

Morris and Tennyson

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I

Morris went up to Exeter College, Oxford, in January 1853. Mackail notes that he already knew Tennyson's poetry, as well as the first two volumes of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*. 'One of Burne-Jones's earliest recollections of his first term', we are told, 'was of Morris reading aloud "The Lady of Shalott" in the curious half-chanting voice, with immense stress laid on the rhymes, which always remained his method of reading poetry, whether his own or that of others'.¹ Georgiana Burne-Jones quotes from a letter from Burne-Jones in Oxford to Cormell Price on 1 May 1853, which included the assertion: 'If Tennyson affords you as many hours of unmitigated happiness – I speak without affectation here – as he has to me, you will look with gratitude to any who helped you to appreciate him.' Burne-Jones particularly praised 'Tears, idle tears', from Part IV of the 1847 poem *The Princess*, and a poem he calls 'Bugle Song', no doubt the lyric 'The splendour falls on castle walls', added between Parts III and IV in 1850, with its chorus:

Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying;
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.²

Burne-Jones concludes the letter on a solemn note, reminding us of the high-minded idealism of these young men: 'Remember, I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood. Learn Sir Galahad by heart. He is to be the patron of our Order'. Burne-Jones signed the letter, grandly, as 'General of the Order of Sir Galahad'.³ The Order, never to be realised, was to have consisted of these young idealists, including Morris as well as Burne-Jones and Price. Tennyson's poem 'Sir Galahad' celebrates the

idealistic knight who could famously claim:

My good blade carves the casques of men,
 My tough lance thrusteth sure,
 My strength is as the strength of ten,
 Because my heart is pure.

The poem recounts, in seven stanzas and Galahad's voice, his pursuit of the holy Grail and his desire to 'breathe the airs of heaven'. He hears a reassuring voice addressing him as 'just and faithful knight of god' and telling him, 'Ride on! The prize is near', but he is still on his quest as the poem ends:

So pass I hostel, hall and grange;
 By bridge and ford, by park and pale,
 All-armed, I ride, whate'er betide,
 Until I find the holy Grail.

(Ricks No.234)

Mackail quotes freely from the reminiscences of Oxford provided to him by R.W. Dixon, who had come up to Pembroke College, just before Morris, in October 1851. Dixon recorded:

It is difficult to the present generation to understand the Tennysonian enthusiasm which then prevailed both in Oxford and the world. All reading men were Tennysonians: all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing; and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson. Tennyson had invented a new poetry, a new poetic English: his use of words was new, and every piece that he wrote was a conquest of a new region. This lasted till 'Maud,' in 1855; which was his last poem that mattered. I am told that in this generation no University man cares for poetry. This is almost inconceivable to one who remembers Tennyson's reign and his reception in the Sheldonian in '55.⁴ There was the general conviction that Tennyson was the greatest of all poets of the century; some held him to be the greatest of all poets, or at least of all modern poets.⁵

Alfred Tennyson had been born in Lincolnshire in 1809, twenty-five years before Morris. The poems which could have been known to Dixon and Morris were those in the *Poems by Two Brothers* of 1827; *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* of 1830; *Poems of 1832*, which contained 'The Lady of Shalott',

'Oenone', 'The Palace of Art', 'The May Queen' and 'The Lotos-Eaters'; the two volumes of poems of 1842, *English Idyls and Other Poems*, which included 'The Epic – Morte D'Arthur', 'Ulysses', 'Locksley Hall' and 'Sir Galahad'; *The Princess* of 1847; and *In Memoriam* of 1850, the year in which Tennyson succeeded Wordsworth as Poet Laureate. The 'Morte D'Arthur' contains a good deal of what was to become known as the Tennysonian music, in its blank verse, as in the lines describing Arthur as he leaves Sir Bedivere and sails away for Avilion;

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail
 Moved from the brink, like some full-breasted swan
 That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,
 Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood
 With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere
 Revolving many memories, till the hull
 Looked one black dot against the verge of dawn,
 And on the mere the wailing died away.

(Ricks No. 226)

Although Tennyson engaged with Arthurian themes in some of his early poems, critics were, surprisingly to the modern reader, unenthusiastic about these. In [anonymously] reviewing *English Idyls* in the *Quarterly Review* in September 1842, John Sterling, whose opinion Tennyson valued, grouped together some of the poems in the second volume as 'Fancy pieces', in which 'the theme is borrowed or imitated from those conceptions of past ages that have become extremely strange or quite incredible to us'. Of these he remarks: 'In these the principal charm of the work can spring only from the vividness and grace of the imagery, the main idea making no direct impression on our feelings'. He included the 'Morte D'Arthur' in this group, remarking that 'The miraculous legend of "Excalibur" does not come very near us, and as reproduced by any modern writer must be a mere ingenious exercise of fancy'.⁶ Leigh Hunt in the *Church of England Quarterly Review* for October 1842, was also critical.⁷ Much later, in 1881, Tennyson told William Allingham that

he had planned out his Arthuriad, and could have written it all off without any trouble. But in 1842 he published, with other poems, the 'Morte

d'Arthur', which was one book of his Epic ... and the review in the *Quarterly* disheartened him, so that he put the scheme aside.⁸

Dixon emphasised the admiration for Tennyson of Fulford, a fine reader of poetry: 'I have listened entranced to his reading of "In Memoriam".'⁹ In view of this attitude, it is not surprising that Fulford contributed a series of appreciative articles on Tennyson to the students' *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* from January 1856. Fiona MacCarthy tells us that Tennyson, acknowledging receipt of a copy, 'praised the "truthfulness and earnestness" of the undertaking'.¹⁰ But Dixon also noted that each of the group of undergraduates accepted Tennyson in his own way, and went into some detail about Morris's approach:

The attitude of Morris I should describe as defiant admiration. This was apparent from the first. He perceived Tennyson's limitations, as I think, in a remarkable manner for a man of twenty or so. He said once, 'Tennyson's Sir Galahad is rather a mild youth'. Of 'Locksley Hall' he said, apostrophising the hero, 'My dear fellow, if you are going to make that row, get out of the room, that's all'. Thus he perceived a certain rowdy, or bullying, element that runs through much of Tennyson's work: runs through 'The Princess', 'Lady Clara Vere', or 'Amphion'. On the other hand, he understood Tennyson's greatness in a manner that we, who were mostly absorbed by the language, could not share. He understood it as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them. Of the worlds that Tennyson opened in his fragments, he selected one, as I think the finest and most epical, for special admiration, namely 'Oriana'. He offered the suggestion, and with great force, that the scenery of that matchless 'ballad' is not of Western Europe, but South Russian, or Crimean. He held that 'the Norland whirlwinds' shewed this: and he had other reasons. It was this substantial view of value that afterwards led him to admire ballads, real ballads, so highly. As to Tennyson, I would add that we all had the feeling that after him no farther development was possible: that we were at the end of all things in poetry. In this fallacy Morris shared.¹¹

It is interesting to find Morris, in Dixon's account, identifying a 'rowdy, or bullying, element' in Tennyson; the effect perhaps occurs when Tennyson, seeking to distance himself from what we would now term

Aestheticism, feels called on to assert a strong moral or political position.¹² Of the poems referred to, 'Locksley Hall' certainly expresses its social criticism with more energy than elegance, as in its concluding lines:

Comes a vapour from the margin, blackening over heath and holt,
Cramming all the blast before it, in its breast a thunderbolt.

Let it fall on Locksley Hall, with rain or hail, or fire or snow,
For the mighty wind arises, roaring seaward, and I go.

(Ricks No. 271)

'Lady Clara Vere de Vere', to give the poem its full title, is a clumsy if ferocious attack on an aristocrat who has scorned and, it would seem, so killed a 'foolish yeoman' who was presumably in love with her:

Lady Clara Vere de Vere,
 There stands a spectre in your hall:
The guilt of blood is at your door:
 You changed a wholesome heart to gall.
You held your course without remorse,
 To make him trust his modest worth,
And, last, you fixed a vacant stare,
 And slew him with your noble birth.

(Ricks No. 246)

On the other hand, *The Princess* explores an important subject, the higher education of women, and does not seem to me notably 'bullying' in its tone, while 'Amphion' is a more light-hearted poem about the classical musician whose lyre could once move nature in amazing ways:

'Tis said he had a tuneful tongue,
 Such happy intonation,
Whenever he sat down and sung
 He left a small plantation ...

By contrast the modern narrator 'could not move a thistle', while his neighbours read 'Botanic Treatises' and grow 'spindlings' which 'look unhappy'. He can only do his best:

I'll take the showers as they fall,

I will not vex my bosom:
Enough if at the end of all
A little garden blossom.

(Ricks No. 270)

This seems at least harmless, though Dixon implies that Morris was right in his judgment of all these poems. It certainly shows that Morris was a careful and discriminating reader of Tennyson at the time, and evidently preferred the more romantic of his poems.

Morris is also said by Dixon to have been less concerned than his colleagues with Tennyson's language, for mastery of which his admirers particularly praised him, and focussed instead on 'substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them'. In the example discussed, the very early 'Ballad of Oriana', Morris seems to have been concerned to identify the location of the poem, and also to have admired its near-epic quality. Morris's choice is of particular interest, as it is not one of Tennyson's best-known poems. It begins:

My heart is wasted with my woe,
Oriana,
There is no rest for me below,
Oriana.
When the long dun wolds are ribb'd with snow
And loud the Norland whirlwinds blow,
Oriana,
Alone I wander to and fro,
Oriana.

The story—again a first-person narrative—tells of the unnamed protagonist riding into action in 'theyew-wood black as night', having plighted his troth to Oriana, who stood upon the ramparts of her castle to watch. The narrator had loosed an arrow at 'a foeman tall', but by mischance had missed him and killed the lady. He then fell on his face, hoping to be killed, but survived the battle. He repeatedly addresses Oriana in his desperate anguish, as her proceeds on his 'weary, weary way'. The poem, in eleven stanzas, concludes:

When Norland winds pipe down the sea,
 Oriana,
 I walk, I dare not think of thee,
 Oriana.
 Thou liest beneath the greenwood tree,
 I dare not die and come to thee,
 Oriana.
 I hear the roaring of the sea,
 Oriana.

(Ricks No. 114)

We can see – or hear – how the music of this poem and its mysterious atmosphere, together with its setting among ‘the Norland whirlwinds’, might have appealed to the young Morris, who was engaged in writing the poems of his first volume at the time. Isobel Armstrong has pointed out that the poem may be seen as a transformation of the folk ballad ‘Fair Helen of Kirconnel’ in Scott’s *Minstrelsy*, and that the line ‘I hear the roaring of the sea’ is taken from an ancient ballad. But she emphasises that the conclusion of the poem is different, in that ‘the simple, personal conflict which leads to the death of Fair Helen is replaced by a more ambiguous tragedy of accident and deflected intention in “Oriana”’.¹³ Perhaps this is why Fulford thought this the ‘most epical’ of Tennyson’s early poems, and to have forecast Morris’s future interest in the ballad form – an interest shared with Tennyson.

In an often quoted letter to Cormell Price in July 1856 Morris, still an undergraduate, remarked that ‘I can’t enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another ...’. He concluded by saying, ‘I was slipping off into a kind of small (very small) Palace of Art ...’¹⁴ Tennyson’s poem of that name had been published in his *Poems* in 1832, and concerns the question, a troubling one for the poet, whether art should be a self-contained activity or an attempt to address social issues. The problem is still unresolved at the end, when the Soul ‘threw her royal robes away’ to ‘mourn and pray’ in ‘a cottage in the vale’, but asks that her ‘palace towers’ should be allowed to remain: ‘“Perchance

I may return with others there/ When I have purged my guilt”.’ (Ricks No. 167) Morris would seem to have been pondering the same problem as he wondered about his vocation; it was around this time that he met Rossetti, who encouraged him to paint.

But Morris was already writing poetry, and in February 1858, at the age of twenty-four, he published *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, containing thirty poems in all. Some of these show Tennysonian features, others the influence of Browning. May Morris included in her Introduction to Vol. XXII of Morris’s *Collected Works* extracts from some notes taken by Sydney Cockerell at an autobiographical talk given by Morris in November 1892. These include the observation, ‘I remember the issue of Tennyson’s “Maud,” and its doubtful reception by the reviewers . . . After the Tennyson period Rossetti introduced me to Browning, who had a great influence on me’.¹⁵ It would be interesting to specify when Morris thought that his ‘Tennyson period’ ended, and indeed what he made of ‘Maud’, a poem which drew a good deal of critical animosity on its publication in the summer of 1855,¹⁶ and might be considered to have in its tone something of the ‘bullying’ element Morris disliked elsewhere. (Nor indeed do we have any record of his response to the first laureate poem, ‘Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington’, published in November 1852, or ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, published in December 1854). Tennyson’s influence is most evident in the more lyrical shorter poems and in the fantasies, rather than in the more vigorous and dramatic Arthurian poems and those deriving from the Anglo-French wars described by Froissart. But whatever influences can be discerned behind these poems, the overall effect is idiosyncratic and personal to the young Morris. Thus Ruskin wrote to the Brownings at the time, ‘I’ve seen his poems, just out, about old chivalry, and they are most noble – very, very great indeed – in their own peculiar way’.¹⁷

The editors of Tennyson’s letters claim that Morris sent Tennyson a copy of *The Defence of Guenevere* in February 1858.¹⁸ But if he did, he seems to have received no response. The reviews of *The Defence* were mostly unfavourable; references to Tennyson were frequent, though varied in their implications. *The Spectator* found evidence of ‘the prosaic baldness of the worst passages of Tennyson’ (*WMCH*, p.31), while Richard Garnett, more intelligently, wrote of the revived interest in the Arthurian romances originating with ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and other poems by Tennyson, but

now taking new directions. He alluded to Edward Bulwer's *King Arthur* and Matthew Arnold's 'Tristram and Iseult', but principally to the Pre-Raphaelites, and the recent decoration of the Debating Chamber at the Oxford Union. Garnett argued that Morris was remarkably different from Tennyson in his handling of Arthurian themes, quoting five stanzas from 'Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery' to make his point. His conclusion is that

Tennyson writes of medieval things like a modern, and Mr. Morris like a contemporary. Tennyson's 'Sir Galahad' is Tennyson himself in an enthusiastic and devotional mood; Mr. Morris's is the actual champion, just as he lived and moved and had his being some twelve hundred years ago

Despite his praise for 'Sir Galahad' and 'The Chapel in Lyonesse', Garnett was severely critical of 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb', attributing to them 'carelessness and inattention to finish' which clearly put them at the opposite extreme to Tennyson. For Garnett, Morris's poems are in the same relationship to Tennyson's as are 'Rossetti's illustrations of the Laureate to the latter's own conceptions' – a reference to the Moxon Tennyson of the previous year.¹⁹ Garnett also noted the influence of Browning on the Froissartian poems in Morris's volume, and praised 'The Haystack in the Floods' in which 'Mr. Morris's native romance and pathos unite with his model [Browning]'s passion and intensity to form a whole unsurpassed, we will venture to say, by any man save Tennyson, since the golden age of British poetry expired with Byron at Missolonghi'. (*WMCH*, pp. 32–4) The anonymous reviewer in *The Tablet* gave an intelligent welcome to the volume, noted that its first four poems were Arthurian, told the story of 'Sir Galahad' with quotations, and stated that 'The Chapel in Lyonesse' was 'very beautiful, and not unworthy of the companionship of Tennyson's "Morte D'Arthur" and "Sir Galahad"'. (*WMCH*, p. 21)

It is illuminating to compare Morris's 'Sir Galahad. A Christmas Mystery' with Tennyson's 'Sir Galahad', which has already been discussed. Morris's poem, deriving from Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Book XVII, is more elaborate and, as Kirchhoff argues, 'offers an alternative psychologically richer and morally more thought-provoking'.²⁰ Its first section, comprising thirty-four four-line stanzas, is narrated by Galahad. It records his loneliness, as he contrasts himself with knights like Palomydes, the lover of Iseult, and his father Launcelot, lover of Guenevere. But when he falls asleep on the chapel floor, he has a vision of Christ, who encourages him

in his celibacy: ‘“look up, I say, /And see how I can love you, for no pride// Closes your eyes, no vain lust keeps them down. / See now you have ME always”.’ (CW, vol. I, p. 27) Galahad then sees two angels and four ladies entering the chapel, who tell him to sleep while the Grail is there.

In the second part of the poem, he awakens to see the angels, who call on him to follow the Sangreal which has ‘gone forth /Through the great forest’ to the northern sea, where he will meet Launcelot, Bors, Percival, and the sister of Percival. The four ladies arm him with hauberke, sword, spurs and basnet, an angel puts on his ‘crossed surcoat’, and Galahad is left alone. He is joined by Sir Bors and Sir Percival and his sister. He asks whether they have news of Launcelot or the Grail. Sir Bors’s answer is not reassuring. They had seen ‘a great light’ gliding through the forest, but it been ‘far off, / And so passed quickly’; / the news from the court is grim: the jester Dinadam has been murdered; Sir Lionel and Sir Gawain have returned from ‘the great quest, / Just merely shamed’; Lauvain had been sent by Arthur to find Launcelot, but has returned injured, and may be dead by now:

everywhere
The knights come foil’d from the great quest, in vain;
In vain they struggle for the vision fair.

(CW, vol. I, p. 28)

It is a bleak and unexpectedly sudden conclusion indeed, and puzzles the reader who is expecting some reassurance. Perhaps the implication is that Galahad and his companions will go on to achieve what the more worldly knights have inevitably failed to do. Christine Poulson remarks that we may see Morris’s poem as a comment on ‘Galahad’s easy acceptance of celibacy and his supreme confidence in his mission’ in Tennyson’s poem. In contrast, Morris emphasises, through Galahad’s hardly suppressed jealousy, the sensual and the erotic. Poulson concludes: ‘Galahad chooses heavenly glory rather than earthly love, but the latter is shown to be very attractive’.²¹ But even this does not account for the downbeat ending of the poem, which surely reminds us that by the time he wrote the poem Morris was no longer a believer. He had decided not to enter the church two years earlier, sometime in the summer of 1855, and confirmed this in a long letter to his mother on 11 November. (Kelvin, vol. I, pp. 24–26) Isobel Armstrong’s penetrating account brings out the poem’s complexity: ‘The

poem can be read as the transcendence of physical love by spiritual love, as the lesser knights who have substituted sexual love for spiritual, fail: the poem ends "In vain they struggle for the vision fair". Or it can be read as the disturbed and deprived imagination's substitution of spirituality for sexuality as the neurotic intensity of Galahad's longing is displaced into the idealism which conjures the Sangreal and its attendant and subordinated female saints'.²² This takes us a long way from the idealisation of Galahad in Tennyson's poem.

The Saturday Review deplored what it saw as the Pre-Raphaelitism of *The Defence of Guenevere*, and Morris's handling of Arthurian themes; the reviewer hoped that, by contrast, this subject-matter might one day be given to 'the fulness of Tennyson's powers'. (*WMCH*, p. 415) This was indeed soon to be the case. For in early 1859 Tennyson returned to Arthurian themes, publishing the first four *Idylls of the King*, 'Enid', 'Vivien', 'Elaine' and 'Guinevere', to widespread applause.²³ The volume indeed marked his acceptance as the great English poet. Georgiana Burne-Jones, writing of the period spent by Burne-Jones at Little Holland House in 1858, quoted from a reminiscence of his about Tennyson, a fellow-guest: 'It was there I got to know Tennyson first. It was in the days when he was fiercely attacked and reviled by people: after he wrote the 'Idylls of the King' and gave them what they wanted they were pleased and praised him – but in the days of the *Poems* and *Maud* he was much abused by the English. Unfortunately he minded being abused and was very sensitive about it ...'.²⁴ Now, confident of the response of his public, Tennyson could continue with the *Idylls*. In 1869, he added 'The Holy Grail', 'The Coming of Arthur', 'Pelleas and Etarre' and 'The Passing of Arthur'; 'The Last Tournament' was published in 1871, 'Gareth and Lynette' in 1872, and the final poem, 'Balin and Balan', in 1885.

Rossetti, writing to Mrs. Gaskell on 18 July 1859, after the appearance of Tennyson's early group of *Idylls*, praised *The Defence* and remarked: 'With all its faults of youth, I must say I think the Arthurian part has much the advantage (in truth to the dramatic life of the old romance) over Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*; wonderful of course as these last are, in rhythm, in finish, in all modern perfections.' (*WMCH*, p.194) But the fullest early comparison of the Arthurianism of Tennyson and Morris was articulated by the historical novelist J. H. Shorthouse; the lecture in which it is expressed is mainly concerned with Tennyson's 1859 *Idylls of the*

King, and probably dates from that year.

Shorthouse set out three sets of principles which should be observed by those aiming to reproduce the legends of the past in modern form, and denies that Tennyson has observed any of them. The first is to 'preserve faithfully the spirit as well as the exterior form of the legends (in which case a wide success amongst modern readers is hardly to be promised them)'. It was here that Morris had succeeded: '*The Defence of Guenevere*, speaking advisedly, is the most wonderful reproduction of the tone of thought and feeling of a past age that has ever been achieved' – which accounts for the failure of reviewers to do justice to it. It evidently did not occur to these reviewers that it might be a demanding task to enter into the spirit of a world different from their own. 'Mr. Morris, if we may judge him by his writings, is not a man to regret the course he took, or to consider his labour thrown away; and, even if he doubted it before, the publication of the *Idylls of the King* has proved that, if the Arthurian Romances are ever to be worthily rewritten in modern poetry, it will be as he has done it, and not otherwise'. (*WMCH*, pp. 48–9)

Swinburne drew a similar contrast in reviewing *The Life and Death of Jason* in July 1867:

A little later than this one [*The Defence*] appeared another volume of poems [*The Idylls*], not dissimilar in general choice of stories and subjects, perfect where this was imperfect, strong where this was weak; but strong and perfect on that side alone. All that was wanting here was there supplied, but all that was here supplied was wanting there. In form, in structure, in composition, few poems can be more faultless than those of Mr. Tennyson, faultier than those of Mr. Morris, which deal with the legend of Arthur and Guenevere.

He then went into a detailed discussion of 'King Arthur's Tomb', commenting on Morris's account of Launcelot's love for Guenevere: 'Not in the idyllic school is a chord ever struck, a note ever sounded, as tender and subtle as this.' Having quoted three stanzas from the poem, Swinburne concluded this part of his discussion in Morris's favour:

Such verses are not forgettable. They are not, indeed, – as are the *Idylls of the King* – the work of a dextrous craftsman in full practice. Little beyond dexterity, a rare eloquence, and a laborious patience of hand, have been

given to the one or denied to the other. These are good gifts and great; but it is better to want clothes than limbs.

(*WMCH*, pp. 57–8, 58, 60)

Similarly, in his sympathetic review of *The Life and Death of Jason* in June 1867, Joseph Knight remarked that ‘It is classical in thought and feeling, but its classicism is all unlike the classicism of Swinburne, or Landor, or Tennyson, or Keats. No single idea about it seems to have even the slightest reference to any modern thought or feeling’. (*WMCH*, p. 52) Mackail was to make a similar point in his biography: ‘Even the transmission of modern sentiment into an ancient story, as had been done with the Arthurian cycle by Tennyson, was a thing that Morris instinctively disliked.’²⁵

The point can be illuminated by considering the two poets’ respective treatments of Arthur, Lancelot and Guenevere. In ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ and ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’ Morris takes the reader into a dramatic world built on medieval beliefs. Here Guenevere recalls the fight of Sir Launcelot – who has grandly left his left side ‘uncovered’ – with Mellyagraunce:

‘The fight began, and to me they drew nigh;
Ever Sir Launcelot kept him on the right,
And traversed warily, and ever high

‘And fast leapt caitiff’s sword, until my knight
Sudden threw up his sword to his left hand,
Caught it, and swung it; that was all the fight;

‘Except a spout of blood on the hot land...

‘Yet Mellyagraunce was shent,
For Mellyagraunce had fought against the Lord;
Therefore, my lords, take heed lest you be blent

‘With all this wickedness...’

(*CW*, vol. I, pp. 7–8)

In contrast, Tennyson’s Arthur addresses his adulterous queen, with however much anguish and generosity, in the terms of Victorian patriarchy:

Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes,
 I do not come to curse thee, Guinevere,
 I, whose vast pity almost makes me die
 To see thee, laying there thy golden head,
 My pride in happier summers, at my feet...
 And all is past, the sin is sinned, and I,
 Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God
 Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest.
 But how to take last leave of all I loved?

O golden hair, with which I used to play
 Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,
 And beauty such as woman never wore,
 Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee –
 I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,
 But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the King's.
 I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh,
 And in the flesh thou hast sinned ...

Tennyson effectively complicates his account by Arthur's admission that his moral rejection of Guinevere does not preclude his continuing to love her – 'Let no man dream but that I love thee still' – but the point of view given is the male one:

And while she grovelled at his feet,
 She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck,
 And in the darkness o'er her fallen head,
 Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

(Ricks No. 474)

Ricks explains that Tennyson's poem was written by March 1858, though published in 1859; it could not therefore have been written, as is sometimes suggested, in answer to Morris's poem. Simon Dentith has recently remarked that the two poets' 'opposite attitudes to Guinevere's transgression are only symptomatic of a whole range of differences, above all in their politics.'²⁶ But the difference is clearly one of poetic technique and intention too.

II

In the decade following the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere* Morris wrote little poetry and completely abandoned Arthurian subject-matter. No doubt his marriage to Jane Burden in 1859, the building of Red House, the births of Jenny and May, and the setting up of the Firm, kept his time occupied, but he did start and abandon the series of poems known as ‘Scenes from the Fall of Troy’, of which only six of the planned twelve were completed; they were not published until May Morris included them in the final volume of the *Collected Works* in 1915. Fiona MacCarthy describes them as ‘strange and intense poems, dealing with the events in Troy as the War itself was coming to an end’, and drawing on various sources including Caxton’s *Historyes of Troy*, Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Shakespeare’s grimly comic *Troilus and Cressida*. She notes that in some of these poems there is ‘vivid and protracted’ violence, suggesting that Morris would have had freshly in his memory at the time ‘those similar scenes of savagery, rape and carnage, perpetrated by the British in north-western India after the siege of Lucknow in the autumn of 1858’. Tennyson might well have taken a different view of what the British called the ‘Indian Mutiny’.²⁷ At all events, Morris abandoned the ‘Scenes’, and when he began writing poetry again it was in a far less dramatic and more relaxed narrative mode, drawing on a wide variety of sources, including prominently the classical, but never reverting to Arthurian subject-matter. J.M.S. Tompkins has remarked in this context: ‘Morris may have felt Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, of which the first four appeared in 1859, an obstruction’.²⁸ She also noted that, unlike Burne-Jones, Morris did not write about the Grail after losing his Christian faith – though the account given above of Morris’s ‘Galahad’ may qualify this.

In these years Tennyson followed the four original successful *Idylls* with the even more successful narrative poem *Enoch Arden* of 1864. These years were indeed, as M. Shaw showed in his 1973 article on ‘Tennyson and His Public 1827–1859’, ‘the high tide of Tennyson’s reputation’. *The Idylls* sold 10,000 copies in its first week, and *Enoch Arden* 40,000 in the year of its publication, earning its author over £5,000. His popularity with the reading public was to continue, although his critical reputation declined during the 1870s.²⁹ Meanwhile, Morris came back to poetry with his lengthy narrative *The Life and Death of Jason*, published in 1867 when he found

that the poem had grown too long to be included in the planned *Earthly Paradise*. The poem gives some evidence of Morris's liking for early Tennyson, as Florence Boos has shown. Jason's exhortation to the mariners is comparable to speeches in 'Ulysses' and 'The Lotos-eaters', and Orpheus' mellifluous song also shows some resemblance to the latter. The description of the garden seems to reflect Morris's reading of 'The Hesperides', and there are allusions to 'Tears, idle tears' and 'The Palace of Art'.³⁰ The editors of Tennyson's letters claim that Morris sent Tennyson a copy of *Jason*; they then quote *Tennyson and His Friends*: 'He tried to read Morris's Jason, but said "No go".' On the other hand, F. T. Palgrave told W.M. Rossetti, in a letter in October, 'I am delighted to see that Jason has reached a second edition. I heard very favourable things about it from A. Tennyson (who came with me for three weeks last autumn into Devonshire)'.³¹

Morris's elaborate poem *The Earthly Paradise* appeared, to increasing popular acclaim, between April 1868 and December 1870. The only known letter from Tennyson to Morris was written, from Farringford, on 9 May 1868, in response to Morris's having sent him the first volume. Tennyson wrote positively: 'Dear Mr. Morris, Many thanks for your new book and your kind regards. If I like the Paradise as well as I did the Jason I shall find it a rich gift.' The editors of Tennyson's letters then state, of Tennyson and Morris, 'They must have met (Allingham was a close friend of both), but no meeting appears to be on record'.³² But it seems to me unlikely that any such meeting would have gone completely unrecorded.

That Morris continued to retain respect for Tennyson's work at this period is evident from a letter he wrote on 12 August 1869 from Bad-Ems to the Oxford undergraduate Edward Nicholson, who was proposing to set up a magazine. (Kelvin's note tells us that the plan was not to be carried out). Morris assured Nicholson that he seems to be better organised than had been the founders of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*; he then goes on:

Your kind talk of my poems gratifies me very much, it is indeed a pleasure to be able to please thinking people – yet – don't think it ungracious if I take you to task for falling upon Tennyson, who after all is a great poet, and to my mind has well won his honours: no doubt you are right in the faults you find in your letter; no doubt Tennyson ought to have avoided them; but it is always unfair to judge a man by any but his best works, and (es-

pecially if he be a lyrical poet, as T. emphatically is) the amount of these don't necessarily add to his claim to be considered a great poet ... I allow as a matter of course that Tennyson has little or no dramatic capacity, not enough for him to write even narrative poetry with success. But if you think of the finish of *In Memoriam*, the pathos and feeling of the *May Queen*, the delicate sentiment of *Mariana*, you must surely allow that he is a great poet – or what do you think of those few lines “tears idle tears”? Well I shouldn't have said so much only one sees a sort of reflex against Tennyson after a great deal of puffry of him; it is natural, it is a good deal his own fault, but it is a pity I think.

(Kelvin, vol. I, p. 86)

The choice is of Tennyson's earlier poems: 'Mariana' was in the 1830 volume, 'The May Queen' in 1832, 'Tears, idle tears' in *The Princess* in 1847, and *In Memoriam* in 1850. This goes to support the observation of Paul Thompson that Morris 'liked very little poetry written after 1855; in particular he felt little sympathy for later Tennyson, later Browning, or Swinburne ...'.³³ Morris's view that Tennyson was temperamentally a lyric poet, who forced himself into narrative and drama, suggests that he saw his own gifts as very different from those of the Poet Laureate. Writing to Webb on 15 August 1869 about Nicholson's letter, which Webb had sent on to Bad-Ems, Morris told him that Janey had 'got a pain in her back in laughing at it'. Presumably it had contained extravagant praise of Morris's poetry compared to Tennyson's, since Morris adds: 'I felt so sheepish; I had to write back again a long letter to him thanking him but explaining to him that Tennyson was not quite a fool.' (Kelvin, vol. I, p. 88)

Tennyson published his second group of four *Idylls* – 'The Coming of Arthur', 'The Holy Grail', 'Pelleas and Ettarre' and 'The Passing of Arthur' – as *The Holy Grail and Other Poems* – in late 1869, and some of the reviews of *The Earthly Paradise* made comparisons with Tennyson. Alfred Austin's article in *Temple Bar* for November 1869 attempted to discriminate among contemporary poets, and found Morris useful for that purpose. For Austin, 'in Mr. Morris is plain and obvious what in Mr. Tennyson, Mr. Swinburne and Mr. Arnold has to be made so by some little examination, unravelling and exegesis on the part of the critic. They halt infirmly and irresolutely between two currents, two influences, two themes. Mr. Morris's poetical allegiance is undivided'. Tennyson, Austin

argues, 'has alternately courted the past and the future, without ever once being able to satisfy our, and, we presume, his own, ineradicable longings for a great contemporaneous poem'. Morris, in contrast, 'has surrendered himself wholly to the retrospective tendency of his time, which, when taken by itself, is the most pathetic and poetical proclivity of which the time is capable'. Morris, unlike Tennyson and the other poets specified, has 'given the go-by to his age, and he has done wisely'. However, this does not mean that he is a great poet; the age could not produce one. He is simply, in his own words, 'the idle singer of an empty day', or, in Austin's concluding view, 'the wisely unresisting victim of a rude irreversible current; the serene martyr of a mean and melancholy time'. (*WMCH*, p. 100) In his account of Tennyson, Austin argued that he was a minor poet, grossly overestimated by the age in which he had the misfortune to live.³⁴

The review of Part III of *The Earthly Paradise* in March 1870 in *The Spectator* asserted that Morris's position as a poet was unique: 'this new part of *The Earthly Paradise* has appeared almost at the same time as Mr. Tennyson's last poems [*The Holy Grail* volume], but no competition or comparison is possible. They belong to different worlds of thought, and one cannot interfere with the other'. The explanation of the difference is that 'It is Mr. Morris's happy and peculiar faculty to cast utterly aside the complex questionings that vex our modern poetry'. Tennyson's tendency is to 'comment and explain in his own person'. In contrast, Morris 'has given us an effectual antidote for the overwrought self-consciousness of this generation . . . his business is to do away with explanations and questions altogether'. (*WMCH*, pp. 112, 113, 114) G.W. Cox in the *Edinburgh Review* in January 1871 took a similar but rather more critical approach; for him, Morris's aim was simply to impart 'the purest and most intense delight' to his readers; 'as we read tale after tale, it would be a vain to attribute to him the fixed design by which Mr. Tennyson has worked the several parts of the Arthurian story into one magnificent whole'; Tennyson created in his Arthur 'the embodiment of the highest Christian chivalry', and thus put himself on a higher plane than Morris. But Cox claimed that he was not 'blind to the loveliness of its [the poem's] flowers, or deaf to the music which is heard amidst its groves'. (*WMCH*, pp. 125, 149)

A review of Part IV in the *Westminster Review* in April 1871 made a slightly different comparison:

Mr. Morris's popularity has, however, something remarkable about it. He is, we have noticed, appreciated by those who, as a rule, do not care to read any poetry. To our personal knowledge, political economists and scientific men to whom Shelley is a mystery and Tennyson a vexation of spirit, read *The Earthly Paradise* with admiration. We do not pretend fully to explain this phenomenon. One of the causes, however, is obviously the excessively easy flow and simple construction of Mr. Morris's verse.

(*WMCH*, p.156)

Modern critics have noted some Tennysonian influences in Morris's poem. Kirchhoff refers to Rolf in the 'Prologue' addressing his companions 'much in the style of Tennyson's *Ulysses* – urging them to resume the quest',³⁵ and Florence Boos makes a similar point. She also argues that echoes of Tennyson can be discerned in the first Prologue, and that the influence of Tennyson can be felt in 'The Death of Paris' – Rossetti complained to Jane that Morris had taken his subject from Tennyson. Boos relates 'Ogier the Dane' to 'The Day Dream' and 'Ulysses'. The waste land in which Orpheus finds himself is compared by Boos to Tennyson's 'Holy Grail' landscape, his song of petition to that of the 'Lotos-Eaters', and the ruined garden he encounters to that of 'Mariana'. In conclusion, Boos admits that *The Earthly Paradise* lacks the 'astonishing verbal subtlety of Tennyson's lyrics', although she claims, reasonably, that it has positive qualities of its own.³⁶

III

The early 1870s saw Morris renewing his poetic strength as his enthusiasm for Iceland and Icelandic culture and literature developed. His reservations about the Tennysonian method as it developed in later poems are succinctly expressed in a letter to Aglaia Coronio on 24 October 1872: 'I suppose you see that Tennyson is publishing another little lot of Arthurian Legend. We all know pretty well what it will be; and I confess I don't look forward to it'. (Kelvin, vol. I, p. 167) Tennyson's 'Gareth and Lynette' was published in 1872. What exactly were Morris's reservations? According to Blunt's diary for 20 May 1896, Morris told him that Tennyson 'never forgave him and Burne-Jones for having disapproved of his bowdlerization of the *Morte d'Arthur* in the "*Idylls of the King*"'.³⁷ While it is not

obvious how Tennyson might have become aware of this, it may indeed express Morris's sense that in the *Idylls* Tennyson was sacrificing drama and story to moralisation. Perhaps we might relate this to the remark of Gerard Manley Hopkins in a letter to Dixon in 1879. Here Hopkins distinguishes in Tennyson's poetry, in a way that Dixon must surely have recognised from his Oxford days, between the poems 'when he is rhyming pure and simple imagination, without afterthought, as in "The Lady of Shalott", "Sir Galahad", the "Dream of Fair Women", or "Palace of Art" ' on the one hand, and on the other 'when he undertakes longer works of fancy, as his *Idylls*: they are unreal in motive and incorrect, uncanonical so to say, in detail and keepings. He shd. have called them Charades from the Middle Ages (dedicated by permission to H.R.H. etc.). The Galahad of one of these later ones is quite a fantastic charade-playing Galahad, merely playing the fool over Christian heroism ...'. Hopkins nevertheless concluded, 'But for all this he is a glorious poet, and all he does is chryselephantine'.³⁸

By contrast with Morris's preoccupations, Tennyson's support for British imperialism was becoming more explicit at this time. For the Imperial Library edition of the *Idylls* in 1873, which included the recent additions 'Gareth and Lynette' and 'The Last Tournament' he provided an epilogue 'To the Queen'. In this he congratulated her in the recovery of Prince Edward from illness, criticised the calls being made for the separation of Canada from Britain on financial grounds – 'Is this the tone of empire? Here the faith / That made us rulers?', reflected on the history of the empire and on the dangers that needed to be overcome for its future to be assured; these included

... Softness breeding scorn of simple life,
 Or Cowardice, the child of lust for gold,
 Or Labour, with a groan and not a voice,
 Or Art with poisonous honey stolen from France ...
 (Ricks No. 476)

While Tennyson's conservatism was increasing, Morris was soon to begin his leftward-moving political education by joining the Eastern Question Association in December 1876.

Sigurd the Volsung of November 1876 was the poem with which Morris hoped to establish the importance of Nordic legend for English culture. He was disappointed that the critics' admiration was not widely shared by the reading public. Theodore Watts in *The Athenaeum* in December 1876 called it 'Mr. Morris's greatest achievement'. But he doubted whether hexameter was a wise choice for a narrative poem of such length, pointing out that there is a danger of monotony 'unless the writer, very now and then, quite alters the character of the line, – as Mr. Tennyson does in "Maud" and Mr. Swinburne in "Hesperia"'. (*WMCH*, pp. 231, 232) The unsigned review in the *North American Review* for March 1877 is unusual for attributing to Morris an approach similar to that of Tennyson:

... he has retold, in the modern temper, the story of the Fafnismal and the Prose Edda ... His method is, in a word, the contemporary English method of treating the antique; to recast it, namely, in the forms of modern sentiment. Whether in poetry, painting or criticism, this method is substantially the same; it is that of Mr. Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*; it is that of the Italianizing Preraphaelite painters; it is Mr. Ruskin's method when he criticises Greek art or character. To reproduce the antique, not as the ancients felt it, but as we feel it, – to transfuse it with modern thought and emotion, – that is the method now 'in the air', as the French say, among Mr. Morris's fellow-artists; it is the main source of the interest which Mr. Morris has given to his own work, as well as the source of its weakness. ... in general, it has to be said that Mr. Morris's medievalism is unreal, that his heroines and divinities appear not in their ancient forms, but in the 'Anglo-Saxon attitudes' that are at present so dear in English art.

(*WMCH*, pp. 246, 248)

The *Atlantic Monthly* for April 1877 was straightforward in its admiration. *Sigurd* was declared to be, in the chronological sense, 'the second great English epic of our generation' and worthy to challenge the priority of Tennyson: 'It fully equals that monumental work in the force and pathos of the story told, while it surpasses it in unity and continuity of interest, and may fairly divide with the *Idylls of the King* the suffrages of the reading world on the question of poetic form.' (*WMCH*, p. 249) The *New York International Review* was equally enthusiastic, and also made the comparison with Tennyson:

Outside of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, we know no poem in the whole range of English literature which illustrates so strikingly the strength and beauty of Saxon speech; and in single lines we venture to think (with all due admiration for the laureate's marvellous work) that Mr. Morris has surpassed him.

(*WMCH*, p. 266)

Later, Theodore Watts, reviewing *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in 1897, related the two poems in another way. Morris, he argued, turned to prose in the late romances because saw that the popular response to *Sigurd* meant that 'the time for writing long narrative poems in verse was gone by for ever ... epics and long metrical narratives were no longer possible. Tennyson shared this view of Morris's, for once when a friend, in talking of *The Idylls of the King*, called the group an epic, he said, "It is not an epic; the day is past for epics"'. (*WMCH*, p. 424) Some recent critics have considered this issue. Simon Dentith in *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* has a chapter called 'The Matter of Britain and the Search for a National Epic' in which he considers *The Idylls* and *Sigurd* as both having claims to such status. But he notes the two poets' differing intentions: 'Tennyson wants his *Idylls* to be morally exemplary, while Morris evokes the barbaric world to insist on its historic distance from modernity.'³⁹

It is no doubt simply a coincidence that Tennyson produced his one piece of work with an Old English basis at the same time. 'The Battle of Brunanburh' was, Ricks tells us, probably written during 1876–7, and was published among the 'Translations' in 1880. Tennyson said that he used his son's translation of the tenth-century poem, published in the *Contemporary Review* in November 1876, but Ricks notes that he clearly studied the original poem too. This had been published in 1838 in E. Guest's *History of English Rhythms*. Tennyson refers twice to the poem in his historical play *Harold* of 1876. For his translation, Tennyson used unrhymed dactyls and trochaics to good effect, as in the opening lines:

Athelstan King,
Lord among Earls,
Bracelet-bestower and
Baron of Barons,

He with his brother,
 Edmund Atheling,
 Gaining a lifelong
 Glory in battle,
 Slew with the sword-edge
 There by Brananburh,
 Brake the shield-wall,
 Hewed the lindenwood,
 Hacked the battleshield,
 Sons of Edward with hammered brands.

(Ricks No. 366)

There is no evidence that Morris read this poem; one wonders what he would have made of it. In his 1884 lecture 'The Gothic Revival I' he wrote of the continuity of English poetry; for him, the Romantics could 'claim brotherhood' not only with Shakespeare and Spenser, Chaucer and Langland, 'but yet more perhaps with that forgotten man who sang of the meeting of the fallow blades at Brannanburgh, or who told of the old hero's death in the lair of the gold-guarding dragon ...'.⁴⁰

IV

The late 1870s saw Morris entering the public sphere he had avoided as a young man, through his involvement with the Eastern Question Association in 1876, and the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. His deepening awareness of the problems of his society led him further in 1882, when he joined H.M. Hyndman's Democratic Federation, committing himself for the rest of his life to the cause of revolutionary Socialism. Meanwhile, in 1880, Tennyson published his *Ballads and Other Poems*, containing two of his most powerful imperial poems, 'The Revenge. A Ballad of the Fleet' and 'The Defence of Lucknow', and in 1883 accepted the barony which marked his full reception into the British establishment.

It is ironic that it was at this time that the minor poet William Allingham, who knew both men, seems to have attempted to bring about a relationship between them. In April 1884 he sent Morris a copy of his poem 'The Primrose', and on the 18th Morris replied, thanking him and regret-

ting that the flower had become associated with the ‘shifty sham statesman BEN’, Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli had established the Primrose League of conservative supporters in 1883. (Kelvin, vol. II, 1987, p. 274) Allingham had evidently asked Morris about his politics, and requested some copies of *Justice*. Morris replied cordially: ‘As to Justice (not of the peace) I will send you one or two odd numbers which will give you all information. / Yes, I am a rebel and even more of a rebel than some of my coadjutors know perhaps.’ (Kelvin, vol. II, p. 274) Allingham went to visit Tennyson in July, and recorded in his diary for 26th:

T. was shocked to hear of William Morris’s Democratic Socialism, and asked to see a copy of *Justice*. (Morris’s *Justice*, I partly agree with and partly detest . . . I want reforms and thorough-going ones, but not by the hands of atheists and anarchists.)⁴¹

Allingham continued to question Morris about his politics, and Morris wrote to him again on 26 November, giving a detailed account of his views and his distrust of palliatives. (Kelvin, vol. II, pp. 339–341) In December Allingham visited Tennyson at Haslemere, and recorded a remarkable conversation with him about Morris and politics in his diary for 5 December:

We spoke of William Morris (from whom I had just had a long letter).
T. said, ‘He has gone crazy’. I said I agreed with many of Morris’s notions. Labour does not get its fair share.
T. – ‘There’s brain labour as well as hand labour’.
W. A. – ‘And there are many who get money without any labour. The question, how to hinder money from accumulating into lumps, is a puzzling one’.
T. – ‘You must let a man leave money to his children. I was once in a coffee-shop in the Westminster Road at 4 o’clock in the morning. A man was raging “Why has So-and-So a hundred pounds, and I haven’t a shilling?” I said to him, “If your father had left you £100 you wouldn’t give it away to somebody else”. He hadn’t a word to answer. I knew he hadn’t’.⁴²

No political rapprochement was possible, but Morris continued to admire aspects of Tennyson’s poetry, including his handling of blank verse. On 19 October 1885 he wrote a long letter to a young Socialist, James G Henderson, commenting critically but constructively on some poems Hender-

son had sent to him. He remarked that Henderson had written a good deal of blank verse, which he saw as a mistake:

... now there is only one measure in English that can be used without ryme and make genuine verse, the ordinary 10 syllable heroic to wit, and there is at present only one man living who can write that with success, that is Tennyson: I think anyone who has a natural turn for poetry writing in English would turn to ryme as a help not a fetter; the fact you must look for a pocketfull of rymes helps the invention.

(Kelvin, vol. II, p. 471)

Tennyson continued to publish in these years: *Tiresias and Other Poems* in 1885, *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* in 1886, and *Demeter and Other Poems* in 1889. Morris had no time for the poems Tennyson had to write in his official role as Laureate. In a letter to Jenny of 30 March 1887 Morris discussed the recent Irish Coercion Bill, and then remarked: 'I am sorry poor old Tennyson thought himself bound to write an ode on our fat Vic's Jubilee: have you seen it? It is like Martin Tupper for all the world.' (Kelvin, vol. II, p. 633, and Note 6, p. 634) 'Carmen Saeculare: An Ode in Honour of the Jubilee of Queen Victoria' was first published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, 5 April 1887. Tupper, as Kelvin reminds us, was the author of popular books of maxims called *Proverbial Philosophy*, published between 1838 and 1867. Tennyson's laureate poem ends on a vaguely hopeful note:

Are there thunders moaning in the distance?
 Are there spectres moving in the darkness?
 Trust the hand of Light will lead her people,
 Till the thunders pass, the spectres vanish,
 And the Light is Victor, and the darkness
 Dawns into the Jubilee of the Ages.

(Ricks No. 418)

The unconvincingness of this is no doubt related to Tennyson's having felt it necessary to adopt a more optimistic view than the one he had expressed forcefully in the previous year in 'Locksley Hall after Sixty Years'. The rationalist critic J.M. Robertson, in his 1887 essay 'The Art of Tennyson', deplored that poem for its 'rhymed recapitulation of the

bad-blooded oburgations of gout-stricken Toryism'. More temperately, Christopher Ricks refers to it as Tennyson's 'onslaught on the age'.⁴³ The angry tone of the poem does not limit itself to its unhappy narrator; it suggests that Tennyson was as unhappy as Morris about the condition of England at the time, but looked in the opposite direction, to tradition and religion, for salvation. The elderly narrator pours out his scorn and anger on the attitudes he sees around him in the modern world:

Bring the old dark ages back without the faith, without the hope,
Break the State, the Church, the Throne, and roll their ruins down the
slope.

Authors – essayist, atheist, novelist, realist, rhymester, play your part,
Paint the moral shame of nature with the living hues of Art.

Rip your brothers' vices open, strip your own foul passions bare;
Down with Reticence, down with Reverence – forward – naked – let them
stare.

Feed the budding rose of boyhood with the drainage of your sewer
Send the drain into the fountain, lest the stream should issue pure.

Set your maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism, –
Forward, forward, ay and backward, down too into the abysm.
Do your best to charm the worst, to lower the rising race of men:
Have we risen from the beast, then back into the beast again?

(Ricks No. 417)

Although Morris conveyed most of his political beliefs in the prose of his lectures and journalism, he did write some socialist poems, which make an interesting comparison with 'Locksley Hall'. *The Pilgrims of Hope* – published in *Commonweal* from March 1885 to July 1886 – is the most substantial of these poems. In its third section, 'Sending to the War', the protagonists come from the country to London, and the poem registers their response:

We two stood in the street in the midst of a mighty crowd,
 The sound of its mingled murmur in the heavens above was loud,
 And earth was foul with its squalor – that stream of every day,
 The hurrying feet of labour, the faces worn and grey,
 Were a sore and grievous sight, and enough and to spare had I seen
 Of hard and pinching want midst our quiet fields and green;
 But all was nothing to this, the London holiday throng.
 Dull or with hang-dog gait they stood or shuffled along,
 While the stench from the lairs they had lain in last night went up in the
 wind,
 And poisoned the sun-lit spring: no story men can find
 Is fit for the tale of their lives: no word that man hath made
 Can tell the hue of their faces, or their rags by filth o'erlaid:
 For this our age invented – these are the sons of the free
 Who shall bear our name triumphant o'er every land and sea.
 Read you their souls in their faces, and what shall help you there?
 Joyless, hopeless, shameless, angerless, set is their stare:
 This is the thing we have made, and what shall help us now,
 For the field hath been laboured and tilled and the teeth of the dragon
 shall grow.⁴⁴

This is one of the grimmest descriptive passages Morris ever wrote, but even here the grim image of the dragon's teeth points forward – to destruction in the first instance but to a future beyond that destruction, just as Marxism promised the society of equals after and in fulfilment of the revolution. The poem is called *The Pilgrims of Hope*, and although it records the failure of the Paris Commune of 1871, it ends with the narrator preparing himself to fight for a better future:

I came to look to my son, and myself to get stout and strong,
 That two men there might be hereafter to battle against the wrong;
 And I cling to the love of the past and the love of the day to be,
 And the present, it is but the building of the man to be strong in me.⁴⁵

As a socialist, Morris's thinking is always directed towards the future in a positive spirit. This is even clearer from the 1885 *Chants for Socialists*, with titles such as 'The Day is Coming', 'No Master', and 'All for the

Cause'. 'The Voice of Toil' begins fatalistically:

I heard men saying, Leave hope and praying,
All days shall be as all have been;
To-day and to-morrow bring fear and sorrow
The never-ending toil between.

But the conclusion is a call to action:

Come, shoulder to shoulder ere earth grows older
The Cause spreads over land and sea;
Now the world shaketh, and fear awaketh
And joy at last for thee and me.⁴⁶

Soon after this Morris wrote his only play, *The Tables Turned; or, Nupkins Awakened*, first performed as part of the entertainment at a Socialist League gathering on 15 October 1887, and published by the League in the same year. The action takes place at a law court, and the second trial we see is that of Jack Freeman – played by Halliday Sparling – a Socialist accused of sedition and incitement to riot and murder, and of obstructing the Queen's Highway.⁴⁷ The witnesses called by the defendant, relating to the former charge, represent the Establishment in its religious, literary and scientific forms, in the persons of the Archbishop of Canterbury – played by Morris – Lord Tennyson, and the distinguished scientist Professor Tyndall. After Tennyson is sworn, the following dialogue takes place:

J.F. My lord, have you been present, in disguise, at a meeting of the Socialist League in 13 Farringdon Road?
Lord T. What's that to you? What do you want to know for? Yes, I have, if it comes to that.
J.F. Who brought you there?
Lord T. A policeman: one Potlegoff. I thought he was a Russian by his name, but it seems he is an Englishman – and a liar. He said it would be exciting: so I went.
J.F. And was it exciting?
Lord T. NO: it was dull.
J.F. How many were present?
Lord T. Seventeen: I counted them, because I had not got anything else to do.

J.F. Did they plot anything dreadful?

Lord. T. Not that I could hear. They sat and smoked; and one fool was in the chair, and another fool read letters; and then they worried till I was sick of it as to where such and such fools would go to spout folly the next week; and now and then an old bald-headed fool and a stumpy little fool in blue made jokes, at which they laughed a good deal; but I couldn't understand the jokes – and I came away.

J.F. Thank you, my lord.

Mr.H[ungary, Q.C., Counsel for the Prosecution]. My lord Tennyson, I wish to ask you a question. You say that you could not understand their jokes: but could you understand them when they were in earnest?

Lord. T. No, I couldn't: I can't say I tried. I don't want to understand Socialism: it doesn't belong to my time.

[Exit⁴⁸

Tennyson is treated more sympathetically than the other two Establishment witnesses: the Archbishop describes what he heard as 'a mass of the most frightful incendiarism, delivered with an air of jocularly and dry humour that made my flesh creep', and Professor Tyndall alleges that the defendant was 'boasting of the extent and power of the Socialist organisation' and 'seemed to me a determined, cunning, and most dangerous person'.⁴⁹ By contrast, the admission attributed to Tennyson, that Socialism is beyond his historical understanding – he was not far off eighty at the time – is mild indeed.

v

Tennyson died on 6 October 1892, having published two further volumes, *Demeter and Other Poems* in 1889 and *The Death of Oenone and Other Poems* in 1892. In a letter of 7 October 1892 to Bernard Shaw – who had apparently wanted to interview Morris about Tennyson – Morris writes:

... to say truth I consider that I have piece of luck [sic] in not being a professional journalist any longer. Just think if I were still Editor of Commonweal I should have *had* to write something about Tennyson. As it is I needn't and flatly, as you have guessed, I *won't*. I really don't know what

to say of him; and as I think you will agree the present is the worst time to say anything.

Dont you think Lord Lorne ought to be made Laureat? Wouldn't that please all parties?

(Kelvin, III, p. 453, and Note 3)

Kelvin tells us that Lorne, who was married to Queen Victoria's daughter Louise and became ninth Duke of Argyll in 1900, had published several volumes of verse; he also points out that Morris enjoyed joking about the Laureateship, referring to Sydney Cockerell's *Diary* for 13 October, which records Morris's having again proposed Lorne as Laureate at Gatti's after an SPAB meeting, while on 17 October he suggested for the post Sir Theodore Martin, a courtier and writer of comic verse. (Kelvin, vol. III, p. 453, Note 3) To Bruce Glasier on 11 October, Morris wrote: 'What a set of ninnies the papers are about the Laureateship, treating it with such absurd solemnity. Bet you it is offered to Swinburne. Bet you he accepts it.' (Kelvin, vol. III, p. 454)

Morris was evidently still respectable enough to be invited to attend Tennyson's funeral, a great public event which took place on 12 October in Westminster Abbey. A brief letter of the same date to Macmillan and Co. thanks them for sending an invitation card, but states that he will be unable to attend. (Kelvin, vol. III, p. 456) On 13 October Morris writes to Jenny: 'I see my name is in the paper as being invited to the funeral: I beg to state that I did not go there.' (Kelvin, vol. III, p. 456) However, as Kelvin informs us, the *Daily Chronicle* twice reported Morris's presence at the funeral; it was gratified to record that 'William Morris walked in the procession behind the dead man whose poetry he loved', and it recorded that beside the weeping Meredith, 'A not less conspicuous figure was that of William Morris, with his bright clear eyes and broad forehead'. (Kelvin, vol. III, p. 457, Note 3) Burne-Jones did attend the funeral, but wrote, 'I wish I hadn't gone'.⁵⁰ He was shocked that there were few signs of mourning in London, and that the Queen did not attend. Philip Henderson describes the funeral as 'like a last parade of eminent Victorians', and notes that the Queen sent a wreath inscribed 'A tribute of affectionate regard from his Sovereign'.⁵¹

In 1893 Morris became involved in a final Tennysonian project, through his newly established Kelmscott Press. A letter of 5 January to Macmillan and Co. sets out the terms on which Morris was prepared to print five hundred copies of Tennyson's *Maud* at the Press. It was very unusual for Morris to print on behalf of another publisher, and it is not clear why Macmillans asked him to do so. Morris suggested that Macmillans might consider including other poems with 'Maud', which would otherwise make 'a very small book'. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 4) According to Blunt's Diary, Morris later told him, 'I would sooner have printed them Tennyson's first volume, which is all I ever cared for in his poems'⁵² – the reference no doubt being to the two volumes of 1842 rather than the very earliest poems. But a letter of 15 January confirms that there will be no difficulty in delivering copies before October 1st, as required by Macmillans, adding, rather casually, 'I suppose the book will be limited to Maud, without any of the additional poems included in the first edition' – these had included the 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington' and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 7) A postscript to a letter to Emery Walker on 9 August runs: 'Sent off Maud yesterday'. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 73) Kelvin tells us that this means that Morris had just sent the title page for engraving; the text had finished printing by 11 August. On 20 August Morris wrote, probably to the engraver Charles Keates, returning a corrected proof of some initial letters, and asking when he would receive the title-page of *Maud*. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 77) On 23 August Morris told Keates that he was satisfied with the corrected roman capitals for the engraved title, and asked Keates to do 'the utmost you can for me' with the border, as he was 'already behindhand with the work'. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 78)

However, matters did not work out smoothly. The Kelmscott *Maud*, *A Monodrama*, by Alfred Lord Tennyson was issued on 30 September 1893, at the price of one and a half guineas. On 16 November Morris received an unwelcome communication from Macmillan and Co., enclosing a letter of complaint from the bookseller Bertram Dobell: a customer to whom he had supplied a copy of the book had returned it to him 'saying that it is disfigured by such numerous and gross misprints that he cannot keep it' – though actually identifying only three errors, on pages 19, 26 and 69. (Kelvin, vol. IV, p. 107, Note 1) Morris's reply was immediate and apologetic:

I am very sorry that any misprints should have happened in the Maud: I am sorry to say that as to the places quoted in Mr. Dobell's note, the facts are as stated; but having been carefully over the book I can see no other errors. I will go over it again and when I have found out what the worst is; we will consider what is best to be done.

(Kelvin, vol. IV, pp. 106–7)

Morris printed cancellaria correcting these mistakes, and Macmillan wrote to Dobell on 17 November: 'If you will kindly send back your copy ... we will put it right'. (Kelvin, vol. IV, pp. 107–8, Note 3) The accounts shown by Peterson reveal that Tennyson was paid a royalty of £200, and that Morris made a profit of £113.17.6.⁵³ As Tennyson was dead by then, the royalty payment was presumably made to the Tennyson estate. After these anti-climactic events, no further references to Tennyson appear in Morris's letters.

It is hardly surprising that Tennyson's name seldom occurs in the reviews of Morris's late works, since these were the prose romances. But in its review of *The Wood Beyond the World* in July 1895, *The Spectator* compared Morris's description of the lady in the magic wood to Tennyson's Vivien in 'Merlin and Vivien' (*WMCH*, p. 382), while *The Academy*, reviewing *The Sundering Flood* in March 1898, found the poems 'of this Anglo-Saxon Scald' included in the romance lacking in vigour compared to 'such an admirable version as, for instance, the late Laureate's "Battle of Brananburgh" [sic]'. The reviewer quotes what he calls 'the best stanza of the book', a description of spring:

Now the grass groweth free
And the lily's on lea,
And the April-tide green
Is full goodly beseen;
And far behind
Lies the Winter blind,
And the Lord of the Gale
Is shadowy pale;
And thou linded-beblossomed with bed of the worm
Cometh forth from the dark house as Spring from the storm.⁵⁴

The reviewer comments, 'It is pretty, but much too smooth and Mor-

risian'. Maybe another critic might have found a more vigorous and comparable poem elsewhere in the book, but he makes a fair point in observing the effect of Morris's avoidance of alliteration. (*WMCH*, pp. 428, 429) Finally, the young H.G. Wells, reviewing *The Well at the World's End* in the *Saturday Review* in October 1896, related both Morris and Tennyson to Malory:

It is Malory, enriched and chastened by the thought and learning of six centuries, this story of Ralph and his Quest of the *Well at the World's End* ... It is Malory, but instead of the mystic Grail, the search for long life and the beauty of strength. And women as well as men go a questing. Tennyson, too, gave us Malory, but with the Grail – as remote and attenuated indeed as the creed of a Broad Churchman, but the Grail still, and for the simple souls of the future and the past, all the involved gentilities of the middle Victorian years. Morris is altogether more ancient and more modern.

(*WMCH*, pp. 410–11)

This is an effective restatement of the contrast with Tennyson that earlier critics had made, and which Morrisians would no doubt wish to maintain.

The contrast between the two men as public figures is neatly encapsulated in the strikingly different forms of their funerals. Fiona MacCarthy draws a compelling contrast between the grandeur of that of Tennyson in the capital city and that of Morris in Kelmscott churchyard. 'Deep red autumn leaves cascaded from the pillars of the nave. The lamps in the church were wreathed with ears of oats and barley. Morris's country funeral was the absolute antithesis of Tennyson's burial in Westminster Abbey in 1892'.⁵⁵ While we cannot claim that Morris's poetry was 'the absolute antithesis' of Tennyson's, we can see how the younger poet both profited from and moved beyond the influence of the elder, while evidently maintaining respect for aspects of his achievement.

NOTES

1. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 1899, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922, vol. I, p. 40. Subsequently Mackail.

2. Quotations from Tennyson's poetry are from *The Poems of Tennyson*, edited by Christopher Ricks, London: Longmans, 1969, 1835 pp. *The Princess. A Medley* is poem No. 286 in this edition. Subsequent references in brackets after quotations.
3. Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 1904, London: Lund Humphries, 1993, vol. I, p. 76. Subsequently *Memorials*.
4. When Tennyson was awarded the honorary degree of DCL, to great applause. See R.B. Martin, *Tennyson. The Unquiet Heart*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 383.
5. Mackail, vol. I, p. 46.
6. John D. Jump, ed, *Tennyson. The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, p. 114. Subsequently *TCH*.
7. *TCH*, p. 119.
8. William Allingham, *The Diaries*, edited by H. Allingham & D. Radford, 1907, London: The Folio Society, 2007, p. 277, entry for 16 October 1881. Subsequently Allingham.
9. Mackail, vol. I, p. 47.
10. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, p. 99. Subsequently MacCarthy.
11. Mackail, vol. I, p. 47. William S. Peterson, *A Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, 1985, p. 47 informs us that, while at Oxford, Morris owned *Poems*, 10th edition (1855), *In Memoriam*, 6th edition (1855), *Maud, and Other Poems* (1855) and *The Princess* 6th edition (1854), all now at Kelmscott Manor. Subsequent references Peterson.
12. A similar view was to be expressed much later, in 1879, by Gerard Manley Hopkins in a letter to Dixon, Morris's old friend, who became a canon of Carlisle in the Church of England: 'His opinions too are not original, often not independent even, and they sink into vulgarity: not only "Locksley Hall" but *Maud* is an ungentlemanly row and "Aylmer's Field" is an ungentlemanly row and *The Princess* is an ungentlemanly row'. Hopkins goes on to condemn 'rhetorical pieces' like the 'Lord of Burleigh' and 'Lady Clara Vere de Vere', which he calls 'downright haberdashery'; *TCH*, p. 334.
13. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1993 (1996), p. 65. Subsequently Armstrong.
14. Norman Kelvin, ed, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, vol. I, 1984, p. 28. Subsequently Kelvin; references in brackets after quotations.
15. May Morris, ed, *The Collected Works of William Morris*, London: Longman, Green and Co., vol. II, 1910, pp. 677–8. Subsequently *CW*. Quotations of Morris's works from this edition; references in brackets after quotations.

16. For the reception of 'Maud', see *TCH*, p. 9. 'Maud met with reprobation so widespread as almost to drown the voices raised on its behalf in *The Spectator* and elsewhere'; reviews given on pp. 186–211.
17. Peter Faulkner, ed, *William Morris, The Critical Heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 189. Subsequently *WMCH*; references in brackets after quotations.
18. Cecil Y. Lang & Edgar F. Shannon, eds, *The Letters of Alfred Tennyson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, vol. II, p. 492. Quotation from James Hoge, ed, *Emily Tennyson's Journal*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981, p. 109. Subsequent references *Tennyson Letters*.
19. The publisher Moxon brought out an edition of Tennyson in 1857, with fifty-four illustrations by eight different artists. Hunt provided two illustrations for Morris's favourite, 'Oriana', Hunt and Rossetti one each for 'The Lady of Shalott', Rossetti two for 'The Palace of Art' and one for 'Sir Galahad', Millais two for 'Locksley Hall' and two for 'The Day-Dream'. No comment by Morris on the book is recorded, although he served as the model for Rossetti's Lancelot in 'The Lady of Shalott'.
20. Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979, p. 45. Subsequently Kirchoff.
21. Christine Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail*, Manchester: Manchester University press, 1999, p. 91. Poulson also reproduces (p. 92) Burne-Jones's attractive 1858 drawing 'Sir Galahad', on which she comments that 'not surprisingly, it owes more to Morris than to Tennyson'. Subsequently Poulson.
22. Armstrong, p. 242.
23. For the success of the 1859 *Idylls*, see *TCH*; the editor remarks (p. 10) 'review after review was highly enthusiastic'; also that 'During the eighteen-sixties, public respect for Tennyson was almost unbounded.' (p. 11) Reviews given on pp. 215–66. Herbert Tucker, in his monumental *Epic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, argues that with the later instalments of 1868 and 1872, *The Idylls* achieved 'the civic force of myth' (p. 390) and that, though Tennyson found his path difficult and slow, 'in the fullness of the century Victorian Britons came to embrace [it] as their favourite body of national myth'. (p. 447)
24. *Memorials*, vol. I, p. 182.
25. Mackail, vol. I, p. 308.
26. Simon Dentith, *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 76.
27. MacCarthy, pp. 190, 191, 192. Tennyson's 'The Defence of Lucknow' was to be published in *Ballads and Other Poems* in 1880.
28. J.M.S. Tompkins, *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry*, London: Cecil Woolf, 1988, p. 20. Contrasting the two poets' poems about Galahad,

- Tompkins argues that Tennyson's is 'a picturesque abstract of noble and obedient fortitude' compared to the complexity of Morris's character, and comments that 'What Morris owes to Tennyson is the challenge of a felt insufficiency.' (p. 46)
29. M. Shaw, 'Tennyson and his Public 1827–59', in D. J. Palmer, ed, *Tennyson*, London: G. Bell & Sons, 1973, pp. 82, 87.
 30. Florence Boos, *The Design of William Morris' 'The Earthly Paradise'*, Lampter: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1991, pp. 195, 198, 216, 219, 230–1. Subsequently Boos.
 31. *Tennyson Letters*, vol. II, p. 492. The quotation is from Hallam, Lord Tennyson, ed, *Tennyson and His Friends*, London: Macmillan, 1911, p. 117.
 32. *Tennyson Letters*, vol. II, p. 492.
 33. Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, 1967, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 167. Thompson remarks of his early years: 'Morris's tastes ... tended to medievalism and escapism'.
 34. *TCH*, pp. 294–311, from *Poetry of the Period*, (1870), revised from an article in *Temple Bar*, May 1869.
 35. Kirchhoff, p. 58.
 36. Boos, pp. 54, 46, 111, 116, 252, 257, 336, 339, 340, 391.
 37. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries*, 1919, 1920, One-volume edition, London: Martin Secker, 1932, p. 229; Entry for 29 May 1896, quoted Peterson, p. 47.
 38. *TCH*, pp. 334, 335.
 39. Dentith, pp. 64–83; p. 79.
 40. Eugene D. LeMire, ed, *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, p. 72.
 41. Allingham p. 287. Entry for 26 July 1884; Kelvin, vol. II, pp. 274–5, Note 4.
 42. Allingham, p. 298. Entry for 5 December 1884; Kelvin, vol. II, pp. 341–2, Note 11.
 43. Robertson in *TCH*, p. 414, Ricks, p. 1359. Ricks tells us that Tennyson denied any 'touch of biography' in the poem, and that Gladstone attempted a refutation of the argument of the poem in *The Nineteenth Century* for January 1887.
 44. William Morris, *The Pilgrims of Hope and Chants for Socialists*, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1915, p. 12. Subsequently *Pilgrims*. Morris did not complete revision of the poem, as May Morris tells us in the Introduction to *CW*; Vol XIX, xxxvii, though he included three sections in *Poems by the Way* in 1891; she therefore omitted it from the *Collected Works*.
 45. *Pilgrims*, p. 57.
 46. *Pilgrims*, pp. 65, 66.

47. William Morris, *The Tables Turned; or, Nupkins Awakened*, London: Office of 'The Commonweal', 1887, p. 9. Subsequently *TT*. Included in May Morris, ed, *William Morris. Artist, Writer, Socialist*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936, Vol. II, pp. 528–67.
48. *TT*, pp. 17–18.
49. *TT*, p. 18.
50. *Memorials*, vol. I, p. 78; cf. vol. II, p. 230.
51. Philip Henderson, *Tennyson, Poet and Prophet*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 208.
52. Quoted Peterson, p. 47; Blunt's Diary, 6 October 1893.
53. Peterson, p. 194.
54. This is one of the songs sung by the hero Osberne across the river to Elfhild; *The Sundering Flood* is in *CW*, Vol. XXI; the quoted stanza is on p. 38, with slightly different punctuation. In fairness to Morris, some of Osberne's other songs are markedly less 'smooth' and employ alliteration, for instance that on p. 109 beginning:
- The War-god's gale
 Drave down the Dale
 And thrust us out
 To the battle-shout;
 We wended far
 To the wall of war
 And trod the way
 Where the edges lay,
 The rain of the string rattled rough on the field
 Where the haysel was hoarded with sword-edge & shield.
55. MacCarthy, p. 675.