

Verbal and Visual Seduction in "The Defence of Guenevere"

In *The Last Romantics*, Graham Hough explains William Morris' medievalizing tendencies as the result of a huge nostalgia, an attempt to escape from the bustle of contemporary industrial society into a seemingly changeless and more beautiful world of the past. He concludes:

Thus for Morris to collect the old stories, to accept them as they come, and to tell them again in a style that removes them as far as possible from the troubled actuality of life, is to perform the proper function of the poet. It is a curiously incomplete aesthetic . . . It explains some of Morris' odd but persistent views about poetry—that anybody who is any good ought to be able to compose it while weaving a tapestry at the same time.¹

In his effort to explain Morris' medievalizing, Hough inadvertently but quite precisely illuminates the complex nature of Morris' aesthetic position in "The Defence of Guenevere." It is a poem whose central character is in fact a verbal artist weaving a tapestry of words in which she herself is the focal point: a self-created artistic object. Guenevere takes on two roles in the poem—artist and artifact—and performs both with brilliance. Though "The Defence of Guenevere" has been most often interpreted on a moral level, as an impassioned yet (at least ostensibly) reasoned plea for exoneration and understanding, it may be seen as an exploration of value on other levels as well. On the human level, it offers a testimony to the transcendent values of love and beauty in the world and details a metaphoric quest for self-definition by an individual caught in an intense moment of both internal and external conflict. On the aesthetic level, it suggests an implicit statement on the tangled relationship between the artist and his audience, Art and Society.

To view the poem first in moral terms, one must examine the nature of Guenevere's

arguments in her own defense—a somewhat tedious but nevertheless inevitable task. As the poem opens, Guenevere has been tried and convicted of adultery with Launcelot; she is tied to the stake before an audience of her accusers, awaiting the fatal lighting of the match yet hoping she can, through her words to the knights and lords, bring about a stay of execution just long enough to allow Launcelot to arrive, in true chivalric fashion, saving her at the last moment. She is motivated to speak in her own defense by a combination of three emotions: anger at her very real sense of a just grievance, fear for her life, and love for Launcelot. As Laurence Perrine has noted, she mixes passion, sincerity, bluff, and bold lies in her arguments;² none of these arguments turns out to be a justification for her obviously guilty behavior. Still, the movement of the poem is mainly from argument to argument, as Guenevere proceeds through apparently rational but ultimately specious pleas on her own behalf.

Through the parable of the cloths (ll. 16-41)³, Guenevere first tries to demonstrate the difficulty of making responsible, informed moral choices in the world. Having been accused of committing an offense against the public morality, she tries to show the relative nature of that morality and to raise a doubt about the validity of the moral code by which she has been judged. She presents the baffling parable of the cloths as analogous to her own moral dilemma; the clear impossibility of making the "right" decision of blue or red cloth parallels her own difficulties in choosing between Arthur and Launcelot. The color symbolism is at best ambiguous and seems subtly designed to mislead: Blue, "heaven's color," (l. 37) seems the obvious choice, but it may point either to the Christ-like Arthur or to the beloved Launcelot.⁴ The "proper" choice (heaven or hell, Arthur or Launcelot) turns out to be simply a matter of luck, and Guenevere argues that such choices, which seem at the time to be natural and sensible,