

WRITING
ON THE IMAGE:
READING
WILLIAM MORRIS

David Latham

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

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

- 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.
- 2.2 William Morris. *Trellis*. Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.
- 2.3 William Morris. *Daisy*. Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.
- 2.4 William Morris. *Fruit (or Pomegranate)*. Hand-block printed wallpaper. Morris & Co., 1864.

William Morris, Shaper of Tales: Creating a Hero's Story in 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End'

Janet Wright Friesen

In 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' – the fifth poem in William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858) – Sir Peter Harpdon, the commander of a crumbling English fortress in France, confers with the leader of the besieging French army, Sir Lambert. Their situation reflects the complex alliances of the Hundred Years' War, as these men are cousins serving opposing armies. Sir Lambert comes under the pretence of persuading Sir Peter to forsake the doomed English cause and to unite the family on the French side. However, as he speaks, Sir Peter suddenly interrupts their conference with a reference to an 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, most readers 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 need 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 hero:

Now

Why should I not do this thing that I think,
 For even when I come to count the gains,
 I have them on my side: 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, 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. (208–20)

This passage presents the poem's definition of heroism. However, it also shows Sir Peter's self-conscious interest in shaping the interpretation of his last days – of making himself into a hero. Hector did something that people have 'talked of': his actions reflected his dedication to principle – in spite of inevitable failure – and this nobility of character has appealed to the sympathy of readers for centuries. Consequently, Sir Peter chooses to adopt the noble spirit and actions of Hector as a paradigm for his loyalty to the failing English cause, so that he too may be remembered sympathetically and become 'great.'

Few treatments of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' have examined the implications of Sir Peter's notion of a hero for the rest of the poem. In fact, although it is the longest poem in *The Defence of Guenevere*, it has received little critical attention in comparison to the Arthurian poems in the volume.¹ In the last thirty years, the criticism has judged Sir Peter to be a pitiful and pathetic character pursuing a path of failure. Charlotte Oberg has summarized the critical focus in this way: "'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is actually a rather cynical poem suggesting an underlying conception of basic human frailty and helplessness beyond the remedy of social reform based on medieval or any other models' (131).

While it would be fair to argue that the definition Sir Peter offers for heroism requires just such unaccommodating conditions, I wish to argue something rather different: Sir Peter is, in fact, a hero, and 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is a reflexive poem about the making of a hero and about the shaping and crafting of a heroic tale. This interpretation of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is first of all suggested by

the characters' own interest in the shaping of interpretation: the shaping of memory and reputation, and the crafting of narrative and story. However, the reflexivity – or the integration of medium and message – is dramatically signalled by Lady Alice's self-referential comment at the conclusion of this work:

Yea, some men sing, what is it then they sing?
 Eh Launcelot, and love and fate and death;
 They ought to sing of him who was as wight
 As Launcelot or Wade ...

yea, perhaps they will,
 When many years are past, make songs of us;
 God help me, though, truly I never thought
 That I should make a story in this way,
 A story that his eyes can never see. (709–12; 715–9)

This declaration, that looks into a future when people will sing and tell stories of Sir Peter and Lady Alice, suggests that Lady Alice may well be the author of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End.' In other words, here is a play about Sir Peter and Lady Alice in correspondence with Lady Alice's speculation. Lady Alice's closing words suddenly refocus the story of Sir Peter Harpdon and place his story within the framework of her own. At the very least, her speculation should prompt the reader to consider the extent to which the characters' concern about the shaping of reputation and the crafting of story is played out on another level, that of the shaping and structuring of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End.'

As Sir Peter and Lady Alice struggle with the senseless events of war, both characters are concerned about how they will be remembered – how their actions will be interpreted in the future. Some of Sir Peter's musings on this subject have already been observed, but it is critical to note how pervasive this concern is. Isolated in his outpost, Sir Peter entertains an imaginary conversation with Lady Alice which is prompted by his wish to dispel her doubts about his loyalties and to preserve her confidence in him. After his arrest, he hastily explains to Clisson – a knight who serves the French army but who offers a ransom for Sir Peter's life because Sir Peter once saved his – that he weeps over his unfulfilled love for Alice rather than in response to Sir Lambert's taunts, not wishing to leave him with the wrong impression. Still worried about how Lady Alice will remember him, Sir Peter requests that Clisson send someone to her to report his death and to convey his 'last love.'

Notably, Lady Alice is also interested in interpretation. At first, her concern is to piece together any interpretation of Sir Peter's story in the face of confusion, despair, and possible deception. More than once, her desire for relief from her anxiety in the oblivion of madness or death shows how easily the memory of Sir Peter might be obliterated by a weaker woman. However, when she interviews Clisson's messenger, she demands that he look her in the eyes as he delivers his message, so she can determine his sincerity and distinguish the truth from the lies. She further tests the integrity of his tale with accusations of treachery and jest. Then, as the poem closes, Lady Alice turns her attention to the idea of shaping Sir Peter's memory. She overhears a song in the street: a song about Launcelot which preserves the memory of that knight as a hero in spite of his failures. 'Love and fate and death,' she observes, were the lot of both Sir Launcelot and Sir Peter. The only difference between their stories is the interpretation of their deeds and the crafting of Launcelot's reputation as a hero by the songwriter. With her final speculation about their future reputation, Lady Alice intimates the 'authority' she would like, or intends, to command over the reputation of her lover.

The notion of Lady Alice as the author and shaper of Sir Peter's heroic reputation ought not to strike the reader as an anomaly. 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,' after all, belongs to the same collection of poems in which Morris gives Queen Guenevere her own voice. Neither Thomas Malory, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, nor Alfred Tennyson, in *Idylls of the King*, thought to give Guenevere an opportunity to defend herself. Like Lady Alice, Guenevere initially appears to be a victim of her gender and her circumstances, hopeless of changing her situation. However, the queen ultimately defends herself in a particularly artful and successful manner. Hence, Lady Alice can no longer be viewed as a victim of defeat and despair or as a secondary character if the correspondence of Sir Peter's story with Lady Alice's speculation is considered seriously. On the contrary, the various ways in which medium and message are integrated in 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' show that she is a clever woman who exacts a revenge on those who have destroyed Sir Peter's reputation and her happiness.

Jerome McGann has commented on the reflexive character of Morris's work, observing the integration of medium and message. He observes that a key feature of a reflexive work is its 'quoted' or 'secondary status' which makes the 'fundamental subject' of a work 'the craft and the art of making' ('Thing to Mind' 55-6). This 'quoted' or allusive

characteristic is particularly apparent in the Arthurian and Froissartian poems from *The Defence of Guenevere*. In these poems, we are conscious of the difference between the 'version' of the story we are reading and some other version. In the case of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,' *The Chronicle of Froissart*, to which Morris's work alludes, does not mention a Sir Peter Harpdon. History has indeed forgotten him – perhaps because he was executed as a traitor, not celebrated as a hero. Regardless, the difference or tension between two versions of a story highlights the compositional aspect of Morris's work, the notion that its medium might be encoded with a message. It raises questions about the manner in which Sir Peter's story is presented: Why create fictional characters when there must have been many casualties of the Hundred Years' War who aspired to heroism but suffered a traitor's end? Or how much of history is fiction or interpretation?

One of the most striking characteristics of the medium of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is that it is a play with stage directions and speaking parts. Jean-Marie Bäisus, one of the few critics to comment on the dramatic aspect of the work, has suggested that 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' can be divided into five dramatic acts with a concluding song (1:59-60). The first four acts present the story of Sir Peter Harpdon who is ultimately captured by the French and executed for treason. The final act – and the act which forms a frame around the previous action – is set at the home of Lady Alice. In this act, the reader/audience first meets Lady Alice outside of Sir Peter's imagination. There is a despairing monologue by Lady Alice as she overhears fragments of news about Sir Peter's dire circumstances. She then receives a squire, from Clisson, a former friend of Sir Peter who now serves the French, with the report of Sir Peter's death. In a further monologue, Lady Alice responds to the news of her lover's death. The poem then concludes with a song about Sir Launcelot sung in the street below Lady Alice's window.

The dramatic medium calls attention to the crafted nature of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,' to its material condition as a work of art. As a play, this work depends on dialogue, monologue, asides, and stage directions to present a tale for the reader's/audience's interpretation. The occasional disparity between the content of the monologues and the dialogue, the ambiguity of the second- or third-hand account of Sir Peter's fate, and the shift to another genre with the concluding song are some of the characteristics of this work that draw attention to the fact that the hero's story must be pieced together. The absence

of any record of a performance of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' amongst Morris's coterie of the Pre-Raphaelites also suggests that the purpose of a dramatic medium was not presentation or performance but something integral to the work's message. Consequently, the dramatic medium engages the reader in a process of interpretation which highlights the malleable nature of meaning and the potential for shaping a story.

A medium that challenges the notion that meaning/interpretation is self-evident is particularly suited to Lady Alice's purpose of creating a hero's story and shaping her lover's reputation. Clisson's account of Sir Peter's fate, which a squire brings to Lady Alice, is a good example of how the ambiguity of the medium of this work is integrated with Lady Alice's message. The integrity of the squire's report cannot be fully verified. Lady Alice might visit the tomb Clisson has erected, but she must accept the possibly softened account of Sir Peter's capture and plea for his life. Instructed by Clisson, the squire reports that Sir Peter's plea for his life was marked by his desire to live for the sake of those he loved and who loved him:

Within a while he lifted up his head
 And spoke for his own life; not crouching, though,
 As abjectly afraid to die, nor yet
 Sullenly brave as many a thief will die;
 Nor yet as one that plays at japes with God:
 Few words he spoke; not so much what he said
 Moved us; I think, as, saying it, there played
 Strange tenderness from that big soldier there
 About his pleading; eagerness to live
 Because folk loved him, and he loved them back,
 And many gallant plans unfinish'd now
 For ever. (636-47)

Possibly one of the most poignant passages of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,' this portrayal of Sir Peter reveals a very noble knight and corresponds to the climax of sympathy for him. Without this sympathetic account of his last moments, Sir Peter might not be deemed a hero or to have died a hero's death. However, having pleaded for Sir Peter's life himself, Clisson is likely to want to alleviate Lady Alice's grief with the image of a courageous and honourable knight. Consequently, the unreliable nature of the squire's report indicates that

the 'truth' is not necessarily the primary concern for either Clisson or Lady Alice. Instead, this medium of Sir Peter's reputation demonstrates the malleable nature of interpretation and the opportunity Lady Alice has for determining Sir Peter's future reputation.

The reflexive nature, or 'quoted' status, of this work is also apparent in Lady Alice's reference to the countess of Mountfort, someone whose story is found in Froissart (1:196-204, ch. 79-81). This allusion to a slightly older contemporary draws attention to the fact that Lady Alice's interest in shaping a heroic reputation for Sir Peter is integrated with the medium of the story. In response to the news of her lover's death, Lady Alice conceives a vision of the revenge she would take on Sir Peter's executioners, if she took action in the manner of the countess of Mountfort:

Eh Guesclin! if I were
 Like Countess Mountfort now, that kiss'd the knight,
 Across the salt sea come to fight for her;
 Ah! just to go about with many knights,
 Wherever you went, and somehow on one day,
 In a thick wood to catch you off your guard,
 Let you find, you and your some fifty friends,
 Nothing but arrows wheresoe'er you turn'd,
 Yea, and red crosses, great spears over them;
 And so, between a lane of my true men,
 To walk up pale and stern and tall, and with
 My arms on my surcoat, and his therewith,
 And then to make you kneel, O knight Guesclin. (680-92)

In this passage Lady Alice longs to emulate the countess of Mountfort who, in 1342 during the Hundred Years' War, guarded her husband's interests in Brittany when he was imprisoned by the king of France. Not only did the countess negotiate military relief from the king of England, but she also participated in the defence of her castle and its town. She led a raiding party that set fire to the French camp and then escaped to a neighbouring castle to recruit more troops. She dismissed the persuasive advice of her counsellors to surrender and eventually welcomed reinforcements from England led by Sir Walter Manny. When the French siege was dispersed, Froissart records, the countess of Mountfort 'came and kyst sir Gaultier of Manny and his companions one after another, two or thre tymes, lyke a valyant

lady' (1:204; ch. 81). Any identification with such a figure should surely contradict the notion of Lady Alice as a victim.

Lady Alice's comparison of herself with the countess of Mountfort is a similar appropriation of a model for action as was observed in Sir Peter's comparison of himself with Hector. The notion that Lady Alice adopts the activism of the countess to vindicate Sir Peter has been overlooked because of her complaint that, as a woman, she is too weak to carry out such a revenge. She does despair:

- alas! alas! when all is said,
What could I do but let you [Guesclin] go again,
Being pitiful woman? I get no revenge,
Whatever happens; and I get no comfort,
I am but weak, and cannot move my feet,
But as men bid me. (693-8)

However, the dramatic contrast of this complaint with the preceding impassioned vision of heroic action, coupled with the reference to a female activist, ought to direct the reader to at least ask the question: If military action, in the style of the countess, is not an option, is there any other way in which Lady Alice metes out a revenge for Sir Peter? Or defends his honour? 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is Lady Alice's revenge to the extent to which it shines a sympathetic light on Sir Peter and shows him to be a hero, rather than the treasonous scoundrel Sir Lambert claims he is and for which he is hanged. The allusion to the countess's story signals Lady Alice's appropriation of authority to defend her lover's honourable reputation and to perpetuate it in defiance of his enemies. In the context of her resolve for revenge, her digression on the powerless state of women takes on an ironic edge: she may not be able to don armour to make her point, but she can wield the power of an artistic medium to give meaning to her lover's life and death. The parallel between Lady Alice's and Sir Peter's appropriation of a model for action further indicates a reflexive tale by virtue of the integration of both characters' messages with the actions of the hero/heroine on which they model themselves.

Sir Peter's reference to Hector at the beginning of the poem introduces an extended comparison of the two men. As we have observed, Lady Alice understands the power of appropriating a model for action, and she now applies this strategy to her rhetorical presentation of Sir Peter. She shapes a poignant and sympathetic interpretation of Sir

Peter as a hero by structuring her work around the story of a previously established hero, Hector. Sir Peter, like Hector, foresees the inevitability of his death with the success of the siege but courageously maintains his position. In *The Iliad*, Hector foresees the fall of Troy and relates this prophecy to Andromache: 'For of a surety know I this in heart and soul: / the day shall come when sacred Ilios shall be laid low, / and Priam, and the people of Priam with goodly spear of ash' (*Iliad* 6:447-9). Significantly, the hypothetical conversation Sir Peter imagines with Lady Alice, which would have been their last, is comparable to the final meeting between Hector and Andromache (*Iliad* 6:394-450). The poignancy of both these scenes stems from the clash between public duty and private loyalties and from a heroic dedication to principle.

With Sir Peter's integrity and courage now established, subsequent details of Sir Peter's final days correspond to the story of Hector, portraying Sir Peter as a fourteenth-century Hector. The first battle Sir Peter fights is with Sir Lambert, who has come to him as the representative of Guesclin, the constable of France. This encounter, which results in Sir Lambert's capture and mutilation, corresponds to Hector's battle with Patroclus, the close friend of Achilles, and the shameful stripping of Patroclus's dead body (*Iliad* 16:793-867). When Sir Peter is captured by the French, Guesclin's refusal to spare his life because of his treatment of Sir Lambert parallels Achilles' refusal of Hector's request, out of honour to Patroclus, to return his body to his father (*Iliad* 22:261-6, 345-54). Even Clisson's offer to pay ransom for Sir Peter's life has a parallel in Homer, when Priam steals into the Greek camp to offer ransom for his son's body (*Iliad* 24:477-506). Guesclin's execution of Sir Peter as a traitor, refusing him an honourable death, is comparable to Achilles' dishonourable treatment of Hector's body, his dragging it around Patroclus's funeral pyre behind his chariot (*Iliad* 23:183-91). Finally, even the scene in which Lady Alice momentarily takes refuge in unconsciousness, when she overhears the news of Sir Peter's doom, corresponds to Homer's scene in which Andromache rushes to the tower in time to see Hector's body dragged to the Greek ships and then faints (*Iliad* 22:460-72). Set during the final days of the two heroes, these episodes revolve around the notion of honour due to heroes. Essentially, Lady Alice is carefully following the formula for a heroic reputation she has already put in Sir Peter's mouth at the beginning of her work. Put another way, this referencing of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' to the story of Hector calls

attention to how the work was constructed and to the fact that as a medium it is carefully integrated with its subject: the heroic nature of Sir Peter's life and death.

'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' is most certainly a reflexive work for those who can recognize the allusions to the story of Hector and to *The Chronicles of Froissart*.² For Morris's coterie, the story of Hector would have been familiar as it was to all Victorian schoolboys who studied Greek and Latin literature. More specifically, they may also have been aware of the contemporary drafts of Morris's projected work *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*: three of these scenes focus on Hector (24:9-16, 16-20, 21-5).³ However, readers are not solely dependent on an ability to recognize allusions to appreciate the reflexive nature of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End.' As we have seen, Lady Alice's ruminations on Launcelot's heroic legacy suggest the prominent theme of shaping interpretation. They further suggest that Sir Peter's tale is framed within his lady's tale. The integration of message and medium is finally apparent in the song about Launcelot that concludes 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End.' This song also contributes to the 'quoted' nature of the work as the shift from drama to song and from Sir Peter to Launcelot obliges the reader to reflect on the significance of the song to the preceding work. Here, the author of the song mentions Launcelot's failings but perpetuates the memory of a heroic Sir Launcelot in the same manner that Lady Alice has tried to create a heroic reputation for Sir Peter. In the song, the writer asks for the blessing of the audience:

*All men pray for me,
Who made this history
Cunning and fairly. (745-7)*

Lady Alice does not make the same request. She does not need to. She has not relied on mere assertion; she has integrated her message with her medium and shaped her story of a hero. It needs no defence; it is a 'cunning' tale that exacts a revenge as it perpetuates Sir Peter's heroic reputation among future generations.

NOTES

- 1 An early and relatively lengthy treatment of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' was afforded by John Drinkwater in 1912; this is primarily a summary of the plot. Generally overlooked by critics until the late 1960s along with the other poems in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' has rarely been considered on its own, but has usually been examined as one of a group of poems (Ralph Berry; Patrick Brantlinger, 'A Reading'; Peter Faulkner; Charlotte H. Oberg; Dianne F. Sadoff; Carole Silver; Lionel Stevenson). Classified as one of Morris's Froissartian poems, it has been examined closely for its use of Froissart's *Chronicle* by John M. Patrick and David Staines, and subsequent treatments have been influenced by this interest in the poem's sources.
- 2 This is an important point that deserves more attention elsewhere. One hundred and fifty years after the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere*, many readers of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' do not immediately grasp the degree of correspondence between Sir Peter's and Hector's stories. Perhaps fewer recognize the allusions to Froissart. However, there is no doubt that the story of Hector and at least some of *The Chronicles of Froissart* were familiar to the Second Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which gathered in Oxford in 1857 and to whom Morris read many of the *Defence of Guenevere* poems.
- 3 Morris's first audience for 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' would also have known *The Chronicle of Froissart*, as J.W. Mackail records that Morris read this work aloud to his friends that same summer (Mackail 1:136).