

'The Defence of Guenevere' and contemporary critics

by John Schofield

ON the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere* Mackail (*Life*, I p. 130) says: 'On its appearance, it met with no acclamations; it did not even gain the distinction of abuse: it simply went unnoticed.' In fact, there are six known contemporary reviews,¹ five of which are discussed here, as well as Swinburne's later tribute; some abusive, others mildly encouraging or non-committal. The first to appear, very soon after publication of the volume early in 1858, was short and dismissive. The *Spectator* of February 27 told its readers:

The poems of Mr William Morris chiefly relate to the knights and ladies of King Arthur's time, and nearly all the rest of the pieces to the vaguely fabulous age of chivalry; though the author has introduced into his poems touches of what modern research of judgment has shown to be its real coarseness and immorality. To our taste, the style is as bad as bad can be. Mr Morris imitates little save faults. He combines the mawkish simplicity of the Cockney School with the baldness of the worst passages of Tennyson, and the occasional obscurity and affectation of plainness that characterize Browning and his followers. Some of the smaller poems are less unpleasing in their manner than the bulk of the book, and a poetical spirit runs through the whole, save where it is unskilfully overlaid. We do not, however, augur much promise from this power; the faults of affectation and bad taste seem too deeply seated.

Only a few days later, however, the *Literary Gazette* for March 6 pronounced: 'These are remarkable poems... if he do but wield the brush to half as much purpose as the pen, his must be pictures well worth a long pilgrimage to see.'

The critic of the *Gazette* was the first to bring together all four topics of interest to the contemporary reader: the con-

¹ The full list is as follows: *The Spectator*, February 27, 1858, p. 238; *The Literary Gazette*, March 6, 1858, pp. 226-7; *The Athenaeum*, No. 1588, April 3, 1858, pp. 427-8; *The Saturday Review*, VI, November 20, 1858, pp. 506-7; *Fraser's Magazine*, June 1860, pp. 823-8; *The Tablet*, April 1858, so far untraced; information from Mr Peter Faulkner.

nections with Rossetti and the still-controversial P.R.B., the influence of Browning, the 'careless, affected' spirit of many of the lyrics, and the undoubted merits which nevertheless shone through the resulting confusion.

Who but Mr Rossetti or his double could have written anything like this? ... Other pieces are yet more characteristic; for example, 'Golden Wings', which seems to conduct us through a long gallery of Mr Rossetti's works, with all their richness of colouring, depth of pathos, poetical but eccentric conception, and loving elaboration of every minute detail.

In Mr Morris's volume we for the first time trace the influence of Browning on a writer of real original genius, and the result is very curious. 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End' shows that Mr Morris possesses considerable dramatic power, and is so far satisfactory, otherwise it appears to us ultra-Browningian, unpleasant and obscure. 'The Judgment of God' reads exactly like Browning's dramatic lyrics, but is, we think, better than any but the very best of them. By far the best of these pieces, however, is 'The Haystack in the Floods', where Mr Morris's native romance and pathos unite with his model's passion and intensity to form a whole unsurpassed, we will venture to say, by any man save Tennyson, since the golden age of poetry expired with Byron at Missolonghi.

To describe any one as Rossetti *plus* Browning, is as much as to say that he is not a little affected and obscure. This perhaps, is Mr Morris's misfortune; his carelessness and inattention to finish is his fault, and a serious one.

This reviewer was the first to divide the poems into the three classes – 'the Arthurian, the Froissartian, and the purely imaginative' – which have been the starting-point of nearly all subsequent *Defence* criticism. He approved most of 'Sir Galahad' and 'The Chapel in Lyonesse', admitted that 'Rapunzel' 'will be a fearful stumbling-block to prosy people', and was troubled by the 'luminous indistinctness' of the Pre-Raphaelite lyrics, 'Golden Wings', 'The Blue Closet', 'Spell-Bound' and 'The Wind'. 'Still', he concludes, 'his volume is of itself a sufficient proof that it is not necessary to be a master in order to delight and astonish. Mr Morris is an exquisite and original genius, a poet whom poets will love.' Perhaps this is the notice of which May Morris wrote, 'my mother remembers how my father came to her one day in a great state of excitement, waving the paper containing the notice of *The Defence of Guenevere*' (*Works*, I, p. xxi).

Two deprecatory reviews followed, in the *Athenaeum* on April 3 and in the *Saturday Review* for November 20. The critic in the *Athenaeum* called attention to the book 'as to a

curiosity which shows how far affectation may mislead an earnest man towards the fog-land of Art.' A sarcastic, at times incomprehensibly muddled review, it rejected the poems as 'stark, staring nonsense', 'thin and theatrical', and ended with the fear that Chinese pagodas would follow Gothic churches as the current vogue of poetical inspiration. The *Saturday Review* was less abusive, but still unenthusiastic: 'Mr Morris's powers . . . are, in our judgment, considerable, though altogether spoiled and wasted by his devotion to a false principle of art . . .'

After criticising the quaintness of 'Golden Wings' (the poem which seems to have disturbed most critics), the reviewer seemed to have premonitions of the young poet's later activities in book publishing: 'Each poem is hard to decipher as though it were written in black letter. It is crabbed, and involved, and stiff . . . but bright, sparkling, distinct, and pictorial in effect.' . . . Still, the general effect is decidedly unpleasant.

These four reviews appeared in 1858; the volume hardly sold at all. The last contemporary review appeared two years later. On May 14, 1860, John Parker, editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, wrote to his poetry critic 'Shirley', Sir John Skelton: 'I saw Morris's poems in manuscript. Surely 19-20ths of them are of the most obscure, watery, mystical, affected stuff possible.' Skelton disagreed, however, and produced a favourable notice, including a long analysis of 'a really fine poem', 'King Arthur's Tomb', in *Fraser's* for June of that year.

Mr Morris . . . is sometimes awkward, and often involved and obscure. Yet it is so obvious that his object is, not merely to say pretty or fine things, but to follow and depict the windings of passion, to relate the actual words spoken by people who suffered great wrong or sorrow.

Skelton thought that most of the obscurity resulted from difficulties in handling the soliloquy, at which Morris had only half-succeeded, 'as in a photograph, where, though the edges may be blurred and blotted, some feature starts out with life-like distinctness,' Skelton also offered the most balanced discussion of the new arrival's connections with the Pre-Raphaelites. After commenting on the 'striking family likeness' between the poems of Morris and the paintings of 'Rossetti, he continued:

Mr Rossetti excels all his contemporaries, is excelled by no one perhaps since Titian, in the oriental richness, the vivid splendour, the intense glow which he can bring out of colours that, in the hands of other men, remain dingy and ineffective, and produce no vivid impression. It is always, in like manner, the colour of an object which first attracts Mr Morris's eye . . .

...it must be granted that Mr Morris displays a good deal of the harshness and ungainliness which some of these painters appear rather to seek after.

The result, notwithstanding the occasional quaintness and uncouthness, is certainly effective.

Skelton also approved of 'Sir Galahad', admired the 'dramatic energy and life' of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End', and the 'weird music' of 'Rapunzel'. He concluded with a word of encouragement: 'If Mr Morris be a fair representative of our younger poets, we may look forward with hope to the future.'

'It is not a little thing for a shy and sensitive young man to have his first volume of poems treated with understanding and sympathy', said May Morris (*ibid*, p. xxi). All in all, the critical reception of *The Defence of Guenevere* came out in favour of its vitality and imagination, while warning the poet against being indistinct and careless. It makes all the more strange Morris' change in poetic ambition which, eight years later, was to produce *The Earthly Paradise*.