

“Heaven’s Colour, the Blue”: Morris’s Guenevere and the Choosing Cloths Reread

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Perhaps the most striking image – and certainly the most painterly in its conception – in William Morris’s ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ (1858) is the one generated by the defendant herself: that of the choosing cloths. Both the critics and the ‘common reader’ have been powerfully drawn to the image and it has often been viewed as a crux to the poem. Nevertheless, its most significant function – as a purely rhetorical strategy – tends to be overlooked by Guenevere’s modern ‘advocates’ in their more abstruse discussions of its role as prophetic dream or psychological revelation. Guenevere uses the analogy as a means to convince her audience of her moral probity: nothing more, nothing less. What is particularly interesting, however, are the terms used within the analogy; the choosing cloths scene reveals in its very iconography the ‘bad faith’ which the defendant is trying to belie.

The choosing cloths are, as Guenevere makes clear, banners: the sort of colourful fabrics which appear in Pre-Raphaelite paintings of medieval knightly scenes, richly decorated with heraldic devices. One thinks most obviously of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s ‘Before the Battle’ (1858), where the focus is upon the lady attaching to the knight’s lance a streamer which reproduces the knight’s crest on a larger and much more prominent scale. In Elizabeth Siddal’s ‘Lady affixing a pennon to a Knight’s spear’ (c.1857), moreover, there is such a marked contrast of blue (in the lady’s skirt) and red (in the knight’s pennon) that it is tempting to see the painting in the context of Morris’s poem. What is important about banners of this type, too, is that their iconography is readily ‘readable’. The whole point of a banner is that its visual impact yields an immediate identification. It is presented, as it were, to be read. Guenevere’s use of this parable in this context, then, is calculated, and her aim is an ethical one. Adopting what appear to be almost formal rhetorical devices in her presentation of her analogy as a means of establishing credibility, she attempts to show that she is an innocent victim rather than a conscious villain.

As Guenevere points out, an examination of these particular banners – blank expanses of colour without armorial bearings – gave no visual clues and she therefore had no guidance on which choice to make. That she be punished for an accidental mistake must seem to any judicious person altogether unfair. Guilt implies evil intention and she chose blue with the most virtuous of motives, as she observes, because it represented the colour of heaven. Whatever the consequences, her instincts must be viewed as praiseworthy. Most subsequent critics of the poem, moreover, have agreed with Guenevere’s reading of the parable. In ‘Guenevere’s Critical Performance’ (*Victorian Poetry* 17 [1979], 317-27), Jonathan F. S. Post, for example, has observed that “Even the parable of the red and blue cloths shows the Queen attempting, if not

altogether successfully, to separate the universe into sharp surface outlines: emptied of mystery, reduced to manageable symbols, Heaven and Hell can be viewed as a game of chance" (p.322). In "The Deep Still Land of Colours": Color Imagery in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987), 180-93, Josephine Koster Tarvers has argued that the choice of blue instead of red indicates that "Guenevere seems to be condemned for not being true to herself ... She is condemned for trying logically to decide an event that is predicated on chance. We cannot know what fate would have befallen her if she had chosen the red cloth, for after all her love is morally tainted, but we do know, as sympathetic readers, caught up by the strength of her emotions, and conditioned by Morris to associate her with red, that the choice of blue is a mistake" (pp. 188-89). In other words, Guenevere's rhetorical strategy has thoroughly succeeded – her innocence continues to be pleaded. This, I would argue, is not how Morris intended the scene to be read.

By the logic of Guenevere's analogy – although this is never actually stated – Arthur must be equated with the red cloth and Launcelot with the blue. Within the boundaries of the poem itself, no witness for the prosecution is given a chance to object to this equation, demonstrably false though it be. The first 'external' critic to point out that Morris actually associated Launcelot with red rather than blue was Dennis R. Balch who – in 'Guenevere's Fidelity to Arthur in "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb"', *Victorian Poetry* 13 (1975), 51-70 – postulated that in choosing blue Guenevere was actually opting (perhaps unconsciously) for Arthur and the Christian marriage vow, which in turn must be identified with an internal hell. Guenevere would have chosen differently if she had known Launcelot at the time. In spite of the accuracy of the perception of red as Launcelot's colour, Balch's conclusions cannot be sustained within the context of the poem, or even the parable itself, since the point of the choosing cloths is that they were both presented at the *same* time for *immediate* judgement. Balch, moreover, analyzed only internal clues concerning the 'red – Launcelot' equation, and these are cumulative and retrospective for the reader rather than external and apparent from the very moment the analogy is suggested. It is this latter factor that I should like to emphasize here.

As has been often noted, 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb' form a matched pair, a kind of poetic diptych. The latter poem, too, is in many ways a verbal articulation of Rossetti's 'Arthur's Tomb' (1855), a painting in which Launcelot's red robe forms a visual antithesis to Guenevere's repressive black-and-white nun's habit. Dusty though the robe be after his long journey, the richness of the red is striking. Equally revealing in this context is Rossetti's 'Sir Launcelot's Vision of the Sanc Grael' (1857) where Launcelot's flowing red robes and bright red shield form an immediate visual focus. The robes also blend into the green of Guenevere's gown and the two colours are reflected, in slightly muted form, in the apple tree spreading out behind Guenevere and from which she has plucked the forbidden fruit. (That there is a snake posed on the edge of the shield makes the Edenic implications altogether explicit). Launcelot, then, is quite clearly the red-robed, red-bannered, knight in Rossetti's iconography and this iconography is the precise framework out of which Morris' Arthurian poems grow. As readers, too, we are supposed to be sensitive to this iconographic milieu from the very outset of the poem, well before the parable of the choosing cloths and well before lines 44-46 of 'King Arthur's Tomb',

when Launcelot's nostalgic remembrance that "she would let me wind/ Her hair around my neck, so it fell/Upon my red robe" ironically drives the point home.

Guenevere's use of the choosing cloths analogy, then, is a deliberate evasion, one to which the reader is expected immediately to react. By insinuating that blue not red is Launcelot's colour, when this is clearly not the case, she consciously misconstrues the parable, and attempts a defiant reversal of meanings. It is the first example in the poem where we see that tale-telling and objective truth do not necessarily correspond, where the persuasive context (expressed through its compellingly dramatic medium) becomes the message. On a more general level, the importance of the colour symbolism reminds us as readers of just how painterly a poet Morris was. His poems must be approached with the sensitivity to the kinds of clues normally associated with the 'reading' of visual rather than verbal art.