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William Morris and the Judgment of God

AFTER he decided against a career in the Church (1855), William Morris was reluctant to talk about religion, called himself "careless of metaphysics and religion,"[1] and felt "no disposition to discuss them, because I find that such discussions inevitably become mere word-contests."[2] Critics have assumed from this reluctance that Morris "wandered into the by-paths of agnosticism without any of the spiritual torments which usually accompanied loss of religious conviction among the Victorians."[3] But a number of Morris' early stories and poems suggest that he was careless of metaphysics and religion because he thought men should not concern themselves about God.

"Amazing as is the whole phenomenon of the universe," said Morris in 1895, "I cannot see any real evidence of the existence of God." Having thus confessed his agnosticism, however, he then went on to make it clear that he thought the question of God's existence was really beside the point; if God exists, He must mean for men to ignore His existence: "And of this I am absolutely convinced, that if there is a God, He never meant us to know much about Himself, or indeed to concern ourselves about Him at all." "Had He so wished," Morris concluded, "don't you think He would have made His existence and His wishes so overwhelmingly clear to us that we could not possibly have ever doubted about it at all?"[4] As Browning's Cleon asks, "If [God has] care—where is the sign?" Although Morris did not make these remarks until the year before his death, this idea, that since God does not give signs He must (if He exists at all) mean for men to ignore Him, is the basis of stories and poems he wrote forty years earlier.[5]

In "Lindenborg Pool" (pp. 245–53), for example, the protagonist wants, but does not get, a sign from God. The story, which Morris published in the September issue of his short-lived *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856), is about a man who, having killed an enemy "not undeservedly, God knows" (p. 246) ten years before, comes on the anniversary of that killing with coils of line "to fathom" (p. 245) Lindenborg Pool. The pool is supposed to have been the scene, in the thirteenth century, of a sign from God to men, and it becomes clear that what the protagonist wants "to fathom" is not the pool but the past; he wants to know, through a sign such as that said to have been given in the thirteenth century, God's judgment of that ten-year-old killing. The man does not, however, receive a sign; he claims "God knows" the enemy deserved killing, but he discovers no more of God's judgment than his line can tell him of the bottom of bottomless Lindenborg Pool.

In that same September issue of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* Morris published the first part of "The Hollow Land" (pp. 254–90), a story about medieval knights who discover that God does not give signs of His judgment. The knights, who thought they had signs, finally realize that they have only taken their own judgment for God's.

A knight, Sir Florian, and his brother decide to kill their queen because she has insulted their family and, subsequently, murdered her husband, the king. Florian's brother says that they would have forgiven the insult, "but when the news came concerning the death of the King, and how she was shameless, I said: I will take it as a sign, if God does not punish her within certain years, that He means me to do so" (p. 256). The brothers have no way of knowing, as the Lady of the Hollow Land tells Florian, how God may have been punishing the queen, "how many times . . . she woke in the dead night . . . seeing King Urrayne's pale face and hacked head lying on the pillow by her side" (p. 279). But since God seems not to punish the queen, the brothers take the lack of a sign for a sign, their judgment for God's, and kill her.

Harald, the queen's son, also takes his own judgment for God's: when Florian finds him painting the walls of the brothers' castle with the colors

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scarlet and yellow, Harald explains that scarlet and yellow are the colors of hell and insists, "I paint God's judgments" (p. 284). In time, however, Florian and Harald forgive each other, "and as the years went on and we grew old and grey we painted purple pictures and green ones instead of the scarlet and yellow, so that the walls looked altered; and always we painted God's judgments" (p. 287). In that purple and green are, one assumes, the colors of heaven, the two knights have replaced an angry God with a merciful one; but still they pretend to know His judgments.

One day, seeing a funeral procession, Florian and Harald notice that the mourners are dressed in every possible combination of the four colors and that the procession is dominated by the crest of the dead man, two hands clasped in prayer. Immediately thereafter, the two knights give up trying to paint the judgments of God. They seem to have realized that life is a procession to the grave during which, as the crest suggests, men can only pray; that human lives are too complex, the colors too mixed, for any man to guess how God might judge; that, in a world without signs, men who concern themselves about God's judgment tend only to take their own judgments for His.

Similarly, even "The Judgment of God" (pp. 96–98), a poem from Morris' first collection (*The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, 1858), does not, in spite of its title, present God's judgment; it too argues that men should not attempt to ascertain the judgment of God. A knight, Sir Roger, faces a trial by combat, the outcome of which is supposed to make manifest God's will. There is, however, right on both sides: Roger admits that his father did wrong long ago in killing one of the Hainaults (ll. 11–24), but Roger also thinks he has balanced that wrong by saving the life of Ellayne (ll. 62–72). The situation is too complex to be settled by combat, by a simple victory of right over wrong. Even if God does judge, the trial by combat, with its either-or conclusion, cannot act as a sign of the necessarily complicated verdict the case requires. Moreover, Roger does not really believe God will give a sign; he plans to use his father's "crafty way" of fighting, not to defeat God, but to defeat Oliver, the Hainault champion (ll. 73–76). Nor does Roger believe the Hainaults will accept the outcome as God's judgment should he win, so he orders his men into positions from which they can come to his aid (ll. 76–80). Had Morris not ended the poem before the fight, had he made either Roger or Oliver win, then it might seem as if God had made a decision; as it is, "The Judgment of God" assumes that there will not be a sign and argues that, since human situations are too complex for simple verdicts, and since men will accept a judgment as God's only if it conforms to their own expectations, men should not attempt to know the judgment of God. After all, men who leave God out of the question may remember that their judgments are only human, inadequate, and fallible; men who seek signs from God will find signs, will not remember that their judgments are only human, will want to enforce their judgments as if those judgments were God's.

This argument, that men who seek God's judgment only take their own judgments for His, is the basis of Guenevere's defense in the title poem of Morris' first collection, "The Defence of Guenevere" (pp. 1–10). Morris' Guenevere tells her accuser, Gauwaine (in Malory, Modred), that he is unable to embody, as he pretends to do, God's judgment of her.

The key lines of the poem are those of the thrice-repeated stanza:

> Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
> Whatever may have happen'd these long years,
> God knows I speak the truth, saying that you lie!
> (ll. 46–48, 142–44, 283–85)

The problem with these lines has always been that they seem both to admit and to deny guilt: something happened during the long years, but Gauwaine still lies. The solution to the problem depends upon knowing the exact nature of Gauwaine's charge, but Morris does not make that charge explicit; it must be inferred from Guenevere's defense. If what happened during the long years was adultery, and such is certainly the most reasonable reading of these lines, then Gauwaine can only have lied by saying more or claiming more than that Guenevere had been unfaithful to Arthur. In the course of the poem it becomes clear that Gauwaine has equated his verdict with God's; Morris' Guenevere does not deny adultery, she denies Gauwaine's claim to know God's judgment of her.[6]

Guenevere is at first contrite, yet she decides that

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she must examine Gauwaine's charge (ll. 1–7). "God wot," she says, "I ought to say, I have done ill, / And pray you all forgiveness heartily" (ll. 13–14), but it is precisely at this moment that her defense comes to her. The juxtaposition of God's knowing and her praying for forgiveness reminds her that, if she is to pray for forgiveness, she must pray it of God, not of the knights before her. The next lines reflect her hesitation: "Because you must be right, such great lords—still . . ." (l. 15). She then draws the analogy of the choice between cloths; she opens her defense.

"Suppose your time were come to die," she posits, and suppose further, she goes on to say, an angel were to appear whose "commands / Seem to be God's commands," and that the angel has two cloths, the one red and the other blue, of which he says:

> One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
> Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
> I will not tell you, you must somehow tell
> Of your own strength and mightiness.

And suppose, she concludes, "After a shivering half-hour you said: / 'God help! heaven's colour, the blue;' and he said: 'hell' " (ll. 16–38). That Guenevere first saw Launcelot at Christmas (ll. 61–62) is, if God does mean to damn her, very like hell's cloth being heaven's color, the blue. Similarly, as blue is the color of heaven, so love is an attribute of God, and thus when Guenevere says that, loving Launcelot, she loves "God now a little" (l. 90), the implication is that to condemn her for loving is very like damning the man for choosing blue, for choosing what seemed to be heaven. Also, and finally, Guenevere describes herself as "half-mad with beauty on that day" (l. 109) when she and Launcelot first kissed. It was a spring day, and she was in a garden, the very wall of which "trebled all that beauty" (l. 114). Even now she dares not think of her own beauty in connection with the beauty of that spring morning lest she lose her head as she did then (ll. 120–27, 131). Into that garden and into that mood came Launcelot, and they kissed (ll. 136–38). Guenevere was, in other words, blinded by God's own gifts, by a beautiful world and her own beauty, when she began to love Launcelot, when she chose blue.

No one, except perhaps Burns's Holy Willie or Browning's Johannes Agricola, would accept the choice between cloths as a valid analogy of salvation or damnation. If the individual is at all responsible for his own damnation, then the man who has to choose between cloths simply does not have enough information to make a responsible decision. The man acts, in fact, according to the best information he has by choosing blue, which suggests the sky, rather than red, which suggests the flames of hell. The choice between cloths, then, is not a choice but a trick, and one may only conclude from Guenevere's analogy that either God is a trickster or (and such is Guenevere's point) that God would not damn, as Gauwaine and his fellows are prepared to do, without taking into consideration the blindness of the accused. This is the line of thought which leads Guenevere to exclaim that, no matter what happened during the long years, God knows she speaks the truth saying that Gauwaine lies. She does not deny adultery, she denies Gauwaine's ability to judge as God would judge.

In the next section of the poem Guenevere examines what evidence she has that God's judgment may in fact differ from Gauwaine's. Her first argument in this section, based on an exemplum, asks if she seems an unforgiven sinner. Do not queens, she asks, having sinned, sear their consciences, never weep as she has done, and afterwards live "hatefully, slaying and poisoning"? As she does not fit that description, so perhaps she is not the sinner Gauwaine thinks her to be (ll. 145–49). Her second argument explains why Morris changed the accuser from Modred to Gauwaine—Gauwaine's mother was guilty of adultery. "Remember in what grave your mother sleeps," Guenevere appeals, asking him to have "God's dear pity" if he is to make God's judgment. But Gauwaine does not listen: "God of mercy," Guenevere exclaims, "how he [Gauwaine] turns away!" (ll. 150–64). Just as Gauwaine does not have God's mercy, Guenevere concludes, perhaps he does not have God's justice: "So—let God's justice work!" she says, and reminds the knights of the previous occasion when she was charged with adultery by Mellyagraunce who, having discovered blood on her bed, accused her of entertaining a wounded knight. She then describes at some length how Launcelot, even though he fought without a shield, killed Mellyagraunce in a trial by combat. Gauwaine and his lords seek God's

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judgment?—she gives them a precedent (ll. 166–221).

As Guenevere convinces herself that such great lords need not be right, may even be wrong, she becomes more and more Guenevere the Queen and wonders openly why she defends herself:

> so must I defend
> The honour of the lady Guenevere?
> Not so, fair lords, even if the world should end
> This very day, and you were judges here
> Instead of God. (ll. 181–85)

Guenevere the Queen reminds the lords of their place: God is her judge, not they. Beware the fate of Mellyagraunce, she warns them: "Mellyagraunce was shent, / For Mellyagraunce had fought against the Lord" (ll. 220–21).

Guenevere's final defense is an appeal to her own beauty, which ends: "will you dare, / When you have looked a little on my brow, / To say this thing is vile?" (ll. 236–38). Within the logic of the poem, this is her strongest point. The man who chose the blue cloth went by the best evidence he had; dare they do differently? Beauty is usually considered an attribute of heaven, not of hell; had they not better choose that which seems heavenly since they know no more of God's judgment than did the man who had to choose between cloths? Blue may be, after all, heaven's color.

"By God!" Guenevere concludes, "I will not tell you more to-day, / Judge any way you will—what matters it?" (ll. 278–79), which is what she has been saying all along. Morris, following Malory, brings Launcelot to the rescue (l. 295), but Guenevere's "Defence" rests before he arrives; it ends with her defiant cry:

> Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
> Whatever may have happen'd these long years,
> God knows I speak the truth, saying that you lie!
> (ll. 283–85)

On the other hand, while it may be impossible to know whether Guenevere has sinned against God, certainly she has sinned against Arthur, and it is her innocence or guilt in this latter sense that is the subject of the companion piece to Guenevere's "Defence," "King Arthur's Tomb" (pp. 11–23). In that poem, Launcelot, riding to meet Guenevere at Glastonbury after the death of Arthur, does not know if he is "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," but he does know that he must see Guenevere again (ll. 1–17). As he rides, he remembers their times together. When she kissed him, he says to himself:

> the bell
> Of her mouth on my cheek sent a delight
> Through all my ways of being; like the stroke
> Wherewith God threw all men upon the face
> When he took Enoch, and when Enoch woke
> With a changed body in the happy place.
> (ll. 47–52)

As her kiss seemed almost to catch him up into heaven, so there may even have been, he suggests to himself, a time "when she dwelt up in heaven a while ago, / And ruled all things but God" (ll. 65–66); certainly, he continues, she reminds him of "Maiden Margaret" painted on the church walls (ll. 79–81), and he asks God's forgiveness for his having missed chances to hold her hand (ll. 89–90). In other words, Launcelot has convinced himself that God approves of their love—Launcelot thinks he knows God's judgment.

When he arrives at Glastonbury, however, Launcelot passes "the thorn-tree / Wherefrom St. Joseph in the days past preached" (ll. 123–24). The thorn-tree is the Glastonbury Thorn which, according to legend, sprouted from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea on the very spot where he founded the Christian Church in England. Thus, even before Guenevere enters the poem, a tension is set up between Launcelot's confidence and the thorn, between his certainty that God approves and the symbol of the Church and of its teaching (Joseph preaching).

Similarly, later in the poem, Guenevere has two memories: the tournaments where she and Iseult were the belles, where the whole atmosphere conspired to make her love Launcelot (ll. 326–60), and "the mass in the chapel on the lawn" where:

> every morn I scarce could pray at all,
> For Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,
> Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,
> Mingled with dreams of what the priest did
> say. (ll. 304–08)

As Launcelot, confident that God approves, does not see the Glastonbury Thorn, so Guenevere, when she loved Launcelot, did not want to hear what the priest was saying.

Now, however, Guenevere hears the priest

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clearly. She had, all night, been lying "on her purple bed," waiting "until that Launcelot's head / Should lie on her breast, with all her golden hair / Each side" (ll. 134–38). But with the coming of morning, she looked out the window and "the grey downs bare / Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere" (ll. 139–40).

"I [am] very sorry for my sin," she prays to the crucifix:

> Moreover, Christ, I cannot bear that hell,
> I am most fain to love you, and to win
> A place in heaven some time—I cannot tell—
> Speak to me, Christ! I kiss, kiss, kiss your feet;
> Ah! now I weep! (ll. 177–82)

Caught between her love for Launcelot and her love for Christ (and her fear of hell), Guenevere finds that the one obscures the other, that just as thoughts of Launcelot blinded her during mass, so now, with the thought of hell momentarily real to her and the crucifix before her, she can weep for her sin, can see it as sin against God.

Thus Guenevere and Launcelot quarrel because they both think that they know the judgment of God: Guenevere fears damnation, and Launcelot is certain that their love is their salvation. She says "God's curses" must keep them apart (ll. 195–97); he, paraphrasing Christ's words from the cross, asks God to forgive her, "she not knowing what she does" (ll. 201–03). He says, "for God's love kiss me" (l. 204); she, "Christ . . . help me to save his soul" (ll. 207–08). He begs:

> rise up, I pray you, love,
> And slay me really, then we shall be heal'd,
> Perchance, in the aftertime by God above.
> (ll. 365–67)

To which Guenevere answers, "Never, never again! not even when I die" (l. 392).

Morris' Guenevere and Launcelot finally do separate, but not because Guenevere believes that they have sinned against God. They quarrel because she sees their relationship as earning hell and he sees it earning heaven, but Guenevere almost yields to Launcelot. What keeps her from yielding is neither her love of Christ nor her fear of hell, both of which are again obscured by Launcelot's presence, but the carved figure of King Arthur on his tomb. When she finds Launcelot kneeling beside Arthur's tomb, "some of her long hair / Brush'd on the new-cut stone," and she says, "Well done! to pray / For Arthur, my dear lord, the greatest king / That ever lived" (ll. 185–90)—which is the last thing Launcelot is thinking of doing as he kneels by the tomb he did not even know was Arthur's (l. 126). So too, when they are about to kiss, Guenevere draws back, saying:

> 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?
> (ll. 208–12)

She equates Launcelot with the tempter in Eden, not because she remembers either Christ or hell, but because the carved stone face on the tomb reminds her that they betrayed Arthur. Her final renunciation of Launcelot is expressed in similar fashion: she calls him Arthur's sword, but compares him to a Malay crease that, after cutting poisonous fruit, cuts the bearer with its crooked blade and poisons him (ll. 372–75). He is, she says, a sickle that, after cutting hemlock all day, poisons the husbandman who hangs it over his shoulder (ll. 377–80). Guenevere no longer speaks of sin against God, but of sin against Arthur; she tells Launcelot that even his hope of reunion in heaven will come to nothing: "you dare not pray to die, / Lest you meet Arthur in the other world" (ll. 381–82). If there is life after death, what Guenevere now fears is not God's judgment, hell, but Arthur's judgment. While man cannot know the judgment of God, cannot know if he has sinned against God, he can know that he has sinned against man. Guenevere is guilty, not, as Gauwaine would have it, of sin against God, but of the betrayal of her husband.

William Morris, who was later to write, not of heaven but of *The Earthly Paradise* ("Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing"), insisted, even in these early stories and poems, that no man had the power to sing of heaven or hell, of God's judgments. Men who concern themselves about God's judgments tend to take their own judgments for His, since even if God exists He does not give signs of His will. For this reason men should not concern themselves about God or His judgments, the man should cease trying to fathom Lindenborg Pool, Florian and Harald are correct when they

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give up trying to paint God's judgments, the Hainaults have no right to seek God's judgment against Roger, and Gauwaine has no right to pretend that his judgment of Guenevere is God's. When, at "King Arthur's Tomb," Guenevere finally does not concern herself about God at all, then she discovers the truth about her guilt.

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Notes

[1] *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans, 1910–15), xxiii, 280. Unless (as here) otherwise noted, Morris' quotations are from Vol. i of *The Collected Works*, and page and line numbers have been incorporated into the text.

[2] *The Letters of William Morris*, ed. Philip Henderson (London: Longmans, 1950), p. 290.

[3] John Heath-Stubbs, *The Darkling Plain* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1950), p. 170.

[4] J. Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London: Longmans, 1921), p. 171. I am aware of R. Page Arnot's harsh comments about Glasier's book (Arnot, *William Morris: The Man and the Myth*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964, p. 14), and I contend that what I have to say in this article vindicates much of Glasier's chapter on "Morris and Religion."

[5] The two most recent books about Morris, Philip Henderson's new biography, *William Morris: His Life, Work, and Friends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), and Paul Thompson's general introduction, *The Work of William Morris* (London: Heinemann, 1967), say nothing about his early stories and little about his early poetry. What they do say is very like what was said twenty years ago by Graham Hough (*The Last Romantics*, London: Duckworth, 1949) and again recently by Cecil Lang (*The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), that Morris' early poetry owes a debt to Browning's dramatic techniques and to Rossetti's vivid details, While this generally accepted opinion certainly describes Morris' early poetry, it does not begin to define his themes.

[6] The most recent studies of "The Defence of Guenevere," by Laurence Perrine ("Morris's Guenevere: An Interpretation," *PQ*, 39, 1960, 234–41), Mother Angela Carson, O.S.U. ("Morris' Guenevere: A Further Note," *PQ*, 42, 1963, 131–34), and Carole G. Silver (" 'The Defence of Guenevere': A Further Interpretation," *SEL*, 9, 1969, 695–702), agree that Guenevere's innocence or guilt of adultery is important, the usual opinion of the poem.

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