

MORRIS AND MASCULINITY: RE-READING “RIDING TOGETHER”

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1. “Unmanly, effeminate, mystical”: On Incident and Ornament

William Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, published in 1858 and dedicated to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, has been called the first Pre-Raphaelite book of verse. For David Latham, Pre-Raphaelite poetry involves “the jarring juxtaposition of incongruities,” a “fusion of such seeming opposites as aesthetics and politics, the spiritual and the sensual, an ethereal symbolism and an earthly verisimilitude” (139; 133); here I will establish the relevance of this hybridizing tendency to issues surrounding gender.¹ In particular, close analysis of Morris’s “Riding Together” will demonstrate that this poem’s treatment of narrative and character permits it to navigate between what Victorians saw as male- and female-coded poetic strategies – thus positioning it at a crux of nineteenth-century anxiety about the Pre-Raphaelites – and that its depiction of intimate comradeship serves to reconcile divergent versions of manliness.² I first show how this poem’s formal features shape its approach to portraying plotted selfhood, which I then connect at length to gender politics. I conclude by turning to Morris’s *Chants for Socialists*, another collection of brief poems, to provide a fresh vantage point on his representation of masculinity in the *Defence*. Overall, in offering an extensive new reading of the understudied “Riding Together,” I also use it to argue that gendered perspectives on Pre-Raphaelitism can illuminate the cultural position of Victorian verse.

“Riding Together,” which originally appeared in 1856 in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, adapts an episode from Jean de Joinville’s *Life of St. Louis*.³ This poem is narrated by a crusader who is captured, and his companion killed, during a battle. Studiously matter-of-fact in its tone, “Riding Together” reflects a more general trend among shorter *Defence of Guenevere* pieces: even poems that portray dramatic events tend to use repetitive formal techniques to impede both the overt demonstration of strong emotion and the onward trajectory of narrative. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident