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SEXUAL POLARITIES IN *THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE*

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WILLIAM MORRIS'S EARLY poetry is striking for its erotic intensity and powerful evocations of passionate and unhappy women. Indeed, his portrayals of confined, alienated, and dependent women are *so* sharp that they pose some obvious questions. Do they, in the end, simply stylize and project some of the most destructive conventions of Victorian patriarchy? Or do they actually provide some "defence" of female passion and sexuality, against the social hierarchies and emotional suffocation they depict?

I will argue that his portrayals do provide such a defense. Morris came to value highly many traits he attributed to his major female protagonists and used his portrayals of them to express a rare Victorian suspension of judgment about female sexual conduct. Even his early work showed insight into the distorting effects of sexual polarities, and his women gradually came to embody forms of artistic and sensuous "love" with which he consciously identified *himself.* At their best, these qualities anticipate a world in which "beauty" might be an enabling social force, rather than a counterfactual representation of poetic "truth."

The Defence of Guenevere contains Morris's best early poetry. Its lyrics and dramatic monologues are intense, startling, and dreamlike, and its medievalism unhindered by pedantry. Critics have concentrated on the ambiguities of the Launcelot-Guenevere-Arthur triangle, but the work's principal motifs are its protagonists' direct erotic emotions and pervasive fears of frustration and defeat.[1] Ralph Berry has pointed out that twenty of the volume's thirty poems end in defeat or death,[2] and even its nominally successful poems (such as the title poem itself, "The Defence of Guenevere") are often preoccupied with anxiety and struggle. The volume's

themes of sexual tension and defeat also reinforce each other, for most protagonists "love that well which [they] must leave ere long."

Less noticed has been a related paradox: the degree to which rigid sexual polarities motivate both love and battle. *The Defence*'s women wait in confinement for male lovers whose grueling conflicts often end in failure. United only by their common unrealized desire, the men and women of *The Defence* suffer alone. This early intensification of the familar division of chivalrous labor expresses an idiosyncratic mixture of quiet fatalism and ardent idealization. At best, that ardor and the portrayals' sheer dramatic power rescue them from the Victorian prudery into which such exaggerated dichotomies otherwise lapse. Morris presents with sympathy not only "good" heroines such as Jehane and Alice, but complex ones such as Guenevere in "King Arthur's Tomb" and Yoland in "The Tune of Seven Towers."

Unfortunately, Morris's suffering and beautiful women often fall into another Victorian female stereotype – women as helpless victims, preoccupied wholly with love. His early poetic division of labor might seem to permit a more extended range of social action for men – heroic defense of one's homeland, for example, and loyalty to one's comrades – but the emotional constraints of unstinting service to this heroic role (pose?) are almost as rigid.

Such stylized polarization of sexual roles had been present in Morris's earliest writings – the juvenile poem, "The Fen-River," for instance, whose courageous lover rescues a pale, frightened woman. In the prose romances for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, the dichotomy begins to take on some of the ominous forms it later assumes in *The Defence*. In "A Dream," for example, the irascible Ella demands that her lover Lawrence prove his bravery in the "cavern of the red pike," where he remains in solitary isolation for *four hundred years*, cared for by Ella once each century. At the end of their needless separation, they are united in the grave.

Somewhat less temporally bizarre polarities recur in *The Defence*. In a world in which men and women are preternaturally dissimilar, small actions move in fields of exaggerated sexual force, and heroic men and women are separated not only from each other, but also from most forms of everyday human life. Sexual tension that in more fortunate circumstances might seem pleasant only heightens

the pain of denial and defeat. Morris's portrayal of such tension poises in uneasy balance between protest and admiration.

Evidence for the oppressive nature of this radical partition of sexual natures may be found throughout *The Defence*. In the first two poems of the four which comprise the opening Malorian group, "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb," Guenevere and Launcelot are almost always separated; a stereotypically manly life of action and quest drives him forth into the world, and she waits confined in castle and nunnery while external forces determine her fate. His is the oppression of unceasing, unavailing labor, hers the humiliation of self-conscious inanition. Our first perception of Guenevere in "The Defence of Guenevere" is of a human being whose every thought and gesture is choked, strained, and constricted:

> But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
> She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
> Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,
>
> As though she had had there a shameful blow,
> And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame
> All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,
>
> She must a little touch it; like one lame
> She walked away from Gauwaine. . . .[3]

Her greatest speech is delivered "knowing now that they would have her speak"; she sweats, is lamed by tension, feels physical responses which she wants to repress, is conscious of abasement before "such great lords," and compares herself to someone dying "quite alone and very weak." Her love's epiphany occurs in a garden "walled round every way," and she and Launcelot are surprised in her chamber. At the opening of the poem, she is constricted by her clothes, as well as confined and about to be bound to the stake. Morris dwells on conditions of constriction and confinement at suspicious length, but not to suggest that they are *natural*: countervailing imagery of female sexual fulfillment is of violent loosening from constraint: "But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair. . . ."

Launcelot has other problems. He labors almost monotonously to regain what he thought was won, fights Mellyagraunce at cruel

odds, survives ambush and exile, and struggles anxiously at "headlong speed" to save Guenevere. These frustrations are intensified in "King Arthur's Tomb" when the weary Launcelot is cruelly rejected at Glastonbury by the one person whose love he most assumed and for whom he has forfeited all else. Both quest and confinement, in short, are wretched, and only rare moments of freedom from constraint bring happiness and sexuality unmarred by fear.

Guenevere provides a focus for these early preoccupations with love triangles and suffering women, and Morris's sympathy for her distress is clear. In particular, his sympathy in *The Defence* with a "woman taken in adultery" greatly heightens the work's poignancy as well as its complexity. Guenevere sometimes makes her case with a curious detachment – she seems to *view* her own beauty and distress, rather than *feel* them from within. In a sense she serves as her own chorus. At the same time this detachment distances her from the intense subjective emotions she expresses, and gives them a kind of reflective resonance they would not otherwise have. The consort of a king who has given her a "great name" but "little love," Guenevere may or may not have committed the "treasonable" offense of adultery with Launcelot. At issue is not "sin" or "romantic passion" in the abstract, but the special circumstances of a woman who was married at an early age, for reasons of state, to a cold and neglectful spouse, and who has felt for many years a sustained attachment to another man. Guenevere's defense is the legitimacy of her desire to escape this life of weakness and repression, a desire whose intensity has surprised even her. She denies the indefinitely specified charges against her, but acknowledges her love, and gradually widens the scope of her argument from introspection to attack. Her accusers' principal motives, she avers, are spite, malice, and resentment of the natural and creative force of her love.

All of this contrasts quite markedly with the Malorian prototypes on which Morris drew. He ignores the genuine amiability of Malory's Arthur, the heartfelt friendship which is destroyed by his bitter conflict with Launcelot, and the general ambience of Malory's dynastic intrigues, to focus on one woman's vindication of the reasons of the heart. Morris's poem minimizes the interlocking feuds of Malory's military caste to magnify the frustrations and

internal conflicts of two threatened lovers. Guenevere herself suffers forms of wretchedness and alienation quite foreign to Malory's politically shrewd and self-respecting queen; Malory's sophisticated aristocrat would have experienced little of Guenevere's sense of shame before "such great lords." Whereas Malory's Guinevere is self-protective and resilient, Morris's Guenevere expresses hopeless intensity, inspired compulsion, and seems "born for love alone."

Morris's second pair of Arthurian poems in *The Defence of Guenevere* – "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery," and "The Chapel in Lyonesse" – offer models of sublimation, now relieved only at death: a conventional solace which lacks the originality and fierce conviction of the title poem and "King Arthur's Tomb." Galahad is granted only a brief vision, and the final dream of the dying Ozana is not of Christ, but of tresses of golden hair, "Thinly outspread in the clear air / Against the jasper sea." "The Defence of Guenevere"'s earthly garden had been described in awed detail, but the empyreal garden of "The Chapel in Lyonesse" is merely mentioned, and "The Chapel"'s heavenly maidens are stilted and emblematic presentations, symbols of sublimation rather than believable companions or love-partners, even in heaven. Galahad's wistful loneliness and Ozana's beclouded confusion are more memorable than their visionary rewards. Unlike Tennyson, whose smugly exuberant Sir Galahad Morris once described to his friends as "rather a mild youth,"[4] Morris heightens the theme of sexual renunciation until its frustrations virtually become the theme of the poem, and like Launcelot, Galahad becomes the lonely defender of an evanescent ideal.

By contrast with such relentless exercises in sublimation, the secular adventures of Froissart's *Chronicles* provide for Morris what seems to have been a welcome immersion in historical narrative. Once again, however, Morris reworks Froissart's narrative to present men immured by their enemies and women who wait in stereotypical confinement. Consider, for example, "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," the longest *Defence* poem based on a Froissartian chronicle. The poem narrates the siege of Sir Peter's forces in a castle in Poictou, his imprisonment and execution, and the anxiety and grief of his lady Alice. As the poem opens Sir Peter, aware that he is trapped and may be killed, grieves that he cannot explain to Alice his military and political choices. Like other Morris characters

in extremis, he fantasizes an ideal scene, here of the recent rather than distant past; like that of Launcelot and Guenevere, his love finds its emblem in a garden:

> "O lady, have I sinn'd, your knight?
> That still you ever let me walk alone
> In the rose garden. . . .

The fantasy ends characteristically in an intense and all-forgiving kiss, coldly followed by renewed awareness of the reality of imminent defeat.

Alice is not estranged from him, as Peter fears, but her utter insulation excludes any possibility of help, or even sympathetic awareness – and so they are walled away from each other after all, but as much by assignment of social roles as by the fortunes of war. Sir Peter's last regret is that no woman can kiss him before he dies. Like Launcelot, Sir Peter has struggled in vain against oppressive odds: "Moreover, too, I like the straining game / Of striving well to hold up things that fall. . . ." Alice is in fact overwhelmed by the anxiety of waiting for news of Sir Peter's fate, an inner fear which becomes a "curling snake." Each sound is unbearable, and she too finds consolation in the fantasy of an ideal garden, and a kiss followed by oblivion:

> . . . it all sounds dim
> And faint, and I shall soon forget most things; . . .
>
> Lying so, one kiss,
> And I should be in Avalon asleep,
> Among the poppies and the yellow flowers; . . . .

Not a simple dream state, the fantasy in this poem gradually comes to incorporate some of the threatening qualities of outer reality. The worlds of dream and sensory perception merge:

> And there should be a noise of water going,
> Clear blue, fresh water breaking on the slates,
> Likewise the flies should creep – God's eyes! God help!
> A trumpet? I will run fast, leap adown
> The slippery sea-stairs, where the crabs fight.

Her anxiety turns in upon itself; on hearing the messenger's announcement of Sir Peter's death, she responds: "Do you not know, one turns one's head round quick, / And something cracks there with sore pain?" Bitterly aware of her inability to revenge herself

upon Guesclin, she articulately defines herself as a compassionate – and passive – woman, in a world controlled by active – and warring – men:

> And then – alas! alas! when all is said,
> What could I do but let you 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.

In desperation, she makes the somewhat bizarre offer to kiss the messenger if he will tell her that her husband still lives. Like Guenevere she is drawn in her anguish to fantasies of Christ as lover, but unlike Guenevere – who had imagined herself in Mary Magdalene's gesture as kissing Christ's feet – the less diffident Alice offers herself as the object of Christ's kisses.

"Sir Peter Harpdon's End" is one of Morris's best, most fully developed narratives. Unlike the Arthurian narratives, its plot is his own, and it is a virtual paradigm of many of Morris's later preoccupations. Only twenty-five years old and loyally devoted to his beloved, Sir Peter is attracted to the strength and orderliness of medieval England, and is willing to accept defeat in service to noble and beautiful causes: "So one becomes great." Alice and he embody the traditional virtues of their respective sexes, but simple happiness eludes them even more than Launcelot and Guenevere. Their lives and redemptive fantasies end in isolation, though each yearns sincerely for the other and for an emotional synthesis they will never have.

At least one long poem of *The Defence* provides a brief suspension of the somber tensions of the Malorian cycle and the deep frustration of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End." The sexual polarities in "Rapunzel" only underscore the poem's fairy-tale motif and conclusion. The poem begins as the dreamy, hesitant king's son rides out "to look for love," and sees a tower which he considers the appropriate dwelling for a virginal and beautiful woman. What most moves him about the tower, however, is that:

> . . . on all sides I saw the proofs
> Of a great loneliness that sicken'd me;
>
> Making me feel a doubt that was not fear,
> Whether my whole life long had been a dream. . . .

Not just perception of beauty but anger at its confinement moves him to heightened self-knowledge, sense of purpose, and sexual desire:

> Not born as yet, but going to be born,
> No naked baby as I was at first,
> But an armèd knight, whom fire, hate and scorn
> Could turn from nothing: my heart almost burst. . . .

In "Rapunzel" the Prince's descriptions of the lady emphasize to excess her weakness and need; he speaks of "her face quite pale against her hair" and "thin feet bare," and her victimization by "foul things . . . in the very likeness of Devil's bats. . . ." Compassion deepens sexual desire and in part justifies it. In a description anticipating the woman's mournfully hollow cheeks in "Beata Mea Domina," the Prince recounts a fantasy-image of his beloved's face: "A half smile on the lips, though lines of care / Had sunk the cheeks, and made the great eyes hollow."

Before finding his beloved, the Prince spends a period of lonely trial in the beechen wood, in which he experiences strange and awful fears, confusions, and dreams of a holy quest, followed by an interlude of nighttime self-confrontation, which parallels Galahad's dark night of approach to Lyonesse, and Launcelot's painful fears en route to Glastonbury. Like Alice and Guenevere, Rapunzel responds to her incarceration with lamentation, fear, prayer, and desire for a heavenly kiss: "*Give me a kiss, / Dear God, dwelling up in heaven!*" As is Alice, Rapunzel is granted relief from anguished visions in peaceful trance:

> God sends in middle of that dance,
> And I behold the countenance
> Of Michael, and can feel no more
> The bitter east wind biting sore
> My naked feet; can see no more
> The crayfish on the leaden floor,
> That mock with feeler and grim claw.

The imagery of the crayfish parallels the intrusion of fighting crabs into Alice's trance. These horrid visions appear on the nights when the witches plait Rapunzel's hair, symbolically confining her natural sexuality in bonds of convention. Rapunzel does not pray for escape from the tower, however, but for a face which will kiss her (like Sleeping Beauty) where she is. A model of Victorian

stereotypes, she does not expect to fight her way out of the tower, and considers confinement her womanly fate. Only when an outsider finds her enclosure and brings sexuality to "this very place" can she achieve freedom.

The Prince now confides to Rapunzel the disturbing nature of his own dreams; he fears death in combat, treachery of brothers-in-arms, and the general loneliness of battle. She replies with a tale of two knights who fought each other until one was wounded and the other dead, in which the Prince sees a parallel with himself. She answers with the healing suggestion that he leave his fears for love, "Yea, love; but shall we not depart from hence? / The white moon groweth golden fast. . . ."

"Rapunzel" has been read both as the embodiment of a familiar Victorian pattern of initiation into sexual and social duty, and as a romantic renunciation of military conquest and ambition for an inner world of love and imagination.[5] Much turns on the poem's interpretation of the Prince's "sword." At first it seems obviously associated with masculine readiness for battle and sex. The Prince, moreover, does not renounce the sword in favor of love, and phallic sword-references become rather ludicrous:

> Now let us go, love, down the winding stair,
> With fingers intertwined: ay, feel my sword!
>
> Guendolen now speaks no word,
> Hands fold round about the sword.
> Now no more of Guendolen.

Nevertheless the Prince contrasts the potentially fatal "wars and business" of the golden hall with his forest journey to seek love, and at the end Guendolen promises him: "Your hands need never grip the hammer'd sword again, / But all my golden hair shall ever round you flow."

The psychological emphases of this plot suggest another Victorian dramatic and lyrical narrative on the nature of marriage, published eleven years before the *Defence* and certainly known to Morris: Tennyson's *The Princess.* In it a dubiously medieval prince is considered by others to be eccentric, even mad: he sees visions, feels confused, and is unable to take hold of his life. Hitherto completely unwarlike, he nevertheless meets and wins Princess Ida's love by repelling an attack on her women's college; accepted

by her, he then faces the adult world with a sense of vocation and with the princess as his consort. The Prince's battle is so unreally and artificially inserted into the plot that it is hard to consider it more than symbolic, a description which would also apply to the Prince's rescue in "Rapunzel."

Tennyson's lyric "Come down, O maid, from yonder mountain height . . . / For Love is of the valley, come . . ." in *The Princess* had relied on the pervasive image of an aloof celibate woman who descends to join her lover on earth. In Morris's poem, by contrast, the lady's exalted state is physical not intellectual, and Rapunzel's descent causes none of the degradation and humiliation with which Ida is stripped of her women's college and dream of a new life for women. Rapunzel's reward is a happy union with nature.

Morris's Prince also has Adam's privilege to name his consort, in this case "Guendolen," to whom he sings a love-song which evokes a predictable response:

> Hands used to grip the sword-hilt hard,
> Framed her face, while on the sward
> Tears fell down from Guendolen.

At the tale's end, the Prince returns home to enjoy with confidence the respect of his people. Whether the sword has fought inner or outer battles, whether the Prince has repressed fears of mortality and betrayal, suppressed phallic anxieties, or both, the struggle has been brief. He is a temporarily alienated hero who rejoins society and takes his place beside his new wife in an ordered world:

> I am so glad, for every day
> He kisses me much the same way
> As in the tower; under the sway
> Of all my golden hair.

His initiation into maturity has been moderately strenuous, but the life that follows is one of peace. Compliance with sexual archetypes thus unites the Prince and Guendolen in conventional social patterns. But it should also be noted that the lovers have had to leave the worlds of battle and tower: the tale offers no happiness to men trapped in war and conflict, or to women enclosed in physical and psychological confinement.

I have argued that rigid schematization of sexual behavior recurs in virtually every poem of the *Defence*, where certain patterns and

associations are repeated again and again. In "The Gilliflower of Gold," for example, the male lover fiercely defends his beloved in a tournament. Like Launcelot in "The Defence of Guenevere" and the protagonists of Browning's "After" and "Count Gismond," the protagonist of "The Gilliflower of Gold" battles an evil and cruel opponent, here the wicked Sieur Guillaume. As the Prince in "Rapunzel" is moved from trance-like uncertainty by Rapunzel's beauty, so the speaker of "Gilliflower" is aroused from fear by pity for his beloved, whose death would follow his own. The gilliflowers directly recall the yellow lilies of the plaintive juvenile poem, "The Three Flowers," and the warrior turns out to be a king's son, whose use of his sword in some mysterious, extra-legal fashion earns him the kingdom. The new King's exuberance is momentarily suspended as he muses on what might have been:

> I almost saw your quiet head
> Bow'd o'er the gilliflower bed,
> The yellow flowers stain'd with red –
> *Hah! hah! la belle jaune giroflée.*

Compare Rapunzel's reflective shudder: "And even now a harsh voice seems / To hang about my hair."

As the title of "The Eve of Crecy" suggests, its French protagonist, Lambert, will be defeated the next day in battle, his visions of the golden Marguerite a frustrated fantasy. Familar patterns recur: as in "The Gilliflower of Gold," the lively rhythms reflect Lambert's eagerness for battle. As in "Rapunzel" and elsewhere, the desired woman is beautiful, physically remote, long-haired, associated with gold and flowers (the marguerite, or daisy), and, like most *Defence* heroines, of aristocratic birth. Like other protagonists, Lambert is preoccupied with kisses: "If I were rich I would kiss her feet, / I would kiss the place where the gold hems meet." Two departures from Morris's concept of heroism presage Lambert's defeat: he is not motivated by compassion or pity for Marguerite, who is not herself in any danger, and his love of glory gradually becomes covetous:

> Of Margaret sitting glorious there,
> In glory of gold and glory of hair,
> And glory of glorious face most fair; –
> *Ah! qu'elle est belle La Marguerite.*

His motive is also partly economic: the lack of "heaps of food and firewood." His love does not have the disinterested quality of Launcelot's or Sir Peter's. Lambert also makes the fatal mistake of waiving the obligatory night of self-doubt, a necessary initiation for Morris's eventually victorious knights.

Several other poems also follow the joyful-brave-victorious knight pattern of "The Gilliflower of Gold"; among these are "Two Red Roses across the Moon," "Father John's War Song," "A Good Knight in Prison," and "The Little Tower." The latter even cheerfully inverts the themes of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" and "The Defence of Guenevere." A nobleman rides away from the king's council table knowing that he must defend his castle from siege and his lady from death; his motive is defense of his family and his land. His night journey is warmed by his sense of purpose, but otherwise similar to those of Sir Galahad and Launcelot, and like Sir Peter he bravely endures siege. The poem's rhythms in describing these experiences are vigorous and syncopated:

> Though our arms are wet with the slanting rain,
> This is joy to ride to my love again: . . . .
>
> What matter: up and down hill after hill;
> Dead grey night for five hours still.

Some of the rhymes are themselves minor acts of courage: "There she stands, and her yellow hair slantingly / Drifts the same way that the rain goes by." The woman, Isabeau, is again fair and golden-haired, and her hair intermingles with the wind and rain of journey and siege. Like Guenevere she may die at the stake, and as with Rapunzel, protection of her beauty is associated with the defenders' political and personal independence: "My lady is right fair, see ye! Pray God to keep you frank and free."

Several *Defence* poems conclude by framing the past and present, or viewing the present in retrospection from the future. As Sir Peter's bravery survived faintly in the song about Launcelot, so in "The Little Tower" the "Lady's golden head" remains the castle's symbol. The final line is a characteristic qualification of the poem's celebration:

> Many a year when we are dead,
> And over it our green and red,
> Barred with the Lady's golden head;
> From mere old age when we are dead.

"The Little Tower"'s physical terrain suggests that of "Rapunzel," of course, but also the landscape of Browning's "Childe Roland." In an earlier essay on *Men and Women* in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, "Childe Roland" had inspired a passionate outburst by Morris on work and love:

> . . . for this and all the others seem but a supplement to the love-poems, even as it is in all art, in all life; love, I mean, of some sort; and that life or art where this is not the case is but a wretched mistake after all.[4]

Morris may be incorrect in assuming that Browning's Dark Tower lacked a lost beloved, but his complaint is an interesting comment on his own determination to fuse the themes of work and love.

Thus far several possible fates have emerged for male protagonists. If they are good, they may suffer frustration or defeat by attrition, weariness, imprisonment, or death. No virtuous men are actually killed in battle anywhere in the *Defence*: they are treacherously murdered afterwards, run through from behind by a band of attackers, or cruelly beheaded. Evil men have more cause to fear death in battle or tournament, but good men ride cheerfully to victory, winning or defending their beloveds. Men suffer or triumph in battle, while women tensely await their return in confined enclosures, and several poems portray their discomfort or partial consolation.

Sexual polarities are equally conspicuous in the *Defence*'s dreamlike poems, which are preoccupied with the inner states of the women who wait. "The Sailing of the Sword," for example, is a ballad whose triadic patterns create an incremental sense of impending misfortune. The first two sisters, dressed in red and russet gowns, receive courteous attention from their noble lovers, Lord Robert and Sir Miles, who are departing on a sea voyage, and will in time return to marry them. The narrator, dressed in white, is snubbed by her departing lover Roland, who returns with a rival "tall white maid" as his new love. Once again the men travel and choose, and the women wait. The narrator's pallor and passivity is revealed by an affinity for the "peel'd white wand" and white gowns, rather than the natural holly, oak leaves, and rich colors of her sisters' garments.

In "The Tune of Seven Towers" the motif of the waiting woman whose adventuring lover will not return is inverted: like Ella in the early prose romance "A Dream," she forces him to go on a journey

from which he will not return, a journey rendered ominous and macabre by the introduction of a ghostly nether-world. Not Yoland, this time, but the ghosts have hair which floats in the wind: "Feet half in the water, there in a row / Long hair in the wind afloat." She has sent him on an impossible quest in search of trivial favors: "My coif and my kirtle, with pearls arow, / Oliver, go to-day!"

She "inwardly" promises the inevitable kiss, but refuses to speak the promise aloud to reassure him, and despite the presentiment that he will die, she implacably urges him forth. Their kiss may be reserved for a fine and private place:

> If you will go for me now,
> I will kiss your mouth at last;
> [She sayeth inwardly]
> (The graves stand grey in a row.)
> Oliver, hold me fast!
> *"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,*
> *"This is the tune of Seven Towers."*

"The Tune of Seven Towers" is a strangely disturbing poem, possessing some of the uncertain thematic resonance of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci": Yoland may be the voice of fate calling Oliver to inevitable death; she may feel sympathy as well as fear in anticipation of his destruction; or perhaps, as in "The Blue Closet," intend that he lead her into death. Whatever her motives, she remains both beautiful and cold, and Oliver leaves the fortress a solitary victim. Of his fate, she declares, "If any will go to it now, / He must go to it all alone," and her own last cry, "Oliver, hold me fast!" is precisely what he cannot do.

Morris employs his familiar conjunction of towers with desired women and life's tasks, with seven as a conventional numerological emblem of closure. The first stanza suggests poems from the juvenilia ("The Banners," "The Abbey and the Palace," and "Dedication of the Temple"):

> No one goes there now:
> For what is left to fetch away
> From the desolate battlements all arow,
> And the lead roof heavy and grey. . . .

Each succeeding stanza moves toward the two lovers' deaths. The often-quoted remark of an unidentified early acquaintance, "[Morris] has lately taken a strong fancy for the human,"[6] though arch,

correctly reflects Morris's shift of interest in the *Defence*, away from edifices and toward the people who inhabit them.

The varying line lengths and syncopated rhythms, like the poem itself, are subtly discordant; the refrain's alternating first word makes each repetition seem to bear a new relationship to its stanza: "*Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers, / "This is the tune of Seven Towers.*" The first line of the refrain is one of the longest in each stanza, which melodically expands and is then diminished by the next line's brevity and sudden change from dactyllic to trochaic meter.

Like "The Tune of Seven Towers," "The Blue Closet" was written in response to a Rossetti watercolor, and shared some of its elaborate formalization of death-in-life. The noble sisters Alice and Louise are immured in the Blue Closet; once a year they are allowed to sing, but must moderate their music so that a constant death knell overhead can still be heard. The torrential rhythms of the first stanza suggest the happy vigor with which they would like to infuse their playing:

> Lady Alice, Lady Louise,
> Between the wash of the tumbling seas
> We are ready to sing, if so ye please;
> So lay your long hands on the keys;
> Sing: "*Laudate pueri.*"

The icy discomfort of the Blue Closet reflects the claustrophobia of Rossetti's interior with its female figures. The sisters' singing in their confining closet before their death also recalls Tennyson's Lady of Shalott's weaving in the tower before she descends to her doom; like Morris's sisters, she too returns to the water. Thus, the "Blue" of the closet not only reflects cold, sadness, and the icy heaven of death, but specifically suggests the blue salt-sea which is oozing into their closet – a coffin to be swallowed in the all-consuming sea of existence.

The bell has been tolling for Louise's love, Arthur, whose return Louise has awaited (once again) since time immemorial:

> How long ago was it, how long ago,
> He came to this tower with hands full of snow?
>
> "Kneel down, O love Louise, kneel down!" he said,
> And sprinkled the dusty snow over my head.

Arthur becomes a virtual Love-in-Death image, as Yoland had been to Oliver. Unlike Yoland, however, he is affectionate and deeply regrets her sorrow; he in turn has been victimized and destroyed by the sea, where "she" – perhaps some demonic seaspirit – keeps his emotions and body enchained, and where "they" may strangle him, fates reminiscent of those of other Morris heroes. Arthur also recalls Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman," here stranded in the sea rather than on land. The passages describing Arthur's slow physical decay and reincarnation after death also suggest the strange reappearance of Lorenzo's pallid corpse to Isabella in Keats's "Isabella: Or, the Pot of Basil." Keats's Lorenzo had felt pain in watching his own gradual deterioration after death: to the extent that the body retained its human form, life remained in it. By contrast Arthur willingly forgets his decayed physical self, for he feels a regeneration in the spiritual world; his regeneration is rather melancholic and distant, however, in contrast to the more limited but earthly reincarnation of Keats's lovers.

An annunciation of Arthur's death occurs on Christmas Eve, while Louise, in the tradition of other *Defence* heroines, prays over her sorrow; her prayer, in fact, directly invokes his presence:

> Dear Lord, that loves me, I wait to receive
> Either body or spirit this wild Christmas-eve.
>
> *Through the floor shot up a lily red,*
> *With a patch of earth from the land of the dead,*
> *For he was strong in the land of the dead.*

The red lily has come a long way since its appearance as tiger-lily in Morris's juvenile poem, "The Three Flowers." Its sudden phallic penetration into the closed scene gives its image a startling vividness. Until now all has been green, purple, white, or blue, but red suggests passion and death, and the lily projects an unusually clear shape.

Arthur leads away Louise and Alice to join him in death, a variant of the doomed love triangle of Morris's juvenilia. There is no suggestion that Alice is reluctant to accompany them; perhaps the imminence of death – always in Morris a powerful healer of friction and loss – has rendered any such emotion irrelevant. All have followed their prescribed sexual patterns to death; he has gone forth to meet his, and the women have sadly awaited theirs.

"The Blue Closet" is a carefully idiosyncratic and complex poem, in some respects one of the best short poems of *The Defence*. Even a casual attempt at uncovering its intentions casts a strange backward light on earlier critical views that Morris's non-Malorian lyrics were melodious verbalism, devoid of meaning.

Sexual roles have been polarized in all the poems I have discussed, but the motif's complexity and evocative power have evolved from the juvenile poems, in which brave men rescued fair, frightened women. The elegant madrigal of disparate sexual roles now brings frustration and loneliness, intensified by self-conscious desire. Prisons and confining castles predominate over garden memories.

All of this returns us to the original question: to what extent do Morris's presentations reinforce conventional gender stereotypes? On the surface the men in *The Defence* are simplistically brave and resourceful, and the women are exaggeratedly fearful and helpless to the point of inanity. At their best, however, these helpless women exhibit a certain force of character and bravery in passive resistance. Jehane of "The Haystack in the Floods," for example, has standard-issue "slender fingers" and "weak hands," but stoically rejects submission to the tyrant Godmar and pays for her steadfastness with madness and death. Nor are all of the women of *The Defence* as emotionally unstable as Guenevere or as callous as Yoland; "Sir Peter Harpdon"'s Alice is also steadfast as well as loving and Rapunzel / Guendolen is at least devoted, good-natured and grateful for her rescue. An undertone of constraint and frustration is always discernible in Morris's women, no matter how intensely imaginative their attempts to realize traditional "womanly" virtues may be.

At their best, Morris's powerful characterizations of women subject to Victorian sexual polarities show the constraints under which women lived. In her 1982 *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*, Nina Auerbach has argued that male projections of female sexuality and power were central to Victorian culture, and that such "demonic" idealization provided women with some compensation for their legal and social disabilities. It is true that Victorian male portrayals of destructive women (Arnold's Iseult of Cornwall, Tennyson's Vivien, Rossetti's Sister Helen) often

conveyed repressed forms of anxiety and guilt; but a power to embody demonic or subrational forces might be as dubious as proletarian power to embody bourgeois fantasies of "the mob," or blacks' power to embody a "heart of darkness." Such ascriptions of power would seem rationalizations of powerlessness.

If Mary Wollstonecraft was right, that "women desire not power over men but over themselves," then the Gueneveres, Jehanes, Yolands, and Gudruns of Morris's poetry are truly victimized, isolated and desolate in a world in which they can suffer but not act. Much sexism is diverted puritanical rage, and Morris's obvious sympathy, absence of prudery, and high valuation of sensuous spontaneity culminate in his repudiating the divine patriarch's Edenic curse. Morris's alienated women represent passionate as well as "good" forces condemned to frustration and inactivity. Their intense wretchedness is an oppressively "feminine" but impassioned response, corresponding to some aspects of his own desires to liberate and redirect human energies. Morris's underscoring of the agonies of senseless male struggle and senseless female passivity expresses a partly unconscious critique of the "ideal" sexual patterns of the society in which he lived.

One aspect of the growing demands for women's rights gained Morris's strong advocacy: the right of women to freedom of choice in sexual matters. In private, he quietly accepted Jane Morris's liaison with Rossetti and was a devoted father to his two daughters. His actions and poetry also showed consistent respect for women's rights of private judgment and recognition of their equal dignity of perception and character. For this kind and compassionate man, portrayals of intensely suffering, isolated men and women may have been a cry of protest from the Victorian unconscious.

Morris's early poetry places high value on the qualities of his male protagonists – courage, fidelity, persistence – but values *equally* stereotypically feminine qualities with which he identified *himself*: intensity, longing, and sensuous response to physical beauty:

> As for me . . . I have [a love of beauty] naturally, for neither my father nor my mother nor any of my relatives had the least idea of it. I remember as a boy going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of Heaven had been opened to me – also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript. These first pleasures, which I discovered for myself, were stronger than anything else I have had in life.[7]

The sheer artistry of his portrayals of intense aesthetic experience is one of the most attractive aspects of his work.

Like the strands of Morris's designs, then, the qualities of courage and the love of beauty form an indefinitely extended complementary pattern, which should be interwoven, but which social constraints have unravelled. Morris's women represent artistic and emotional forces within every human being which s/he cannot repress without self-destruction; and these forces inspire not only the stereotypical virtues of Morris's male characters, but a deeper acceptance of nature which Morris considered the only possible form of human redemption.

For Morris then – more, perhaps, than for other Victorian poets – moral(istic) judgments of female sexuality are irrelevant, and the dignified women of the early poetry elude Victorian sexual codes. Morris's men and women embody qualities *equally* necessary for life: judgment and strength must be informed by passion and beauty, grace and intensity by perseverance and loyalty. His characters' struggles to reunite these complementary qualities witness the needless absurdity of their separation.

Morris thus portrayed forms of psychological and physical confinement of women which other male poets often ignored. The "romantic" predicaments of the women in *The Defence* reflect deeper forms of human alienation which he tried to remedy in many ways during his life. Men too are victimized in Morris's poetry, but the suffering of the women is more vivid, and more urgently demands redress. To Victorian debates on the nature of sexual experience, Morris's poetry contributed an appreciation of the psychological intensity and depth of female experience; and a characteristic awareness that social injustice falls with greatest weight on those permitted the meagerest defense.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Laurence Perrine, "Morris's Guenevere: An Interpretation," *Philological Quarterly*, 39 (April 1960), 234–41; Angela Carson's "Morris's Guenevere: A Further Note," *Philological Quarterly*, 42 (January 1963), 131–34; and Carole G. Silver, "'The Defence of Guenevere': A Further Interpretation," *Studies in English Literature*, 9 (Autumn 1969), 695–702.

2. Ralph Berry, "A Defence of Guenevere," *Victorian Poetry* 9 (Autumn 1971), 278.

3. Passages from *The Defence of Guenevere* are cited from *The Collected*

Works of William Morris, edited May Morris, London: Longmans, 1910, volume I.

4. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 1899; rpt. New York/London: Benjamin Bloom, 1968, I, p. 45.

5. See Robert L. Stallman, "'Rapunzel' Unravelled," *Victorian Poetry*, 7 (Autumn 1969), 221–32, and Dianne F. Sadoff, "Imaginative Transformation in William Morris's 'Rapunzel'," *Victorian Poetry*, 12 (Summer 1974), 153–64.

6. Mackail, I, p. 137.

7. British Library Add. MS. 45,350, F. 40.