A Defense of Guenevere

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Abstract. William Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere* is a poetic construct of still undervalued originality. The central situation of the volume, embodied in twenty out of the thirty poems, is defeat. Defeat is coupled with war, with sexual passion, and with age. The past, for Morris, supplies a vital point of reference; it is not sheer escapism, but a legitimate framework for the projection of his poetic vision. The past also enables Morris to express his sexual preoccupations more safely, as does his use of symbols. Within the past-historic lies the past-personal of the recollective narrative. This narrative expresses itself in imagistic, and not metaphoric detail, to convey the sense of reality. The best poems in the volume embody these themes and techniques. Finally, perhaps the defeat theme of *The Defence of Guenevere* implies a mental set that may be relevant to an appraisal of Morris' later life and work.

Of all the English poets, few can be less concerned with metaphor than William Morris. His material is the sense-data of past experience, focused in clear, sharp images. And these images express, in *The Defence of Guenevere*, a continuing and central symbol, or rather situation. That situation is defeat, coupled usually with sexual frustration though not stemming directly from it. The relation of this situation to the techniques of *The Defence of Guenevere* is the key to a poetic construct of still undervalued originality.

That construct, as expressed in *The Defence of Guenevere*, requires the volume to be assessed as a whole. We know that it is the fruit of two or three years in Morris' youth, 1855-57, dating from the time he first discovered that he could write poetry. The experience must have been intense; after the discovery of his talent and the reception from his friends, composition flowed very rapidly. "No week went by without some poem," says Burne-Jones. And Canon Dixon: "From that time onward, for a term or two, he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem" (p. 54). Many, perhaps most, of these poems were destroyed by Morris, and *The Defence of Guenevere* is a selection of the best. In it, we can see his creative talent.

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seeking an outlet in several sorts of poems, and finding its way to compelling and personal utterance.

I

A primary classification of *The Defence of Guenevere* yields three varieties of poems. The volume may breathe "the magic of that crowded world of Camelot," as Mr. Fredeman observes; but actually the Camelot poems number only six, the first four together with "A Good Knight in Prison" and "Near Avalon." The second category is historical, based more or less explicitly on the late Middle Ages. These can be called the Froissart poems; I count eleven of them. No name exists for the third and largest category, thirteen poems based neither on Camelot nor on a fixed historical era. They can best be thought of as fantasies: the term includes "The Wind," "Rapunzel," and "Two Red Roses Across The Moon." In sum, the three categories amount to a varied fusion of fantasy and reality. The reality element predominates in the historically based poems, exists on perhaps equal terms with fantasy in the Camelot poems, and is a slighter element in the rest. The themes of the volume are restricted. Basically, they are an alternation of triumph and defeat, with the latter heavily predominating. Of the thirty poems, precisely twenty close in death, or defeat. Moreover, it is not purely a matter of numbers. The success poems (such as "Sir Giles’ War-Song," "Welland River," "Praise of My Lady") are not usually considered as among the finest in the collection. They have virtually the status of intermezzi in the volume as a whole. And they often seem to be "answered" by later poems that deal more weightily, and tragically, with the same situation. Thus, the triumphant escape story of "The Little Tower" is answered by "The Haystack in the Floods"; the rather juvenile rescue concluding "A Good Knight in Prison" must be set alongside "In Prison," which derives its weight from its final position in the collection: "Westward the banner rolls / Over my wrong." And in one poem, the hoped-for triumph of the young French knight is answered by the very title, an interesting instance of the "integral" title: "The Eve of Crecy." The key to *The Defence of Guenevere* is this recurring situation of defeat. Without this key, the fantasy poems, and indeed fantasy sections, are liable to be misunderstood. For example, one critic quotes the four opening verses of "Golden Wings," and remarks: "This is certainly charming.

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9Quotations are from *Collected Works of William Morris*, I (London, 1910).
But the ‘beautiful world,’ from which everything harsh or disagreeable is excluded, turns out to be a daydream world and, in no very long run, an uninteresting one." Had the same writer extended his quotation to the end of the poem, he would have recalled to his readers a passage less admirably adapted to his commentary:

The draggled swans most eagerly eat
The green weeds trailing in the moat;
Inside the rotting leaky boat
You see a slain man's stiffened feet.

The triumph-defeat themes are realized in several ways, of which war is only the most apparent. Sexual passion (present in all save half-a-dozen of the poems) accompanies, or is central to, the situation of the poem's protagonist. It is a part of the defeat of Sir Galahad, as he muses on his “poor chaste body” and recalls the partings of his fellow-knights and their ladies: “And their last kisses sunk into my mind.” “Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery” contains plainly the awareness of the Grail quest as a form of sexual transference. At the heart of the Camelot poems is a thwarted sexual passion. Similarly with the Froissart poems: the bitterness of death for Sir Peter Harpdon is bound up with his vision of Alice, and for the “son Roger” of “The Judgment of God” the memory of Ellayne. Nearly all the fighting is conducted before (as in the tournament poems), or for, women.

The fantasy poems contain several embodying a sexual triumph—“Two Red Roses,” and “Rapunzel,” for instance. These, together with the cries of consummatory joy that conclude “A Good Knight in Prison,” indicate clearly enough a constant area of Morris' concern. But the successful sex fantasies can hardly be said to represent the drift of The Defence of Guenevere. Defeat is present, too, in the antithesis of youth and age, innocence and experience. This antithesis is the structure of “The Wind,” “The Defence of Guenevere,” and “Concerning Geffray Teste Noire.” But this raises the whole question of the past, or rather the two sorts of past that The Defence of Guenevere projects.

II

Anyone choosing to express himself in the mode of a past era has to run a critical gauntlet. Morris, certainly, has had his share of this form of buffeting. The question is quite central to his work, and must now be asked. Why is The Defence of Guenevere medieval? The customary answer is that such medievalism (in Morris, as with others) is a

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form of escapism. Graham Hough, while recognizing the realistic qualities of certain poems, is impelled to the conclusion that "the spirit informing it is still mainly that of the fairy-tale." There is some truth to this view, certainly. A number of poems, as I have indicated, belong quite literally to the "fairy-tale" category. But I think it inadequate as a verdict on the whole volume.

The rationale for medievalism, or for any mode of the past, is certainly not confined to escapism. The past, or rather a specific era of it, may supply a vital point of reference, an answer to a deficiency in contemporary life. All eras lack something. The point is easily justified if one considers the current fascination (in Britain) with the Victorian / Edwardian eras, and the two World Wars, for reasons that are not hard to expound. The turning away to the past is an ambivalent affair, and has an easily recognized negative side. The "retreat to a dream-world" is not only a critical cliché, it describes fairly much of late Romantic work (including Morris'). What I am concerned to stress here is the positive side of the matter. An era, such as the mid-Victorian, lacking a major war or myth of defeat (such as the Confederate States of America), committed to the ideology of progress, and reticent to the point of inanity on sex, could not accommodate the vision of a poet obsessed with strife, defeat, and sex. It is an attitude impossible to project in contemporary nineteenth-century terms.

This is primarily a matter of Morris' personal vision, that of a past that offered a dramatic milieu adapted to his preoccupations. But we have also to take into account the conventions of public communication in the mid-century. Much of the communication between artist and public is coded in a form hard to appraise fairly today. This is obviously, and especially, true of sex. The visual arts give the game away. The "Classical Revival" is, in painting and sculpture, merely a managerial change whereby the purveying of nudes to the general public can continue unchecked by the watch-dogs. The past sanctifies; one has simply to recognize the formula. In literature the same difficulties present themselves. Rossetti might label one poem "Nuptial Sleep"; it did not save him—and it—from Buchanan's attack. With Morris, the past can fairly be regarded as one of his censor-defenses. One can hardly imagine the sexual detail of "The Haystack in the Floods" escaping an outcry, if presented in the dress of the nineteenth century. The other major defense was that of sexual symbolism. One cannot undertake a study of it here; but the attention of critics could

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5The Last Romantics (London, 1947), p. 120.
profitably be directed towards the Fisher-King overtones of “Father John,” the consistent use of scarlet to indicate sexual passion,6 and the mysterious symbolism of “The Wind,” with its haunted recollection of a past sexual encounter:

On its folds an orange lies, with a deep gash cut in the rind.

If I move my chair it will scream, and the orange will roll out far,
And the faint yellow juice ooze out like blood from a wizard's jar.

(The two motifs of scarlet and the orange are both, suggestively, present in Morris' only painting, “Queen Guenevere,” at the Tate.)

In a word, we must regard the past as a legitimate framework, containing strong positive and defensive qualities, for the projection of Morris' poetic vision.

III

Into this framework, the techniques of the best of the Guenevere poems fit logically and consistently. Within the historic past rests a personal past; poems such as “King Arthur's Tomb” and the title poem, “Concerning Geffray Teste Noire,” “Riding Together,” and “The Judgment of God,” all embody a recollective narrative. There are perhaps two major uses of this. The device takes to itself all the poignancy of the past, the state of prelapsarian paradise explicit in the opening lines of “Golden Wings,” and the ecstasy shudderingly evoked by Launcelot and Guenevere. It also fixes the present, it fixes reality. Past and present interpenetrate in life, as they do in Morris' recollective narratives:

Now while I ride how quick the moon gets small,
As it did then—I tell myself a tale
That will not last beyond the whitewashed wall,
Thoughts of some joust must help me through the vale,

Keep this till after—How Sir Gareth ran
A good course that day under my Queen's eyes,
And how she sway'd laughing at Dinadan—
No—Back again, the other thoughts will rise.

("King Arthur's Tomb")

The perception of the moment includes this double consciousness of reality. Past and present fuse for the narrator of the poems, just as they did in the historic imagination of Morris. As a consecutive technique, the rapid cutting from present to past and back again (in, especially, “The Judgment of God”) is almost cinematic.

6I am indebted for this point to Mr. William R. Sweeney, a graduate student of mine at the University of Massachusetts.
This apprehension of reality is fixed, however, above all in the imagistic detail that is the substance of Morris' verse. In this, metaphor has little place. Metaphor is alien to Morris' poetic; his poetry advances the statement, not "this is like it," but "this is." Here is the acute visual imagination of Morris catching a moment of a past already lengthening out:

The blue owls on my father's hood  
Were a little dimm'd as I turn'd away.  
("The Judgment of God")

Note, this is no statement of emotion. The emotion is implicit in what the speaker saw; everything rests on the sense-data. What the memory retains of a Morris poem is precisely this sort of imagistic detail: the swerve as one sees the eyes through the helmet-slit, the smell of the human bones burnt in Beauvaris church by the Jacquerie, the sense of the dead English overlordship of France caught in

Edward the king is dead; at Westminster  
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.  
("Sir Peter Harpdon's End")

The grasp of objective reality is formidable. As so many of these poems are dramatic monologues, the narrator's memory is stimulated by the impressions retained on his mental retina. Thus we receive an extremely "pure" form of poetry, in which the narrator and poet are at one and the narrator's sensibility reacts to the most natural stimuli. Of these stimuli, the most important is the weather. In all the poems recently mentioned, Morris places the past with reference to the weather. This is not in any way a matter of landscape painting, even on a miniature scale. It is a trigger for recalling experience. Thus:

We saw the trees in the hot, bright weather,  
Clear-cut, with shadows very black,  
As freely we rode on together  
With helms unlaced and bridles slack.  
("Riding Together")

Hard by, the sea  
Made a noise like the aspens where  
We did that wrong, but now the place  
Is very pleasant, and the air  
Blows cool on any passer's face.  
("The Judgment of God")

It is not, I think, too fanciful to relate this to Morris' feeling for the material in architecture. A passage such as this (quoted in Hough, p. 94) is suggestive:

Eschew all vagueness. . . . Hold fast to distinct form in art. Try to get the most out of your material, but always in such a way as honours it most. Not only should it be obvious what your material is, but something should be done with it which is specifically natural to it.
These, and the rain that is "The Haystack in the Floods," sufficiently establish the point. The effect of this constant reference to the weather and natural background is one of great immediacy and veracity. It is a mistake to term these backgrounds "decorative." They are a part of the event; and that event is a human apprehension of reality.

The context of these image-details is a sometimes archaic, apparently naive form of exposition that courts extraordinary risks. Morris treads quite deliberately the tightrope between banality and a heightened sense of reality. Thus:

> Across the moat the fresh west wind  
In very little ripples went;  
The way the heavy aspens bent  
Towards it, was a thing to mind.

("Golden Wings")

The second and fourth lines illustrate perfectly the risks Morris is prepared to run. "Very" is a primitive conversational intensifier that virtually any poet would avoid. "Little," a favorite Morris adjective, rivets attention to the thing itself. And the final line almost consciously resists the invitation for a "poetic" comparison. It insists, in rigorous understatement, on the thing itself. The purpose of such lines, mannered as they sometimes are, is to compel the reader to reconsider a phrase constructed out of quite ordinary words. Launcelot's final "When I rose up, also I heard a bell" owes its almost hallucinatory quality to the positioning of "also." The language of The Defence of Guenevere stands entirely opposed to the classic fault of late Romantic poetry. Such poetry consists too often of words as things in themselves, effete descendants of words used earlier and better by Keats, whereas the words of Morris' poetry have as their prime function the revelation of reality.

IV

The major poems of The Defence of Guenevere are those in which these, the themes and techniques discussed, intersect. That is to say, the central poems of the volume project the situation of defeat, coupled with thwarted sexual passion; they rely on a first-person narrative that creates a poignant fusion of past and present, one built on the precise recollection of sense-data. These poems include, therefore, the title-poem and "King Arthur's Tomb"; "Old Love" and "The Judgment of God"; "Riding Together" and "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire"; and "Sir Peter Harpdon's End." In this group must be sought the evidence to support the main claims one would advance for Morris' poetry. It is not my intention here to analyze these poems, but to point to what they have in common and how they catch the tenor of
the collection. At the heart of "Old Love," for example, is the brilliant perception of the fall of Constantinople as a figure for human activity:

"And in such way the miscreants drag
Christ's cross upon the ground, I dread

"That Constantine must fall this year."
Within my heart: "These things are small;
This is not small, that things outwear
I thought were made for ever, yea, all,

"All things go soon or late," I said.

And so the consciousness of the symbol flows into the conversation of the two old men. The flow is not even impeded by the presence of unnecessary punctuation, for in Morris' later revision the quotation marks are removed. The last line of all sums up the theme of age and defeat—defeat in love, for which Constantinople is only a symbol: "This love is not so hard to smutch." The downbeat final is quintessential Morris as "In vain they struggle for the vision fair" ("Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery") and "he's dead now: I am old" ("Concerning Geffray Teste Noire").

The longest, most ambitious, and I think the best version of Morris' construct is, however, "Sir Peter Harpdon's End." It is built around the situation of defeat: the sliding cause of the English in France, the crumbling keep, the disgraced knight to hold the walls against the onset of Guesclin and certain defeat. The long, elegiac survey in the first scene of the doomed cause is an almost sensuous evocation of defeat:

for, look you, times are changed,
And now no longer does the country shake
At sound of English names; our captains fade
From off our muster-rolls.

And then, the parley between Sir Lambert and Sir Peter allows Morris to present the core of the matter. The symbol is the Trojan War; and from it comes the life-value, and Morris' resolution to guard it:

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."

The third, fourth, and fifth lines compose as good a motto-statement of Pre-Raphaelitism as any I know. The sense of strange, new beauty—focused to the finest point of literal detail—is the dominant mood of Pre-Raphaelitism. But it does not exist, for Morris, to be savored
in some aesthetic tank, like the study of the duc des Esseintes. It has
to be fought for. Hence the second part of Morris' statement in this
crucial passage—we need not, I think, question the assumption that
Sir Peter speaks for him:

   Yea, they fought well, and ever, like a man
   That hangs legs off the ground by both his hands,
   Quite sure to slip at last; wherefore, 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.

   Now
   Why should I not do this thing that I think;
   For even when I come to count the gains,
   I have them my side: men will talk, you know,
   (We talk of Hector, dead so long agone.)
   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, as ease and money is to you.
   Moreover, too, I like the straining game
   Of striving well to hold up things that fall;
   So one becomes great.

This, surely, is Morris' testament of beauty. "The straining game"
exactly conveys Morris' apprehension that life is in essence a struggle,
a process of choosing and defending a cause. E. P. Thompson well
comments that "eagerness to live" (a phrase applied to Sir Peter
Harpdon) is a quality seldom absent from the best of the Guenevere
poems." It is, in fact, expressive of Morris himself. "Eagerness to live"
—and fight—could well be his epitaph.

V

Nevertheless, that struggle is seen by Morris as one that must,
at the last, lead to defeat. It is hardly legitimate to relate this volume
to the course of Morris' later life; but it is a matter for some interest
that recent critics, who have reviewed sympathetically the works on
Morris that have appeared in the last few years, have not infrequently
judged him to be a brilliant failure in his life. Morris' later dedication
of his life to the radical sector of the Socialist movement, his com-
mitment to a philosophy of art and crafts partially refuted in his life-
time, even his difficulties with his wife; these do not follow in a
discernible cause-and-effect chain from The Defence of Guenevere.
But who can say how far this earliest of his works reflects a mental

set, an attitude to life that is destined to produce results analogous to the fates of the protagonists of the *Defence* poems? And is the philosophy of Sir Peter significantly different from the life-statement of Morris?

This is speculation. But it is reasonable to claim for the volume a validity stemming from something quite different from the "escapist charm" of the folklore sector of Morris criticism. *The Defence of Guenevere* advances an attitude to life that (as is apparent in, for instance, Morris' welcoming of the stoic Icelandic ethic) is at the root of his being. He did not learn it from Keats or Browning. That attitude seeks for symbols of defeat—Constantinople, Troy, Crecy, Poictou—and on them bases studies of human beings that look back on their own past and on the wreck of hope and love. The past-personal is fixed by hard-edged images of natural environment, themselves an instance of the best Pre-Raphaelite literalism. This, with the fusion of past-historic and past-personal, combines to create a poetic construct that is Morris' own. Fantasy has its place in this construct; but it appears, on a closer gaze, to embody a kind of realism.