background of *Trellis* are rendered in very
muted shades of brown and green as is usually the case, the fact that
the flowers and thorns of its climbing rose are the same vibrant colour
(orange, yellow) associates the beautiful and attractive with the
painful and dangerous, a theme found in many of the poems in *The
Defence of Guenever* volume and reinforced in the design by the presence
of (delicate, vulnerable) mayflies and (robust, static) beetles as well as
floral and other natural forms to 'disciplined and orderly pattern[s]' (3:203-4). Indeed, Daisy fully exemplifies the 'two everlasting patterns of beauty' whose discovery and application in 'floral ornament' by 'medieval workman' established for Ruskin 'the principles of decorative art ... [and] mass arrangement in general' to the 'end of time' – namely, the 'law of growth,' typified by the profiles of buds and leaves, and the 'law of proportion,' typified by the 'series of three' ribs in a leaf (that is, a central rib with 'two ... and no more, on each side') (3:211-3). By the early 1860s, the Morris's would also have known that in discussing the 'orders of leaves' in Modern Painters Ruskin draws an almost explicitly moral contrast between, on the one hand, the sweep of the chestnut and gadding of the vine,' and, on the other, 'the close shrinking trefoil, and contented daisy, pressed on earth' (5:102). Both the daisy hanging and the Daisy wallpaper are pictures of rural and domestic contentment. Little wonder that Daisy became one of 'the most popular [wallpapers] ever produced by the Firm' (Burdick 46).

Morris's third wallpaper design of the early 1860s, Fruit (or Pomegranate) (fig. 2.4; circa 1864), consists of four branches of fruit (oranges, lemons, peaches, and pomegranates) arranged diagonally across the design with most of their leaves and flowers flattened to face the viewer, and the pomegranates in various stages of ripeness and in various orientations. It is these that are the most striking (if not startling) features of the design, for especially when ripening or opened to reveal their seeds they bear unmistakable resemblance to female genitalia, a visual metaphor also exploited by Rossetti in Proserpine (1873-7). To conclude that the pomegranates in either Morris's wallpaper or Rossetti's painting are merely metaphorical of female body parts would be erroneous; however, thoroughly conversant as they both were with Christian iconography, Morris and Rossetti would have understood 'the pomegranate, bursting open, and the seeds visible ... [as] an emblem of the future – of hope in immortality' (Jameson 1:35), a significance that it carries, not only in Proserpine, but also in Rossetti's watercolour drawing of Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante (1852) and in the erotically charged girdle of his Astarte Syriaca (1875-7). More than any other fruit in Pre-Raphaelite poetry and painting, the pomegranate radiates both sacred and profane significances: an 'image of temptation' and 'passion' it certainly is in Morris's wallpaper (MacCarthy 183),11 and also an image of present and future fulfilment.

Although Fruit recalls Trellis in its evocation of the tensions and

(energetic, aggressive) birds. The associative use of colour in Trellis thus provides the viewer with an interpretative entry point that is enlarged by other aspects of the design, including its reliance on a tension between the natural world of the birds, beetles, mayflies, and climbing rose and the artificial realm of the trellis itself and the supporting wall to which it is nailed: the overall effect is of a convergence of nature and culture in which the darker aspects of the former are by no means eradicated by the discipline and cultivation of the latter. The climbing rose that mediates between nature and culture in this scheme is a domesticated plant that is still very much a part of the natural world of display and defence, desire and threat, sexuality and violence that animates 'King Arthur's Tomb' and other early Morris poems and prose romances. Here, as in The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, the imbrication of display and defence, desire and threat, sexuality and violence implies that no easy distinctions can be made among wild, domesticated, and human nature, house, garden, and beyond. That the serpentine and quadrangular shapes of Trellis are homologous with those of Arthur's Tomb is not so much an indication of the wallpaper's lineage (though it may be this) as a testament to Morris's extraordinary and growing capacity in the 1850s and 1860s to recognize and redeploy patterns that could be said to reflect foundational structures and tensions in the human psyche (or at least imagination).

If Morris's other wallpaper design of circa 1862, Daisy (fig. 2.3), was partly inspired by the daisy wallhanging for Red House that Jane Morris may have helped to design as well as embroider in 1860 or, like the hanging, by an illumination in a medieval manuscript, then this might explain the absence in it of the serpentine line and the thematic resonances of Trellis. Consisting of four different floral clusters arranged in horizontal lines so that they articulate but do not overlap, Daisy's overall effect is one of stasis, tranquillity, and harmonious coexistence. Like the daisy wallhanging, its major design elements are traceable to Modern Painters 3, though not so much to the reproduction of a Cyclamen that shares Plate 7 ('Botany of 13th Century') with the Apple tree, as is the case with the wallhanging, as to Ruskin's discussion of the medieval interest in flowers elsewhere in his chapter Of Medieval Landscape: First, the Fields. Especially germane is his emphasis on two aspects of the mind and art of the Middle Ages: an exclusive attention to 'what was graceful, symmetrical, and bright in colour' in 'Lower nature' and a heraldic reduction of the complexity of
continuities present in ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’ and Arthur’s Tomb, it differs from the earlier wallpaper in the insistently diagonal patterning of the branches of which it is composed, all of which point upwards at almost precisely a forty-five degree angle from left to right. In this, Fruit recalls several of Rossetti’s paintings of the late 1850s and early 1860s that are either diagonal in structure, reliant on a diagonal movement, or graced by a diagonal ornament of some sort – for example, Mary Magdalene Leaving the House of Feasting (1857) (diagonal banisters), The Time of the Seven Towers (1857) (diagonal penannular staff), and The Wedding of Saint George and the Princess Sabra (1857) (diagonal shoulder decoration and, as Waugh observes, ‘the design [as a whole] is built about the diagonal and nestles within its limits,’ 95). That Rossetti associated the diagonal elements of these and other works with the reconciliation of sacred and profane love is indicated both by their content and by their structural and thematic resemblance to his Dantis Amor (1859–60), where the figure of Love stands at the centre of the painting across a diagonal that divides and yet joins Christ and Beatrice, heaven and earth, the divine and the human (see Bentley, ‘Staff and Scrip’). First in Morris’s rooms in London and then in Red House, Dantis Amor graced a settle between panels depicting The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Florence and The Meeting of Beatrice and Dante in Paradise. Painted in the weeks following the Morrises’ return from their honeymoon in the early summer of 1859, it is an exalted and epithalamic vision of the sanctified human love denied to Launcelot and Guenevere and given its most tangible form in the furnishings, gardens, and architectural poetry of Red House (1859–64). But it is also unfinished, and when the Morrises vacated Red House in 1865, it was separated from its accompanying panels so that they could be ‘framed together with a partition … on to which Rossetti painted a second version of Dantis Amor in a narrow oblong’ (Surtees 1:70); the lives and imaginations that had become irrevocably entwined a decade earlier had entered a new and less happy phase for which, ironically, Arthur, Guenevere, and Launcelot rather than Dante, Beatrice, and Dantis Amor would supply the pattern.

Writing apropos of Morris’s wallpaper designs of the early 1860s, Fiona MacCarthy suggests that he ‘always asked for meaning in a pattern. It acted as a code; it gave a stab of recognition. It was a good way of making a connection with the past’ (182). ‘These early wallpapers,’ she adds, ‘show how he used his patterns as a form of reminiscence.’ MacCarthy’s comments refer primarily to the imagery of Morris’s designs, but they can be extended to the generative structures of his patterns, for surely their reliance on systems of repetition also reflects a disposition towards ‘reminiscence’ and ‘connection with the past,’ since each repeated element is no more or less than a return to what was before and still remains but at a different place and time of observation. In the wallpapers, as in the medieval recreations of The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, repetition’ combines with progression to suggest continuity and difference: the past persists, but only like it was. Seen or read in this way, Morris’s wallpaper designs are figures of the (dis)continuities from which they stemmed, extensions of the broken serpentine line that runs into and out of Arthur’s Tomb, ‘King Arthur’s Tomb,’ and Modern Painters, connecting and dividing the high and the low, the left and the right, the sacred and the profane. To borrow some phrases from Morris’s ‘Lindenborg Pool,’ his works of the late 1850s and early 1860s, like those of Rossetti and Ruskin from which they so often drew succour, are ‘strangely double’ – immensely appealing and semi-abstract artefacts of a ‘proper nineteenth-century character’ and repositories also of a ‘long-past age’ of turbulent feelings and high hopes (CW 1:247–8).

NOTES

1 David Latham introduces these issues of ‘love, sin, death, and redemption’ in his discussion of the ‘typological shadows that leave love haunted,’ as ‘Guenevere agonizes over her desire to kiss the lips of Launcelot “across my husband’s head,”’ with Morris’s ‘favourite preposition – “across” – exploited as a momentary crucifixion image’ (Haunted Texts 15–16). Numerous scholars have noted that the ‘particular episode depicted by Rossetti does not occur in Le Morte d’Arthur’ (Surtees 1:34), but this is only true in so far as the final meeting of Launcelot and Guenevere that occurs in Book 21 of Malory’s work takes place at Almesbury, where Guenevere had entered a nunnery, rather than Glastonbury, where Arthur was buried. In other respects, Rossetti is true to Malory in depicting Guenevere as a nunne in whyght clothys and blik who at her last meeting with Launcelot denies his request that she ‘kysse [him], and never no more’ (Malory 718, 721). In the notes to her edition of The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, Margaret A. Lourie identifies the tree in the painting with ‘the Glastonbury thorn’
and suggests an inspiration for its subject in the episode in Book 21 in which, after Guenevere's death, Launcelot lies 'groveling on the tomb of Kyng Arthur and queene Guenever' (723). Although Rossetti may have come to Malory by way of the story of Paolo and Francesca (who, of course, were tempted into adultery by reading about Launcelot and Guenevere), he may also have been encouraged to read Morte d'Arthur by Ruskin or by Ford Madox Brown, whose diary entries for 21 March and 1 April 1855 state that he 'read King Arthur (7½' hours') and 'talk[ed]' about King Arthur, in prais [sic] of, & how it would illustrate ... Rossetti abusing Mrs. Ruskin & praising Mr.' (128, 130). Surtees interprets these statements as references to Tennyson's Morte d'Arthur, notes that 'one of Rossetti's contributions to Tennyson's Poems was an illustration of King Arthur and the Weeping Queens,' and observes that both Arthur's Tomb and Paolo and Francesca de Rimini were among the commissions that he received from Ruskin. It is possible, however, that Brown's 'read King Arthur' refers to Robert Soutey's 1817 reprinting of Caxton's edition of Malory's Morte d'Arthur under the title The Byrh, Lyf, and Actes of Kyng Arthur.

2 See also Morris's La Belle Iseult (1858), where Iseult wears a patterned dress with red sleeves and appears to be fastening or unfastening her girdle.

3 In 'Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery,' which follows 'King Arthur's Tomb' in The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems, Christ wears a 'raiment half blood-red, half white as snow' in Galahad's vision (CW 1:26).

4 See also Collingwood 1:193–4 for Ruskin's letter of circa October 1855 to Thomas Carlyle explaining that the new volumes of Modern Painters are 'ready for press' and will be dispatched on 5 November, and 1:199–203 for the letter of 10 December 1855 from Paris in which Robert Browning answers Ruskin's comments on his poetry in Modern Painters. Ruskin regarded Browning as 'unerrecting in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages ... so that in the matter of art ... there is hardly a principle connected with the medieval temper, that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and too rugged rhymes of his' (4:377).

5 Just such a figure, flanked by two angels holding swords and by the words 'Eritis siuei dei[sic] scientes bonum et malum,' appears in Rossetti's 1859 drawing Hamlet and Ophelia. Both the design for Arthur's Tomb and the carving in Hamlet and Ophelia may owe a debt to Albrecht Dürer's engraving The Fall of Man (1504) (or Adam and Eve, as it is sometimes called), which contains an apple tree that was greatly admired by Ruskin (see Modern Painters 3:121 and 5:68–9, and, for Rossetti's as well as Ruskin's enthusiasm for Dürer's engravings, see Jan Marsh, Dante Gabriel 168).

6 This effect is more obvious in the 1860 replica of Arthur's Tomb (Tate Gallery), where the light falling on the tomb is brighter and the shadows darker. There are several other notable differences between the 1855 and 1860 versions of the painting, the most significant being the omission in the latter of the serpent, an absence counteracted formalistically by the addition of a serpentine ribbon flowing from a band on Guenevere's left arm and iconographically by the addition of several more fallen apples in the forefront of the scene and by the addition of a head-like ornament to the end of Guenevere's girdle. In the replica, the white covering of Launcelot's horse is an insistent invitation to the eye to enter the picture at that point.

7 In Luke 23:24: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' See also Rossetti's St. Cecilia illustration in Moxon's Tennyson for the use of a sinuous line (from the angel's wing through the saint's face, neck, and body to her knee) in a highly eroticized depiction of the interaction of the heavenly and the earthly.

8 Lorie suggests that a "V" was supposed to distinguish poisonous snakes' (190). The viper is the only poisonous snake in England. See also the omitted or cancelled opening of 'The Defence of Guenevere,' where Launcelot's 'colours' are a 'great snake of green / ... twisted on ... quartered white and red' (CW 1:xx).

9 In her biography of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy observes that he was 'not the first of the partners [of the Firm] to embark on [wallpapers]: already in January 1861 Rossetti was describing the paper he had made for his and Lizzie's rooms in Blackfriars. This was a fruit design in yellow, black, and Venetian red, and Rossetti asked the paper manufacturer to print it on "common brown packing paper and on blue grocer's paper," to see which looked the best' (182). MacCarthy observes of Morris's first three wallpaper designs that 'they are gentle flowing patterns which show Morris's belief in the purpose of pattern to impose a rhythm, to soothe and civilize' (182). MacCarthy describes the 'rose bushes' in Trellis as 'obviously, ominously thorned' (182). The birds in the design are usually assumed to be hummingbirds, but clearly this is not so; rather, they seem to be of two different species (perhaps swifts and woodpeckers).

10 Both the individual clumps of flowers and their bright blue background in the daisy-hanging are strongly reminiscent of Ruskin's 'Cyclamen.'

11 MacCarthy also interprets the pomegranate as an emblem of 'loss' for
Morris (183). Given Morris’s admiration and emulation of Browning in the late 1850s, he probably knew the explanation of the significance of the pomegranate that appears in the last number of Bells and Pomegranates (1856). Noting that ‘Giotto placed a pomegranate fruit in the hand of Dante’ (in the so-called Lost Portrait of the poet in the Bargello in Florence) and that ‘Raffaello crowned his theology (in the Camera della Segnatura) with blossoms of the same,’ Browning quotes ‘the Bellari and Vasari’ on the fruit as ‘simbolo delle buone opere [good works]’ – il qual Pomogranato fu però usato nelle veste del Pontefice appresso gli Ebrei’ (128; see Exodus 28.33–4, and also Browning’s Pippa Passes 138). Rossetti’s painting and drawing of Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante, which depict the poet with a pomegranate in his hand, were executed in 1852.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 2.1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Arthur’s Tomb. Watercolour on paper, 1855. 9 x 14 ½ in. British Museum, London. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

Fig. 2.2 William Morris. Trellis. Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.

Fig. 2.3 William Morris. Daisy. Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.

Fig. 2.4 William Morris. Fruit (or Pomegranate). Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.

In ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ – the fifth poem in William Morris’s Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems (1858) – Sir Peter Harpdon, commander of a crumbling English fortress in France, confers on the leader of the besieging French army, Sir Lambert. Their situa
tions reflect the complex alliances of the Hundred Years’ War, as these are cousins serving opposing armies. Sir Lambert comes under the pretense of persuading Sir Peter to forsake the doomed English cause and unite the family on the French side. However, as he speaks, Peter suddenly interrupts their conference with a reference to ancient precedent, and asks ‘but have you read / The siege of Troy?’. Then, speaking more to himself than to his opponent, Sir Peter observes that, in spite of the Trojans’ fatal support of Helen’s abduction, the Trojans sympathize with the Trojans and judge Hector to be a hero.

take note

How almost all men, reading that sad siege,
Hold for the Trojans: as I did at least,
Thought Hector the best knight a long way. (205–8)

Faced with his own inevitable defeat, Sir Peter entertains the question: ‘What made Hector of Troy a hero? He observes that one’s cause not be successful for one to be remembered as a hero. Rather, heroism is comprised of an extraordinary dedication to virtue and a performance of noble actions for which there are no obviously supportive conditions. He wonders whether he too might be remembered as a her