

Morris to Swinburne

by George P Ladow

On 21 April 1882 Swinburne wrote from The Pines, his home in Putney, to ask Morris for information about names in Malory:

I have been vainly hunting in the *Morte d'Arthur* to find where Mallory gives the name of the Queen of Orkney, Modred's mother, which I have always thought was there given as Morganse (I am not thinking of Morgane "la Fee" or "Morgan le Fay" as the said Mallory has it, in defiance of what Mr. Squeers [of *Nicholas Nickleby*] calls "her gender") and as Morganse I have mentioned her in my forthcoming poem [*Tristram of Lyonesse*] now in the printer's hands. You, if anybody, can give me the authority, and I shall be really much obliged and relieved of a distressing doubt on an important point of historic accuracy if you will kindly send me just one line of reference when you get this. I would not trouble you with such a petition but that I feel I have a character to keep up on that score, having just been promoted on the ground of my historic research and fidelity to write the life of Mary Queen of Scots in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.¹

The following letter,² now in the Harry Lyman Koopman Collection at the John Hay Library, Brown University, contains Morris' reply:

Kelmscott House,
Upper Mall, Hammersmith.

My dear Swinburne

April 27 [1882]³

Book 2 Chap XI of Mallory you will find these words (as the

¹ *Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–62), IV, pp. 269–70. (Entire letter) Rather proud of being chosen to write the life of Mary Queen of Scots, Swinburne wrote on 17 April 1882 to William Bell Scott 'I doubt if any other of our "idle trade" ever had such a tribute offered to his conscientious industry and fidelity as a student of history: and I am the more pleased because I can honestly think it is not undeserved' (IV, 268).

² This letter is printed here with the permission of Dr David A Jonah, Director of Libraries, Brown University.

³ The accompanying envelope is postmarked 'Ap 27 82'.

Parsons say, or did in my time) “So at the enterment came King Lots wyf Morganse with her four Sons Gawayne Agravayne Gaherys and Gareth.”

This is Jenny’s discovery, as I had given it up as a bad job after much rummaging. I am so glad to hear from Watts that your epic is actually finished: it ought to be one of your best works.

I am sending you by parcels Delivery, the North’s Plutarch I spoke of: it is a very pretty edition, I think the first. Item, the bookbinder I told you of really rejoices in the name (or says he does, which is the same for our purposes) of Roger de Coverly: his address is 6 St Martins Court. He is not a man of any taste (like poor old Fosbrooke was) but is careful, & will do what you tell him, & is used to dealing with valuable books.

Yours ever truly

William Morris

P. S. I have in my head that I have seen somewhere a statement that Morganse is a real *Irish* name: but I cannot give Chap & verse for it.

Swinburne replied on the next day, 28 April 1882:

I really do not know how to begin thanking you. The present is almost too splendid—but at all events it will not be wasted on me. It is one of the most beautiful old (sic) copies of any book I ever saw, and must be worth mints of money—let alone its value as a “friendly move.”

I am very much obliged also about Morganse. I have got by the same post a line from Ned [Burne-Jones] (to whom I applied on finding that you could not, unassisted, give me the reference at once) which directs me to the same chapter and book. Good fortune would seem to have one quality in common with misfortune, that of never coming singly. Thanks too for the bookbinder’s address, of which I shall duly “make a note.”

I hope that you will like my “Tristram” now in the press. There is no one whose good opinion of it would give me more pleasure.⁴

One may add that the reappearance of Morris’ letter to Swinburne confirms Cecil Lang’s guess that the ‘old book’ referred to in this letter was a 1595 Plutarch’s *Lives*, ‘a copy of which, inscribed by Morris to Swinburne, was sold (Lot 928) in Sotheby’s Swinburne sale, June 1916’.⁵

⁴ *Letters*, IV, 270. (Entire Letter).

⁵ *Letters*, IV, 270n.