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## The Individual and the Violence of History: The Froissart Poems of William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere* and Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'

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Celia M. Lewis

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.

(Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History')

[...] see how white

The skull is, loose within the coif! He fought

A good fight, maybe, ere he was slain quite.

(William Morris, 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire')

Although time, language, culture and attitudes toward artistic creation divide William Morris and Walter Benjamin, the writers shared an awareness of the individual's vulnerability to the chance circumstances of time and place, a position that intensifies in the context of war. Benjamin's death offers a tragic embodiment of that experience: after having successfully fled to the Spanish border from Nazi-controlled France, Benjamin took his own life, convinced that he was trapped even in spite of the fact that he held an American entry visa in his pocket. The quotation above from the

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‘Theses’, Benjamin’s last and arguably ‘most important late statement on historical questions’, offers a provocative philosophical space from which to examine the history-based poems in Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858).<sup>1</sup>

Although the two thinkers’ attitudes towards modernity may have differed profoundly – with Morris condemning the mechanical reproduction that modern technological advancement allowed and Benjamin lauding the possibility that mechanical reproduction might liberate art from the ‘aura’ of ritual and worship – Benjamin’s awareness of the tenuous nature of human life in any present moment evokes the tenor of Morris’s Froissart poems. ‘However real the continuity of history’, Morris cautioned, ‘[artists] must recognize the enormous gulf between that period and the present’.<sup>2</sup> Readily acknowledging the distance between the historical past and the present moment, Morris would likely have agreed with Benjamin’s claim that true knowledge of the conditions of the past was unattainable.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Morris’s focus on the disjuncture between individual experience and reported history finds a kindred impulse in Benjamin’s later preoccupation with ‘the discrete historical moment in its singularity’.<sup>4</sup>

The intellectual concerns of both writers reflected a socio-historical aesthetic tradition that recognises the role of the imagination in attempts to resurrect forgotten history. While at Oxford, Morris’s reading of Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) introduced him to a condemnation of capitalist society for its rejection of human values that ‘won a response from Marx, and remained indelibly printed upon William Morris’s consciousness’.<sup>5</sup> Yet *Past and Present* also exposed the poet to a spirit of inquiry that accessed the past by envisioning the reality of medieval lives – for example, the imagined lives and concerns of the monks in St. Edmundsbury Abbey. As cultural theorists, both Morris and Benjamin were part of a philosophical tradition that recognised the value of the materials of past existence – be they edifices, artefacts, texts or poetic images – in constructing a more accurate record of history. For Benjamin, the gap between the past and the present – a gulf hidden by the myth of a traditional history written by the victors – could be bridged by engaging with works of art or cultural products ‘in which past ages have deposited their collective dreams and longings, their aspirations for a better life, aspirations which adverse historical conditions have heretofore frustrated’.<sup>6</sup> In other words, as Benjamin argued in ‘Theory of Art Criticism’, a work of art may contain ‘a power to provide us with the experience of truth otherwise inaccessible to us’.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that Morris’s medieval history poems offer a nineteenth-century reconstruction of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century life rather than genuine medieval artefacts, his poetic imagination took inspiration in part from what Victorians considered to be a ‘true’ medieval historical account, Jean Froissart’s *Chronicles*. Within

that medieval framework, Morris's poems voice the difficulty of accessing the past in their envisioning of individual lives and experiences that have been long buried or ignored. Indeed, Morris's 1858 commitment to evoke in his poetry the grim material reality of the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century world that his *Defence* characters inhabit is consonant with Benjamin's concern for the forgotten past. With Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in mind, this essay focuses on the temporally and spatially-bound images created by Morris in his Froissart poems to express the characters' troubled relationship with those 'Who make this history' ('Sir Peter Harpdon's End', ll. 744-48). Ultimately, I wish in this analysis to sound the poems' recognition that individual experiences, especially those steeped in violence, cannot be entirely known through reported history.

Scholars have long noted ways in which the poems in the *Defence of Guenevere* volume problematise the Victorian concept of heroism by exposing war's brutality and by rejecting the impulse to sentimentalise the medieval past.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging this move toward authenticity, Ingrid Hanson confirms that Morris's response to violence, like that of many Victorian poets, was complex and imaginative rather than monolithic: 'in turning to the past', she notes, Morris 'suggests the failures of the present'.<sup>9</sup> Yet Hanson also observes that Morris's work as a whole 'can be understood in its diachronic relation to the history of ideas as well as its synchronic relation to the preoccupations of its own time'.<sup>10</sup> Positing the relevance to Morris's poetry of the work of twentieth-century thinkers Georges Bataille, René Girard and Elaine Scarry on war, sacrifice, violence and pain, Hanson draws those writers' ideas into her examination of Morris's depictions of violence.<sup>11</sup> And yet, the concern evoked specifically by Morris's use of Froissart's writing also anticipates Walter Benjamin's later preoccupation with forgotten historical moments. In the Froissart poems, violence threatens to destroy both individuals and any record of their experiences; thus, central to the poems' historical impulse is a represented disjuncture between individual experience and reported history. This aspect of Morris's history poems – the firm grounding of his characters in isolated and overlooked moments of a 'true' historical context and his focused representation of the 'horrific immediacy' of that world – merits further consideration.<sup>12</sup>

The online William Morris Archive version of *The Defence of Guenevere*, edited by Margaret Lourie, notes Morris's reference to events in medieval history that span from 1250 up to 1453.<sup>13</sup> Within that contextual framework, Morris's attentiveness to verifiable historical events or people and, paradoxically, his creation of imagined personal experiences reflect a humanistic drive towards authenticity realised in the violent content of the Froissart poems. In this analysis I will examine how the collection's title poem prepares Morris's reader for the history poems that follow,

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before exploring the paradoxical issues that rise to the surface in the three Froissart poems most concerned with reported history: ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’, ‘Concerning Geffray Teste Noir’ and ‘The Haystack in the Floods’.

*The Defence of Guenevere’s* focus on its title character in the volume’s initial poem later resonates in the Froissart poems as it bears down on the issue of the flaws inherent in second-person historical accounts. From the beginning of his collection, Morris destabilises his reader’s expectations by evoking a well-known and immediately identifiable fictional character, and then presenting an ‘unknown’ Guenevere who tells her own story – one we might not expect. Through the queen’s self-analysis, Morris invites his readers to consider the troubling prospect of falsely reported narratives. Various scholars have observed that Guenevere sets the tone for the volume by subverting notions of truth and challenging her audience’s moral assumptions. For example, Jonathan Freeman notes that Morris’s ‘Defence of Guenevere’ appropriates the Arthurian legend to subversive ends; Anthony H. Harrison, with reference to Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), pushes that analysis further by suggesting that Morris’s title poem counters Victorian notions of manliness ‘by making Guenevere a genuine heroine’, a move which also challenges Victorian assumptions regarding Christian virtue, chivalry and sexuality. Karen Herbert records ways in which the poems’ dialogic structure and content expose a disjuncture between individual and public interpretations of experience: through their speech, memory and imagination, Morris’s characters ‘move tentatively toward’ Herbert Marcuse’s concept of a multi-dimensional society.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Herbert sees Guenevere’s monologue in Morris’s *Defence* as ‘[encapsulating] the volume’s overall focus on mythical and linguistic incompatibility’.<sup>16</sup> All three of these analyses take note of the challenges Morris’s Guenevere offers both to fictional characters within the poem and to contemporary readers.

In fact, Guenevere’s monologue also raises the issue of historical inaccuracy by representing a character that questions the reliability of official reports that are accepted as truth.<sup>17</sup> Although the setting of King Arthur’s court does not offer a ‘real’ historical moment, the Guenevere-Launcelot affair is central to the fictional history of what is arguably the most significant of British legends. By depicting a scene that is not represented in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* (1485) and by offering Guenevere the opportunity to speak in her own defence to the knights that have accused her of treason, Morris alerts us to the existence of untold stories. Without ever explicitly admitting that she is guilty of adultery or excusing herself, Guenevere confronts her judges with her personal version of events and evidence of her accusers’ hypocrisy. Her dramatic monologue points to paradoxes in both her situation and in her accusers’ assertions.

Morris's Guenevere makes it clear, for example, that in comparison to the love and affection she feels for Launcelot, her legal, contractual marriage to Arthur holds little value. Virginia Hale and Catherine Stevenson remind us that within the context of a medieval court and the tradition of courtly love, Guenevere's love for Launcelot would have required no defence: her situation simply mirrors a cultural incoherency as she is ethically trapped between the church (and its state-governed legal contract of marriage) and courtly love, a value system that privileges love over legality.<sup>18</sup> As Florence Boos notes, 'Malory's characters knew the facts, and were constrained by an arbitrary law to identify adultery with "treason"'.<sup>19</sup> However, Morris's medieval text '[upholds] a defensible sense in which Guenevere was otherwise "loyal" to her husband'.<sup>20</sup> Consistent with this attitude, as Carole Silver has observed, the notes in the version of Malory's text used by Morris – Southey's edition – would have encouraged Morris to see Guenevere as a true lover, not as an adulteress.<sup>21</sup>

In that spirit, Morris's Guenevere emphasises the subjective and context-dependent nature of reality, noting three times that she alone can know the truth regarding her relationship with Launcelot and imbuing her claim with spiritual import: 'Whatever happened on through all those years,/ God knows I speak truth' (ll. 47-48, 143-44, 284-85). Her statement reminds us of the fact that the 'truth' about what has happened in her life has not been nor can ever be entirely grasped objectively. More generally, as Karen Herbert has noted, the poem highlights the discrepancy between personal experience and public report.<sup>22</sup> This leads to the second issue raised by the queen's monologue: citing evidence that the accusers who have reported her action as a criminal offence are themselves both treasonous and hypocritical, Guenevere alludes to incidents in the *Morte* when knights wrongly accused her of treachery though they themselves were guilty.<sup>23</sup> Those allusions to falsely reported past events cast doubt on the legitimacy of the knights' present indictment and imply that the veracity of reported events – often accepted as history – may be flawed in any number of instances. History reported from the perspective of those who have established the terms of judgment will naturally show bias.

As Walter Benjamin would later write in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', the practitioners of historical materialism may share a similar frustration given their opposition to 'the adherents of historicism [who] actually empathize [...] with the victor'.<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, Benjamin wrote the above lines in a desperate moment. As Michael W. Jennings reminds us, the German philosopher composed them while 'in flight before the Nazi war machine' at a time when it seemed clear that the Nazis would win, that their worst crimes would be accepted with impunity, and that many individual 'histories' would be forever lost.<sup>25</sup> Yet significantly, the moment in Guenevere's story that Morris has chosen to represent is precisely the instant in which

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she is most vulnerable – and desperate.

Morris, of course, magnifies the ostensible powerlessness of his poem's subject by virtue of the fact that the central figure is a woman. In this same vein of understanding, Jonathan Freedman suggests that Morris was more interested in power than he was in truth, but clearly the two were inextricably intertwined. Freedman writes that:

in Morris' hands, what Guenevere reminds the Victorian audience – and a twentieth-century one as well – is that narratives such as Guenevere's are always written from the point of view of Gauaine; that history is not a value-neutral set of facts or even a privileged set of myths expressing universal truths, but a trial, a contestation, a clash of interpretations which the more socially powerful always wins.<sup>26</sup>

Though Guenevere opens her monologue with a recognition that it takes 'but little skill/ To talk of well-known things past now and dead' (ll. 11-12), her monologue emphasises the fact that things seemingly 'well-known' may not have been accurately known or truthfully reported. Nonetheless, the accepted interpretation of past events haunts Guenevere's present existence with the threat of violent death since her accusers – corrupt though they may be – intend to burn her at the stake for treason. Although Guenevere's situation in the poem is menacing, her legendary history is so well known that readers must know she will escape a brutal death: Launcelot will come to her rescue.

In contrast, the characters placed in Morris's history-based poems are not so lucky.<sup>27</sup> Carole Silver has described the distinction between the groups of Morris's fiction and history poems in similar terms: '[t]o move from the works inspired by Malory to those derived from Froissart is to travel from a mythic realm of romance to a world of the grimmest reality'.<sup>28</sup> As Silver observes, 'Froissart provides a frame of reference wherein Morris's poems become fully plausible'.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, though Morris's poems are inspired by the writings of a medieval historian, they also depict moments in time that are not reported in those accounts.

At least six of the thirty poems in Morris's *Defence* collection were inspired by Lord Berner's translation of Froissart's *Chronicles* and focus on events that, in Froissart's narrative, are claimed to have taken place during the Hundred Years' War. These poems are collectively distinct from the Arthurian poems in that their historical frame of reference within a war-torn country offers a realistic setting for heroism. The contrast created by the juxtaposition is vital, for the situations of Morris's Froissart characters widen the gap between the Victorian (or indeed any) heroic ideal and

medieval material reality as good people who behave heroically are tortured, killed or forgotten. In analyses of these poems, scholars have noted Morris's grasp on the brutality of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the relevance of those observations to the poet's contemporary world.<sup>30</sup> Yet Morris's Froissart poems reach beyond their critique of war's brutality past and present.

By illustrating the effects of violence on individual lives and gesturing toward the inadequacies of reported history, the poems construct what Benjamin would later recognise as a meaningful focus on the marginal or minor historical event. As Benjamin noted, '[a] chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'.<sup>31</sup> A historian may fail to record individual tragedies, but Morris, as is evident in his Froissart poems, seeks to rectify history's omissions. To an extent, the dramatic monologues crafted by Morris reflect the Victorian poetic focus on historical figures exemplified in works such as Robert Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto' and 'Fra Lippo Lippi'. Like those works, *The Defence of Guenevere* offers a codicil to history by fashioning the untold stories of 'minor' historical figures. Morris's innovation lies in the poetic contrast he sets up between an idealised myth and the real violence of personal loss ignored in a historian's narration of major events.

In 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End', the song sung at the end of the poem is not about the 'real' character, Sir Peter, whom the reader has witnessed suffer and die heroically. Rather, the song represents the story of a legendary hero, Sir Launcelot, as history. Sir Peter's story is ostensibly forgotten, and his lover, Lady Alice, is left in despair. Despite Alice's hope that when many years have passed, songs will be made of her and her lover Sir Peter, that never happens – with the exception of Morris's 'song', a poem that reflects the violent anonymity into which the love (and lives) of people like Sir Peter and Lady Alice sink.

The action of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' takes place during 1377, or thereabouts, when England was losing ground in Western France. In real life, Sir Bertrand de Guesclin, Constable of France, and Sir Oliver de Clisson began attacking castles still held by those sympathetic to the English cause.<sup>32</sup> In Morris's poem, Sir Peter, a Gascon knight fighting on the side of the English, is said to be the nephew of Sir John Harpdon, a well-known English knight who actually existed.<sup>33</sup> Through the fictional Sir Peter's allusions to actual events, Morris allows the reader to place him in a precise historical framework: November 1377 (ll. 36-37). As the poem begins, Sir Peter is fighting a hopeless battle, defending a castle with crumbling walls from the French. He notes: 'Edward the prince lies underneath the ground;/ Edward the king is dead;/ at Westminster/ The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard./ Everything goes to

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rack – eh! and we too’ (ll. 44-46), yet despite that admission, Peter will not accept defeat. His motivation for fighting a losing battle is both that he likes ‘the straining game/ Of striving well to hold up things that fall’ (ll. 220-21) and that he hopes to win renown for his courage and loyalty. When Sir Peter’s cousin Lambert, who is allied with the French, comes to seek a truce, Peter compares his own situation to the story of Troy, asserting:

[...] men will talk, you know,  
(We talk of Hector, dead so long ago,)  
When I am dead, of how this Peter clung  
To what he thought the right; of how he died,  
Perchance, at last, doing some desperate deed  
Few men would care do now [...]

(ll. 211-16)

The reference to Homer’s *Iliad* reveals both Peter’s heroic ambition and his belief that his moral integrity and courage will not be forgotten by history. During the parley Lambert treacherously tries to murder Sir Peter, but Peter captures him. The poem emphasises Lambert’s wickedness through his own admission of sin and corruption, yet rather than have Lambert killed, Peter has Lambert’s ears cut off to mark him as a traitor. Then the tide of the war turns: within twenty lines, Peter has been taken prisoner by Lambert, Guesclin and Clisson. When Sir Peter begs for his life, Guesclin tells him that he must die because of what he has had done to Lambert’s ears. Thus, the mercy Sir Peter granted is not returned. Moreover, before the heroic knight is hanged like a common criminal, Lambert tortures him psychologically, describing how his hanging corpse will blacken, and mimicking his lady, Alice de la Barde, from whom Peter cannot receive his only last wish, a parting kiss. The brutality depicted in the poem goes beyond the time and place of Sir Peter’s death; it dwells in the fact that the treacherous liar goes free, while he who has been loyal, honourable and heroic is cruelly abused, then executed.

The last third of ‘Sir Peter Harpdon’s End’ offers an often untold story of war’s effects: the poem depicts Alice de la Barde’s reaction to the news of her lover’s execution. Alice is waiting anxiously for her lover, Sir Peter Harpdon, when a squire sent by Clisson interrupts her reveries to tell her that Peter fought the good fight, and died a noble death. Faced with Sir Peter’s end, Lady Alice first denies his death, allowing herself to think that the squire is jesting; then, after the squire leaves, she grows angry at Guesclin, imagining how she would murder him in vengeance if she were a man. Bargaining with herself (‘Suppose this had not happen’d after all?’ (l.

699)), she leans out of the window to watch for additional reports. From outside, Alice hears a song about Launcelot and Galahad. She reflects that those singing should be singing of Sir Peter, a noble knight who failed despite his strength and courage. Therein lies the point. Just as Sir Peter did earlier, Alice wonders if anyone will ever write a song about her and Sir Peter. Morris answers the question by having the poem 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' conclude with a song of Sir Launcelot. Thus, embedded within the historical context of the poem, the experience of a legendary hero is immortalised rather than the 'real' experience of Sir Peter and Alice.

With reference to the Holy Grail, the song incites listeners to sing Launcelot's praises yet 'again' and to pray for the poet who 'made this history/ Cunning and fairly' (ll. 748-49); here, too, Sir Peter's true act of heroism and his unjust death are ignored. Of course, one might assert that the poet himself, Morris, is the hero for having attempted to redress an historical omission. Yet such a claim would shift our attention from what would seem to be the poem's aim: the juxtaposition of the Launcelot myth with the grim story of Peter and Alice reveals a clear distinction between the romanticisation of fictional heroes and the material reality of the Middle Ages. In other words, the poem gestures at the fictionalised world of heroism and its distance from both history as reported and trauma as experienced. Through this contrast, the poem alerts the reader to the prior existence of heroic individuals who were crushed by hostile historical circumstances and ignored or forgotten by the official *Chronicles* of history.

In the poem 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire', the Hundred Years' War is once again used as a setting for challenging reported history through the representation of individual violence and forgotten lives. Morris names the narrator as John of Castel Neuf, whom Froissart calls Chatell Neufe in the *Chronicles* (2: 446). Castel Neuf recounts his personal experience in a failed attempt to reconstruct the violent end of two unknown individuals.<sup>34</sup> The backdrop for the dramatic monologue is Froissart's description of the fight against Geffray Teste Noire, the actual leader of an outlaw group who pretended to be English so that he could freely pillage French towns.<sup>35</sup> In Morris's poem, John of Castel Neuf tells his audience – a young man named Alleyne – what happened to him long ago, and asks Alleyne to relay the story to the Canon of Chimay, otherwise known as Froissart.

The narrator recalls that while waiting in a forest to attack Geffray, he discovered two skeletons. From the physical remains of the bodies, he pieced together a narrative account in which a knight and his lady were ambushed by bandits, and tried unsuccessfully to escape.<sup>36</sup> In what he admits was a reverie that lasted hours, the narrator went so far as to envision the lovers at a tournament and to fall in love with the imagined woman's face. Remarkably, as the reader may realise, the skeletons of

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the unknown victims served as a canvas onto which John of Castel Neuf projected his own romantic fantasies, constructing a narrative for which there was hardly any evidence.

When the signal from his leader interrupted his thoughts, Castel Neuf charged out of the wood with the other knights in the vain hope of killing Geffray Teste Noire. Ironically, Castel Neuf's violent, offensive attack as described places him in a position similar to the outlaws who he supposes attacked the knight and the lady about whose skeletons he has just fantasised. Believing he need only examine the skeletons for their story to '[come] out clear without a flaw' (l. 120), Castel Neuf asserts the victims were 'waylaid' or ambushed (l. 121), and even imagines that the unknown knight 'knew not she was dead/ Thought her but fainted from her broken wrist' (ll. 129-30). Whoever the victims were, the fact that their bodily remains serve the fantasies of a person ignorant of their true story might seem another level of violation against them. Castel Neuf tells Alleyne that Froissart 'knoweth [Geffray] is dead by now' (l. 190), but that Froissart does not know the story of the lady and the knight. Then he suggests Alleyne tell Froissart the story of the two lovers and offers to show his listener the chapel in his new castle where he has buried the two skeletons and commissioned two stone effigies to adorn their tomb.

Has Castel Neuf done the putative lovers honourable service, or has he simply used them to sentimentalise a violent act? He is not a character we necessarily condemn: his admission that at only age fifteen he had 'joy' helping to slaughter those responsible for the bloody Jacquerie rebellion is somewhat balanced by the physical revulsion he experienced immediately afterwards, when directly confronted with the carnage of war (ll. 13-16). Yet his immediate shift in the next line to a romantic description of the found skeleton he assumes is female – 'An arrow had gone through her tender throat' (l. 17) – adds another layer of ambivalence. In any case, although Castel Neuf has memorialised what he assumes to be the remains of unknown lovers, their story does not make it into Froissart's official history. Morris's invention of Castel Neuf's anecdote along with the warrior's overt reference to the *Chronicles* draws our attention to the vulnerability of individuals to chance circumstances in times of war, the elusive quality of the past, and, in any case, the incapacity of historical record to capture it.

The poem 'Concerning Geffray Teste Noire' calls attention to the uncertain truth of reported history not only with its mention of an actual fourteenth-century chronicler, Froissart, but by focusing on a narrative that was never told by him; indeed, a narrative that could only be partially reconstructed from forensic evidence and imagination. The narrator's monologue also foregrounds an unjust and inescapable irony: while the violent bandit Geffray eventually died at home in his bed, the

unknown lovers died violently, their bodies left to rot in the forest. Geffray's story makes it into Froissart's *Chronicles*; the tale of the murdered lovers does not.<sup>37</sup>

The events in the most notable and most violent of the Froissart poems, 'The Haystack in the Floods', take place around the time of the 1356 victory of the English over the French at Poitiers. The historical irony of the poem is acute: the English characters Jehane and her lover Robert are victors of a war; yet because of a chance turn of events, they become its victims. In the first stanza of the 160-line poem, Morris offers a foreshadowing that the lives of the two lovers will be lost even though their country has triumphed:

Had she come all the way for this  
To part at last without a kiss?  
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain  
That her own eyes might see him slain  
Beside the haystack in the floods?

(ll. 1-5)

While riding toward sanctuary at the Gascon border, Jehane and Robert are captured by Godmar, a character we can identify as Godmar du Fay, a cruel and powerful French Baron who fought against Edward III.<sup>38</sup> The poem is narrated from Jehane's point of view: she identifies Godmar as a traitor; he is a 'Judas' who still flies pennons depicting the British red lion even though he has sided with the French. Jehane's lover, Robert, makes a heroic attempt to fight, but fails; he is outnumbered, his own men betray him, and he and Jehane fall easily into Godmar's hands. Godmar demands that Jehane make an unacceptable choice: either she must become his lover (thus desecrating her love for Robert), or he will kill Robert.

The figure of Jehane stands in contrast to Morris's earlier depiction of the mythical Guenevere: both females are put to trial by powerful men; both are made the focal point of the poem; both are seemingly given the chance to determine their own fate through speech. Like the mythical Guenevere, Jehane is trapped in a paradoxical situation, yet Morris has drawn crucial distinctions between Jehane's situation and that of the fictional queen. No lover is waiting in the wings to rescue Jehane. In fact, her only potential rescuer is about to be executed before her eyes. Jehane's only options are to give her lover a death-sentence, or to degrade their love by promising to be his enemy's lover, in which case Godmar (already characterised as a traitor) may still kill Robert. Another critical distinction Morris offers in the two poems is that of the temporal difference between fiction or myth and reality: in 'The Defence of Guenevere', the reader is given the impression that the heroine can stall

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for time through speech for as long as is necessary to secure her rescuer's arrival. Jehane, however, is not only trapped by her enemy, she is imprisoned by 'real' time, granted only an hour to choose between her lover's death and her prostitution to Godmar. Her reflection earlier in the poem, 'Would God that this next hour were past!' (l. 59), marks her realistic assessment of the horror that she will endure despite the fact that she and Robert are on the 'winning' side of a war.

Although Jehane is a creation of Morris's imagination, he evokes through her experience a realistic temporal and physical framework. His poem might be likened to a reconstructed historical narrative that Benjamin would have appreciated, a narrative that, as Jennings notes, '[eschews] the sort of truth claims that speak from traditional historical narratives, replacing them with the hope that truth might arise from the often violent collision of a past that has been recuperated in bits and pieces and a present badly in need of insight into what has been'.<sup>39</sup>

When Godmar suggests that he may rape Jehane all the same once Robert is dead, she responds by threatening to strangle Godmar in his sleep (ll. 91-93). Then she attempts to console herself with the thought of suicide by starvation, but Godmar intervenes, stating ominously that if she refuses his advances he will take her to Paris and to Chatelet prison where he will 'tell/ All that [he knows]' (ll. 102-3). When Jehane protests that any stories he might tell are 'foul lies' (l. 103) Godmar reminds her that in Paris his lies about her will be accepted as truth. He paints a vivid picture of how his report will be received: the population will cry out for Jehane's death, and she will be burned or drowned for being a witch. Despite her protest, Jehane realises that the judges and the public will accept Godmar's lies as truth. Morris's reader knows this too, as at the first sight of Godmar she foresaw her violent end:

The court at Paris; those six men;  
The gratings of the Chatelet;  
The swift Seine on some rainy day  
Like this, and people standing by,  
And laughing, while my weak hands try  
To recollect how strong men swim.

(ll. 51-56)

In fact, Jehane's imaginings of what will happen to her when she arrives in Paris may be kinder than the reality of history. According to Veronica Kennedy, the hands of suspected witches were bound hand to ankle – left to right and right to left – which would make swimming nearly impossible. Survival in the water meant death on the shore, as being able to float was proof of witchery; death by drowning, on the other

hand, indicated innocence.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in what we may project to be the ‘second fittē’ of the poem, Jehane will again be ‘hemmed in’ (l. 95) between two unviable options.

Jehane’s lucidity indicates that she is neither a witch nor mad. Godmar, on the other hand, may well be. At the end of the hour she rejects Godmar – thus sentencing Robert to death. When Robert tries unsuccessfully to kiss Jehane, Godmar beheads him on the spot. Within the historical frame of the poem, Godmar’s inhuman brutality is credible: just as war provides the opportunity for heroism in traditional heroic narratives, Godmar’s marginal political position during a time of war gives him license for sadism. He is doubly dangerous as a traitor whose ambitions have failed; theoretically, he should be at Robert’s mercy since the British have won the war, but as events have trapped Jehane and Robert in French territory, the power roles have been inverted. The heroic characters in the poem are tortured and die (or will soon die) after having suffered humiliating deaths; the traitor escapes scot-free. Jehane’s nightmarish situation raises the troubling issue of historical perspective, for there is a horrific contradiction between what Jehane and the reader know to be true, and what Godmar will report as the truth in Paris. Through the characters of Robert, Jehane and Godmar – the victimised and the victor – Morris offers his readers a credible historical situation in which the murder of a courageous hero will not be avenged, lies will be represented as truth to an official court and an innocent woman will be executed.

The implication of personal narratives inspired by a historical chronicle but not reported therein is enormous. By telling stories which would by their nature have been forgotten, Morris breaks with proponents of historicism, whom Benjamin criticised because their ‘empathy’ rests with the victor.<sup>41</sup> In many ways, Morris’s focus on material reality in his history-based poems is not only consistent with his socialist views; it aligns with the precepts of Benjaminian historical materialism. Though the Froissart poems centre on individual experience, one of their themes is the dichotomy between history as experienced and history as reported. The troubling narratives the poems recount challenge the Victorian obsession with heroism by embedding fictional characters in the real historical context and violence of the Hundred Years’ War. In that world, the characters that readers are invited to admire and respect for their honour, fidelity or heroism are either brutalised or suffer ignominious deaths. That Jehane, Castel Neuf’s imaginary lovers and Sir Peter are not based on real historical figures renders their individual stories more universal. Unlike Godmar, Geffray and Guesclin – historical figures that Froissart names in his *Chronicles* – Jehane, Robert, Castel Neuf’s murdered lovers and Sir Peter might be every man and every woman whose life is crushed by historical events, and whose tragic heroism falls outside of history’s reported scope. In a sense, Morris writes the unwritten story that,

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paradoxically, cannot be written. However, by basing the poems loosely on Jean Froissart's fourteenth-century *Chronicles*, Morris encodes a desire to do what Benjamin later identified as '[brushing] history against the grain'.<sup>42</sup>

The Victorian desire for heroic narratives manifested itself in obsessions with both history – see, for example, the numerous editions of Edward Shepherd Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo* (1851) – and the fictional works of Malory and Tennyson. As Morris believed Froissart's *Chronicles* to be a historical source, one might argue that his poems based on that volume simply 'fictionalise history'. Yet, ultimately, the *Defence* volume offers two seemingly opposing gestures: a historicising of fiction through poetic narrative and a fictionalising of history. As we have seen, the title poem registering Guenevere's personal defense undercuts the reader's narrative assumptions by focusing on the fragile and subjective nature of truth and the likely existence of untold stories. History, too, is a potential narrative, written, as Benjamin's 'Theses' remind us, by the victors. Morris's 'historical' Froissart poems force the reader to contemplate, via the experiences of fictional characters, the personal horrors of the Hundred Years' War; indeed, the brutality of all wars. By interspersing history-based, heretofore untold narratives throughout a volume of poems built otherwise on the national Arthurian myth, Morris's *Defence of Guenevere* collection would seem to relegate all of traditional history, including some of its most widely-accepted heroic narratives, to a domain of dubious truth if not of fiction. The poems of William Morris remind us that imaginative art may reveal a more accurate sense of reality than historical report, thanks to the poet's ability to encode the emotional and moral patterns of human experience into the untold story.

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#### NOTES

1. Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 45. For an analysis of Benjamin's historical views see especially Chapter 2, 'The Permanent Catastrophe: Benjamin's Philosophy of History', pp. 42-81. (Afterwards Jennings). Line reference to poems from *The Defence of Guenevere* will appear, in parentheses, in the body of the article. All references to the text refer to William Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, ed. by Margaret Lourie (New York: Garland, 1981), available online: <[http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Defence\\_of\\_Guenevere/defencetext.html](http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Defence_of_Guenevere/defencetext.html)> [last accessed 1 March 2015]. (Afterwards, Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere*).
2. William Morris, 'The Early Illustration of Printed Books' [1895] in Morris, *The Ideal Book: Essays and Lectures on the Arts of the Book*, ed. by William S. Peterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 22-23.
3. Jennings, p. 48. For Morris, see Florence Boos, 'The Defence of Guenevere: A Morrisian Critique of Medieval Violence', *JWMS*, 18:3 (Summer 2010), 8-21. (Afterwards Boos, 'The Defence').
4. Jennings, p. 12.
5. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Merlin, 1977), p. 31.
6. Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 217.

7. Jennings, p. 124.
8. Raymond Chapman notes that Morris 'has a stronger sense of the reality of medieval life than most of those who had previously looked to it for an image of the beautiful'. Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 71. (Afterwards Chapman). Frederick Kirchoff remarks that 'the more ambitious of the historical poems [...] are perennially cited as evidence of Morris' refusal to sentimentalize the past' in Kirchoff, *William Morris: The Construction of a Male Self, 1856-1872* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990), p. 101. (Afterwards Kirchoff). Florence Boos writes that Morris constantly 'sought ways to render his medieval and historical poetry more authentic' in Boos, '1896-1996: Morris' Poetry at the "Fin de Millénaire"', *Victorian Poetry*, 34: 3 (Autumn 1996), 285-98 (288). (Afterwards Boos, '1896-1996').
9. Ingrid Hanson, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856-1890* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), pp. xiii, 44. (Afterwards Hanson).
10. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
11. The theories of Bataille, Girard and Scarry, more than Walter Benjamin's philosophical-legalistic examination of the purposes and results of violence in 'Critique of Violence' (1921), offer a phenomenological means of understanding Morris's visionary use of violence.
12. Roger Simpson, 'Morris's Unpublished Arthurian Translations', *JWMS*, 20: 4 (Summer 2014), 7-18 (12).
13. Margaret Lourie, 'Editorial Notes and Annotations', in Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere*, pp. 223-50. See also Boos, 'The Defence', pp. 11-12.
14. Jonathan Freedman, 'Ideological Background: Tennyson, Morris, and the Pastness of the Past', in *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*, ed. by Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe (New York: Garland, 1988), pp. 235-48 (236). (Afterwards Freedman). Anthony Harrison, 'Medievalism and the Ideologies of Victorian Poetry', *Studies in Medievalism*, 4 (1992), 219-34 (221, 223). (Afterwards Harrison).
15. Karen Herbert, 'Dissident Language in *The Defence of Guenevere*', *Victorian Poetry*, 34:3 (Autumn 1996), 313-27 (315).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
17. Both Jonathan Freedman and Antony H. Harrison observe that Morris, like other Victorian poets, appropriates the discourse of Victorian medievalism to his own ends. Freedman and Harrison note that Morris's purpose in usurping Arthurian discourse is to challenge and subvert cultural expectations and conventions. Yet Freedman and Harrison neglect the significance of the Froissart poems, poems inspired by actual history that Morris scattered throughout the *Defence* volume. Freedman, p. 236; Harrison, p. 221.
18. Virginia S. Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, 'Morris' Medieval Queen: A Paradox Resolved', *Victorian Poetry*, 30:2 (Summer 1992), 171-78 (171). (Afterwards Hale and Stevenson).
19. Florence Boos, 'A Modern Guenevere: Morris's Reshaping of Malory's Tale', *Useful and Beautiful: The Newsletter of the William Morris Society in the United States* (Summer 2015), p. 21.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 251. (Afterwards Silver).
22. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 19. Hale and Stevenson make this point as well (Hale and Stevenson, p. 173). See also, Thomas Malory, *The Byrth, Lyf, and Actes of King Arthur: Of his Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table, theyr Merveyllous Enquestes and Aduentures, Thachyeugn of the Sanc Greal; and in the end le Morte Darthur, with the Dolourous Deth and Departing out of thys Wordle of them al*, with an introduction by Robert Southey, 2 vols (London: Printed from Caxton's edition, 1485, for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, by T. Davison, 1817), II, p. 400. Her allusion to poisoning (l. 149) recalls the poisoned apple incident from Malory's 'Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenevere', in which the knights accuse Guenevere of having poisoned the apple that led to Sir Patryse's death. In Malory's story, the knights'

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- misrepresentation of the truth put the Queen's life in jeopardy. In the *Morte*, the incident is resolved when Launcelot champions Guenevere's innocence by defeating her accuser; and when the Lady Nynyve reveals that the poisoning has resulted not from the queen's actions, but from treachery among the knights (Malory, II, p. 620). Nonetheless, because a story was incorrectly reported, a queen was nearly put to death.
24. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. By Harry Zohn, 3rd edn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 258. (Afterwards Benjamin).
  25. Jennings, p. 45.
  26. Freedman, p. 244.
  27. Interestingly, Andrew Lang compared Morris's 'unrivalled sense of what was most exquisite and rare in the life of the Middle Ages' with Froissart's 'superficial pages'. Andrew Lang, 'The Poetry of William Morris', *Contemporary Review*, XLII (August 1882), 200-17 (202).
  28. Silver, p. 33.
  29. *Ibid.*
  30. See Notes 8 and 9, above. Specifically, Chapman, p. 71; Boos, '1896-1996', p. 288; Kirchhoff, p. 101; Hanson, p. 44.
  31. Benjamin, p. 256.
  32. Silver, pp. 36-37. Jean Froissart, *The Chronicle of Froissart*, trans. by Sir John Bourchier, Lord Berners, with an introduction by William Paton Ker, 6 vols (London: David Nutt, 1901-3), II, p. 484. (Afterwards, Froissart).
  33. Silver contests Frank J. J. Davies's assertion that Sir Peter is Sir John Harpendan or Harpendon. Silver, pp. 198-99, note 41.
  34. Froissart, II, p. 446
  35. Froissart, V, pp. 80-112.
  36. Silver suggests that the poem 'emphasized the connections between the capacity for romantic passion and the brutality [Morris] finds characteristic of the Middle Ages'. Silver, p. 38.
  37. Froissart, V, pp. 254-57. The violent scene pieced together by Morris's Castel Neuf is embedded in another story of brutality – his attack on Geffray's men – which may also, one has the impression, be neglected in reported history.
  38. Silver, p. 35.
  39. Jennings, p. 50.
  40. Veronica Kennedy, "'The Haystack in the Floods': An Uncharacteristic Pre-Raphaelite Poem", *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 8 (1990), 29-35.
  41. Benjamin, p. 258.
  42. *Ibid.*, p. 259.