

Aesthetic effects and their implications in ‘Rapunzel’, ‘The Wind’, and other poems from William Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere*

Alexander Wong

I

Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott was famously ‘half sick of shadows’. Morris’s Guenevere is ‘half mad with beauty’. Compared to many of his contemporaries, and his own later literary works, there is something particularly nervy, gamey, and spicy—a strong taste of distinctive aesthetic intensity and strangeness—in Morris’s first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858).¹ There is often a strong note of the *weird*, a strangeness touched by the numinous, the uncanny, the ghoulish; and indeed the very word ‘strange’ and its cognates are frequently employed in the poems.

In relation to this strangeness, we might turn to Walter Pater, who, in his review of Morris’s early work encourages the reader to ‘catch at ... any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend.’² We may consider this an echo (‘strange dyes, strange flowers’) of the parenthesised words in these lines from ‘King Arthur’s Tomb’:

Skies, earth, men’s looks and deeds, all that has part,
Not being ourselves, in that half-sleep, half-strife, ...
(Strange sleep, strange strife,) that men call living ... (ll. 12–17)

Indeed Morris’s lines fit well with Pater’s position. ‘Skies, earth, men’s looks and deeds’ are equivalent to the various examples Pater gives of the external impres-

sions and stimuli which lead to 'stirring of the senses'. Both Morris and Pater share this idea of life as 'strange', or of its potential to be so to an aesthetic observer—and the notion of the value of such strangeness. In 'The Poetry of Michelangelo' (1871), later part of *The Renaissance*, Pater writes:

A certain strangeness ... is indeed an element in all true works of art: that they shall excite or surprise us is indispensable. But that they shall give pleasure and exert a charm over us is indispensable too; and this strangeness must be sweet also—a lovely strangeness.³

In the 'Postscript' to *Appreciations* (1889), moreover, he specifically relates this quality of strangeness to Romanticism (as opposed to Classicism): 'It is the addition of strangeness to beauty, that constitutes the romantic character in art ...'.⁴ Pater essentially realises the basic strangeness of art in its relation to life, and understands that an appropriate degree of this quality is necessary for a work of art to make itself felt; it is productively disorientating. Simultaneously distancing and intriguing, it forces us to take a fresh look at familiar objects. 'Failure is to form habits,' Pater famously said.⁵

The element of cultivated strangeness in the *Guenevere* collection is distinctive, though not isolated. The poems' patterned intricacy, narrative confusion and rearrangement—indeed, sometimes, lack of narrative; their bright colouring, and emphasis on sound and music; their awkward angularity and twistiness of structure, rhythm, perspective, emotion—indeed of the human form itself; all these qualities align them (some, where such traits are strongest, more than others) with Rossetti's early watercolours, as well as with the work of other painters experimenting with what would later become Aesthetic Movement tendencies. Three poems in Morris's *Guenevere* — 'King Arthur's Tomb,' 'The Blue Closet,' and 'The Tune of Seven Towers' — were inspired by Rossetti watercolours from which they take their name. Of these, the last two are amongst those poems in the collection which demonstrate such characteristics at their most extreme.

Paul Thompson regards the merit of *Guenevere* as 'something of an accident; a vividness of expression which stumbled out of Morris's unconscious almost in spite of himself'. He quotes Morris himself, writing to Cornell Price about his rhymes: 'it is incompetency ...'. But I cannot quite go as far as to say, with him, that 'apparently masterly devices in the poetry were the result of chance'.⁶ When Mackail asked which model the *Guenevere* poems were written on, Morris, he says, replied that they were 'More like Browning than anyone else, I suppose'.⁷ This suggests a deliberate roughness, brokenness, obliquity: the narrative *difficulty* encountered in the poem 'The Defence of Guenevere' does seem indeed cultivated. Alongside strangeness comes difficulty. The obliquity of such works is certainly designed to give pleasure: that of the highly-wrought. But this trait is dependent upon the existence of a relatively small, necessarily elite intellectual

readership, and perhaps may be felt by the artist (certainly, one such as Morris, who would be increasingly drawn into Socialist politics) to be overly self-rewarding, self-indulgent.

What, then, is the particular flavour of these strange, intense early poems? Much is in the experimental forms, the free rein of the lyric, and difficult or unusual rhythms (accidental or otherwise). This early strangeness is diminished in later works in part because of Morris's concentration chiefly on longer narrative poems in consistent metres. Burne-Jones, surely thinking of these later works, commented: 'unless he [Morris] can begin his tale at the beginning and go on steadily to the end, he's bothered'.⁸ It may be that the relatively poor critical and public reception of *Guenevere* contributed to a feeling of obligation in Morris as poet to greater finish, completion and narrative intelligibility.

Morris's career may be followed in terms of a continual tension, growing with his Socialism, between those aspects of his art which could be felt as indulgent, and those which promoted The Cause: anxieties about what Socialist artists are allowed to gratify in their own creative drives and tastes. The recognisable, fully-developed Morris can no longer, *except in translated works*, justify the difficult, abstract, decorated style of his early lyrics, with (what I hope to show is) their ambiguous treatment of social themes. (We might consider Morris's translations as a concession to his private artistic tastes and impulses, especially where they are odd and difficult). If, in the later works, Morris seems much less to be burning with Pater's 'hard, gem-like flame,' it is perhaps because Socialism does not live in the present, but the future. In 'The Beauty of Life,' (1880), Morris famously advised: 'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful'.⁹ The contents of *Guenevere* may represent the latter type of 'thing', but over the course of his career Morris increasingly desired to produce work which would fulfil *both* criteria at once.

II

In discussing the judgement that *Guenevere* lacks moral gravity and a sense of social duty, Fiona MacCarthy contrasts the volume with contemporary works more directly engaged with social and political issues.¹⁰ However, she does not take account, as neither does Elizabeth Helsinger, of the note of 'protest' for which E. P. Thompson argues, in what he considers to be the finest of the poems. Thompson infers in this collection a kind of re-invigorated Romanticism, manifested in part as aesthetic, emotional and narrative intensity and violence, and conducive, with time and alteration, to actively revolutionary politics. This is opposed to the passive nostalgia of mainstream Victorian Romanticism, and its 'luxurious misery'.¹¹

Helsingering emphasises the lyric intensity of the poems, and in particular the role played by colour. But this quality is considered mainly from an aesthetic viewpoint, whereas Thompson brings out its political implications as an expression of youthful vigour and protest at the dulled conditions of Morris's contemporary world. When Helsingering does consider wider conceptual or ideological consequences of the aesthetic, she can be a little one-sided. For instance, she writes compellingly about Morris's use of intense colours as 'hinges' or 'triggering' stimuli for memories—often traumatic—and shifts in mental states, or as a mask for traumatic realities. She claims that 'in Pre-Raphaelite practice, colour often speaks less of serene faith than of social and sexual tensions and disturbed emotions': a point which she pushes perhaps a little too heavily, contrasting it neatly with Ruskin's association of 'medieval colour with medieval faith'. Her point is tenable only to a degree, but when she correctly observes that 'dulling and fading out of colour,' often 'compared to the colourless time before sunrise or dusk,' is linked in the poems with 'the general incapacity to feel (sometimes sensory as well as emotional)', her observation implicitly suggests that intensity of colour is very often associated with desirable capacity for, and intensity of, feeling, as well as with the tensions and disturbances which she emphasises (possibly as part of an effort, conscious or otherwise, to redeem the Pre-Raphaelites from charges of sentimentality). Intensity of colour is thus sometimes, if not always, illustrative of what E. P. Thompson sees as a show of youthful vigour, even when associated with trauma, violence, or distress. It is thus to some extent celebratory, vivid; contrasted with and essentially criticising modern drabness.¹²

A reading of 'Rapunzel' may help to show that, in some cases, a compromise between Helsingering's position and Thompson's can be interesting and fruitful; especially as the poem is one of deceptive simplicity disguising extreme complexity, to which neither critic pays significant attention. Isobel Armstrong, however, does offer a politicised reading, but argues (and in my view some of her specific comments belie this point) that:

The poems [in *Guenevere*] are not concerned either directly or indirectly with work or politics. Instead they are an attempt to *be* the form in which modern consciousness shaped by work and labour sees, experiences and desires, to be what it imagines and the myths it needs to imagine with.¹³

My own reading might be taken to suggest that 'Rapunzel' and 'The Wind' (which Armstrong also examines, and which I shall discuss later), are indeed concerned 'indirectly' with political themes and the idea of 'work'.

The opening scene (of 'Rapunzel'), as elsewhere in the volume, uses repeated sense-impressions. Temperature and moisture are particularly noted (ll. 38–48), but colour, as so often, predominates. Near the outset, the reader is faced with wide, indeterminate masses of colour and shade: 'knotted mass,' 'shadows,'

'grass,' 'golden hair!' (ll. 17–20). Moreover, the violent disturbance usually simmering below the surface of Morris's early poems, glints occasionally with the symbolic colour of red. In the opening scene, Rapunzel twice evokes the colour red (ll. 9–10; ll. 27–29) which foreshadows a memory, later in the poem, of violence. Juxtaposition of red with yellow or gold not only anticipates this later memory, but also recurs in other poems: (e.g. 'The Wind', 'The Gilliflower of Gold'). Afterwards, she speaks of 'golden Michael, on the spire / Glowing all crimson in the fire / Of sunset' (ll. 202–04), again linking red with gold. Then, the traumatic memory:

... I saw against the wall
 One knight lean dead, bleeding from head to breast,
 Yet seem'd it like a line of poppies red
 In the golden twilight ... (ll. 218–21)

Helsingier is correct about colour sometimes operating as a trigger or mask for repressed or inaccessible memories: here Rapunzel softens the gory memory of blood into one of symbolically red flowers. But the argument needs to go further. More generally, emotions and memories—especially difficult ones, repressed or partially accessible—come to be associated with sense impressions, abstractions, or objects: all externalities of limited relevance. Rossetti's 'The Woodspurge'¹⁴ takes this habit to an extreme, symbolising objectively an incommunicable emotion by means of an arbitrarily connected external object, the flower. In *Guenevere*, the orange in 'The Wind' is one example of such an object; the gilliflower in 'The Gilliflower of Gold' another.

So far I have concentrated, as does Helsingier, on aesthetic qualities of 'Rapunzel' and their application to psychological readings. Incorporating E. P. Thompson's concerns, I will now suggest that vibrant colour in the poem not only means violence and disturbance, but life: intensity as 'a measure of the intensity of his own revolt against the impoverished relationships of his own society', the vivid aesthetics signalling 'not nostalgia but protest'. Further, 'Rapunzel' may be read as a poem about responsibilities, vanities, and, above all, *action* versus dreamy passivity. Thompson sees Morris as refusing the 'dream-world of imagination' to which 'the aspirations of the great romantic poets' had sunk. 'He refused to relax passively in the currents of nostalgia, however much he felt their attractions.'¹⁵ 'Rapunzel' would appear to address this very conflict.

In the second scene, the Prince dreams of a 'path of stars' (l. 52) to heaven from which humans turn back (mirroring 'the golden stair' of Rapunzel's hair), in describing which he (ll. 69–74) refers to his life at court, from which he has fled. He 'was content to live that wretched way' amongst 'knave[s] and coward[s],' but has now ridden forth 'arm'd beneath the burning sun.' His 'real life had begun,' and he knows he will be 'strong.' The pale, cowardly vanities of court have given

way, apparently, to manly action, life, vigour. There is an increase in sensory impression: music and heat: 'the birds within the thickets sung, / Even in hot noontide' (ll. 76–77). He is 'riding out to look for love' (l. 75). Is this a noble cause? Is it redemptive, or selfish? Is the Prince renouncing worldly vanities or ignoring his duties? Is he correct to see his quest as 'real life'?

What follows is an ebb and flow of colour and colourlessness, which coincides, respectively, in the Prince, with action and dreamy passivity. Such conflict of mood is always present in him. Looking on Rapunzel's tower, he

... 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,
 And I should wake up soon in some place, where
 The piled-up arms of the fighting angels gleam ... (ll. 89–94)

Line 90 recalls 'The Lady of Shalott',¹⁶ and Rapunzel is obviously in comparable circumstances. However, this time, the male hero is also lost in dreams: although the above excerpt ends with images of action, defiance and manly assertion, five lines later he lies 'a-dreaming'. A 'strange year' passes in inactivity of 'joyous pain,' his 'heavy body' lying on the ground (ll. 138–140): he fears that it is 'a kind of dream not understood' (l. 144). Time is lost in passive, languishing self-indulgence; but the Prince still feels a need to break away: 'I am not happy here, for I am strong' (l. 151). What is needed is *action*: dreams limit and weaken. Armstrong hints at this point in her discussion of 'powerlessness' in the poem, for she observes that 'The Prince ... can only gain access to Rapunzel when he has assumed the warlike identity urged upon him by his guardians in the "council hall", when he works rather than dreams'.¹⁷

'Fighting angels' reappear in Rapunzel's song. Here the 'moral' of the story becomes increasingly complicated, and there is a difficult irony in Morris's ambiguous diversion of the expected straightforwardness of the fairy-tale. Rapunzel's religious stance is troubling. Her prayer (ll. 162–81) is strongly sensual and material: 'Give me a kiss, / Dear God ...', 'Lord, give Mary a dear kiss ...', '... bring me that kiss / On a lily!' When she prays for 'a true knight' who has

... a steel sword, bright,
 Broad, and trenchant; yea, and seven
 Spans from hilt to point, O Lord!
 And let the handle of his sword
 Be gold on silver ... (ll. 169–73)

the erotic and the materialistic powerfully meet. Even St Michael is imagined in the form of a precious object: 'gold Michael, who looked down, / When I was

there, on Rouen town ...' (ll. 178–79). (Morris probably also had in mind the medieval gold coin the Angel, depicting St Michael—which association further highlights the feeling of religion commodified). And yet, in the midst of the witches' Sabbaths, she experiences religious visions: 'a trance / God sends in the middle of that dance, / And I behold the countenance / Of Michael ...' (ll. 192–95).

Visions, witchcraft, St Michael, Rouen, incarceration—surely Morris is making a bizarre allusion to Joan of Arc? Ambiguous as well, since historical accusations of witchcraft may here be relevant. (It transpires that 'Rapunzel' has taken the name of the witch who imprisons her, suggesting some kind of identity blurring.) Joan is a notoriously ambiguous figure. (Puppet? Propagandist? Saint?) But *her* dreams, so to speak, inspire active social efforts—to fight oppression—whereas in 'Rapunzel,' the Prince's dreams are generally prohibitive of action. Yet, if the poem is to be read in this way, Morris foxes the reader by leading the hopeful narrative to an ambiguous ending, which seems a kind of defeat. Arguably the ending is a subtle critique of the smug, socially elite luxury and 'mere matrimonial existence' which is apparently *not* criticised or censured in *Love is Enough* (1872); a work which disappointed Burne-Jones: 'It's splendid when the King gives up his Kingdom for Love's sake, but when at the end it comes to nothing more than a mere matrimonial existence, that's poor'.¹⁸

The moral confusion of the poem comes to a head when Rapunzel reveals that her name is *not* Rapunzel (l. 280). The Prince explains that a minstrel had prophesied to him of a yellow-haired woman, whose name would be Guendolen. Now he repeats 'that song the *dreamy* harper sung' (l. 286; emphasis mine). Thus, after fruition of the hero's manly action (rescuing the damsel), he *reverts to dreams*. Matters worsen when the damsel accepts this 'new-found name' (l. 305): 'found' for the first time, or found again? She seems to be willing to become a kind of passive commodity. Her words of reassurance to her rescuer then evoke a twilight state—colourless, like much of the imagery surrounding inaction and dream in the poem, and death elsewhere in the volume:

But all my golden hair shall ever round you flow,
Between the light and shade ... (ll. 307–08)

In the final scene (ll. 309–341), the sense of vain materialism returns disconcertingly with unusually frequent repetition of the same colour: gold. Precious materials are not excluded from Morris's utopian vision, even in the Socialist years; gold is for everyone in Nowhere, and not hoarded or fetishised. But here it seems associated with regal pomp, and becomes monotonous. We hear the voices of 'great knights' only—a social elite. When Guendolen says

Nothing wretched now, no screams;
I was unhappy once in dreams ... (ll. 335–36)

is she, so to speak, correct? Is not her new life of royal, matrimonial comfort and luxury in some sense less *real* than the wretched screams of her past? She speaks of her imprisonment as a time of ‘dreams,’ and yet, earlier, during that very period, she has told us that she *cannot* dream except ‘*when they let me dream*’ (l. 175).

‘Rapunzel’ is a poem which explores the idea of ‘dreams,’ their varieties, values, limitations. As such, it makes a valuable case study in the context of a central debate about *The Defence of Guenevere*: how to reconcile (in Florence Boos’s words) its ‘eroticised violence’ and ‘violent, anarchic world’ with Morris’s Ruskinian ‘idealisation’ of medieval society. In her view, ‘Morris went out of his way to document the violence and degradation which flowed from feudal abuses of power’.¹⁹ Whilst I am sceptical of such poems’ ability to ‘document’ any such thing, it is certainly true that the medievalism of *Guenevere* is frequently brutal, and invites politicised interpretation. As Richard Frith observes, these poems ‘tend to be praised today for their rejection of *dreams*’, (italics mine) and for their ‘gritty realism’. Frith sets out, in his readings of the Froissartian poems, ‘to suggest some of the ways in which the ideal infiltrates Morris’s undeniably brutal vision of the medieval world’, attempting thereby to temper the emphasis on ‘ironic and anti-romantic’ aspects of the poems by critics concerned ‘to clear Morris of the charge of mere literary escapism’.²⁰ Frith thus appears to equate ‘dreams’ with ‘the ideal;’ whereas my reading of ‘Rapunzel’ (which was beyond the scope of Frith’s examination) centres on the idea of ‘dreams’ in a sense, or senses, at once more literal and more general. Nevertheless, although I do detect in this particular poem an implied ‘rejection of dreams,’ this inference must be taken in the context of a fairy-tale poem which must surely be considered at least as ‘romantic’ as it may be ‘anti-romantic,’ and I wholly concur with Frith’s argument that elements of idealism or dreaminess in the poems should not and need not be underplayed.

Armstrong makes the obvious connection between Rapunzel’s hair, and wealth, regarding it furthermore as a ‘symbol of mediation’; but she rightly concludes that its ‘importance ... in the poem is not that it can be given a specific meaning but that it is implicated in desire and is substituted for different things in different ways’.²¹ Of course, Guendolen *may* simply be taken as representative of wealth or abundance (susceptible to materialism, but capable of spiritual purposes) brought away from the covetous clutches of the witches (who still clamour, at l. 314, for ‘*One lock of hair*’) to freedom and public *display* (which is all one can really argue) by the Prince. This more obvious reading still reveals socio-political concerns, but does not take account of the complex and ambivalent handling of *dreams* and *dreaminess*, versus action, in the poem; nor thematic links with aesthetic effects—primarily colour. It also feels to me rather too reductive.

The poem gives no real satisfaction to either the hero's anxieties or the heroine's regarding the 'dreams' which cloud their experiences; the images of armed angels come to little; and we suspect that his major impetus might simply be the mundane obligation of a royal heir to contract a marriage of convenience: 'Thou art a king's own son, / 'Tis fit that thou should'st wed.' (ll. 13–14, repeated ll. 23–24).

If Morris really intends the Prince as a moral role-model, then we might very well share Burne-Jones's dissatisfaction about *Love is Enough*, in this poem as well as that. But the beguiling dissonance of 'Rapunzel' dissuades us from such a view. Rather like Keats's *Eve of St Agnes*, but craftier because of its disorientating use (or Bloomian 'misreading?') of a familiar story, it is a morally self-deconstructing fairy-tale, heavy with endless symbolic possibilities, and essentially Symbolist rather than allegorical.

III

I turn last to 'The Wind,' probably the most psychologically disturbed poem in the *Guenevere* collection, and also (and the word seems eminently appropriate) the most *weird*. The title comes from the refrain:

*Wind, wind! thou are sad, art thou kind?
Wind, wind, unhappy! thou art blind,
Yet still thou wanderest the lily-seed to Wnd.*

Superficially, but significantly, this refrain is disconnected from the rest of the poem, and whether or not it is spoken by the narrating protagonist is unknown. Therefore, on one level, the refrain and the wind it describes function like the little flower of Rossetti's poem 'The Woodspurge':²² an arbitrarily connected externality which becomes a symbol for a mental state in a disorientating way—as well as providing a distraction from it. Going one step further, we see that it may be the protagonist's feelings (sadness, unhappiness, moral self-questioning) which are projected onto this object. The wind's blindness may represent the partial understanding of repressed memories; in any case it is presented as an obstacle to the finding of 'the lily-seed'. The ability to find it is associated with sight; and the quest is for the seed of the lily; white, clean, innocent. This point is significant, because, as before, the traumatic memories are associated strongly with bright colour impressions.

The protagonist in the present moment sits thinking 'of the days gone by, / Never moving my chair ... / Making no noise at all'

For my chair is heavy and carved, and with sweeping green behind

It is hung, and the dragons thereon grin out in the gusts of the wind;
 On its folds an orange lies, with a deep gash cut in the rind. ...
 If I move my chair it will scream, and the orange will roll out far,
 And the faint yellow juice ooze out like blood from a wizard's jar;
 And the dogs will howl for those who went last month to the war.

(ll. 10–18)

At first sight even the basic, static scene conjured in the early part of the poem is utterly incomprehensible. What is this gashed orange balancing in the back of the speaker's chair? Are we to imagine it as real (for that is how it is ostensibly presented), or is it embroidered (Florence Boos thinks it most likely to be depicted on a tapestry hanging behind the chair, rather than part of it),²³ or could it be carved in the back of the chair? In fact, the enigmatic orange works in a similar manner to the refrain, as an objective symbol, acting as a trigger to memory, and of superficially obscure relevance. But the memory/hallucination which it helps to recall/summon is one of death, and possibly rape (ll. 34–78). The speaker stands on a hilltop with 'Margaret'.

I held to her long bare arms, but she shudder'd away from me
 While the flush went out of her face as her head fell back on a tree,
 And a spasm caught her mouth, fearful for me to see ... (ll. 40–42)

When, avoiding the protagonist's embrace, 'Margaret' strikes her head on a tree, the speaker thinks all is well, and claims that 'she kiss'd me on the brow' (l. 49) and 'spread her arms out wide while I went down below' (l. 51). This could plainly be read erotically. He then collects daffodils and piles them on top of her, and eventually, realising that she remains silent and still, removes them: 'Alas! Alas! there was blood on the very quiet breast ...' (l. 76).

We can now see, at least in part, the events which the speaker seems to associate with the threat of the orange falling and oozing blood, and of the chair screaming. The scream is self-explanatory, but the orange, too, begins to betray its relevance. The sphere with its oozing gash recalls Margaret's head, struck (apparently fatally) on the tree. The juice leaking from inside may represent repressed memories escaping control; and the juice is yellow, like the colour of daffodils. Furthermore, as Helsinger has pointed out, the colour orange is a mix of yellow (daffodils) and red (blood),²⁴ thereby becoming a blended aesthetic symbol of the moment when the speaker 'grew hollow with pain' (l. 71), revealing blood beneath the daffodils he removes. One might say that the objective impression (i.e. colour) fills, or acts as a mnemonic substitute for, that interior hollowness. I would add that, originally, the image of the orange produces both 'yellow juice' and the comparison with 'blood,' so that from the outset, light from the orange is decomposed into its constituent primary colours.

The poem seems deliberately and calculatedly *weird*; its discontinuities of thought are compelling. The long hexameter lines, mostly with a middle caesura, but open at times to a non-stop reading which captures a kind of panic of evasion, modulate to a rapid replaying of events perhaps *rather* evaded. 'The Wind,' however, may not be without its portion of social anxieties. We may infer that the speaker's mental state has caused him to withdraw from society and what we might call *useful toil*. He 'used to paint' the shields of warriors. His occupation was thus of an artistic nature, and, for Morris, or for Ruskin, ideally a manifestation of 'Useful Work', and productive of the 'pleasure in labour' and 'the hallowing of labour by art' which Morris, in Ruskin's wake, advocates throughout his work.²⁵ Yet the protagonist remains, instead, alone, unproductive, and unhappy, afflicted by guilt. Boos speculates:

Was it a mark of the speaker's disorientation that he did not or could not rejoin his fellows in war? Does he belatedly abhor the war's destruction, and his complicity in it? Is he haunted because he too is guilty, or simply distraught by the loss of everyone he had loved?²⁶

All of these possibilities are plausible, and merely suggest what was already clear: that the poem is profoundly ambiguous. But in the context of my present reading, it seems to me that this is a guilt of unmet obligation, manifested as a paranoid fear of 'the ghosts of those that had gone to the war' (l. 81). We may infer that the speaker should also have gone to the war, and that this may lie at the root of his guilt. We do not know if the 'war' in which these men have died has been just or unjust, though the closing reference to 'Olaf, king and saint' would appear to link assertive, warlike action with moral calibre, as might also the allusion to Joan of Arc in 'Rapunzel.' 'The Wind', but for one last refrain, ends with the vision of these ghosts, with the 'colours ... all grown faint' (l. 83) on their arms—colourlessness once again associated with death. On this score, Isobel Armstrong echoes E. P. Thompson's arguments about aesthetic intensity as a form of protest against drabness; for she remarks that the 'heraldic colours' on the ghosts' arms

once painted by the dreamer, but now 'faint', and thus unreadable, are the antithesis of the brilliant and hallucinatory colour of objects at the start of the poem. Nevertheless, they are complementary, for a brilliant and fantastic intensity is one of the needs of the consciousness experiencing the faded sense of lack and numbness ...²⁷

I return to the enigmatic orange, which may possess further symbolic or associative consequences. Fruit, as a recurring image in Morris's work, intimates abundance, and a 'benign' nature, able to be enjoyed by humanity in an ideal society. Red House was deliberately built in an orchard; in 'Pomona', the 'ancient apple queen' is 'a hope unseen.'²⁸ The luxuriant growths of fruit in Morris's tex-

tile and wallpaper designs equally suggest the fruitfulness and abundance to be enjoyed by a society fully adapted to nature. The 'red apples' in the second stanza of 'Golden Wings' help to conjure a setting of bounteous wholesomeness, and in Morris's painting *La Belle Iseult* (1858–59), golden fruit adorn the background tapestry, and bright oranges lie in a bowl on the queen's bed-side table, closely matching the burnished gold of her belt and buttons, and the flowers she wears in her hair. Oranges seem to be associated with gold, and thus expressive of nature's bounty.

We find the orange resting among folds of 'sweeping green,' presumably fabric, the colour combination suggesting, of course, an orange tree, here awkwardly recreated artificially. But the greenery is hostile, decorated with grinning dragons, and the orange is spoiled, gashed through the 'rind'. Still, the connection between the interior and natural world outside is compounded by the fact that the green fabric is rustled by 'gusts of the wind,' even inside the house; and when the memory or dream begins, the 'blue roof' parts to show 'blue sky' (ll. 26–27). Even in the psychological move into nature and the outdoors, the artificial is still present in the 'painted book' which Margaret holds (l. 34). When the moment of violence comes, it is a 'tree' upon which Margaret strikes her head (l. 41).

Though the poem resists decisive moral interpretation, these details help to create a sense of a dysfunctional relationship with nature. The protagonist has seemingly committed a violence (his wearing of 'mail' [l. 43] and simile of Margaret's hair as 'like a gold flag over a sail' [l. 45], implying either war or commerce, emphasises such a feeling of aggression or imperialist superiority), but he projects the blame for it onto nature: the tree, the flowers, the natural associations. Intensity of colour in this poem thus refers both to nature as fundamentally benevolent and vivid, *and* to the tension and disturbance which it provokes in the protagonist; so the intensity functions both, implicitly, as a celebratory liveliness (Thompson's youthful vigour of protest) *and* as Helsing's sign of agitation and disorder. Since Margaret's hair is golden, she too is linked with abundance, as are the heaps of golden daffodils. The protagonist kills both.

Remembering this, he leaps up, causing the orange to fall, gashed and unhealthy, from the figurative tree of the chair's green folds. This action invites biblical associations of the anxiety of picking fruit, disrupting humanity's prelapsarian accord with paradisaical nature. As his unhealthy relationship with the natural world thus reaches its representational pinnacle, the ghosts enter, and as in 'Rapunzel,' the ending is ambivalent. We may imagine the war as just or unjust, a duty or a crime, as Boos implies in her speculations about the nature of the protagonist's guilt. The speaker, though, recognises the 'arms' he 'used to paint' (l. 82), which brings his labour into line with Morris's crafting and decoration of functional objects, and reminds us of the importance for the artist of an appropriate attitude to nature, which Victorian writers such as Ruskin and Morris

stressed. Thus the protagonist's observation that 'the colours were all grown faint' (l. 83) might imply not only ghostliness, but the troubling sickness which has arisen in his broken or perverted affinity with nature and society, resultant, it would seem, from a too voracious and indulgent attitude to the abundance which can exist between them.

NOTES

1. William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. London: Bell and Daldy, 1858, 248 pp. Hereafter *Guenevere*. Line references as printed in Cecil Y. Lang, ed, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*. 2nd edn, revised, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 161–278.
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