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simplest-seeming matters." (Sidney Colvin, *Memories and Notes*, quoted from E.A.W. St George, *Browning and Conversation* [Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1993], p. 53).

St George observes that "[f]rom the 1840s to the 1880s, hundreds of conversation books appeared offering advice on everything from tone of voice to tone of politics in conversation." (p. 11) and particularly refers to Roger Boswell's *The Art of Conversation* of 1867, which maintains that "[c]onversation, indeed, is an art, like playing, singing, or drawing." (see St George, p. 17).

Letters II, p. 302.

See Betty S. Flowers, *Browning and the Modern Tradition* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), p. 80; compare also Mrs Sargent Curtis' dictum that Browning's "reading of his own poems was a never-to-be forgotten delight" (quoted from St George, p. 65).

Binding Men: William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* and the Circulation of Masculine Desire

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In this essay I wish to argue that William Morris's first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, created a private language of masculine desire which was understood by Morris's 'set' of friends, but which was deliberately obscure to a wider reading public. While substantial critical attention has been given to representations of women in *The Defence*, little comment has been made about the depiction of relationships between men in several of the volume's poems. Thus drawing on some recent work on Victorian masculinity I will offer readings of several of the poems in the volume to show how they express an anxiety about prevailing bourgeois models of masculinity and male sexuality. I will also discuss the homosocial and heterosexual triangulation of desire in *The Defence*, in particular relating it to Morris's intense bond with Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹

The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems came into being as a result of Morris's time as an undergraduate at Exeter College, Oxford, from 1853-55. On arrival at Oxford Morris made immediate friends with Edward Burne-Jones, and during their time as students they embarked on a course of reading which was to shape and determine their future artistic endeavours. They developed a broad interest in medieval literature and works of history, mythology and poetry, and read many medieval romances and chronicles, notably the *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart, and Robert Southey's 1817 edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. A huge revival of interest in all things Arthurian was already underway when they arrived at Oxford, and Morris and Burne-Jones alighted with glee on Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1832), "Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere", "Morte d'Arthur" and "Sir Galahad" (1842). Fiona MacCarthy writes that "Arthurianism, as Burne-Jones and Morris saw it, was not merely an intellectual exercise. They fell upon it as an extension of religion, adopting the chivalric as a rule of life".²

Significant to my argument is that what the Victorian appropriation of Arthurianism valorized, seen in the immense popularity of a work such as Kenelm Digby's *The Broadstone of Honour, or Rules for the Gentlemen of England* (1822), was a chaste and intimate bonding between men. The idealization of King Arthur presiding over his knights of the Round Table offered young men an ideological and ethical framework within which they could express their masculinity.³ Morris and Burne-Jones did not take up the more paternalistic aspects of neo-Arthurianism (as did Benjamin Disraeli's Young England party) but rather, I think, they were influenced by the notion

of the Round Table, which bound young men together who aspired to a common cause. Along with four of Burne-Jones's friends from his home city of Birmingham (William Fulford, Richard Watson Dixon, Charles Faulkner and Cornell Price) the six men referred to themselves as 'the Brotherhood', united in their commitment to art and literature. What these men shared with each other was the circulation of literature, and this consolidated their group identity as together they read Malory, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Kingsley, Charlotte Yonge and Ruskin.

In the autumn of 1854 Morris presented his first poem to his friends, "The Willow and the Red Cliff", and from then onwards he wrote many further poems, not all of which were eventually published in *The Defence*.⁴ As MacCarthy notes, it was the "context of their writing" that was important about the production of Morris's poetry at this time, as "poetry at Oxford had been a group activity".⁵ Morris's writing of his poems arose out of the shared reading of 'the Set', and they were then read aloud by him to the other members. Thus this shared writing and reading consolidated the literary identity of this group of men.

In his book *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature* Herbert Sussman argues that the notion of monastic celibate communities became a way for middle-class male writers and artists of the early Victorian period to register anxieties about male sexuality. Sussman suggests that "as celibate male, the monk becomes the extreme or limit case of the central problematic in the Victorian practice of masculinity, [which is] the proper regulation of an innate male energy".⁶ He further argues that for middle-class men dissatisfied with a dominant model of masculinity which proscribed marriage and the settling into domestic life,

the monastery as a sacralized, celibate all-male society safely distanced in time provides a figure through which they could express in covert form, or as an open secret, their attraction to a world of chaste masculine bonding from which the female has been magically eliminated.⁷

This form of regulating and ordering masculine desire has a clear relevance to Morris's Oxford Brotherhood, which was itself influenced by the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848-53). When Morris and Burne-Jones decided in 1855 to reject their expected career as priests and instead to pursue their artistic interests, "they saw themselves as entering a secular monastic order devoted to art".⁸

Turning to the poems in *The Defence* we find a number of them also focus on relationships between men. The third poem in the volume is "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery", a monologue by the purest knight of the Round Table as he comes to rest at a chapel on Christmas Eve. As Galahad breaks from his quest for the Sangrael, the poem opens with a strong evocation of weariness

as the knight questions the point and purpose of the journey he is engaged upon:

Night after night your horse treads down alone
The sere damp fern, night after night you sit
Holding the bridle like a man of stone,
Dismal, unfriended, what thing comes of it?"

Galahad's purity is ultimately a sexual purity. It is because he is sexually chaste and does not have a mistress, unlike some of the other knights, that he is one of the few who do eventually achieve the vision of the Holy Grail which all the knights are questing for. The quest for the Holy Grail thus becomes a test of the knights' ability to regulate their (hetero)sexual desire. But at the opening of the poem it is precisely Galahad's awareness of his chastity and lack of a female lover that is making his continuing commitment to the original goal so difficult. The Sangrael is the embodiment of the highest masculine ideal within Arthurian mythology. Thus its attainment is only given to those men who have achieved the highest standards of masculine behaviour, which is here equated with (hetero)sexual abstinence. "Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery" sets the pursuit of this abstract ideal and the purity and isolation that are required in order to be meritorious enough to achieve it against the immanent physical rewards of having of a lover.

Galahad regards the questing of such as Palomydes and his father Launcelot worthwhile for them because they both have a female lover to think of, and even if as yet she has not returned their love, or never will, the happiness that comes from the idealization of her is a more desirable state to be in than his own. He imagines himself being found having died from the cold and those who find him will pity his "poor chaste body!" (25). He wants to be remembered after his death by a lover more than he wants to be remembered for having achieved the Sangrael: "no maid will talk / Of sitting on my tomb" (25). This first part of the poem is thus infused with Galahad's unfulfilled heterosexual longing; the option to desire has been denied him for the sake of the pursuit of a supposedly morally superior aim. He is now questioning this goal and the very masculine identity which he has constructed around its pursuit.

However, Galahad then relates how he has been visited at the chapel by a vision of Christ. The male Christ appears before him and offers an affirmation of his solitary stance: "I will be with you always, and fear not / You are uncared for" (27). Christ offers himself as of far greater value than a human lover, and becomes the jealous lover of both Launcelot and Galahad, describing himself in physical danger and pain from Guenevere's sexual proximity to Launcelot: "Her warm arms round his neck half throttle ME, / The hot love-tears burn deep like spots of lead" (27). Christ posits himself as Galahad's greatest lover, saying, "see how I can love you" (28) and he proposes his love as an endless presence: "See now you have ME always"

(28). Christ encourages Galahad to continue in his quest, reminding him that the eventual reward is "to walk around / The garden where I am" (28). Christ here speaks as a human possessive lover who does not wish the men he loves to relate sexually to women, reaffirming the Grail quest as a masculine journey which bonds men together.

A later poem in the volume, "Riding Together", figures a male narrator describing how he and his fellow knight rode into battle.¹⁰ They ride as part of a larger band of men, but the narrator pays particular attention to his riding partner. The constant repetition of "together" in each stanza turns this experience of riding to war into an event that celebrates masculine bonding:

For many days we rode together,
 Yet met we neither friend nor foe;
 Hotter and clearer grew the weather,
 Steadily did the East wind blow.
 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.

[...]

And in the night lay down together,
 And hung above our heads the rood,
 Or watch'd night-long in the dewy weather,
 The while the moon did watch the wood. (135)

Although poems in *The Defence* do valorize male companionship and camaraderie, they also register a disturbed and disturbing anxiety about the possibility of this male closeness. Images of violence and death are rarely far away in the volume, and in the second half of "Riding Together" the narrator recounts how he saw his friend die as they enter battle:

Down sank our threescore spears together,
 As thick we saw the pagans ride;
 His eager face in the clear fresh weather,
 Shone out that last time by my side.

[...]

There, as we roll'd and writhed together,
 I threw my arms above my head,
 For close by my side, in the lovely weather,
 I saw him reel and fall back dead. (136)

Although it is the opposing sides here who role and writhe together, the narrator's awareness of his riding partner makes this a scene in which the sexual is experienced and blurred with violent death. The narrator's response is to take on the killer of his friend – "I and the slayer met together, / He

waited the death-stroke there in his place" (136) – and although he is successful in avenging this death the narrator is nonetheless bound and captured, and the poem ends with the reader's realization that this story has been told from a prison cell:

We ride no more, no more together;
 My prison-bars are thick and strong,
 I take no heed of any weather,
 The sweet Saints grant I live not long. (136)

So juxtaposed with the affirmation and legitimation of relationships between men in *The Defence* are images of violence, separation and death. In relation to Morris and his friends at Oxford these poems suggest a desire to be able to represent forms of masculinity which bourgeois norms do not easily permit, and the medieval setting, sufficiently removed from contemporary life, allows this possibility. But these poems suggest an uneasiness around such representations as well; a sense that this bonding cannot be sustained and a fear of violent enforced separation. "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" ends with Sir Bors bringing news of the other knights' pursuit of the Grail. The Sangrael has been seen, at a distance, ever going before them, but the news from the court is "nought good" (30). Dinadan the jester has been found "all hack'd and dead" (30) and the knights are failing in their pursuit of the Grail:

The knights come foil'd from the great quest, in vain;
 In vain they struggle for the vision fair. (30)

Thus the poem ends with the same sense of despair as it began, and this ending qualifies Galahad's affirmation by Christ for the next part of his journey. The text leaves the reader questioning the purpose and efficacy of the Grail quest *at all*, and in the context of my argument, its efficacy as a model for regulating masculine desire. Although Arthurian legend appears to have offered Morris a means of representing relationships between men, this poem suggests a questioning of the masculinity on offer, and at times a deep disturbance with the possibility of expressing a masculine sexuality.

The second important influence on *The Defence* is Morris's meeting and subsequent friendship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Indeed Morris was to head the volume "To My Friend / Dante Gabriel Rossetti / Painter / I Dedicate These Poems". Morris was introduced to Rossetti early in 1856, once he and Burne-Jones had moved to London, and the tantalizing and charismatic Rossetti was to have a profound and long-lasting influence in Morris's life and art. Through meeting Burne-Jones and Morris Rossetti was able to gather them into "a Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the second phase",¹¹ and he appears to have had a certain need of such male artistic communities. Sussman comments that,

For Rossetti, who contemporary critics too easily see only in terms of a heterosexual desire signified in his objectification of the female, such masculine bonding was crucial to his identity and a restrained homoeroticism central to his personality.¹²

In his work *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, René Girard proposes that desiring subjects in nineteenth-century French novels frequently have their object of desire determined for them by a third party, or 'mediator'. The subject acts under the illusion of individual autonomy, when actually his (sic) free choice is being determined by the mediator. Thus the process of desiring becomes not a matter of two participants – subject and object – but three: subject-mediator-object. Hence desire functions according to a triangular model. Girard makes it clear that the mediator gets in the way of the subject-object relationship, and this forces attention onto the subject-mediator relationship. As he says, "The impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator".¹³ What Girard fails to elaborate upon in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, and what Eve Sedgwick develops in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, are the implications of the gender dynamics of these triangles. Girard's examples all involve subject-object relations of man-woman, with a male mediator, and what Sedgwick sees Girard as exposing, almost without realizing it, is the gendered importance of the subject-mediator relationship:

... the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved [...] In fact, Girard seems to see the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved [...] the triangles Girard traces are most often those in which two males are rivals for a female; it is the bond *between males* (my italics) that he most assiduously uncovers.¹⁴

Using literary texts from different historical periods, Sedgwick argues that this subject-mediator-object triangle functions within a patriarchal social order as a means of perpetuating and ensuring the homosocial bonds between men. And within this triangle, woman as object is both absolutely necessary and absolutely subordinate, almost irrelevant. She is necessary as a means of codifying men's relationships as homosocial (and heterosexual) rather than homosexual in a society which radically disrupts the potential continuum between the two terms due to its own homophobia. Woman is subordinate because she is being used to confirm a relationship between men which ultimately excludes her.

The explicit triangulation of desire of which Girard and Sedgwick write is a recurring motif throughout Morris's life and work. MacCarthy goes so far as to say that "all Morris's main emotional relationships take triangular form, by design or by invasion",¹⁵ and it is with the arrival of Rossetti in Morris's life

that this triangulation starts to become so apparent, and in particular Morris's depiction of heterosexual relationships are very frequently complicated by a third male figure. Dianne Sadoff writes, "Whether Morris understood his need to repeat this structure, he is clearly compelled to deal with it again and again, and so to subject himself and it to repetition".¹⁶ To whom is Morris's desiring male subject attracted? The woman as object of his desire, or the mediating male? Or both? Rossetti was to lurk, as an omnipresent shadow, over Morris's experience and literary depiction of heterosexual relationships: when Morris was to meet Jane Burden, his future wife, late in 1857, Rossetti had found her first. And Jane was, of course, to be immortalized as Pre-Raphaelite icon of woman *par excellence* through Rossetti's almost obsessive painting of her, as well as engaging in an affair with her.

But this triangulation is also a matter of art as well as life for Morris. What was to be shared between Rossetti and Morris was not just words and poetry but visual images too. Robert Keane argues that up to 1858 "the two artists lived in an atmosphere of imaginative influences and friendships that created an environment for art and letters".¹⁷ Rossetti was steeped in the same medievalism and fascination with Arthurian legend as Morris and Burne-Jones and was to produce a number of watercolours in this period which depicted Arthurian or medieval-style subject matter. When Rossetti was invited to paint a series of murals in the Oxford Union in 1857, along with some fellow artists, the theme chosen was scenes from Malory. Morris was to paint 'How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Iseult with exceeding great love out of measure, and how she loved not him again but rather Sir Tristram': the triangulation of frustrated, tragic desire.

Specifically in relation to *The Defence* there is a two-way verbal/visual interplay between Rossetti and Morris in that Morris not only purchased a number of Rossetti's paintings at this time but also wrote poems with the same titles. "The Blue Closet" (1856), "The Tune of Seven Towers" (1857) and "King Arthur's Tomb" (1857) all appeared in the volume. This artistic exchange of media and subject matter is nonetheless also an economic transaction: Morris becomes ever more bound to Rossetti. As exemplary of the issues of triangulation that I have been outlining I will now discuss in more detail Morris's and Rossetti's versions of "King Arthur's Tomb".

"King Arthur's Tomb", which follows "The Defence of Guenevere" in the volume, focuses on the guilt and fear that is part of Launcelot and Guenevere's consciousness of their relationship, having them meet long after the disintegration of the Round Table and Arthur's death. The title immediately thrusts the triangulation of their adulterous relationship to the fore. The sense of identity that Launcelot had by being part of the social order of the Round Table is now lost – he no longer knows himself "the bravest knight" (11) – indeed he no longer has any clear notion of his identity at all: "he was, he knew not" (11). This immediately qualifies the heroic view of

Launcelot with which "The Defence of Guenevere" ends. His reflections on the times he spent with Guenevere, occasions of having acted upon non-socially sanctioned desire, is also of how desire was so intermingled with fear. He says, "I almost died / In those night-watches with my love and dread" (12). Launcelot now rides his horse aimlessly, with no sense of purpose at all, through the barren landscape that reflects his lost sense of self.

Morris's presentation of Guenevere in "King Arthur's Tomb" also modifies the presentation of her in "The Defence of Guenevere". "King Arthur's Tomb" does not follow on the narrative causality set up at the end of the latter poem that suggests Guenevere and Launcelot almost riding off into the sunset together, but follows Malory's legend of Queen Guenevere, which has her end her life as a nun, doing penance for her sin. Morris portrays the tension between the unavoidable ongoing presence of sexual desire and Guenevere's reinstatement within a social and moral order, symbolized by the nunnery, in which her desire for Launcelot is to be conquered by replacing it with a desire for God. On his journeying Launcelot stops to rest unknowingly at Arthur's tomb. The scene dramatizes the lover-wife-husband triangle very graphically as they debate and question the morality of their liaison in the absent presence of Arthur.

Morris's poem is almost certainly influenced by Rossetti's watercolour *Arthur's Tomb*, which was his first treatment of an Arthurian subject [Fig. 1]. It depicts Launcelot leaning over the carved stone body of Arthur on his tomb, into the face of Guenevere, who is dressed as a nun and who has a hand up to her face, preventing him from kissing her. They meet under an apple tree, with apples fallen to the ground, providing the association of Guenevere with Eve's 'sin' in the Garden of Eden. This is stressed further in this first version of the picture, dated 1854,¹⁸ in which there is a snake in the bottom left-hand corner. Two scenes are depicted on the visible side of the tomb: to the left Arthur is knighting Launcelot, who kneels before him in homage and allegiance, and to the right the knights of the Round Table receive the vision of the Holy Grail, which initiates their quest to attain it. These two scenes are divided by Guenevere's body, which occupies the central vertical of the picture, and the vision of the Grail has the shadow from the trunk of the apple tree cast over it; both these things pointing to Guenevere as the cause of the sin that results in the breaking of the bond between Arthur and Launcelot and Launcelot's inability to attain the Grail.

Rossetti painted two versions of *Arthur's Tomb*: the second one [Fig. 2] inscribed "Dated 1855 copied 1860",¹⁹ thus the second picture was finally finished after the publication of the poem, which in turn was influenced by the first version. Subtle but significant changes have been made in the 1860 version. Overall all details of the picture are more sharply delineated – the first version has a softer focus. In particular this makes a difference in the faces of Launcelot, Guenevere and Arthur. In the earlier picture Guenevere does not look at Launcelot, shyly avoiding his gaze, but in the second the features of

her face are much more distinct and she glares at Launcelot fiercely, as if she sternly resented his proximity. Similarly, Launcelot's eyes are not clear in the earlier picture, but in the second they have almost eyeball-to-eyeball contact. Added to this, the effigy of Arthur in the first version has his eyes closed, but in the second he stares into the faces of his wife and most loyal knight, creating a macabre image of the presence of the living dead.

The sharper delineation and heavier colour in the second version adds to the great sense of claustrophobia which the structural composition of the pictures produces. There is virtually no free space – no air – in them, particularly so in the second version. The foliage of the apple tree spreads over the breadth of the top of the picture, pushing the viewer's gaze down, while the central horizontal of the top of the tomb, and the solidity of the rectangle of the tomb beneath it forces the viewer's gaze up. Launcelot's angularly bent body creates a frame within the picture to the left, while Guenevere provides a frame to the right, forcing the viewer's attention onto the intense *menage-à-trois* of the three heads of wife-lover-(dead)-husband.

This intensity is also found in Morris's poem in the conversation of Launcelot and Guenevere when they meet. Launcelot's desire is for the physical proximity of Guenevere that he has longed for, but she adopts a stance of renunciation. In this guise, Guenevere is almost unrecognizable to Launcelot: she is choosing to robe herself in a pre-formulated identity which denies her own desire and sense of self, and to her lover it is as though she had changed her very form and become "some other thing" (17). Launcelot sees her refusal of him as a form of madness, and the effects of Guenevere's denial of her desire are depicted as producing a fear of mental disorder which erupts into the language of desire she is so desperate not to act upon:

"I shall go mad,
Or else die kissing him, he is so pale;
He thinks me mad already, O bad! bad!
Let me lie down a little while and wail". (22)

Launcelot's response is a sexually-charged prayer:

"thy heavy law, O Lord,
Is very tight about her now, and grips
Her poor heart, so that no right word
Can reach her mouth; so, 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!" (17)

It is this collision of erotic and Christian discourse, and the blurring of any clear boundary between them that one imagines was part of the early critics' concern at the moral disarray they perceived in *The Defence* (of which more below). The tension Morris dramatizes in his portrayals of Launcelot and

Guenevere is between “the sin *they* said we did” (20) and Guenevere’s struggle for her own self-definition and the right to her own version of events as woman and lover.

“King Arthur’s Tomb” represents desire between men and women as problematic, haunted by a third (wronged) party. The meeting of Lancelot and Guenevere at Arthur’s tomb emphasizes the guilt of their liaison, as well as bringing heterosexual desire into a juxtaposition with death (and thus the end of desire). Isobel Armstrong writes that “death broods over *The Defence*, a never repressed nemesis”.²⁰ There is also a sense that Guenevere has disrupted a stronger and more vital bond between men, for which she must now pay. But as we have seen, relationships between men are not idealized in the volume either. To return finally to Morris and his male friends, the poems commented upon here give the impression that this male bonding has reached its limits, that it cannot last much longer. Morris’s poems and Rossetti’s paintings serve to bind their friends into a closed artistic fraternity, in which Arthurian myth functions as a shared code which legitimates the exploration of homosocial desire. Ultimately, however, the poems in *The Defence* had to go public.

This article will thus conclude with a few related remarks about the response of critics to the volume. Morris paid out of his own pocket to have *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* published in March 1858 by Bell and Daldy. He had also financed *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. This self-financing adds to the sense of *The Defence* as a predominantly private venture, not primarily meant for the public domain, and indeed the volume did not make much impact in terms of sales: Mackail records that of the total edition of 500, 250 copies were either sold or given away, the rest remaining with the publishers into the early 1870s.²¹

While Morris’s friends were enthusiastic about his poems, critics in the various periodical press journals were baffled, bemused and even offended. *The Defence* came in for attack for its morality. *The Saturday Review* said,

If the ages of faith and chivalry were this sort of thing, it must have been a queer world to live in. We never knew any knights or ladies of this class, but there must have been a great deal of blood as well as lances and shields in these days; and though there was a great amount of kissing [...] it appears that the kissers and kissed had but little respect for the marriage service. This, we are bound to say, is the general moral impression conveyed by Mr. Morris’s very chivalrous little pictures.²²

Morris’s style was described in the *Literary Gazette* as “Rossetti plus Browning [...] affected and obscure”.²³ Victorian critics expected easy access to meaning and signification in the poetry they read, and they frequently found poems in *The Defence* to be unyielding. “For most [Victorian] critics”, writes

Armstrong, “a style should be a non-style and language should be transparent, like water”.²⁴ The review in the *Literary Gazette* continued, “we are delighted with his poetry, but cannot very well tell what it is all about”.²⁵

In his reminiscences, *The Table-Talk of Shirley*, John Skelton recalls how the editor of *Fraser’s Magazine*, John Parker, had allowed him to give some attention to the writings of the young William Morris in the magazine, but only with some reluctance. Parker wrote to Skelton on 14 May 1860:

I saw Morris’s poems in MS. He wanted us to publish them. I confess I could make nothing of them. Nor could a very able man who looked at the MS. for me. Surely 19/20ths of them are of the most obscure, watery, mystical, affected stuff possible [...] For myself, I am sick of Rossetti and his whole school. I think them essentially unmanly, effeminate, mystical, affected and obscure.²⁶

What is notable here is the linking of Morris’s and the Pre-Raphaelite’s ‘obscurity’ with aberrant forms of masculinity, as though their work were infused with a secretive masculinity, not easily recognizable to others, and this is precisely what I have wished to suggest in this article. *The Defence* circulated ‘in private’ amongst a group of male friends who both provided a context for the expression and exploration of masculinity, and who could read the volume’s coded messages. ‘In public’, however, the language of the volume became opaque, not readily yielding up its dissident discourses on masculinity and sexuality. It seems no coincidence that the one critic who should read *The Defence* so differently, and who is attuned to the “passion of which the outlets are sealed”²⁷ in the volume is Walter Pater. Recent scholarly interest in Pater has focused on his place in constructing a gendered discourse of aestheticism in late nineteenth-century culture which is “implicated in the cultural history of gay male discourse”.²⁸

This article has offered some new ways of thinking about *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, specifically in relation to how the volume attempts to articulate and circulate alternative discourses of masculine desire. It has often been noted that Morris’s poetic style changes dramatically after *The Defence*, and perhaps here my argument has something to offer in accounting for this. I have suggested that the representations of masculinity in *The Defence* show homosocial bonding at its limits. Something has to give: private desire must go public. And subsequent to *The Defence* Morris became a much more public poet, using a language that also became more (hetero)sexually respectable.

The first study to consider Morris and masculinity was Frederick Kirchoff's *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1990). This work produces psycho-biographical readings of Morris's poetry in relation to his developing sense of self. Much more recently Jan Marsh has offered a biographical account of Morris and masculinity in "William Morris and Victorian Manliness" in *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, eds. Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter UP, 1999), pp. 185-99.

Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 58.

For more on the Victorian Arthurian revival see Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981), and Debra N. Mancoff, *The Return of King Arthur: The Legend Through Victorian Eyes* (London: Pavilion Books, 1995).

Further discussion of Morris's unpublished early poems can be found in Florence Boos, *The Juvenilia of William Morris* (New York: The William Morris Society, 1983).

MacCarthy, p. 77.

Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature* (Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 3.

Sussman, p. 5.

Sussman, p. 141. Back in 1853, prior to going to Oxford, Burne-Jones wrote to a friend, "I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood. Learn 'Sir Galahad' by heart; he is to be the patron of our Order. [...] A few months later he writes again, 'We must enlist you in this Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age;' the crusade then definitely including celibacy and conventional life". J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London: Oxford UP, 1950), Vol. 1, p. 65.

May Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London: Longman & Co., 1910-15), Vol. 1, p. 24. All further references to *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* from this edition are given by page references only in the running text.

For a discussion of "Riding Together" in relation to Robert Browning's "The Last Ride Together" see Amanda Hodgson, "Riding Together: William Morris and Robert Browning", *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 9:4 (1992), pp. 3-7.

MacCarthy, p. 115.

Sussman, p. 141.

René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1972), p. 10.

Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p. 21.

MacCarthy, p. 105.

Dianne Sadoff, "The Poetics of Repetition and *The Defence of Guenevere*" in *The Golden Chain: Essays on William Morris and Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. Carole Silver (New York: The William Morris Society, 1982), pp. 97-113; p. 109.

Robert Keane, "Rossetti and Morris: 'This Ever-Diverse Pair'", in Silver, pp. 115-48; p. 127. For further discussion of the artistic relationship of Rossetti and Morris see

Robert Keane, "Ut Pictura Poesis: Rossetti and Morris: Paintings into Poetry", *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 7:2 (1987), pp. 74-9; Jan Marsh, "Knights and Angels: The Treatment of 'Sir Galahad' in the Work of Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal and William Morris", *Journal of the William Morris Society*, 8:1 (1988), pp. 14-23; Constance Hassett, "Esthetic Autonomy in the Sister Arts: The Brotherly Project of Rossetti and Morris", *Mosaic* 25:4 (1992), pp. 49-62.

18 See Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Oxford UP, 1971), 2 Vols., Plate 80 and Catalogue p. 34. Surtees suggests that the date of the first version was added later and that it was actually executed in 1855.

19 See Joanna Harris and Jennifer Harris, ed., *William Morris and the Middle Ages* (Manchester UP, 1984), p. 163.

20 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 249.

21 Mackail, Vol. 1, p.134.

22 Unsigned review, *Saturday Review* 6, 20 November 1858, pp. 506-7. Quoted in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 46.

23 Richard Garnett, unsigned review, *Literary Gazette* 42, March 1858, pp. 226-7. Quoted in Faulkner, p. 36.

24 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (London: Athlone Press, 1972), p. 50.

25 Garnett, quoted in Faulkner, p. 36.

26 Sir John Skelton, *The Table-Talk of Shirley* (London: 1895, no publisher known), pp. 78-9. Quoted in Faulkner, pp. 6-7.

27 Walter Pater, unsigned review, "Poems by William Morris", *Westminster Review* 90, October 1968, pp. 300-12. Quoted in Faulkner, p. 83.

28 Laurel Brake, *Walter Pater* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 2.



Fig. 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Arthur's Tomb*, First Version.



Fig. 2: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Arthur's Tomb*, Second Version.

A Very Private Gesture: William Morris' *A Book of Verse* and its Public Sequel

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Victorian poetry is obsessed with a series of displacements...The problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become central. Teleology is displaced by epistemology and politics because relationships and their representation become the contested area, between self and society, self and labour, self and nature, self and language and above all else self and lover.¹

This preoccupation, even obsession, with love relationships is particularly apparent in the poetry produced by the Pre-Raphaelites. Jan Marsh has noted, for instance, that "the fact that women form such a large, even dominant, component of Pre-Raphaelite subject matter suggests that [their] most compelling concerns lay precisely in this area"² Publicly sanctioned and privately tolerated relationships existed side by side, of course, within this artistic circle; one of the better known instances is perhaps the case of William Morris, his wife Jane, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Morris' gradual realisation that his feelings for Jane were no longer reciprocated, and that Rossetti had replaced him in her affections, became the basis of some of his most transparently autobiographical work. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that much of Morris' poetry "explicitly depicts [...] conflicts in love"³ and that in his "The Defence of Guenevere" he put his own particular gloss on one of the greatest love triangles of all time. In this poem, Guenevere comes to recount her first sighting of Lancelot

It chanced upon a day that Lancelot came
To dwell at Arthur's court: at Christmas-time
This happened; when the heralds sung his name ...⁴

and the unsettling feelings and thoughts he eventually inspired in her:

And in the Summer I grew white with flame
And bowed my head down : Autumn, and the
sick
Sure knowledge things would never be the
same,

While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would crowd,
Belonging to the time ere I was bought
By Arthur's great name and his little love; (pp. 4-6)